

# Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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May/June 1997

## Tomorrow Had Already Happened



**Jack Womack interviewed by Andrew M. Butler**

**Vector Review of the Year**

**Cyborg Sex and Violence**

**Hardback Reviews – page 16**

**Letters – page 3**

**Paperback Reviews – page 26**

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## Contents

Editorial	3
<i>The View From Mount Pleasant by Andrew M. Butler</i>	
ΨΦ	3
<i>Letters to Vector</i>	
Tomorrow Had Already Happened	5
<i>Jack Womack interviewed by Andrew M. Butler</i>	
Books of the Year – 1996	9
<i>A Review edited by Paul Kincaid</i>	
Cognitive Mapping 8: Violence	14
<i>by Paul Kincaid</i>	
From Friday to Mabdi	15
<i>Mary Anne Lever on Cyborg Sex and Violence</i>	
First Impressions	16
<i>Hardback and Original Paperback Reviews edited by Paul Kincaid</i>	
Pulp Fiction	26
<i>Paperback Reviews edited by Tanya Brown</i>	

## VECTOR

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All opinions are those of the individual contributors and should not necessarily be taken as the views of the editor or the BSFA.

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Apology: The photograph on the cover of the last issue of Vector was mistakenly credited to Jim Burns. It was, of course, a photograph of Stephen Palmer, courtesy of Orbit.

Cover: Jack Womack courtesy of Harper Collins.

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## EDITORIAL – The View from Mount Pleasant

The nearest I have been to violence recently was in Liverpool, walking back from the Speaking Science Fiction conference to my bed for the night – or what passes for 'for the night' after four a.m. – when someone tossed a crate of milk bottles in my general direction. Someone had checked that I didn't want a taxi ordering – was it safe? – but I'd responded that I'd walked through city centres I didn't know in the middle of the night for almost a decade and had never come to harm yet.

There's always a first time, of course.

I stood on the verge of an act of violence – intellectually speaking, and quite trivial compared to a baseball bat – when the next day (later the same day?) I risked a comparison between Anthony Burgess and Jack Womack, misrepresenting both. At the same conference, Veronica Hollinger had suggested that *A Clockwork Orange* and *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* were modernist and postmodernist examples of the same construction/deconstruction of identity through language and violence. She didn't announce a causal link, as I came close to, which is just as well given what you will learn Womack's opinion of Burgess in the interview contained within these pages.

Kubrick's film of *A Clockwork Orange* was withdrawn from this country by its director, as he began to become blamed for every act of violence in the land. Cronenberg's *Crash* was going to lead to a series of copycat car accidents – and note (with thanks to the *Daily Mail*) that the BBFC includes among its members the ex-wife of Malcolm 'Alex-from-A-Clockwork-Orange' McDowell. But the BBFC – having showed it to a room of disabled people who did not proceed to have an orgy on the coach home – have now granted the film an 18 certificate, whilst the tabloids were distracted by the small matter of an election being announced.

Having seen *A Clockwork Orange* – it has dated badly – I'd suggest it might benefit from George Lucas adding some extra digital violence. *Star Wars* remixed is meant to be the sf event of 1997, a strange phenomenon which displays an odd sense of family values, a nostalgia for nostalgia and a stunning disregard for life.

As Kevin Smith's characters discuss in his much more worthy film *Clerks*: was it really moral to have killed the hundreds of construction workers rebuilding the Death Star in *Return of the Jedi*, or did they deserve it as they were obviously working for the evil empire? (It also has a succinct comment on the respective strengths of episode five and six of the saga: 'Empire had the better ending. Luke loses his hand and finds out Vader is his father. Han is frozen and captured by Boba Fett. It ends on such a down note. Just like in real life. All *Jedi* had was a bunch of Muppets.')

*Star Wars* was old-fashioned space opera, the sort of thing we like to think we left behind with E E 'Doc' Smith. On the other hand, look at all the space opera in the BSFA Best Books of 1996 Poll – perhaps the pendulum has swung back to gung-ho adventures. And with that thought, O my little brothers, my droogs, let us proceed to the rest of the magazine.

by Andrew M. Butler

# ΨΦ

## LETTERS TO VECTOR

*We begin with two letters passed onto us from some time back. Mike Brain wrote from the Chester area just before Christmas, partly in response to the letters in Vector 190:*

This is probably my first letter to *Vector* (memory not what it used to be), but I have on a few rare occasions written to *Matrix*. I have a broad sweep & largely uncritical view of F & SF having begun with Vargo Statten in 1953, & Tolkien in 1957! At one time I was a member of the Brum Group in the days of Novacon 1, and for informed choice on the F & SF scene, mainly rely on BSFA & Andromeda catalogues.

As most F & SF fans probably started by borrowing from friends & then the local library, may I PLEAD for FIRST getting/ordering a loan copy of New F & SF, then buying the pb to re-read and/or keep. That way you support the Authors, make more SF choices for library readers, and conserve a valuable resource that is under threat.

**Sarah Goldner:** I agree that the (mistitled?) *Fairyland* was an unworthy winner of the Clarke Award – didn't get to finish it myself, but had expectations after reading *Pasquale's Angel*.

**Mike Mason:** His letter was great – he should be co-opted/persuaded to write regularly as a Columnist.

**Chris Hill:** More agreement, but I still read & enjoy *Fantasy*, not caring for Cyberpunk, and though I enjoyed *Hawke's Voyage* by Paul Kearney, it crammed in too many familiar themes to fully categorise it. To the Fantasy writers list I would add M. Gentle and B. Hambly.

**Jack Hughes:** Finally, I love awful puns, so how many trees did we demolish to publish his letter?

*In February Philip Muldowney wrote, voicing some dissatisfaction with the balance of the magazine:*

I wonder if the time has come to reassess *Vector*? Financial exigencies forced the merger of *Paperback Inferno*, and since then, it has really had no clear character. It comes across as more assembled than edited. Like the old definition of a camel, an animal designed by a committee. A question: with five members on the editorial team, who is doing the steering?

Take the present issue, 191. 20 out of 32 pages are reviews. Knock out the Bookspotting piece (a review by any other name) and the editorial, and you are left with ten pages of non-review material. Why is *Vector* just a reviewzine, and not a lot else now?

You might well argue that it is essential that the reviews are the heart of the matter. There are precious few places where you can find decent sf reviews now. Outside of *Interzone*, and the capsulated book reviews of *SFX*, there is hardly anywhere that you can get a broad overview of the sf on the market. The general press seem to have abandoned any pretence of sf reviewing whatsoever. Therefore, why is the general quality of *Vector* so hopelessly variable?

It seems that there is no clear general idea as to the overall nature and quality of the reviewing. Everyone speaks with a

different voice and a different standard, and on this occasion, variety does not add to the spice, just entirely confuses the palate. It becomes a cacophony, the good drowned out by the bad.

The idea of giving longer reviews has not worked out too well. The original idea of *Paperback Inferno* – short condensed reviews to give an overall review of what was going on – was a very good one. However they seem to have expanded to fill the space available. Some like the reviews of *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind* (Maureen Kincaid Speller) and *Fever Dream* (Tanya Brown) seem to be heading into the 800+ words, while the average is about 600+. Since these are often reviews of books that have already been reviewed somewhere else, perhaps the whole space that Pulp Fiction takes up might be reduced by more concise reviews.

The wordier length of First Impressions seems to have encouraged self-indulgence, rather than perceptive analysis. Bad habits seem to have crept in. Over lengthy plot summary (YAWN!) seems to have become the norm, personal clever smartassness, character and motive assessment that is woefully shallow, and analysis done as a piece of GCSE coursework. It would be unfair, and I have not the time, to do an individual analysis of faults, but they are certainly legion.

This sounds like a truly carping letter. I do not mean it to be like that. It is just that I enjoy the non-review parts of *Vector*. The Michael Marshall Smith interview was particularly interesting. It is just that I think that the overall policy of the reviews dominating everything needs to be seriously questioned. If things are to stay as they are, then the reviews have to be a damn sight more professional.

*This is something we take seriously, but steps were already being taken to alter the balance before we saw your letter. Paul Kincaid has now taken over sole control of the review pages and is left to make sense of the hardbacks, yuppibacks, paperbacks, paperback originals and reprints which form the British scene. He can speak for himself:*

Yes, there has been rather too much of *Vector* devoted to reviews of late. I think I speak for the entire editorial team – probably for the entire BSFA committee – when I say that, ideally, I would like to see no more than 50% of the magazine given over to reviews.

It's not going to happen immediately. One of the things we aim to do with *Vector* is to provide the most comprehensive coverage of new books possible; we also want to provide up-to-date coverage of the books that are out now. These two aims are, perhaps surprisingly, contradictory. At the moment, partly because of the hiccups in our schedules last year, we're running further behind with our reviews than we would really like. We're starting to catch up again, but it will be a little while before we are right up to date. Until that happens, it's likely that there will be a somewhat greater preponderance of reviews than we would really like in the magazine.

However, changes are already under way and I hope that over the next few issues you will start to notice the effect. For instance, Tanya Brown will in future be working on the BSFA web page; this has necessitated her giving up the paperback reviews and we will be bringing all the reviews together. This will allow other changes that should become apparent in time and which will, I believe, allow us to achieve our twin goals of being comprehensive and up-to-date. But please be patient, it will take some time for these changes to feed through into the magazine.

As to the quality of the reviews in *Vector*, it is worth remembering that the BSFA is and always has been an amateur organisation, and while some of the people who write for us have written professionally, all the reviews are, strictly, amateur and provided by members. In fact, it is one of our aims to encourage as many of our members as possible to write for our publications, and contributing reviews is often a good way to do that. Quality will, of course, vary, both from one reviewer to the next and from one review to the next, but I happen to believe that we have a very good team of reviewers working for *Vector* and I think the general

standard is quite high. Of course the reviews do need to be edited, and if there are failures of quality it is more likely to be my failing as editor rather than the reviewer's failing as writer. But without wanting homogeneity, or to impose a house style on what reviewers should think and write, we do aim to achieve as high a standard as possible – and I think mostly we do achieve it.

The length of the review is, generally, governed by a wide variety of factors, including the importance of the work or the author, the perceived quality of the book, or how much the reviewer has to say on the topic. I do give reviewers a word length to aim for as a guideline, but this has to be flexible to allow for their personal response to the book in question. We will, in future, be featuring a greater variety of length of review, but we will not be abandoning the long review that gives a critic the opportunity to really get their teeth into analysing a work. Such long reviews can be, I feel, invaluable, and we would be doing both *Vector* and our readers a disservice if we unilaterally tried to exclude such consideration at length from our pages.

But, as I said before, all these things are part of the mix that we will be changing, sometimes subtly sometimes dramatically, over the coming issues. I think you will find that these changes do answer most of your criticisms.

*Incidentally, excluding editorial matter, Vector had stabilised at one part articles to two parts reviews, even without the magazine and small press coverage we used to have (and would like to resume in some form). If there is a move to a fifty-fifty split, we will of course need to receive more submissions than we receive now – or we'll have to commission even more material.*

Chris Hill also commented on the Michael Marshall Smith interview, prior to his joining the BSFA staff as Awards Administrator:

After falling foul of the black hole of Bramley Mailing Services, I finally received *Vector* 191 a week or so ago. It was amusing to read about drinking out the old year in Andrew's editorial. The new year seems so long ago now.

I left Kevin [McVeigh]'s article on *The Wasp Factory* for the moment as I haven't read the book yet and want to remain unspoiled. However Penny (my wife) tells me it's very good...

It was a strange experience reading Paul Kincaid's transcript of the interview with Michael Marshall Smith. It took place at one of the BSFA London meetings that I managed to make (an all too rare occurrence). What is lost is quite how funny Michael is to listen to. He has a very good sense of comic timing which you cannot capture on paper. Still, it brought back memories of a very pleasant evening.

Dave M. Roberts's article on Tim Burton was an okay introduction to Burton's films. However, I feel that there is a place for a more in-depth look at his work.

On the strength of Justina Robson's article on Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* I read the book. Very good it was too. It just adds to my theory that most of the really good fantasy these days is being published for children.

Anyway, an enjoyable issue.

*We hear that under its US title the book is shortlisted for the ABBY award. The cynics on the editorial team are tempted to mutter that fantasy is literature for children, but we might get hit by Certain Parties, so we won't. There's enough violence in this issue already. If anyone wishes to write in depth on Burton then please do – particularly since the masterpiece [GD] or mess [AMB] that is Mars Attacks! has been released.*

*Letters to Vector should be sent to Gary Dalkin, 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth, BN11 8SN and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.*



# tomorrow had already happened

An Interview with  
**Jack Womack**  
by Andrew M. Butler

*Vidding that Jack Womack – scribe of the five Dryco Chronicles sf novels and mainstream Let's Put the Future Behind Us – was Britside, I trained metrowards to see if we could truthspeak. Past deconstructing British Library we footstepped, electing to beset ourselves within the safety of the Euston Plaza Hotel.*

**When you started to write the Dryco Chronicles, you hadn't read much science fiction, had you?**

I'd read next to no science fiction. At that point I had read only Philip K. Dick. I'd read his *The Man in the High Castle*; I'd read, back when I was eleven or twelve, *The Martian Chronicles*. I had always been a big fan of science-fiction movies but I had never got into the literature. I got distracted by too many other things in the regular literary field early on, and just never got around to hitting it at that optimum period in early teens, when so many writers and readers I know were first introduced to it or came upon it.

**Do you consider yourself an sf writer, or are you on the edges somewhere?**

I always consider myself in-between. I have no difficulty with the label "science fiction", because, you know, anyone who writes anything that's set even in the immediately near future is technically writing science fiction. At the same time, what I always try to do involves so much more in terms of social satire and observations on contemporary society, that I see myself doing that slippery-edge fiction where I can pretty much get away with anything. Science fiction is nice because it enables me to get away with much more in terms of being able to explore more interesting concepts, wilder ideas, actually to think about things that are so often ignored in contemporary mainstream fiction, which so often focuses upon the characters of a select group of individuals. What I try to bring to science fiction is just a broader sense of social milieu and a deeper sense of character that comes just from my regular reading, my personal preference for reading, just literature in general. And so I like the combination I have there, when I can sort of bring them together.

**It's interesting that you mention *The Man in the High Castle*, because that's one of the classic alternate history novels.**

Well, the first time I'd heard of Phil Dick was when I'd read Paul Williams's *Rolling Stone* article back in the mid-seventies. Of course at the time I read it I thought, "Oh, this guy sounds really interesting," and so I said to myself I'd have to read something of his, and I believe that one is specifically mentioned. I've always liked alternate histories – history being one of my fields of interest. I'm always thinking, you know, "For want of the nail, the shoe be lost" sort of thing. And then when I read that one, that would have been, not that long before I began writing *Ambient*: '81, '82. And then of course I read *Nineteen Eighty Four* and *Brave New World*, the more "OK" science fiction.

**What about Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*?**

I had read that but not liked it; in fact I never finished it. I loved the movie, but the book I could just never really get through... [laughter]

**It's always being mentioned in relation to your work.**

Oh, they stuck it on early, early on. I liked Burgess's nonfiction writings, his writings on music, his essays on Joyce, but his

fiction never really caught me. And *Clockwork Orange* was like Riddley Walker, which also crops up periodically –

**Yes, that was next on the list!**

– I've just never been able really to get through either of those books. I just don't have the patience, I suppose, to do the sort of things I subject my own readers to on a smaller scale.

**What about James Joyce?**

Joyce, of course, Joyce was always one of my favorites going back to Junior High School, when I first read *Dubliners* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and then in High School I read *Ulysses* for the first time, and then reread it several times. I still believe that there are sections of *Ulysses* that could easily be set aside and no one would really miss them.

Most of my influences early on, just again came from the broader scale. I mean, I enjoyed Faulkner, but I much preferred Shirley Jackson and her most famous short story, "The Lottery".

**I don't know that name, I'm afraid.**

OK, she's an excellent, deeply underrated, American writer, written several novels. Her best two novels would've been *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, psychological character studies of individuals who are tangentially in contact, as they perceive it, with the supernatural, but they may not be. She's just a marvelously subtle writer, and just one of the first writers that I could read and just see how you could really understate something and get the point across.

My other favorite minor American writer was Ambrose Bierce, for his very high level of cynicism, as well as for his propensity for knowing when to play it subtly and when to know when to hit his readers over the head with a cosh of some sort.

**His *Devil's Dictionary* is ideal bedside reading.**

That is definitely true. Anyone who can describe a hearse as "Death's baby carriage" appeals to me greatly.

**I can see that... Your first five books carry endorsements by William Gibson, and Bruce Sterling, which suggests you're being positioned within cyberpunk.**

What had happened was I had started *Ambient* in late '83 and had finished it in early '85, and had absolutely no idea of the existence of cyberpunk or Gibson or anything like that or even what was going on in contemporary science fiction. I realized that, when I was finishing *Ambient*, that if I was to do it properly as a novelistic series I was going to need to do it in up to six books – not realizing that at the time that the one area, God help us, that trilogies were easily gotten away with was in science fiction. You know I didn't realize this. When *Ambient* and especially when *Terraplane* came out, the first people to notice me were the science-fiction readers attracted by cyberpunk, which at the time I had no idea existed. I was coming in on what was basically the end of cyberpunk, looking back. Gibson had encountered me fairly early on, and didn't have the faintest idea

where I had come from. I had just sort of popped up out of nowhere.

Right before *Ambient* came out in 1987, I read a review in *The Village Voice* of *Count Zero* and thought, "This guy sounds as if he's writing about the same sort of thing as I am, I'd better check it out", so I looked at a copy (I worked in a bookstore at the time), and I thought, "OK, he's got the same viewpoint, but he's coming at it from a different direction, so I'm safe there". "Who's this Gibson guy?" and everything. So I was read by, early on, by cyberpunk readers and writers and then it slowly, very slowly, expanded outward from there.

**Besides Alice, you don't really seem to go in for computers.**

No, because it's like in the future computers – (on the one hand I didn't consciously think about this at the time)... You see in *Ambient*, Alice is meant to be more of a god representation more than anything, it's all tying back in with one of my overall messiah themes that will later pop up. In terms of science it's on the same level as in *Terraplane* and in *Elvissey* going back and forth between parallel worlds essentially with a VCR. I just try to get away with as little science as possible in these and just get back to whatever points and stories I'm trying to make. Computers – thinking about it, looking at it, what I suspect it'll be like in the future, what has certainly been the case as I've gotten my laptop and worked on it – it's just computers, will be just one of those things that you just don't notice in thirty years. It'll just be like, I think I've seen a description one time, where you worry about your computer in the same way you'll be really deeply concerned about the motor in your refrigerator. They'll be everywhere but just not noticed.

**Some critics have seen cyberspace as a representation of the underworld, a place characters go to try and solve some of the problems in their own world – often failing of course. You seem to use time travel in a similar way.**

I use the parallel world *Terraplane*, *Elvissey* and in the final book of the series – which is the one I'm working on now – in order to posit the existence of a history that's yet alternative to the one which I present, which is closest to our world, which will undoubtedly not be like our world.

**Like *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* in *The Man in the High Castle*?**

Oh, right, yeah, exactly. I rather liked that notion of there being several worlds, and I just played with that a bit with this book. Basically with the parallel world in my universe, I just want to posit a world which is in not only different from the one which we share, but is, in many ways, even worse. And it's just sort of like, you get your choice of dystopias.

With the world in which my books take place, in the first five, there's a certain level of detachment which is necessary for all of the characters to be able to live, to get by. And the parallel world allows me to make that world somehow a little more homier, in a bizarre kind of way, just that you can say, "Phew, we're back", where you can just figure that everyone's killing each other but at least we know *why* and it's like –

**'There's no place like home'.**

Exactly, just home is rather gruesome [laughter] when you think about it.

**Elvis seems an obvious musical icon to use. Why Robert Johnson?**

Jake is the one who is most representative in terms of as a personification of Dryco as being essentially just, "We're here to do this, and this is what I'll do, and it's not very pleasant, but I do it very well". Jake has essentially had to circumscribe his emotionally life in so many ways, that this was just the one

outlet that he found, of a kindred spirit. It's more than just a personality thing, Jake identifies with Johnson's belief that "I'm going to be doing this, but I'm cursed, but I have to do it because essentially my soul was essentially sold for me many years ago, or if it wasn't then it should've have been" etc. It adds an incongruous element to the character of Jake, for another thing.

At the same time, it allowed in the parallel world – which is so much more overtly racist, an America which is at that time so much more overtly racist and eventually genocidal – it allowed me to have Johnson coming to New York, again, as he certainly seems to have done at one point during the thirties. He never had the chance to come back to the Carnegie Hall, to the "Spirituals to Swing" concert in '38 since he had died beforehand. Again it just opened up a nice little alternative sort of thing there.

**Is Buddy Holly next on the list?**

No, no, I could never do that, I would never do that, nor will there be any reintroduction of Elvis, or the Big Bopper, Gene Vincent or Eddie Cochran.

**Bob Dylan?**

I'm going to avoid him, though at some point you might get a brief glimpse of The Velvet Underground, anyway.

**In the afterword to *Heathern* you suggest we go back and reread, or read for the first time, *Ambient* and *Terraplane*.**

Er, yes, except that I've slightly altered the reading order; I would say *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* and *Heathern* take place concurrently, I would recommend, to those readers who haven't come to me before or the readers who read me again to start read *Random Acts* first.

**It's a very harrowing place to start.**

Yeah, but by the end of the book, you should be ready for everything else I throw at you. Because that was the way I intended that one, I wanted that to like the novel that someone who wasn't necessarily familiar with my work and who wasn't necessarily a science-fiction reader, could pick up, read. It starts out as mainstream, completely mainstream, and a child's narrative at that and then, the slow transformation, not only is inherent to the plot, to the nature of the book, but it also enables the reader to reach the point by the end of that to not to theoretically – and I think this often happens – to no longer have any trouble with the language. Even when you hit those words you don't understand, you've picked up enough of the context, that the reader shouldn't have any trouble reading the others, and has also been prepared by slipping in to the future world, in such a way that they can handle whatever sort of oddball things I start throwing at them.

So I now recommend *Random Acts*, *Heathern*, and then *Ambient*, *Terraplane*, *Elvissey*, which are the five that are out. I know that the earlier ones are out of print over here, but the first five at least can now be read in consecutive order. As I say, I'm writing the concluding volume now.

**Why has it taken you so long to get to writing number six?**

Oh, because I'm slow and dilatory. In the mean time I have written *Let's Put the Future Behind Us*, because I did want to do one which was completely contemporary. Though by setting it in contemporary Russia I was able to automatically have a society that was so alien, so science-fictional that, er, it wasn't so much a case of exaggeration and extrapolation as trying to subdue the surreality that was already there, in order to produce a believable fictional background. But in terms of why it took so long to produce the rest of, my getting to this one: it takes me usually about a year, a year-and-a-half, to write each book. Most of the time I've been doing this I've been working, and in the past couple of years I haven't had a day job, although of course,

the perils of the freelance writer, that can always change...

### So you're no longer with the newspaper of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textiles Union?

No, no, I was off of them for two years, so, off of them two years ago. So we'll have to just see after my tax bills come in this year as to whether or not I go back to a day job.

It seems difficult to see how you could regood Dryco convincingly, along with the rest of the world, how salvation can come.

Oh well that's the whole point of regooding from the start. For one thing it's a forced moral rearmament as it were. There's a very insightful review that Simon Ings did for *Foundation* 59, of *Elvissey*, and he points out that at this point, Dryco has become history, it is the world, and with something of that size it is so big, it's so great, that all thinks it can do this. It's too late, it's just stepped so far in the own blood it's drawn and unable to go back. They realize this eventually, but they're trying it out, there's this brief moral flicker.

### 'Back to Basics' they called it in England.

Precisely, and that's worked just about as well. They've tried the same thing in America, and that's worked just about as well over there. One of my great beliefs is that good intentions so often go horribly, horribly wrong, and certainly in *Elvissey*, with regooding, certainly it's a very good intention. But it causes nothing but great traumas for those such as John, Iz's husband, who are having to specifically regood, just finding that they can't, it's just impossible, but the company is so big and careless and thoughtless it just doesn't even notice much less care.

I have to say with the portrait of the generations of Thatcher Drydens on the wall in *Elvissey*, there's a real sense of an end of an era there.

Yeah, which is precisely what I want to carry. *Elvissey* is a transitional thing, it's the last time you will see a number of those characters, there'll be a few showing up in the last book. Joanna, notably of course, who has essentially been sitting on Long Island for six years, waiting to know exactly what it is a messiah is supposed to do. But most of the characters at that point are gone, and the legacy of Dryco has just been so poisonous that it's infected everyone within the company, which again has been the world.

One of the basic beliefs of Gnosticism was as the world had been created by the evil personification of God or by the demiurges, that the only chance one had to redeem oneself was through self-salvation. And that's what Iz does, she realizes at the end that she has to go forward, she wants to have her baby, she doesn't want to kill herself, even is her death is definitely foreseeable. She just makes a decision that "I'm not going to die and I'm going to make the best of it." *Elvissey* ended up with a much more optimistic ending than I would've ever guessed, but there you have it.

### Salvation certainly seems to go through all of your works.

Salvation, or the hope for salvation, striving to find salvation or hope or something, because it's the only thing so many of my characters have to get by, even if they're not conscious of it. Even if it's just this vague yearning that they know they should want it, but they haven't the faintest idea of what it is, or how they receive it, but they just know they need something else. And it's not so much even a religious feeling, it's, you know, "Give me a reason why I should wake up tomorrow."

I love the line you have in your *Locus* interview: "The fun about sinning is that you can repent".

Oh, precisely, that's one of the basic teachings of the Baptist

religion, which I left when I was about six. But it's absolutely true, just it's *ad infinitum*, it's an endless process, the tape-loop of redemption.

In Britain we're probably more ready to accept a villain called Thatcher. There's the throwaway gag of the Thatcher monument in *Elvissey*.

I came up with the name Thatcher Dryden, unconsciously – although I was certainly aware of Thatcherism, it was the early days of Reaganism in America – but I wasn't consciously thinking. I was just using the name because it was just exceptionally WASPy. But at about the time of the third book, actually my first tour over here, a couple of times it was discussed that it was obviously Thatcherism, but I had honestly not thought of that before. And I suddenly thought, h'm... So in *Elvissey*, which was the first novel I'd written in which I'd consciously taken some science-fiction tropes and concepts and try to turn them inside out and play with them a lot more, I couldn't resist throwing it in the future world – a little Thatcher statue in a square which is briefly glimpsed.

### Are there any references to Dryden?

The poet? No, no, Dryden just had a nice ring to it. I was thinking of Dryden the poet when I came up with it, but it went well with Thatcher. It allowed Dryco very nicely, which was just a clumsy enough name to sound vaguely believable.

### Like Glaxo.

Exactly. The things they have come up with since have sounded more unlikely.

*Let's Put the Future behind Us* came out of a film you were going to write with Gibson. Or was that just wangling expenses?

Gibson had to remain stuck in Vancouver. They sent me to Moscow for a week so I could soak up local color for a script and whatever. Of course nothing happened to the script for the film, but I was able to actually go as it were to the parallel world for the first time in real life and then come back with this entirely unexpected wealth of material. In '92 it was truly like the parallel world visit. I went back there this past summer to cover the election for *Spin* magazine, and I suddenly definitely had the feeling this trip out that it wasn't that world, that it was starting to take on really unexpected aspects of things I had written about in my novels, but in a kind of wilder way than I could ever have foreseen.

It's shades of John Sladek who had a character in a story called Ronald Reagan, who then turned into a real person; Sladek's promised not to do it again.

Precisely – and suddenly a night in June last I found myself in a place where, I ask whether the posters are for the upcoming elections, but I'm told, "Oh no, it's David Bowie playing the Kremlin." And all the criminal mafia are walking around in suits of really bright colors, and where you're body searched in some hotels, going to lunch. This wild sense of the barbecue grill of capitalism with a can of gasoline tossed on, just really capitalism at its most rampant, and with the complete absence of morality, which was a remarkable thing to see.

I actually, er, at least enjoyed this thing. I always had this sneaking fear that if I wound up in the Dryco world that I might actually get along reasonably well, as long I could run and duck fast – I was never a big weapons guy. In Moscow I definitely got the feeling that "This is rather pleasant", but again I think I'd find myself ducking too often, there's always that, the inherent gun fire element there, which has just developed. But I wasn't aware of that, of course, when I first met all of this.

I wasn't just able to take off what I read, I tried, all of my

books I write in the first person narration, I tried to make this one sound like a Moscow, an intelligent Moscow businessman, writing either in English, or having had it written in Russian and having it translated – so it had that delightfully odd Russian-English translation tone, slightly formalized and full of bombast and an odd sort of insecurity running through as well as the telling of what's going on, with very dark humor and extreme cynicism, which gets even worse as the book progresses. And it's just my broad-based view of the world, of humankind.

It struck me that whilst you begin by satirising Russia, which in a sense is a soft target, you end up, with the Disney-like Sovietland and the rampant free market economy, with a commentary on the USA.

Oh, right, exactly, precisely. There are great similarities between Russian and America, in many ways, just in terms of everyone loves money, everyone loves things that are big, everyone is nice sometimes and really incredible terrified other times, there's a number of generalizations. But then again, my sense of humor tends to be so really glitteringly dark that it's just about average for Russia. There are times when it gets a bit shaven for America. But Russians are just so good with irony, which Americans are not, not good at all.

I always get into trouble when I make comments like "Americans don't do irony"

They don't, they don't, but I do. But you won't find it too often! [laughter].

At the same time, the American ironists – like Vonnegut and Bierce – are some of the best around. It seems like there's no middle ground.

No, you either understand it, in which case you understand it reasonably well, and I don't want to sound self-aggrandizing, but at least for an American I'm fairly good at irony. Or you just never get it at all, and are therefore like left bereft of just understanding of why just so many things in American life are so inherently ludicrous, but you can never understand it because you're not able to see the contradiction if you're seeing America with a non-ironic viewpoint.

Most of the reviews seem to pick upon the quote on the back cover: "We can prove Kennedy shot himself, as long as we're paid in advance".

Oh, they like that line; I suppose it is one of my better lines. And it's true, you know, Max does have a business where essentially he's been able to so commodify, history is just a product. There's just so much in the world, even the contemporary world, that has been commodified, and it happened in the science-fiction novels as well, the commodification of the world, which is what Dryco affects. Plus in Russia you've got the long-standing tradition of changing history as need be, depending upon the political circumstances at the time.

*Picnic in a Graveyard* was the original title of the novel. *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* was just the more felicitous title, that we

came up with, during a moment of inspiration back in the union, as a possible column head for the president, the union president's boiler plate message which is always "The future is in front of us". Where else would it be?

Yeltsin seems permanently in and out of hospital – I hear he's out again –

–He is out of hospital, but I'm sure that's not going to last –

–Some people are nostalgic for the communists, some want the Romanovs back. Can Russia, as it were, regood itself – assuming it was ever good?

Oh Gawd, er, yeah, it was good in the first place, but I think that time was possibly before 1200 AD. Since then it's just suffered so many utterly inept and horrible drunken leaders, and they've become so used to being led by the inept and horrible, the thuggish, that it's sort of what they expect. But at the same time the basic human love of art, of music, the basic human passion, has certainly never been curtailed in Russia, that is to say the gracefully thing that those people have that however badly things get, they can see it with humor, with a joke, rather than necessarily with a revolution. Though sometimes the other way seems the likeliest as well.

Recently one academic suggested that the future for sf lies in the Pacific Rim nations – Australia, Japan, the tiger economies. You've visited Japan in *Heathern*. Any plans for a return visit?

I have, yes, but I've never been there myself. I would just love to go to anywhere along the Pacific Rim, and see it myself, because I'm sure I could come up with two or three more books. But in *Heathern* I just touched by tangentially, just to give some idea of how Dryco is managed. I wrote that before the bubble burst, as it were, in Japan, and when it seemed like Japan would continue upon its upward economic course, which does not seem to be the case now that it has to some degree been supplanted by Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and the other countries, and China, to some degree. And it's interesting too, in that China's turned out much closer to the sort of Soviet Union I posited in *Terraplane* than Russia has. It's just the totalitarian capitalist system which seemed an unlikely combination, does seem to be what they're developing very nicely in China, unfortunately.

Finally, I gave a paper on your novels at an academic conference, as did Veronica Hollinger. At my paper, the second, one member of the audience suggested that this had made you canonical. Does the thought of this fill you with horror, or has it made your day?

No, I find it impossible to believe, I guess, because I just think that one thing a writer should never do is believe anything bad or good that's said about him or her. It keeps the writer much more sane in the long run, and much more realistic and much more focused on what they should be doing, which is writing.

#### Novels by Jack Womack

*Ambient* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987; London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).  
*Terraplane* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988; London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).  
*Heathern* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990; New York: Tor, 1990).  
*Elvissey* (Easton Press, 1993; New York: Tor, 1993; London: HarperCollins, 1993).  
*Random Acts of Senseless Violence* (London: HarperCollins, 1993; New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994).  
*Let's Put the Future Behind Us* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1996; London: Flamingo, 1997).

#### Short Works by Jack Womack

"Out of Sight, Out of Mind", *Walls of Fear*, edited by Kathryn Cramer (New York: Morrow, 1990).  
"A Kiss, a Wink, a Grassy Knoll", *Omni* May 1991.  
"Lifeblood", *A Whisper of Blood*, edited by Ellen Datlow (New York: Morrow, 1991).  
"Twelvefourteen", *Strange Plasma* 4 1991.  
"That Old School Tie", *Little Deaths*, edited by Ellen Datlow (London: Millennium, 1994; New York: Dell, 1995).

# Books of the Year – 1996

Compiled by Paul Kincaid

It was Elizabeth Billinger who agonised over the wide remit given to BSFA reviewers and committee members in responding to this annual survey, and who finally arrived at the following conclusion: 'If I wanted to look back on the "best" books published in 1996 I could refer to awards and shortlists for same, or I could look back through reviews in relatively current magazines.

To have the benefit of knowing what other people read and enjoyed last year, regardless of publication date, perhaps provides more of a service and something of fresh interest, rather than simply repeating what has already been said.' It is probably better, therefore, to talk of these as 'favourite' books rather than 'best' books of 1996. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how they do compare to the 'best' books as represented by the shortlists for the Arthur C. Clarke and BSFA Awards, and what stands out is that every one of the books from the two shortlists (a total of eleven books in all) has found its way in as someone's favourite. The clear favourite, in fact, also won the BSFA Award, though it is perhaps not surprising that the tastes of BSFA writers and members should coincide in this way.

And what has emerged as the favourite from the last year is Iain M. Banks's *Excession* (Orbit). In all the years that I have been conducting this poll, I can't remember another occasion where one book has emerged with such a clear lead. It was named by about one third of all respondents and had nearly twice as many votes as the second-place book. It is a little curious, considering that those who chose it were not altogether overwhelming in their support. John D. Owen said it was: 'not the best of the Culture novels, but one of the most disturbing, placing as it does humans very much on the periphery of influence in the Culture's major decision making processes.' And Paul Allwood concurred: 'One of these days Banksie will get it just right. The idea of an excession causing havoc and how the Culture citizens and Ship brains would handle it offer great potential and some of the early set piece scenes are stunning, but I felt that the flow of the story was lost towards the end, hidden in the complexity of the narrative and scene switching. His non-sf doesn't seem to suffer in the same way, though.' Not everyone was as equivocal, however, about what Colin Bird called: 'A glorious mess of a Culture novel: Banks has style and imagination to burn.' Andrew Seaman said: 'Another typically exuberant exploration of the Culture. Good old-fashioned sense of wonder, tempered by Banks's ironic

postmodern sensibility', while Paul Kincaid considered it: 'the first of Banks's space operas that I think has really worked, the sense of scale, the humanity, the mystery are all in perfect balance.' It was left to Paul Billinger to say what really seems to have won people's votes, the sheer exuberance of the book: 'How space opera should be, witty, intelligent

and pointed with some of the most fully realised artificial minds and a plot to match. Book of the Year.'

It is never easy to tell what people look for in science fiction. For a start it can be a matter of fashion changing from one year to the next. In the last two years – with *Complicity* by Iain Banks and *The Prestige* by Christopher Priest named books of the year – people seemed to have had a taste for more literary and less overtly science-fictional works. This year it is the

opposite. After Banks's baroque space opera the second place (a long way behind, but with enough votes to have won in just about any other year) comes *Distress* by Greg Egan (Millennium), and again it is a work chosen for its distinctly science-fictional values. 'Hard sf at its very best: mind-blowing ideas, deep plotting, and more twists than a Chubby Checker Greatest Hits album' said John D. Owen, a view echoed by Norman Beswick who called it: 'Ingenious hard sf, intellectually taxing.' K. V. Bailey made much the same point: 'post-Einstein, quantum-happy, postmodern apocalypse', while Paul Allwood expressed slight reservations but still applauded the ideas in the book: 'Not quite as good as *Permutation City* in my opinion, but nevertheless a fine piece of sf. Egan always seems to find something new to write about and his books are usually chock full of ideas.'

Maybe we are heading back to a taste for sf when it used to be considered the 'literature of ideas'. At least, such an impression is strengthened by the other books that scored

well in the poll. The Egan, curiously enough given this level of support, didn't make the short list for the BSFA or Clarke Awards, but the book that came third is the only title to have made both: *Blue Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson

(Voyager). Again this is a book praised for its ideas, though it seems to have won its votes not for the merits of this volume on its own, but as the completion of Robinson's Mars trilogy, which Andy Sawyer, for one, believes is: 'one of the most ambitious utopian sequences in recent years'. Indeed, Colin Bird made this explicit: 'Not a great book on its own merits, but a satisfying final volume to a trilogy that stands

## Books of the Year – 1996

- 1: Iain M. Banks – *Excession* (Orbit)
  - 2: Greg Egan – *Distress* (Millennium)
  - 3: Kim Stanley Robinson – *Blue Mars* (Voyager)
  - 4: Stephen Baxter – *The Time Ships* (Voyager)
  - Sheri S. Tepper – *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (Voyager)
  - 6: Stephen Baxter – *Voyage* (Voyager)
- Neil Gaiman and Ed Kramer (eds.) – *The Sandman: Book of Dreams* (Voyager)
- Peter F. Hamilton – *The Reality Dysfunction* (Macmillan)
- Jack McDevitt – *Ancient Shores* (Voyager)
- Jack McDevitt – *Engines of God* (Voyager)
- Ian McDonald – *Sacrifice of Fools* (Gollancz)
- Jeff Noon – *Automated Alice* (Doubleday)
- Neal Stephenson – *The Diamond Age* (Penguin)
- Bruce Sterling – *Holy Fire* (Orion)
- N. Lee Wood – *Looking for the Mahdi* (Vista)

### "A near perfect end-of-history-as-we-know-it"

K V Bailey on Greg Egan's *Distress*

out as a towering achievement'. Andrew M. Butler made the same sort of point when he said: 'the epic sf novel of the 1990s is finally complete and worth the wait. Robinson's strategic changes of scene to Earth, Mercury and beyond should surely finally convince that this is more utopian mapping than a blueprint'. Certainly it seems to be the neatness of the way in which this final volume closes the circle of the trilogy as a whole that has attracted K. V. Bailey: 'A kind of culminating and satisfying circularity: a terraforming completed and new terraformings and wilderness entered upon: a second sun created: a new "First Hundred" starward bound: a valediction for and celebration of the founding "First Hundred".'

Because respondents are asked to name five books from those they have read in the previous year, the list never consists entirely of new books. Like everybody else, BSFA reviewers and committee members often have to wait for books to appear in paperback or else catch up on books they have been waiting to read – sometimes for years. As a result the list tends to be fairly eclectic, including quite a number of old titles. Nevertheless, it is unusual for an older book to feature highly in the list, especially when, as in the case of Stephen Baxter's *The Time Ships* (Voyager), it came second in last year's ballot and won last year's BSFA Award. It has to be a measure of the book's quality that it comes in as joint fourth this year. Joseph Nicholas summed up the response best of all: 'A work which I'm sure needs no comment whatever, other than to express a delighted surprise that it is actually possible to produce a work of genuine scientific romance in these cynical postmodernist times... and even more delight that the romance should be so damn good. (It should definitely have won the Hugo. A decade from now who will remember the novel that did? [Neal Stephenson, *The Diamond Age* – Eds.])' It's worth noting here, as well, that Baxter's latest novel, *Voyage*, which only came out in hardback fairly late in the year, has already made enough of an impact not only to make the Clarke shortlist but also to figure here as joint sixth. Yet again it was the science-fiction quality that was picked up on, although Andy Sawyer notes: 'in a way hardly sf – a historical shift changes our present very slightly and we go to Mars. And, er, that's it. But it's a neat revisiting of the nuts-and-bolt Clarkeian space-journey novel and the juggling with time is at times quite disconcerting. And there are on or two sections – deliberately brief – which capture that overpowering Clarkeian sense of awe along with the nuts and bolts.' And that sense of intellectual excitement that seems to be the connecting factor in all the books so far discussed is also applauded by Paul Allwood: 'I thought this might be boring, being just an alternative history on how mankind could have got to Mars using existing technology given the political will, but I found it gripping. Another fine piece of work from Baxter and I'm sure it will win some awards.'

There is something of the same sense of excitement in the novel that tied with *The Time Ships* for fourth place. *Gibson's Decline and Fall* by Sheri S. Tepper (Voyager) has also made

the Clarke shortlist, and to judge by Vikki Lee's comments it is the storytelling skill that might have got it there: 'I've waited a long time for my latest Tepper "fix" – and was not at all disappointed by this offering. All Tepper's drum-banging about green issues and population control is still there, but played down much more in this book – more built into the story. I'm hopeful that this is a sign Tepper is going back to what she does best – storytelling. An engrossing

read.' There was a time when dramatic storytelling, vigorous plots, strong characters and sharp new ideas were not always lauded as the finest virtues of science fiction, but however much good writing and complex intellectual stimulus are to be celebrated, people have never really lost a taste for colourful action as well. Norman Beswick certainly found it here, *Gibson's Decline and Fall* was, he declared: 'absorbing, preposterous, mind-bogglingly gorgeous'.

Usually by this stage in the game we would have exhausted the books that more than one respondent chose to name (hardly surprising, given the number of books published in each year, and the number of non-sf or old titles selected – it sometimes seems that any agreement at all is amazing). This year, however, has been something of an exception, and a staggering total of fifteen books were named by two or more respondents.

Of those that feature alongside Baxter's *Voyage* as joint sixth, perhaps the most surprising and in some ways the most pleasing is *The Sandman: Book of Dreams* edited by Neil Gaiman and Ed Kramer (Voyager). This is the first time in more years than I care to recollect that a short story anthology has received such a distinction.

Paul Kincaid considered it: 'One of the best original anthologies I have come across in years. The stories by John M. Ford and Susanna Clark alone make it stand out as indispensable.' Andy Sawyer went further: 'For once a spin-off collection which adds to the original. This is, in fact, splendid, so full of good things by people who have responded to Gaiman's *Sandman* that I hardly know where to start. Let me just cite George Alec Effinger's "Seven Nights in Slumberland"; Windsor McCoy's gorgeously chilling "Little Nemo in Slumberland" covered many of the emotional areas Gaiman now explores, and Effinger's brings the two comic-strip evocations of Dream together, highlighting both.'

A couple of years ago I was bemoaning the almost complete absence of short stories from the list, so the high placing of *The Sandman: Book of Dreams* is particularly pleasing. But what makes it even more surprising is that it isn't alone. Two other anthologies made the list, one of which was a reprint anthology – *On Spec: The First Five Years*, which Andy Mills described thus: 'An eclectic anthology gleaned from the Canadian sf magazine. Virtually all the writers were unknown to me so this proved to be a refreshing voyage of discovery, with many quality stories to enjoy.' The other original anthology was *Starlight 1* edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden. So far this has only been published in America (Tor), but Maureen Kincaid Speller's enthusiasm

## BSFA Award Shortlist (1996)

**Winner: Iain M Banks – *Excession***  
 Gill Alderman – *The Memory Palace*  
 Stephen Bury – *Interface*  
 Ken MacLeod – *The Stone Canal*  
 Kim Stanley Robinson – *Blue Mars*  
 Bruce Sterling – *Holy Fire*

## "One of the most ambitious utopian sequences of recent years"

Andy Sawyer on Kim Stanley Robinson's *Blue Mars*

suggests that if it does find a British publisher it could feature strongly in future years: 'The first of a new series of original short story anthologies, and those are rare enough these days, it possesses another rare commodity: artistic integrity. These stories are chosen by an sf fan for sf fans: they're well-written, thought-provoking, entertaining, they trample cheerfully over genre boundaries yet remain true to the vision of sf as mind-expanding. Patrick hoped the anthology would rekindle a sense of wonder; it certainly did for me.'

Maybe that rekindling of the sense of wonder is something that is going on more generally in sf at the moment. Certainly it is there in all the books that featured in the list up to now, and there does seem to be a genuine enthusiasm for science fiction on a grand scale. Witness the reaction to Peter F. Hamilton's *The Reality Dysfunction* (Macmillan): 'It's about time we had someone who could:

a) write well and b) tell a good space opera. Peter Hamilton was my discovery of 1996,' said Paul Allwood, while Gary Dalkin considered it: 'barnstorming space opera on not quite a grand enough scale to justify the length. Still a very enjoyable read.' Or the two novels by Jack McDevitt that made the list:

*Engines of God* (Voyager) is, said Colin Bird, 'good old old-fashioned sf: solid storytelling and big concepts clash in an enthralling tale.' The same book (another Clarke shortlist title) was 'pure Clarke', according to Gary Dalkin, 'and hence winning no marks for creativity or imagination, this is a tremendously exciting slice of archaeological sf. Disappointing primarily for stopping, rather than ending, nevertheless I will be reading the inevitable sequel.' McDevitt's other novel to see British publication during the year, *Ancient Shores* (Voyager), received a similar reception: 'Having read and enjoyed his *Engines of God* I was looking forward to this one. An easy read and an inventive first contact story, with interesting politics between American Indians, Scientist and the US Government', said Paul Allwood while Andrew M. Butler drew another comparison with Clarke: 'alien contact using the realist route: 2001 as envisioned by Clifford D. Simak. Even the ridiculous ending doesn't destroy the atmosphere.'

One wonders if there had been only one novel from McDevitt published in the year whether it would have finished higher still in the list. And the taste for that 'barnstorming', 'old-fashioned' sf continues with Ian McDonald's *Sacrifice of Fools* (Gollancz), as Steve Jeffery said: 'McDonald's ongoing recursive discourse with the sf genre takes in Gwyneth Jones's *White Queen and North Wind*? But it's also a pacey thriller, set in, and reflecting through an alien mirror, the divisions and distrust of Northern Ireland.' John D. Owen also commented on the novel's political dimension: 'In a year for alien invasions, you can trust Ian McDonald to turn the concept on its head, while still making a telling commentary of Ulster's continuing problems.' Yet another book lauded for its science-fictional virtues was *The Diamond Age* by Neal Stephenson (Penguin) which, like Baxter's *The Time Ships*, also featured strongly last year. Claire Brialey praised: 'the wealth of ideas, interplay of characters plotting, narrative variance, scope or pace. All impressive...' and Elizabeth

Billinger made a telling point when she said it was: 'like reading *Snow Crash* but more so. I was so conscious of the process of reading and yet still totally absorbed.'

The thing that strikes me about all these books – with the exception of *Sacrifice of Fools* and *Ancient Shores* – is their distance from normal experience in time or space, and even these two use aliens to take us away from the known. The near-future only features in a couple of books on the list, as if science fiction is once more taking us far away from the grim dystopia we begin to see in our daily world. Nevertheless, the near future does occur, though in the case of *Looking for the Mahdi* by N. Lee Wood (Vista), another title from the Clarke shortlist, it uses thriller elements alongside the sf as Ian McDonald does. Andrew M. Butler commented wryly: 'Despite wondering "What's a Mahdi?" for most of its length, this book had me gripped throughout; a thriller for a media

age with more twists and turns than a twisty-turny thing.' Steve Jeffery backed him up: 'Tense political thriller set in near future US/Gulf politics. If this goes out in the US with a blonde Barbie heroine on the cover, I shall join with Colin Greenland on a Campaign for Real Covers.'

The other novel that attempts to picture the familiar world of tomorrow is Bruce Sterling's *Holy Fire* (Orion), which made the BSFA Award shortlist. Brian Stableford considered it: 'a compelling account of a believable future'. Andy Mills pointed out that: 'This novel received very mixed notices but I have to say I am in no doubt that this was the best of the review books I received in 1996.'

It is not that the near-future has disappeared from the sort of sf people are choosing to read, it is there often enough in other books that have been listed. There are two of the other books that appear on the BSFA Award shortlist, *Interface* by Stephen Bury – 'A rattling good political techno-thriller, guaranteed to keep the reader turning the pages, but populated with a cast of solid, believable characters' (Andrew Seaman) – and Ken MacLeod's *The Stone Canal* – 'I suspect

one day he will write bizarre mainstream novels under the pseudonym Ken M. MacLeod; this Banksian-structured novel is as interesting for its political edge as its hi-tech thrills' (Andrew M. Butler). It is there, also, in MacLeod's previous novel, *The Star Fraction* – 'Triffic satire of both Trotskyist and libertarian ideas, even if you can't quite believe the Balkanised near-future Britain he offers' (Joseph Nicholas) – and in last year's Clarke Award winner, *Fairyland* by Paul J. McAuley – 'All too probable miseries to come – read it between political election manifestos' (Norman Beswick). Nevertheless, compared to the results from the previous years this seems a very small percentage, maybe the approaching election referred by Norman Beswick was enough to make us want something a little more escapist in our reading.

But if the near-future doesn't feature strongly this year, neither does the pastiche, or the 'literary' form of the fantastic. The one that does stand out is Jeff Noon's *Automated Alice* (Doubleday), of which Paul Billinger said: 'Not having read the Alice books I wasn't sure how I would

#### Arthur C. Clarke Award Shortlist (1996):

Stephen Baxter, *Voyage*  
Amitav Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*  
Jack McDevitt, *The Engines of God*  
Kim Stanley Robinson, *Blue Mars*  
Sheri S. Tepper, *Gibbon's Decline and Fall*  
N. Lee Wood, *Looking for the Mahdi*

#### "It should definitely have won the Hugo"

Joseph Nicholas on Stephen Baxter's *The Time Ships*

get on with this but I needn't have worried as the style took little effort to adapt to and rapidly became addictive. Plus, I'm now going to read Carroll's Alice books. *Automated Alice* is not quite alone on the list. Of the more literary fantastic we might count *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* by Stephen Marlowe, which Graham Andrews considered: 'The best novel yet written about Edgar Allan Poe – bar none. Fantasy/science fiction/thriller/historical/what-the-hell – the only companion piece I can think of for it is William Kotzwick's *Fata Morgana* (high praise, to my mind) or Richard Powers's *The Goldbug Variations*, which Maureen Kincaid Speller described as: 'Part mystery, part love story, two strands set in two different decades, it's about

cracking the genetic code, the computer code, the code of relationship, the code of information. Beautifully written, mixing Bach and DNA, passion and rationality, it seems to have everything I might want from a book.' And there is pastiche also in Martin Rowson's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*: 'The first and finest of all postmodern novels rendered as a graphic novel? Yes, and excellently so, and Rowson has managed to add hilarious jokes of his own that are perfectly in keeping with the spirit of Sterne's original', as Paul Kincaid said. Nevertheless, when we consider that the last two winners of the Book of the Year poll might have fallen into this loose category, it's a distinct change of pace.

Fantasy still seems to hold up well as favourite reading matter, though even here there has been something of a move away from the traditional heroic fantasy to something slightly more complex or, sometimes, just darker. This although fantasy of a more traditional kind appears on the list, such as Terry Goodkind's *Stone of Tears* and excellent follow-up to *Wizard's First Rule* – 'losing much of the "clunkiness" one gets with a first novel. Another adolescent love affair is improved by separation (always a good plan) and the book gets much darker as it progresses' (Vikki Lee) – and *A Man Betrayed* by J. V. Jones – 'A

romp of a fantasy that never quite makes the nitty-gritty need to rank it a "great" book. Not many books make me laugh out loud nowadays, but this did, frequently' (Vikki Lee) – these are outnumbered by fantasy that is more enigmatic and often much darker. Gill Alderman's BSFA Award-shortlisted novel *The Memory Palace* – 'I still keep finding things in this, and echoes of Gill's ambitious romp through an eclectic mix of reference, from Russian folk tales, the Fisher King, fairy tales and Steeleye Span' (Steve Jeffery) – or Charles de Lint's *Memory and Dream* – 'The best fantasy of the year, primarily because it forswears sword and sorcery for a modern setting, in which dark magic comes through Art (of the painterly variety)' (John D. Owen).

One of the things I've noticed is that, besides fantasy, sf readers seem to read lot of crime fiction. This year is no exception: *Invitation to a Funeral* by Molly Brown and the *Faith, Hope and Charity* trilogy by Len Deighton. But these are only a small sample of the wide variety of what we might loosely term 'mainstream literature' that is included, usually recommended because it arouses some science-fictional response. Andy Sawyer stated this explicitly in choosing

*Theory of Mind* by Sandjida O'Connell, which is: 'the kind of non-sf book you find which sf readers should appreciate – and not only because of the references to Philip K. Dick. Through a researcher's study of chimpanzees, her experiences with her self-centred lover, and a highly intelligent but severely autistic child, we speculate about empathy and whether we can really imagine other minds as autonomous individuals. Despite the melodramatic ending, a fascinating book.' Andrew M. Butler included Pat Barker's *The*

*Regeneration Trilogy* on the strength of: 'Sex, psychiatry, slaughter, Stevensonian echoes, Sassoon and science fiction: what more can you ask for in a book?' K. V. Bailey hailed Alan Garner's long-awaited novel *Strandloper* for 'ancient

custom, the mind's dreamtime, the surfacing of archetypes, the cruelly shifting ironies of history, all cunningly interwoven.' Janet Stephenson said of Tom Holland's *Attis*: 'while not sf (it's mainstream-literary-mystery, an updated reworking of the affairs, romantic and politic, of the poet Catullus) appealed massively – it has a sense of place which is both surreal and bleakly surrealistic. The atmosphere if nothing else put me in mind of *Gormenghast*. Full of energy, it is more dense, more satisfying, than *The Vampyre*.' And Maureen Kincaid Speller's discovery of 1996 was *Loving Little Egypt* by Thomas McMahon: 'Theoretically, I should hate this, I'm not fond of the use of historical figures, but this works. Marly Void, a physics prodigy who is almost blind, learns to tap into the burgeoning phone system of 1920s America, setting up a communications network for the visually handicapped. It doesn't take a genius to see this novel has neatly pre-empted the later phenomenon of phone phreaking, a precursor of computer hacking, but the story that surrounds this neat idea is equally startling.'

Then again, while there is not much non-fiction about sf on the list – John Clute's *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* is the sole exception – people have clearly been reading a lot of non-fiction, and much of it has been

recommended because of the way it chimes with the sf they read. Steve Jeffery found an sf reference in the history book *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* by Frances Yates, which describes: 'a brief period in Europe on

the crux of the Thirty Years War where politic and occult/experimental science stood briefly poised on the brink. Had things gone differently, we might even now be in a world more recognisable in the novels of Mary Gentle.' But you can't help feeling that there was a similar impetus behind Andrew Seaman's choice of *Gutenberg Elegies* by Sven Bickers, which he characterised as 'a series of cogently argued and wonderfully inspiring arguments in defence of reading in the age of post-literacy and the Internet' or Maureen Kincaid Speller's espousal of Alberto Manguel's *History of Reading*: 'This has been criticised for its supposed lack of scholarship, but it's not meant to be an exhaustive study of the art but instead an historical overview and a personal celebration of that most private of pastimes. Manguel is an enthusiast for reading (and how!) and his book guarantees that you never again take the skill for granted.' She also championed *Longitude* by Dava Sobel: 'A slim and admittedly expensive volume (but doesn't it feel good and solid in the hand?), it

## "Absorbing, preposterous, mind-bogglingly gorgeous"

Norman Beswick on Sherri S. Tepper's *Gibbon's Decline and Fall*

## "Banks has style and imagination to burn"

Colin Bird on Iain Banks' *Excession*



proved an unexpected hit. I'm not one for hype, but I'm a sucker for scientific history, and this book was a gem. The "longitude" problem was a scientific dilemma of the first order in an age of exploration where men were still lost the moment land disappeared. Sobel tells the story of how John Hamson, an engineer, challenged the astronomers and eventually won. Filled with skulduggery, derring-do and the determination of one very ordinary man, it is as gripping and enthralling as a novel.' Even *The Works of Lord Byron* had Andy Sawyer: 'annoying the family with sudden spurts of giggles in the same way as I do when I read a Terry Pratchett book.'

As an aside, for the first time a film script makes it into the list, and not one but two (or, in a sense, three). *Smoke and Blue in the Face* by Paul Auster got this recommendation from Paul Kincaid: 'Smoke was undoubtedly the best film of the year and the script shows why: delicate, sensitive and precise characterisation. As usual with Auster, a beautiful piece of writing.' David Cronenberg's script for *Crash* was, said Andrew Seaman, 'a tantalising glimpse of what we're missing.'

For all that, though, it is science fiction that still arouses most enthusiasm. There are not just the anthologies mentioned earlier, but no less than eight short story collections on the list, ranging from a collection of classic stories by James Blish, *A Dusk of Idols and Other Stories*, to two new collections by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Unlocking the Air* - 'A really excellent collection with stories that made me giggle and one that nearly made me cry and a couple that left me feeling baffled and passed over' (Sue Thomason) - and *A*

*Fisherman of the Inland Sea* - 'it was marvellous to come across these stories which can stand among her best. She has gone back to what she herself has said is her primary concern - to depict and understand character - rather than letting the theme dominate' (Cherith Baldry).

And above all there are the novels. There is time travel in Orson Scott Card's *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus*, medical detection in Amitav Ghosh's Clarke Award shortlisted novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* ('A fine combination of sf and historical detection which has, tucked away inside it, one of the best and most chilling ghost stories I've ever read' - Paul Kincaid), the 'pure delight' (Cherith Baldry) of Terry Pratchett's *Hogfather*, and *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell ('an earnest account of first contact, solidly based in anthropological and historical accounts of past first contacts' - Brian Stableford). The sf that predominates, as it has done right through this list, is 'widescreen space opera' (Colin Bird), the colourful adventure, exemplified in their various ways by David Brin's *Brightness Reef*, Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Gap into Ruin*, Stephen Palmer's *Memory Seed* - 'An intriguing and promising debut which fails to deliver its potential but still offers more than several books by supposed masters of the genre' (Gary Dalkin) - Dan Simmons's *Endymion*, Michael Marshall Smith's *Spare* - 'Mix of many genres, crime, cyberpunk, horror. Fast moving and a compulsive read' (Paul Billinger) - Gene Wolfe's *Exodus from the Long Sun* and David Zindell's *The Wild* and many more.

It has been a dramatic year for science fiction.

### Also recommended:

Gill Alderman - *The Memory Palace*  
Paul Auster - *Smoke and Blue in the Face*  
Iain Banks - *Whit*

Clive Barker - *Sacrament*  
Pat Barker - *The Regeneration Trilogy*  
Roland Barthes - *Mythologies*  
Sven Birkerts - *The Gutenberg Elegies*  
James Blish - *A Dusk of Idols and Other Stories*

Rebecca Bradley - *Lady in Gil*  
David Brin - *Brightness Reef*  
Molly Brown - *Invitation to a Funeral*  
Bill Bryson - *Notes from a Small Island*  
Stephen Bury - *Interface*  
George, Lord Byron - *The Works of Lord Byron*

Orson Scott Card - *Maps in a Mirror*  
Orson Scott Card - *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus*  
Jonathan Carroll - *The Panic Hand*  
C. J. Cherryh - *Fortress in the Eye of Time*  
John Clute - *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*

David Cronenberg - *Crash: the screenplay*  
Charles de Lint - *Memory and Dream*  
Len Deighton - *Faith - Hope and Charity*  
trilogy

Stephen R. Donaldson - *The Gap into Ruin*  
Terry Dowling - *Rynosseros*  
Helen Fielding - *Bridge Jones's Diary*  
Stephen Fry - *Making History*  
Jostein Gaarder - *Sophie's World*  
Alan Garner - *Strandloper*  
Amitav Ghosh - *The Calcutta Chromosome*  
William Gibson - *Idoru*  
Terry Goodkind - *Stone of Tears*

Nicola Griffith - *Slow River*  
Ken Grimwood - *Replay*  
Tom Holland - *Attis*  
Peter Hopkirk - *On Secret Service East of Constantinople*

William Horwood - *The Wolves of Time*  
Ronald Hutton - *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*  
Peter James - *The Sunken Kingdom: The Atlantis Mystery Solved*

J V Jones - *A Man Betrayed*  
Graham Joyce - *The Tooth Fairy*  
Arlow Karlen - *Plague's Progress*  
Guy Gavriel Kay - *The Lions of Al-Rassan*  
Gary Kilworth - *A Midsummer's Nightmare*  
Gary Kilworth - *The Roof of Voyaging*  
Stephen King - *Rose Madder*  
Nancy Kress - *Beggars in Spain*  
Dave Langford - *The Silence of the Langford*  
Ursula K. Le Guin - *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*

Ursula K. Le Guin - *Unlocking the Air*  
Richard Mabey (ed.) - *Flora Britannica*  
Paul J. McAuley - *Fairyland*  
Ken MacLeod - *The Star Fraction*  
Ken MacLeod - *The Stone Canal*  
Thomas McMahon - *Loving Little Egypt*  
Sara Maitland - *Home Truths*  
Alberto Manguel - *History of Reading*  
Stephen Marlowe - *The Lighthouse at the End of the World*

Mick Mercer - *The Hex Files: The Goth Bible*  
Spike Milligan - *Black Beauty according to Spike Milligan*  
James Morrow - *Homeless in Abaddon*  
Alvaro Mutis - *Maqroll*

Kim Newman - *The Bloody Red Baron*  
Haing S. Ng - *Surviving the Killing Fields*  
Patrick Nielsen Hayden (ed.) - *Starlight 1*  
Sandjida O'Connell - *Theory of Mind*  
On Spec: *The First Five Years*  
Tim Page - *Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden*

Stephen Palmer - *Memory Seed*  
Richard Powers - *The Goldbug Variations*  
Terry Pratchett - *Hogfather*  
Terry Pratchett - *Johnny and the Bomb*  
E. Annie Proulx - *Heart Songs*  
Ed Regis - *Nano*

Martin Rowson - *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*  
Mary Doria Russell - *The Sparrow*  
Carol Sagan - *The Demon-Haunted World*  
Francis A. Schaeffer - *Escape from Reason*  
Sharon Shinn - *Archangel*  
Dan Simmons - *Endymion*  
Michael Marshall Smith - *Only Forward*  
Michael Marshall Smith - *Spare*  
Dava Sobel - *Longitude*  
S. P. Somtow - *The Pavilion of Frozen Women*

Brian Stableford - *Salamander's Fire*  
Neal Stephenson - *Snow Crash*  
Howard Waldrop - *Strange Things in Close Up*

Jill Paton Walsh - *Knowledge of Angels*  
Ian Watson - *Hard Questions*  
James White - *The Galactic Gourmet and The Water Papers*  
David Wingrove - *Days of Bitter Strength*  
Gene Wolfe - *Exodus from the Long Sun*  
Frances Yates - *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*



# Cognitive Mapping 8: Violence

by Paul Kincaid

We live in a violent century. Inevitably, popular literature – all literature – has reflected this: war and crime have been a fundamental element in the plots of an overwhelming majority of novels and films, plays and television drama. It is hard to think of a computer game today that does not have violence as its guiding force, as the impetus that drives everything else.

A lot of this, of course, is cartoon violence: on one page the hero is

cruelly beaten by the bad guys, by the next page he is up and about as if nothing had happened. Or a war leaves the screen littered with dead bodies, but they are neat and tidy, there is no blood or pain. It is simply a conveniently violent backdrop to highlight the heroics of our protagonist. There is plenty of this in science fiction.

Militaristic sf has a long history of providing violent but generally sanitised wars as backdrop for far-fetched adolescent adventures, ranging from the space wars of E. E. Smith's *Lensman* series (1934-50) in which each subsequent episode seemed to feature a yet larger weapon, to the conflation of World War Two and alien attack in Harry Turtledove's

*Worldwar* quartet (1994-96). In film this has been, if anything, even more obvious with marauding aliens from *The Thing* (1951) and *The War of the Worlds* (1953) to *Independence Day* (1996) and *Mars Attacks!* (1996) there simply to provide an excuse for a visually satisfying sequence of on-screen explosions – a far cry from the rare message of peace that is preached by the alien visitor in one of the first major sf films after the violence of the Second World War, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951).

Often violence provides an easy drama: the writer keeps the action going by introducing another fight just as things begin to flag. Occasionally it used to signify the degeneracy of the bad guys: we know the Morlocks in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) have degenerated because of the way they attack the peaceful Eloi, just as the ritualised violence in Piers Anthony's *Battle Circle* trilogy (1968-75) is a symbol of the way this post-apocalyptic society has broken down.

Sometimes violence acts as a counter-example, a representation of the author's horror at the violence in the real world around him. Philip George Chadwick reacted to the rise of the fascist powers by creating the chilling violence of *The Death Guard* (1939), but in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War George Orwell, in *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949), saw a grey, inhumane, communistic future in terms of one of the most violent images in the whole of literature: a boot stamping on the human face, forever. Political satire has continued to provoke violent images ever since, whether it is Norman Spinrad's cruel but slapdash novel *The Men in the Jungle* (1967), typical of the way a generation of American writers reacted to the Vietnam War, or Ursula K. Le Guin making a feminist point in stories such as 'A Woman's Liberation' (1995) by subjecting her protagonist to a series of rapes, attacks and degradations.

More often, today, writers paint a generalised picture: violence is a constant but often unremarked part of the background to their novels. By the end of Iain M. Banks's *Against a Dark Background* (1993), for example, virtually every named character in the book has been killed or damaged in some way. Or violence is a recognised but unavoidable social evil as long ago as 1962, when Anthony Burgess portrayed beatings and rape as a common form of entertainment for disenfranchised teenage gangs in an urbanised future in *A Clockwork Orange*. Certainly the lustre of the future that once was a feature of science fiction has long since worn off, and few of us are

likely to want to live in the grim, realistically nasty world portrayed, for instance, in Richard Calder's *Dead Girls* (1992) or Jack Womack's aptly titled *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* (1993).

For all the persistence of violence throughout the last century or more of our genre, few science-fiction writers have used it as much more than a dramatic backdrop, a propellant to the plot, or an easy symbol of their

disgust for the way our society is going. But in one of the first and in its way most violent of all science-fiction novels, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson actually makes the violence of Hyde a fundamental part of his acerbic examination of the veneer of civilisation. The story is based on the true case of deacon Brodie, a

*Presently her eye wandered to the other, and she was surprised to recognise in him a certain Mr Hyde, who once visited her master, and for whom she had conceived a dislike. He had in his hand a heavy cane, with which he was trifling; but he answered never a word, and seemed to listen with an ill-contained impatience. And then all of a sudden he broke out in a great flame of anger, stamping with his foot, brandishing the cane, and carrying on (as the maid described it) like a madman. The old gentleman took a step back, with the air of one very much surprised and a trifle hurt; and at that Mr Hyde broke out of all bounds, and clubbed him to the earth. And next moment, with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under foot, and hailing down a storm of blows, under which the bones were audibly shattered and body jumped upon the roadway. At the horror of these sights and sounds, the maid fainted.*

*Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) Robert Louis Stevenson

respectable and successful Edinburgh merchant who, by night, was an equally successful thief until he was captured and hanged on the gallows of his own devising. This notion of duality, of civilised and non-civilised behaviour existing side-by-side in the same person, was explored and expanded by

*It seemed John's hands worked of their own, tearing the pages aside, grabbing for inks and washes while the drawings grew in depth and vividness. The brilliant side lighting; film of sweat on bodies that distended and heaved in ecstasies of pain; arms disjointed by the weights and pulleys, stomachs exploded by the rack, bright tree shapes of new blood running to the floor. It seemed the limner tried to force the stench, the squalor, even at last the noise down onto the paper; Brother Sebastian, impressed in spite of himself, had finally, dragged John away by force, but he couldn't stop him working [...]*

*He only spoke once, and then to Brother Joseph; leaning upright, eyes frightened and wild, gripping the boy's wrist. 'I enjoyed it, Brother,' he whispered. 'God and the Saints preserve me, I enjoyed my work...'*

*Pavane* (1966) Keith Roberts

becomes a monster of increasing violence. What civilisation has done, Stevenson is saying, is provide a stopper which bottles in our natural violence and by so doing allows us to live a more pleasant life.

Violence is, of course, ugly and unpleasant. We none of us wish to be its victim nor do we want to be part of a violent society. (The adverse reaction we have to the worlds of *Dead Girls* or *The Men in the Jungle*, for instance, is ample evidence for this.) Nevertheless, Keith Roberts provides something of a correction to Stevenson's view in 'Brother John', the story that forms the centre of his mosaic novel *Pavane*. Brother John is a talented artist and a monk who is called in by the Inquisition to record their activities. This becomes a series of pictures of bodies distorted by pain and violence, but the real horror does not lie in the violence itself but in Brother John's reaction: 'I enjoyed my work'. Here we see violence not as something terrible but as something fascinating: it is not the violence bottled within us but the love of violence, the ability to witness without speaking out, the way that fascination overwhelms disgust that is the true horror. Martin Amis captures something of this in *Time's Arrow* (1991) in which we witness a man's life lived backwards. He begins in old age as a surgeon who takes whole, healthy bodies and breaks them into the victims of accidents or disease, but as he grows young he becomes a doctor in a Nazi concentration camp who takes wrecked bodies and turns them into whole human beings once more. The violence of the twentieth century has been transmogrified, but in the transformation the old questions of complicity are asked anew.

Stevenson seems to have discovered a truth in the notion that civilisation holds in check the raw violence within us, but Roberts seems to have found something deeper and more disturbing, the fascination of violence that implicates us all in the crimes of our time. It is perhaps this same complicity, this same fascination, that makes us write scenes of violence into so much of our fiction, and, more importantly, that keeps us reading such scenes.

# From Friday to Mahdi: Some Notes on Cyborg Sex and Violence

by Mary Anne Lever

The recent gestures begin in *Blade Runner*, but that is only an arbitrary starting point. Think of the two death scenes which dominate the film: first, the slow-motion assassination of Zhora, the stripper replicant – the lady with the snake, whose shower we have witnessed and no doubt been titillated by – her aestheticised and eroticised death becomes a soap powder commercial, with glass showering around her. Of course, she made the mistake of hitting our square-jawed hero. Second, the wholly sexualised fight between him and Pris ('Your basic pleasure model') leading to her expiration-as-orgasm.

At around this time Robert A. Heinlein published his novel *Friday*, the tale of an Artificial Person, or, rather, an Artificial Woman, whose mother was a test-tube and whose father was a knife. The Freudian symbolism of this (cups and swords) is such that even someone created away from an essentially gendered origin is implicated in the biological battlegrounds.

In 1985 Donna Haraway published her 'Manifesto for Cyborgs', an attempt to think beyond such old-fashioned dualisms as machine and organic, male and female and so on, and declared that we are all cyborgs now. The cyborg identity is one of 'transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities'. We should be able to expect fruitful analysis of gender politics from both Robert A. Heinlein and Roberta Heinlein. And yet for reasons which will become apparent in a moment, I'm uncomfortable with Heinlein's novel as an example of feminist discourse.

At the start of chapter two Friday is attacked and raped by enemy agents:

The whole operation had amateurish touches. No professional group uses either beating or rape before interrogation today; there is no profit in it; any professional is trained to cope with either or both. For rape she (or he – I hear it's worse for males) can either detach the mind [ ... ] emulate the old Chinese adage [ ... or] the victim can treat rape as an opportunity to gain an edge over her captors.

Note how the event becomes shrouded in economic connotations, as if the most degrading and humiliating experience that a person can experience is purely a business transaction, an opportunity to be taken advantage of. Friday seeks revenge for the rape, not because of her violation but because the perpetrators weren't pleasant enough: "the scum should bathe and he should have his teeth fixed and should brush them and use a mouth wash. And somebody must tell him that it is not polite to slap a woman with whom he has copulated." Indeed: an act of bestial brutality is trivialised as a breach of etiquette. I find myself unable to read any more of this novel.

I fear that the average (male) reader of sf will figure that getting around a woman's 'no' is simply a matter of improved technique, and that the unaverage (female) reader will presume that such enforced sex is something to be endured rather than deplored. But that was the early eighties for you – fifteen years later, after the men's tree-hugging antics and the spectre of HIV, things must have improved.

Take N. Lee Wood's debut novel *Looking for the Mahdi* (1996). Even with the dedication to 'Norman, my friend, my partner', one might assume that this is a male writer, were it not for the extratextual knowledge that this is Norman Spinrad's wife. Here it is a male cyborg, John Halton, an artificial bodyguard who is being smuggled into an invented

Gulf state to further American interests. He is being smuggled in with the aid of a Kate Adie-like journalist, Kay Munadi, but a journalist who has to disguise herself as a man. By the time she has to leave the country: 'as a woman disguised as a man disguised as a woman' (334) – she is deep in cyborg territory.

As a man, she is twice the victim of violence; firstly, a classic kick to the crotch situation:

Do you know that if you kick a woman in the crotch as if she had balls, the resulting physiological incapacitation is very similar? Well, okay, maybe not *exactly* the same, but when he kicked me with a steel-reinforced boot, I heard the bones go crunch. I don't know if it hurt as bad as it might have had I been a man, but it was bad enough. (81)

Note the same cross-gender comparison as Heinlein made, but also note that this is a situation that the male reader is more likely to be repelled by than turned on by. This attack is chickenfeed compared to a later ambush:

He didn't rape me, nothing so simple as pushing a protruding part of his body into a concave part of mine [...] He was careful not to create an injury I could actually die from. Not then. Not at first. He systematically broke several of my fingers, pausing between screams, then expertly squashed my nose into pulp (313)

This is much more graphic than anything in *Friday*, but at the same time there is something coldly clinical about it. The torturer takes a quiet pleasure in the extended sequence of inflicting pain, the narrator unemotionally portrays her experience. I know journalists are meant to observe, but we are uncomfortably positioned as voyeurs.

At least Munadi is not taking pleasure from this torture, but then she takes pleasure from so little. Haraway argued in her manifesto for 'pleasure in the crossing of boundaries'. What boundaries, then, does Munadi cross? Racially she is a combination of American and Arab, in appearance she can pass for a man ('As a woman, I was homely as a mud fence, but as a *man*, the same features were judged as "craggy," or "distinguished" ' (111)) but not so handsomely that she is attractive to gay men. Nor are the lesbian possibilities explored: as a man she operates in a culture which downplays female desire, and therefore no woman is allowed to fall in love with her male persona.

On one occasion the gender politics are played out, with the CDI agent Laidcliff:

I said in a low, sexy voice. 'I'm saving myself for you.' [...] His reflex was lovely to watch. His eyes told him I was a man before his brain kicked in and reminded him I was really female. Then he glanced around hastily, afraid someone would see and think he was with a faggot. (30)

Alas they become polluted in homophobic feelings, and later cause her trouble. Even her sexual intercourse with Halton cannot be viewed as a transgressive act – except for the human / machine boundary – since he is not responding to her apparent maleness but to her (female) chemical secretions.

Alas, in the age of the cyborg, the transgression, the hybrid, we return to biological essentialism, and traditional gender roles. Violence remains something that women are forced to tolerate and, even worse, are willing to consent to.

Mary Anne Lever teaches self-defence - AMB/GD



# First Impressions

## Reviews of Hardback and Paperback Originals

Edited by Paul Kincaid

Peter S. Beagle

*The Unicorn Sonata*

Headline Feature, 1996, 154pp, £9.99

Nigel Suckling, Linda & Roger Garland

*The Book of the Unicorn*

Paper Tiger, 1996, 128pp, £12.95

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

*The Book of the Unicorn* is a lavish large-format softback rich in fantastic, often full-page, colour illustrations, the work of Linda and Roger Garland. Thematically and stylistically, these match the sections into which Nigel Suckling has divided his survey of unicorn myth, lore and 'natural history'. Its four chapters ('The Legends', 'Unicorns in the West', 'The Lion and the Unicorn', 'Unicorns in the East') are subdivided into such topics as 'Seekers and Sightings', 'Travellers' Tales' and 'The Unicorn and the Maiden', this last containing an illustration of Therese protecting the exhausted unicorn from Boron's hunters, the tone of which is Pre-Raphaelite, the maiden evocatively Burne-Jones. In 'Unicorns in the East' the unicorn (the Chi'-lin) is depicted rising from the waters in a delicate pastiche of Chinese landscape painting. I found particularly pleasing a black and white medievally-styled representation of the chase for 'The Wondrous Alicorn'. The alicorn was the unicorn's horn which was endowed with so many medicinal and magical properties (such as the detection of poisons) that any number of fakes and substitutes (narwhal, rhino) flooded the market. Suckling instances these in detail, as he does the various one-

horned beasts which have been created by accident or by grafting. The chapter of widest (and deepest) interest is 'The Lion and the Unicorn' which, after tracing the children's rhyme through history and heraldry, goes on to consider the two emblematic figures in relation to the Tree of Life and their association with the sun and moon. In the alternations of day and night, phase and eclipse, they have assumed cosmic significance; in other guises, as god or devil, they came to be religious symbols. The text includes brief references, though there is no bibliography or index, it is not that kind of book; but it does cover the field pleasantly and informatively, and delights with its fantastic paintings.

At one point, Suckling quotes the Unicorn's astonishment on encountering Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*: 'I always thought that [human children] were fabulous monsters'. Peter Beagle's *The Unicorn Sonata* (not a sequel to *The Last Unicorn* but a welcome return to the fabled beast) starts with a unicorn meeting a human child, thirteen-year-old Josephine, in a small suburban Los Angeles music shop. The unicorn has assumed human shape and is trying to sell his horn (transformed into a wonderful melody-producing instrument) for the gold which could give him permanent entry to human life. Joey - the 'Alice' or, perhaps more comparably, the 'Dorothy' of this semi-adult fairytale - hears his unearthly music and is eventually lured by it to cross the Border into the world, not of Oz, but of She'rah. She is greeted by the satyr, Ko, who takes her to the 'Eldest', the leaders of a varied population of unicorns inhabiting this idyllic terrain of meadows, craggy heights and streams with, centrally, an expanse of rose-red forest: Sundown Wood.

Joey's meeting with the Eldest is deep in this luminous and music-filled wood, and there she realises that they are blind, a fate awaiting all the unicorns. How Indigo's 'trading' visits to LA and Joey's grandmother's escape from an LA rest home to Shei'rah will help them, is the story's dramatic substance.

The charm of the book lies in Joey's encounters with individual unicorns and with other exotics: baby satyrs, the naiad-like 'brook jalla' and elusive mini-dragons. Sundown Wood, though it has its dangers, is less menacing than Robert Holdstock's Ryhope Wood, but it, too, is a kind of reservoir of myth, though its flavour is more 'classical'. There is, in

fact, a Platonic aspect to the Eldest and to the musical harmonies which emanate from Shei'rah and at rare times flow over into the Outworld (our world) to which unicorns have crossed to live human lives. The mingling of perennial allegory with West Coast viewpoints and colloquialisms, adroitly avoiding banality and sentimentality, manages to be unforced and does much, on the one hand, to universalise the story, and on the other to make it congenial as contemporary fantasy. Incidents in its progress are illustrated appropriately with a fine mixture of realism and outlandishness, with nine full-page colour paintings by Robert Rodrigues.

**Stephen Bradbury**  
(with David Howe)

**Reflections**  
Paper Tiger, 1996, 128pp, £12.99

**David B. Mattingly** (with  
Cathleen Cogswell)

**Alternate Views,  
Alternate Universes**  
Paper Tiger, 1996, 128pp, £12.99

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

An exercise in contrast: two art books, two very different styles and artists – one a British ex-postman, the other an American who served out an apprenticeship as a matte painter for Disney Studios.

Stephen Bradbury's work will be instantly familiar to almost anyone who has casually browsed the covers of more than a handful of fantasy novels. That almost cartoon-like style of sharp-edged, ice-blue mountains in the far distance, spiked cities and waterfalls, ornate pillars and borders of twisted dragons, leaves and sword hilts. Recurrent motifs that become as familiar and distinctive as the little SB in the bottom corner. This is what Bradbury disarmingly refers to as his 'heavy metal' period, a harder-edged style he started to develop around the mid-'80s starting with Freda Warrington's *Blackbird* series, and reaching a sort of apotheosis in his covers for books by Sheri Tepper, Marc Alexander and Elizabeth A. Lynn.

Up to now, I have to admit, I've not been a great fan of Bradbury's work. It all seemed a bit too pristine, sharp and clinical. On the other hand, this is cover painting, not fine art; it has a job to do, a message to convey: this is a fantasy novel. In this, it is supremely successful.

Seeing his work collected like this, however, you get a better sense of progression in a very personal style, and perhaps a better appreciation of Bradbury as an artist. More recent work sees him moving back to a softer, more diffuse look, in a series of covers starting with Julian May's *Jack the Bodiless*. He also seems to have started a minor trend for covers with disembodied eyes floating above a foreground landscape. Again, there are recurrent motifs and elements that serve to tie a series of books together as a whole. In the last couple of years Bradbury's style has changed again, almost to a Pre-Raphaelite mood of misty lakeside landscapes. The juxtaposition of 1995's *The Kingmaking* (Helen Hollick) or 1993's *Mists of Avalon* (Marion Zimmer

Bradley) with the stylised formalism of his mid-'80s 'heavy metal' period is quite striking.

The work of David Mattingly is, to my mind – perhaps because of unfamiliarity and because it is more wide ranging in subject, style and technique – less immediately distinctive. Mattingly is probably more technically proficient as an illustrator, although his figures and action scenes often have an oddly posed, stuck-on, quality, as if they were constructed as a collage. Part of this may lie in his free use of the computer and scanner in composition. For works that are intended as collages, such as the covers for *Star Wars* novelisations, this works quite well, but other tableaux, particularly action scenes, look curiously static and frozen.

The computer comes into full play, however, in Mattingly's depictions of interplanetary hardware, which are rendered in digitized hyperrealism, as if someone had built a hugely detailed model of one of those 1970s Chris Foss spaceships and then photographed it. The effect of this level of detail extending far into the background, is initially disconcerting and unreal, until you realise that this is space, and perhaps you *would* be able to see that far and that clearly without the blurring effect of atmospheric haze. It reminds me of the first time I tried contact lenses after years of the same under-prescribed spectacles, and stood in the middle of a busy shopping centre, amazed at how much I could now see in that formerly blurry netherland outside the frames. In painterly terms, though, it is still odd, because the eye is drawn everywhere rather than any central focus, and some of Mattingly's compositional tricks to overcome this come across as artificial and forced.

Artists, it seems, cannot resist playing games and visual gags. Look closely and you'll find Mattingly's cat's head lurking among an asteroid swarm, little in-joke messages among the city neon signs and graffiti. Bradbury, who works in a less directly illustrative and more interpretative style, is less prone to this, possibly because he can work his personal motifs directly into the paintings and borders.

Art, as much as music and fiction, is very much a personal taste. Of the two books here I prefer the Bradbury, as much for the stylised compositions as for the short notes and cover credits which accompany each painting. Mattingly's paintings are often technically impressive, but there are few I could see hanging on my walls.

**Vera Chapman**

**The Three Damosels**  
Gollancz, 1996, 383pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The life of the average Arthurian damosel was restricted. Carried off by Breuse Saunce Pitie, rescued and married, she would dwindle down into a lady and never be heard of again. So it should be no surprise that in writing these three short

novels, each with a different damosel as its central character, Vera Chapman had to invent two of them.

The authentic member of the trio is Lynette, who appears at Arthur's court in Book VII of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* seeking the help of a knight and is furious to be fobbed off with the kitchen boy who is soon to emerge as Sir Gareth of Orkney. But Vera Chapman does something more interesting than merely retelling familiar material: the

original story is barely alluded to; rather the novel traces Lynett's background up to the point when we meet her in Malory then follows what happened to her after that story is over. She emerges as a challenging character, ill at ease in the rôle which her society lays down for her and finding eventually another destiny for herself, but not without pain.

Lynett's story is the second of the three; first comes the story of Vivian, the imagined granddaughter of Merlin and Vivian/Nimue, whom Chapman identifies with Bertilak's Lady in the Middle English poem *Gawain and the Green Knight*. This is another Gawain, too, nephew of the 'real' Gawain, and as Chapman retells the poem she also connects these two characters into the Arthurian world and shows how their story influences its fate.

The third novel tells of Ursulet, daughter of Arthur and Guenevere, who attempts and fails to make herself Queen after the departure of Arthur and the destruction of his kingdom. Together with Ambris, the son of Gawain and Vivian, and helped by Lynett, she discovers a new way of

transmitting the spirit of Arthur down the ages to create a response for the time when Arthur shall come again.

As this shows, the three novels are linked, not just because they share the Arthurian background, and part of the fascination of reading them is the tracing of the various threads, of theme and plot, that run through all three stories. When I first came to read this book I had my doubts about adding to and adapting the Arthurian material so freely, but I don't doubt any more. In extending the legend and exploring its themes, Vera Chapman is carrying on the tradition of the Middle Ages. There's no reason to think of the Matter of Britain as if it was carved on stone tablets, not when the adaptation is as sensitive and imaginative as this. The colour of the Arthurian world as portrayed here is a joy; the stories are moving and above all true.

These three novels were originally published in the '70s and, although Lynett's story reappeared in the collection *The Pendragon Chronicles*, the complete version has been difficult to get hold of. It's here now; it makes a splendid book and we should all celebrate its reappearance.

Alice Thomas Ellis

*Fairy Tale*

Viking, 1996, 213pp, £16.00

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Mainstream writers who venture into the fantastic tend to do so with an agenda. They are not writing out of the heart of the territory we know as fantasy or science fiction; rather they are using its devices because it suits their purpose. What tends to happen, therefore, is that the fantastic is used in a blunt and unknowing way by someone with no appreciation of its nuances or possibilities or history (as with P.D. James, for instance); or the fantastic device is given far more prominence or weight than it needs for the sake of the story simply because the author is showing off his invention (as Martin Amis did in *Time's Arrow*); or, more often, both. When a mainstream writer, therefore, touches only lightly on the magical and leaves it as a vague shiver barely visible in the background of the tale but vital for any understanding of it, it is an accomplishment to be applauded.

Not that Alice Thomas Ellis is a complete stranger to the fantastic (she has ventured into this territory in previous novels), or that this is necessarily a great book. It isn't, it is neither as original nor as effective as it might have been; but it is all too easy to imagine the hamfisted attempt that too many other writers might have made of this story.

The thing to bear in mind is that *Fairy Tale* is a comedy, one of those peculiar literary confections intended to raise a wry smile rather than an all-out guffaw. It is, therefore, peopled with the sort of paper-thin characters never intended to step off the page into any sort of real life. Eloise, at the centre of it all, has the sort of fey vacuousness that makes

you wonder how she could have survived long enough to get married – or how the practical, unimaginative non-entity Simon could have become her husband. Claire, Eloise's mother, is the sort of dithering, unseeing air-head that has become the cliché for sitcom motherhood. And there is, of course, Miriam, the practical, no-nonsense older woman who gets it all sorted out but who would, in truth, never have befriended Claire in the first place or got herself into the sort of situation we are asked to accept here.

Suspension of disbelief, in other words, comes under tremendous strain before you can even start to accept the story. But if you can get past the fragility of the characterisation, the subtle incursion of the supernatural into a remote corner of Wales has a robust, everyday ordinariness that is really quite wonderful. Eloise starts to receive visits by four strange men in business suits who talk with strange accents yet say nothing she can remember afterwards. Then she declares she wants a baby. Unsettled by her stranger than usual behaviour, Simon summons Claire and Miriam to visit, but before they can achieve anything Eloise appears with a baby. Where it came from, nobody can say, but before long the four strange men reappear – and their demands become ever more threatening.

What does work well in this slight novel is the supernatural. Alice Thomas Ellis is true to the tradition in her portrait of fairy kind, but at the same time she gives a convincing picture of a race pushed ever more to the edges of existence by the encroachments of rational humanity. This is not quite the adult fairy tale it might have been, but at the same time it gives a solidity and a menace to the fairies that is both welcome and pleasing.

Laura Esquivel

*The Law of Love*

Chatto & Windus, 1996, 273pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

*The Law of Love* is a strange blend of magic realism and New Age spirituality, from the author of the award-winning *Like Water for Chocolate*, which was made into a successful film. Esquivel's second novel is set mainly in 23rd-century Mexico; but there are flashbacks to the past using an imaginative blend of music and graphic art. This may be the first true multi-media novel; it is packaged with a CD which contains a

catholic mixture of Puccini arias and Mexican *danzones*, and the narrative switches between text and pictures – drawn by the celebrated Latin-American graphic artist, Miguelanxo Prado – as the characters relive their past lives, each evoked by a particular melody.

The novel begins with a flashback to 16th century Mexico at the time of the Conquistadors. Rodrigo, a Spanish commander, has conquered the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan with sword and flame. As his soldiers destroy the city, he sees Citlali, an Aztec woman whose new-born child he has killed, and is smitten with lust; he rapes her on the pyramid of the Temple of Love, and takes her to be his slave. Rodrigo

imports a Spanish wife, Isabella, who eventually becomes pregnant. When the child is born, Citlali kills it; Rodrigo kills her, and then himself.

After the blood and horror of the opening chapter, the contrast with Azucena's life could not be greater. She lives in the Mexico City of the 23rd century, in an enlightened world where people routinely boast of their past lives and how much karmic debt they've worked off. Azucena is an 'astroanalyst' who helps people regress to previous lives to discover the roots of their current problems: her landlady's grandmother, for example, is blind because in a previous life as a member of the Chilean military 'she had blinded several prisoners during torture'.

Azucena has evolved to such a high level that at last she is permitted to meet her twin soul, Rodrigo. But after one night of cosmic passion they are parted; Rodrigo has been framed for a murder he did not commit by Isabel Gomez, the next candidate for Planetary President and the apparent reincarnation of Mother Teresa.

Stricken with grief, Azucena resolves to be reunited with Rodrigo. In the process she will relive episodes from several past lives, and realise that the two of them – along with Isabel and Citlali – have played out a violent drama together in several past lives, each taking his or her turn at the roles of victim, aggressor and avenger. Only after reliving her various pasts can Azucena begin to understand who she is in this life, the karmic debt she owes and the mission she has repeatedly tried to complete. During her quest, she is aided – in the

grand tradition – by a motley assortment of helpers, from Julito and his rag-tag spaceship the *Interplanetary Cockfight*, to Cuquita – Azucena's landlady – and her amazing cybernetic ouija board. Azucena's Guardian Angel Anacreonte, and the demon Mammon, Isabel's 'teacher', provide a more theologically-oriented commentary on the proceedings.

*The Law of Love* is a blend of Latin American magic realism and classic European fairytale themes, set in a future world which, although not entirely consistent, is nevertheless quite believable. The author doesn't seem to have set out to write a science fiction novel, but rather to depict a society in which reincarnation, cosmic harmony and all the rest are not only acceptable but integral to everyday life. Her characters are as ready to propitiate a volcano as to commute to work from the Moon. Esquivel successfully imagines a future which encompasses not only astroanalysis and past-life regression, but also instant teleportation, weather forecasts by planet and holographic TV. That future is occasionally cartoonish, and scientifically shaky, but it provides an entertaining backdrop for the author's exuberantly human protagonists.

The horror of the first chapter balances the epiphany of the grand finale: above all, this is a book about balance and reconciliation – European with Mexican, man with woman, mother with daughter – and the ability to forgive people no matter what they have done to you.

## K.W. Jeter *Blade Runner 3: Replicant Night*

Orion, 1996, 311pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

*Replicant Night* is K.W. Jeter's second follow-on to the Ridley Scott film – not, note, from the original Philip K. Dick novel, though Dickian concerns and themes do have walk-on parts. But if you have seen the film (and who amongst *Vector* readers has not?) you respond immediately to Jeter's imagery:

When he'd still had the gun, he'd walked with the black piece dangling at his side, its weight pulling down his hand the same way it'd dragged rocklike the shoulder holster strapped beneath his long coat. Rivulets of LA's monsoon rains and his own sweat had oozed beneath his shirt cuff, across the back of his hand, into the checked, death-heated grip inside the aching curve of his palm. He's walked across spearlike shards of glass crunching under his shoes. The frames of the store windows through which Zhora's dying body had crashed were transformed into gaping mouths ringed with transparent, blood-flecked teeth.

In a neat twist, retired, broke blade runner Rick Deckard is involved with a seedy Mars-orbit video company which is making a film of his life. His involvement ends – or so he thinks – when a replicant is deliberately killed on set. He returns to Mars and Sarah Tyrell, with whom he shares a hovel, taking with him a briefcase which contains the downloaded personality of Roy Batty, recovered from the dead body of Holden, a former colleague of Deckard's. Batty wants Deckard to take the case to the free replicants in the outer colonies, because it contains the code which will waken those replicants on Earth who do not know their true nature and could be recruited as allies. In the meantime, Sarah has gone back to Earth in the company of two odd characters, employees of a 'shadow' Tyrell Corporation, who return

Sarah to the Scapa Flow graveyard of the spaceship she was born in, a move which is critical in pushing her already fragile mind off the edge.

Throughout the book, Jeter maintains, with great aplomb, a brooding, claustrophobic atmosphere: this is *film noir*: the novel writ large. People, replicants and things die violently and – invariably – with utter pointlessness: do not read *Replicant Night* if you need a quick chortle before bed.

And those Dickian touches? Well, apart from talking briefcases we have sentient clocks and calendars, cloned employees, dehydrated deities, secret organisations, questionable realities and conspiracies galore. Jeter has, I fear, gone somewhat over the top with the latter: wherever you move on this dark set, you trip over a prop marked CONSPIRACY.

Yet this would be fine if the reader did not become convinced that Jeter was making the whole thing up as he went along. Sometimes, when reading a book, you think this doesn't add up, then turn a page and a character says: that didn't add up, and the reason for that is... It happens *all the time* in *Replicant Night*! Why do the replicant, Holden and Marley get killed? What was the point of the first scene with the film director? How could Deckard walk away from Holden's death so easily? Why was Sarah taken to the *Salander 3*? Who was right about the reason behind taking the briefcase to the replicants in the colonies – Marley or Batty – and what was the point of setting up the conjecture without resolving it? How did everyone find Deckard so easily after he'd just wandered into a bar? And how, pray, does Deckard come out of his drug-induced state clutching an object given to him in his dream? I'm especially eager to discover the answer to that one.

What we have is great atmosphere and interesting ideas put together in a professional way (Jeter can write decent prose) but with a crucial lack of any editor's critical input. *Replicant Night* is considerably better than the vast majority of books which sport the dreaded letters <sup>TM</sup> on the cover – but ultimately it still disappoints.

David Lavery, Angela Hague & Marla Cartwright (Eds)

*Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files*

Faber, 1996, 233pp £8.99

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

*Deny All Knowledge* is a collection of papers by American academics on *The X-Files*. It has already achieved a magnitude of success far beyond the dreams which academics normally entertain; it has been published by a mass-market publisher rather than a specialist press and it has been published quickly (run-of-the-mill collections of academic essays usually take about seven years to go through the exhaustive process of getting into print in the USA).

From an academic point of view, of course, publication is an end rather than a means. Most books are exercises in communication which attempt to convey something to an audience, and publication is merely a conduit through which the communiqué passes, but the politics of academic life are such that *getting published* is the currency of reputation, promotion and tenure. The particular cynicism involved in selecting hot topics of popular interest as a subject for academic analysis has far less to do with the possibility of making money from royalties than with the possibility of clocking up publications on an accelerated timescale. David Lavery has experience in this line of work, having edited a collection of essays on *Twin Peaks* a couple of years ago (to which Angela Hague was a contributor), and he can hardly be blamed for his relentless application of the age-old academic adage that if you ever get on to a good thing you milk it to death.

Given this, it is hardly surprising that *Deny All Knowledge* has little or nothing to offer the general reader, and even less to offer the hardened X-Phile. Indeed, the acknowledgements dutifully attached to some of the essays suggest that the method of research employed by several of the writers has been to post requests for helpful suggestions to the various Internet discussion groups devoted to *The X-Files* and then to translate the replies into appropriately jargon-laden prose,

lightly-spiced with obligatory homages to such currently-fashionable academic gurus as Jacques Lacan and Donna Haraway. (Interestingly, there is not a single reference in the entire book to Jean Baudrillard or Jean-François Lyotard – how brief fame is in these postmodern times!)

Actually, the book isn't entirely useless. 'Rewriting Popularity: The Cult Files' by Jimmie L. Reeves, Mark C. Rodgers and Michael Epstein has some useful background on the economic history and politics of 'cult' TV shows. 'DDEB, GATB, MPPB, and Ratboy' by Susan J. Clerc makes some attempt at a superficial sociological analysis of *X-Files* fandom. If you read on, however, you will quickly see why the editors put these two items first; anyone who stays the course to the bitter end of Elizabeth Kubek's 39-page essay on 'You Only Expose Your Father: The Imaginary, Voyeurism, and the Symbolic Order in *The X-Files*' will feel that they have been ploughing through the Great Grimpen Mire without even the Hound of the Baskervilles to keep them company.

The trouble with following academic fashions as slavishly as the authors gathered here is that all their muted commentaries are bound to fuse into a single undifferentiated – not to say chaotic – mass. Taken as a whole, *Deny All Knowledge* is rather like Frederick C. Crews's classic *The Pooh Perplex* with none of the humour and none of the variety. Why, oh why, is there no Benjamin Thumb to provide a proper analysis of the show's source-material, no Woodbine Meadowlark to remind us that education and esotericism are two different things, and – most regrettable of all – no Simon Lacerous to remind us that *The X-Files* is, after all, popular television with no pretensions whatsoever to moral or intellectual profundity?

If I were paranoid, I'd hazard a guess that the editors and authors of this book are aliens intent on exploiting our naivety and ignorance to the full. They already have the Establishment of the US Education System in their pocket, and they're making significant inroads into Publishing. Resist the infection! The truth is out there, not in here. Trust no one, ambitious academics least of all.

Ursula K. Le Guin

*A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*

Gollancz, 1996, 191pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

This slim volume (published in the USA in 1994) contains eight of Ursula K. Le Guin's short stories, which appeared in various American magazines between 1983 and 1994.

Sf, says the author in her thoughtful introduction, 'is fiction that plays with certain subjects for their inherent interest, beauty, relevance to the human condition' – note that 'plays'. I hadn't previously associated playfulness with Le Guin, yet two of these stories are based on jokes. 'The Ascent of the North Face' – the shortest and earliest story in the collection and one which loses its funniness once explained – is very silly indeed and had me giggling hysterically. In 'The First Contact with the Gorgonids' a couple driving across the Outback encounter a crashed flying saucer and its weird inhabitants. Le Guin skillfully shows the relationship between Jerry Debre and his wife through her choice of dialogue and action, and by the end of the story we are glad the timid wife has become the heroine.

The stories aren't all jokes, of course. 'The Kerastion' originated at a writing workshop run by Le Guin where she

was given the task of using items invented by the other participants, she chose 'the kerastion... a musical instrument that cannot be heard'. Here it is played at a funeral, its music heard only by the deceased, and gradually the narrator reveals it is her brother who died, and tells us how and why.

Le Guin calls 'Newton's Sleep' (from a Blake quotation praying we be kept from 'single vision... [and]... Newton's Sleep') a 'cautionary tale'. Like Rose is a rational man, determined everybody should share his view, but other people on the space station start having visions, seeing earthly people and places in the sterile corridors. Le Guin has been accused of Luddism, but I feel she is merely proposing that human beings need to be 'earthed'; as for charges of manhandling, like is sympathetically portrayed, his excessive rationality arising from his need to control the uncontrollable.

Of 'The Rock that Changed Things', Le Guin says 'its anger makes it heavy', but this is to underrate a fine story. Once again, her theme is rationality as a means of controlling chaos: here a blue-green rock causes the nurobls, who appreciate curves and colour, to challenge their masters who prefer straight lines and black and white.

The relationship between perception and reality is explored fully in the final three stories, all of which use Le Guin's latest sfnal invention: 'churten theory'. Where the



'ansible' allows instantaneous communication between two points, churten theory (pace Einstein) allows instantaneous travel or 'transilience'. Unlike the ansible, however, transilience is affected by the perceptions of its participants. Thus, in 'The Shobies' Story', a space ship finds itself in limbo until its disconcerted crew can construct a shared reality. They finally achieve this by telling a communal story. Things have progressed by 'Dancing to Ganam': music has replaced storytelling, and Dalzul and his three shipmates sing the different notes of a single chord. But though they reach their destination safely, their realities soon begin diverging, and Dalzul's preconceptions lead to needless tragedy.

A good storyteller often points out something that then seems blindingly obvious: in 'Another Story or A Fisherman of the Inland Sea' it's the similarity between how time passes in folk tales (a day in Faerie equals a century in the mortal

world) and the time dilation effect. In either case, friends and relatives are long dead by the time the traveller returns. This longest and most recent story in the collection uses transilience gone wrong as a means of time travel: few get to correct mistakes and recapture lost love, but in this elegiac story the older and wiser Hideo gets to do just that.

These stories deserve the wider readership this collection should provide – few Le Guin fans will have subscribed to all the magazines in which they first appeared. The three churten stories in particular benefit from being published together, as they throw light on one another. There is much to enjoy here, not least Le Guin's invention of one of the most complicated marriage structures ever! The 'sedoretu' is a foursome (two men and two women) in which each person is sexually involved with two of the others. It looks like Le Guin's inventiveness and playfulness is still thriving, I'm glad to say.

## Ian McDonald

## *Sacrifice of Fools*

Gollancz, 1996, 286pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

The day Andy Gillespie drives for a doomed Loyalist murder attempt is the day the aliens arrive. Three years later, in 2004, eighty thousand Shian have settled in Ireland. Gillespie, freed from prison in the amnesty which followed the establishment of joint rule, is working at the Belfast Welcome Centre: having renounced violence, he has dedicated himself to understanding and helping the new colonists. Then one night he finds a family of five Shian ritually murdered.

Gillespie becomes the prime suspect in DS Rosin Dunbar's investigation. Then a human family is murdered in the same way, and a Shian celebrity goes missing. Gillespie joins forces with Ounserratt Souleurya, a Shian Knight-Advocate, to discover the truth and clear his name, while Dunbar continues the official hunt.

The basic plot is a reworking of *The Silence of the Lambs* in the context of *Alien Nation* and spiced with a helping of *Predator*. McDonald makes no effort to disguise this. Indeed there are deliberate references to, resonances with, or wholesale borrowings from: *Three Days of the Condor*, *Cracker*, *Snow Crash*, *The Crying Game*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Independence Day*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *Babylon 5* and doubtless others I missed. So is the book more than a patchwork of secondhand components grafted onto a set of worn-out serial killer clichés? Well, yes it is, but only just.

The plot is the problem. For most of the book it is quite relaxed, not in itself a good thing for a thriller, though it does build to quite an exciting – if formulaic – finale. There is only so much mileage to be gained from the tracking of serial killers, and it has been done too many times before – definitively by Thomas Harris and David Lindsey – for a newcomer to the field like McDonald to add anything of value now. I kept waiting for the point at which the killings reveal themselves to be just one small aspect of a much larger picture, or for them to act as a catalyst to great science-fictional events, but it never comes.

And if *Sacrifice of Fools* lacks the splendid imagination of McDonald's previous Irish novel, *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day*, neither is it anywhere near as well written. What it does have, however, is a fascinating exploration of culture and character, with powerfully explored themes of identity and division. We should not be surprised that a Belfast writer should choose to write about division, and everything in this

book is either an opposite or half of a whole: Male/Female, North/South, Catholic/Protestant, Love/Sex, Human/Shian. The Protestant Male ex-terrorist is contrasted with the Female Catholic detective, and they find they have as much in common as they have dividing them. Gillespie is also balanced with the Female Shian and finds a sort of love where there cannot be sex. As McDonald wrote in *Matrix 30*, he sees the Shian as mirrors of humanity: he admires the fact that their sexes are equal, that there is no possibility of human-style sexual violence. The Shian reflect everything sordid, corrupt and twisted that McDonald finds in male sexuality – both Gillespie and Dunbar have a scene in which they discover graphic male perversion – and his sense of loathing runs deep. It is perhaps carried too far in one particularly detailed account of inter-species, homosexual gang rape – not in the sense that my 'good taste' was offended, but in the sense that the worst horrors really do live in the unseen but imagined. Unfortunately, the incident is related with such an unflinching eye that one must suspect McDonald himself is divided on this point, that part of him wants to look and his loathing is in part self-directed.

The theme of division intersects that of identity. Gillespie recalls growing up in Belfast, having to choose to be one thing or another. No fence sitting during the Troubles, no place to just be yourself: everyone is defined by what they are. It is a division which has made Dunbar nearly schizophrenic in her efforts to serve the all-demanding Police God yet be a good wife, lover, mother. But the Troubles are over and everyone is changing.

Symbolically, for a book in which few characters believe in God but all live in the shadow of the divided church, Gillespie changes exactly halfway through his Biblical three score years and ten. Ironically, the Xenologist called in by the police, who lectures everyone on the nature of sex and violence yet who can't keep his own marriage together, is so unsure of his identity that he has modelled himself almost entirely on Fitz from *Cracker*. Other humans are so uncertain of who they are that they become Frooks, men and women who dress and live like the Shian. Some go further and want to become alien. Even the Shian change: they go through bi-annual mating seasons which are chemically mediated and change everything, even their language. The Shian are effective mirrors even if, at times, with their inscrutable ritual, symbols and patterns of speech – to say nothing of their collapsible fighting sticks – they seem more like Japanese Minbari than a truly original creation.

Given McDonald's themes, perhaps it is appropriate that *Sacrifice of Fools* feels recycled, that it doesn't quite know

what it is or where it is bound, what it is saying or what it believes. It just knows it isn't going to give up until it gets some answers. It is a bleak vision which hovers on the edge of despair, but thankfully refuses such cowardliness. A

Michael Moorcock

# The War Amongst the Angels

Orion, 1996, 247pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

*The War Amongst The Angels* concludes a trilogy, perhaps more properly a triptych, that started with the fix-up fantasy of *Blood* and continued through a frame-narrative collection of stories in *Fabulous Harbours*. Here the form changes again, this time to a more or less standard novel playfully subtitled 'An Autobiographical Story'.

The sequence has improved immeasurably, at least in coherence, as it progresses. *Blood* was an awkward fix-up of separate, and seemingly irreconcilable, stories published in the revived *New Worlds* anthologies. The story of the loves, losses and adventures of a group of eternals, Jack Karazaquian, Colinda Devero, Rose von Bek and Sam Oakenhurst, fellow travellers, prospectors and players in the Great Game of Time in the salons and southern riverboats of a Chaos-transformed earth; the action then shifted abruptly into a cartoon space opera universe concerning a Great War and quest for a Lost Universe between the opposing forces of Chaos and the Singularity, and its equally improbable cast of adventurers, captains and pirates: Billy-Bob Begg, Pearl Peru, Horace Quelch, evil Freddy Force and Old Reg, the monstrous Original Insect of the Singularity.

*Fabulous Harbours* continued as a set of travelers tales, expanding and continuing some of the stories and adventures across other planes of Moorcock's teeming Multiverse. How this is all drawn back into the concluding volume is, it must be admitted, a rather impressive sleight of hand. Even more characters are introduced, from Dick Turpin and Buffalo Bill Cody to Rose's father, Sir Arthur Moorcock, and his brother Michael, a moderately successful writer now living in Texas.

In reviewing *Fabulous Harbours* I said, with what now seems like alarming prescience, that the enigmatic Rose might prove to be one of the more important characters in this pantheon. Indeed, the 'Autobiographical Story' of *The War Amongst The Angels* is that of Rose herself, daughter of Sir Arthur and music hall star, Lady Eleanor, growing up among the gypsies, highwaymen and adventurers, her brief career as

provisional report from the midst of an un-easy peace, perhaps? But only a small story from a much more promising world.

Captain Hawkmoon on the 'high toby' with Dick Turpin, her marriage to Prince Lobkowicz and her affair with Sam Oakenhurst.

It is this last which leads Rose to the select band of jugaderos, or mukhamirim, in the Great Game, on whose play entire worlds hang in the balance between the forces of Chaos and the crushing regimentation of the Singularity. That game, on another plane of the Multiverse, becomes the War in Heaven, and threatens to break through into the quotidian world. From the borders of his ranch in Texas, Rose's uncle Michael catches visions of monstrous angels, exhausted and regrouping after battle. Accompanied by her father and her various allies, Rose travels to Texas to play her part in the final stage of the War in Heaven.

This is all a huge amount of fun as Moorcock reinvents history, a dozen or so legendary (both real and fictional) figures, and half the map of West London in the process, and even steps in himself as an eponymous archangel with a flaming sword. Self indulgent? Every bit of it, but underpinning a lot of it is a political satire that is both partly nostalgic for the lost romance of days gone by, and a liberal anarchist argument against crushing conformity and regulation.

It rounds off the trilogy very nicely, after a bit of a wonky start which gains more in hindsight. It also poses a huge problem for new readers, who might come to this with only a slight or passing familiarity with the rest of Moorcock's prodigious and eclectic output. What are they to make of the sinister albino, M. Zenith, the cheerful cockney advice of Mrs. Cornelius, or the mysterious Prince Ulrich von Bek? There are times when Moorcock's entire cast seem so closely interrelated that it's no wonder they all appear slightly nutty. Perhaps it's the fact that they keep slipping between worlds, and the shifting planes of Moorcock's Multiverse, to the point where even they start to worry about being real or fictional.

If you can cope with that, and enjoy the literary equivalent of a switchback ride, then this is Moorcock in full flow, playful as ever, and throwing out more sparks than a spinning Catherine wheel.

Adam Nichols

# The Pathless Way

Orion, 1996, 407pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

At 400 pages, this is a mere slip of a volume by today's bloated standards. Very little is padding and it is not part of an everlasting series (while set in the same world as *The War of the Lord's Veil*, no previous knowledge of that book is assumed and it is set in a different part of the world).

The two main characters are both (initially) immature young people who are part of a small community in an isolated region. Guthrie is the younger son of the Lord (Reeve) of the settlement; the girl, Alia, is a member of an anarchic group who have forsaken the general community for their own loose association of Hunters out in the hills. The peace of both the main settlement and the Hunters' isolated group is shattered by a raiding party of 'Sea Wolves' -

Viking-like raiders who tear the place up, killing the Reeve and his heir in the process, then leave. Guthrie is left wandering the wilds thinking everyone is dead, until he meets a member of the strange order of 'Closters', who teaches him some extremely strange things about the world and leaves him feeling confused about what reality is.

Alia also has the potential to see beneath the 'real' world as most people know it, and perceive the underlying reality. Her emerging ability leads her into trouble with an invading wizard who uses, but does not understand, his perceptions of this underlying reality.

The book works well on a number of levels. It is an engaging story of a community riven by outside forces, emerging through the fire and death to something better by reaching an accommodation with themselves and some of those attempting to invade. The stories of Guthrie and Alia present an interestingly different take on the idea of the young person who believes themselves special, especially as

they explore the theme of the use and abuse of power. Finally, there are some very interesting ideas about how a 'magical' world can underlie a 'real' world, being seen by few, who must pay a tremendous cost for their insight.

The writing is fairly solid, not too overblown, though some of the archaisms ('coolth' instead of coolness) can be a little distracting when inserted into more modern-sounding passages. Details of the landscape and the fighting are sufficient but not overwhelming and, unlike many writing

this sort of story, Nichols doesn't fall into the trap of trying to describe a full fight with medieval weapons. The land portrayed has the beauty of the wilds of the British Isles even today; the people have their doubts and their wise and foolish moments, and do come alive on the page.

Millenium are pushing Nichols as the next David Gemmell. Not being a Gemmell fan, I can't really compare them, but *The Pathless Way* is certainly worth looking out for on its own merits.

## Larry Niven

## The Ringworld Throne

Orbit, 1996, 376pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

Twenty-six years ago the original *Ringworld* caused a minor sensation in the sf community, with its colossal artificial bioworld revolving in space, created by the mysterious Pak. It scooped the Hugo and Nebula awards, though not everyone liked it: the characterisation was wooden and the irritating Teela Brown, selected simply for having a good-luck gene, distracted from the main thrust of the plot. Nonetheless, the *Ringworld* itself was an attractive example of what *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* calls 'big dumb objects'; and David Pringle, in his *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction*, wrote of its 'sheer effrontery of scale' – and that sums it all up rather well. Niven can always think up good ideas; what he is less good at is making top-class sf novels out of them.

*Ringworld* raised squillions of questions, some of which the 1979 sequel, *Ringworld Engineers*, set out the answer – rather to the book's disadvantage as a story. Since then, sf authors have given us many more big dumb objects to amaze us (Shaw's *Orbitsville*, Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, Bear's *Eon*) and Niven has gone on to explore more of the future history of his Known Space, often with collaborators. Now he returns to the *Ringworld* to amaze us once more.

Louis Wu is 200 years old and in need of rejuvenation. He enters into a contract with The Hindmost, the last Puppeteer, which throws him into a bewildering conflict involving over 60 characters (with names like Tegger hooki-Thandarth, Grieving Tube, Valavirgillin) and representing some fourteen species, most of them hominid but culturally distinct and separate.

The sheer size and shape of *Ringworld*, and the variety and complexity of the technologies in operation, add to Niven's task – and in one sense he's supremely competent. In

true hard-sf fashion he presents his tale as seen through the eyes of whichever character he is following at the moment, which does mean that the reader must be constantly alert. You solve the problems with them, and as there are so many individuals and species it is sometimes very hard work. The list of characters at the end helps, but it is easy to get tangled up and confused – well, I did, anyway. Yet this is part of the fun of the story, the pleasure of sorting out a fictional world which Niven has thought through in meticulous detail. If you've had a surfeit of dragons and quests, *The Ringworld Throne* is a tonic; and you'll still find vampires, ghouls and night people, all very scientifically described.

What you won't find are characters you can believe in and warm to. We've met Louis Wu in three stories now, and he gets no more interesting; nor does The Hindmost. One reason why the different hominid species are sometimes hard to distinguish from one another is that they're not particularly different as people. They make plans, they work out problems, they find and prepare food, and they fight; their only other activity is 'rishathra', defined as 'sexual practice outside one's own species but within the intelligent hominids'. So when groups from two different species meet, they politely have rumpy-pumpy with each other, which is supposed to help inter-species understanding. When I'd worked out what some of them must have felt and smelt like, I wasn't terribly excited; but on *Ringworld* it might seem different.

You'll gather that I'm less than totally enthusiastic about *The Ringworld Throne*. If you've read and enjoyed the others, you'll enjoy this one; if you've not read them but are willing to try, it will help your understanding of *The Ringworld Throne* to have read them first. I'm glad I've read it – Niven is a leading example of one of trend and it's useful to keep in touch with his development and ideas – but with such a wealth of talent around at present I don't expect to go back to it.

## Jeff Noon

## Automated Alice

Doubleday, 1996, 252pp, £14.99

Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

Lewis Carroll's Alice books are odd in many ways, one of which is the rare number of sequels that have been written despite the number of years they have been out of copyright. A specialist children's bookshop had many editions, with many different illustrations, but no spin-offers. *The Encyclopedia Of Science Fiction* mentions only *Alice Through The Needle's Eye* by Gilbert Adair (1984), and over the last twenty or thirty years it has been the adaptations that have drawn publicity (Ralph Steadman's new illustrations, or Jonathan Miller's TV version, for instance), never an attempt at a sequel.

On the other hand, in recent years Lewis Carroll himself has been the subject of several examinations of his unusual

tastes, and a Dennis Potter filmscript, *Dreamchild* (1985), the title coming from the verse dedication in *Alice In Wonderland* – in fact, the word 'dream' occurs three times there, and four times in the acrostic poem that spells 'Alice Pleasance Liddell' at the end of *Through The Looking Glass*. Dreams cause problems for anyone looking at the Alice books because while their events can be explained as dreams (Alice begins both books very tired), once inside they maintain a continuous if inverted logic. That is, they do not progress 'dreamily'. So much so that they are not very popular with children themselves, because the books are so dark, so cruel, with more than a cartoon cruelty.

Now into this world 'Jeff Noon takes on the mantelpiece of Lewis Carroll, bringing Alice thoroughly up to date. Not so much a sequel to *Alice In Wonderland* and *Through The Looking Glass*, more of a treguel, the third book in a series of misadventures even weirder than your dreams,' – or so the cover blurb says. Alice is visiting her Great Aunt Ermintrude

in Didsbury, Manchester, and 'beginning to feel very drowsy from having nothing to do', after failing to complete a jigsaw puzzle. In the first book she followed a rabbit, in the second a kitten, here she releases a parrot from its cage, and follows it as it disappears into the workings of a grandfather clock, to see time racing past her until she is caught by 1998. But this is not 1998 as we will know it.

She enters through a termite mound, and finds, like the White Rabbit, that these animal creatures have little place for names:

'Oh!' cried Alice, 'Miss Termite, you're just too... too... too logical for me!'

'Logical? Of course I'm logical. I'm a computermite.'

And a computermite we learn is 'a termite that computes'. On the other hand, or leg, this does nothing to stop another termite riding through on a bicycle.

We are in a land of strange confusions. In fact, it has been affected by 'Newmonia', a disease that turns people into combinations – like Badgerman and Policedogmen. Alice the human stands out because she is not one of these chimera (all of them 'invurtebrates'). Captain Ramshackle the Badgerman warns her: "Be careful out there, Alice," shouted Ramshackle. "Times may have changed since your day." And, of course, they have. He's already told her that she's one-hundred-and-thirty-eight years late for her two o'clock writing lesson. He has not, though, warned her of the jealousies and paranoia induced by the 'newmonia' and before long Alice has been arrested by the police, who are investigating a series of jigsaw murders. In Carroll's rabbit holes Alice went back into feudal times – it was royalty and guardsmen who threatened her. Now we have a police force to lock her up, though I'm not sure why Ramshackle would have used a line from *Hill Street Blues* to warn her.

So who is Automated Alice? because Alice so far has been the Alice that Carroll knew and perhaps loved. Automated Alice is an anagram – she is Celia the doll come to life, and it is this second Alice who leads the first through the topsyturvy world. This is where Noon starts to get a bit gruesome:

Celia bent forward at her squeaking waist and then turned a couple of screws on each side of her temple. She swivelled aside the top of her head. Alice leaned forward to peer into the gaping skull and found inside a loosely-packed mound of soil through which a million termites were scuttling.

In the next chapter, though, we discover that not all these bizarre creatures are like Celia when we meet James Marshall Hentrails, who has been created by a reverse butcher:

She reached into the soft, damp, warm interior of the giblets (shivering from the squelchiness) to pluck free a small piece of jagged wood that rested just to the north of the liver and the kidneys. 'This is a piece of my jigsaw zoo,' Alice said.

But Hentrails is almost completely lost to the world – too much a parody of the original Jimi. He had a pill problem, but the original Alice had a pill problem of a different kind. Alice's size changed as a result of her pill taking, now size problems re-occur in the use of handles on Celia's china legs that send them shooting up into the air, though unusual legs have already appeared in a hut on hen's legs that walks out of a garden. I'm not sure if this is just duplication or whether it represents a theme.

Alice begins to discover that she must collect her missing jigsaw pieces and meet the mysterious Professor Chrowdinger if she is to get back in time for her writing lesson in Didsbury. And both of those seem to represent problems with *Automated Alice*. Firstly, I could not identify why the jigsaw matters – it is mentioned before Alice goes into the clock, but not significantly. Why should she want to collect its missing pieces, even in a dream – isn't losing jigsaw puzzle pieces an everyday problem?

Secondly, some of Jeff Noon's new themes are hidden too deeply. I realised belatedly, for instance, that 'Chrowdinger' is based on 'Schrodinger' of cat fame, but while the name tickled it did not hammer home its connection, and of course there is no cat, because the cat (Dinah) appeared in *Through The Looking Glass*.

So is *Automated Alice* successful? It has a lot in common with the original works – it's almost possible to think that Jeff Noon has got a little into Lewis Carroll's mind, but I'm not sure it was a mind capable of sustaining a 'treguel'. The work with which I would compare this is Norton Juster's forty-year old *The Phantom Tollbooth*, which also deals with time, number and logic in a fantastic way. Try reading them both. You'll need to if you want to make a comparison. And as Alice probably discovers, you have to make your own comparisons – you can't buy them for love nor money.

Sheri S. Tepper

*Gibbons Decline and Fall*

Voyager, 1996, 404pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

Sheri Tepper's latest novel continues in her popular vein of extremely well told adult stories. This novel is reminiscent of *Beauty* in its curious merging of real locations, modern characters and fantasy/sf; but unlike *Beauty* these latter elements are played down until the concluding chapters so that it becomes a modern tale – almost a detective novel – that mutates into science fiction. In fact there are plenty of sf values and clues early on, but they sneak up on you unawares. Though the two authors have very different styles, it is reminiscent of Gene Wolfe's 'modern' novels such as *There Are Doors* or *Devil in a Forest* – the almost hallucinatory quality of mixing reality and fantasy can be found in both. There are sections, too, which are reminiscent of Orson Scott Card's *Ender* books: like *Beauty* the novel has an emotional honesty that is very welcome in the welter of shallow rubbish which masquerades as science fiction these days. Of course it makes for painful reading, and there are

passages even more horrible than those describing the afflictions of Beauty, but this too is to be welcomed, if with trepidation.

The plot concerns six women who make a pact in the '60s declaring they will be true to themselves as women. Five of the women survive, but the sixth, Sophy, vanishes – and there is mystery afoot. To reveal more would be an injustice to those who will read the novel; suffice it to say that the ending, while not entirely convincing, is as unexpected as it is imaginative.

*Gibbons Decline and Fall* – a title, I imagine, which refers to the millennial sense of doom and foreboding that shadows the Western world – is a strongly feminist novel that juggles themes which a university professor of feminism might balk at. Are men the way they are because of genes or society? Can we understand human behaviour through chimp behaviour (my reading of these parts suggests the author is not sure, but it is difficult to tell in the thick of plot and counter-plot)? Can the victim of an appalling rape be healed, or is she forever doomed to mental suffering? What is the connection, if any, between the violence of men and sex?

Was the domination of women as a social class the precursor of hierarchical society?

But don't let these weighty topics put you off: the author is renowned for her storytelling ability, which seems to her as natural as speaking. In fact, some of the more difficult topics – what is the evolutionary path and mechanism of human women given that there is no apparent connection between physiological fertility and their desire for sex? – are discussed in the form of folk tales, giving them a resonance that seems to echo down the ages from the time we were apes. Perhaps it is this balancing act between humanity as animals and as social beings that is the central point of the novel.

## Jack Vance

## Night Lamp

Voyager, 1997, 380pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Dave Langford

Jack Vance is eighty this year, has been publishing sf for just over fifty years, and assembled a recognized classic as long ago as 1950: *The Dying Earth*. Now here's another solid sf novel, which is as readable as ever. Some people dislike Vance's elaborate ironies, his coolly exotic style, and his fondness for describing (at length, and with footnotes) oddly conceived societies replete with strange customs, disconcerting food, subtly coloured artforms and downright lunatic musical instruments – like the new novel's 'froghorn'. Personally I love these excesses and suspect that the harsher Vance critics object not so much to his characteristic baroque and verbal furbelows as to the fact that the stories he tells may seem almost too simple – even pulp-plotted – for the ornate vehicles that carry them.

There is some truth in this, the fine point of judgement concerning whether the rich icing is being applied to a good plain cake or a stale one. Certainly *Night Lamp* features many standard plot elements, often already used by Vance himself. The young hero, Jaro, has amnesia – as did the hero of *Marune: Alastor 933* and a million books by others – and is (here owing to adoption) something of a social outsider – as in numerous Vance novels, notably *The Blue World* and *Emphyrio*. As in *Emphyrio* and the Cadwal Chronicles, he longs for and ultimately attains his own spaceship to travel freely about the Gaean Reach. Shady property speculators covet his home, as in *Maske: Theryn*; and as in that book and each volume of the Demon Princes sequence, he ultimately sees the not entirely satisfying destruction of his lifelong enemy. As in (again) Cadwal, there is a strengthening relationship with a fond and competent father, strife with an appalling adolescent gang, and difficulties with a theoretical ally whose sufferings should make him an object of sympathy but who has been driven by them into complexly malevolent insanity. Lots of other such points could be cited.

Yet *Night Lamp* certainly doesn't feel stale. There is a real sense of doom in the few childhood images that haunt Jaro, as though (as also seemed to happen in the slenderly plotted *Marune*) Vance is intermittently touching on electrifying personal archetypes. The last torment of Jaro's mother is as hideously inventive as anything in the Musical Hell of Bosch; we can believe that Jaro has to forget, and later win at a stroke of irony when the desperately lying villain relates a

There is also a curious, almost muted, Christianity about the novel; many Christian symbols make an appearance, and there is talk of the Horned Devil and others. This seems to fit into the general flow of the book, especially since it is set in an America where ninety-odd percent of the people are still Christians; but if anything there is an underlying anti-Christian stance.

If you have not read Sheri Tepper before, this is probably not the best one to start with. Though it is certainly worth reading, it carries a heavy punch that some may not want. All in all, though, it is recommended, especially if you are already familiar with her work.

version of events which is somewhat truer than Jaro can ever know. His quirky professorial foster-parents – whom one has come to like – need to be disposed of, and (rather than stoop to traditional means, such as a traffic accident) Vance takes some trouble to invent yet another bizarre society whose peculiar obsessions lead all too logically and even semi-comically to the couple's fate. Other diversions from Jaro's own story include two other characters' tales of grisly doings, one of these quite irrelevant.

My own digression is into a Theory of Successful SF-Indulgence. Old and revered sf authors notoriously produce longer and more sprawling works than in their prime, perhaps not so much because trembling editors are afraid to suggest cuts as because typical book lengths have considerably increased, while the average Dean of SF's notion of how much plot is suitable for a novel may not have changed in decades. Hence, possibly, the padded feel of the later Asimov's gaseous expositions or the later Heinlein's endless wrangling about protocol and sex. Contrariwise, when writing sf at greater length (as here and in *Araminta Station*) Vance gives us more of what he's good at: warped sociology on successive worlds, meticulous landscape-painting in subtle colours, and numerous touches of satire. The class system on planet Gallingle is characteristic, with its frenetic upward striving to join ever more elitist peer-groups with suspiciously frat-like names – 'from Parnassians to Black Hats to Underwoods, to Squared Circles, then perhaps to Val Verdes or Sick Chickens' – the apex of the pyramid being the sonorously titled aristocracy of the Clam Muffins.

Admittedly, *Night Lamp* is eccentrically paced and slightly shambolic in construction. The conclusion trails off into conventional boy-wins-girl happiness, with just a bracing touch of uncertainty; but despite many cheery and even funny passages, this novel is somewhat darker than expected from this author. Vance seems much possessed by death, perhaps no unusual thing for an octogenarian. One poignant aside concerns the dilapidated libraries of the ancient world Fader (whose lonely sun is *Night Lamp*): all their books, millennia old yet still compelling, are the last personal testaments of people who earnestly wanted to convey something of themselves into the unknown future. Comment would be superfluous. Jack Vance has already succeeded in this traditional auctorial goal, but I hope he'll be with us for a while longer, and able to convey some more.

# PULP FICTION

**Paperback Reviews**  
**edited by**  
**Tanya Brown**

[From the next issue Paul Kincaid will be taking over the editing of all book reviews for *Vector*. Tanya Brown will be developing a BSFA site on the World Wide Web.]

**Marion Zimmer Bradley,  
 Andre Norton &  
 Mercedes Lackey**

***Tiger Burning Bright***  
 Avonova, 1996, 504pp, \$6.50

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

According to the cover blurb, *Tiger Burning Bright* is "from three legendary authors, a stunning novel of cunning, magic and power". Hmmm; let's see.

Merina is a city that has always known peace under the rule of the House of the Tiger. The current House is ruled by a formidable trio of females – the ruling Queen, Lydana; her mother, the Dowager Queen Adele; and Lydana's impetuous daughter, Princess Shelyra. The marauding Imperial Army of the Emperor Balthasar is fast approaching Merina, and the centuries-long peace is about to be shattered. The all-conquering army cannot be defeated by a city that has no standing army of its own, nor can it be bribed. Merina, then, can only open its doors and admit the enemy, hoping to eventually defeat it from within.

The Dowager Queen leads a double life, as Gemen Elfrida, a Grey Robe in the temple of the Goddess of Light. Her death as Adele is arranged and broadcast, supposedly as a result of the fall of Merina. She is now free to begin her part in the battle against the usurpers.

Lydana apparently flees the city, but remains in disguise to undermine the new regime. Shelyra, also supposed to flee the city, remains hidden in the warren of passages that riddle the city of Merina and begins her own campaign to rid the city of its enemies. It is from the relative safety one of these secret passages that she first becomes aware of the disaffection between the Emperor Balthasar and his son, Prince Leopold.

This is a well-written tale about three resourceful women's battle of brains over brawn, against a darker evil than ever they imagined when first handing Merina over to their enemy. It is not the Emperor they have to defeat in order to regain peace, but the Sorcerer, Apolon, and his necromantic army, who are the real power behind Balthasar and his relentless quest for world domination.

I have to say that although this book will never be deemed 'the cutting edge of fantasy', it is a hugely enjoyable and involving read indeed. The characters are very well drawn and, for the most part,

extremely likeable. The plot is engaging, although one can see where it is leading from time to time, so there are few real surprises. One also finds oneself trying to identify which of the fantasy luminaries wrote which main character role; I have my own thoughts on this, but you will have to buy the book and read to decide for yourself. I would highly recommend this book as one to whittle away a few hours – you will not be disappointed.

**Ramsey Campbell**

***The House on Nazareth Hill***

Headline, 1997, 470pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

The dwelling of the title – Nazareth – has a dark past, with witches being (somewhat improbably) tortured there before the original house, torturers and victims were all consumed by fire. When fifteen-year-old Amy Priestley and her father move into a flat in the renovated mansion, a link is opened with the past. Fleeting glimpses are seen of terrible creatures. Worse, Oswald Priestley begins to change, turning into one of the witchfinders of yore. And guess who his target is...

SFX liked this book so much it graded it A+. *Interzone* thought it "first-class". It irritated the hell out of me. Why? Well, the story of the possessed house, if scary in parts, is a hackneyed one and Ramsey Campbell offers no new variant on it. All the characters save Amy are ciphers; despite a number of them (the other residents of the development) being introduced early on, they are soon virtually ignored. Oswald's growing puritanical speech is consistent with his possession but that doesn't explain why his attitudes are mirrored by almost everyone else in the book: there is a disturbing similarity in the dialogue.

There are, of course, redeeming features. The climactic duel between good and evil is exciting and the horror it contains is, well, horrible. It will doubtless satisfy horror fans. And this is a book which will speak directly to teenagers, as it lucidly shows the lack of power they have relative to adults (Amy and her boyfriend are disarmingly ordinary kids who are treated with suspicion or condescension by every adult around them). Indeed, perhaps *The House on Nazareth Hill* is meant to read as a commentary on how care can so easily turn to abuse: if it is, it's an important statement, but one which is here swamped by the genre packaging.

**Humphrey Carpenter**

***The Inklings: C S Lewis,***

***J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles***

***Williams and their friends***

HarperCollins, 1997, 284pp, £8.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

This fascinating book was awarded the Somerset Maugham Award for best biography on its first publication in 1978. It gives a well-researched account of a small group of writers and academics who met regularly and informally in pubs and in C S Lewis' Oxford college rooms, to discuss theology and literature and read each other extracts from books in progress. The interest for *Vector* readers is that C S Lewis wrote the Narnia stories and the space trilogy beginning with *Out of the Silent Planet*, as well as books of popular religion: that Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as tomes on Old English; and that Charles Williams wrote theological thrillers as well as poetry and works of literary and religious exposition.

They were a strange group, in many ways stuffily conservative and prejudiced; and Lewis, the person around whom the Inklings gathered, was the oddest of them all. Despite his religious certitudes, one wonders whether he ever truly grew up. Only in the latter years of his life did he, to his own surprise, find himself in a loving relationship with a woman, unexpectedly marrying a divorced American, Joy Gresham, who was later to die tragically from bone cancer.

More attractive as a person was Charles Williams, a self-educated literary enthusiast working for the Oxford University Press, a

charismatic adult education lecturer of enormous energies, whose supernatural thrillers were weird and his Taliesin poems incomprehensible.

Tolkien, whose biography Carpenter had already written, seems almost normal by comparison: suspicious of modernity, deeply Catholic and dedicated to the recreation of old myth. Endearingly, all three drank huge quantities of beer and on walking holidays seem to have proceeded from pub to pub.

One hopes this book may revive interest in Charles Williams' novels (for example *War in Heaven*, *Many Dimensions* and *The Great Divorce*); and Hobbit enthusiasts will wish that they had been present as Tolkien read the latest chapter to his fascinated friends.

**Nancy Collins,  
Edward Kramer &  
Martin Greenberg  
(eds)**

***Dark Love: 22 Tales of Lust  
and Obsession***  
New English Library, 1996, 402pp, £6.99

Reviewed by: Stephen Deas

Bad Cupid. Shouldn't have dropped that acid. Shouldn't have dum-dum'd those arrows either. Maybe blame Psyche – fancy carving 'Tie me down and Fuck me' across herself like that.

Get the picture? Lust and obsession in abundance, but the main title sums it up better. Take a good strong dose of love, then squeeze it, bend it, warp it into something it was never meant to be. Add a generous doses of violence and insanity and a little dark humour, flavour with the toxin of your choice and behold! *Dark Love!* Oh, and it doesn't say this on the jacket anywhere, but it should probably be kept away from children, parents, loved ones and other impressionable minds.

The stories themselves steer a course from sheer pornography (Karl Wagner's 'Locked Away') to tripping along inside the head of someone who's way over the edge (Kathe Koja's 'Pas de Deux' – I defy anyone to read this and still feel comfortable by the end), to what could almost be a touching true story (Nancy Collins' 'Thin Walls'), to the inevitable Jack-the-Ripper story. The quality's variable, but there's nothing that's painful to read (actually there is, but it's a good pain), and several of them are quite excellent. Don't be fooled by the names on the front – not that they're not good stories, but they certainly don't stand out from the crowd.

This is not a nice book. It sets out to be bloody and sick and nasty and twisted and gloriously politically incorrect, and it succeeds admirably. I want more...

**Jack Deighton**

***A Son of the Rock***  
Orbit, 1997, 374pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

This first novel by a Scottish writer new-ish to the British scene (he is a veteran of 'Interzone' and 'NewWorlds') stands as evidence against all those cynics who keep saying British SF is dead. British SF is not dead, and here is a unique tale to prove it.

In an unspecified future universe where interstellar travel is possible, Alan, the central character of the novel, is advancing his career as a mining expert with a multi-planet conglomerate. On the planet of Copper he meets the woman destined to be the love of his life, Sile, but he also meets a curious and repulsive old man called Sonny. For this is a universe where nobody ages thanks to wonder-drug Euthanol. Sonny, sitting alone in his rock-strewn landscape, attracts and repulses Alan and Sile; day after day he sits and talks about the Rock, a piece of geology with some religious significance, for which he is the last guardian.

A web of relationships is woven in the first half of the novel, as Alan and Sile embark on their passionate affair, try to understand Sonny, fail, and then drift apart as non-communication and an influx of media personalities intrudes on Copper's desolate calm. Eventually an embittered Sile leaves Alan, and he remains to ponder his memories and the fact that somehow Sonny has persuaded him

to become the next guardian of the Rock.

In part two, Alan, more successful but lonely without Sile, and hampered by relationships in his dysfunctional family, tries to come to terms with his life. As the years pass he still has not taken his shot of Euthanol. He ages. Eventually he is a freak, elevated to media stardom, venerated, then ignored, and finally even abused. In the almost redemptive ending there is both hope and sourness – mainly the latter.

What marks this novel out as so different to any other is its clear focus. Its main theme of age and sexual attraction, and its minor themes of colonial repression and arrogance, shine through on almost every page. To keep this up over almost four hundred pages is a tribute to the author's skill. You don't lose interest in Alan and the tangled web around him. Yes, there are moments when geological info-dumps threaten to bore the reader (the author is a chemist with a clear love of rocks...) but these don't, in the end, spoil the novel, as the relationship that you somehow know is going to fail does indeed collapse. The more melancholic second part, set some years after the first and with a broader palette, winds up the novel in a satisfying way, except, possibly, the ending – which I won't spoil here.

This is a thinker's novel. As an enthusiastic Ian McDonald says on the cover, it is profound and written with integrity. Action is minimal, and while there are plenty of events to be concerned with, they generally emerge unforced from the relationship of the characters.

All in all, recommended. Readers should find their perception of the youth-obsessed society around them subtly changed after they've read it. Well done, Orbit!

**Joe Donnelly**

***Havvock Junction***

Arrow, 1996, 464pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Sebastian Phillips

*Havvock Junction* has to be the most tedious book I've read since having a crack at *Absolom, Absolom* back in '83. The basic plot is promising – a woman rescuing her children from an immortal witch gets trapped on the highway to hell. Donnelly has a very visual imagination and a lot of the description is strikingly baroque; it should have worked well. The problem is that nothing really happens. Monsters appear from the shadows and walk around a bit but don't seem capable of catching anyone. We don't care enough about the characters to become involved with their struggle, and the book isn't gruesome enough to work as a straightforward gorefest.

What really stings me is the way that *Havvock Junction* feels padded – too much plot explanation gets repeated. There are too many bad dreams. Too many incidents don't add anything. I can't shake the feeling that the first draft of this book was about 150 pages shorter ...

**Dave Duncan**

***Past Imperative: Round One  
of The Great Game***

Corgi, 1997, 477pp, £5.99

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst and Alan Fraser

*The Great Game* swaps between two worlds: England in 1914, where Edward Exeter, has spent his first summer out of school, waiting for the inevitable war, in which he expects to take his commission, like any public school boy; and the other world, Nextdoor. Nextdoor is peopled by peasants, priests, travelling players, dragons, and gods in many forms. In Nextdoor they are waiting for the conjunction of a girl named Eleal, and a man named D'ward Kisser who shall be the Liberator. He won't be everyone's Liberator, though, as the gods and their followers are engaged in a bloody and underhand rivalry.

The story begins with Edward waking up in hospital accused of impaling his chum on an assegai. For obvious reasons, concerned with the nature of British justice, he is prepared to flee his sickbed, and travel with a bunch of gypsies to Stonehenge, that node of power, and cross into the other world. Eleal happens to be there

when he arrives. As the book ends Edward realises that at least some of the gods are mad.

The Great Game, according to the cover blurb, is played out between men and gods, though it was originally played out on the North West frontier, a little before Edward's time: Kipling's *Kim* made it a common phrase. I suspect that Dave Duncan has another Great Game in mind: how he can play with chase and fantasy. There are a lot of echoes here, from a page that mentions both a man who cannot remember his name (cf the Mouth of Sauron) and the 'Old Ones' (cf Lovecraft), through to the escape with the gypsies in which the contents of a stew take up pages (cf *Wind in the Willows*). And, of course, a wounded hero entering a wounded land recalls Stephen Donaldson.

All of this threatens that this trilogy will be pastiche. I would have preferred more originality, but for those who like what they know ... Of course, you do know *Kim* and *Wind in the Willows* and ... don't you? [LJH]

I haven't come across Dave Duncan before, although he is apparently the author of over 20 books. *Past Imperative* is the first in the *Great Game* trilogy, the others being *Present Tense* (a chapter of which is included here as a taster) and *Future Indefinite*. I was confused because the book is titled as being a "round" of a game, but is subdivided into "Acts", with the prologue and epilogue called "Overture" and "Curtain". A definite case of mixed analogies!

*Past Imperative* follows a well-worn groove of ordinary people travelling between multiple worlds, whilst not having a clue what they're mixed up in. In a mediaeval land called the Vales, Eleal, a crippled orphan, has been adopted by a troupe of itinerant actors. Because she is believed to play a vital part in a prophecy, she is kidnapped by the priests of an unpleasant goddess. In England, it is 1914, and young Edward Exeter, about to join up for the Great War, is lying in a hospital bed with a broken leg and a serious head wound, accused of the murder of his best friend. However, unbeknown to Edward, he has an even bigger role to play in fulfilling the same prophecy.

So far, so bad. However, I made the mistake of assuming this book was going to be awful, and it most certainly isn't. The vital ingredient that makes it good despite all the clichés is the skill with which Duncan creates his characters, sets up an involving plot, and keeps the pace going. At the end I was definitely ready for the next book, and that was something I didn't think would happen. *Past Imperative* will never win any awards, but it's still a good read. [AF]

## Terry England

## Rewind

Avon Books, 1997, 341pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Janet Barron

The aliens have come and gone, leaving a legacy of seventeen apparent 9-year-olds who claim to be rejuvenated adults of ages between 25 and 79. A claim met with scepticism and almost universal fear and revulsion.

Although a quote - 'Replay the tape a million times...' - from Stephen Jay Gould prefaces the book, this is not a novel about second chances, or serendipity. It is a thriller with many of the attributes and attitudes of a made-for-TV movie, laced with melodrama and sentiment, and is excessively predictable. The novel is very American and very media-oriented, inserting information in the form of news reports, press conferences and roundtable sessions, not perhaps surprising since the author is a journalist in Santa Fe. Despite the direct prose and slick action, it leaves a pervasive sense that the printed page is the wrong medium for this tale.

Most of the tension rests on the physical vulnerability and legal helplessness of the Rewoundees. Stripped of all adult rights, no sooner are they released into the custody of legal guardians, than we hear of deaths. Unlikely as this may seem, these attractive-looking youngsters are being murdered by husbands, fathers, evangelical congregations, fearful that the 'ki-people' are aliens.

Focus is on three of the rewoundees - Earl, a sassy 79-year-old is

in the custody of distant relations, the only family in the book who show any signs of coping with their not-child. Then there is Marion, sold to a drug company by her sister, and Aaron, sold likewise by his wife who loses no time in completing their divorce. Aaron and Marion escape and are harboured by a community of squatting down-and-outs, who find a new purpose in life in protecting their protégés.

Will they be found first by the good scientist or the bad drug company?

Will Earl shake his younger relations out of a lifetime's complacency, or will they knuckle under to threats by outsiders?

Will Aaron and Marion find pre-pubescent romance?

No prizes for getting it right.

## David Feintuch

## Challenger's Hope

Orbit, 1996, 407pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Simon le Bisson

David Feintuch's *Seafort Saga* is an attempt at a far future Napoleonic naval novel, in the tradition of C.S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower. In the second volume, *Challenger's Hope*, Nicholas Seafort, precipitously propelled by volume one's tragedy from midshipman to captain, is at last ready to board his own command, ready to go out and track down the strange interstellar "fish".

But in the best tradition of the naval pot boiler, nothing goes as planned. The rivalry of an insecure admiral leaves Seafort transferred to an old bucket of a starship, full of street kids and griggish aristocrats. But the admiral's failure to fight in a crucial battle with the space-dwelling aliens leaves Seafort trapped with a disabled starship light-years from home.

Death seems to follow Seafort everywhere he goes: mutiny, plague and suicide. It's no wonder that he's a most unsympathetic narrator - full of self-pity and self-loathing. Each set-piece disaster leaves Seafort writhing in yet another bout of moral agony, until he returns from self-imposed isolation to win the day. Whilst most modern day space opera has chosen the path of investigating moral ambiguity and indecision, Feintuch's absolutist Seafort pits his black and white views against a darkening tomorrow.

There's a wearisome grimness to Feintuch's world, a world where the key to everything good appears to be an unstinting (and even vicious) discipline. It's in the background, however, that the weaknesses start to show, and you realise that it's all been done before, and better. The translation of naval novel to SF is accomplished more effectively in David Weber's 'Honor Harrington' novels; in the economically depressed Earth-dominated interstellar society in F.M. Busby's 'Hulzein' saga; and in the power of the disciplined man in Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*.

Despite its many flaws, *Challenger's Hope* is a readable book, and will help pass away that interminable morning commute. Let's face it, anything (even this) is better than the newspapers during the run up to a General Election.

## Philip Finch

## Paradise Junction

Orion, 1995, 342pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Sebastian Phillips

*Paradise Junction* is a very proficient and enjoyable thriller. It's written in that terse, tense style which most US crime novels seem to adopt, perfectly suited to the material. A pair of bored yuppies get involved in burglary and then start thinking about murder for kicks. Unfortunately, they pick the wrong victim and things start to go very wrong.

OK, so this isn't the world's cleverest plot, but Finch judges the pace just right and the reader's attention never wavers. The characters are likeable, the action is believable and well-paced. The only criticism I would make of this otherwise excellent book is that it lacks a really hard edge - everyone here turns out to be a little too nice, a little too reasonable. The ending smells like the set-up for a sequel, but I for one am not complaining.



**Parke Godwin*****The Tower of Beowulf***

Avon Books, 1996, 343pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

*Beowulf* is a seventh-century Scandinavian epic. It is heroic, and Parke Godwin specialises in heroes – Arthur, Saint Patrick, Robin Hood – drawing on legend, ballad and history, imaginatively shaping these into fiction. *Beowulf* presents a challenge because the poem itself (as we have it) is a tenth- or eleventh-century masterpiece. In the three action episodes – *Beowulf's* slaying the monster Grendel, his descent into the mere to kill Grendel's mother, and his final and fatal fight with the dragon – Godwin stays close to the main strands of his source, describing events in arresting prose. These episodes, however, he sets into a scenario involving characteristics and motivations peculiar to the novel.

So, we encounter the Norse gods, approaching Rāgnārök, first in Asgard and finally with their deeds and dooms reflected in Loki's underworld incarceration. The wild god Loki is here grandfather of Grendel: and both Grendel and his mother are portrayed as unhappy 'halling' creatures, aspiring to godhead and beauty but condemned to hideousness and the animality of endless pre-hunting. This is made the more poignant because, in a shape-shifting way, their unattainable ideal forms keep visibly breaking through, intensifying frustration. *Beowulf*, though an unyielding antagonist, is shown as not insensitive. In fact, while facing his last enemy, (he) felt an empathy with the dragon, almost a kinship, the dragon being a reassemblage of the remains of the long-dead guardian of an ancient hoard. Loyal to the old gods, *Beowulf* also knows, from northern-faring priests, of the 'White Christ', and even senses a common pre-ordained sacrificial role. Although the pagan *Beowulf* poem does exhibit Christian influences, this fictional dimension is audaciously way-out, though, given the Rāgnārök context, not at all meaningless. As well as being a well-told story, containing such appealing inventions as the love-idyll of *Beowulf* and Ina, it offers constant mental stimulation through its symbolic shadowing of a critical phase in north-European history.

**Frances Gordon*****The Burning Altar***

Headline, 1996, 442pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

In a rundown part of London, where Jack the Ripper had once stalked, was a deserted music hall which was soon to be the Chance Centre. Sir Lewis Chance, millionaire, eccentric, philanthropist, has financed a drop-in centre for the lost and lonely. But Lewis Chance has a dark secret, several of them in fact...

Frances Gordon's latest novel swings from modern London through Victorian journeys deep into the Himalayas and back again via the 1960s in a whirlpool ride that never really lets up. Bits of the plot seem a bit clichéd (the Thing in the Cellar: come on!) but they are presented in a skewed sort of way that overcomes their roots and makes them new and unusual. As we follow the trail of the Victorian, Patrick Chance, and his descendant Lewis Chance into the dark, Himalayan valley where they will meet their destiny, we soon begin to care what happens to them. Add to these characters the defrocked priest Raffael and Lewis' new aide de camp Elinor Craven and a cast of extras from the street population and the stage is set for a non-stop read. Evil secret sects, suppressed Vatican documents and undercover Catholics all add to the fun.

There are flaws in this book; sometimes it reads like a melodrama, but in the end it's a bit like those TV soaps that you watch the end of while you're waiting for something else to start and find that the plot hook has worked and you have to watch the next episode to find out what has happened. There is just no easy place to stop reading and put it down.

Not to be read on the bus. You'll miss your stop.

**Sharon Green*****Convergence***

AvonNova, 1996, 442pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Susan Badham

This book has some good points and lots of bad points. Like, it's well written, but tedious. If I were the kind of reviewer who believed that authors base their books directly on their experiences, I would be recommending that Sharon Green go into therapy. Nobody has nice parents in this book – they're all domineering, manipulative and downright nasty in most cases. Add to this the fact that everyone's got an unhappy past and you get as fine a collection of emotional cripples as you could want for the main characters. When they are combined with a plot that moves at about the speed of Golden Syrup oozing off a spoon it makes for a bit of a tedious read.

The fantasy background is high medieval, à la Barbara Hambly, and the magic is nicely worked out, if a bit conventional: but you just know that the characters are going to change and grow into better people and the problem is that you don't believe a word of it. They're not exactly stereotypes, just not very original, really. Add to this the fact that the only bit of intrigue in the book flickers briefly up halfway through and then vanishes (presumably to get you to buy the sequel) and you have a book with some nicely quirky bits and nothing in particular to recommend it. It's bog standard fantasy, folks, so it's that's what you want, go ahead and buy this book. It won't surprise you. That I guarantee.

**Colin Greenland*****The Plenty Principle***

Voyager, 1997, 427pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Colin Greenland's first collection of short fiction provides, as you would expect, a mixed bag containing efforts stretching back to his first published story, 'Miss Otis Regrets', from way back in 1982. The chief attraction will be the more recent fiction of which there is plenty. Nineteen tales in all showing the author's range from horror to mainstream fiction.

Some of the straight horror stories are surprisingly effective; the eponymous 'Grandma' is a particularly macabre creation showing the author's dry humour at its best. 'The Station With No Name' is another horror story that activates all the genre bells and whistles without being overburdened with originality.

Greenland uses some of these stories to delve into the worlds created by other authors and in the process pays tribute to many of his influences. 'Temptations Of Iron' is a convincing Elric tale which is uncannily Moorcockian – although Greenland did base a large part of his doctorate on Moorcock. You would think that Neil Gaiman's Sandman stories are so idiosyncratic that any attempts by other writers to enter this world would fail miserably. But Greenland's 'Masquerade And High Water' succeeds as do many of the other stories that appeared with it in last year's *The Sandman: Book of Dreams*.

For a writer whose fiction developed from an academic background, Greenland strikes me as a natural storyteller rather than a literary stylist; his fiction is indelibly entertaining. The obvious example of this is the Tabitha Jute stories which fail to chart new territory in the genre but are immensely successful nonetheless. This collection contains a new Tabitha novella 'The Well Wishers' which will be a major attraction for many readers. It's a pleasant change to find such a memorable character in wide-screen Space Opera and this novella is a suitably entertaining addition to the canon.

There are a few disappointments; the shared-world stories (one from *The Weirde* and one from *Temps*) are best read in that context; 'In The Garden' is a slightly *Plenty* prequel. But this is generally a fine collection for Greenland fans to enjoy.

**Jon Courtenay Grimwood**

**neoAddix**

New English Library, 1997, 359pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

In his review column in *Asimov's Science Fiction* (December 1996), Norman Spinrad suggests that on the continental mainland the term 'science fiction' has been discredited by the endless waves of TV and film tie-ins and as a result the term 'cyberpunk' is being applied increasingly to those books from the more literate end of the genre. As a result, some rather unlikely contenders have acquired the cyberpunk label – I mean, *Orson Scott Card* a cyberpunk? Anybody familiar with that particular sub-genre of sf may be rather surprised by some of the books they might encounter under this revised categorisation system, but *neoAddix* does at least confirm that there are still books out there which conform to the expectations of the cyberpunk label.

This is a first novel from a new British writer, a freelance journalist writing about the on-line world, manga and – just for variety – as contributing editor to *New Woman* magazine, and New English Library are to be commended for issuing it as a relatively inexpensive paperback, a policy which should have brought the book to a wider audience but which has been undermined by the lack of any kind of fanfare surrounding its publication. Also, it has to be said, this isn't a particularly good novel – but it's not a particularly bad one either. In fact, as much as anything and rather surprisingly given its self-proclaimed 'cutting edge' status, it just feels curiously old-fashioned, laden as it is with the cyber noir (as the cover has it) trappings which we tend to associate with books by the likes of Gibson or Kadrey from the mid-eighties. It seems unfair to burden this, or indeed any, book so heavily with the cyberpunk label but the term keeps coming back to the reader; it's all here. There's Alex Gibson (interesting choice of name), an evidence chaser, with a recording device mounted in his eye and a head full of crucial information, and a Japanese street gang lead by Johnnie T (another good c-punk name, that). We have vicious street crime, and massive all-powerful international corporations with plenty of high-tech for atmosphere. The attached publicity material tries to give it all a somewhat more nineties feel by invoking comparisons with Tarantino, presumably on the strength of some rather gory killings, but you're still left with the feeling that you're on familiar territory. Nevertheless, as a relatively cheap paperback, and a first novel to boot, it's probably worth checking out a copy if you can, just to show that there is a market for new British sf, whether it's labelled cyberpunk or not.

**Robert Holdstock**

**Ancient Echoes**

Voyager, 1997, 403pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

There are places in this world – often to be found in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, but also incarnate as caves and groves in Western Europe – where the sense of "a life of their own" becomes more than a dead metaphor. Robert Holdstock is a fantasist at home in these regions. As a boy Jack Chatwin senses a world beyond: visions of a man and a woman ("Greyface" and "Greenface") fleeing something unnameable as the sounds and scents of their environment causes a shimmering effect around him. His girl-friend Angela and the dowsier-archaeologist John Garth take an interest in this phenomenon, and through Garth Jack learns something of Glanum, the prehistoric city which seems to lie at the heart of his home town of Exburgh, and which in some way bursts through into his reality.

Ten years later Jack and Angela are married, with a daughter, Natalie. Jack feels Greyface burst into reality, but somehow Greenface remains trapped in the mysterious land within his mind. With Natalie threatened, Jack has no choice but to use the techniques of virtual reality and lucid dreaming developed by his wife's former lover to travel into the hinterlands of his own unconscious. In this domain, both symbolic and highly specific, the secret of humanity's early urban past lies buried in the story of

Greyface and Greenface and their sacrifice.

Once more, Holdstock wanders among archetypes, where the social self and that of the individual fuse and become one. Jack is at once exploring his own psychology and an event in the deep past of pre-Biblical times, and his story is, in a very real sense, also history. The scenes we read as set within Jack's mind are rich and powerful, full of reference to what may be the archetype behind the Minoan Bull cult and the darker elements of Old Testament religion, but there are other possible resonances – the reflections implied by some of the nomenclature, for instance, seem to feed back into the energy of the story to remind us that Holdstock's inspiration is fuelled above all by the energy of English myth.

**Joe R. Lansdale**

**The Two-Bear Mambo**

Indigo 1997, 273pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Antony J. Shepherd

*The Two-Bear Mambo* is the third in Bram Stoker-award winning Joe R. Lansdale's series of novels which began with *Savage Season* and continued in *Mucho Mojo*. Together, the novels chronicle the adventures of white, straight, disillusioned idealist Hap Collins and his best friend, black, gay, hard-headed Vietnam veteran Leonard Pine. And like the two previous novels, they're well-paced, violent, but never gratuitously, and full of some of the funniest dialogue you're likely to find in a serious novel.

Our story begins on Christmas Eve as Hap arrives to find that Leonard has set the crack house next door on fire, and is proceeding to 'whup the ass' of the people within. After a night in jail their friendly police lieutenant suggests they get out of town for a while, and there's something they can do that would make him drop charges...

His lover, Florida, has gone down to a small town in the south, to find out about the alleged suicide in the town jail of Bobby Joe Soothe, grandson of the legendary blues guitarist L. C. Soothe. But she's not been heard of since. And, well, the folks of that town aren't exactly friendly. Down in Grovetown it's like the civil rights movement of the '60s never happened, so when a black lawyer turns up poking around into the alleged suicide of a black man, well, they're not the kind of people to take that kindly. Could be the Klan were involved.

So our two heroes ride off into the south to see what they can find. Signs that say "No Coloreds", the N-word in abundance, and where a white man and black man travelling together are definitely not going to fit right in with the rednecks and good ole boys of the town. Just for being there. The fact they're going round asking all kinds of awkward questions, well, is just asking for trouble. Which they get in abundance. They take a beating, and on the Sheriff's advice head for home, to lick their wounds, hurt and scared. But they have to go back, to find out what really happened to Florida and to Bobby Joe.

Well, they do, but you're going to have to read the book to find out, let's just say that some of the characters aren't as two-dimensional as you might be led to believe along the way, and the climax of the novel is truly apocalyptic.

Oh, and *Two-Bear Mambo* is, of course, a euphemism...

**Mark Leon**

**The Unified Field**

Avon Books, 1996, 281pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Colin Bird

I hate to begin by reviewing a blurb; but here we have an example of misrepresentation, with the book being marketed as a whacky romp through a series of humorous SF situations. The piqued concepts are there (a levitated Atlantis, the Holy Grail on the dark side of the moon), but Mark Leon lacks the fecund energy to ignite his colourless prose. Even the tennis match, with the future of Earth at stake, fails to excite.

It's a readable enough effort, but the author's lazy philosophy causes the plot to grind to an unconvincing halt too often. Fans of

Leon will know his two previous novels: *Mind Surfer* and *The Gaia War*. The *Unified Field* follows events from these predecessors with several cross-references labelled as footnotes. I can't recommend such a lacklustre book except to fans of the author's earlier work.

### Ian McDowell

### *Mordred's Curse*

Avon Books, 1996, 311pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

*Mordred's Curse* is rather an oddity among Arthurian fantasy novels, veering as it does between black humour and the darker and bloodier aspects of Celtic legend. The author favours the Dark Age Arthur as opposed to the chivalric version: but, as he cheerfully admits in his afterword, the book is a fantasy, not an historical novel with any claims to authenticity – which goes some way towards explaining Mordred and Gawain calling their mother, the witch Morgawse, 'Mum'. It also excuses the sometimes uneasy combination of Mordred's thoroughly modern cynicism and the author's depiction of a Dark Age fantasy Britain complete with giants, palug cats and talking decapitated heads.

The narrator of this book is Mordred, and he recounts his version of the events leading up to his finding a place at Arthur's court and Arthur's marriage to Guinevere with, unsurprisingly, Mordred himself standing centre stage throughout. The book draws on the basic plot that everyone knows: Mordred is the result of unwitting incest between Arthur and his sister Morgawse, and he lusts after Guinevere, his father's wife. However, as Mordred tells it, he is definitely more sinned against than sinning, understandably bitter when the king and uncle he has worshipped rejects him on learning that the youth he thought his nephew is actually his son. The relationship between Mordred and Guinevere is one of mutual passion – Mordred assumes the role taken by Lancelot in medieval versions of the tale. Meanwhile, Arthur is shown to be a sanctimonious prig – in need of rescuing by the despised Mordred on more than one occasion.

This is not a book for readers who think that Mallory is the definitive voice of the Matter of Britain, but readers who enjoy the humorous subversion of old legends may find it useful for the proverbial train journey.

### Michael Moorcock

### *Elric of Melniboné*

Orion, 1996, 690pp, 16.99

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

When I began reading science fiction regularly, some empty-ump years ago, I made a deliberate decision to avoid fantasy, which I thought was a soft option for those afraid of the real future before us; a future which only science fiction could illumine. Ultimately, I got better (science fiction is a form of fantasy, after all), but fantasy still seemed less attractive – too dependent on formula, too simplistically divided into good and evil, too many wizards in pointy hats and (worse) elves who cleaved still to the elder ways against the coming of man. Then, braving the somewhat lurid covers in which Mayflower wrapped Michael Moorcock's books, I encountered Elric of Melniboné.

It was immediately obvious that this was something more complex. The names might have been cut from the same stock of fantasy images – the Young Kingdoms, the Dreaming City, the swords Stormbringer and Mournblade – but the tone was very different. Where other fantasies trowelled on a pretence of lushness and ancient wisdom, Elric's world was clearly tired and half-abandoned, as though its people had physically used it up. Monstrous creations abounded, but the stories turned more on the characters, conveying an awareness that although in the shorter term the struggle against encroaching disorder might serve some purpose, the grand sweep of history would eventually reduce the effort to just another footnote. (M. John Harrison's 'Viriconium' stories share much the same worldview). Finally, and more importantly, Elric possessed a genuine ambiguity of spirit: although

he fought for Law against Chaos, he did so with some reluctance, never sure that one was inherently preferable to the other – but well aware that neither was inherently good.

Later Elric stories – 1976's *The Sailor on the Seas of Fate*, and even 1972's *Elric of Melniboné* – seemed more diffuse, perhaps because by then Elric was no longer an independent creation but had been incorporated into the ramifying 'Eternal Champion' mythos, and his particular ambiguity thus submerged into a wider argument about the utility of leadership. 1989's *The Fortress of the Pearl*, written at a time when Moorcock was engaged in other things, read like an afterthought.

This new one-volume edition brings together these three novels and some of the shorter works, all revised to some extent since their original appearance. Other stories, including 'Stormbringer' and 'The Vanishing Tower', have been omitted, and will perhaps appear later in *Stormbringer*, a future volume in the 'Eternal Champion' sequence. Nevertheless, reading these tales again after so many years reminded me why I enjoyed them in the first place – and, indeed, why they remain exceptional. Fantasy still relies too much on unrealistic conflicts between good and evil, and invented Celtic folderol; we need fewer talking cats, and more Elrics.

### Eric S Nylund

### *Dry Water*

Avon, 1997, 311pp, \$12.50

Reviewed by Andy Mills

With original fantasy novels, a fine line needs to be drawn by the author between exercising his vivid imagination and throwing in one "magic" novelty after the other. Cross that line and you can move from a book which is new and exciting to one which is just plain silly. *Dry Water* pushes the boundaries but – I'm happy to report – stays on the right side. It's a snappy, thought-provoking read which whisks the reader around from start to finish. No wonder there's an endorsement from Tim Powers on the back cover: had the author's name been missing from this book, I'd have pegged this as a short Powers novel.

Larry Ngits, a writer with some psychic ability, arrives at the desert town of Dry Water, intending to break away from his stultifying day job and girlfriend to start afresh and concentrate on his literary career. His arrival in the strange town is marked by a bizarre lightning storm. Larry thinks the lightning is directed at him. He's right. A necromancer, Judyzas, considers Larry to be a prophet who will bring catastrophic change to the world, and he intends to kill our hero. To confuse things, Larry is also sought by a former lover of Judyzas, who wants him for her own ends.

The reader is immediately plunged into a maelstrom as Larry and the other characters encounter ghosts and spirits, enter a river of past lives, manipulate the lives of people long dead in order to change history, die and live again, and meet up at the end for a showdown. It's all very fast and furious, but Nylund introduces other elements too, elements which combine to make this a mature novel. For instance, none of the warring characters are evil: indeed, the irony of the whole affair is that each of them sincerely believes that they are working for the good of the world. And whilst the resolution is satisfying, the hero does not end up, as in most fantasy novels, with the world at his feet.

### Diana L Paxson

### *Lord of Horses*

Avon Books, 1996, 373pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Janet Barron

This is the third part of the *Wodan's Children* trilogy – but can easily be read alone, since the previous works are not needed for an understanding of the action.

A skilful blend of legend and history, this is a densely descriptive novel. The detailed imagery, like a tapestry of many tiny stitches, evokes the sights, sounds and smells of the Dark Ages interwoven with the glittering threads of myth. No page-turner, then, but a narrative journey to be taken at a leisurely pace, rich with sensation

and emotion. The depth of characterisation is to be recommended.

Sigfrid and Brunnahild are dead. Sigfrid, murdered by the Burgund kings, his own oath brothers, leaves a legacy of bitterness to Gudrun, his widow – and a power vacuum. Set firmly in AD 429, and during the subsequent decade, alliances are shifting in middle Europe as the fading might of Rome feels the growing strength of Attila, khan of the Huns. For the sake of the Burgunds, Gudrun must make a marriage of political expedience to Attila, as her brothers, Gundohar and Hagano, Sigfrid's murderers, attempt to preserve their power and their people in a changing world. A tale which encompasses betrayal and consequences, the tides of war, and the touch of a god.

Events lead in stately progression to the final confrontation between the Burgunds and Attila, when Gudrun, with her grievously mixed loyalties, is the pivot upon which the outcome depends.

I approached this novel dubiously, having read only one (early) work by the same author and found little in it to impress. This was much more enjoyable, the sort of thing to have at hand in case of a bout of 'flu, when pressing issues are on hold, and a good soaking in prose is what the doctor ordered.

## Tim Powers

### Last Call

Avon Books, 1997, 535pp, \$13.00

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

This is a new edition of a novel first written in 1992 by one of the best American sf-fantasy authors of recent years. In 1995 *Last Call* won the World Fantasy Award and judging by the review quotes was universally admired. It is described as a work of magic realism; there are no sf elements and many of the fantasy elements are hidden under layers of metaphor and obscurity, although to fantasy fans – particularly those enamoured of the Arthurian cycle – much will become clear as the novel progresses. The first chapter-head quotes are from T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Idylls of the Kings", which gives a good idea of the territory the reader is in. And there is the inevitable Egyptian reference, this time ISIS and the sigil on the slightly bland front cover.

The tale concerns a gambler, Scott Crane, who, on a houseboat on Lake Mead in 1969, wins a vast amount of money that he considers his own by right. But as the story progresses it turns out that the poker game was rather more than it appeared, and, rather than win outright, Scott Crane merely exchanged the money for something else – his soul. The real winner of the games has come back for his winnings...

The story is written as a helter-skelter of events, characters and images, with many twists and turns. There is much mention of such things as Assumption and Communion and Tarot, gold cups and lances, knives that re-enter pools to be caught by turtles – or was that a hand? – and much more. And because this is America there is a lot of unfighting and mention of pistols by their calibre size. And Coors beer, whatever that is. The fact that the novel is set in America could make it less engaging for European readers, but probably not. The appearance of mathematical and high-energy physics terms does make it seem as though Tim Powers has thrown everything but the kitchen sink into this book, but fortunately he keeps the Californian Stuff under control.

The writing is in places lyrical, and the storytelling is excellent. The multiplicity of characters in places becomes difficult, but the main characters, Scott Crane and Ozzie and Mavranos and Funo, all stay consistent and help keep the reader on track. None of them are what you might call likeable, but they are well drawn, and both relevant to and immersed in their own stories.

This is probably an easier, more readable work than, say, *The Anubis Gates*, and comes recommended.

## Christopher Priest

### The Prestige

Simon & Schuster, 1996, 404pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Martin Sketchley

Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* has won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the World Fantasy Award, and was nominated for both the 1996 Arthur C. Clarke and BSFA awards; and although such things are occasionally subject to fashion and politics and cannot always be relied upon as an indication of quality, in the case of *The Prestige*, they are wholly justified.

The story is a tragedy, an examination of the influence negative energy can exert on the human mind if it remains unchecked; an example of how pathetic human beings can become if they are consumed by bitterness; a demonstration of the level to which pride and paranoia can overwhelm a person's life, and affect everything and everyone around that person; and it is an emotionally engaging chronicle of one man's discovery of his origins, self and substance.

The bulk of the story is set around the turn of the century, focusing on two magicians – Alfred Borden and Rupert Angier – who, due to youthful naïveté, tragic coincidences and misunderstandings, and mutual pride, begin a feud early on in their careers, which then continues for the rest of their lives. They become obsessed with each other, and the desire of each to outdo the other consumes them both.

The story is told from several viewpoints, each of which constitutes a separate section of the book, which are, in turn, divided into chapters. The key events in the main characters' lives are imparted from their own viewpoints, and because of this insight into their deepest thoughts and motivations we see that essentially it is their inability to communicate that fuels their feud, prevents a reconciliation, and ultimately leads to their downfall.

We see events from Alfred Borden's viewpoint first, and because of this our sympathies initially lie with him, while Rupert Angier is felt to be the villain. When we come to understand Rupert Angier more fully, however, and appreciate the events as he sees them, it becomes clear that neither of them is worthy of our sympathy; indeed, both deserve our pity. But the plot is so beautifully constructed, and the facts revealed to us so carefully, along with the paranoid conjectures and half-truths that infest the main characters' heads, that we are often uncertain as to whether or not we really know what is true and what is false. The obsession of both men to discredit or subvert the other is infectious, and the reader is carried along by the strength of their emotions; our loyalties shift with a turn of events, our emotions are twisted and plundered as they betray those around them, themselves, and frequently we feel, us. When we have seen all the events, and been shown glimpses of the possibilities, the missed chances, and witnessed the waste of potential, we come to realise that Priest is not just telling a story that involves the few characters in his book, but our whole race.

Despite the SF element of *The Prestige*, which is essential to the novel as well as adding to the personal torment of Rupert Angier, the book is not overtly a work of SF. Because of this some potential readers may choose something in a more familiar style or sub-genre to avoid the risk of being disappointed; they will be missing out. *The Prestige* is one of the subtlest, most satisfying novels I have read in a very long time, and I cannot recommend it highly enough. Priest has written with supreme skill and restraint, creating a backdrop which remains exactly that whilst enhancing the story line and illustrating the social rituals of the period setting, and the kind of characters one feels saddened to lose at the turn of the last page. When you go to buy your copy of *The Prestige*, make sure you buy a copy of every other book by Christopher Priest that they have in stock: it'll save you a return trip.

**Michael Scott Rohan****Maxie's Demon**

Orbit, 1996, 376pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

The guy sitting next to me on the train was reading one of Rohan's early *Winter of the World* novels. "Is that the new one?" he asked. "What's it like?" When I said this was a 'humour' book, he looked distinctly unimpressed.

And there lies a problem. That early trilogy was quite dark in tone, and the sequence that followed, starting with *Chase the Morning*, was more a parallel world swashbuckling romp of high adventure. This latest novel, set in the same interconnected worlds of the Core and the Spiral, shows a radical change of style and direction.

The eponymous Maxie is a thief, pushing a ton in a stolen Ferrari Testarossa with the cops in hot pursuit. Better than sex, until the screen is suddenly full of truck, and Maxie is flying upside down off the westbound carriageway into no mans land. He survives, but who is the odd looking yokel with a scythe on the verge (and what is he really cutting)? And why do the inhabitants of the nearby pub all look and sound like extras from a 16th century theme park?

Maxie has slipped into the shadow world of the Spiral, but to what end? That revolves around a hungry demon, a group of adventuring cut-throats who want Maxie for their leader, and a couple of Elizabethan alchemist mages, whose ritual Maxie literally drops in on. Those pair turn out Dr John Dee and Edward Kelley, who are equally shocked when Maxie turns up instead of the expected angelic presence. Being an almost unbelievably resourceful thief and con man, with ventriloquism, sleight of hand and a quick line in patter, Maxie gets caught up in their schemes and finds himself in Prague, until he makes an enemy of Kelley (who Rohan paints as a devious, bullying charlatan), all the while pursued and hounded by the leaderless pirate band up through the streets and different ages of Prague.

Puns, in-jokes and deliberate anachronisms abound; scarcely a paragraph gets by without one, and the effect becomes wearing except for some inspired moments (Maxie's encounter with Kafka, for example, and the faked angelic conjuration that announces itself "I am the Walrus..."), while others ring like purest tin. Whether, as someone said, "if you like this stuff, this is the sort of stuff you'll like", or you find it strays too far into Craig Shaw Gardner or Piers Anthony territory as a disconcerting change of style from the previous books, is largely a matter of personal preference. I enjoyed it on the whole, but I think it's going to confuse a lot of Scott Rohan fans.

**Amy Stout****The Sacred Seven**

Avon Books, 1997, 260pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

*The Sacred Seven* is Amy Stout's first novel, and somewhere within it is a halfway decent fantasy struggling to be told.

The first problem is sloppy copyediting. Phrases such as 'chatting it up' and sentences where the object is far from clear abound. This, combined with the usual silly spellings of names – Maercus rather than Marcus, for example – tempted me to give up before the end of the first chapter. Why do authors feel they have to add extra letters in names, or try to make them unpronounceable? At least Ms. Stout counteracts Maercus with plainer names such as Jillian and William.

The other main problem the book suffers from is having too large a cast. This results both in the characters being sketchily drawn and the viewpoint changing frequently. Virtually all of the sections on Lydia and William could have been edited out which would have tightened up the book a little. One or two of the characters begin to be interesting towards the end: perhaps Ms. Stout may develop them in the all-too-obviously signalled sequel.

Despite these problems, the book has some merit. Ms. Stout takes the rather trite 'find the King's lost heirs as only they can save

us from the forthcoming holocaust' plot and produces a couple of interesting twists from it. It is not immediately obvious which of the large cast are the two heirs and while some of the characters are facile others have slightly more ambivalent motivations.

All in all would I recommend it? Probably not. Once Ms. Stout has some more experience her fantasies may be worth looking for, if you like that style of book, but this is all too obviously a first novel.

**Sherri Tepper****Grass**

Voyager, 1996, 540pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This classic SF novel is set on the world of Grass, one of many planets colonised by humans, and one of the few not dominated by the theocracy of Sanctity. Sanctity promises its enrolled members physical immortality, bodily resurrection through the cloning of stored tissue samples. But Sanctity's rule is threatened by a plague, an invariably fatal illness with no known prophylaxis or cure, that has spread to every human-inhabited planet but one – Grass. There are rumours that plague victims visiting Grass have been cured. But Grassian society is closed, strictly limited by the noble *bon* families. Sanctity's Hierarchy sends his nephew Rodrigo Yrarier and family to Grass in search of a cure. The Grassian nobility are said to be obsessed with hunting; Rodrigo's wife Marjorie is an Olympic medalist in several equestrian events. But Grassian foxes and hounds are nothing like their Terran counterparts, and the nobility's mounts – the Hippae – are not horses.

Rigo and Marjorie, and their children Stella and Tony, are four very different personalities, with divergent views of their posting to Grass. The family are also sincere and practicing Old Catholics, with ethics and beliefs which are sometimes deeply in conflict with those of Sanctity. Rigo and Marjorie take very different approaches to their secret mission; trying to gather information from the noble families on their isolated *estancias*, the Commons who carry out all Grass's agriculture, craft and commerce from a single restricted town, and the Sanctity-sponsored Green Brothers who are excavating a city of the long-vanished Arbai, an interstellar civilisation known only through archaeology. As the family slowly gain more and more knowledge of the complex links between all who live on Grass, they become increasingly estranged from one another. It is eventually left to Marjorie to attempt a solution to a set of fundamental ethical dilemmas: when, if ever, is it right to kill, or to allow to die, to prevent further evil, further death? When is it right to intervene, and when to stand aside? May a sentient being ethically eat its own pre-sentient larval stage? When is one sentient species justified in making a major intervention in the lives of another sentient species?

*Grass* is a thoughtful, well-written and fully realised novel, a convincing and satisfying read on many levels. Highly recommended.

**J.R.R. Tolkien****The Monster and the Critics  
and Other Essays**

HarperCollins, 1997, 240pp, 9.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Despite the title, this is not actually a collection of essays but rather of six lectures and an introduction. They were all aimed at a general audience, but they were also drawn from Tolkien's academic preoccupations so they are not always easily accessible. Indeed, so strictly academic is Tolkien in his approach that the introduction he contributed to a then new translation of *Beowulf* reads for the most part like a criticism of the book that was to follow. (Here also, and throughout the collection, Tolkien has a penchant for dropping in quotations from the original Anglo-Saxon or Old English, generally without translation – these pieces may have been aimed at a general audience but perceptions of what makes up a general audience have clearly changed over the last half century or so.) Anyone, therefore, who approaches this book as a way of once more entering Middle

Earth is in for a disappointment – anyone who approaches it, on the other hand, to find out more about what went in to the creation of Middle Earth will find it full of fascinating if often oblique riches.

There is, for a start, the perennial fascination with language. The introduction, "On Translating Beowulf", for instance is full of the subtleties of language, the precise meaning of individual words or their lack of a precise modern form which can not only change the meaning of the entire piece but also throw light upon the society depicted and the society of the poet. He reflects on the differences between a high or deliberately poetic language with its archaisms and metaphors, and a low or demotic form which will be much more prosaic, and how the readers (or listeners) of the time would understand the differences between the two and appreciate what this meant. With further comments on the metre and rhythm of Anglo-Saxon verse, there is much in this essay alone that echoes (it was written in 1940) the linguistic patterns of *Lord of the Rings*. There is more still on this topic in the lecture "English and Welsh", delivered the day after the publication of *The Return of the King* (1955) and full of insights into Celtic survivals in our language. Above all – and this consistency of focus illustrates the vital importance of language in everything Tolkien did, from his academic studies to his relaxation to his fiction – there is the lecture here titled "A Secret Vice" which was probably delivered in 1931. The secret vice is the creation of languages, something that was obviously a lifelong obsession with Tolkien for he includes examples of schoolboy languages whose vocabulary and grammar were far more elaborate than any normal schoolboy might construct, and the essay traces this interest through to the creation of "Elvish" verse.

But it wasn't just the language. Two of Tolkien's best known lectures are included here: "The Monster and the Critics" which is a robust defence of Beowulf against academic trends of the time which saw it as poor literature but tangentially interesting history. Here we get a stirring statement of Tolkien's belief in the poetical value of Beowulf and also in the value of its fantasy. And this is backed up by "On Fairy-Stories" which was first delivered in 1939, preceding C.S. Lewis's essay lecture "On Science Fiction" (1955) by a good 15 years and hence the first serious academic consideration of the fantastic in the history of our genre. This is not just an analysis of what goes to make a fairy story (and hence what Faerie consists of) it is also an important defence of the whole notion of fantasy as something of worth in the literary and cultural development of adults as well as children.

Piecing all these various lectures together it is easy to build a picture of the sorts of obsessions and interests that went into the creation of one of the most important and influential works of imaginative fiction this century.

## George Turner

### *Drowning Towers*

Avon Books, 1996, 387pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

This paperback edition reprints George Turner's 1987 *The Sea and Summer*. Although this new title makes it seem more apocalyptic, it is probably more accurate – the drowning towers are huge accommodation blocks on the edge of Melbourne, Australia, which are being inundated as global warming floods an overpopulated world. The people have divided into Sweet (who live in the Erinborough-like suburbs) and the Swill in the towers, who are ruled by block lords. Written with the help of an Australian government literary grant, in some ways it shows. The story of the towers is topped and tailed by investigations in the year 3000, long after this civilisation has collapsed, when the towers stand in the sea like broken teeth. An archaeologist and a mime artiste determine to recreate the lives of the towers.

*The Sea and Summer* is a novel by the archaeologist telling the lives of the Conway family from 2040 AD onwards, as Dad is made redundant, the money economy collapses, and the Conways move closer to the Swill.

The tale is told from multiple points of view. Francis is a

brilliant mathematician who becomes a bookkeeper for the mobs, while Teddy his brother flees and becomes a police officer. Teddy especially goes through many rites of passage to discover that there is still a government in the land.

The towers with their poor water supplies and terrible flushing toilets are bad, but overall the people are not bad. What is odd about this book is that the people are not morally scorable. The brothers are unpleasant snobs both, but this is not a horrible future. If the Sweet are the entrapped people of *Mad Max II*, the Swill are not the degenerate bikers.

It is an odd book to read in which the future problems of flooding sewage play a major part in their caution for the future. It is odd still that George Turner manages to do this without rubbing one's face in it.

## Bernard Werber

### *Empire of the Ants*

Corgi, 1997, 348pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

*Empire of the Ants* was first published under the plain title of *Les Fourmis* ("The Ants") by Editions Albin Michel, Paris, in 1991. Bantam Press brought us the Anglie edition (translated by Margaret Rocques) five years later. The attendant bumf reveals that Bernard Werber is "a young scientific journalist who has studied ants for the last fifteen years."

H. G. Wells – it should go without saying – wrote the original 'Empire of the Ants' short story. And Werber's most important, though offstage, character is Edmond (as in Hamilton?) Wells.

"A plot of enthralling suspense", said the *Sunday Times*. I wonder ... did the reviewer read this antsy epic right through to the very end? It certainly doesn't match my definitions of 'plot', 'enthralling' or 'suspense' – although you may hold more sympathetic definitions. Werber is a stylistic reincarnation of Frank Herbert – three parts exposition to one part story. he must have read *Hellstrom's Hive* (1973, 'inspired' by *The Hellstrom Chronicle* docudrama of 1971).

The text is caruncled with extracts from the (Edmond) Welshian *Encyclopaedia of Realism and Absolute Knowledge*. "Competitors: When the first ants appeared, fifty million years later, they had to watch their behaviour. The distant descend - " No – the effort defeats me. I wouldn't mind (much), but the dialogue is equally didactic: " ... if we carry on like this, the old ideas from early last century will be coming back: communism, psychoanalysis and relativity ... the average life expectancy has gone up, as well as the number of divorces ..."

We are told that *Empire* has enjoyed sales of over 800,000 in Korea (North Korea?). Once one has said that, of course, one has said everything.

The sequel is *Le Jour de Fourmis* ("The Day of the Ants"). But do yourselves a favour – instead of buying the book, watch the so-bad-it's-good *Empire of the Ants* movie (1977, starring Joan Collins).

## Brian Lowry

### *Trust No One: The Official Third Season Guide to the X-Files*

Harper Collins, 1996, 262pp, £9.99

## Paul Mitchell

### *The Duchovny Files*

Bantam Books, 1996, 284pp, £9.99

## Stefan Petrucha, John

### *Dead to the World*

Rozum & Charles Aldard

Titan Books, 1996, £6.99

Reviewed by Kay Hancox

Whoopie, a bumper pile of *X-Files* books. Who reads this stuff and why? I think the readers can be divided up into three categories: people who have crushes on David Duchovny/Mulder and/or Gillian Anderson/Scully; people who are interested in the Fortean side, and people who just really like the *X-Files* and want to know more about how it was made, and win the *X-Files* quiz night down

the pub. The reason they read it is because ... well ... basically for the reasons above: they want to find out more about the actors, the weird stuff, or the series.

If you are in love with David Duchovny, then *The Duchovny Files* is for you. The first part of the book is an unauthorised biography – mainly, gathering by the credits at the end, cobbled together from magazine articles. It imparts such astounding information as "David loved archaeology and especially dinosaurs", and harks on about how Duchovny has never had therapy. There are then some truly horrid photos (look at David, look at David in his vest, look at David with no shirt on, look at David cheekily showing his nipple). The rest (over half) of the book is filler material: a filmography, an episode guide, and hot stuff from the internet X-file sites and newsgroups. Here you amongst other things you can learn in which episodes in which Scully drives, and in which episodes Mulder cries (David's sooo in touch with his feelings – and he's never had therapy).

If you love trivia and want to know everything about season 3 of the *X-Files* then try *Trust No One*. Each episode has a cast list, details of writer, director, date of first broadcast, a page of photos, a 2 or 3 page plot synopsis and a page or so of "Back Story" which disappointingly generally turns out to be tales from the shot, or reactions from the internet rather than an explanation of the phenomena discussed in the story. This book is the best of the

bunch, and if the *X-Files* is your thing probably worth £10.00.

Unfortunately, I can not provide any suitable reading for the hungry Forrean. The comic book *Dead to the World* looks promising with stories of vampires, Big Foot and goatsuckers. The goatsucker story – "Scape Goats" by John Rozum – has the feel of the *X-Files* and is an entertaining read. However, it suffers from the same problem as the other two stories in that the characters are badly drawn, so much so that it is difficult to work out who is who. Unfortunately the first two stories by Stefan Petrucha – "Dead to the World" and "Big Foot, Warm Heart" – are either poorly written, or vital parts of the book have been left out as continuation between one frame and the next is sometimes very tenuous, and sometimes not there at all.

So, three books with the same television programme in common, but that is about all. The comic book is poor, I imagine that anyone who bought it would regret it. *The Duchovny Files* is probably an ideal present for anyone smitten by David, and the episode guide isn't bad if you like that sort of thing.

### Vector 193 – Index of Books Reviewed

<i>The Unicorn Sonata</i> – Peter S. Beagle.....	16
<i>Reflections</i> – Stephen Bradbury (with David Howe).....	17
<i>Tiger Burning Bright</i> – Marion Zimmer Bradley, Andre Norton & Mercedes Lackey.....	26
<i>The House on Nazareth Hill</i> – Ramsey Campbell.....	26
<i>The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and their friends</i> – Humphrey Carpenter.....	26
<i>The Three Damosels</i> – Vera Chapman.....	17
<i>Dark Love: 22 Tales of Lust and Obsession</i> – Nancy Collins, Edward Kramer & Martin Greenberg (eds).....	27
<i>A Son of the Rock</i> – Jack Deighton.....	27
<i>Havvock Junction</i> – Joe Donnelly.....	27
<i>Past Imperative: Round One of The Great Game</i> – Dave Duncan.....	27
<i>Fairy Tale</i> – Alice Thomas Ellis.....	18
<i>Rewind</i> – Terry England.....	28
<i>The Law of Love</i> – Laura Esquivel.....	18
<i>Challenger's Hope</i> – David Feintuch.....	28
<i>Paradise Junction</i> – Philip Finch.....	28
<i>The Tower of Beowulf</i> – Parke Godwin.....	29
<i>The Burning Altar</i> – Frances Gordon.....	29
<i>Convergence</i> – Sharon Green.....	29
<i>The Plenty Principle</i> – Colin Greenland.....	29
<i>neoAddix</i> – Jon Courtenay Grimwood.....	30
<i>Ancient Echoes</i> – Robert Holdstock.....	30
<i>Blade Runner 3: Replicant Night</i> – K.W. Jeter.....	19
<i>The Two-Bear Mambo</i> – Joe R. Lansdale.....	30
<i>Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files</i> – David Lavery, Angela Hague & Marla Cartwright (Eds).....	20

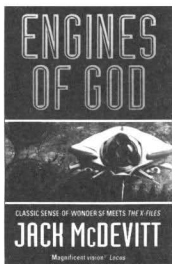
<i>A Fisherman of the Inland Sea</i> – Ursula K. Le Guin..	20
<i>The Unified Field</i> – Mark Leon.....	30
<i>Trust No One: The Official Third Season Guide to the X-Files</i> – Brian Lowry.....	34
<i>Alternate Views, Alternate Universes</i> – David B. Mattingly (with Cathleen Cogswell).....	17
<i>Sacrifice of Fools</i> – Ian McDonald.....	21
<i>Mordred's Curse</i> – Ian McDowell.....	31
<i>The Duchovny Files</i> – Paul Mitchell.....	34
<i>Elric of Melniboné</i> – Michael Moorcock.....	31
<i>The War Amongst the Angels</i> – Michael Moorcock.....	22
<i>The Pathless Way</i> – Adam Nichols.....	22
<i>The Ringworld Throne</i> – Larry Niven.....	23
<i>Automated Alice</i> – Jeff Noon.....	23
<i>Dry Water</i> – Eric S. Nyland.....	31
<i>Lord of Horses</i> – Diana L. Paxson.....	31
<i>Dead to the World</i> – Stefan Petrucha, John Rozum & Charles Aldard.....	34
<i>Last Call</i> – Tim Powers.....	32
<i>The Prestige</i> – Christopher Priest.....	32
<i>Maxie's Demon</i> – Michael Scott Rohan.....	33
<i>The Sacred Seven</i> – Amy Stout.....	33
<i>The Book of the Unicorn</i> – Nigel Suckling, Linda & Roger Garland.....	16
<i>Grass</i> – Sherri S. Tepper.....	33
<i>Gibbons Decline and Fall</i> – Sheri S. Tepper.....	24
<i>The Monster and the Critics and Other Essays</i> – J.R.R. Tolkien.....	33
<i>Drowning Towers</i> – George Turner.....	34
<i>Night Lamp</i> – Jack Vance.....	25
<i>Empire of the Ants</i> – Bernard Werber.....	34



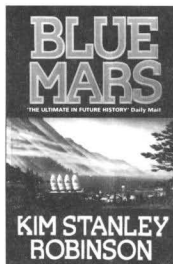
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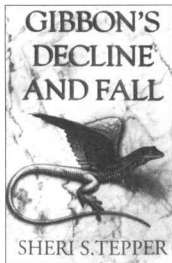
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