

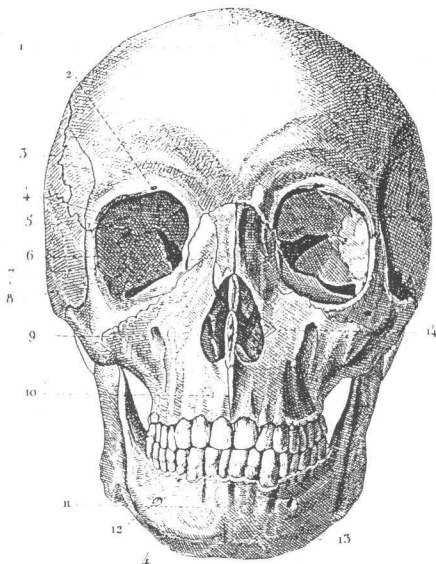
Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

£2.25

September/October 1997



Death

The Movies of Luc Besson

Mark Adlard and Howard Baker

Hardback Reviews – page 15

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Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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VECTOR

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Production and General Editing

Tony Cullen - 16 Weaver's Way, Camden, London,
NW1 0XE
Email: tcullen@as-lonsb.demon.co.uk

Features, Editorial and Letters

Andrew M. Butler - 33 Brook View Drive,
Keyworth, Nottingham, NG12 5JN

Gary Dalkin - 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth,
Dorset, BH11 8SN

Book Reviews

Paul Kincaid 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone,
Kent CT19 5AZ
Email: mks_pk@cix.compulink.co.uk

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BSFA Membership

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RENEWALS AND NEW MEMBERS - PAUL BILLINGER, 1 LONG ROW CLOSE, EVERDON,
DAVENTRY, NORTHANTS NN11 3BE

USA Enquiries - Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred Street, Detroit, MI 48213 USA

Other BSFA Publications

Focus: Carol Ann Green, Flat 3, 141 Princes Avenue, Hull HU5 3DL Email: metaphor@enterprise.net
Julie Venner, 42 Walgrave Street, Newland Avenue, Hull, HU5 2LT

Matrix: Chris Terran, 9 Beechwood Court, Back Beechwood Grove, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS4 2HS

BSFA Officials

Administrator - Maureen Kincaid Speller, 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent CT19 5AZ
Email: mks_pk@cix.compulink.co.uk

Treasurer - Elizabeth Billinger, 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry, Northants NN11 3BE
Email: billinger@enterprise.net

Publications Manager - Steve Jeffery, 44 White Way, Kidlington, Oxon, OX5 2XA
Email: peverel@aol.com

Orbiters - Carol Ann Green, Flat 3, 141 Princes Avenue, Hull HU5 3DL
Email: metaphor@enterprise.net

Awards - Chris Hill, Rook's Cottage, 3 Lynch Hill, Whitchurch, Hants RG28 7ND
Email: cphill@enterprise.net

Publicity/Promotions - Claire Brialley, 26 Northampton Road, Croydon, Surrey, CR0 7HA
Email: cbsfa@tragic.demon.co.uk

Mark Plummer, 14 Northway Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 6JE

London Meeting Coordinator - Paul Hood, 27 Strawberry Lane, Tiptree, Essex CO5 0KX

The View from the Brook

Driving through the pre-post-industrial landscape of the North East in search of a conference on postmodernism and truth (you know, the way you do), it struck me that the vista resembled the visual style of bits of *Bladerunner*. This is hardly surprising, given that the brothers Scott grew up in that general area.

But there was another sf resonance which I missed at the time: Mark Adlard's *Tecity* trilogy was set there too. I hadn't really thought of Adlard as British (in fact I kept confusing him with Mack Reynolds for some or no obscure reason) but I'd seen *Interface* and *Volteface* and, er, whatever the other one was called, but it *did* have face in the title and *Greenlander* or *Highlander* around second hand over the years, but never found the whole trilogy at once or worked out which was first so I could start collecting. (Such caution is normally rare, alas). I suspect I will reconsider in the light of L. J. Hurst's assessment of his work.

My appetite had already been whetted by a talk on Adlard Dilys Jones gave at the Hull SF Group last year. Which brings us to the profile of another member of the Hull Group, Howard Baker, another neglected British writer. Special thanks should go to Tony B, who stepped in at the last minute when I found myself unable to write the piece I'd planned.

Adlard and Baker have been unfairly neglected, D. G. Compton disappeared for a decade and then returned to sf (Adlard had an article published called 'D. G. Compton and New Standards of Excellence' in *Vector* #66, July 1973). The careers of British sf writers seem particularly like a roller coaster ride. One author who is consistently successful, also under C, is Arthur C. Clarke, who will be 80 later this year. We are currently assembling a issue of *Vector* to mark this, and would still welcome any contributions to it.

For the last four decades the British Science Fiction Association has been charting the course of British and world sf, and we've been wondering what the most popular British sf novel has been in that time. We'd like this to be as wide a vote as possible, and so we invite you to drop us a postcard (or letter) listing your three choices for favourite or best or most significant sf novel published, by a British author, since 1958. Feel free to annotate the list. If you get the listing to us by the end of the year, then we'll run the league table in the anniversary issue.

Voting, anniversaries, ends of eras. I think there's something in the air right now. The observant among you will notice my address has recently changed: after a third of my life I am back in Nottingham, where I spent the first two thirds. Jolly good, I get to have Kenneth Clarke as my M.P. At least he's in opposition now: I'm frankly glad to see the back of the government which spanned the second two-thirds of my life.

The repercussions rumble on: Joe 90 has left his office and position, leading to a battle between a Vulcan and a beardless Ming the Merciless (fortunately Tarzan took an early bath). The looming referendums for the regions (excluding, of course, Northern Ireland) suggest the impending end of the Union, and a Balkanisation recently described by Ken MacLeod in *The Stone Canal* (1996). We're living in an sf novel.

And meanwhile, we've gone back to Mars. Craters used to be called Barsoom or Burroughs – is it a sign of the times that they're looking at a rock named Scooby Doo? I certainly think it's a sign of the pre-millennial tension (a project itself doomed rather than domed, I fear) that we are both hypnotised and unconvinced by this – someone pointed out to me it looks rather like Marlboro country. (So that's why the Martians died out). But then humankind can only stand so much truth, and very little postmodernism.

Andrew M. Butler

Nottingham – Hull – Nottingham, August 1997

the magazine, Martin Clarke from the West Midlands defends the practice:

I would like to comment on the views expressed in *Vector* 193 on the subject of space given over to reviews.

I rejoined the BSFA last year mainly as a way of getting access to a source of information about and reviews of newly published science fiction. Speaking for myself the only absolutely essential items in your publications are the book reviews in *Vector* and the 'Recent and Forthcoming Books' in *Matrix*. I would be very concerned if you were planning to reduce the quantity and quality of your reviews (Very short reviews are a waste of time if they amount to nothing more than a plot summary).

I would also like to say that I do not find the quality of reviews published at the moment in *Vector* to be less than good.



We have here what you might call the feedback effect: people write in and complain about something, followed by others stating the opposite opinion, defending something close to their heart. After Philip Muldowney's letter on reviews taking over

The editors reply: The joint features editors shuffle their feet and whimper at the thought of being less than essential. But we're glad you've liked the review coverage so far, and Chris Terran's rightly esteemed listings in Matrix. But things have to change: for a variety of external and internal regions. With the explosion of 'related genres' – wookiedom, true science, nut books, 'cruddy Celtic' fantasy trilogies, non-fiction, mainstream writers producing technothrillers or alternate histories, sf writers writing mainstream books – there's an awful lot to cover. As we agonised ad nauseum in these pages before, the sf novel which isn't part of a drekology is a rare bird indeed. And that's before we start looking at audiobooks and card collecting games... Hopefully the changes in place will realign our coverage – and hopefully won't sacrifice quality. What do you think so far?

Meanwhile, Dr Debbie Shaw of Islington, London, comments on a short article in the same issue of Vector:

You do not have to look very hard to find sexism in a Robert Heinlein novel (Mary Anne Lever, 'Some Notes on Cyborg Sex and Violence', Vector May/June 1997). Heinlein's rather suspect gender politics are writ large over the majority of his work (remember *Stranger in a Strange Land* – 'Front!'). He, without doubt, took pleasure, more akin to literary transvestism (see *I Will Fear No Evil* than the kind of transgression that Haraway recommends for feminists needing new myths of identity in the late 20th century. Haraway, like other post-modern theorists currently jumping on the bandwagon (see eg Jean Baudrillard), recognises the potential that sf offers for understanding the body as a contested site and for revealing gender as culturally constructed rather than as essentially given.

However, Haraway selects her sf with care. Her feminist cyborg stories are more concerned with monstrous hybrids than with rôle reversal; more interested in what happens at the interface than in the given constituencies of gender. In others, cyborg politics requires a more radical imagination than the old literary trope of artificial identity (even Shakespeare played with that one). We find out cyborgs in unexpected places. While I entirely concur with Lever's point that both Heinlein and Wood's violent imagery detracts from any reading of their respective characters as 'transgressive', I would suggest that to attempt to read either in terms of Haraway's cyborgs is problematic in the first place.

Ok, over to our literary theorist:

AMB: Thanks guys! I have to confess that it was a long time ago that I read Haraway, and got little out of it then, and that I re-read it after we'd published the piece by Lever.

Let's rewind a bit to check I'm still following this. Looking back, it seems as if human behaviour has been determined by one's dangly bits: one is born male and is therefore naturally active, aggressive, strong and so on, or one is born a woman and therefore is naturally passive, withdrawing, weak and a good cook. During this century, various people have dismissed this as booeey: one is born a man, yes, but this is a kind of

unmoulded clay which is dressed in blue, told off for crying and given an action man. Society has dictated that certain behaviours are masculine and are the 'right' behaviours for a man, and certain behaviours are feminine, suitable for women only. Macho is complimentary, sissy an insult. There is no intrinsic reason why a woman should not take on some or all masculine behaviour patterns without being somehow deviant.

But the dangly bits cause a bit of a problem – or perhaps the chromosomes. One may be behaving as if one is female in gender, yet deep down, the bottom line, a bloke is a bloke because he was born that way. Sf provides a medium where even this essentially, this male and female bottom line, is just the arbitrary accident of evolution. What place male and female when there is three sexes? Or individuals can change sex? (Medical and surgical advances suggest that the real world may yet catch up.

Donna Haraway's article 'Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s (An Ironic Dream of a Common Language for Women in the Integrated Circuit)' was first published in *The Socialist Review*, summer 1985. The cyborg, if I understand correctly, crosses all boundaries: not just male / female but animal / machine self / not-self and so on. It resists the logical categories and categorisation which might be seen as a masculine trait (logical pigeon-holing of everything as 'a' or 'not-a' being a masculine behavioural pattern). Her sf examples, which include Delany, Russ, Tiptree and McCaffery, seem to be cyberpunk-flavoured, where the meat has been left behind – such as *The Ship Who Sang* as examples of where sf has considered behaviour freed from bodily considerations. A tale of the doubly castrated, starting from the premise that female is already castrated.

(Gee, thanks, Freud. Is there a Robert Holdstock in the building?)

It does strike me as being more radical than the cyborg offered by Wood, and using Haraway is problematic – not least in penetrating (whoops, sorry, masculine language there) Haraway's language. If anyone does understand her, and her use in understanding sf and feminism, please write in – there's a Vector article in there somewhere...

Meanwhile, I suspect you're unfair on Baudrillard. His writings on the media and mediated landscapes, on Disneyland as reality, on the orders of simulation, have always had a science-fiction flavour. He's certainly read Philip K. Dick, and I suspect was inspired by him. It's those who read Baudrillard but not Dick who are on the bandwagon. See Dick Hebdige's article 'Postmodernism and the Western Front' and so on. Another I'd absolve from the charge is Fredric Jameson – who was writing about sf long before postmodernism. And, gosh, another two ideas for articles.

Unfortunately, Mary Anne Lever has yet to comment.

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.

Besson vs Hollywood

By Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

In the 1950s French film saw a revolution. A small group of film critics-turned-directors rejected the traditional methods of French filmmaking. The result was the *Nouvelle Vague* and their heroes were Hitchcock and Ray instead of Renoir and Carné. Flash-forward twenty-five years and history begins to repeat itself... The *Nouvelle Vague* of the 1980s also sought its inspiration from America, although this time from the world of advertising and pop videos. Financially they proved to be more successful, and of this New New Wave, Luc Besson emerged as their Spielberg.

With only seven films to his (directorial) credit made over a period of seventeen years, Luc Besson is not the most prolific of film-makers, but he is among the best. The son of two diving instructors, he originally wanted to become a dolphin specialist. However, he turned to film-making after a diving accident prevented him from pursuing this

dream. He joined the 1980s New Wave of directors who made slick, visually stunning but often vacuous films, and has now taken Hollywood by storm as this year's *enfant terrible*. The Americans had failed to remake his films successfully, in the traditional Hollywood style. John Badham's *The Assassin* (1993) (aka *Point of No Return*), with Bridget Fonda, was a direct but dreadful remake of Besson's *Nikita* (1990). Now Besson is making films in the Hollywood mould but by his own rules: witness the science-fiction blockbuster *The Fifth Element* (1997). We're not talking cheap imitation. *The Fifth Element* broke French box office records with the opening week's takings, comparatively on par with *The Lost World*'s opening in America. The critics hated it, but the public came along in popcorn-scented droves.

The following is a brief introduction to his work.

1983 *Le Dernier Combat* (*The Last Battle*)

The supreme test of any first time film-maker: how to make a worthy film (particularly feature length at that) for absolutely no money, well, Fr 700,000. The early films of directors reveal much about their artistic skills – and a great deal more about their resourcefulness. This one, however, highlights Besson's sheer audacity. Based on a short made whilst he was at film school, it is set in a post-apocalyptic world, where the few survivors are attempting to get by, living on their wits, and also trying to discover why they cannot speak and therefore communicate properly. The film is virtually without dialogue, with only one word spoken throughout (you can't fault him for innovation, as he hasn't got the budget for sync sound recording). The scene where the protagonists discover a device which may help them speak is truly moving. The whole scenario is morally ambiguous, and there are several issues that need resolving, but the circumstances in which the characters find themselves help provide some understanding.

Featuring among the newcomers is Jean Reno, in the first of many rôles he will play in Besson's oeuvre. Here he is an initially amusing, but persistent, infiltrator, whose intentions and actions become more diseased as the story progresses. In one scene virtually the entire contents of the featured laboratory/dwellings are used at one time or another to beat the daylight out of either The Brute (Reno) or The Man (Pierre Jolivet), its length turning the violence into futility.

The film is reminiscent of George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1970), which has a similarly stark *mise-en-scène* while producing deep emotion, and exhibits the same degree of innovation. Comparisons could be drawn with both *Dark Star* (1973), which it resembles in tone during lighter moments, and *Mad Max* (1979), with which it shares a bleak scenario of the world in decline. It is in this environment of sound without speech that makes the film work so well; perfectly complementing the black and white harshness of the cinemascopé cinematography. (The use of black and white might be compared with David Lynch's debut feature *Eraserhead* [1976], albeit the latter was not made in

cinemascope). Despite all these science-fictional comparisons, it is not for another fourteen years that he was to return to sf proper.



1985 *Subway*

This is Besson's most vacuous film, arguably little more than a glorified pop video. Very 1980s, *Subway* follows the exploits of various characters who live around the Metro system. Fred (Christophe Lambert) has some papers and everyone

want Fred. Dead. Falling in love with potential buyer Helena (Isabella Adjani) is not a good idea. Neither is having to run from criminals and the police, with your only hope being a group of underground dwelling artists and pop musicians.

From the astonishing opening car and foot chase about and into the Metro, you are aware that this is very much an eye candy movie, but a good one at that, which shows a sure eye for snappy editing, hand-held camerawork and cinemascope composition. Ultimately, *Subway* is a shallow film.

1988 *The Big Blue* (original French version 119 minutes with music by Eric Serra, has been subtitled; 110 minute version with music by Bill Conti, dubbed into American, Version Longe approximately 170 minutes, with music by Serra, has also been subtitled)

The most personal film that Besson has directed to date, *The Big Blue* tells the story of two friends and rivals competing for the title of world's greatest diver. The term diver here refers to the sort that use neither oxygen tank nor fixed line. This gives a ready suspense mechanism for the director to exploit to maximum gain. Will they hold their breath long enough to swim to the surface alive? Should they even be alive, bearing in mind the depths to which they descend? Throw in a touch of doomed romance and some psychotic behaviour, courtesy of Jean Reno, and what could clearly descend into a Jacques Cousteau buddy/buddy film fortunately comes across as affecting and believable. Oh, and there are lots of dolphins, too.

The cinematography is breathtaking, sweeping from intimate close shots to surreal oceanscapes. The documentary film *Atlantis* (1991), later directed by Besson, also derives from his interest in the ocean and the underwater world, but is basically *Wildlife on Two* writ large (70mm) as a pop video.

1990 *Nikita*

In the rain-drenched city, a wretched gang desperate for their next fix raid a pharmacy. The police arrive and inevitably things turn very nasty. All the gang are killed except for Nikita, who, when discovered, kills a gendarme. She is sentenced to death for this and, indeed, the newspapers announce her death by lethal injection. She awakes in a stark white room: she has been given 'another chance' and will be trained as a spy/assassin. The film becomes more mainstream as it progresses and it explores the consequences of letting a trained and yet deeply vulnerable killer back into society.



1995 *Leon* (aka *The Professional*)

The most enjoyable of Besson's films, and a prelude to *The Fifth Element* in that it has a Hollywood flavour and is set in New York – and yet the style is as French as a baguette. Another assassin, Leon (Jean Reno) is totally professional: he picks off his victims one by one, but they never see nor hear him until it is too late. He lives next door to a dysfunctional family, and when all but one of them are killed by the corrupt cop played by Gary Oldman, Leon reluctantly befriends the surviving daughter and agrees to help her avenge her loss.

This is very much a transitional film in terms of



Besson's career trajectory, where Besson becomes accepted by the mainstream, by the studio and distribution systems and by the audience, and it really paves the way to making a blockbuster production. That said, it is a masterpiece in its own right: fast-paced, snappy and, above all, intelligent.

1997 *The Fifth Element*

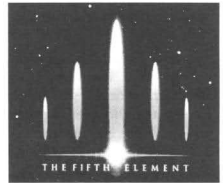
A science-fiction blockbuster in every sense of the word. Besson has been building up to this film since the age of sixteen. Stylistically evolved from the comics *Metal Hurlant*, *The Fifth Element* opens in a past derived from *Stargate* (1994) Egyptology and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) action, with chubby aliens (who look like a cross between a Vorlon and a hedgehog) and some pseudo-mystical exposition. It then hurls us into the twenty-third century, where our hero, Korben Dallas, (Bruce Willis, but it really should have been Jean Reno) has to save the world by bringing together the representations of Earth, Air, Fire and Water with the fifth element, Leeloo (Milla Jovovich), to create the ultimate weapon and destroy the enemies that were prophesied to obliterate the Earth.

Fast-paced throughout, we have flawed good guys, psychotically evil bad guys, stupid cops, dumb and violent aliens, a beautiful diva, an intensely irritating media star and a long suffering cat. Visually the film is never short of breath taking: the reconstruction of Leeloo and her subsequent leap of faith into Korben's taxi, stomach-turning taxi chases through the congested skyways of New York, ludicrous quantities of military hardware and the opulence of an off-world holiday resort. What sets these apart from the average effects movies is that these details are not confined to the set pieces, but pervade throughout the film in a myriad of secondary components. It is this attention to design that is internally consistent, despite gaping plot holes.

And that is the point. *The Fifth Element* is entertainment pure and simple, you can cash your brain in at the car park and return two hours later with a cheesy grin on your face. If anything, the implausibility helps the film along: the only time you catch your breath is when the hyperactive and terminally obnoxious Ruby Rhod (Chris Tucker) enters the fray. At which stage even the most devoted pacifist may discover the will to kill.

Gary Oldman camps it up wonderfully as the evil Zorg, outdoing even his seminal nutter

performance in *Leon* and developing a bizarre southern drawl – halfway between Ming the Merciless (all vertical collars and silly beard) and the melodramatic intensity of the Hooded Claw. Bruce Willis shows he knows how to pick good science-fiction



movies (he's been in two of the best of the last decade) and give it his all.

The actors do get thrown around. A lot. Besson's insistence of handheld camerawork, normally shot by himself for that *auteur* feel, demands intimacy with the subject, but the kind of intimacy that precludes stunt doubles for all but the long shots. With Leeloo smashing through walls, through cabs, out of windows and kicking seven bells out of all and sundry for a large chunk of the running time, it is a surprise that she doesn't end up looking like the diva. Blue.

Besson is not a science-fiction director: he is a filmmaker who sometimes uses science-fiction contexts, and good ones at that, but within his own styles and by his own rules of film-making. His sf work sharply defines the world he is creating, the details within and the plot that develops, but then his mainstream work does too. Most of his films set in the modern day tend to exude an air of otherworldliness. In *Subway*, the *mise-en-scene* is placed in an alternative Metro; we know the setting, but are introduced into a world that, although not beyond our imagination, ventures past normal considerations. With *Nikita*, the use of electronic doors and bizarre drugging devices place it in no-when-land. *The Big Blue* has fantasy elements, particularly those scenes involving dolphins and the ambiguity of the ending.

There are themes and motifs that manifest themselves throughout his work, particularly in the relationships between characters – elements of adoption and protection – the surrogate father/daughter or father/son relationships set up in *Nikita*, *Leon* and *Le Dernier Combat* where the protégé in turn provides a degree of security and/or stability to the protector. In *The Fifth Element*, Korben decides to take on responsibility

for Leeloo, but ultimately she is the only thing that can save him, and the world.

Another motif that has developed in his work is that of an object that has special significance to the protagonist; the plant in *Leon* and that poor cat in *The Fifth Element*. These elements are not relevant to the plot, but once again highlight Besson's attention to details that help create a greater sense of empathy with the characters, the world they live in and the circumstances in which they are involved. It is rare to see this in typical Hollywood

films; by their rules everything should have a significance to ensure complete narrative closure.

Stylistically, Besson's work is descended from French comic book artists rather than the earlier generations of French film-makers, and this results in an oblique aesthetic. With a strong sense of visual elegance, combined with complementary soundtracks, and with his discernible character-driven narratives, he never fails to entertain and stimulate.

INTERNET

<http://www.ih.uio.no/~mariuswi/besson/>
The Luc Besson Films WWW page has lots of interesting bits and bobs about the man and his films. Don't be fooled by the spartan front end.

<http://www.fifthelement.co.uk/>
Has the low-down on *The Fifth Element* in all its multimedia glory. Those with little computers or little patience avoid, those without both bask in gratuitous technology, get the screensaver, watch the trailer, and feel smug.

VIDEOS

With the exception of *Le Dernier Combat* and *The Fifth Element*, all of Besson's films are available in this country. Be warned that there is a horrible dubbed/pan and scan version of *Subway* about, and even the subtitled / letterbox version is poorly transferred. *Le Dernier Combat* occasionally crops up on Channel 4.

[Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc are still part of the increasingly visible Coventry 'L' fandom (a blatant imitation of the use of the middle initial 'M' in Hull fandom). They first appeared in the last issue of Vector writing on Jeunet and Caro; since then they have been converted to watching Babylon 5. — Eds.]

The Prescience of Mark Adlard

BY L. J. HURST

It must be ten years now since newspapers first reported a new style of training shoes successfully launched in the USA. The Mall Walker is popular with older people as it has a better grip on the tiled floors of the huge shopping malls where so many of these people now spend their time. The malls' air-conditioned ambience varies across the country – cool in the south, warm in the cooler north – but provides perfect combined opportunities of shopping and exercise. Sensible people are improving their social life and extending their vitality by joining mall walking clubs. The clubs' membership is increasing very week, L. L. Bean's catalogue seems to offer a wider range of mall shoes in every issue and I've seen the signs at the mall entrances in Massachusetts announcing the time that the clubs will meet to walk.

Mark Adlard's *Interface* or *Tcity* trilogy, published in the early 1970s, saw that specific thing happening, among many others. Another was the importance of male yuppie hairstyles – which has come into and gone out of fashion since I wrote the first draft of this article in 1988. Adlard's books provide remarkably prescient detail about the close future but they are now hardly known and seem to have been out of print for years, though second-hand copies are common. In their time they were published in hardback and papercover, in the USA and in Britain, and in bookclub editions.

Adlard was then a manager in the North Eastern steel industry who was also knowledgeable about sf (he was a contributor to the first edition of Peter Nicholls's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*). He seems to have lapsed into silence after publishing the first volume of a projected trilogy about

nineteenth-century whaling (again, one comes across second-hand Penguin copies of *The Greenlander*). I hope he is alive to read this tribute.

Interface (1971), *Volteface* (1972) and *Multiface* (1975) seem to be ignored in some critical works, but David Wingrove (in *The Science Fiction Source Book*) called them 'extraordinarily erudite' and Peter Nicholls (in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*) wrote that the **Tcity** 'books are ambitious in scope and deserve to be more widely known'. They are also unusual in that they manage to combine a large number of subjects naturally into one story. Peter Nicholls identifies at least nine themes covered by the books: 'automaton, hierarchical systems, the media landscape, revolution, [...] leisure, class distinction [...] fantasies of sex, [...] the stultifying pressures of conformity' and the nature of industrial management.

The trilogy can be read as both utopia and dystopia, as political and non-political, as religious and as materialist. At the same time, through a roughly realist style, it manages to imply much more than is described.

The trilogy was clearly planned before the writing began so that each volume leads naturally to the next, and concludes with the third. The first volume introduces Tcity, a dome-covered megalopolis sited between the Tees and the Tyne, associated with the nearby Stahlex plant. Stahlex is the wonder material of this future, capable of being used to construct everything from roads to hosiery. The Stahlex Corporation is responsible for running the city nominally, although due to high levels of automation both city and factory run themselves with little human involvement. An almost incredible number of people cannot work because there is little rôle left for human labour and possible human error. They are bored and unhappy, though they do not recognise it. The tiny number of executives have surgically increased intelligence, and tend to mingle with the ordinary city dwellers only when they go slumming or looking for rough trade.

Along with all this there has been a Denaissance – art has ended, and people know that they are living in a sterile, non-creative world.

The first book, *Interface*, mostly centres on a

Will Taggart, a man who lives only to work and turns into an almost drooling idiot when five o'clock comes.

group of executives, their personal happiness, affairs and strivings, and the way their lives are affected when there is a revolt of disaffected citizens and allied managers. It begins with Jan Caspol, one of the elite, waking in the cubicle of an aphrodisiac, and ends with violence and destruction, but readers do not know how much.

As *Volteface* begins the revolt is some time past and the executives have decided that the people's lives must be filled, by re-creating work. A vast manufacturing, distribution and sales system for ear-rings, bracelets, trinkets and gewgaws is generated and the market then artificially maintained (by TV programmes using sex fantasies). Applicants are appointed to jobs for which computer matching shows they are suitable, but some are then swapped to completely inappropriate posts by executive action, since this is felt to replicate how business was organised in

our twentieth-century heyday. The novel expands its social reach to deal with the middle-ranking managers who find a place in this new business. The city fathers have decided that work will be elaborated and exacerbated by using our management methods, and the book follows the experiences that suggest the lives of everybody who goes to work today is partly one of horror. (This second volume, more than the other, can be read as a

satire on the present day).

Among others, Adlard introduces Gregory Smythe, James Twynne and Carl Amory – young men who spend their time in whatever recreation they can find until one day they come out of a concert to see new adverts for work opportunities flashing in front of them.

Adlard uses the trick of a character noticing another in passing, and that character becoming important only later (as Robert Altman did in the film *Short Cuts* [1993]). This is how Ventrix is introduced – an attractive blonde girl passing. Later, the story follows here as she goes to the computer to find suitable work. Her responses to the thematic apperception tests are unusual:

Ventrix looked at [a picture of] a girl, who was sitting cross-legged on a chair, and who appeared to be gazing thoughtfully at some object which was outside the confines of the picture.

'Tell me what you think the girl is doing,' Ventrix answered without hesitation. 'She is

watching the tri-di and worrying in case it is going to turn into an erotic fantasy.'

The screen blanked.

'Perhaps you said that she was remembering the last happy evening she spent in a saloon,' commented the indifferent voice, 'and that she is looking forward to going there again. Or something like that.'

Ventrix's other comments become particularly ironic. One of the executives becomes obsessed with her, but only after he has been disembodied in an accident and kept as a brain in a central processing unit: Ventrix becomes his sexual fantasy.

Adlard does something similar when James Twynne gets a job as Planning Manager of Depot Number One and meets his new boss for the first time:

'Excuse me, sir.'

The Director faced him unwillingly. The eyes were furtive behind the coloured irises of his contact lenses, and there were faint scars of facial surgery about his forehead, cheeks and mouth. He must have already spent his first month's increment.

Twynne recognised him under the cosmetic tan, and extended a joyful hand. 'Congratulations, Greg.'

Director Gregory Smythe is all appearance and no depth.

Multiface follows the system working and explores the everyday lives of a still lower class – those who have become clerks and such-like as well. (The series never deals with those people found to be fit only for warehouse staff or delivery drivers, or unemployable). This exploration is one of psychopathology – people brought up in the residential blocks of Tcity have led lives of misery and for most of them work is an escape.

Among other things, the Directors of other warehouses start plotting for market share, and Gregory Smythe's unit dives towards bankruptcy, driven by the Machievellian plotting of Mr Felixstowe, the Director of Depot Number Five, and his own incompetence.

Felixstowe is asked: 'Why did you trick that

man into paying more than he need have done for stock you didn't want anyway?' and he replies 'It's good business.' Smythe has the appearance of a businessman, but Felixstowe has the mind.

Other lives are even more bizarre – such as Will Taggart, a man who lives only to work and turns into an almost drooling idiot when five o'clock comes. Or Osbert Osborne, who does not work but becomes obsessed with collecting doorknobs. Both of them are sick, but it is the apparently comic obsession of the doorknobs that leads to murderous tragedy. The lives of the executives are not much better, and the books end with Jan Caspol, who has been followed through the series, in a Buddhist retreat in Northumbria.

I don't want to suggest that Adlard has all or any of the answers – after all hairstyles seemed important a few years ago, and now are less so; or the use of body piercing and nipple-rings, shows that we are not talking about tight prediction. In *Volteface*, body piercing and jewellery become the engine of the new businesses, something that is happening now in the late 1990s, albeit not in the world of an exotic princess (as the Tcity TV subliminally advertises them), but rather in something frequently associated with new paganism, fetishists and nightclubbing ravers.

The trilogy is not a dystopia, at least in the sense of an Orwellian 'boot trampling on a face forever' dystopia. It represents some of the interests of its author, some of his fears, a projection of the implications of work with which he was familiar,

but includes in them something much bigger. Where Mark Adlard was most successful though, was in including the small with the large – he filled in the details – and in some ways, long before the time he suggested, things have gone as he

People brought up in the residential blocks of Tcity have led lives of misery and for most of them work is an escape.

indicated.

He cannot, probably, be called Cyberpunk. The media landscape is important, but the methods of electronic communication are not. Specifically, Tcity is about reality, and not virtual reality. Yet his three books are just as important, and perhaps some editor might consider re-issuing them in a *Tcity Omnibus*.

[L. J. Hurst is a regular reviewer for Vector. Mark Adlard was interviewed for Vector way back in September 1972 by Peter Tate — Eds.]

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"I should have seen it coming"

The Uncertain Futures of Howard Baker

by Anthony Blundell

Some writers appear to have been with us forever, churning a new book out every year or so, perhaps being taken for granted, perhaps just part of the background noise of publication history. Others appear with a great flourish and demand attention, and may fail to fulfil their claims, or succeed beyond expectations. There is a fourth category: those who sidle quietly onto the stage, say their piece, and then seem to be written out of the rest of the plot.

One such case, at present anyway, is the writer Howard Baker. You'd look in vain in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* to find his name, despite three published sf novels to his credit which ought to win him a place. Nor will you find him in *Trillion Year Spree* or *The Science Fiction Sourcebook*, or even, as far as I can make out, reviewed in the hallowed pages of *Vector*'s past. His four novels were all published by Robert Hale in the early 1980s, but not specifically as sf and so they fail to be listed in the Hale entry in the *Encyclopedia*. In fact, were it not for the brief and perversely incomplete entry for him in Robert Reginald's bibliography of *Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature 1975-1991* you'd be forgiven for thinking that Baker had been airbrushed, Trotsky-like, out of history.

'I should have seen it coming' serves as the hindsight-sees-all opening sentence of his 1988 mainstream novel, *Summer of the Melting Days*, and

it was the problematics of prediction which informed the premise of Baker's first novel, *All the Gods are Dead* (1983). It was written in a time when the fear of a nuclear attack on Britain seemed a very real, if not certain, possibility, and when American missiles were using British soil as a base.

"The number of people interested in the meaning of life is rather limited"

But as anyone who knows about the Second World War raid on Dresden can tell you, the impact of a conventional assault can be in itself deadly. And so as a firestorm rages through Britain, Baker's fictional fire forces attempt to save Britain from destruction.

The novel ends uncertainly, midstream, and the follow-up, *Alive to the Burning*, was as much a continuation of the second half of one four hundred page novel as a sequel. The efforts of Emergency Column Eight to save there neighbourhood continue, against the odds, to a grisly conclusion. Baker's career was underway, and *All the Gods Are Dead* was hailed by the Glasgow Herald as "a splendid first novel. *British Book News*-praised his "handling of the human, technical and tactical elements" as "highly effective".

The uncertainties of prediction are central to *Headcrash* (1984), at that point Baker's most science-fictional narrative, and borrowed from classic science fiction at that. One of the most fascinating ideas in Asimov's Foundation sequence was psychohistory: the attempt to predict broad

human behaviour patterns. The difference is that Baker can write a decent sentence and create human characters.

By tracing trends in history, statistical records and so on, a retired librarian is able to calculate the odds of particular disasters happening – a ship vanishing without a trace in mid-Atlantic, the literal collapse of a particular style of building and the disaster at Three Mile Island. He enlists the help of his daughter's boyfriend to help him work out the details of a forthcoming event: an IRA assassination of Charles at his coronation, following the abdication of Elizabeth. His aide is an expert in computers, one of whose colleagues has a program that can take information and extrapolate from this.

A few years ago I would have cited this as the flaw in the diamond. Could a computer really digest such information so quickly, and comprehend it enough to be able to predict probabilities of the future? Perhaps not, but the Labour party's supercomputer at Millbank, designed for rapid rebuttal of assertions suggest the technology is closer. Nevermind: the thriller elements means you can suspend your disbelief, as the plot drives on to its conclusion. The dangers of prediction come up for discussion along the way: it's one thing to know what might happen, it's quite another to attempt to change it or be certain whether it is for the better or for the worse. It may be necessary for things to go wrong now in order for things to go right in the long term.

And things did go wrong for Baker. Howard Baker's last published novel, *Summer of the Melting Days* was published in 1988 and was a thinly disguised autobiography, chronicling the break-up of his marriage. Despite being compulsively readable – to the extent that I read it one sitting, book in one hand, lunch being made with the other – a *roman ... clef* was not what Hale were looking for, and they cowardly rejected the sequel. This remains unpublished.

And so lies the situation today. The unpublished

Whirlpool of Shadows saw the possibilities of virtual reality technology for artistic endeavour, and used this to explore acutely painful human emotions of guilt and regret. A more recent project seems to take off from a throwaway line in *Headcrash*:

'Ever wonder what the hell's wrong with everybody?'

'No need, I know. This isn't a planet. It's a galactic mental asylum for cosmic psychopaths.'

In fact, by the time the 1990s were half underway, Baker had become convinced, in print anyway, that the planet Earth is a cosmic penitentiary where criminals are exiled to serve their three score and ten year sentences. And at a reading of an extract from his manuscript, Baker

seemed to be able to counter any objection that the audience might raise. How else do you explain Hitler, Pol Pot and Thatcher except for accepting that we are all born criminal?

Alas, his manual for living was rejected by one publisher with the comment that 'the number of people interested in the meaning of life is rather limited'. In the meantime, Baker ekes out a precarious existence as a freelance journalist, advertising copywriter and writer of jokes for greetings cards. His store of anecdotes about selling electrical goods (How do you sell a new tape machine with a brand new version of Dolby, when the previous version eliminated all known hiss?) or being a small cog in large news stories or how to write ad libs for a well-known comedian seem, mercifully, limitless.

But until British publishing sees the error of its ways, his insights will be confined to local newspapers, the more obscure greetings cards and an occasional one liner on *Week Ending* – or the twice-monthly meetings of the Hull SF Group. Alas, though, genius is rarely recognised in its own lifetime.

How do you sell a new tape machine with a brand new version of Dolby, when the previous version eliminated all known hiss?

Tony Blundell's middle name does not begin with 'M', but is an (occasional) attendee of the Hull SF Group.

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by Paul Kincaid

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form or another, in straightforward science-fiction stories, such as the voodoo imagery in William Gibson's *Count Zero* (1986) or Lucius Shephard's *Green Eyes* (1984). In the main, however, science fiction has not treated death as a horror but rather, in the manner of Homer or Dante, has turned it into a landscape, a place through which the hero might journey, replicating the journey of the soul in Christian imagery – from the medieval lyric 'Lyke Wyke Durge' to *Pilgrim's Progress* (1684) by John Bunyan.

Sometimes, this science-fictional realm of death is one from which we might return, as the hero of Iain Banks's *The Bridge* (1986) returns from the landscape of the dead that is a transformed Forth Road Bridge, or is a place that may be visited briefly as in various retellings of the Orpheus story from Russell Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency* (1979) to Jeff Noon's *Vurt* (1993). Sometimes the dead retain some measure of consciousness, sufficient at least to communicate and interact with the living, as occurs in Iain M. Banks's *Feersum Endjinn* (1994) or Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty* (1994). Such technological ghosts, usually personalities downloaded into computers in one form or another, as in Greg Egan's *Permutation City* (1994), actually offer the science-fictional hope of avoiding death, of achieving a kind of immortality, one of the most persistent themes in the whole of science fiction.

In the main, however, science fiction offers no handy way out of death. Whether it is the endless river of Philip José Farmer's *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* (1971), the mathematical eternity of Rudy Rucker's *White Light* (1980), or the industrial city of Unthank in Gray's *Lanark*, the afterlife offers immense potential for exploration and adventure but not for escape. This is significant, for death is not just an alien planet: the landscape through which the hero soul must venture has a particular symbolism. In the case of

Lanark, his wanderings through Unthank do not just echo the wandering through Glasgow of his former self, Thaw, they also represent his life. As his exchange with Rima indicates, one thing death does is give the hero a chance to re-evaluate his life.

In the absence of an effective medical science, Gray argued, the war against death was essentially a war of propaganda, and myths were to be judged in that light – not by their truthfulness, even in some allegorical or metaphorical sense, but by their usefulness in generating morale and meaning. By elaborating and extrapolating the process of death in this way, a more secure moral order could be imported into social life. People thus achieved a sense of continuity with past and future generations, so that every individual became part of a great enterprise which extended across the generations, from the beginning to the end of time.

'Mortimer Gray's *History of Death*' (1995)
– Brian Stableford

The change of state between life and death usually brings both forgetfulness and an increased sense of morality, so that the first and most important task facing the soul in the afterlife is to learn about, then compensate for the actions of the hero during life.

Michael Swanwick's story 'Radio Waves' (1995) follows the pattern precisely: death results in being swept away from

this Earth, which is frightening at first so that some newly dead cling desperately to our world, as the hero does. But gradually continued existence in this world becomes more frightening, until the hero has the opportunity to atone for cruelties committed during his life and finally welcomes the release of letting go this Earth. It is a pattern repeated in numerous other stories, and though the story may be dressed with agnostic or even atheistic declarations, the pattern itself is clearly religious and the imagery often Christian. It is in this way that science fiction continues the propagandising mythology that Brian Stableford draws attention to in his essay within a story.

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Ludwig Wittgenstein made the famous remark: 'Death is not an event in life.' In science fiction, however, as in religion, death is a way to understanding our life.

[Paul Kincaid is the author of the history of British science fiction *A Very British Genre* and reviews editor of *Vector* – Eds.]

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First Impressions

Book Reviews Edited by Paul Kincaid

Note: All novels marked: are eligible for the 1997 BSFA Award for Best Novel. All collections and anthologies marked: contain stories that are eligible for the 1997 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction.

Ric Alexander (Ed)

Cyber-Killers

Orian, 1997, 408pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

It is authors who make an anthology. *Cyber-Killers*, despite a slightly silly OTT title, has managed to acquire a highly impressive array of authors. To name but a few: Philip K. Dick, Harry Harrison, J.G. Ballard, Iain Banks, Pat Cadigan, William Gibson (of course!), Terry Pratchett (yes, really), and many, many more. All have stories in this thick volume, some strongly connected to the theme of death via cyberspace, others less so. The book is split into three sections, the first loosely based on internet terrorism, the second dealing with android crime, the third – least persuasively – with virtual murder.

Some of the stories are absolute classics; for instance, Kim Newman's 1984 story 'Dreamers', which first appeared in *Interzone*, speculating on links between John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley – as you do. Also J.G. Ballard's 1967 *New Worlds* story 'Zone of Terror', which used many eighties-style cyberpunk concepts years before any American had even thought of them.

Other stories are slightly more puzzling, for instance, Pratchett's '+ifideDEBUG+"world/enough"+"time"', an interesting enough story from a great author, but it sits rather uncomfortably among the slash-and-buck of your Gibsons, Shirleys and Cadigans, especially as it is the first story in the book. The last story is also curious, a sort of advert for the *Daily Telegraph* by Peter James. 'Angel' by Pat Cadigan – the only story amongst the twenty four by a woman, a rather sad statistic, I think – is one of the best, certainly one of the deeper stories, and the only one I really wanted to go back to once I had read it. No coincidence that

it was a finalist for the Nebula, the Hugo, and the World Fantasy awards. 'Johnny Memnonic' by William Gibson stands as the best slice of cyber in this anthology.

All in all, then, a book that makes you realise that anthologies are difficult beasts, this being the sort of book to dip into, now and again. Nobody could read these from start to finish, like a novel, but probably nobody would want to. And that's taking into account the star quality of practically every contributor.

A final quibble. The cover is particularly naff – a go-green pistol set against a red circuit board. Clichéd and gaudy.

Gregory Benford

In the Ocean of Night

Vista, 1997, 333pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Colin Bird

This is a timely reissue of the first book in Benford's Galactic Centre Cycle which came to a close with *Sailing Bright Eternity* in 1995. Benford was a different writer in the early stages of his career and, in the course of this series, his prose has hardened, losing some of the wilful prolixity of his earlier fiction. In fact, *In the Ocean of Night* is a fix-up and the individual stories date from the early seventies when Benford was very much learning his trade.

The first part of the novel concerns the discovery of Icarus, an asteroid thrown into an eccentric Earth-intersecting orbit by an eruption of gas. English astronaut Nigel Walmsley is sent to fragment the asteroid with a nuclear 'Egg' but discovers Icarus is a long-derelect spaceship and delays setting off the Egg to allow time to explore the interior of the spaceship, causing much consternation on Earth. The Egg is finally deployed and Icarus is destroyed just in time.

Fifteen years later a strange signal is tracked around the solar system. It seems an alien ship, dubbed the 'Snark' by Walsley, has come to see what happened to Icarus. Walsley is sent to communicate with the Snark with a payload of weapons in tow should the robot ship get nasty. A brief exchange between astronaut and machine intelligence links Walsley to the Galactic Centre saga and to the struggle between organic and artificial life.

In the final, least successful section Walsley accesses another derelict spaceship on the Moon, this time left by a race of organic life forms who may have accelerated Mankind's evolutionary progress to best prepare us for the coming onslaught of mechanised invaders.

Jeanne Cavelos

Babylon 5 #7: The Shadow

***Within* □**

Boxtree, 1997, 259pp, £4.99

Al Sarrantonio

Babylon 5 #8: Personal

***Agendas* □**

Boxtree, 1997, 212pp, £4.99

Jane Killick

Babylon 5 Season by Season:

Signs and Portents

Boxtree, 1997, 184pp, £7.99

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

Babylon 5 is the latest big thing to perform the crossover between genres. Following the success of books based in the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* universes, the big corporations are all desperate to market books for their favorite (sic) licencing play.

Babylon 5, the TV series, is somewhat different from many of the other TV/movie sources for such books in that it is basically a single story told by one man (J. Michael Straczynski). His artistic control could have raised the level of the merchandise books somewhat beyond the mediocre level that such series generally generate. Unfortunately, this promise has yet to be fulfilled, the writers all seem to be unknowns or very minor names, and these two are little different.

The Shadow Within is, at first glance, moderately promising. The basic premise is to explore some of the backplot revealed in the series: the adventures of Anna Sheridan on Z'ha'Dum. Unfortunately, Cavelos does not seem to have a good sense of the *Babylon 5* universe. The expansion on information from the TV show is patchy and occasionally inconsistent; the characterisation doesn't ring true; and the author insists on bringing in the station and as many major players as possible, presumably to justify the 'floating heads and station' cover art. The plot involving Captain Sheridan's first mission as commander of the Agamemnon warship is militarily naive.

Personal Agendas also starts with some promise: Sarrantonio credits Straczynski with the premise and title. Again, however, there are problems: the events in the book are set early on in the fourth season of the show, before these episodes are broadcast in the UK. Without the background of these episodes, the plot is difficult to follow; having seen the episodes, it just doesn't fit in. There isn't sufficient time for it to happen, and the lack of any mention of it in the show detracts further from the consistency. Once more, main

This book feels dated; the author's metamorphic prose and flashy experimental typefaces are straining for an effect that the material barely justifies. Benford's later works, such as the recently reissued *Timescape*, are more satisfyingly sophisticated, although the Galactic Centre books are a struggle to follow at times. But I like the haunting lyricism that pervades *In the Ocean of Night* and found this book harkened back to days when Hard SF was more accessible and less dominated by the latest indigestible quantum theory. A sophomoric work, but coming from one of the best exponents of genre fiction that means nothing less than an enjoyable read.

characters are brought in with a sense of 'we must have them in' rather than for any believable, internally consistent reason. And the writing is poor: we are told about characters' emotional states rather than having them demonstrated through actions and descriptions.

After eight books badly received generally by the fans of the TV show, Warner Bros. and J. Michael Straczynski are still looking for a successful formula for the books.

As for the show itself: Episode Guides, Nitpicker's Guides and 'minor character background appearance guides' are another boom industry for media-related merchandising books. Jane Killick's *Babylon 5: Season by Season*, covering season one, is a fairly standard example of the type. The episodes are summarised in a workmanlike fashion, there are a couple of brief interviews with cast and crew, and an overall season description. Unfortunately, with *Babylon 5*'s popularity on the internet, this has all been done before, and done better. So much so, in fact, that Killick's attempt looks lacklustre. For those without internet access, the book may serve a useful reference function to remind people of what has gone before, but the opportunity to do so much more has been wasted. More information about Straczynski's vision of the future (his on-line writing alone gives vast reference material) should have been included, and longer interviews with the cast and crew would have placed this book on a much higher plane. The lack of listings of major guest stars, the lack of any mention of the crew behind the scenes, such as the ground-breaking special effects technology (particularly ground-breaking for the first season) and other such omissions condemn this book to a brief browse and a place on the reference shelf. Only to be read by those who missed the show's earlier episodes or didn't spot the ongoing plot threads themselves. A nice idea that should have had more time spent on research and expansion, rather than being prematurely pushed to market.

Kathryn M. Drennan

***Babylon 5 #9: To Dream in the City of Sorrows* □**

Boxtree, 1997, 337pp, £4.99

This latest novel in the series centres around the training of the Rangers and their first big battle.

Joseph Cochran

The Babylon Project

Titan, 1997, 196pp, £14.99

A role-playing game based on the TV series.

Greg Bear

Slant

Legend, 1997, 491pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Slant is a sequel of sorts to *Queen of Angels* (1990), although it can easily be read independently of the earlier book. Two characters are carried forward – policewoman Mary Choy and psychiatrist Martin Burke – but their roles are marginal to the main action. The world of the book does, however, extrapolate the ideas contained in the earlier volume in a careful and interesting manner.

The central thesis of *Queen of Angels* was that advancements in the scientific understanding of the brain and the mind and developments in nanotechnology would facilitate dramatic improvements in psychotherapy – and that such improvements would be vitally necessary in a society riven by the stresses of 'future shock'. The principal subplot of the novel involved the evolution of self-consciousness by an artificial intelligence contained in a space probe. In the 'dataflow culture' of *Slant* the ability of individuals to cope with everyday channels of communication is dependent on their mental stability – a stability ensured for all but a minority of 'naturals' by artificial therapies. The first fully sentient earthbound artificial intelligences are now on-line, although they require protective 'firewalls' to maintain their individual integrity within the turbulent ocean of the dataflow.

Queen of Angels was the most ambitious novel Bear had so far attempted in 1990, although it had neither the cosmic sweep of *Eon* (1985) nor the apocalyptic extravagance of *Blood Music* (1985). Writers of near-future sf who spurn large-scale social transformations experience much more difficulty in constructing satisfactory plots than those who take the apocalyptic option because fictional worlds which have sufficient stability to absorb the stresses and strains of wild ideas into a sustainable normality need far greater structural complexity and innate resilience than those which are set up merely in order to collapse or explode. In order to develop and display this resolute complexity *Queen of Angels* played with a few literary devices which still qualify as avant-gardish within the conservative conventions of sf publishing, and *Slant* dutifully plays with a few more – although its textual embellishments are very modest compared with those of John Brunner's DosPassosque *Stand on Zanzibar*, which still remains sf's boldest attempt to characterise an entire future society.

Queen of Angels was sufficiently daring in its scenaristic endeavours to disregard the customary genre insistence on a robust plot, and was blithely content to be something of a tortuous mess in regard to the laying down and eventual unravelling of its storylines. What effect this had on the selling-power of the book I do not know, but it may be significant that *Slant* takes no chances in this respect; the careful sophistication of its image of 21st-century American society is embedded in the hoariest of all plot-clichés: the mad scientist whose evil plan to destroy the world must be thwarted amid a hail of exotic bullets in a slam-bang climax. If *Slant* were to be stripped of its outer turgor of intelligence, the residue might serve as a treatment for a movie in much the same mould as *Total Recall*.

I was recently commissioned to write a brief article on James Gunn's *The Joy Makers* for a forthcoming *Dictionary of*

Literary Utopias, for which purpose I re-read American sf's first notable exploration of the notion of psychotherapy perfected and *Slant*'s most obvious intellectual ancestor. One thing that struck me very forcibly was the way in which Gunn's satirical exercise in philosophical speculation had been bolted on to the chassis of an orthodox pulp adventure story. 'How unfortunate,' I thought at the time, 'that matters had to be handled that way back in the 1950s.' *Slant* demonstrates that not much has changed; indeed, the relative sophistication of Bear's prose style and the skilful elaboration of his scientific and technological hypotheses actually serves to deprive his book of the frank immediacy with which Gunn was able to confront his readers with the philosophical issues at the heart of his story. Here, the subplot involving the confrontation between two sentient artificial intelligences is handled with such slick facility that it never attains the depth or affective authority of the soliloquies attending the uplift of their predecessor in *Queen of Angels*. *Slant* is more readable than *Queen of Angels*, and its dramatic tension is far better sustained, but those features do not work entirely to its advantage.

Mercifully, until and unless the movie is ever made, *Slant* will present itself to its readers with its outer turgor intact; it is an intelligent and vivid projection of some fascinating ideas, and it does take time out to consider some unusual existential enigmas and offer suggestions as to their resolution. Given that such books are so very difficult to write there is certainly no sense in complaining that too much effort has been put into the task of making it easier to read. If a writer as bold and as clever as Bear cannot be forgiven the odd mad scientist, who can?

Terry Bisson

The Fifth Element

Voyager, 1997, 250pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

A novelisation is not the work of its author in the same way a novel is. Terry Bisson's novelisation of the Luc Besson film, for instance, is actually 'from the screenplay by Luc Besson and Robert Mark Kamen, based on a story by Luc Besson'. The phrase: 'Too many cooks...' springs to mind.

What we get, therefore, is a talented, idiosyncratic author noted for bringing a stylish and slightly twisted perspective to his work, writing the novel version of a film by a talented, idiosyncratic director noted for bringing a stylish and slightly twisted perspective to his work. It is a combination that should work. In a sense it does work, I can't think of many writers who could have rescued as much from this source material. But Bisson's style and idiosyncrasy don't quite mesh with Besson's. You can sense Bisson in the sideways glances, the (few) introspections that fit around the bare bones of the screenplay. But for the vast majority of the book he is straightjacketed by the script, and unfortunately it does not sound on the page the way it might do in the mouth of an actor. On screen you can sometimes get away with a story that doesn't really make sense: give it a bit of surface sparkle and glitter, hurry through the questionable bits with fast cuts and spectacular effects, get some good actors to give a sort of sense to nonsensical words. These devices are not available to the novelist, and the corresponding devices that could be used, lengthy description, slow evocation, introspection are inappropriate in the high-speed world of

the novelisation. Wherever Bisson is constrained by the script, therefore, the skimpy silliness of the plot shines through.

There is the sort of introductory waffle of a discovery in an Egyptian tomb that is all too familiar in films like this, then we cut to the chase. An ancient evil is on the loose, all that can stop it is an alien armed with the curious stones that were found in that tomb. Along the way we get the taxi-driver who just happens to be the sort of super-competent hero that would have given Heinlein wet dreams, a megalomaniac villain who would destroy the universe for a profit (where do they get the brains to run their super-

efficient operation without being able to see the flaw in this proposition?), an incredibly beautiful girl in an incredibly skimpy costume, an over-sexed rapping DJ, and the usual assortment of dim cops, dimmer villains, innocent bystanders and the rest. To say that the plot develops by a seemingly unending stream of coincidences would actually be unfair to coincidence – there isn't even that much logic in what happens. There are, however, a satisfying number of explosions, crashes, shoot-em-ups and daring escapes. But these don't look anywhere near as impressive on the page as they do on the screen.

Stephen Briggs

Guards! Guards! The Play

Corgi, 1997, 184pp, £6.99

Reviewed by John Newsinger

It is no coincidence that the generic name for Terry Pratchett fans is 'prats'. They range from the fanatics who are, of course, complete prats through to occasional readers who are only prats now and then. The fact that the Pratchett cult's fanzine is hilariously named *The Wizard's Knob* only bears this out. Of course, Pratchett is not to blame for any of this himself; the author of a series of competently-executed comic fantasies that contain a few good jokes and the odd inspired leap of the imagination, how was he to know that the whole thing would get out of hand and he would be condemned to spend the rest of his days churning out book after book to satisfy the apparently insatiable demand of his followers. In fact, this would make a good Discworld plot: a popular novelist held prisoner by a cult of fanatical readers and made to rewrite the same novel for eternity. Combine it with elements of *The Man in the Iron Mask* and that's the umpteenth Discworld novel finished.

Of course, any attempt to discuss just how good a writer Pratchett actually is always produces the response from his acolytes that critics lack a sense of humour. Nevertheless, the question is worth asking. For my money, his novels are too comfortable and complacent, there is nothing challenging about them, they are not quite grown-up, not in the same league as Tom Sharpe. (I except from this his *Truckers* trilogy, one of the best contributions to writing for young people in recent years.)

At the moment of writing, the first of the Discworld cartoon films, the disappointing *Wyrd Sisters*, is appearing on television and a short documentary programme celebrating his work has already appeared. The Pratchett cult seems intent on world domination. They have even penetrated the world of amateur dramatics, a world inhabited by prats long before Terry Pratchett appeared on the scene. *Guards! Guards!* is the fourth novel to be adapted for the stage by Pratchett's faithful Tonto, Stephen Briggs. On the page it seems rather uninspired, reproducing the weaknesses of the novel but not its strengths. How well it would work on stage is another matter, although personally I have no wish to find out. The very thought of Discworld plays put on throughout the country leaves me cold. One suspects there could come a critical point where the number of productions staged on one particular night might be enough to threaten the fabric of reality itself, letting unknown horrors loose upon the world. In fact, this would make a good Discworld plot...

Allan Cole

When the Gods Slept

New English Library, 1997, 469pp, £6.99

David Drake

Lord of the Isles

TOR Books, 1997, 448pp, \$25.95

Reviewed by Susan Badham

These two fantasy novels have one refreshing feature in common: the authors have turned away from Europe in favour of different backgrounds. The two are well written, with strong characters and (mostly) convincing plots, though they have some faults.

I was expecting death, mutilation and carnage in David Drake's *Lord of the Isles* since his science fiction has tended to concentrate on these things. Instead he works on establishing character, background and relationships in a well-detailed pastoral society. Drake has done his research: the technology, religion and society are convincing but, being a fantasy novel, practically every major character turns out to have a Greater Destiny. As they all live in one small, insignificant village, this is a little hard to swallow.

The book follows a familiar quest format: the character goes through various adventures, battling magical bad guys and monsters as they begin to see their places in the greater scheme of things. All the male characters change and develop as a result of these experiences; the female characters, on the other hand, stay much the same and tend to get pulled around by the plot rather than acting by themselves. Maybe Drake just prefers writing about men, but it seems a pity that he can't slip in the odd good role model.

In Drake's world, you definitely shouldn't trust wizards. In Allan Cole's, on the other hand, the hero is a wizard. Safar's real interest is in solving an abstruse magical problem which is irrelevant to the plot (though it provides his major motivation and it is strongly hinted that it will be important in the next two volumes), but he has an effect on the world's destiny because he meets an Alexander-type world conqueror whom he helps to greatness. The plotting of the book is predictable: there seems no good reason for Safar to join a circus, for example, except that he will learn things he will use later, while the female thief he meets early in the books of course turns up in another guise at the end. However, within these limitations the book is well written and a pleasant read. The characters are well handled and the treatment of the major monsters elevates them above simple cannon fodder, it's nice to meet non-mindless monsters for once.

Paul Cornell***Ob No It Isn't!* □**
Virgin, 1997, 249pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Daniel O'Mahony

When good Time Lords die, they go to Cambridge. This is the upshot of *Ob No It Isn't!*, the first of Virgin Publishing's attempts to spin off the self-originated elements of their *Doctor Who: The New Adventures* series now that BBC Books have nabbed back the rights. The good bit of the collective title having been pinched, these are just *The New Adventures*. It's a reasonably accurate (if feeble) description though, and thankfully the embarrassing publicity strapline: 'Science Fiction has never been this much fun!', is absent from the jacket of the actual book.

The focus of attention has shifted from the unmentioned Doctor to former companion Bernice Summerfield, an undiminished phoney archaeology professor, now located at St Oscar's University on the planet Dellah in the 26th century. That this is Cambridge with aliens is no surprise, Paul Cornell – Bernice's creator and copyright holder, and persuasively the best writer to work on the Doctor Who-based *New Adventures* – rarely strays beyond late twentieth century Britain (or a thinly-veiled version thereof) and *Ob No It Isn't!* is loaded with contemporary references. Whether this is a valid science-fictional approach is debatable; whether it is successful or not depends on how it is approached.

Is it a novel or a comedy? It starts as the former. The first chapter, laid out in relaxed, delicious prose, establishes Bernice's world and her inner life without the punctuation of incident. Cornell makes Bernice a real woman – a qualified fake, a divorcee trundling towards middle-age (though not as fast as she thinks), a bitter wit and a frustrated lover. This is easily the finest passage of the book. It is the introduction the series demands.

Then plot intrudes and the story turns quickly to comedy. Bernice and just about the entire university staff travel to a newly dequarantined planet, once home to a race of disappeared liminal beings (whose present circumstances, when revealed, are depressingly clichéd) and are soon under attack by another species of fact-hungry alien warriors (who are just as clichéd but much more entertaining: Cornell has milked fellow NA writer Gareth Roberts's thesis that these stock aliens are (de)characterised by their unconscious and transgressive humour). Bernice and various other characters – including her cat Wolsey – are then transformed into analogues of themselves in a pantomime reality. A half-hearted explanation is offered, towards the end, though since this is now a comedy, it's hardly the point.

Bernice isn't fooled and this is where the dialectic between novel and comedy begins to show. Though her only problem is – ultimately – to be herself in the face of galumphing reality manipulations, she remains a novelistic reporter and the story is essentially her reaction to her new situation rather than the exigencies of the panto in which she is caught up. Bernice is, however the only Real Person in the story, other characters are only allowed snatches of inner life. Wolsey, who becomes anthropomorphised, gains a nice line in double entendres ('Hang on to me, Dick!') and momentarily fears the oblivion of mindless domesticity that a return to reality would provide. Everyone else – from Bernice's would-be student lover to a Kenneth Williamish Vizier – is a cypher or a joke. Bernice may be Real, but it

feels like the author thinks everything else must be made less real in order to accommodate her.

There are some fine set-pieces: an elaborate pantomime ball and an Aladdin's lamp sequence which feel like fragments of polished Pratchettique, just waiting for a structure to come by and integrate them. While Cornell inspects the often ridiculous conventions of panto, he doesn't try and lacerate them, nor is there any sense (as in Pratchett) that the essential story of the form has broken down. Unlike Pratchett, Cornell is unwilling to create a character who is both a part of the comic world and capable of reflexivity towards their environment (though Wolsey comes close). Bernice doesn't want to get involved in all this plot, she just wants to get back to normal.

There are hints at a grander order waiting for the reader who sticks with the series, notably via the introduction of two extraneous representatives of the People – a hugely powerful pseudo-utopian society crudely xeroxed from the best-known sf creation of a Bigname Author (a.k.a. Bigname M. Author) – who, in *Ob No It Isn't!*'s only cynical flourish, spend most of the narrative disguised as a horse. This is a strange introduction for a series though. Everything beyond the first chapter is padding, which is a shame as the introspection of the opening could easily have sustained something more substantial. As it stands, this is too insular, too flimsy and too eccentric to lend the new *New Adventures* much shape. To its credit, it never smells of Doctor Who.

As a comic romp, stuffed with bad jokes this is okay, though not subtle. Science-fiction has been much more fun than this and *Ob No It Isn't!* is nowhere near as profound or innovative as it thinks it is. As comedy it is undistinguished. For the sake of the author, the series and the protagonist, this should be taken – for all the flaws that reading generates – as a novel.

J.R. Dunn***Days of Cain***

Avon Books, 1997, 328pp, \$23.00

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

One of the reasons that science fiction has always been so popular with satirists is the opportunity it offers to manipulate reality to make a moral point. That said, science fiction that truly is built around a moral conundrum is relatively rare. This is, in part at least, because tackling moral questions can leave the author open to all sorts of pitfalls, from trivialising the issue to ducking the question altogether.

Daringly, J.R. Dunn has taken on the biggest moral conundrum of our century, and if he doesn't entirely avoid the pitfalls neither does he come as much of a cropper as he might well have done.

The Moiety is an organisation made up of humans plucked from every point in our history, from the ancient past to a future so distant its beings have entirely dispensed with the physical. Their rôle is to ensure the smooth progression of history, to prevent anyone using the available technology of time travel to change the past. It is a hard lesson its guardians must learn, for they must stand by to ensure that the rapes and massacres of our history continue to happen as they always have happened. But one of the brightest of their 'monitors' decides that the evil of the Holocaust was so great that even at the cost of future history

it cannot be allowed to stand unchanged. With a small group of followers, she turns renegade and when their first attempts to kill Hitler before his rise to power are thwarted, she puts herself into Auschwitz to subvert history from the inside. Meanwhile her mentor, Gaspar, is assigned the task of hunting her down and ensuring that Hitler's Final Solution progresses as history recorded it did.






Here is where Dunn is stepping on the most dangerous ground. To suggest the Death Camps are a suitable plaything for time travel adventures is questionable enough; but if he suggests that Auschwitz stands out as especially evil throughout the entire unimaginable history of mankind he is suggesting in some way it is an aberration, an atypical extreme that somehow deflates its genuine horror, while to say on the other hand that it is just one among many is to deny its unique iconic part in our moral conscience. You just can't win, and Dunn compounds the problem by making his renegade, Alma Lewin, a strong and competent woman who, for an unfeasibly long time, is able to change the regime, mitigate the effect of Auschwitz, at least for the women of one hut. To believe that one prisoner in Auschwitz, even one with the advantage of pills and other supplies from the future, could make that much difference from the inside is a

reflection on the suffering of the Jews and Slavs and homosexuals and other 'subhumans' who died in the camps that makes me feel very queasy.

But the camps win – and without overmuch interference in the course of things from Gaspar and his team. The story of a normal woman in the camps is told straight, without laying on the pathos or the drama, and it is moving enough as it stands. The big moral question – should history be changed to avert the Holocaust – is sidestepped, though there is the face-saving suggestion that without the example of the Holocaust there would have been no moral restraints preventing even worse carnage later in the century. This is just thrown in without being questioned or examined, which drastically undermines the moral weight of the story. But at the same time there are small changes, notably the Auschwitz guard whose life is changed forever by his one small act of moral courage. Though this is again undermined by a dreadfully twee ending in which in effect, everyone goes to heaven.

That apart, this is a courageous, stirring, moving and superbly written novel. It may, when we finally add up the moral stakes, be a noble failure, but it is noble nonetheless.

It's Fantastic!

Chris Claremont	Shadow Dawn 
	Bantam, 1997, 416pp, £15.99
Charles De Lint	Trader
	TOR Books, 1997, 352pp, \$24.95
Raymond E. Feist	Rage of a Demon King 
	Voyager, 1997, 463pp, £16.99
Robert Jordan	The Conan Chronicles 2
	Legend, 1997, 871pp, £16.99
Greg Keyes	The Waterborn 
	Legend, 1997, 436pp, £5.99
Mickey Zucker Reichert	Prince of Demons 
	Orion, 1997, 622pp, £16.99, £9.99 pb
Paul Ware	Flight of the Mariner 
	Hodder & Stoughton, 1997, 489pp, £17.99
Terri Windling	The Wood Wife 
	Legend, 1997, 320pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Janet Barron

The Conan Chronicles 2, comprising three Jordan novels and an essay by L. Sprague de Camp, have a pantomime feel, stock characters romping through exotic locations with neither political correctness nor self-consciousness. Few surprises here; thews are mighty, print is big, doxies are heavy-breasted, black-hearted villains worship gods of lust and pain, and Conan ensanguines his blade with vigour and predictable success. Simplistic and spirited, for aficionados only.

As, indeed, are the next three representatives of multi-volume epic fantasy: *Rage of a Demon King*, *Prince of Demons* and *Shadow Dawn*. In Volume Three of the Serpentwar Saga,

Feist offers the culmination of a tale composed with the usual ingredients: elves and sorcerers, underdogs and kings. Armies march, an invasion approaches, and if the day is to be won, Pug, the young magician must confront Macros the Black. It did not engross. The pace was leaden, the characters flat, frequently petty or sentimental, and sometimes both. Nor will I be seeking out the five previous Renshai novels. *Prince of Demons*, second of the Renshai Chronicles, follows Kevral as, among affairs of greater moment, she must decide between the two men she loves, Colbey (the original Renshai) now a demigod in Valhalla, Griff the young King faced with manipulating the Staffs of Order and Chaos, and the Dark Elves who threaten the throne. The characters attempt to develop in the course of the book, but this process is undermined each time they suffer badly. Initially, this may enlist the sympathies but eventually these spasms of mental and physical anguish, some of which seem to have very little provocation, irritate and alienate. The Claremont and Lucas follow-up to *Shadow Moon* centres strongly around young Elora Danaan and, as you might expect from Lucas, contains a delightfully varied cast of beasts of different charm, power and malignity. Elementals, trolls, dwarves, brownies, dragons, demons, you want it, you got it; all very colourful stuff. Elora herself, feared by the people since the Destroyer struck her silver from head to toe, undergoes varying forms of transformation while the Shadow war rages and tolerance for those who are Other is rapidly vanishing. The threads are strongly woven but the prose is full of horrid wordiness and clumsy bits, the net effect of which is of trying to run with chewing gum sticking to your shoe. And, like the Feist and the Reichert, it is contemporary American through and through: the setting may be exotic but not the heroine's mind-set. Hence dialogue such as 'Wow.' and 'Someone got

real mad here, Rool. And then they got even.' Oh well, there's a lot of it about.

Not, however, in Paul Ware's debut novel, which is true Brit. I rather suspect that he would like it to be praised as in the tradition of Swift or Defoe. Told in the first person, the narration in formal prose becomes positively archaic once in Shushuan, although it does get more punchy by the final action sequences. It's a Gate-to-Elsewhere story, where the jumping off point is England in the 1970s. The fact that it manages to be absorbing, despite prose such as 'suitably fortified by this repast,' is quite an achievement. The hero, David Shaw, is a solitary eighteen-year-old schoolboy and his companion is his schoolteacher, the young Mrs Catlin. Mrs C has a lot to answer for, not only does she fail, when teaching him English Lit, to point out that Dickens died some time ago, but she also wakes in him uncanny abilities in swordsmanship during fencing lessons and practically drags him through the junction. Their successes in this post-technological society, and their trials, such as enslavement, transform David physically, though not mentally. Imagine Copperfield the Barbarian and you'll get something of the flavour. And while many of the elements are hackneyed, the whole is individual. Ware is excellent on engineering, but weak on romance, and the overall effect is patchy but promising.

The Waterborn is an accomplished first novel, gentle in style, subtle, witty and well crafted. It is steeped in primitive attitudes; beliefs in little gods who personify natural features, and bigger gods who devour the small fry – a whole ecology of gods, in fact. Hezhi, independent-minded child, is about to reach womanhood and, when she does, the power of the

Waterborn, the children of the River God, will wake in her blood. Her fate is in the balance, for after puberty many of the royal family are never seen again. Perkar has a grudge against the bloated River God who continually eats Perkar's local stream deity, literally his sex goddess. Their fates are intertwined, but when Perkar finds Hezhi, will he kill her or save her? Perkar may be a Hero, but Heroes are frequently deadly to those around them. Unreservedly recommended.

Trader is a 'personality switch' story in the urban fantasy mould, as carefully characterised as you would expect from De Lint. Max Trader's comfortable existence as a guitar craftsman is shattered when he wakes up in the body of ne'er do well Johnny Devlin. Things rapidly degenerate and within hours he is out on the streets with only his inner resources to hold him together. His attempts to come to terms with his loss, and to regain his old life, culminate in an inner-world confrontation with Devlin and with unfinished business from his own past. This may not exactly break new ground for De Lint, as claimed on the jacket, but it does use his stock-in-trade (accurate contemporary descriptions, credible and appealing characters, and life enrichment by the creative force) to good advantage.

Winding covers some of the same ground as De Lint and with at least as much conviction. No melodrama here: Maggie Black moves from the city to the desert, to the house left to her by murdered poet, Davis Cooper, where she uncovers the mysteries of the past. The answers lies in the interplay between human creativity and the elemental forces of the land, given form by Cooper's artist wife, and in the discovery Maggie defines herself and her future. Beautifully written, elegantly crafted, satisfyingly resolved.

Niall Ferguson (Ed.)

Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals

Picador, 1997, 348pp, £20.00

Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

Like J. C. Squire's *If It Had Happened Otherwise*, first published in 1932, this is a collection of essays exploring counterfactuals, with an introduction and conclusion by the editor; the big difference is that Ferguson has looked only to academic historians for his contributors. His tone to Squire is derogatory, and his discussion of fictional explorations suggests that he is unaware of the extent of the literature (apart from errors he makes). He is not much better on more mainstream thinkers, treating what I read as short but quite reasonable discussions by Edward Gibbon (what would have happened if Charles Martel had not defeated the Saracens) and Bertrand Russell (if Henry VIII had not wanted a divorce) as almost worthless lollipops. The rest of the introduction goes on to a discussion of the philosophy of history which almost completely abandons Alternative History as a subject and scarcely shows any common theme.

The nine essays include the questions: What if Charles I had avoided the Civil War? What if there had been no American Revolution? What if Germany had invaded Britain in May 1940? and What if John F. Kennedy had lived? These subjects immediately spark interest: there are quite a few discussions of history diverging under the Tudors, for instance, but I cannot think of any which discuss the

continuity of the Stuarts and their feudal Divine Right of Kings. Similarly, although we look back at the United States involvement in Vietnam, there is little explicit discussion of the consequences of Kennedy's own home policies (Johnson in many ways was far more radical). Really, only the subject of Hitler's England is not new, but that seems to lend itself to a hundred different treatments.

But of all these promises few are kept: this is a book by academic historians who seem intent on making their work dry as dust. In particular they are all intent on setting the scene for their point of divergence, and then they fail to expand the consequences. After struggling through the Introduction, the despair I felt when I realised that the first essay, John Adamson's 'England Without Cromwell', was no better cannot be understated. Should Adamson have left the subject of this book to the last paragraph and then reduced it to these few lines?

How many of those who became parliamentarians during the 1640s would otherwise have become the loyal servants of a monarchical regime? In most cases this must remain an open question.

I think not: it was to read answers or suggestions of answers to this sort of question that I spent my £20.

In 1994 Michael Morton started to publish a magazine, *Alternate Worlds*. Only one issue appeared, but that first issue included a long bibliography of alternative history, as well as articles by Brian Stableford and Andrew Marr. Intelligent discussion of 'What if' history has so long and credible a record that I am starting to think that so many contributors

unaware of it coming together in *Virtual History* is beyond chance. Ferguson's own statements are outstanding examples of this counterfactuality. He writes 'Small wonder the volume (Squire's) was soon dead and buried' (page 10), and then maintains this stream. He discusses Robert Harris's *Fatherland* and then mentions Philip K. Dick's *The Man In The High Castle* as one of 'many less successful works' (page 441). He calls Keith Robert's *Pavane* a 'Catholic Utopia'. The contrary, of course, is that Squire's book is well known (if difficult to obtain), and was reprinted in an expanded edition as recently as 1972; that Dick's novel is a far greater success

than Harris's (unless Ferguson means copies sold); and that *Pavane* is dystopian. He also manages to invent a novel by John Wyndham entitled *Random Quest*.

I had great hopes for *Virtual History* – I would not have paid out real cash otherwise – but I was disappointed. And the cynic in me wonders did this manuscript perhaps drop through some wormhole in the space-time continuum from another dimension where things are not as they are in this world? Not being sure I suggest not buying *Virtual History* should you wish to find out. Do not let history repeat itself over the bookshop counter.

Alan Dean Foster

***The Spoils of War* □**

Legend, 1997, 296pp, £5.99

William H. Keith, Jr

Warstrider

Avon Books, 1997, 295pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Ian Sales

I've never really understood how the sub-genre of militaristic sf came about, nor why it is so popular. Looking back, there's no novel that stands out as a precursor, though I suppose it could be argued that pulp sf like EE 'Doc' Smith's *Lensman* series is militaristic – it was, after all, based around the eons-long war between Eddore and Arisia.

And there is something that harkens back to Kimball Kinnison in Foster's *The Spoils of War*. Subtitled *Book Three Of The Damned*, it is set during a future war against the Amplitur who are determined to subsume the various races of the Weave into their Purpose. This is a war the Amplitur is winning... until the Humans – the universe's 'hornier critters' – join the Weave. Lalelelang, a Wais historian, is researching her thesis – that Humanity will be unable to adapt to peace once the Amplitur are defeated and turn on the other races of the Weave – and to that end visits several worlds where battle is taking place. She meets a Human, Straat-ien, who is a member of the Core, survivors of a genetic experiment by the Amplitur and now their implacable enemies. The Core are busy working behind the scenes to defeat the Purpose. And they succeed – with Lalelelang's help.

It is the Amplitur which remind me of Smith's Eddorians, although the Core are no Lensmen or Arisians. The battlescenes – planet-bound; extrapolated military hardware; a focus on tactics – are not the 'coruscating energies' of pulp sf,

but closer to the Vietnam Vet school of sf. It is a strange mix, and not entirely successful. The book is also unbalanced: three-quarters covers the lead-up to the Amplitur's surrender, and the remaining quarter details the years of uneasy peace that follow. It's really two stories – *How The War Was Won* and *How The Amplitur Tried To Subvert The Weave Through Trickery* – but split unevenly within a single novel. Not one of Foster's best.

Keith's *Warstrider: Battlemind* is probably the better of these two. It is more overtly militaristic sf – from the series title to the opening scene describing striderjack Captain Kara Hagan battling for her life against the inimical Web machine-intelligence. There's a curious prudery to *Battlemind*: it's okay to dwell lovingly on the graphic violence (although, of course, it's all at one remove, the product of technology); it's permissible to mention sex (but not to describe the act); but swear words are definitely not allowed. Instead we have: 'Kuso!' and 'gokl'.

Nothing in *Battlemind* has not been done before: the military technology, the Japanese interstellar empire, the interstellar computer network, the virtual reality, the trip to the distant future to find some way of winning the war... Still, it all hangs together, although no idea seems to be used to its full potential. Having said that, it's a good example of its type: large enough in scope to cover all angles, with a sufficiently diverse cast of characters, and plenty of action. As militaristic sf goes, this is one of the better ones.

I'll cheerfully admit I've read some enjoyable militaristic sf (but we won't go into that). However, they always seem a little thin, as if the ideas thrown into the pot are not thought through fully. It must be a factor of the sub-genre.

David Gemmell

***Winter Warriors* □**

Bantam, 1997, 316pp, £15.99

Dark Moon

Corgi, 1997, 413pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Stephen Deas

Roll up! Roll up! See the healing magician with the power to save the universe! See yet another world's deadliest swordsman! They don't quite start with 'It was a dark and stormy night...' but you can feel the words there, haunting the pages, just looking for an excuse...

Sigh.

I'll say one thing for these books. At least you know where you stand, right from page one: high fantasy cliché

land. There's a certain kind of person who reads these books, and this is targeted straight at them. So if you're not feeling a strange tingling mixture of shame and anticipation by now, you may as well move on.

Actually, they're not all that bad. As usual, meddling sorcerers end up unleashing all manner of sinister horrors, and it's left to our heroes (and heroines – one in each) to clean up the mess. There are some nice touches here, not all *Dark Moon*'s clichés are quite as expected, while the overall feel of *Winter Warriors* is quite broody (The heroes are mostly old men with an air of old-soldier bitterness to them and the plot quietly lurks in the background, keeping itself out of the way, tempering everything with something darker, more measured, promises of a more thoughtful story than usual).

Irritating *Deus Ex Machina* plot-explaining spirits aside, both books are pleasantly engaging...

...until the second half. At this point, *Dark Moon*, which had been quite pacey, becomes full of padding while the principal characters (and the reader) are waiting for the plot to happen. *Winter Warriors*, meanwhile, enters a long chase sequence, far too long for what it contains, and by the end I was more interested to know what the mystical significance of the number thirty five was than to find out what actually happened. Both have their moments (having a sixty six year old veteran soldier with all the manners and culture of a slug being midwife to a queen when she gives birth was good for a chuckle), but both ultimately drag. *Dark Moon* picks up again for the big fight at the end, and only just fails to give a satisfying ending. *Winter Warriors* left me feeling I'd been right to be more interested in the number thirty-five. And in both cases it's down to the characters.

That's my main gripe with both these books. The supporting cast (and in *Dark Moon* there are a lot of them -

too many) are all thoroughly two-dimensional. I could live with that (one or two are even quite amusing), but most of the main characters suffer from it too. Some of them try: Karis (*Dark Moon*'s 'warrior woman and strategist' and also, apparently, the only woman on the planet to have access to contraception) and the above-mentioned impromptu midwife both come close enough to be interesting, but neither quite make it, and both books have endings which very much depend on this happening (*Winter Warriors* also suffers from the fact that the ending rests heavily on key minor characters who have had no effective development. Left me wondering exactly what the point of the previous two hundred pages was).

Brain-candy, then. They won't make you think, they won't move you to tears of sorrow or laughter, they won't make you wonder about anything much or leave you gasping for breath. *Dark Moon* is adequate for a couple of long and lonely winter nights if you've nothing better to do; *Winter Warriors* might just prompt you to find something.

Alistair Gentry *Their Heads Are Anonymous*



Pulp Books, 1997, 191pp, £8.99

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Parry is Talent at Bigger Amusement World, one of workers who interact with the public whilst dressed as a Bigger cartoon character. He also sees flying saucers hovering over the amusement park most days. No one else, however, can see them. The story begins when Priscilla, fellow Talent, is violently ill and subsequently fired for being seen in public without her cartoon character's head (a sackable offence at Disney World, apparently). Parry, who has had enough of being a Bigger employee, decides to leave with Priscilla, but before they can do so the amusement park is invaded by the surviving member of the Bigger family (they had sold Bigger Amusement World years before to an international corporation). Charles Bigger institutes a sadistic reign of terror on staff and visitors, and begins searching for the cryogenically frozen body of his grandfather, the founder of the Bigger empire, builder of Bigger Amusement World, who is apparently hidden somewhere in the park. Parry and Priscilla, plus assorted other characters, are caught up in this.

Gentry's inspiration for Bigger Amusement World is not exactly subtle: this is Disney World under another name, even down to the rumours of a cryogenically-frozen founder.

And this conceit is Gentry's first mistake. Disney World is a purely American phenomenon, but *Their Heads Are Anonymous* is set in the UK. It just isn't British. The US has theme parks; the UK has Butlins and Alton Towers.

However, not content with crudely welding elements of US culture onto a British setting, Gentry chooses to go completely overboard with Charles Bigger's invasion of the amusement park. People are slaughtered left, right and centre; his mercenaries enact all the excesses of soldiers-for-hire in an Angolan brushfire war. Disbelief is not so much suspended, as put up against the wall and shot. The climax, involving a reanimated grandfather Bigger, psychic insects and 'explanations' for a variety of unexplainable phenomena (including the flying saucers), pushes suspension of disbelief beyond surrealism and into barking.

On the plus side, Gentry has a way with words, and the book's surrealism works more often than it fails. It's simply that hip and trendy US fiction only really works if it's, well, hip and trendy US fiction. Hip and trendy UK fiction is a different animal. *Their Heads Are Anonymous* isn't sure what it is. It's too American to be British; but not American enough to be American. In that respect, it fails; it is as real as Disney World.

Their Heads Are Anonymous is an attractively packaged book, but at nine quid for nearly 200 pages, it's not what you would call good value.

Andrew Harman *A Midsummer Night's Gene*

Legend, 1997, 359pp, £16.99, £4.99pb

Reviewed by John R. Oram

I've been far from impressed with Andrew Harman's work: awful names which could only be relevant to a real ale fan (Hogshead, Firkin, etc.), worse jokes (a girl named Dawn gets out of bed: 'Dawn rose') and absolutely appalling titles (*The Sorcerer's Appendix*, *The Frogs of War*). Fortunately, he has eradicated the terrible, unfunny names and the bad jokes from this book, and revealed a talent for humour I would not have expected from him. For one thing, it is not set in a

fantasy realm, but the mundane world we all live in. The settings are familiar, and that makes the book that much funnier.

The setting is Camford, a mix of Bedford and Cambridge, where two feyries, fed up with their lot at the court of Oberon and Titania, escape into the upper world in search of a girl to kidnap. Unfortunately, while one wants to kidnap a baby in the traditional manner, the other wants a fully grown girl. They end up with Tara, the daughter of the local police chief, an sf fan who is thrilled at the idea of being kidnapped by aliens. Add two crooked scientists, intent on defrauding the government to make chicken-flavoured corn by the use of genetics; a barmy group of animal rights

activists; a soupçon of Fairyland (Titania is hooked on a fairy version of soap opera); cable layers and a grass-mad Head Groundsman at the local golf course, and you have a chaotic romp which which entertains at every turn.

Throughout the story, Harman sets his sights on the sillier aspects of modern life. Anyone interested in sf will recognise the shop which sells anything from *Star Trek Voyager* models to a Dalek dustbin; and anyone who has been held up in traffic jam will be familiar with the cable layers digging up the roads. This pair are absolutely hilarious.

I have one small quibble. The publishers will insist on comparing Andrew Harman with Terry Pratchett. This should stop: he is an original, and this book marks his entry into the world of adult humour. It is well written, the characters are well observed, and if he continues to write to this standard I, for one, one will become a firm fan.

M. John Harrison

Signs of Life □

Gollancz, 1997, 255pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

It has become increasingly difficult to disentangle truth from fiction in the works of M. John Harrison, particularly in novels like *Climbers* (1989) and *The Course of the Heart* (1992). Not in any superficial sense – I am not trying to suggest that Harrison was the trapped and powerless narrator of *The Course of the Heart*, still less that he is the sad, failed 'China' who makes a living illegally dumping chemical and medical waste, in *Signs of Life* – but his dialogue has the hesitant, broken-off, indirect feel of something overheard; his characters have the hesitant, unfinished feel of people who aren't performing in the artfully structured world of a novel; his situations have the hesitant, unexpected, shapelessness of events that have not been ordered by a novelist.

The book, in other words, has the feel of something experienced not written; yet this incredible naturalism is offset by an intense artificiality. Harrison's narrators – and, through them, Harrison himself – are constantly seeking out symbols. Everything from a dream to a casual remark, from a change in the weather to an incursion of brutal reality, is seen as part of a cosmic pattern, a hint of the religious. His characters live in grittily described real places where brick is crumbling, dust is settling, the stink of rotting vegetables hangs on the air; yet they are also in a wonderland of signs and portents, where they listen constantly for the echo of things yet to come, and invariably hear it.

And what do they hear? They hear their own failure, for Harrison's characters are driven by fate, have little personal control of their lives. Things fall apart, entropy rules; in the title of one of his finest stories, everything is 'Running Down'. But there is hope, there is always a second chance; the unfortunate thing that Harrison's characters never recognise is that this second chance invariably comes in ways that are unexpected, offers a chance that is not quite what was hoped for, and is as quick to fall apart as everything else in this world.

All of which is a hesitant approach to distinguish the shapes and patterns, the signs and protents in the work of one of our finest novelists. Not fantasist, not science fiction writer – *Signs of Life* is both fantasy and sf, of course – M. John Harrison belongs outside those narrow bounds; his remorseless, unblinking, unsettling gaze is the match for any

writer of any fiction working today. And *Signs of Life* belongs up there with his finest work.

'China' Rose (his first name is Mick, Harrison's first name is Michael, but let us not draw too many conclusions from that, for all that this seems like one more bruising round in his battle for a sort of psychological autobiography) is fortysomething, survivor of a failed marriage, something vague and unsatisfying in advertising, and bored. In fairly short order he meets Choe Ashton and Isabel Avens; in a more conventional work Choe would represent the devil dragging China down while Isabel, with her dreams of flying (and that avian-suggesting surname), would be the angel. But things are never that simple: Choe is a life force, an eruption from outside China's narrow world who is dangerous, yes (like Yaxley in *The Course of the Heart* his influence can be ultimately damaging) yet without Choe China would not have a life anyway. Isabel is the great love of his life, the force for good who will bring him most of his happiness, yet her dreams of flying are ultimately destructive for both of them, and it is an urge for self-sacrifice that she brings out in China as much as anything.

Choe is the trigger for most of the events in the novel. He persuades China to quit his job and set up a courier service which mostly consists of dumping dangerous and unregistered medical supplies in remote infill sites at dead of night. (In Harrison's world there is always rain or snow; it is generally dark and dispiriting.) The business expands, so much so that they set off for Hungary on a fateful trip to investigate ways of operating in the newly-opened East. But it is Choe, inevitably, who falls for the glamorous spell of a bunch of Eastern European criminals – and the business falls apart. Just as China's relationship with Isabel is falling apart. She has met one of their clients, a reputable but questionable doctor, and she leaves China to live with him. Only later do we learn that the doctor offers implants of feathers, and Isabel sees this as a way to make her dreams of flying come true. But the implants go disastrously wrong, and the stage is set for the tragedy of China's second chance.

In outline, this may sound dour, even morose. Certainly the same sense of hopelessness surrounds China, Choe and Isabel as surrounds the central trio in *The Course of the Heart*. So much so, in fact, that it comes as something of a shock to realise that this threesome is materially well-off, leading stylish and successful middle class lives; Harrison has the ability to make even a desirable city home sound like something only one step removed from a slum. Yet for all that it is a gripping, challenging novel, a work that keeps you intellectually on your toes while being thoroughly and emotionally engaging. It is a world you don't want to leave when you finally come to close the book, but at the same time it is a world you are glad you don't live in.

Robin Hobb

Royal Assassin

Voyager, 1997, 752pp, £6.99

Assassin's Quest □

Voyager, 1997, 742pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

I'd like to start by apologising to Robin Hobb for assuming, in my review of *Assassin's Apprentice* (V188) that she's a man, in fact Robin Hobb is better known as Megan Lindholm.

These long books conclude this classic fantasy trilogy set in the maritime Kingdom of the Six Duchies, ruled by a line of 'farseers' gifted with special powers called the Skill, the latest of whom is King Shrewd. They continue the story of Fitz, the bastard son of Shrewd's eldest son, Chivalry, now untimely deceased. The first book, after telling how Fitz trained in secret as an assassin for his grandfather the King, ended after Fitz had foiled a plot by the King's youngest son Regal (royal names are always noble qualities, but here it is ironic) to dispose of the current heir, Fitz's other uncle Prince Verity. Regal is prepared to do anything to gain the throne for himself, even ally with the fearsome raiders from the Red Ships who are ravaging the shores of the Six Duchies, subjecting the inhabitants to a terrifying fate called Forging which is essentially the stripping from them of all the qualities that make them human.

Royal Assassin begins with Fitz taking his place beside the King to help in the fight both openly against the Red Ships and covertly against Regal (I should point out that in all the three books Fitz doesn't get to do that much assassinating, and even then only of those who are thoroughly bad.) More is revealed about Fitz's enigmatic and oracular mentor, the King's Fool, and of the motives and powers of the Red Ship raiders. Fitz develops his powers in both the Skill, and also in the forbidden hedge-magic, the Wit, which gives him power to communicate with and control animals (and more). Losing the battle against the Red Ships, Verity sets out to look for the fabled Elderlings whom legend tells saved the Six Duchies

when they were in similar dire straits centuries before, leaving Regal with a lot more room to manoeuvre. At the end of the book Verity is missing, feared dead, and Fitz is in worse danger than ever, as are the Six Duchies. *Royal Assassin* is a much better book than middle volumes of trilogies normally are, and left me desperate to read the final book.

Assassin's Quest starts well and continues well for most of its length. Now officially dead and forced to adopt a new identity, Fitz starts out on a quest to find Verity and save the Six Duchies. He teams up with old and new characters on his journey, and they go through nail-biting adventures. However, after 700 pages virtually nothing has been done to resolve the situation facing Fitz and his allies in the Six Duchies. I realised then that the events for which I had been patiently waiting (namely the seeing-off of Regal and the Red Ship Raiders, and the explanation of the Forging mystery) were going to happen off-stage, described briefly in an italic chapter foreword – and I was right. I therefore felt rather cheated, both for myself and for Fitz, who should have been asked to play a much greater and more personal part at the end rather than just being the catalyst to bring it about (and for that matter get a better deal, although to be fair this was signalled from page one of *Assassin's Apprentice*).

Despite the constraints of her formula fantasy trilogy format, however, Ms Hobb has delivered an excellent first work, with well-paced plotting in the first two books, and genuinely involving characters, though I was personally disappointed by the abrupt ending of the trilogy.

Tom Holt

Paint Your Dragon

Orbit, 1997, 311pp, £5.99

Open Sesame ♠

Orbit, 1997, 312pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Stephen Deas

Tom Holt has a formula: take one myth, tweak it, set it as inappropriately as possible and press go. Where possible, guest stereotypes or figures from other myths and legends will come along to join the fun and/or add to the confusion. Generally, it seems this can lead to one of two things: either it's hysterically funny, or it falls flat on its face.

Paint Your Dragon, sadly, is of the Splat! Ouch! variety. The plot – if you can call it that – is a standard Half affair: for reasons that are never entirely clear, St. George and the Dragon are back for a rematch. A bunch of demons on their trip-of-an-afterlifetime to Knoxville bumble around the place. It has its moments – two, I think – and both George and the Dragon have a certain charisma, but on the whole it tries oh-so-hard to be witty and clever and hardly ever succeeds. It's a pity. At his best Tom Holt can be a genuinely funny man, hard on the heels of the likes of Pratchett and Adams (and if you like Robert Rankin, Holt is about the closest I've found), but this is just painful. By the end, there are so many threads hanging loose that any attempt to tie them up was doomed to incoherence. Best joke of the book? Kurt Lundqvist threatening to throw a cantankerous statue into a river with a human tied to its ankle. Would you really want to wade through 250 pages for that?

Open Sesame, fortunately, is something of a return to form. Akram the Terrible, head of the infamous forty-thieves gang, begins to figure that being a storybook villain isn't all

that great a career. Let's face it, he's got this cave full of loot, and all that ever happens is some bugger comes and steals it, and when he tries to get it back, it's Ali Baba and boiling oil and all the way back to square one. Does he get to spend any of it? Does he get to splash out on a pair of battery-heated winter slippers? So it's sod this for a lark and off to reality. Where we have A. Barbour the dentist, a recession-hit tooth fairy gone bad, machines with attitude – I do have a soft spot for machines with attitude, and the Argos catalogue joke is quite priceless... And back in storyland, the 39 other thieves tramp chaos through neighbouring fairy tales, searching for their leader. OK, it's not hysterical, the humour's fairly bland where it could be wickedly cutting, but it's still quite funny. Better than that, it's consistently quite funny. Fans will be relieved, newcomers could do a lot worse than this one.

Garry Kilworth

The Welkin Weasels:

Thunder Oak ♠

Corgi, 1997, 382pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

This children's fantasy is the first of a series of books in the tradition of *Redwall* and *Watership Down*. It is set in an imaginary land, the Welkin, from which all humans have vanished long ago, and the wild animals of the woods have acquired human intelligence and attributes. They have also, where possible, taken over human possessions, cutting them down to animal-size. The stoats have become a powerful aristocracy, treating the weasels as virtual serfs, while other animals such as badgers, pine-martens, hedgehogs and otters keep more to themselves. The hero of the book,

Sylvester, is the leader of a band of outlaw weasels, somewhat reminiscent of Robin Hood, while the villainous stoats are led by Prince Poynt, who is aided by his henchman, Sheriff Falshed – their human equivalents would be Prince John and the Sheriff of Nottingham!

Prince Poynt's main aim in life is to capture Sylvester, even if he has to hire Magellan, the fox-mercenary who killed his brother to do it. To add to Sylvester's problems, the Welkin, an island below sea-level, is threatened by the imminent collapse of the human-built sea-walls which the animals, lacking human expertise, are unable to repair. Sylvester does not particularly like what he has heard about humans, but he believes that they must be found and brought back to the Welkin so they can mend the sea-walls, even if their return results in the animals becoming wild creatures again. The

book tells the story of the first part of his quest to find the humans.

The Welkin Weasels: Thunder Oak is not one of those books written for children that could equally be for adults, but its intended age range (about 9-12) should find it a thoroughly enjoyable fantasy. Like all the best children's books, it succeeds because it does not patronise, recognising that children are quite capable of reading about such things as the death of certain characters. The humour, particularly the confrontations between Prince Poynt and the Sheriff, is pitched just at the right level for this age group, while the fast-paced adventures of the weasels make it an ideal book for able readers who are not quite ready for adult novels, and yet are looking for a challenging read.

The Horror! The Horror!

Joe Donnelly

Twitchy Eyes

Michael Joseph, 1996, 444pp, £16.99

Karen Hall

Dark Debts

Macmillan, 1997, 424pp, £15.99

Dean Koontz

Sole Survivor

Headline, 1997, 352pp, £16.99

Richard Layman

Fiends

Headline, 1997, 275pp, £16.99

Phil Rickman

The Caliche

Macmillan, 1997, 350pp, £16.99

Thomas Tessier

Fog Heart

Gollancz, 1997, 319pp, £16.99

Philip Trewinnard

The Pastor

Gollancz, 1997, 351pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

Let's start with the serial killers. *Twitchy Eyes* by Joe Donnelly is a stalk-n-slash novel set on the west coast of Scotland in the 1960's; in a town which is living in fear of a child killer. The killer has already struck twice and consequently the town's children have spent the summer cooped up where their parents can see them. Five teenagers decide to make a break for it one weekend, sneaking off into the hills to look for the 'dummy village' (a decoy from the war) instead of going with the other kids on the official trip to Scout camp. Naturally, the serial killer (the man with twitchy eyes) is waiting for them. *Twitchy Eyes* is a coming-of-age novel which follows the boys as they are forced to grow up and come to terms with their emerging sexuality during their encounter, over one weekend, with a violent psychotic. Donnelly is an articulate writer, overly so at times; the characters of the boys are finely drawn and the ending is made all the more effective as Donnelly briefly describes the future for each of them. That's the twist in the ending – the catalytic events of the weekend did not occur in a vacuum and although the boys survived, the emotional scars remain.

It is unusual that the real effects of violence and sexual violence are portrayed in horror and this is the case in *Fiends*. I've never been attracted to Richard Layman, but for those who are, *Fiends* is a collection of old short stories along with

a new novella from which the title of the collection is taken. It is written in Layman's usual breathless style and his stereotypical serial killers behave as they always do – this is lowest common denominator stuff and it's all rather jokey.

Dean R. Koontz is not so much a novelist as a storyteller and *Sole Survivor* reads as much like a film script as a novel. Flight 353 crashed, running nose first into the ground, and two of the hundred or so fatalities were Joe Carpenter's wife and child. The official enquiry was a whitewash and a year later he is on the detective trail, tracking down the truth behind the crash ('crash for questions'). That's not the story's hook though, the hook is this: he meets someone who survived the impact. 'How could anyone survive?' we ask ourselves and, following all the cops and robbers bits, we find out. Actually there's not much horror here and I found the dénouement (reminiscent of *The X-Files*) quite disappointing.

Fogheart by Thomas Tessier is much more bitter and twisted. Oona is a medium (sort of) who has a knack of reading the innermost secrets of men. She and her sister, Roz, take two couples under their wing to try and help them come to terms with the unexplained psychic occurrences that have been happening around them. Nothing is what it seems. The people are not exactly the innocent victims that they appear to be and neither is Oona. She cannot help but excavate the untruths in their souls, just as they are drawn to uncover the mystery within her. *Fogheart* is a novel about the ways in which we brutalise and exploit each other, where nothing is simple and motives are complex, laced with emotional blackmail and, well, the baggage of relationships. It is about love and hate and (particularly) those who feel fear. It's about facing up to the truth without guilt. I liked *Fogheart*.

I also liked *Dark Debt* by Karen Hall, but the guilt is of the plain old Catholic variety. A young Priest, Michael Kinney, tries to exorcise a teenage boy, but fails. The members of the Landry family have slowly been going mad and, when not killing others, they have been killing themselves. Only Jack Landry is left. Then the demon returns to taunt both of them and they realise exactly what they have in common: guilt. The demon says to the priest 'you are sworn celibate yet you are still drawn to attractive woman' and it says to Landry 'you cannot depend upon your own actions'. It's as if the author wrote this novel in an

attempt to come to terms with her own sense of doubt, her own sense of guilt – her own sense of belief? Her priest swears and curses and exchanges pithy one-liners (Hall has been a script writer on shows like *M*A*S*H*) with his girlfriend (with whom he also has sex) as he attempts to come to terms with the dark debt that he has inherited. It's good fun and thought-provoking although the characters are rather too clever for their own good at times.

The Pastor is a rather brittle story about one twin sister coming to London to find her twin who has disappeared. She discovers that her sister has been working for the wrong sort of people in the wrong sort of place: a sado-masochistic club.

She slowly becomes embroiled in it all and begins to find out exactly who *The Pastor* is and the extent of his influence. It all seemed a bit daft to me and overlong; it would have made a more effective short story.

The byline of *The Chalice* by Phil Rickman is 'A Glastonbury Ghost Story', which sums it up quite neatly. The plot is complicated, but basically involves a bunch of new age travellers, the friction between the conservative tenants of Glastonbury and the hippie immigrants, the black chalice (i.e. an anti-grail) and, of course, the Tor. Also the young female lead is over-weight. Chirpy characters and lots going on. Jolly.

Shariann Lewitt

Interface Masque

TOR Books, 1997, 350pp, \$23.95

Reviewed by John Newsinger

This is very much a routine novel, blending an advanced technology (the net and its accessories) with the intrigues and skulduggery of a baroque pseudo-Renaissance Venice. The powerful Sept houses (guilds of computer adepts) are assembling in the city to formalise their complete takeover and domination of the net with all the wealth and power it will bring. The Septs themselves are divided, with some more enthusiastic than others, but the takeover looks certain to go ahead, imposing order and hierarchy on the net while trampling underfoot freedom and individuality. One of their tools in this endeavour is the Pieta, the Venetian choirs whose music both symbolises and helps consolidate discipline and conformity.

But all is not as it seems. In Venetian society men and women go masked, their motives and loyalties uncertain. Much is hidden, there are plots within plots, betrayals as well as friendships and, as a sub-plot that unfortunately gets lost along the way, there are almost incidentally aliens colonising the net. All that can stop the Sept takeover is the agitation of an unlikely group of dissidents, whose rebellion is inspired, made possible, by a rival music to that of the Pieta: jazz. This is an interesting idea but, like the aliens on the net, it is not developed.

David Gavrilli, the estranged son of one of the richest families in Italy, is living incognito in Venice, playing jazz

piano and plotting the overthrow of the Sept houses. A number of other individuals are pulled into his orbit, notably Sean, his Irish lover and a singer with the Pieta, and Cecile, a young adept with the house of Sept-Fortune. They find themselves swept along by the ramifications of a conspiracy too big for them to pose any real threat: their very lives are in danger.

While Shariann Lewitt's novel is very easy to read, she fails to involve the reader with her characters and the predicaments they find themselves in. It eventually becomes clear that what is at stake has nothing to do with freedom, nothing to do with first contact, nothing to do with anything of interest or importance. All we are witnessing is the circulation of elites with David finally coming into his inheritance and Cecile in the process of becoming head of Sept-Fortune. The characters have not won the reader's sympathy enough for it to matter. David's character is a lost cause, but Lewitt could have done more with Cecile, in the end, though, she loses out in comparison with, for example, Aiah in Walter Jon Williams's *Metropolitan* (1995), a far superior novel that shows how this sort of thing should be done.

One last point: the overthrow of the Sept conspiracy is very poorly done without any real thought. David's lover, Sean, is Irish and so obviously knows how to make bombs. He blows up the Sept Board meeting – that's it.

This novel is an undemanding read, but the flip side is that it is also an unrewarding one. A disappointing, somewhat ersatz novel.

George Lucas

Star Wars: A New Hope

Faber, 1997, 173pp, \$7.99

Leigh Brackett & Lawrence Kasdan

Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back

Faber, 1997, 140pp, \$7.99

Lawrence Kasdan & George Lucas

Star Wars: Return of the Jedi

Faber, 1997, 111pp, \$7.99

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Wookie books. Literally. Now that the *Star Wars* trilogy has become to popular cinema what the Beatles are to pop music, the screenplays have joined Faber & Faber's extensive range of scripts classic and contemporary.

It's a little confusing but nowhere, outside or in, do these volumes tell you exactly what they are. Many published

screenplays are actually transcriptions from the finished film, including every last change and revision made while shooting and editing, and omitting any material from the writer's script which was not made it to the final cut. Such books serve as a printed record of the finished film and so can be used to study the film or to settle arguments over who said what to who. Don't buy these books if that's what you're expecting, for what we appear to have here – it's not possible to be absolutely certain – are the complete original scripts from which the *Star Wars* trilogy was shot, albeit with the camera and editing instructions removed for easier reading. Change of scene headings have been retained, though not scene numbers.

Star Wars: A New Hope (the books do not include episode numbers or refer to a Special Edition) is the most interesting, because it is the most different from the finished film. It would seem that the scripts for the second and third films

were much more honed before filming began. *A New Hope* contains several more scenes set on Tatooine than appeared either in the original release, or in the Special Edition. Luke Skywalker is first met rather earlier than the released film, watching the battle between Princess Leia's ship and the Imperial Cruiser from out in the desert. There is also an early scene in which Luke meets Biggs, and which would have added emotional resonance to Biggs's death, at the expense of slowing the beginning of the film down. Camie, the character astonishingly, in retrospect, played by Koo Stark, also appears. There are more minor differences later on, mainly in terms of slightly different dialogue, or extra dialogue. There are several pieces of background detail which the budget clearly did not run to, and while these have not been digitally appended for the Special Edition, oddly several things, the new reptilian banthas for example, which were not in the screenplay, have.

The screenplays for *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* are much tighter than that for *Star Wars*, and on this evidence underwent far fewer changes on their way to celluloid. Small sections of dialogue are a little different, and there are occasional extra lines.

As part of Faber & Faber's ongoing range of published screenplays, the books are stylishly presented large format paperbacks with good quality paper and artwork from the original posters gracing the covers. There is a selection of black and white stills at appropriate points in the books. Each volume also contains a small amount of supplementary material. For *A New Hope* this consists of an article by

Stephen Zito about the background to the film; originally published in *American Film*, April 1977, the piece was written even before the press screenings of the film and thus offers a fascinating insight from the days when *Star Wars* was considered a bizarre gamble headed for financial disaster.

The second book contains an interview with writer Leigh Brackett from a 1976 edition of *Films in Review*. It is mainly concerned with the films of Howard Hawks and John Ford, and, given its date, obviously contains nothing about *The Empire Strikes Back*. Strangely no mention is made anywhere of Brackett's alternate career as a pulp sf writer. Nevertheless, it offers an interesting look at her approach to her craft.

The final book features interviews with Carrie Fisher and Richard Marquand, taken from the June and September issues of *Starburst*. They are routine publicity circuit fodder, though Fisher shows real personality and humour.

The first book is certainly of interest to the serious fan, providing considerable extra material which does give more insight into the world building of the *Star Wars* universe. The original script contains rather more about who the Empire is organised by and the politics of the situation. The scripts of the second and third films are so close to the finished articles as to provide no fresh material, yet sufficiently different to be an unreliable source for those wanting to either relive the movies or check individual lines of dialogue exactly. As such they are rather more difficult to recommend, but doubtless many fans will feel all three are essential purchases.

Larry Niven

Destiny's Road

TOR Books, 1997, 352pp, £24.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

Don't make the mistake I made with this book. I began flipping casually through, only to grind to a halt part-way along. I realised I had no idea what was going on. Niven tells his story in time-honoured hard-sf fashion: he describes what the main protagonist is aware of, but he doesn't explain. As a result, only the alert reader will make the connections and pick up the overtones. Niven expects – he even requires – that you read with close attention: your reward will be understanding, the penalty for failure is bewilderment.

After that initial mistake, I never fully recovered confidence. Jeremy Blocher leads a quiet life in the small

community of Spiral Town, but gets into a fight which ends in the death of a labourer from one of the powerful caravans. He is forced to flee, following the long road initially carved out by the lander 'Cavorite' 250 years earlier. Along the way he meets a variety of people and communities, some more baffling than others: who, for heaven's sake, are the Proles? It's not immediately obvious and you get minimum clues. Several times I came to a halt, forced to go back and re-read key passages, and whereas this challenge can be pleasurable in other novels, somehow in the case of *Destiny's Road* the pleasure leaked away and my task turned into a chore.

I am perfectly prepared to admit that the fault could well be mine, but I have to report as I found and I did not enjoy the experience.

Debbie Notkin & Roger Stewart (Eds)

The Outer Limits: Volume One

Bantam, 1997, 250pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Stanley Riiks

Plastering 'Volume One' on the cover is a sign that the publishers think this is going to be a success. And it might be. But it shouldn't be. Judging by the four stories in this volume they must be holding back the good stories for future editions.

The only original story, by Harlan Ellison, about a futuristic machine-like soldier brought back to the present in a freak accident reads well, and is also the shortest story. But after the forty pages or so that Ellison takes up, it is downhill

all the way. The other three stories have trouble bridging the gap between the sixties plots, taken directly from the original scripts, and the modern audience – it is a confusing and frustrating experience.

It is hard to blame the writers entirely for these poor efforts – much blame must also lie with the editors or whoever thought up the concept of ripping off old programmes and collecting the stories in an anthology. Sadly this shows again that we must fight off the instinct to buy a book based on a favourite programme.

Eric S. Nylund***A Game of Universe***
Avon Books, 1997, 355pp, \$5.50**Tricia Sullivan*****Someone to Watch Over Me***
Millennium, 1997, 289pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

William Burroughs pondered once, rhetorically, in a review: "To be stuck permanently in this body until I died – how would that feel?" How many times have I asked that? Indeed, it is a fascinating query: is identity bound up with the body provided for you by your genetics? What would it feel like to be someone else (itself a key motivation in reading fiction), to occupy another's body? What would it be like to share a body with someone else, or to have someone else occupy yours? Here we have two novels, as far as I can tell both second novels, which pose and go some way to answer such considerations.

Eric S. Nylund shows us a corporate assassin, Germain, who is able to take over the personalities, or perhaps the souls, of his victims. These include his magical mentor, a female warrior, a gambler and a psychologist. The personae seem to have been absorbed by means of magic – there is vague talk of mnemonics and the Seven Scrolls of Telepathic Construction – despite the apparent sfnal trappings of a multinational, galaxy-spanning future. And onto this intriguing character, Nylund straps another bloody Grail quest. You'd have thought Tim Powers had cornered the market in novels which involve card games and the Fisher King, with some subcontracting out to Jeter and Blaylock, but you'd be mistaken. Germain somehow bluffs his way into a top secret briefing, where thirteen latter-day knights are offered the chance to seek the Grail. If they find it in less than a year, untold wealth may be theirs, if they fail, their souls are forfeit.

So Germain sets out, with a down-on-her-luck pilot he picks up at a casino, and buys a spaceship which had been found abandoned in orbit thirty-four years before. This reminded me somewhat of early episodes of *Blake's 7*, and indeed, before long, the spaceship is revealed to have hidden talents – and treacheries. But the scenes involving the spaceship are the best in the book, with real gosh-wow how-do-they-get-out-of-that set-pieces. When they reach the planet where Germain thinks the Grail is hidden, the novel collapses into fairy tale, with a cursed royal family (complete with King Eliot, who fishes, natch) and the hand-in-marriage-but-with-a-catch of a beautiful princess. And then it's back to Earth for the final showdown, the unmasking of the traitor(s) and the happily-ever afters.

The various absorbed personae are used somewhat arbitrarily, as if they work shifts. When Germain needs to gamble, the gambler takes over, when he needs to fight, the warrior takes over, and when he needs to deal with women, er, a female takes over. We have here the archetypally Resourceful Hero, but with a split personality. Nylund provides a past for his characters (if not quite a link to the present) and deals skillfully with the necessary flashback infodumps. A more ambitious writer might make us wonder more if this is all true or a psychosis brought on by a traumatic childhood. The elements are all there. Alas, though, Nylund has taken the easy route with the off-the-peg Grail-quest plot, and never gets to grips with the horror that

could arise from his scenario: who is in charge? Who am I when someone else is me?

The horror comes closer in Tricia Sullivan's cyberpunk working of the personae trope. What is immediately striking about her novel is its Eastern European setting. The multinational – even transnational – nature of cyberpunk all too often only means South Central LA, a little later than now, or second-hand glimpses of Japan: the Pacific Rim is where the future is at. But the fringes of Europe and the Old World still offer the sf writer a fresh setting – witness Womack in post-Glasnost Russia (*Let's Put the Future Behind Us*) or Sterling playing with the interrail generation's Grand Tour (*Holy Fire*). Croatia provides a suitably fresh and baroque setting for the opening of *Someone to Watch Over Me*. Alas, before long the setting shifts back to New York apartments, and a more familiar future.

Adrien Reyes is a trans, a channel for someone known only as C to view the world through. In Russia a mission to obtain some new technology called I is botched when Adrien is ambushed. Adrien has had enough: he escapes, bleeding, to Zagreb, where he meets a musician named Sabina. This is not good news for Sabina, for whilst Adrien is off having the implant removed, C lures Sabina to America for its own ends. Adrien is left trying to control his own identity once more, to penetrate the true identity of C, to protect Sabina (and her identity) and to survive the machinations of those searching for I.

Despite a few loose ends, the ideas are handled splendidly. The horror of having someone else in control of one's actions comes across, and the shift in focal characters means that often the reader knows more than the character in danger does, heightening both a sense of danger and of multiple personae. The handful of violent scenes do turn the stomach, as they should, but are never gratuitous (although I did wonder about the precise mechanics of singeing scrotum hair when the possessor of said body part is hanging from the ceiling by his foot, and then decided I didn't need to know).

So there is life in the old cyberpunk beast after all: though the necessary brush strokes to invoke computer technology, street life and Japanese culture seem to get lighter with every year. We've sort of seen it already, but a decent plot will convince us to sit through it all again. To take a wider view of sf, what is fascinating is that two such generically diverse sf novels (grail quest and cyberpunk) can both use the concept of different identities running a body. (Perhaps it says something about the nature of cyberpunk as fantasy rather than hard sf). Nylund provides more narrative thrills, Sullivan more metaphysics. Neither of these entertaining novels are destined to be classics, but they're more than just candy.

Terry Pratchett***Johnny and the Bomb***

Corgi, 1997, 238pp, £3.99

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

Well, it's a Terry Pratchett. That's all you need to know, isn't it? What do you mean you want to know more?

Oh all right, it's a juvenile, which means it has chapters – unlike the 'grown-ups' books. I think we're supposed to just stop at a convenient point when we are reading a 'grown-up' Pratchett, generally I just read them until interrupted. Being for 'young people', this book has 'young people' as its main

protagonists. I wouldn't advise you call Bigmac that though, even if he is just a pretend skinhead; the book is about him and Johnny Maxwell, who worries too much. It's about Kirsty, who's angry too much and into Saving the Planet most evenings, about Yo-less, who was born with defective cool, and about Wobbler, who wants to be a nerd but isn't good enough. The characters are sketched quickly and are easily recognisable. It would be an unusual 'young person' who could not identify with any of them, who did not know

someone like them.

I won't reveal the plot, save that it involves time travel and a bomb. The paradoxes of time travel are well handled but there are no blinding new science fiction ideas. Although at times I raced through the pages to find out what happens next it isn't really the plot that matters either. It's the people and what they learn, or fail to learn from events. Oh yes, and it's funny. Well I said that, didn't I? It's a Terry Pratchett.

**Terry Pratchett &
Stephen Briggs**

**The Discworld
Companion**

Vista, 1997, 477pp, £4.99

James Van Hise

**The Unauthorized
History of Trek**

Voyager, 1997, 219pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

OK, so what do you want to know about *Star Trek* (up to 1994, not counting things without the Enterprise in them)? Actually, I may be a bit optimistic in asking that question. If you're a *Trek* fan, then you'll probably know the stuff in this slim volume; if not, then you won't really care. So where does that leave us? 178 pages of rambling, anecdotal text and 20 pages of episode listings. Both sections cover a lot of ground that you'll find in other books and, although I found the episode listings interesting (especially the Animated series listing which cleared up a long-standing family argument about Tribbles...), I'm sure that was because I don't already own anything with these listings in it. The text was a bit of a disappointment, with very little information in it that could be said to be new.


On the other hand, *The Discworld Companion* is a really

useful book. Can't remember who Colonel Moutarde was? Or just what happened to Murone? Look in here! An A-Z of the Disc, covering all the books up to *Hogfather* and including the short stories 'Troll Bridge' and 'Theatre of Cruelty' and the *Discworld Mappe*. What can I say? This is an incredibly comprehensive volume covering (as far as I can make out) everything and everyone on the Disc. Not only that, but the entries are presented with little letters at the end telling which book they came from, and are written each with their own little bit of humour that makes this a delight to read on its own. If I was going to quibble (I'm a reviewer, it's what I do) then I would point out that any listing book like this should be arranged so that when you open it to look for something, cross-references suck you in and you spend the rest of the night following such a tortuous path that not only do you not get any sleep, but you forget what you were looking up in the first place. This doesn't do that. Maybe that's a blessing.

Let's recap: two books, the expensive one is slimmer, less useful and possibly superfluous, the cheaper one is full of bursting with everything that you might want to know and is funny with it. Oh, and I had to steal it off my son's bedside cabinet to review it.

Robert Rankin *Nostradamus Ate My Hamster*

Corgi, 1997, 317pp, £5.99

Sprout Mask Replica 

Doubleday, 1997, 252pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Robert Rankin makes it up as he goes along. Well, most writers do really, but Rankin admits it. Part of the fun of his books is the chaos and wondering if you really have got lost or if it's his fault instead. *Nostradamus Ate My Hamster* is the story of a bloke working in a prop house who becomes fascinated by a story based on the original *Brentford Triangle* books, and tries to track down the parallel world that Pooley, Omally and chums seem to have inhabited. Some vestige must remain of the Flying Swan, mustn't it? Unfortunately things get a little out of hand due to Russell's fondness for the blonde barmaid in the first pub he walks into, and the things that he discovers behind that pub.

While the main story is unfolding there are side stories that are intended to illuminate the main story somehow, unless Rankin just put them there for jolly. They have one of Rankin's usual recurring phrases: in this case the 'Help me... help me...' line from the end of *The Fly*. Not only that, he several times pulls the old 'it was all a dream' line, which deflates tension even if the author admits he's done it. It's

like those horror films where a horrific event turns out to have been an hallucination, so the audience starts relating to the film in a different way entirely. The director/author has come out from behind the curtain and made it quite clear that this is all a game that he is playing with the readers, and that he can shift reality about like props. This author is in the story right from the beginning: 'Pooley and Omally were not urban myths. The Flying Swan was not an urban myth. An author called Rankin wrote all about them'. In the opening Flying-Swan chapter, the one-man-band who arrives to perform in the pub on Christmas Eve is not a fictional character: Johnny G was quite well-known on the West London pub circuit in the 1980s, and as far as I know is still around.

What about *Sprout Mask Replica*? It starts with a series of tall tales purporting to be the story of Rankin's ancestors, including the owner of the Spornan from Hell and the man who ate a motorbike. Rankin seems to be more popular in Ireland than in England, and his brand of public-bar mythologising and telling of tall tales is certainly very much an Irish thing and may account for this. Joe Haldeman suggested in a recent *Locus* interview that actual writing, piling on incident and amusing yourself with dialogue, is easy; it's telling a story, shaping the whole into a coherent structure when we know that life doesn't do coherent

structures, that's a bitch.

There is also plenty of poetry, if you can call it that, recalling the days when Rankin used to run 'Poems and Pints' at the Brentford Watermans Arts Centre. Much of it was real doggerel, including his.

Sprout Mask Replica is ostensibly the story of someone who creates chaotic events: the butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon that creates a hurricane in China, that lad. Then

there's a vicious archetypal biker chick called Litany, to balance out the super-dense proto-hippy called Colon who appeared earlier, the six weird gods, out-of-place items (like the 1966 car trawled from a lake with a 1996 computer on its back seat), stuff like that, and 'Trout Mask Replica' and the rest of the Don Van Vliet bit. Weird Shit generally. That's what.

**Melanie Rawn,
Jennifer Robertson &
Kate Elliott**

The Golden Key 11

Macmillan, 1997, 868pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This tripartite story (not quite a trilogy, though I suspect one author per section) follows the fortunes of the Grijalva family in the quasi-Spanish kingdom of Tira Verte. Through many generations their artistic talent seems to breed true and they rise from obscurity to become respected and wealthy painters, though never quite able to throw off the ugly rumours of 'bad blood in the family' after an incident involving the capture and rape of two Grijalva women by the Tza'ab (quasi-Arabic bad guys). Painters are particularly important in Tira Verte because important documents – wills, treaties, marriages, statements of ownership – are recorded as paintings rather than written statements. Thus the Lord Limner, the official court painter, must be an artist of surpassing skill – and considerable integrity, as he will have many opportunities to influence policy and opinion through his depiction of events.

For the Grijalvas have a secret, more closely guarded than their Tza'ab connections and their bizarre marriage customs (designed to confirm talent and keep it in the family): they are not only gifted, but Gifted. They have the magical ability to change the world through their paintings. What they paint in a certain way, using their own body fluids and incorporating the runes of 'lingua occulta', becomes reality.

The tripartite story is centred around the lives of two Grijalva cousins, Sario and Saavedra: their love, their bitter rivalry, and how both of them cheat death through different applications of the Gift. It's a baroque romance, a complex study of character and motivation that benefits from the very restricted use made of magic – a magic which frequently creates more problems than it solves.

My two main criticisms of the book boil down to lack of depth in specific areas. It's not that the book compares badly with others of its genre, but that its more deeply realised sections show up the areas which have not had such time and care spent on them. Firstly the bad guys, the Tza'ab, are clearly based on Muslim fundamentalists, but although this is an appropriate choice of 'enemy' culture for a milieu based on pre-technological Spain, the characterisation is unthinking. (I wonder if the nasty Mad Mullahs are taking over from the Reds under the Bed, the inscrutable Orientals, or Napoleon as automatic hate-objects for People Like Us? I don't like negative stereotyping sneaking up on me like this.)

Secondly, although Tira Verte becomes larger over the generations by annexing surrounding territories, and although there is evidence of political development towards the end of the book (where an absolute monarchy is replaced by a parliamentary democracy), there is no social or technological development. We get about 400 years of the Baroque, which feels a bit much.

However, neither of these things prevented me from thoroughly enjoying the book as an absorbing read, an unabashedly escapist magical romantic fantasy.

Lucius Shepard *Barnacle Bill the Spacer and
Other Stories*

Orion, 1997, 292pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

There was a time when Lucius Shepard was ubiquitous. For a while, back there in the late 80s, no magazine or anthology was complete without something, usually a long something, from Shepard. And they were good stories, dammit. Shepard seemed to have mastered the difficult balancing act of being prolific without any loss of quality. Then... Well, what?

This latest collection of stories contains one piece from 1996, 'Human History' which is fully up to the standard of his earlier work. Other than that, however, none of these seven stories appeared more recently than 1992. With the exception of one novelette, therefore, this book could have been published five years ago.

Several times in these rather violent stories Shepard's characters exact bloody revenge upon the villain; twice, in 'Human History' and 'The Sun Spider', this revenge is

carried out by female characters, and they are far more violent than any male. There is often a painful rite of passage in which characters have to accept and go through agony to reach what passes for a state of grace in a Shepard story, as the has-been boxer in 'Beast of the Heartland' and the smuggler in 'All the Perfumes of Araby' both discover, and, typically, it is a woman who is both the trigger for the pain and the redemption at its end. Men are, of course, fickle; but so are women, as we see in 'A Little Night Music', 'Human History', 'The Sun Spider' and 'All the Perfumes of Araby', yet this discovery always seems to come as a surprise to the men. The men are often intelligent, as are, for instance, the philosophising policeman in 'Barnacle Bill the Spacer' and the music critic in 'A Little Night Music', yet this cleverness never really extends to understanding women who are disturbing, sexually alluring, bright and forever mysterious. These stories, then, are reports from the sex war – or would be, if these sexual battles were more conscious, more upfront. As it is, they are just part of the background, the way things happen to be, an unmediated backdrop to the

violence, the revenge, the terror which is centre stage in every story.

Shepard's stories tend to inhabit a hinterland somewhere between science fiction, fantasy and horror. In 'A Little Night Music' we have a future in which the dead are resurrected; a music critic reports on a jazz concert by a group of former corpses while brooding on the infidelity of his lover, and gradually the music has a catastrophic effect upon him as it will eventually have on all the living. The two would-be hit-men in 'Sports in America' find themselves caught in an infinite regress of betrayals. Revenge often seems the most basic motivation in Shepard's work, as in 'The Sun Spider' for instance in which a very science fictional idea about the discovery of life on the Sun is almost incidental to a tale of professional and sexual jealousy, murder and revenge, with the revenge partly encompassed in a curious little fantasy story as insidious in its way as the zombie music of 'A Little Night Music'. Revenge becomes the key to 'Human History' also, a complex and richly detailed story that should almost have been allowed to grow into a novel. It is set some time after the fall, in a remote settlement on the edge of a strange wilderness where only outlaws and death

roam. But the wilderness also houses a secret about the true nature of the world, and the discovery of that secret heralds a battle for revenge.

Not all the stories work as well as they might. 'Beast of the Heartland', about an over-the-hill boxer whose fights are driven by fantastic visions, somehow fails to convince the reader about the nature of the demons or the reality of boxing. Nevertheless, these are in the main good stories by a good writer, though only the title story, 'Barnacle Bill the Spacer', really achieves the vintage of Shepard at his very best. Barnacle Bill is the derisive nickname for a simple-minded character aboard a space station who inadvertently becomes the focus of a vicious struggle for power by political extremists. At the same time his observations of the behaviour of strange space-dwelling limpet-like creatures could hold the key to mankind's future. Here a compelling, action-packed plot is put at the service of a complex, fully-realised vision of personal relationships and politics within the enclosed world of a space station. It is a dramatic illustration of why Shepard's relative silence over recent years has been a serious loss to science fiction.

Brian Stableford

Chimera's Cradle

Legend, 1997, 507pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

In this third and final instalment of the planetary romance of the Genesys, Brian Stableford concludes one of the more eccentric ideas of Nineties sf, namely the science fiction novel that looks and feels almost exactly like a fantasy. In the first novel, *Serpent's Blood*, we met the main characters, experienced a very strange world of decaying objects, plant/animal genetic mixtures, and folk questing for this, that, and the other. It was nicely done; perhaps a bit overlong, but not so much as, say, a Stephen Donaldson novel. In the second instalment, *Salamander's Fire*, we discovered that not even an author as good as Brian Stableford can beat the mid-trilogy blues. Now, in *Chimera's Cradle*, we reach the end of the series at the Chimera's Cradle of the title, mentally bruised from this elegantly tortured journey of 560,000 words (kindly mentioned by the author in his last-page note).

Many, though not all, of these 560,000 words are remarkably good ones, usually, though not always, in a remarkably good order. Brian Stableford has elsewhere mentioned his feeling that 'purple prose' is all right in the right place, if not done to excess, and in this novel there are many examples, as with:

Somehow, he lost contact with his heartbeat. It was as if its awesome regularity had had the same ultimate effect as his prison's uniformity, allowing it to fade out of consciousness.

And you have to admire an author who can use the terms Gauntlets of Gladness, Serpent, Manticore, Chimera, Pool of Life, Great Reef, and Spangled Desert – all in Capital Letters, notice – and not trip over his metaphorical tongue like the writers of so many other awful fantasy trilogies. He can even write fight scenes that feel like real fights. This novel's advantage, indeed that of the whole set, is that the reader knows the author is a biotechnological whizz who doubtless

has sound principles ready behind every Serpent, Chimera, and all the rest of them. The dressing up of the sf novel into the fantasy novel is done with skill and ingenuity, even if occasionally it suffers from that bane of fantasy novels: being too long.

To say that this novel lacks the brilliance of such as *The Empire of Fear* is to miss the point. This, and the other two books are highly enjoyable romps infused with the author's decadent imagination, his experience as a storyteller, and his joy in inventing strange biological entities. Recommended, then, although for obvious reasons read *Serpent's Blood* first: unless, that is, you have a phobia about things growing out of bodies that shouldn't be growing out of bodies...

James White

Final Diagnosis

Tor Books, 1997, 284pp, \$22.95

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

James White has been writing Sector General stories for as long as I can remember (in fact a quick check of the copyright date on *Hospital Station*, the first, reveals it to have been published in 1962). Over the years the series has evolved, the naive young hero Conway has become a Diagnostician, the beautiful Murchison (has she a first name?) has become Pathologist Murchison, the other sundry characters are... well they're more or less the same motley collection of aliens with alien names and classifications.

The Sector General stories are set on and around the eponymous hospital in space, built and staffed by a broad selection of races. Its main function is to specialise in multi-species medicine, but its unwritten role is to promote multicultural understanding. White's stories are among the first to deal with medicine in quite this way. He has developed an elaborate four letter classification system to describe the different environmental and racial characteristics that are to be found in his teeming galaxy. The tension in the stories come from the medical puzzles found in them, from the reactions of the main characters to these puzzles and from

the way that different races use their strengths and weaknesses to act together to solve the problems that they encounter.

Final Diagnosis is built along exactly these same lines, with one difference. Throughout the book, the main viewpoint is that of Hewlitt, a DBDG earth human who is a new, somewhat xenophobic, patient in the hospital. We follow Hewlitt on a personal voyage of discovery as he is exposed to the various outlandish races which compose the staff and patients of Sector General. All of which is window dressing for the real point of this novel; the mystery behind Hewlitt's illnesses which are gradually destroying his personal life while never actually endangering his physical life. Like all mystery writers, White has made sure that all the clues are there somewhere. Without cheating! A feat unmatched by some mainstream mysteries I have read. My one quibble is that those familiar with the other books will probably leap to the conclusion quicker than those to whom

Sector General is new.

But what is it like as a book? That's a more difficult question. As someone whose early sf reading was largely based on the Sector General stories in *New Writings in SF* it is difficult to slate this book, but if I'm honest, this is a pot-boiler. It reads a little like it too was written in 1962; Murchison still takes deep breaths that 'expand the spectacular chest inside her tight, white coveralls' and remind people (DBDG of course) that they are still healthy males. Times have changed, translators that have trouble with translating idiom properly and the sort of anthropomorphising that makes the most alien-shaped of races into people with different shapes, have had their time. So if you read this book as the latest instalment of a classic series that has been in the making since 1962, or if you can tell a DBDG from a PVSJ in the dark then you'll be alright, and you'll thoroughly enjoy it. Just don't expect leading edge stuff here.

Michael Williams

Allamanda 

Hodder & Stoughton, 1997, 436pp, £17.99

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Allamanda is another novel by the author of *Arcady*, and in some sense is a sequel to it, although it can stand alone. It takes place in the same world, possibly a far future version of our own, where a sense of desolation and decay arises from a long drawn-out war, and where the land itself can be swallowed by the mysterious and destructive Absences.

Like *Arcady*, *Allamanda* is a house, home of the Haidee family who are related to the Hawkens of *Arcady*, and hostile to them. At the beginning of the novel the remaining Hawkens are forced to abandon *Arcady*, which has fallen prey to the Absences, and seek shelter in *Allamanda*. Although many characters from the first book reappear, the focus this time is on the younger generation. The central figure is Garrick Hawken, forced into leadership although he is too young and inexperienced. At *Allamanda*, he plays at a love affair with his cousin Flora, which leads to her disappearance into an Absence. Garrick's quest to rescue her becomes also a quest to find himself.

A parallel strand of the plot is the attempt of Solomon Hawken to print the New Text - the version of his world's Holy Scripture which he brought out of the Absence in the earlier novel. In this world, the Text is the poetry of William Blake, and the detail of the printing follows Blake's own practices. At the climax of the novel, the printing of the New Text becomes linked with the escape of Garrick and Flora from the Absence, the death of Solomon, and the

regeneration of *Arcady* itself.

The world of this novel is as rich and strange as the previous one. The war, though less central here, still continues, along with conflicts between religious sects, families and individuals. The land is arid where the enigmatic and terrifying Absences have passed, while in the Borders reality is fluid, mythical creatures appear, nothing can be trusted. What is most compelling about this book is the description of the lands within the Absence, and its effects on those who enter it. Williams creates a powerful sense of a malignant presence, beautiful enough to attract, but ultimately destructive.

I found it easier to get into this book, having read *Arcady*, though there's nothing here that couldn't be understood by a new reader. However, it's not an easy read: there is too much detail, in the description of the world itself, in the family and historical background which is so important for events in the present, and in the varied aspects of religion and philosophy which are essential to understand the characters' feelings and motivations. The language too is dense, based on the language of Blake which is at the root of the book.

However, I wouldn't want to put anyone off. Though the book is difficult, it repays the effort magnificently. I felt deeply involved in its world, even though, as with *Arcady*, I feel that there's much more to be picked up from a second reading. And though the book's conclusion is stunningly satisfying, there are enough questions to suggest that Michael Williams might be planning a third volume. I hope so.

Gene Wolfe

Exodus from the Long Sun

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 386pp, £16.99

Reviewed by David Langford

After *Nightside the Long Sun*, *Lake of the Long Sun* (both reviewed in *Vector* 177) and *Caldé of the Long Sun* (V183), *Exodus* completes Gene Wolfe's new tetralogy. It will come as no surprise to his fans that the final volume of *The Book of the Long Sun* clears up several difficulties, only to add fresh ones...

New readers are strongly advised to tackle the books in sequence, now that it's possible to read them through as one long novel. The complexity of what has gone before makes it difficult to follow *Exodus* without recent and unfaded memories of the past books' action, necessary to map the maze.

Here's a situation report, inevitably containing mild 'spoilers': the starcrossed colony-vessel known as the *Whorl* or *Whorl* was sent out from the old Earth of *The Book of the New Sun* by that megalomaniac past autarch

Typhon – a digital copy of whose personality is, or was, Pas, chief god in the ship's synthetic Heaven called Mainframe. Within, the whorl is a vast hollow cylinder lit by its axial Long Sun, arguably a tube of fusing plasma. Outside, as could be inferred from a fleeting glimpse of brilliant sun-dazzle through a viewport in *Lake*, the starcruiser has actually reached its destination system and has almost certainly been orbiting there for some time.

The colonists or 'Cargo' are ignorant of this, owing to centuries of technological decline made worse by their own vandalizing of computers and lander craft for the microelectronic 'cards' now used as coinage. In Viron, one of many internal cities, the series hero Patera (Father) Silk has set out like a holy fool to save his threatened manteeion or temple-cum-school. The repercussions of his efforts lead to political upheaval and the waking – and active interference – of several long-quiescent 'gods' from Mainframe's electronic pantheon.

Behind all these potent but false deities lies the Outsider who first 'enlightened' Silk and who is here identified as the god of gods, creator of Pas himself. Links with Christ and Allah are hinted in the text, although the title 'creator of Pas' would also fit Gene Wolfe... and, more seriously, the twin male/female nature of the Outsider's perceived voice suggests a resonance with some aspect of the former tetralogy's Severian/Thecla. This fascinating question has been put to cagy Wolfe himself. Q: 'Is the Outsider a form of Severian?' A: 'No. Severian is a form of the Outsider.' Since *Exodus* appeared, Wolfe has stated explicitly that 'The Outsider is a spiritual God'... the real thing.

Exodus continues the established multi-sided struggle, with new ingredients added to the pot and intelligently stirred. These include the arrival of an army from Silk's dubious allies in the matriarch-ruled city Trivigaunte; various regroupings, misunderstandings, betrayals and deaths (including one shocking sacrifice); the apparent but debatable electronic resurrection of Pas himself; and emissaries from Mainframe – the Flyers who for so long have watched the action from on high – warning that Pas is prepared to visit the equivalent of Egypt's plagues on the Cargo to force them into setting out for his promised land.

As well as copious action – it's almost cheeky, the way Wolfe ends scene after scene after scene with the sudden crack of a needler or boom of a slug-gun – the book contains much reasonable talk. Silk continues to be an engaging hero and a plausibly good man, still slightly naive and strongly self-doubting, but bringing genuine intelligence and originality to the problems of making war and making peace. Many other characters are instantly distinguishable by manner of speech, sometimes maddeningly so: the hesitant Patera Remora's ums and ahs and incomplete sentences take a certain amount of getting used to, as does self-important Patera Incus's habit of *stressing* virtually every other word. Other effective leitmotifs include 'foreign' choices of word and word-order, varying densities of thieves' cant (authentic and historical), ejaculated sentence fragments bedecked with

exclamation marks, highly constricted vocabulary, stilted formality, and one severe speech defect.

The narrative progresses via many rapid scenic cuts, often losing track of Silk altogether in the doings of a large and active cast, often halting at a cliff-hanger, and very often skipping clean over some expected payoff, set-piece or fragment of continuity – subsequent dialogue fills us in, perhaps not always reliably, on what happened in these tantalizing gaps. How many other writers would lead up to and then calmly omit a double wedding of four major characters? We are as baffled as the Trivigaunti when Silk appears to be sabotaging their famous airship (currently taking him where he doesn't wish to go), shutting down its engines one by one as if by magic. His later, modest explanation of what he did while briefly offstage proves to contain an error pointed out still later by someone else.

Any simple declarative statement in a Wolfe novel may similarly require suspicious examination. Even the routine-seeming cast lists – first printed at the front of *Lake* – are far from static, containing information and confirmations not to be found elsewhere.

This, though, could make a lively story sound solemn (which it isn't) rather than serious (which it is). Despite its darkness *Exodus* also features capers, pratfalls, wit, and some outright jokes – including what I'm sure are in-jokes aimed at Wolfe's own publishers and a particular unloved US critic.

Where does it all end? The physical home of Mainframe at one end of the cylinder-axis is finally attained. There is a vision of space outside the whorl, seen with a fresh and piercing clarity that makes familiar sf trappings strange again. Silk saves his manteeion, though not in the sense he'd originally expected, and slips elusively sideways into the mists of history and legend. Many do indeed reach the promised land – only there are two worlds out there, Green and Blue, and one is already inhabited by 'inhumi' (multiple meanings beckon) who can flit between planets. This 'explains' an important, benevolent-seeming yet surely vampiric character who has been a troubling enigma throughout the sequence... but the significance of his last living action remains uncertain.

Exodus closes with a subtly disconcerting perspective-shift, adding a new layer of slipperiness to a long narrative which still holds a residue of mystery. (For careful readers, this shift has been amply signalled earlier in the book; others who suspected Wolfe of a mere momentary carelessness may now kick themselves.) Looking back, I remember how the finale of *The Citadel of the Autarch* seemed unsatisfactory on first reading, and how deeper and more haunting resonances emerged from further study of the whole *Book of the New Sun*. Perhaps *The Book of the Long Sun* is an achievement of lesser scale; but it too demands to be read again.

Meanwhile, just as the first series acquired that pendant volume *The Urth of the New Sun*, Wolfe is now working on a new series set in that promised land with the overall title *The Book of the Short Sun*. Rumoured titles: *On Blue's Waters*, *In Green's Jungles* and *Under the Long Sun...* suggest an eventual return to the Whorl. Stay tuned.

Articles

These are some of the other books we have seen recently. A mention here does not necessarily preclude a review in a later issue of *Vector*.

Sarah Ash – *Songspinnars*

Orion, 1997, 325pp, £5.99

Reviewing Sarah Ash's second novel in V191, Lynne Bispham applauded the 'complex depiction of character and the ability of the author to resolve all the various strands of the plot... without the conclusion of the novel appearing contrived'.

Gregory Benford – *Matter's End*

Vista, 1997, 294pp, £5.99

A collection of 21 stories spanning the career, including his very first story, '3-In' (1965), which Barbara Davies reported in V189, contains much 'to enjoy and challenge the mind'.

Mary Corran – *Darkfell*

Orion, 1997, 326pp, £5.99

A self-contained story set in the world of Mary Corran's earlier *Imperial Light*, it was described by Lynne Bispham as 'a novel that never really adds up to the sum of its parts... Possibly the book is not as self-contained as it appears' – V191.

Ted Edwards – *X-Files Confidential*

Warner Books, 1997, 200pp, £4.99

Episode Guide to Series One of *The X-Files* with cast list, synopsis, commentary by cast and crew, and an 'Encyclopedia' of the various characters who cropped up during the series.

Diana Gabaldon – *Drums of Autumn*

Arrow, 1997, 1185pp, £5.99

The follow-up to her highly successful *Voyager*, this is another vast historical romance with a time travel twist. In this case it is set mainly in South Carolina on the eve of the American War of Independence.

James Herbert – '48

HarperCollins, 1997, 332pp, £5.99

A combination of alternate history and horror in this novel in which Hitler unleashes a biological plague on Britain in 1945. This novel is set in the grim aftermath, in a diseased London ruled by the Nazis.

Katharine Kerr & Mark Kreighbaum –

Palace

Voyager, 1997, 437pp, £5.99

Though presented more as fantasy, this is actually a science fiction novel set in 'a world ruled by media involvement: everyone votes on everything, popularity ratings in the media are essential for the ruler to rule... This is a really good book that I would heartily

recommend to anyone who enjoys a well-crafted soft science fiction story' – Helen McNabb, V191.

Garry Kilworth – *A Midsummer's Nightmare*

Corgi, 1997, 325pp, £5.99

Garry Kilworth's reworking of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set among New Age Travellers of the 20th Century was reviewed by Cherith Baldry: 'Most of the pleasure of this novel comes from the impact of the fairies and the other supernatural creatures on the modern world, which isn't always what we might expect.' – V192.

Stephen King – *Desperation*

New English Library, 1997, 720pp, £6.99

This huge horror novel is set in the deserted Nevada mining town of Desperation 'where "evil" has been unleashed, a place where we must make our own choices. The writer, the alcoholic, the floozy; all the survivors of this evil must find it in themselves to do battle, to fight with no more than a child to lead them' – Stephen Payne, V194.

Stephen Lawhead – *Byzantium*

Voyager, 1997, 646pp, £6.99

Fantasy writer Lawhead turns to historical adventure with this tale of an Irish monk getting involved with Vikings and Saracens on a quest to Byzantium. In V191 Norman Beswick described it as 'clear, uncluttered and convincing... [but]... not for the squeamish'.

Brian Lumley – *Mythos Omnibus: Volume 2*

HarperCollins, 1997, 684pp, £6.99

A collection of three novels all based around H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos: *Spawns of the Winds* (1978), *In the Moons of Borea* (1979) and *Elysia* (1989).

Anne McCaffrey – *Red Star Rising*

Corgi, 1997, 416pp, £5.99

Described as 'The Second Chronicles of Pern', this is actually McCaffrey's 14th book set amid the dragonriders of Pern. Commenting on the book in V191 Helen McNabb wrote: 'She can, and has, written much better than this and it is disappointing to see her turning out such makeshift work'.

Carl R. Mariner – *The Sex Files: Beyond Limits*

Headline Delta, 1997, 248pp, £5.99

I suppose it had to happen: someone has taken the *X-Files* format and turned it into soft porn. As the publishers say in their blurb: 'The naked truth is out there'.

Les Martin – *The X-Files #11: Ghost in the Machine*

Voyager, 1997, 97pp, £3.99

This is closer to the real thing, another slim novelisation, this time one in which the Spooky Two track an evil computer virus through cyberspace.

Adam Nichols – *The Pathless Way*

Orion, 1997, 407pp, £5.99

Adam Nichols is presented as the next David Gemmell, and this novel was praised by Andrew Adams in V193: 'The book works well on a number of levels... The writing is fairly solid... the people have their doubts and their wise and foolish moments, and do come alive on the page.'

Anne Rice – *Servant of the Bones*

Arrow, 1997, 405pp, £5.99

Azriel was born in ancient Babylon, but is now alive in present-day New York, and finding himself inexplicably involved with the affairs of mortals.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch – *The Fey*

Changeling

Orion, 1997, 514pp, £6.99

The second volume of Rusch's fantasy set on the Blue Isle, set five years after the events in *The Fey: Sacrifice*, this is described by Lynne Bispham as 'an unusual genre fantasy in that the opposing forces are not drawn starkly as Good versus Evil' – V189.

Michael Marshall Smith – *Sparcs*

HarperCollins, 1997, 305pp, £5.99

This witty and violent tale of clones and murders in a surreal megamall of the not-too-distant future was praised by Paul Kincaid in V191: 'It works mostly because Smith is a superb storyteller, and he presents his tale with a relish and a vigour that are immediately engaging.'

Marian Veevers – *Bloodlines*

Vista, 1997, 270pp, £5.99

The famous curse of Shakespeare's *Scottish Play* gets an unusual twist in this dark novel of three women connected across time by the story of Lady Macbeth. This debut novel was described by Tanya Brown as both a gripping thriller and a romance which 'focuses on the darker emotions, and the historical context in which the action takes place' – V189.

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