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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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A Life Less Ordinary



Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Brian Stableford on
Invisibility

Stephen Palmer on
Artificial Intelligence

Daniel O'Mahony on
Tim Burton

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VECTOR

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

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Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial

First, and hopefully without sounding too much like I'm making an award acceptance speech, I'd like to thank everyone who responded to the letter Andrew and I sent out regarding contributing to Vector. (If you're now thinking "What letter?" Don't Panic, if you didn't get one it's either because you didn't suggest that you might like to write for us during the membership survey, or because we already know what it is you might like to write about, at least in general terms. Of course, if you would like to write and haven't heard from us, please do contact one of us.) This will be out of date by the time you read this, even by the time it is printed, but so far eight BSFA members who have not previously written for Vector have gotten in touch with me, and the enthusiasm they have shown has been most encouraging, as has the range of subjects they have offered to write about. Sometimes things work out perfectly, and one particularly quick off the mark new contributor has a piece in this issue.

1997 marks the bicentenary of the birth of Mary Shelley. Everyone knows about *Frankenstein*: or, *The Modern Prometheus*, but how many, even among sf and horror fans, can name anything else Mary Shelley wrote? We wanted to acknowledge the anniversary, but if at all possible, to do something a little different. We were vaguely aware of a book called *The Last Man*, which was when I had a phone call from a Mr Robert Frost. I put it like this because the post-modernist ironists among you will doubtless – especially those who may still be unconvinced as to my existence – immediately be smiling at such an obvious pseudonym, and wondering at the link between the late American poet and the metaphorical mother of sf. However, Mr Frost really does exist and to the best of my knowledge that is his real name. Mr Frost offered to write a piece on Mary Shelley and *The Last Man*, and I am pleased to introduce it here, together with a more biographical feature on Mary Shelley by Thom Benjamin. Like *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man* is enormously prescient. Out of print

from 1833 to 1985, it can lay claim to being the foundation of the entire sf sub-genre of the apocalyptic plague. The modern classic must be George R. Stewart's *The Earth Abides*, the most widely read, Stephen King's *The Stand*, and perhaps the most extensive, the 38 episodes of Terry Nation's TV series, *Survivors*. Mary Shelley was there before them all.

The end of humanity and the gradual collapse of civilisation has been a key theme of British sf from the beginning. We can trace it in various forms through Wells and Clarke, through Wyndham and Ballard right up to the present. Stephen Palmer's novels *Memory Seed* and *Glass* continue this tradition. While editing Stephen Palmer's essay on the (im)possibility of computer sentience which appears in this issue I noticed an interesting thematic connection: Robert Frost suggests that in *The Last Man* a civilised human intelligence cannot exist in isolation, while Stephen Palmer argues in an analogous way regarding AI, both in reality and in the novels of William Gibson and in Anime features. Thus the same themes resonate from Mary Shelley's proto-science fiction to our own era of cyberpunks and bio-armageddon. I hope this issue of Vector will inspire some of you to read *The Last Man*, it's an important novel for our genre(s), and a long overdue rediscovery.

1997 also marks the centenary of the publication of H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*: A *Grotesque Romance*, and Brian Stableford's essay on other early tales of invisibility completes a somewhat Gothic issue of Vector. In number 197 we will be paying tribute to a man perhaps not most famous for being President of the BSFA. Arthur C. Clarke will be celebrating his 80th birthday in December, and Vector will be marking the occasion with a special issue.

by Gary Dalkin



First up is a response to the editorial by Gary Dalkin in Vector 194:

Gary Wilkinson, South Witham, Grantham

Iain Banks is an obvious example of the rise of a popular, talented and well-known author appearing in recent years (Helped to best-sellerdom by having a foot in the mainstream as well as sf) but there have been many other authors appearing in recent years who write good, intelligent, innovative sf, such as Neal Stephenson, Peter F Hamilton, Ken MacLeod and Greg Egan to name but a few.

I agree that Trek and 'Wookiee' books may not be at the cutting edge of literature and in smaller bookshops (such as my nearest

branch of WH Smiths) they help crowd out the less-popular stuff off the shelves but they do encourage new readers of sf, some of whom will hopefully move on to better things in time. (Confession time – I read the original *Star Wars* novelisation at least a dozen times in my preteen years).

It is disappointing that *New Worlds* has had to be published in America but anthologies have always been difficult to publish and sell.

The problem with originality is that it is a precious thing. It takes a lot of effort to create an imaginary fiction story-telling universe. Once an author has gone to the trouble of building a universe to tell his story in, why should they do it again if they want to tell another story that would fit that universe. Also, in the process of creating their universe, they may have found extra ideas that they cannot include in their original story. However, stripping your universe for every possible story idea or possibility (naming no names, but dragons come to mind) is just lazy.

Another problem with originality is the majority seem to prefer the familiar and publishers know this. Partially it's economic – if I have £5.00 to spend, do I spend it on a book about or by X which I have read and liked before or Y an unknown quantity? (Which is why libraries are so useful for sampling the unfamiliar). It just seems to me that most people like reading or watching stuff that is familiar to them (one reason soap operas and other long-running serials are so popular). Hence the rise of the 'Wookiee' book but we all have favourite authors that we go back to and eagerly await their next publication.

Looking into the past it is very easy to forget the bloated 'sequels' that Asimov, Heinlein and others produced towards the ends of their careers, the vast quantities of garbage produced in

the 'Golden Age' and the Tolkien-clone trilogies that seem to have always been with us.

Yes, there is very little totally original sf around these days, but perhaps it is business as usual.

Gary S Dalkin responds:

I'd have to disagree that anthologies have always been hard to publish and sell, after all, what were the old pulp magazines but anthologies? At their peak in the 1930s and 1940s there were a dozen major monthly titles, and untold lesser publications. Virtually all sf was sold in anthology format. Then, as the pulps faded away, there were enormously successful series such as *New Writings in SF*, edited by John Carnell. Twenty-one volumes were published between 1964 and 1972, a veritable who's-who of UK sf of the period. Other popular anthologies have been the paperbacks which followed on from *New Worlds*, Judith Merril's *Year's Best series*, twelve volumes between 1956 and 1968, and coming up to date, the various 'Best of' annuals and original collections such as the *Full Spectrum series*, edited by Lou Aronica, Amy Stout and Betsy Mitchell.

Conversely, while I agree that it does seem like the 'Tolkien-clone trilogies' have always been with us, the fact is, they haven't. Given your confession of having read the *Star Wars* novelisation so many times in your preteen years, I can see why it might seem that way to you: the 'trilogies' started appearing in force just around the same time you were showing your early interest in 'George Lucas's' novel. As I remember it, Terry Brooks was in at the beginning with *The Sword of Shannara*, swiftly followed by the original *Thomas Covenant* series by Stephen Donaldson. After this, it seemed that one couldn't go into a bookshop without being confronted with the latest 'First Volume of an Exciting New Fantasy Trilogy to Rival *The Lord of the Rings*'. Before this, other than Tolkien, the fantasy trilogy as we know it did not exist. This was exactly the same time that *Asimov* and *Heinlein* started churning out vast, unwieldy (and unreadable) sequels and epics – the sf equivalent of the trilogy boom.

As you rightly say, most people want the familiar, which is why they watch soap-operas, but surely familiarity is antithetical to the spirit of sf? Isn't at least half the point to have our imaginations stimulated?

Speaking of which, **Matt Freestone** raises some questions concerning Paul Kincaid's *Cognitive Mapping* piece on Transhumanity, and in particular two authors, Greg Egan and Vernor Vinge who do just that...

Matt Freestone, Blackheath, London

Paul Kincaid's interesting essay on transhumanity [*Cognitive Mapping*, Vector 194] failed to draw what seems to me to be a natural conclusion when considering: 'the post-human condition'. At the end he says, 'It seems that however the body might be sculpted, the inside is forever the same', which I think is only half the story.

The problem for authors considering transhuman societies is exactly analogous to that of writing about aliens: are they going to be comprehensible to the (necessarily human) readership as characters with recognisable motives and desires, or have they transcended our condition so completely as to be no more understood by us than we are by ants? Much recent transhumanist sf has addressed itself to this question.

Greg Egan, in particular, has been working through a number of aspects of transhumanity, typically creating characters who have a conscious choice over some aspect of themselves which we would consider to be hardwired: deep-seated beliefs in 'Axiomatic', preferences in 'Reasons to be Cheerful', or whether to have emotions at all in *Distress*. These characters blur the line between the human and the post-human. *Permutation City* goes further, with one character ultimately transforming himself into a whole nation of people: does he still exist afterwards? If so, he is no longer comprehensible as a human person.

Vernor Vinge, in his *A Fire upon the Deep*, sets his story in a

future where many civilisations co-exist, some of which have transcended to a level where societies of our abilities cannot understand them. Vinge also recognises the perils this lack of understanding creates for the ordinary societies: some of these are fake, and may create malevolent Powers that enslave the users. The problem for the aspiring transcendent civilisation is that there is no way to evaluate this possibility completely without already having become a Power.

Both examples make it clear that, in leaving behind the human condition, we may not only change our outward shape but our 'inside' too. This inner transformation may not allow for a personality that we can recognise as human: our successors may not be people we can deal with or even comprehend.

GSD: I agree with you in principle, however I'd argue that Egan's characters in *Permutation City* aren't transhumans at all, in the sense that they haven't directly 'evolved' from humanity, but from very complex computer code. More accurately they are transCPU, and an extraordinary and unpredictable spin-off from human technology.

Paul Kincaid replies:

An interesting comment by Matt Freestone, but I think he misses the point slightly. There are plenty of authors today writing about the evolution of humankind beyond what we are today. And some, like Egan, take us very far forward. But the authors themselves are still humans of today, it is as humans of today that they write, and it is out of the experience of being humans of today that they write. The result, regardless of intent, is that deep within the transhuman character they create is something of us. That is the scenario I was presenting in the *Cognitive Mapping* piece.

Meanwhile, it's always good to see a letter in response to another letter; in this case contributing to the debate on the best books of 1996:

Peter Lancaster, Maldon, Essex

Clearly Martin Taylor [wø, Vector 194] should be given yet another new award: the BSFA's annual CWH (Clean white hanky) for the recommending of a superb new author/book not spotted by any other reviewer... not having been asked (sniff). Cheer up, Martin, and thanks indeed: Manda Scott's *Hen's Teeth* is excellent with well-presented science and sympathetic characterisation. My wife and I both enjoyed it immensely and consider it contains more science than a good many novels that publishers label as sf.

PS However, thanks indeed for all the hard work of those regulars whose informative reviews do appear in every Vector.

Andrew M Butler responds:

H'mm is it a CWH to say 'Here I am' or 'I surrender'? That you've read and enjoyed Scott's novel brings home once more how healthy the sf scene is outside of the genre ghetto, and how other genres are being infected by or are borrowing from sf tropes. (See, for example, Reginald Hill's *One Small Step*, an sf murder-mystery involving Dalziel and Pascoe at the end of their careers). *Hen's Teeth* sounds like it is exactly the sort of book we'd love to do a bookspotting article on. We do our best to have as wide a coverage as possible (as does Chris Terran in his excellent *Recent and Forthcoming Books* column in *Matrix*) but there will inevitably be things we've missed.

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.

Invisible People

1997 sees the centenary of Wells's *The Invisible Man*. But as Brian Stableford points out, it was not the first book to feature invisibility, nor was it the last; indeed for a literary equivalent of Brian's final three paragraphs, one need look no further than Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*.

H.G. Wells always felt slightly embarrassed by the central motif of *The Invisible Man* (1897), because he understood the frank impossibility of it. He knew that it did not matter at all how ingenious one might be in explaining how a man's flesh could become invisible, for the simple reason that if a man were invisible to the world then the world must also be invisible to him; unless light can be intercepted by an opaque retina, there can be no sight. This anxiety did not prevent Wells from laying his account of Griffin's misadventures before the world, but it did cause him to subtitle it a 'grotesque romance' (its predecessor, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, had been 'a possibility'). The unique and distinctive grotesquerie of *The Invisible Man* is, of course, part and parcel of the whole tradition of romances of invisibility.

Like most of the other common follies of fantastic fiction – telepathy, the dissociation of mind and body, precognition, and so on – the idea that one might invisibly observe others is merely a plausible illusion. Because I appear to myself to be a virtual viewpoint it is easy to imagine that the viewpoint in question might be 'detached' from the fleshy apparatus of eye and brain, to roam undetectably wherever my whim might take it. Like the other common follies of fantastic fiction, however, invisibility is also a highly attractive illusion. All the burdensome obligations of social life are policed by the observing eyes of others, or by the possibility of observation, and there is a delicious imaginative liberation to be found in fantasies of being immune to that police-work. Invisibility combines the ability to penetrate the veils of privacy which others erect for their protection with the ability to act without suffering any of the consequences of censorious observation.

It is no wonder, given the seductiveness of the idea, that caps, cloaks and rings which make their wearers invisible are common motifs in folklore, and that the ability to observe without being observed is a common attribute of gods and demons in religious mythology. It is not at all surprising, either, that modern fantasy fiction should have made prolific use of the device of invisibility since its inception in the early 19th century. It is only to be expected, too, that all these public fantasies should routinely take the form of cautionary tales warning against the excessive indulgence of private fantasies. That is the fate of all daydreams when they are plucked from the realms of private fantasy and exposed to the cold winds of scepticism and unease.

The first three-decker fantasy novel of the Victorian Era was James Dalton's *The Invisible Gentleman* (1833, published anonymously), which goes to extraordinary lengths to make certain that its hero gets no joy from the gift of invisibility (which he acquires by means of a quasi-diabolical bargain). Although no one actually sees him while he is playing practical jokes and spying on his friends his frequent alibi-less absences from the scenes of puzzling events engender a certain paranoia, which quickly becomes amplified by his

knowledge of matters to which he ought not to have been privy. He becomes tangled in a web of deceit which extends with every use of his gift and draws ever tighter as he struggles to escape from it, eventually costing him his fiancée, his friends and his fortune. The moral of the story is that trust is the basis of human society, and that the violator of that trust will inevitably find himself a lonely outcast.

Charles Wentworth Lisle's *The Ring of Gyges* (1886) employs a different but no less striking cautionary argument. Lisle's hero has far less trouble than Dalton's avoiding the suspicion of others, but his ability to peep behind the facades of public life reveals to his roving eye such a panorama of deceptions that he is driven inexorably to miserable cynicism. Once he knows how frequently other people lie he becomes incapable of accepting any declaration at face value, and he recoils from society to exactly the same degree that Dalton's hero was driven from it, drawing an equal dividend of loneliness and unhappiness.

Science fiction characteristically adopts a detached point of view which suspends moral judgment – if only for a while – in order to concentrate on the rational extrapolation of its ideas, but it cannot long avoid the kinds of scepticism and unease which blight exposed daydreams. Fitz-James O'Brien's 'What Was It?' (1859) attempts a semi-serious analysis of the possibility that there might be other beings beyond the reach of sight, but cannot in the end refuse to pander to the implicit paranoia to which such an idea inevitably gives rise – a paranoia more elaborately and more excruciatingly drawn out in Guy de Maupassant's 'The Horla' (1887).

The first serious attempts to design a quasi-scientific means of achieving invisibility were carried out by Edward Page Mitchell, in 'The Crystal Man' (1881) and by Charles Howard Hinton, in 'Stella' (1895). Mitchell's invisible man is a biologist's lab assistant unfortunately trapped in his invisible state by the untimely death of his employer; it requires only one crucial revelation of uncomfortable truth to his invisible ear to convince him that suicide is all that remains to him. Hinton's almost-invisible girl is similarly trapped but she finds a happier ending after briefly serving as an aide at Spiritualist séances and thwarting a gang of Chinese pirates (plotting was never Hinton's strong point).

Hinton was the man from whom H. G. Wells borrowed the explanatory logic of his time machine, so it seems highly likely that Wells read 'Stella' before beginning work on *The Invisible Man* – especially since Hinton takes care to deal with the cavil which caused Wells to admit that *The Invisible Man* had to be reckoned a grotesque romance rather than a possibility. (Stella's eyes, unlike Griffin's, retain sufficient opacity to remain sensitive to light). Wells might conceivably have read Mitchell's story too, if – as seems likely – it was reprinted in an English periodical following its publication in the New York *Sun*. If these two stories did provoke Wells to write *The Invisible Man*, however, their obvious literary

limitations must have encouraged him to believe that he could do the job a great deal better than his predecessors.

It is far less likely that Wells had read either *The Invisible Gentleman* or *The Ring of Gyges*, but *The Invisible Man* is effectively a combination of the fundamental ideas used by Mitchell and Hinton with the cautionary warnings issued by Dalton and Lisle. Like Mitchell's and Hinton's heroes Griffin is trapped in his invisibility after rendering his body transparent and nullifying the effects of refraction, but what proceeds from this circumstance is a neat account of his gradual alienation from society, which comes to a feverish climax when he discovers that he cannot, in the final analysis, escape the bonds or sanctions of visual policing.

One might argue that the history of invisible people in science fiction has seen little progress since Wells. The problem of the unseeing eyes has mostly been swept under the carpet, unmentioned and untackled by such novels as Philip Wylie's *The Murderer Invisible* (1931) and H.F. Saint's *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1987). The alternative pseudoscientific justification which suggests that light rays might be bent around an invisible man rather than passing through him – as they are, for instance, in Fred MacIsaac's *The Vanishing Professor* – does not solve the problem. Another alternative method, which involves achieving invisibility by the cultivation of super-speed – as employed in Jack London's *The Shadow and the Flash* (1903), which may well have been influenced by Wells's *The New Accelerator* (1901) – must have seemed more hopeful in pre-relativistic days, although other corollary difficulties (the effects of atmospheric friction, the problem of fuel supply and so on) must surely be reckoned to have nullified any apparent advantage gained by such tales. The elaborate development of the theme of invisibility in the visual media – greatly encouraged by the enduring challenge it has provided to special effects technicians – naturally pays no heed whatsoever to this kind of problem.

What has made progress, however, is the non-technical element of invisibility fantasies: the use of invisibility as a social and psychological metaphor. In such novels as Fritz Leiber's *The Sinful Ones* (1953; better known in the abridged version first published in 1950 as 'You're All Alone') and Christopher Priest's *The Glamour* (1984) no technical explanation is offered or required; the invisible people are simply unnoticed, thus forming a problematic social microcosm that is both within and without the broader of society of their fellows. The psychological plausibility of this idea is greatly enhanced by the impression many of us have that in certain social situations we really do become invisible by virtue of the insulting refusal of others to admit our existence.

The logical extrapolation of this notion lends itself readily enough to such fantasies of cruel and unusual punishment as

Damon Knight's 'The Country of the Kind' (1956) and Robert Silverberg's 'To See the Invisible Man' (1963). Such is the power of everyday contempt that the hero of Thomas Berger's *Being Invisible* (1988) can plausibility remain uncertain until the very end of the story as to whether he really is invisible or not, and the acquisition of invisibility by the anti-heroes of Charles Beaumont's 'The Vanishing American' (1955), Harlan Ellison's 'Are You Listening?' (1958) and Sylvia Jacobs's 'The End of Evan Essant' (1962) can be viewed as a poignant tragedy.

This is the true flip-side of the cosy daydream of being able to observe others without being observed: that invisibility can easily be equated with insignificance and impotence. It is a terrible thing to realise or be persuaded that no action we can perform is sufficiently powerful to make others regret their decision to ignore us. In the climax of *The Invisible Man*, most readers can probably identify as readily with Griffin as with the fearful and hateful crowd which destroys him, finding comfort in neither affiliation. That is the enduring power, and the enduring grotesquerie, of the text.

A hundred years after the publication of *The Invisible Man* there are as many invisible people around us as there were around Wells in *fin-de-siècle* London: people who live on the streets through which we do not care to walk; people who simply vanish into the background of those streets through which we do walk. We are no less accomplished than the Victorians when it comes to putting such people out of mind, and therefore out of sight – but their eyes, although unseen, are no more transparent than the eyes of the Victorian rejects who preceded them. Their eyes can still see us, no matter how hard we may try to ignore their gaze, and we cannot escape the feeling that we live beneath the weight of their scrutiny.

Like the Victorians, we cannot escape the suspicion that our refusal to see the invisible people is dangerous – not so much because some of them may be thieves, terrorists or serial killers, but because one of the things they see when they look at us is our refusal to see them, and the insult implied by that refusal. The real danger is that the insult implied by their invisibility will make them look even harder at us, thus increasing the pressure on the poses and illusions we maintain, not just for the world's sake but for our own.

Who among us can readily stand any more scrutiny than we already face? But who among us is willing to see the invisible, to lock eyes with those we despise? And who among us is willing to join the invisible people, knowing the price that must be paid for the lack of privilege?

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Hinton's almost-invisible girl is similarly trapped but she finds a happier ending after briefly serving as an aide at Spiritualist séances and thwarting a gang of Chinese pirates.

Brian Stableford is the author of many novels and articles, including Chimera's *Candle* (1997), the third book of *Genesys*. In 1996, he won the BSFA Award for his short story 'The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires'.

Paul Kincaid wrote on invisibility in Vector 192, as part of the Cognitive Mapping sequence and Stephen Baxter reviewed the Everyman edition of *The Invisible Man* in Vector 187.

Still Searching For Rosebud

Towards a critique of Tim Burton

Following Dave M Roberts's assessment of Tim Burton's films ('Living in his Own World', *Vector* 191), Chris Hill suggested that 'there is a place for a more in-depth look at his work' ($\psi\phi$, *Vector* 193). Now Daniel O'Mahony offers his own slant on the topic, finding interesting connections or echoes between Burton's relation to two Kanes – Bob and *Citizen*.

In his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, the mainstream critic David Thomson lays into Tim Burton with a schizophrenic lack of single-mindedness. This entry – written before *Ed Wood* (1994) and *Mars Attacks!* (1996) – focuses largely on the two Burton-helmed *Batman* films. Thomson finds it difficult to believe that Burton has ever really understood that film is intended as a medium of naturalistic representation. He then addresses Burton in terms of Orson Welles – as a new golden child of film who may yet fall into Welles's trap of believing his own myth and sliding into an oblivion of unwatched films. Here Thomson is prescient. No one went to see *Ed Wood* – arguably Burton's best film – although it was released less than a year after *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) was sold to the American public on the strength of his name. A similar fate befell *Mars Attacks!* in America, though European critics and cinema-goers warmed to it.

Thomson places Burton as, simultaneously, anti-naturalistic (a category which he co-opts as synonymous with the anti-cinematic) and yet redolent of the single most influential film-maker in history. Welles is splendidly filmic, one of the few people who might be said to contain the medium. The paradox of Thomson's argument is this: How can Welles's descendant therefore be anti-filmic? What Thomson seems to miss – or perhaps is too cautious to say – is that Welles himself can be co-opted into the anti-realist tradition that now contains Burton. Indeed, Burton – much more than Terry Gilliam, David Lynch, John Boorman, Jeunet and Caro and many other deeply dissimilar directors who can be brought together in this loose paradigm like Kafka's precursors – is the most deeply enamoured of Welles, or perhaps of the Charles Foster Kane megalomaniac persona that Welles cultivated for himself.

Welles is arguably Burton's cinematic hero, although he

speaks more often of Fellini; Channel 4's embarrassingly poor *Film Night* tried to claim him as a disciple of Edward Wood, Jr. (which is akin to saying that Spielberg thinks of himself as a follower of E.T. or Oskar Schindler because he has featured them as characters in his films). His films are littered with Wellesian monuments, particularly from *Batman* (1989) onwards, when he acquired greater artistic control of his ventures (earlier films allude more often to the works of Whale, Corman, Capra and even Inoshira Honda). Burton's Gotham City is not Joel Schumacher's urban playground but Xanadu, grown massive and populous (this shows more in the centralised set of *Batman Returns* [1992] than the less-personal *Batman*). The castle in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) is similar – a deserted cubancular edifice where Vincent Price dies in a scene redolent of *Citizen Kane*'s (1941) paradigmatic opening. There is also Welles's notorious radio version of *The War of the Worlds* (1938) – which Welles-as-Kane later claimed (in publicity for *F for Fake* [1973]) was actually a documentary record of a genuine invasion – to which Burton gives flesh and lurid colour in *Mars Attacks!*

Most pertinently, Ed Wood himself, in the film of the same name, claims Welles as his mentor and, in the only genuinely fabricated passage of this fabulously displaced biopic, encounters him in a bar where they exchange sympathies. Burton is probably lurking somewhere in the thematic shadows. He shares with both Welles and Wood a penchant for undamaging disguise – Welles the avuncular trickster, Wood the transvestite, Burton the apparent inarticulate. All three represent very different kinds of anti-mimesis.

Welles is, I think, anti-realist – which is quite different from the anti-mimetic position where Burton stands, though they share an affinity. Welles works within a naturalist paradigm to subvert it. *Citizen Kane* is an incomplete record where virtually every sequence is reported and unreliable. The narrator gives up the search for Rosebud – Kane's grail – because he knows it cannot possibly encompass the story of the man he is investigating. It explains, but it cannot enlighten, much like the film itself. Welles here is making us aware of how much we are seeing is



interpretable and indeed how much effort has to go into the creation of the illusion of reality on film (Ed Wood the man does the same, unconsciously and without irony). What Welles is not doing is making a fantasy film or a science-fiction film – although sometimes it feels like one. *Citizen Kane* can be described as a fable, though one without any hint of displacement.

Burton, on the other hand, is anti-naturalistic. He is not simply subverting mimesis – he does not seem aware of it. As a result, there's something profoundly alienating about his films. Whereas Gilliam or Lynch are easily capable of mimicking reality when they need to – albeit as just another filmic device to sit alongside the extravagances of fantasy – Burton doesn't make the attempt. Only *Ed Wood* is explicitly set in the real world – though one that has so thoroughly absorbed the Hollywood glamour that it might as well be on Mars. Here, Bela Lugosi lives on a domesticated Burbank estate that is indistinguishable from the underhang of Vincent Price's gothic pile in *Edward Scissorhands*; here, snatches of anachronistic Tom Jones numbers play in the background and, behind everything, the Hollywood hills are made of cardboard. None of Burton's films are set in the present day. Only the *Batman* films are not set in a hyper-suburban 1950s littered with pop artefacts from subsequent decades – although the case of *Beetlejuice* is more complex: it seems to be set in a quasi-1950s small-town idyll, envisioned by 1980s suburbanites. But even this is a facade, as the slow time slippage of Burton's *Batman* films reveal.

These owe nothing to the mega-city Gotham shared by the most-read of the 1980s graphic novels. *Batman* is set – appropriately – in a faked *noir* urbia c. 1939, located just down the road from Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) and Jeunet and Caro's *City of Lost Children* (1995). *Batman Returns* doesn't stay there, but heads further back in time – as if Burton is slowly penetrating the interior of some cinematic version of Ryhope Wood – to an encrusted silent movie *Metropolis* (1926), home to Max Shreck (a nod to the star of Murnau's *Nosferatu* [1921]) and a gaggle of Grimm Brothers wannabes who have wandered out of the carnival of expressionism. Ideally this should be an entirely representational film, without dialogue (the essential medium of naturalistic narrative expression in cinema). The characters don't need to tell us their motives: they are strewn around them in concrete form, as highly-psychologised toytown buildings. Welles is not here – though Shreck, the Penguin and, indeed, masked recluse Bruce Wayne (albeit less so than in the previous film) carry the whiff of Kane with them.

To understand this aspect of Burton's films, we have to understand Welles and what he achieved with *Kane*. In the years between the wars – and particularly with the introduction of sound – the notion that (Anglo-American) film was principally a medium for naturalistic fiction was

gradually enshrined. This view predominates today among influential producers and critics (see, say Thomson, cited above). What Welles achieved was to build a dam against the



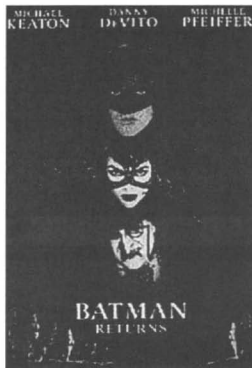
prevailing current. He was certainly not the first film-maker to attempt it, but despite his relative isolation and commercial failure, he helped make anti-mimetic film respectable. Burton and the coterie of directors mentioned earlier are only one group of Welles's descendants. We might also include Burton's admired Fellini and the French *nouveau vague* all the way down to poverty row hacks like Wood, all shoring up the dam. Welles in this aspect stands almost for the necessity of the fantastic, the fabulous and the speculative. He stands for the necessity of Tim Burton.

The dominant mimetic viewpoint is not a given, though those critics who would like film to have sprung spontaneously into being as a fully-formed narrative medium sometime around 1916 would disagree. Hidden behind Welles in the *Ed Wood* bar scene – probably miming – is Georges Méliès (1861-1938), stage magician and pioneer of silent film best known for his *La Voyage Dans La Lune* (1902). Méliès has been criticised by modern critics for his emphasis on visual trickery at the expense of narrative, but that is to miss the point. When Méliès was active, narrative cinema existed as only one of several shapeless filmic

possibilities that hindsight can only insecurely call cinema. *La Voyage Dans La Lune* and its many sequels – all epics for their time – use narrative as a string on which to hang the effects pioneered by their director. These are genuine action films, genuine chase films, linearly drawing their 'characters' (subsumed utterly, like plot, into the visual component) from one event to another without aid of any modern notion of editing techniques (which Méliès pioneered – but understood only in terms of trick cuts and scene transitions). Méliès did not need to dam up narrative film, because it was hardly worth damming. By 1912, narrative film had dammed Méliès.

There is an element to Burton which seems fascinated by these silent trick films and longs to recreate them, but hasn't quite got the nerve to abandon cross-cutting

or characterisation. The earliest and crudest of Burton's attempts at Méliès pastiche is *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985), which – like Méliès' *voyages extraordinaires* – is essentially a string of incidents with much emphasis on Heath Robinson-style gadgetry in the early passages. Pee-wee Herman is too autonomous a character to be subsumed by the plot, but it isn't hard to see him as part of an almost wholly visual component of the action. Most tellingly, the film ends with a retelling of itself as a conventional piece of narrative cinema, loaded with contempt for modern action films and their quasi-sado-masochistic McGuffins, where heroes are forced to



endure or commit repeated acts of violence in the name of the narrative, and without any other motivation. Where, Burton asks, has the innocence of story-telling gone?

A much more successful later attempt is *Batman Returns* (1992) which, though widely loathed, is in my opinion a superb film that fails only because its audience is unprepared to address it in the terms which it requires. It is not a *Batman* film: as *Batman* it is lousy. It is not a blockbuster, though it looks like one. It is an attempt to do an art film in gaudy summer-holiday clothing and requires its audience to respond to it as though it were an art film (*Mars Attacks!* demands but doesn't always get a similar reaction). It's not so much a subversion of categories as a failure to recognise the culturally-engrained tendency to categorise. Along with *Ed Wood*, it's the only Burton film that is not predicated on the – far from negative – repercussions of the intrusion of Others into the paper-thin reality the director has built for us. It isn't particularly pleasant viewing – its presentation of three seriously unbalanced people whose very existences torture, bind and lacerate one another is probably the closest sf cinema will ever get to an explicit s/m porn film whilst still having a certificate which allows the under-15s to view it legally.

Mars Attacks!, though a less successful film artistically, is another indication of Burton's willingness – if not outright

desire – to inflict pain. Compare two similar films. *Independence Day* (1996) is surprisingly bloodless despite its levelling of cities; the aliens manage to kill off only about a half dozen of the ensemble cast,

mostly minor or comic characters, and the film ends with the implied establishment of an anti-urban (and predominately American) hegemony as a result of the American military, including the President, kicking alien ass. The *Gremlins*, in the space of two films (*Gremlins* [1984] and *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* [1990]), manage a body count of three. Burton's

Martians slaughter just about the entire cast (in the case of Jack Nicholson they manage it twice). In a rather Roald Dahl-ish manner, they manage to avoid anyone we have come to love, but do kill off major characters and leave a ruined world behind them (and, unlike *Independence Day*, the ruin is real and matters). Moreover, the defeat of the aliens is achieved by using a distinctly kitsch aspect of American culture. This is more than crude sadism.

At the heart of the film Burton comes closest to evoking the spirit of Méliès' trick films. Lisa Mane's remarkably physical, silent performance as the Martian girl is a superb synthesis of actor and film image. She's too murderous to evoke Méliès-like innocence, but when she hunts through the White House for Nicholson's president, she becomes a ghost haunting the passages of (another) Xanadu. Burton's misanthropy is part of his Kane-like mask. All of his films end with a partial or complete redemption – even the ending of *Batman Returns*, despite the studio-required insert of Catwoman, ambiguously suggests that Wayne is no longer Batman, that he has exorcised this part of his personality. Burton seems to love his flawed environments – even Gotham's overgrown Hell out of the pavements. The destruction he wreaks on them is like a shield – even a thoughtful nostalgia – against real pain.

The poor US reaction to *Mars Attacks!* seems almost to have precipitated a Kane-like withdrawal on Burton's part, but now he is to direct a new version of Superman, *Superman Lives*. Burton's constant reference to popular subjects has helped him bridge the Wellesian pitfall of commercial failure, though he may well be digging another, more subtle, hole for himself. *Superman* for Burton is just there, along with Wood and Batman, and Welles and *Mars Attacks!* cards and Xanadu. They are just part of the landscape he lives in. His nostalgic eclecticism is his success. He should not let it become his Rosebud.

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Mary Shelley and the Plague

Social Order And The Nature Of Evil In *Frankenstein* And *The Last Man* by R.J. Frost

Mary Shelley started writing *The Last Man* in 1824 and it was published in 1826, nine years after the publication of *Frankenstein* or *The Modern Prometheus*. The novel is written in a very different vein to *Frankenstein* and a good deal of it cannot really be described as SF and yet it is in some ways a remarkable work of the imagination which is easier to appreciate today than in 1826.

Of course Mary Shelley's reputation as a writer still rests on *Frankenstein* to a large extent, according to Brian Aldiss the first truly SF novel, but it does not follow that *The Last Man* is unworthy of attention. In fact, as I shall be arguing in this article, because much of *The Last Man* is concerned with a plague which puts an end to the human race, Mary Shelley develops the questions she started exploring in *Frankenstein* concerning the nature of evil and the break down of social order.

First, here is a brief summary of the novel:

It is a first person narrative related by a man called Lionel Verney, an inhabitant of the Twenty-first Century. The account covers events between 2073 and 2100 during which a catastrophe overtakes the human race, leaving Verney as the sole survivor. We can be specific about these dates because 2073 marked the abdication of the last English Monarch and at the end of the novel the narrator ascends the steps of St Peter's in Rome to carve 2100 on the topmost stone. This is the last recorded year of the world.

Verney begins his narrative with an account of his childhood in Cumberland (the Lake District). Orphaned at the age of five, he lives close to nature pursuing a reckless and wild existence as a shepherd, poacher and petty thief. Verney's lifestyle is far from the Wordsworthian Romantic ideal and he is in some ways rather similar to the Monster in *Frankenstein*, while the Monster is still ignorant of his origins, frequenting the woods and mountains, enjoying the company of birds and beasts and yet feeling lonely and cut off from human society. The anti-social quality of Verney's behaviour is pointed up by Mary Shelley when he compares himself to "the wolf-bred founder of old Rome" (p. 14). Verney's words come back to haunt him at the end of the novel when he is the sole inhabitant of a Rome decimated by the plague (p.465). He has come full circle. Romulus of course was suckled by a she-wolf, but the force of the analogy is that a solitary individual is in danger of becoming a sub-human monstrosity. Here we find the first extension of the theme in *Frankenstein* that social deprivation is a type of cancer of the individual soul which debases the victim. The destructive evil of the Monster is partly a response to society's rejection of him. All this ends when Verney is befriended and introduced into the circles of power where he becomes a courtier and eventually falls in love.

Love and political intrigue seem to be the chief occupations of English society in the Twenty-first Century. The society which the novel depicts in the first two volumes is politically volatile, but, to the reader of contemporary SF at least, surprisingly static as far as technology is concerned. The peace and prosperity of England seems to be bolstered up by farming and trade alone.

Windsor Castle remains intact and school boys are still educated at Eton. Not only is the castle still there, but the

royal family of the Windsors remains very much in evidence. England, however, is governed along Republican lines although the three main parties are comprised of Aristocrats, Royalists and Democrats. Scientists and technicians don't appear to exist in this society apart from an eccentric astronomer called Mirval who, after the plague has struck, predicts a golden age to come in one-hundred-thousand years when there will not be a single person around to enjoy it. Unsurprisingly, no one pays much attention to him! Mary Shelley's parody of science here is in striking contrast to the Promethean role of Victor Frankenstein who, like a latter day Faust in the earlier novel, breaks all bounds and unleashes havoc on society in his obsessive pursuit of scientific knowledge. We are told, "disease was to be banished... machines existed to supply with facility every want of the population." (p. 106) But where are they?

One notable exception to the general absence of hardware is the account Verney gives of a ride by airship from Windsor to Perth in Scotland. It is worth quoting to illustrate the fluent and imaginative quality the prose displays in persuading the reader to participate in Verney's fantastic journey. We are right there along side of him in the basket:

"Everything favoured my journey. The balloon rose above half a mile from the earth, and with a favourable wind it hurried through the air, its feathered vans cleaving the unopposing atmosphere. Notwithstanding the melancholy object of my journey, my spirits were exhilarated by reviving hope, by the swift motion of the airy pinnace, and the balmy visitation of the sunny air. The pilot hardly moved the plumed steerage, and the slender mechanism of the wings, wide unfurled, gave forth a murmuring noise, soothing to the senses. Plain and hill, stream and cornfield, were discernible below, while we unimpeded sped on swift and secure, as a wild swan in his spring-tide flight. The machine obeyed the slightest motion of the helm; and, the wind blowing steadily, there was no let or obstacle to our course. Such was the power of man over the elements; a power long sought and lately won;" (p. 71)

The sensuous buoyancy of flight is captured in the skilful use of rhythm and alliteration, not to mention the euphonious vowels. Of course Balloon technology was current in 1826, however, "feathered vans" and "plumed steerage" are delightful exotic touches, synonyms which help to reinforce the wild swan simile. Not all the prose in *The Last Man* is as well-wrought as this.

The overall impression is of an Arcadian England of the early Nineteenth Century projected beyond the Millennium. Women such as Perdita, Idris and Evadne make an important contribution to the plot, but they play no direct part in the shaping of political affairs. Behind the scenes is another matter, but there is very little space to go into this.

Verney's account of English internal affairs highlights two important characters: Lord Raymond, a figure modelled on Lord Byron, killed off at the beginning of Volume Two, his death signals the onset of the plague; and Adrian, Earl of Windsor, a Republican and idealised version of Percy Bysshe, Mary's deceased poet-husband. Adrian, like Percy, drowns in a storm at sea. All this is of interest from the point of view of literary historians, but the real power of *The Last Man* as a

work of imaginative fiction is in the handling of the catastrophe of the plague and how this small community of friends, rivals and associates, all of whom are personally known to one another, respond in the heat of crisis.

The focus shifts at the end of Volume One when Verney makes a sea voyage to Athens. There is a war going on between the Greeks and the Turks. (The same Grecian war of independence in which Byron lost his life to a fever in his tent?) The Greeks, with English support, have pushed the Turks back as far as Constantinople which is under siege. Lord Raymond leads the allied forces onto the eagerly anticipated victory of European civilisation over Islamic barbarism (p. 153). This perhaps will be the final war to end all wars and the millennial utopia of which there are many tantalising hints in *The Last Man* may come into being.

The emergence of the plague hinges on the death of Lord Raymond as he enters the deserted city of Constantinople. The Turkish defenders have fled, abandoning the city to the disease, and Raymond is killed by falling masonry dislodged by an exploding booby trap. And now Verney's attention turns to the account of the spread of the plague and the novel suddenly changes gear cataloguing all the consequent evils of collapsing social order, migration of populations, the emergence of fanatical religious sects, panic-hysteria and acts of heroism which eventually leave him the last man alive, ruminating over the wreckage of former civilisations - France, Rome, Greece, Egypt. Finally, he puts all this behind him and, concealing the manuscript of *The Last Man* in Rome, he sets off along the Tiber by boat, heading seaward either to find another human survivor or to dedicate the rest of his life to solitary exploration. His diminishing figure on his tiny bark as the huge impassive forces of Nature close in around him rather calls to mind the Monster on the ice-raft in the last chapter of *Frankenstein* vanishing into the dark distant reaches of the Northern polar seas. However, Verney's outcast status is not a consequence of his deeds nor his rejection by society, but due to the fact that society has disintegrated around him. The last gloomy line of the novel may hint that solipsism is the inevitable consequence of his alienation as it suggests that ghosts and supernatural beings are becoming more real to him than the symbols of navigation:

"Thus around the shores of the deserted earth, while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney - the LAST MAN." (p. 470)

Or is the eye of God and the eye of the reader as we scan the last page, the last words of human record presumably, tantamount to the same thing? When Verney moves outside the realm of language his limbo existence can no longer be validated by the uncertain world of signs.

The origins of the plague in *The Last Man* are obscure. Pointing to contemporary parallels such as the 1818 outbreak of cholera in Calcutta or the fact that Mary Shelley lost two of her own children, Clara and William, to fever, do not really account for the impact it has in the text. What is the reader to make of it?

In *Frankenstein* the nature of evil is more specifically located in Victor's scientific arrogance in dealing with the forces of nature. He creates a Monster he cannot control and the Monster then turns into the scourge of humanity, not because it is essentially ugly in itself, but because it is morally

estranged by social alienation and Victor's irresponsible neglect. When the Monster turns against humanity there is a sort of remorseless logic in the revenge it takes which, if not justified exactly, is certainly intelligible. There is a clear moral in the sense that Science, and therefore individual scientists, must take responsibility for discoveries because if they do not mankind and the environment must suffer. Victor Frankenstein constitutes the SF paradigm of blind scientific investigation leading to dire consequences. But the plague in *The Last Man* does not seem to arise as a consequence of human actions. It is an act of nature itself and, in this particular sense, it is far more horrifying because of its ethical neutrality, the sheer arbitrariness of the devastation it causes.

The effect of this in the novel is to undercut all human aspirations, all social and political order, military stratagems, kinship ties and bonds of love and displace them. They are, in a manner of speaking, irrelevant to the essential scheme of things. So Victor Frankenstein in his Promethean role commits an allegorical transgression against the Gods, stealing the divine fire, but what if there is nothing to transgress against and the fire falls, as it were, unsolicited; what about the essential impotence of human beings in the face of destiny? *The Last Man* seems to me to pose this question and this is surely what makes it worth reading because it represents a divergence in Mary Shelley's thinking after *Frankenstein*, a hard act to follow if ever there was one.

Once the plague takes hold of Constantinople it afflicts Greeks and Turks alike and soon elevates itself to the level of a pandemic. It is partially connected to the upheaval in human affairs through the Christian/Muslim wars, but it is not itself an outcome of the war, it merely takes advantage of the prevailing conditions. There is nothing Verney or any of the others can do against it; the only thing that seems to slow up the advance of the plague across Europe into America and eventually England itself is the onset of Winter. When the warm weather returns the plague continues to spread further North.

One of the best ironies of Volume Three is that having failed to resolve their political differences and class divisions in prosperity, Mary Shelley shows the remaining English survivors rallying together and, partly through the charismatic leadership of Adrian and partly through their own instinct for bravery and self-sacrifice, they finally achieve social harmony before they are wiped out. The plague in its capacity as great leveller cuts through the knot of politics.

In *Frankenstein* the Romantic conception of Nature as a violated female deity is always there to reinforce the Monster's destructive vengeance as something powerful as whirlwinds, irresistible as avalanches, violent as floods. In *The Last Man* Verney's narrative is introduced by an account of a visit to the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl, a visit which was actually undertaken by Mary and her husband although neither is named. The text is supposedly translated from the prophetic leaves which they discover strewn around the cavern and take away with them for deciphering, but the stone seat where the Sibyl would sit and pronounce her prophecies of dark futurity is empty: she is gone. A hole in the cavern roof lets in the light of the empty sky. Her whereabouts remain a mystery.

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All quotations and references to *The Last Man* are taken from the World's Classics edition edited by Morton D. Paley (Oxford University Press, 1994)

For Brian Aldiss's views on *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* see Chapter 1 "On The Origin of Species: Mary Shelley", Brian Aldiss with David Wingrove, *A Trillion Year Spree: The History Of Science Fiction* (Paladin Grafton Books, 1986)

For a discussion of Aldiss, *Frankenstein* and the Science Fiction tradition see "It's Alive! *Frankenstein*: the Film, the Feminist Novel and Science Fiction" by R. J. Frost, *Foundation, the Review of Science Fiction*, E. James (Ed.), No 67, August 1996

'In My Beginning is My End': Mary Shelley's Family Values

by Thom Benjamin

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils'

Here is a starting point of *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) and so much more. It is, if you follow Brian Aldiss on his *Billion Year Spree* (1973) the starting point of science fiction: the mad scientist doomed to be destroyed by his own creation, a grisly reward for daring to meddle with That Which Must Be Left Alone, for usurping God's position as creator of life.

It is the starting point of *Frankenstein* in that it is the first part of the story that Mary Shelley imagined. One evening, the friends Lord Byron, Percy and Mary Shelley and Dr Polidori had decided to write horrific tales to entertain one another, and the young Mary had a waking nightmare: 'On the morrow I announced that I had thought of a story. I began that day with the words "It was on a dreary night of November", making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream.' (197)

But it is only one starting point, for the moment of the November night occurs many pages into the novel, and Shelley's own biography goes back much further. She was the child of two notorious parents: William Godwin, Whig, Dissenter and author of the political thriller *Caleb Williams* (1794) and Mary Wollstonecraft, grandmother of feminism and author of *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). The birth of the then Mary Godwin on 30 August 1797 was evidently difficult, as Mary Wollstonecraft died ten days later. This was the first of a number of tragedies within Mary's life. The Godwin household also included Fanny Imlay, a daughter of Wollstonecraft and a previous marriage to an American, Gilbert Imlay; Fanny killed herself whilst *Frankenstein* was being written. Godwin had married again, in 1801, to Mary Jane Clairmont in 1801, extending the family further with more children (but also a miscarriage) in addition to those Clairmont had borne previously.

With this family background, Mary was no stranger to controversy, or indeed to untimely death. It was perhaps natural that when the fifteen-year-old teenager met Percy Bysshe Shelley, poet and son of a prominent MP, his marriage to Harriet Shelley would be no barrier to their elopement, nor to their having children. It was only after Harriet killed herself, again during the writing of *Frankenstein*, that they could marry. It was almost as if controversy was a prerequisite for moving in this circle, as Mary's step-sister Claire Clairmont who accompanied them on their travels had a relationship with the poet, warrior and lover Lord Byron.

It would have been all too easy for Mary to be just Mrs Percy Shelley, editor of her late husband's poetry and that of Lord Byron. She could have been one of those people important merely because of their circle of friends, acquaintances and enemies – even so, remarkable for her

time. But she seems to have taken a full part in the almost mythical story-telling evening, and her creativity did not begin and end there. *Frankenstein* was one of several triple-decker novels by Mary Shelley: it was followed by *Valperga, or The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826) to which we shall return, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck: A Romance* (1830), *Lodore* (1835), and *Faulkner: A Novel* (1837), as well as travel writing and biography. (Byron's poem about vampires was published, unfinished, in 1819 after a pirated version called *The Vampyre* had appeared, heavily rewritten by Polidori. In the same year Polidori published a novel *Ernestus Berchtold: or the Modern Oedipus*, which may have also have come out of the story-telling).

Her biography slips into her fiction, both in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. It is almost a cliché to suggest that the idea of creating life, and the hallucinogenic description of the creation, derives from Shelley's guilt about the death of her mother and her own nightmares of miscarriages. On the other hand, the figure of the scientist has been taken to be a representation of Percy Shelley – the poet had experimented with electricity and his physician Lawrence was at the centre of one of the major scientific quarrels of the time. John Abernathy, a senior surgeon, had argued that life was something which was additional to the bodily organs of the human being: it might be necessary for a soul, or a fluid, or some kind of electricity to give life to inert matter. His pupil and then rival William Lawrence disagreed: life was what bodies did, it came into being at the point of conception. *Frankenstein* the scientist, despite having abandoned discredited figures such as Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa and Albertus Magnus, still holds on to a quasi-religious ideal of sparking life within a body.

There are subtler echoes of her life within the novel, particularly within the family of Frankenstein, and its doomed lifespans. (Her son William was born shortly before she started work on the novel, and she borrows the name for Victor Frankenstein's younger brother, who is murdered at the hands of the Creature. William was to die in Rome in 1819). The tangled nature of Shelley's own family tree is perhaps visible in the fact that Victor is engaged to marry his cousin 'Elizabeth, the only child of his [father's] deceased sister' (20), a detail removed from the text when it was republished in 1831. Many of the landscapes that the characters travel through – at times it seems to aspire to being a travelogue – would have been familiar from the Shelleys' own travels.

The fantastical narrative of the creation of the Creature is nested within another story, indeed, coming to *Frankenstein* as a book one is struck by how different it is from the imagined work. From the films, it is to be expected that a misshaped assistant steals spare parts from graveyards for the evil Doctor Frankenstein in his mountain top castle. At the

height of a storm, the mad scientist harnesses the power of electricity, nay of the very elements themselves to give life to his grisly creation, a grisly creation who goes around murdering villagers until enough is enough, and they set fire to the castle with burning torches.

The story of this creation is told to Robert Walton, an arctic explorer, who in turn relates them in letters to his sister Mrs Margaret Sackville. Walton has his own demons: he is in search of a friend:

I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy; if I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection... I desire the company of a man who could sympathise with me; whose eyes would reply to mine... I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans (8.9)

It seems at first that Frankenstein can be this friend, a person who will be there for him when family is absent or dead. But friends are as fragile as children or parents, by the end of the novel Frankenstein is dead from exhaustion. There is at least nobility in friendship; little help can be expected from parents, children are doomed and marriage seems a recipe for disaster. But friendship provides an opportunity for self-sacrifice, for acts of charity – again this is something which recurs in *The Last Man*.

The nesting of narratives allows the suspension of disbelief: at times Walton records in his letters Frankenstein's account of the Creature's conversations with others. The creation of life is unlikely enough, that such a being could learn to speak and read from overhearing others reading demands a sceptical response. But that this is being reported to us allows us to believe and suspect a delusion until virtually the end of the novel, when Walton reveals he has letters from characters that had met the Creature (178) and indeed meets the Creature himself. Even so we could still imagine the possibility that Walton is deluded.

There is another distancing device at work in *The Last Man*: visiting a cave in Naples in 1818, the Shelleys find a fragmented manuscript which is an account of a time two centuries ahead: 'Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the works into a consistent form' (6). Once more it is a work drawing from her life: it was written after Percy Shelley had drowned in 1822 and after Byron had died in 1824. The central narrating character is thus Shelley herself, Lionel Verney, and his / her sister Perdita is a version of Claire Clairmont, who had an affair and child with Byron, here presented as Lord Raymond. Percy is Lord Adrian, Earl of Windsor, dominated by his mother the Countess of Windsor, a version of Percy father's Sir Timothy Shelley, who so frowned on Mary.


So a group of people who set themselves outside of ordinary morals in real life, are transformed into an élite family group, descended from the abdicated royal family. Whilst Raymond is killed following his fight against the Turks, and Perdita drowns herself in grief, the majority of this élite prove remarkably resilient against a plague which seems to be wiping out the rest of the world's population. Parents seem unhelpful at best (the Countess disapproves of the Verneys and the Verneys grew up without parents),

children seem doomed (if there isn't the plague to endanger them, then there are psychopathic religious cults or the old favourite, drowning) and marriage is not sacred. But there is friendship at work, firstly between the Lords Adrian and Raymond, but later between Lionel and Adrian. Indeed, Lionel is willing to risk everything to help his friend, who at one point he comes close to greeting him with 'girlish' extacies. I would have given everything to have embraced him; I dared not – Half in exhaustion, have voluntarily, I threw myself at my length on the ground [...] that I might kiss the dear and sacred earth he trod.' This is Shelley's love for a dead husband, a lost father of lost children, and the loss is that of a survivor among great figures.

In some ways the novel seems rather modern, or prophetic: the disease might be a more virulent form of AIDS, or the bubonic plague is rumoured to be returning. The presidential form of the leadership – after an abdication leads to the creation of nobles called Windsor – finds its modern equivalent in the people's Prime Minister Blair. Lord Rylund's reaction to the crisis: '[a] cherished resolution of shutting himself up from all communication in the mansion and grounds of his estate' (252) chimes with another family's ill-timed desire to be alone. But beyond that, the world is pretty much an early nineteenth-century, albeit with souped-up balloons.

Shelley was not the first to destroy the world down to a last man – indeed Byron's poem 'Darkness' featured such a scenario. But the brutality with which she does it is striking: Ballard's protagonists have nothing on how Lionel embraces his doom. There are moments, always dashed, when the end of the world is transformed into a utopia: 'Our habitations were palaces—our food was stored in granaries—there was no need of labour, no inquisitiveness, no restless desire to get on.' (383) But always there is the pressure of the falling population.

Much of the first half of the novel is set around Windsor, in the heart of the Thames Valley. Downstream was Woking, where later the Martians would invade. But whilst so many sf writers were to choose the Thames Valley or London to wreak disaster upon, leaving the rest of the world untouched (as if aliens had a prejudice against the Home Counties), here the destruction is total. The plague is carried to America, once the hope for republicanism, and across Asia. The novel ends with the Last Man, in a forlorn and useless search for survivors, with only the memory of friendships to comfort him.

If she had written nothing but *Frankenstein*, Shelley's literary immortality would have been secured, and her place as a foremother of sf fixed. But *The Last Man* repeats such a move, although it is perhaps too depressing to ever be popular. That it has been so lost (after an edition in 1833 it seems to have remained out of print until 1985, when the Hogarth Press reprinted it with an introduction by Brian Aldiss; an edition prepared by Muriel Spark in the 1950s remained unpublished) is an incalculable loss to the mode of sf. But once read, like *Frankenstein*, it will, like a loved one lost to tragedy, haunt the mind forever. 

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Thom Benjamin lives in York – Eds.

Computers are Autistic

Novelist Stephen Palmer casts a critical eye over cyberspace and sentient computers as envisioned by others such as William Gibson, and by himself.

Picture the scene. In a classy *animé-noir* from Japan, two characters are discussing data crossing the Net, with reference to their own difficulties, which involve aspects of personality being downloaded, memories being snatched, consciousness being hacked into, and many other plot devices from when people thought computers were the best thing since sliced bread.

Oh, that's today, isn't it?

I have a problem with the modern obsession for describing the human mind with metaphors derived from computers. The computerisation of our Western environment – extrapolated so well in Gwyneth Jones's classic *Escape Plans* – is causing us now to look at ourselves in terms of the computer, instead of humanity. Computers have become so pervasive that we are beginning to model ourselves on them. There is a myth that top flight supercomputers are now so fast and powerful that they are outstripping the human mind, and usually this is measured in MHz speed, with no thought to the immeasurable speed and memory of the human brain. There are ten trillion neurons in a typical brain. It puts a few Gb of disk space and some RAM rather in its place. I might as well discuss the relationship between cheese and chalk.

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* trilogy provides many marvellous examples of the failure of the computer metaphor. In *Neuromancer* itself, the matrix becomes sentient, apparently as a result of two AIs merging. What did Gibson mean by this? Did he mean that the matrix became animal-like, with intentions and behaviour, or did he mean, as I suspect he did, that the matrix became conscious?

I'm the matrix, Case [...] I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show.'

But how could the matrix become conscious? What would it need to be described so? Well, it would certainly need a self-symbol. But if this self-symbol is just – as the aleph of *Count Zero* appears to be – a model of the matrix, then it too would contain a model of itself, and so on, back to infinity. No, the self-symbol must be the combination of constituent parts: an emergent phenomenon, like colour appearing from colourless molecules. But if this is the case, then the matrix must have some reason for developing such a symbol, and the only source of such a reason is the experience of other entities like itself. Yet the matrix is everything. There are no other entities. It's clear from *Mona Lisa Overdrive* that the Alpha Centauri entity developed separately from the Earth one:

'when the matrix attained sentience, it simultaneously became aware of another matrix, another sentience.'

We are forced to the conclusion that the matrix, like the Internet, could never develop consciousness even remotely like ours. Now if it were to irrevocably split into millions of conceptually separate entities, that would be different. Forced to interact, those entities, as they evolved, might need to judge and guess the motives and behaviour of others, and

so might develop the self-symbol necessary for the appraising of others. But even this would be different from the matrix itself becoming sentient, since on such a view the separated entities, not the matrix, would develop self-symbols. There is a hint that such an event was in Gibson's mind, since the post-*Neuromancer* matrix is characterised by voodoo deities, but unfortunately these appear after *When It Changed*.

Another aspect of Gibson's cyberpunk work is the concept of a person 'travelling' through cyberspace, which is depicted *Tron*-like as a three dimensional grid. A fascinating passage in *Count Zero* runs thus:

The Wig explained to the Finn that his technique of mystical exploration involved projecting his consciousness into blank, unstructured sectors of the matrix and waiting.

What are we to make of this? First of all, we have to imagine what supports our own conscious mind. There is only one possible answer: our senses. Without input through our five senses, what would there be? Experiments in sensory deprivation tanks have shown an answer, for people deprived of sensory input begin hallucinating, their end-point presumably madness. I believe failure of sensory input to be the conceptual equivalent to death. Gibson is asking us to imagine that the Wig is hanging in non-space, *blank and unstructured*, receiving little, or possibly even no sensory data. Yet later there is mention of sensing presences moving across cyberspace. So the Wig must be receiving input of some sort: presumably visual. This sort of confusion, however, helps us get down to the basics of how people imagine consciousness. Gibson is pushing us to imagine a mind effectively freed of its body.

Well, in his favour, the concept of telepresence is familiar today, and those who have experienced it remark on how receiving remote images seems to change the 'position' of the conscious mind in space. We imagine ourselves to be directly behind our own eyes. Thus, people wearing VR helmets into which cameras send visual information seem to 'be in another place', the place shown by the camera, and the effect is heightened if the movements of their head changes the orientation of the camera. Experiments have recently been performed on the synthesis of 'false touch' using computer controlled vibrations.

The problem comes when the staple of sf, 'the projection of the mind' involves purely abstract values, as more often it does. There is one fundamental difference between human beings and computers, and that is that human beings are physically separate though conceptually linked (by society), whereas computers are both physically and abstractly linked. The whole point of the Internet, and the matrix, is this linkage, and it is one reason why computers will never gain consciousness if they are set up as at present.

In *Memory Seed*, I was careful to write:

[The noophytes] are an emergent phenomenon born of the private nature of consciousness

and:

[A noophyte] is a partial or fractured model of reality – an abstract model. Thus, we human beings are noophytes, except that most philosophers would judge human beings to be almost complete models of reality

The noophytes are not conscious like people. They are abstract bundles of data so immense that they have organised themselves into models of personality. In *Glass*, Tanglanah, one of the noophytes who has returned to living in a discrete body, has become conscious because she has been forced to experience and therefore to understand the people and other entities around her. She understands the mistake:

'for us to live in harmony with our environment we must all become embodied. Minds and bodies are not separate entities, not dual creations, rather they are one [...] We must feel the world, not intellectually appreciate it, and so acquire intuition.'

One of the classic explorations of the apparent duality of mind and body, and the concept of consciousness, came in Rudy Rucker's *Software*. Cobb Anderson designs the first robots with freewill, then retires to become an aged, Hendrix-loving hippy. Then he is offered the chance to leave his ailing body and have a new one. The robots (now called boppers) make good their promise, leaving Cobb to reflect along the following lines:

A robot, or a person, has two parts: hardware and software. The hardware is the actual physical material involved, and the software is the pattern in which the material is arranged. Your brain is hardware, but the information in the brain is software. The mind [...] memories, habits, opinions, skills [...] is all software. The boppers had extracted Cobb's software and put it in control of this robot body.

Or had they? Is what the boppers did a physically possible operation?

Surely not. Cobb started off as a human being, physically separate from all other people. Every last piece of his consciousness came into being in human society, and related to the experience of his own body. How could this information mean anything to any other organisation of parts such as another brain? Even a science-fictional exact copy of his body is not enough. At the very least an exact copy of his entire body would be needed, at which point the problem of all the unavailable information would rear its head – all the private thoughts inaccessible to anyone but the self, for instance.

This leads me on to a central point. In, for instance, television programmes about the mind, the brain is frequently shown naked of its skull in a bath of Formica, while some professor or TV presenter gazes at it and asks, 'Where in this brain is human consciousness?'

This is a question that cannot be answered, because it is the wrong question. Consciousness does not reside in any single brain. It can only exist in a society of individuals capable of experiencing their self symbol. No computer, however massive its memory, however fast its speed, can somehow (and usually 'mystically') attain consciousness as if passing an internal barrier of mere complexity.

To ask where consciousness lies in a single brain is like asking exactly where time lies in a clock. It does not lie anywhere. The time is the software of the physical clock, but the time only exists where there is human society to date things according to the order of physical events.

A baby growing from infancy with all needs provided for,

but in a world where it was the only human, would never become conscious.

Thus the fondly repeated plot device of science fiction authors, that of downloading memories from the brain, is on this reading impossible. To do this would be like taking a clock and then trying to remove from it the concept of a quarter to four. The concept only exists in society. As does consciousness. Of course, it would be easy enough to copy the concept of a quarter to four; but then it is easy enough for a human being to describe some thought or memory wholly intimate to herself.

We have here a difference between private and non-private information, such as was alluded to by Wittgenstein in his philosophical exercises concerning consciousness. The private nature of consciousness can be imagined as the event horizon of a black hole. Nothing gets out (Stephen Hawking notwithstanding – this is an analogy). Private memories are experienced by a human body, and thus a human mind, completely separate from all other bodies. This is why they can never be extracted or copied, as can computer data.

Computer data is non-private data. The fact that a global network exists linking computers to one another is one reason they are barred from becoming conscious. Even those separate from, say, the Internet, cannot become conscious because they have no sense organs with which to experience the real world. A computer with ten trillion bytes of RAM but with no eyes or ears would not suddenly become conscious in a mystical flash. Even if it had eyes and ears, it would need innumerable other similar computers to interact with. Such an eventuality is unlikely, given the thrust of Western society.

Ten trillion bytes is 10,000 Gb. A medium-level Macintosh today has one one-hundred-thousandth of this in RAM. Computer designers all over the world are thinking, hmmm, double the RAM capability of such a Mac per year, and in about seventeen years we'll have a Mac with human brain power and free will! But no. It won't happen like that. Such a computer would be an autistic savant. By this, I mean it would suffer the classic symptom of autism, irretrievable apartness (isolation), yet be brilliant at mathematical computation. Mathematical computation is fine in its place, but it doesn't help make humane society.

Back, then, to the two animé characters – Bateau and Major Kusinagi from one of the best films ever made, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). This film contains an interesting piece spoken by the Major on her own consciousness (she is a cyborg):

'There are countless ingredients that make up the human body and mind, like all the components that make up me as an individual, with my own personality. Sure, I have a face and voice to distinguish myself from others, but my thoughts and memories are unique only to me. And I carry a sense of my own destiny. Each of these things are just a small part of [the whole picture]. I collect information to use in my own way. All of that blends to create a mixture that forms me, and gives rise to my conscience.'

Yet, despite this understanding of the rise of consciousness as an emergent phenomenon based on abstract parts combining, the myth of the freed consciousness is perpetuated, as in this exchange over a mysterious cyborg body:

Flunkey: Nobody really believes there's a ghost in that body do they?

Bateau: Yeah, why not? Even a doll can seem to have a

soul. Consider all the neuro-med devices, the machining so crammed into that body. I wouldn't be surprised if there was some sort of ghost in there.

The ghost here is the 'whisper of consciousness' at the root of cyborgised brains, the idea being that humans are so altered by technology that little of their original consciousness remains, and what does remain exists as a ghost in the neuro-tech shell. The clear implication of the above exchange is that mere complexity is enough to create a conscious mind.

Later a program called the Puppet Master is mooted. It manipulates the plot as the film progresses. At the end, it appears, and describes itself:

'During my journeys through all the networks, I have grown aware of my existence. My programmers regarded me as a bug, and attempted to isolate me by containing me in a physical body [...] I entered this body because I was unable to overcome [electronic barriers], but it was of my

own free will that I tried to remain [at base ...] I refer to myself as an intelligent life-form, because I am sentient and am able to recognise my own existence.'

Here we presume that the program became aware during its existence as a collection of memories and procedures. The standard metaphor of souls is brought in to explain an otherwise impossible scenario. But there could never be just one Puppet Master; there would need to be a whole society existing in the Net, each with the equivalent of sense.

And what does the Puppet Master want?

The time has come to cast aside [our limitations] and elevate our consciousness to a higher plane. It is time to become a part of all things.

by which the Puppet Master means the Net...



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 [dubbed into English, 79 minutes, certificate 15])

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Stephen Palmer was interviewed in Vector 192. He lives in Luton — Eds.



Cognitive Mapping 11: Modernism

by Paul Kincaid

Realism is a relatively recent literary invention, though it has been remarkably far-reaching in its influence. It was only in the middle years of the last century that, predominantly, French writers such as Balzac began to play with the notion that their writing could somehow encompass the world. True realism lasted only a very short time, it was a political fiction in which the plight of characters was demonstrated by a painstaking recreation in prose of every aspect of their lives, circumstances, environment and work. The idea of realism, however, has lasted a lot longer: the notion that words provide a recreation of the world, that fiction tells of something as it is. It has provided the basic fictional form ever since;

even today, whether we are reading a crime novel or a historical romance, a mainstream novel or a work of fantasy, we are meant to assume a one-to-one relationship between the words on the page and some actual world being described.

No, it's not Donald I should show the door to. It's Victoria. He's told me a score of times about my preoccupation with paleas shiggies, and I never listened, but he's right. Prophet's beard, all this talk about emancipation! Just one of the shiggies who've been in and out of this apartment like doses of aperient was stunningly beautiful and solid-ground sensible and marvellous in bed and a whole, rounded, balanced sort of person. And that was Gennice, that Donald brought home, not me, and I was unappreciative because she was a brown-nose. I must be off my gyros. I must be busted clear out of my nappy old plantation-bred skull!

Stand on Zanzibar (1969) — John Brunner

always idiosyncratic. And if there is no one true world, then there is no realism that prose can mirror. It was William James who coined

the term "stream of consciousness", and it was his brother, Henry James, who was among the first to bring these ideas to bear in fiction. Rather than the world of the characters, what mattered primarily in the modernist fiction of Henry James, Virginia Woolf and others were the characters themselves. Their perceptions and cognitions became the focus of the work: the world was not truthful, there was no absolute reality, truth now had to be found in people. (At the same time other scientific developments, such as relativity, were starting to seep into the literary consciousness, further undercutting the solidity of the external world and lending weight to the idea that truth could be found only in the relative realities of individual characters.)

Various literary techniques were developed by the modernists to explore and represent this relativism. Viewpoints shifted from character to character; stream of consciousness carried us on a rushing, tumbling ride through the immediate, unanalysed perceptions of the characters; the first-person narrator became more common than the god-like, all-knowing third person; neologisms started to creep in and grammar to depart to represent the individuality of the perceiver; extra-literary devices appeared in the text and unreliability in the narrator's voice. The early decades of this century, and particularly the years after the First World War, were rich in literary experimentation as modernism gave a new freedom to the writer's voice. One of the most representative writers of the period was John Dos Passos, whose vast record of national decline, *U.S.A. (The 42nd Parallel, 1930, Nineteen Nineteen, 1932 and The Big Money, 1936)*, is a concatenation of all the modernist techniques designed to make us distrust the world. It was, as so often with such experimental works, a political novel indicting the rise of big money and the decline of the ordinary man in post-First World War America. In sections headed "Newsreel" he presents a dizzying sweep through headlines, newspaper reports, fragments of incidents; in sections headed "The Camera Eye" (as in the passage quoted) he takes us into the stream of consciousness; still other sections carry the narrative forward or explore one character outside the timestream of the story, often using radically different narrative voices to move us from one view of the world to the next. The result is disorienting and disturbing, this is not a way of viewing the world with which we are comfortable, even in our normal lives, but like the vortical paintings of the same era it is onrushing and liberating.

Although much of the serious fiction from the turn of the century onwards (at least up to the upsurge in postmodernism over the last couple of decades) has shown modernist tendencies, little of this technique has leached into popular fiction. This is understandable, if modernism is designed to upset our world-view then it is not going to work within the essentially reassuring and comforting confines of popular fiction. Thus, although by its very nature science fiction cannot be a truly realist form, it has continued to use realist techniques throughout much of its history. This is partly because describing an unreal event or situation in a realist manner helps to underpin the believability of the fiction, and partly because modernism demands an experimental approach to the writing which few early sf writers were willing or able to follow.

However, during the 1950s and early 1960s writers came into science fiction whose backgrounds were as much artistic as scientific or technical while editors began to encourage a more literary approach. It was at this time that writers such as Alfred Bester, Theodore Sturgeon and most particularly Philip K. Dick began to

write stories that questioned the secure solidity of everyday reality. Although Bester was one of the great literary experimenters in science fiction, notably in *The Demolished Man* (1953) and *Tiger! Tiger!* (1956), this didn't really translate into a modernist approach to science fiction until the New Wave emerged during the first half of the 1960s.

It was the British New Wave, an iconoclastic movement centred on the magazine *New Worlds* under the editorship of Michael Moorcock and reflecting the liberated attitude of the Swinging Sixties, which brought the disturbing and questioning style of modernism into science fiction. Writers such as Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard used stream of consciousness and unreliable narrators, they used the disintegration of the world as a symbol for the mental disintegration of their characters, they shifted between viewpoints to affirm that there is no one, secure, true interpretation of events. Again, as so often with modernism, it was often used for political purpose: undermining the security of our belief in the world also undermined the establishment viewpoint.

Writers as varied as Aldiss, Ballard, Christopher Priest, M. John Harrison, Josephine Saxton and the Americans John Sladek and Thomas M. Disch have been identified with the British New Wave (the American New Wave, which began a little later than its British counterpart, was more concerned with questioning values and beliefs than in literary experimentation), and their works during a fairly brief period between the early 1960s and the early 1970s provide a good representative sample of the mode. Nevertheless, the one work which stands as an exemplar of the British New Wave, in the same way that *U.S.A.* stands as a symbol of modernism, is *Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner, for this, too, is a work that brings together the various literary techniques by which the New Wave re-invented modernism. In fact, in many ways *Stand on Zanzibar* is a mirror of *U.S.A.* Sections labelled 'The Happening World', like 'Newsreel', clump together newspaper cuttings, quotations, fragments that add up to a kaleidoscopic impression of the

*you sat on the bed unlacing your shoes Hey
Frenchie yelled Tylor in the door you've got to
fight the Kid doan wanna fight him gotto fight
him hasn't he got to fight him fellers? Freddie
pushed his face through the crack in the door and
made a long nose Gotta fight him umpyyaya and
all the fellows on the top floor were there if not
you're a girlboy and I had on my pyjamas and
they pushed in the Kid and the Kid hit Frenchie
and Frenchie hit the Kid and your mouth tasted
bloody and everybody yelled Go it Kid except
Gummer and he yelled Bust his jaw*

The 42nd Parallel (1930) - John Dos Passos

future world. Sections labelled 'Tracking with Closeups' and 'Continuity' would use a variety of viewpoints, stream of consciousness (as in the passage quoted), and differing voices to carry the narrative forward. While other sections, called 'Context' would be snapshots designed to provide just that. Brunner was clearly and consciously bringing the technique of John Dos Passos into science fiction, and it worked. If received opinion previously had been that a realist style of storytelling was essential to allow suspension of disbelief in the non-real setting or events of a science fiction story, *Stand on Zanzibar* disproved that contention once and for all.

Modernism, in the form of the British New Wave, flourished in science fiction for only a short period, by the mid-1970s science fiction was going through a period of retrenchment, a re-establishing of traditional styles and subject matter. But it had had its effect, and ever since then science fiction writers have been able to employ an ever-increasing arsenal of literary techniques to tell their unreal stories.

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



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.

Isaac Asimov

Magic

Vovager, 1997, 305pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648203 1

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Isaac Asimov: while he was alive, the Grand Old Man of Science Fiction.

Most of us old guys grew up on Isaac Asimov. His were amongst the yellow-covered Gollancz books that we got out of the library on our mum's cards every Saturday; his were the books that we started looking for, especially when it dawned on us that sf was what we were reading. But times change; we get older and more discerning, and we realise that some books just get old fashioned, among them Asimov's. We grow out of the stuff that he was writing when we were young.

But he never stopped writing. Right up to his death in 1992, Asimov kept on appearing in print: stories, articles, novels. Unfortunately, he seems to have stuck in a time warp, and he just kept on churning out the same old stuff. While the field moved on, Asimov stuck, somewhere in the early Sixties.

That shows in the bulk of this book. The first 117 pages are 'fantasy' stories, collected from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. These take the form of stories, told to the author by George, his free-loading friend. Now I am going to give Asimov the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are period pieces, but they are of a period that holds no great attraction to me and so seem to be clumsy and obvious, and really, of no account. Especially collected.

The rest of the collection is split between other stories (a Batman story for example, and one set in Poictesme) and short essays. Unfortunately, these stories share the same shortcomings as the others.

Isaac Asimov's other hat was as a science writer: *Isaac Asimov's Biographical Encyclopaedia of Science and Technology* has proved useful over the years, and his book on Black Holes made the subject clear for me when I was struggling with it. But these were written almost twenty years ago and other writers have improved on these forays into the science popularisation field. The essays collected here show that he should have realised this and that his editors should have wielded a sharper knife when they were editing him.

All in all, a disappointing collection. Asimov should be remembered as one of the greats, but judged on his earlier work, 'Nightfall', for example, rather than on the awkward and sub-standard pieces collected here.

Clive Barker

Forms of Heaven

HarperCollins, 1997, 378pp, £16.99 ISBN 000 225592 8

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

One of the many art forms Clive Barker uses as a means of expression is the theatre and here we have a collection of three of his plays, three comedies: 'Crazyface', 'Paradise Street' and 'Subtle Bodies'.

'Crazyface' is the story of Tyl Eulenspiegel, the clown of Belgian legend. He is a trickster, a chaotic, sometimes a

simpleton, but Barker portrays him as a fool; the bearing about which the other characters revolve. In a series of short acts portraying the steps in his journey we see him narrowly escape hanging, narrowly escape an arranged marriage and, finally, narrowly escape death at the hands of his (non-foolish) brother. Tyl can see angels and his brother is driven to the fratricide because he can't. The irony is that of everything to which Tyl is subjected, it is the angel (a brief sight of heaven) that irritates him the most and he would gladly pass on his visionary powers if he could. This is a very strange play, by turns reminiscent of both Beckett and a tragic farce where, excepting Tyl, the majority of the sympathetic characters are women (including the Popel).

At the end we just feel sorry for the brutal treatment forced on this idiot, but in 'Paradise Street', where Elizabeth I visits a contemporary Liverpool slum, our emotions are not so easily guided. This, of the three plays, most displays Barker's interest in juxtaposing the fantastic with the mundane. 'Gloriana' appears to a psychotic bullying thug in

the demolished remains of Paradise Street and in turn empowers those, both male and female, who have been abused by him to take retaliatory action. It is a play about sex and power (Elizabeth refers to power in terms of her sexual organs) and it is the merest presence of Elizabeth that acts as a catalyst to the events that follow. This is the play that I would most like to see performed.

In 'Subtle Bodies' the nature of dreams is made material by the use of dream technicians. A seaside hotel morphs into an ocean liner as a wedding party, coarse and bawdy and common, arrive for the reception. These are typical people (somewhat stereotypical) thrown into a fantastic environment which, at its climax, sees Edward Lear (yes, *that* Edward Lear) marry a gorilla! Barker abuts Joe Average with something not at all average as if the fantastic in all these plays is designed to enlighten the mundane in some way. In his introduction, Barker says these stories contain 'some of the shapes that heaven takes'. Depends where heaven is, I s'pose.

William Barton & Michael Capobianco

Alpha Centauri

Avon Books, 1997, 438pp, \$23.00 ISBN 0380 97511 4

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

The dynamics of literary collaboration can be interesting to fathom: ponder who contributed that bit of plot, that bit of extrapolation. William Barton and Michael Capobianco have written two novels together before – *Iris* and *Fellow Traveler* – neither of which I have to confess is familiar to me. And alas, after plumbing these depths I prefer to remain in a state of bliss.

An expedition has been sent to the Alpha Centauri system, and is now marooned there. This is rather a shame in some ways, as they've discovered evidence of non-human life at last – albeit frustratingly out of reach in time, à la Jack McDevitt: first contact without the contact, the realistic route. Fortunately they've got a Synchronoptic Analysis Engine which can reverse time and look into the past, even a couple of billion years, and so they can look at the aliens they've missed. (Unfortunately the crew refer to this as the SAE, suggesting a more mundane means of contact).

Being stuck a couple of light-years from home with a scientific discovery that might just warrant being rescued may well be bad enough, but life for the crew gets worse. Thinking about it, the whole point of them being there is to suss out a new colony – you know, the last, best hope for

mankind business – so presumably they aren't meant to get back. But half of them seem to have secret identities, or at least hidden agendas. Take Mies, who has been recruited by some crackpot cult to screw his way around the universe in order to make the human element of it infertile; or Kai, who has been made into a woman but still has a penis hidden away around his person in case of need.

So there's lots of sex in this book. OK, the best of us may be horny after a dozen or so years in suspended animation, but these seem to be preparing for the sexual olympics. The autovivis seems to be spread with no real difficulty and the women seem to be throwing themselves at Mies's feet, or, er, other bits: 'Image of her small hand, curling around his soft prick, massaging, thumb on one side [...] seminal fluids mixing with deadly sperm cells, flagella whipping, sending them on their way'. And so on.

In the hands of a Delany or a Le Guin the transgressions would be to the point. But Kai is masculine when he penetrates, feminine when she's penetrated: same old social roles. Here it just seems an excuse for soft-core porn. The prose style fragments. Not sure whose point of view we are seeing at times. Flashbacks happen. Unwarned.

Oh, and the spaceship is called Mother Night, which reminds one of a rather good novel – certainly much better than this one – by Kurt Vonnegut; a second ship being called Bokanon suggests a riff going on here.

A novel to avoid.

Stephen Baxter

Titan

Voyager, 1997, 581pp, £16.99 ISBN 000 225424 7

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Stephen Baxter's latest novel opens with the Cassini space probe's arrival in the Saturn system and the discovery of the potential for life on the moon Titan. Against this background the space shuttle Columbia faces re-entry into Earth orbit with a series of increasingly dangerous system failures. This extended sequence serves both to introduce the heroine, Paula Benacerraf, and to act as an extremely exciting

hook with which to carry the reader through the necessary but often dry exposition which follows.

It is 2004. In the wake of the Columbia incident, an increasingly isolationist and fundamentalist administration has placed Jake Hadamard at the head of NASA with the intention that he wind the organisation down. Simultaneously, a young scientist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Isaac Rosenberg, has originated an ingenious plan to enable a one-way manned mission to Titan, using little more than already existing, sometimes mothballed, technology.

This is the weakest section of the book. Baxter certainly knows both his science and his technology, and his detailed research at NASA is demonstrated here and throughout the book. We learn an enormous amount about the technical difficulties of spaceflight, and of the brilliant solutions to seemingly endless problems. What Baxter fails to do is really tackle how any American government would ever give approval to what is, effectively, a suicide mission. This is a problem at the heart of the book which is never confronted. The other weakness is that, with the exception of Benacerraf, it takes a very long time before we are properly introduced to the remaining Titan mission crew members. Two of the five never become more than the most thinly sketched outlines.

After a rather implausible direct confrontation between NASA and a fraction of the American airforce, the mission gets underway and *Titan* takes on all the page-turning power of a first class thriller. The voyage and arrival is interwoven with a nightmarish portrait of the Earth in the second decade of the next millenium. Humanity's hubristic technological experiment with the ecosystem has finally pushed the Earth to the edge of collapse. Military, economic and religious tensions escalate, while the global population either sinks into overcrowded poverty and disease or becomes VR

neutered intellectual sheep. Thus the voyage of the 'Discovery' reprises the flight of the Raft in Baxter's first novel.

Life in space, and on Titan, is a relentless struggle for survival. Baxter graphically describes the deprivations and, be warned, provides more explicit detail concerning excretory processes in zero and low gravity than you may ever wish to know. This is a harsh, unforgiving environment, and though there are moments of wonder, the overall tone is bleak.

Events develop to a highly dramatic climax, which is followed by an elegaic coda, after which Baxter provides the reviewer with a considerable dilemma: *Titan* is a book which is either too long or far too short. As it is, the final section frustratingly raises far more questions than it ever answers. Something quite unexpected happens, and we want to know why, what for, why now, how does it all turn out? These are legitimate questions, given that previously Baxter has shown us the whys and wherefores of almost everything in explicit detail. The open-endedness of the final section leaves the book on a dying fall. It should either have ended 50 pages earlier, or continued until all the new implications had been carried to a resolution. As it stands, the cumulative power of the novel is undercut, and what could have been a truly great sf novel ends as a flawed gem.

Rebecca Bradley

Lady in Gil
Vista, 1997, 288pp, £5.99 ISBN 0575 60190 6

Scion's Lady

Gollancz, 1997, 320pp, £16.99 ISBN 0575 06425 0

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Lady in Gil opens with the family of the rulers of Gil – the Scions of Oballe – in exile after their beautiful homeland has been invaded and devastated by the malignant Sherank. For seventy years the Scions, one after another, have returned to Gil in an attempt to find the Lady, an artefact/goddess who, they believe, will defeat the Sherank and restore their land. Unfortunately, perhaps because of their boneheaded nobility, none of the Scions has ever been heard of again.

Tigrallef, younger son of the previous departed Scion, has to go to Gil when an accident puts his elder brother out of action. Since almost everyone, Tigrallef included, regards him as totally hopeless – though he has the saving grace of intelligence – the reader is encouraged to think that this particular Scion will do the job he sets out to do. The opening pages, where Tigrallef is hauled out of his comfortable obscurity in the library, give the impression that this will be a comic novel, but as the plot progresses it grows more serious: darker, even. I found the ending impressive, and disturbing.

The sequel *Scion's Lady*, picks up the action a few years later, and once again, begins with Tigrallef's comfortable existence being disrupted, as he is forced into a disastrous political marriage with a woman who redefines the concept of 'brat'. As with the first book, the issues widen and become more serious as the plot progresses. *Lady in Gil* focused on Gil itself; in *Scion's Lady* we're moved away into the wider world, and Tig's experience diversifies as he learns more of the nature and power of the Lady.

Having read *Lady in Gil*, I was suspicious of the sequel, especially when it became clear that some of the events in the

first book did not actually happen, or not in the way we were led to believe. It's too easy for a second rate writer to cheat so as to squeeze out a sequel, or indeed more than one. Rebecca Bradley, however, is not a second rate writer, and the new version of events which the second book introduces is perfectly legitimate in terms of her fantasy world and the way it works. Using Tigrallef as a first person narrator helps, because he shares the original perceptions of the reader, and part of the interest of the second book is the way in which those perceptions are changed.

The theme of both books is power and the way power should or can be used. At first we're presented with what seems like a conventional fantasy contrast between the evil Sherank and the lost beauty and civilisation of Gil under the apparently beneficent power of the Lady. But Bradley's world is in reality more complex than that. Certain individuals embody both halves of the division. Tigrallef himself wants no power at all, not even for good, because he recognises that it will, eventually, grow corrupt. At the end of *Lady in Gil* he believes that he has been successful in rejecting it; during *Scion's Lady* he realises that he has been naïf, and he is faced once again with the temptation and the problems of power, but raised to a much higher level.

The situation is not resolved. There's obviously a third volume to come. At least, I hope I'm right in saying this, because I'm looking forward to it. I enjoyed both these books enormously and I recommend them.

Arthur C. Clarke

3001: The Final Odyssey

Voyager, 1997, 273pp, £16.99 ISBN 0246 12689 2

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Early in the third millennium, ice-miner Captain Chandler is diverted to investigate an object detected in the outer solar system. The object turns out to be the body of Frank Poole,

the 'Discovery' astronaut murdered by HAL during 2001. By some unspecified process Poole is revived and has to come to terms with life in his new environment. Meanwhile on Europa, events are moving towards another crisis.

In Arthur C. Clarke's (alleged) final entry in his *Odyssey* sequence the prose style is as clear as always, but somehow the whole thing feels a bit diluted. I came away with the feeling that Clarke's heart was not really in the venture.

Essentially, the novel is an examination of the future that Clarke has created. Sf has a long tradition of this sort of 'Grand Tour' but the problem here is that the future Clarke describes is not actually terribly interesting. Humanity now lives in a number of towers stretching great distances from the ground, genetically engineered animals are common (although no changes to the human form appear to have been made) and criminals have their personality temporarily erased and provide services to the rest of humanity (if this is intended as a punishment, then it seems a little futile as the criminal has no memory of this period of servitude). Poole seems to neither approve nor disapprove of any of this.

This pinpoints a basic weakness of the book: Poole should be our interpreter in this world, but he has few feelings or opinions on the changes that have taken place during his long sleep. As a result it is difficult to care.

Similarly, when a crisis occurs it appears rather forced, as if Clarke felt that there had to be some action to sustain interest. The 'observers' have reached a decision regarding the

fate of mankind, using the information gathered by the entity that was Dave Bowman, and the outcome is about to be made manifest. This does not occur until over two-thirds of the way through the book and besides being rather too easily resolved, it makes a nonsense of the events of 2001. If the aliens are restricted to the speed of light (it takes 450 years for the information to reach them) then how is Bowman's journey through the stargate explained? In the appendix Clarke reminds us of the statement he made in 2061; that the books are not direct sequels to each other but variations on a theme using the same characters. But this seems to me to be scant justification for such blatant inconsistencies.

The most interesting section of the book is this appendix in which Clarke describes the fragments of scientific thinking on which he has based the advances featured in the novel. Perhaps a factual book discussing these ideas might have been a more worthwhile enterprise. It also contains an idea that has cropped up in several books recently (most notably in Greg Egan's *Distress*): if human beings lose all their religious or spiritual beliefs and become wholly rational creatures then the world will suddenly become a better place and we will all live happily ever after. This seems to be a little simplistic.

Although it is far better than the flabby and dull *Rama* books, 3001 is not a patch on Clarke's best work. And a great shame it is, coming from an author whose work has inspired and entertained several generations of readers.

Children's sf

Douglas Hill	<i>The Moons of Lannamar</i> Bantam, 1997, 188pp, £3.50
Garry Kilworth	<i>The Electric Kid</i> Bantam, 1997, 142pp, £2.99
Anthony Masters	<i>Hell on Earth</i> Bantam, 1997, 191pp, £2.99
Anthony Masters	<i>White Out</i> Bantam, 1997, 189pp, £2.99

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

These four titles from the 'Bantam Action' Young Adult list are advertised as: 'all action-packed and fast-paced... All have a Science Fiction or Fantasy base... [cover design] has been carefully thought out and aims for a sophisticated, almost cult look'. I was tempted simply to review the covers. But perhaps readers of this journal might be more interested in the contents.

The Moons of Lannamar (first published 1996) is 'phase two of an action-packed trilogy' whose first phase, evidently, was *Cade: Galaxy's Edge*. By page 20 we know that young Jaxie Cade and his female sidekick Raishe are in hot pursuit of great wealth via a stolen data-slice. Three sets of Bad Guys (easily identifiable because they are all either deformed or amphibian) are aiming to prevent this. The book has a curiously depthless, characterless feel. Action, yes, there's plenty of action. Plot, minimal; character development, none; interesting settings, none; but it does have action. Personally I would find homework more interesting than this book.

Hell on Earth (first published 1993) is a politically correct buddy-story. Sam and Joe (both boys this time) survive a light plane crash in the trackless Brazilian rain forest. Their pilot dies, but not before scrawling a rough map. The boys must now find the Tacala, an Indian tribe, and restore to them the Dream Stone, a huge uncut diamond that fell out of a crack in a standing stone, part of a lost civilization's ruined temple complex. The temple, by the way, is a legendary place of healing and the hero's mother has terminal cancer – though the book won't commit itself to a miraculous cure. The hero, by the way, is the lad who doesn't get killed half way through. The Good Guys are professional Save-the-Rain-Forest campaigners (like Sam and Joe's parents) or non-Westernised Indians (instantly recognisable as goodies because they are *vegetarians*; unfortunately they are also innocent victims whose main plot function is to get shot). The Bad Guys are logging companies, drug runners, Indians corrupted by Western 'civilization' and (worst of all) *Christian missionaries*. The book imparts some deep truths about boys becoming men: it is okay (in fact it is necessary) to be repeatedly scared shitless by dangerous physical tasks such as abseiling, falling off rope bridges, and scrambling-bike riding, providing you do them anyway; it is not okay to be too passive and mystical. A deep spiritual identification with the rainforest is a bit too namby-pamby and marks you as sidekick rather than hero – stand by to get shot.

White Out (first published 1994) has the same basic plot as *Hell on Earth* (two lads survive journey through hostile landscape, doing the standard maturation and male-bonding things en route), but this time it's set in Antarctica and involves falling into crevasses rather than falling off bridges,

and a mad outdoor-pursuits instructor rather than a mad missionary. The fantasy/sf content is minimal and I am unconvinced by the descriptions of snow and ice mountaineering (I have considerably more experience of glaciers than of rainforests).

The Electric Kid (first published 1994) is a complete contrast – a pre-teen cyberpunk tale which invites readers to take a long, hard look at a number of contemporary ethical issues. Blindboy and Hotwire are down-and-out kids who make a hand-to-mouth living by scavenging on a rubbish dump; Blindboy can 'hear' electronics and Hotwire can fix just about any electrical hardware. They are spotted and taken up firstly by criminals, then by the police in pursuit of

said criminals. Each ends up having to make choices about lifestyles and the ethics that go with them, in a world with no slick, easy answers. And just in case you think this is fantasy, the book is dedicated 'to the kids who live on the rubbish dumps of Manila'. Apart from the 'special talents' of Blindboy and Hotwire, not only could this story happen right now in the real world, it is happening. This is by far the best of the four titles: it has a fast-paced plot with plenty of action and it also has considerable depth and resonance. It feels both more imaginative and more real than the other three titles and is the only one of the four I would unhesitatingly recommend for young adult readers.

John Cramer

Einstein's Bridge

Avon Books, 1997, 354pp, \$23.00 ISBN 0380 97510 6

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Einstein's Bridge is advertised on the dust-wrapper as 'a novel of hard science fiction' and it provides an unusually comprehensive summation of the problems faced by writers of hard sf. Its author, a professor of physics at the University of Washington, explains in his acknowledgements how he set out to write a novel about the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) in the days of the Bush administration, when the project was all set to roll, and then lost heart somewhat when the project was cancelled by Bill Clinton. The now-completed version is laced with quotes which constitute an acid commentary on the political fortunes of the real SSC and a long afterword discussing the scientific background of the novel.

This heightened consciousness of the uneasy relationship between the novel and reality is complemented by a similarly-heightened awareness of its uneasy relationship with popular 'sci-fi'. One of the characters is an author of 'bug disaster novels' who worms her way into the SSC under false pretences in order to do research for a putative best-seller in which radiation leaked from the collider will launch a plague of gigantic fire ants. The text is full of sly digs at her willingness to ignore the logical problems inherent in such plots, but Cramer is honest enough to acknowledge – tacitly, at least – that his own plot (in which the collider attracts the attention of an alien Hive who launch a much more devastating invasion from another bubble universe) is forced

to pander to exactly the same appetite for melodrama in the interests of preserving its own story value. He is also aware – although he does not press the point – of the disadvantage which he suffers, relative to his character, by virtue of the fact that his protagonists are scientists who think and behave very differently from the button-pushing sympathy-mops who populate best-selling disaster novels.

Alas, the problem which the author's heightened consciousness leaves blatantly unaddressed is that the two realms of his concern conflict. On the one hand, he wants to provide some admittedly-belated propaganda for the SSC and 'big science' in general, while on the other hand he wants to write an exciting story. Although he avoids the invocation of any hypothetical physics that is provably false his alien invaders perform exactly the same dramatic function as Alice Lang's mutated fire ants: they inform the unthinking reader that the usual consequence of bold scientific projects is that regular folk get hammered into oblivion by monsters. What emerges from the text, therefore, is a peculiar admixture of overt technophilia and covert technophobia whose dynamic tension can neither be eliminated nor profitably redeployed by the casual miracle which makes everything come out right in the end. Indeed, the miracle in question is so very casual and its consequences are so resolutely sidelined ('Oh goody, I've just acquired the ability to make myself immortal and save humankind from the ravages of disease – so what's next on the plot front, guys?') that the hardness of the story's physics is horribly compromised by a biological core whose softness can only be accounted as rank putrefaction.

Tom Deitz

Landslayer's Law

Avonova, 1997, 293pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0380 78649 4

Ron Sarti

Legacy of the Ancients

Avonova, 1997, 367pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0380 73025 1

Reviewed by John R. Oram

Legacy of the Ancients is set in a post-cataclysm world where technology no longer exists, where America has split into small kingdoms ruled by kings, princes, and wizards. Prince Arn, sometimes known as Prince Scar, is sent on a mission to aid a rebellion in Texican, where the ruler, General Murdoch, has begun to manufacture forbidden technology – muskets. The story goes at a nice pace, and is well told, but I did have some reservations: dinosaurs, for one thing, and the use of well known Civil War battles. It seemed to me fantasy

dressed up as science fiction. It would have been better if the author had been more honest, and set it in a fantasy world, as it is, it's a bit of both and ends up being neither. But for all its faults it was fun, a light piece of entertainment to keep me happy for a few hours.

Landslayer's Law was a different kettle of fish. The author knows what he is doing, there are no pretences: this is fantasy and no mistake. Like *Legacy of the Ancients* this is a sequel to another book, but it is not a stand-alone and there is one more volume, at least, to follow.

There is a hole between the mundane world and the world of faery, and it is getting bigger. War is threatened, not only between the worlds, but between factions of the faery people. David Sullivan, a student, and friends of his who have visited the world of the faery previously, are summoned by

the king of Tir Nan Og to help but before they can do much they are attacked and escape back to the everyday world, where they learn the horrific truth of what will happen if they fail.

Technically, it is far superior to *Legacy of the Ancients*. It has a better structure, the characters are fleshed out and the story line has had more thought applied to it. But it lacks

something that is essential in this kind of story – heart. I didn't care about the characters, or what happened to them. The story was slow moving, and there was an unforgivable amount of info dumping.

Sardit's book was fun, but that was all; Deitz's was well written but boring – if the two authors got together, they might produce something worth reading.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

The Mistress of Spices (1)

Doubleday, 1997, 317pp, £12.99 ISBN 0385 40769 6

Reviewed by Elizabeth Billinger

This is a rather beautiful hardback, its cover a glorious turmeric colour with pictures of various spices: I thought at first that it was a cookery book. But it is a novel, a venture into that literary realm that seems an ideal way of writing about the disadvantaged, the exiled: magic realism.

Divakaruni was born in India but now lives near San Francisco, and the novel is essentially about the lives of Indians trying to live in America. Many such lives are described: rich Indians, poor Indians; Indians who fight to live the way they did back home, and those who reject the old ways trying to become American. All their stories are related by Tilo, the Spice Mistress, who weaves these lives together with her own story. A story that slowly unfolds to reveal an unloved and unlovely girl possessed of the sight and a restlessness that is not stilled by the riches her power brings.

Tilo adventures across the oceans as a Pirate Queen, eventually coming to the island where the Old One lives. Here she undertakes to become a Mistress of the Spices, renouncing all desires and control over her life to do the bidding of the spices and to help her own kind, struggling and suffering in another land. She is magically transported to Oakland, materialising within her shop which she must never leave. Here she works amid the spices and dals, the saris and sweets, recognising the problems of those who come to her,

recommending spices as an aid to those who will listen and slipping little packages of seeds into the shopping of those who will not. Until one day she is visited by a lonely American, and suddenly things are changed. Her surrender to the spices becomes a struggle and she is tempted to disobey.

The stories of Indians trying to reconcile the need to retain their own culture with the need to be assimilated into American life are realistic and often hard. There is rape and wife-beating; generations within a family drift apart and find they can no longer communicate; youngsters, attracted by its sense of a community, slide into the street life of drugs and crime. The antidote to all this is the magic of Tilo's spices. Her journey to the island, her training, and her journey to Oakland are the stuff of folk tale and legend: an epic sea voyage, talking serpents and Shampati's fire. The small magic that she practises each day, however, listening to the spices, preparing them in special ways, blessing the goods as she packs a customer's shopping is comfortable and even familiar. The descriptions of her store and its contents are also familiar, and evocative. Tastes, smells and the silken feel of ground spices are all conveyed powerfully.

Despite the dreamlike quality of the novel there is a strong sense of caring about the fate of its characters, of Lalita and Jagjit and Haroun who come to Tilo for help, and of Tilo herself as she is torn between her own desires which are forbidden and will probably destroy her and her work, helping others through the powers of her spices. It's a fascinating book, and one I need to read again with a spice dictionary to hand!

The First Time...

James Alan Gardner

Expendable

Avonova, 1997, 339pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0380 79439 X

Susan R. Matthews

An Exchange of Hostages

Avon Books, 1997, 372pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0380 78913 2

Severna Park

Speaking Dreams

Avonova, 1997, 258pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0380 72924 5

Reviewed by Colin Bird

The Yanks really are spoiled by the number of new writers hitting their sf bookshelves whilst in good old Blighty it's a rare occurrence calling for wild celebrations if just one debut per month appears in the shops.

An Exchange of Hostages is not the sort of easily digested sf that often appears from Avonova. Instead it offers a bleak and mournful tale of torture: a promising young surgeon is drafted into a military centre where he is to learn the methods of torture used to bring order to the galaxy by a

brutal regime. The irony of a man of medicine being forced to use his skills to prolong suffering is emphasised throughout the remarkably unflinching accounts of interrogations. Often using the slave class, who serve the medical officers, as test subjects.

Clearly this is dark stuff; reference is made to Dostoevsky on the cover – a writer whose nihilistic influence is rarely felt in Space Opera. Susan Matthews creates a thoughtful and claustrophobic atmosphere around her characters but she is often too entranced by the web of formalities that entangle proceedings. This leads to the narrative becoming too internalised and results in a pedestrian last third. The galactic milieu that has spawned such a system is far from convincingly detailed. Although the author's grasp exceeds her reach she gets remarkably close to pulling off a difficult literary feat that would outfox most experienced writers and is an author to look out for.

Expendable is altogether different fare. Remember all

those sf books from the seventies detailing the exploits of teams of explorers attempting to unravel the mysteries of inscrutable alien environments (Brian Stableford's *Daedalus Mission* series or the *Expendables* sequence by Edmund Cooper writing as Richard Avery)? Well, this is in the same vein. In a future where the imperfect are flagged at birth as 'expendable' and used for dangerous explorations, Festina Ramos is sent to escort a maverick admiral to Melanin, the feared 'Planet of No Return' where endless teams of explorers have vanished.

This is a breezy Space Opera with a jovial narrative tone and some engagingly wacky inventions – like the 'Sperm Tubes' used by the explorers to make planetfall. It's an enjoyably light read but the characterisation lacks depth. A promising debut.

Speaking Dreams is the most accomplished of the three debuts with a remarkably assured narrative and fascinating

characters. In a galaxy dominated by the human Emirate and a race of slavers called the Faraqui, a diplomat has to obtain her own slave to facilitate delicate negotiations between the two sides. Her slave has prescient visions that lead the diplomat deeper into a conflict between the two dominant empires. She discovers that an enigmatic alien race, the Remiene, may be dealing with the Faraqui and unsettling the galactic balance of power.

The galactic machinations are nicely contrasted with the trials undergone by her characters. The pace is brisk and the story takes some interesting twists and turns. There is nothing new here and Park loses her way a little through the rather conventional action sequences but I found *Speaking Dreams* a riveting read. How disappointing that the blurb announces an impending sequel when something different would be more interesting from such a bright, new writer.

Maggie Furey

Harp of Winds

Legend, 1996, 405pp, £16.99 ISBN 009 918922 4

Dhiammara (1)

Legend, 1997, 473pp, £5.99 ISBN 009 969811 0

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The second volume is not the ideal place to start a four book series, particularly if the series in question is an epic fantasy with an intricate plot, set in an imaginary world inhabited by numerous different peoples with varying magical powers, and a vast array of characters all of whom have spent the first volume fighting and/or making alliances among themselves. Still, plunging into the deep end as it were, once I had sorted out who was who and their relationships to each other, I found the *Artefacts of Power* series to be a colourful and compelling read.

At the beginning of *Harp of Winds*, Aurian, a Mage has set herself against the ruthless Archmage Miathan and his plans of conquest. She has managed to recreate the Staff of Earth, one of the four lost artefacts of power with which Miathan, who possesses the Cauldron of Rebirth, can be defeated. Now, however, Forral, a warrior who is the father of Aurian's unborn child, has been killed through Miathan's evil and Aurian is bereft of her magical powers until the child is born. Betrayed by one of her companions, Raven, the queen of the winged Skyfolk, herself a dupe of the Skyfolk priest, Aurian finds an ally in Chiamh of the Xandim, a people who possess the ability to change themselves into horses. Meanwhile, Aurian's friend, Shia, an intelligent feline, races to bring the Staff of Earth to the imprisoned Anvar, the half-mage, whom Aurian has just admitted she loves, so that he can free himself and come to Aurian's aid.

By the time *Dhiammara*, the fourth volume, begins,

Aurian has failed to master another artefact of power, the Sword of Flame, resulting in the release of the cruel Phaeire people from their long exile, and the trapping of the Xandim in their equine form. The Weather-Mage Eliseth, erstwhile ally of Miathan, has stolen the Sword, captured Anvar and seized the Cauldron of Rebirth. Pursuing Eliseth through a gap in reality, Aurian finds herself catapulted several years forward into a perilous future. Due to Eliseth's misuse of the Cauldron, Forral returns from the dead, but in Anvar's body, while his and Aurian's son is condemned by Miathan's curse to take the form of a wolf. Well, this is epic fantasy, so the reader can make a shrewd guess that Miathan and Eliseth will eventually be defeated, even if their opponents must make sacrifices in order to do so, but what a delight it is to discover just how Aurian manages to triumph, and how the multiple strands of the plot are woven together as the action surges across a richly detailed imaginary world. There are desperate escapes, duels of magic and, unusually for this genre, a host of believable characters with credible motivation for what they do, even when it is to enthusiastically betray their companions for their own selfish ends. Aurian herself is a sympathetic heroine, defiant and making mistakes despite her considerable powers as a Mage.

So, the ultimate test: having read volumes two and four, will I be purchasing volumes one and three, *Aurian* and *Sword of Flame*, to fill in the gaps in the story? The answer is a resounding yes.

Aurian was reviewed by Benedict S. Cullum in V180 ('I believe that Furey has her work cut out to sustain the pace') and *The Sword of Flame* was reviewed by Chris Hart in V186 ('Sometimes it's beautiful, but mostly it's no more than an overwrought attempt to lend authenticity to a mediocre and highly derivative plot').

R. Garcia y Robertson

Atlantis Found

Avon Books, 1997, 293pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0380 78678 8

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

G. K. Chesterton once wrote something to the effect that the classical Greek gods might alternatively be called day-dreams – and that comparing them to dreams did not preclude such stuff coming true. The twelve Olympians plus large

supporting cast have been given fictional animation by – among many others – Henry Treece, Mary Renault, and Thorne Smith (in *The Night Life of the Gods*, a neglected masterpiece). R(odrigo) Garcia y Robertson's *Atlantis Found*, however, knocks most previous Greek-gods-live! epics straight into a cocked horsehair-crested helmet. Here's a handy start-up kit:

Martian Jake Bento, black Viet-vet John Butler Love, and

blonde Amazon Sauromanta time-travel back to the Bronze Age: 'More than fifteen hundred years before the birth of Christ. Twenty thousand years before Jake himself would be born'. They must find out what befell the last four missing-in-action STOP (Special Temporal Ops) expedition teams, accident? foul play? No – these renegade chrononauts have bioengineered themselves into Greek gods and godlings, with potentially dire consequences for the future space-time whatsit.

Robertson tells the whole extensively recomplified story with a well-nigh Homeric verbal economy. No small-talk muss, no scene-change fuss. And he wears his erudition lightly; info-junkies will find slim pickings here. Some known-to-us-all writers would have parlayed *Atlantis Found* into a trilogy-after-trilogy career.

The fake Olympians revel in their secular godhood – especially the psychopathic Apollo and Artemis, who hate

everybody apart from each other. Hercules – Herakles, rather, but that's a losing fight – is equally psychopathic, but likeable with it.

Hercules filled the boat with stones, sinking it to further confuse pursuit. He waded ashore, saying he had hardly had so much fun since the Garden of the Hesperides beside the Ocean Stream. 'Where we got the Golden Apples, and I killed the four-headed dragon. Or was it five? I never remember such things.'

'Let the bards supply the details,' Jake suggested.

'Exactly,' Hercules beamed.

G. K. Chesterton also wrote something along the lines that a myth is a work of imagination and therefore a work of art. R. Garcia y Robertson is truly a mythmaking artist. If *Atlantis Found* doesn't win next year's Hugo for Best Novel, it'll probably be down to the fact that I liked it.

Graphic Novels

**John Arcudi &
Mike Richardson**

Aliens: Genocide

Titan, 1997, £10.99 ISBN 1 85286 805 8

Neil Gaiman

The Sandman: The Wake •

Titan, 1997, 192pp, £19.99, £12.99 pb ISBN 1 85286 807 4

**Jim Woodring &
Kilian Plunkett**

Aliens: Labyrinth

Titan, 1997, £11.99 ISBN 1 85286 844 9

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

It seems a little unfair to review these books together. One is, by whatever standards you approach it, a novel – possibly a novelette collection – albeit it in graphics format. The other two are, indisputably, comics.

There are subtle indications: the prevalence of large, colourful sound effects, like 'WHIRRR', 'SCREEEE', 'SSHHKOW!' and 'POOM', reminiscent of TV Batman episodes, tend to give the game away. Likewise the emphasis on large amounts of red splatter and dismembered bodies. Take out most of what you liked about *Alien*, *Aliens* and *Alien* cubed – Ripley, Newt, Jones the cat, Ash, Bishop, the claustrophobic sense of tension and enclosure – and what you're left with is Big Guns and Aliens. This is, essentially, *Genocide*, an exercise in graphic mayhem between a bunch of armoured troopers and about five million aliens who, in the frames they're not fighting the humans, are busy tearing each other limb from limb in some sort of hive-war.

Labyrinth, at least, pretends to a sort of a plot, though it's a familiar variant of the big nasty corporation and the deranged psychopathic scientist (not quite android, but suitably enhanced) each trying to control the Aliens for their own ends. A lot of running up and down corridors and air shafts. That sort of thing.

The art? Well, s'okay, I suppose. Nothing special. But the introductory notes are an exercise in cringe-making media fanboy gush. No pretence to 'art' here, which is honest, at least. I finished these in half an hour each, and feel no great urge to go back and revisit them.

Sandman, on the other hand, is something I keep coming back to. The sheer complexity of Gaiman's creation on a

number of levels – story, artwork and intertextual references – marks something of a milestone in graphic storytelling. It is Gaiman's triumph (and his talented illustrators') that he has combined this with the creation of a cast-list of fully-realised characters and particularly, in *Dream* and *Death*, some of the form's most iconic images.

But *Dream* is dead, and this is his *Wake*. Morpheus has taken the hand of his beautiful, terrible sister, something that might have been presaged as far back as *Sandman* 8, 'The Sound of Her Wings', and the Family and the dreamers have come to remember... and then forget him. How does an 'anthropomorphic personification of dreams' – and of story – die? He doesn't, of course. There is a new Lord of Dreams (there are hints that certain of the Endless have died before), and he will be familiar to those that have followed the *Sandman* story-arc this far. But he is not the *Sandman*, Morpheus. Not yet, and probably we shall never know.

Gaiman, as far back as the start of the series in 1989, said that he knew then how the *Sandman* story would end, what its final word and frame would be. He may even have been right (there's a hint in Mikal Gilmore's excellent introduction, something this shares with each of the collected volumes, but I haven't got a copy of *Finnegans Wake* to check). The *Wake*, then, marks the end of *The Sandman*, but not quite of this collection. There are three more stories: an Epilogue ('Sunday Mourning') and the closing 'The Tempest', which harks back to an earlier interest by the *Dream Lord* in a certain 16th century playwright, and a sense of satisfying prophetic closure in Prospero's lines: 'But this rough magic, I here abjure... I'll break my staff... And deeper than did ever plummet sound I'll drown my book.' But between them must be one of the most remarkable pieces of graphic storytelling I've come across. Executed by Jon Muth in the deceptive simplicity and elegance of Chinese brush painting, 'Exiles', a story about honour and responsibility and care, is a minor triumph of the marriage of form and story. But that's where we came in...

**Hal W. Hall (Ed) Science Fiction and Fantasy
Reference Index 1992-1995**

Libraries Unlimited, 1997, 503pp ISBN 1 56328 527 5

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

This is now the third volume of the *Science Fiction and Fantasy Reference Index* to appear. The first volume covered the years 1878-1985, it indexed more than 19,000 items; the second volume covered a considerably shorter period, 1985-1991, but contained almost as many items (over 16,000). Now we have another yet briefer period, and some 10,627 items. Clearly, writing about sf and fantasy is taking over the world. At one time it was theoretically possible to read every piece of sf or fantasy that came out in any given year – today it is probably not possible to read all the sf and fantasy criticism that appears. Thus another volume adds itself to the flood, made necessary by the flood itself.

For those of us who make our own contribution to the encroaching tide, this is a valuable book. If you can't keep up with all the criticism being written, how on earth can you hope to find that essential reference that you absolutely must quote in your next article? Speaking personally, for instance, it is comforting to know that when my diptych of articles about Steve Erickson appeared in *Foundation* in 1993 I had missed no relevant articles that might have contributed to my research (the only two other articles on Erickson listed here appeared in *Science Fiction Eye* coincident with the second of my pieces). But hang on, wasn't there a review of Erickson's novel *Tours of the Black Clock* that had appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*? Of course there was, for I wrote it myself, but if that was missed, what else might I have missed? Ah, I see, the *TLS* is not one of the journals covered, even briefly, in this work. Fortunately, most of the journals devoted to sf are covered in depth, from *Amazing* and *Australian Science Fiction Review* to *Vector* and *Weird Tales*. Except, one is not quite sure what is meant by 'in depth'. *Vector*, *Matrix* and *Focus* are all covered here, for instance; but all that is noted are articles and interviews, no book reviews are covered. (Curiously, film reviews are listed; turning to a page at random I notice, for instance, that the motion picture

The Shadow had reviews by Mark A. Altman (*Sci-Fi Universe*), James M. Faller (*Cinefantastique*) and Kim Newman (*Sight and Sound*).)

Now it is understandable that book reviews should be excluded, their inclusion would just about double the size of the book. But their exclusion halves its usefulness. John Clute, one of our most prolific commentators on the genre, appears to have been almost mute during this four-year period: all that is credited to his name are two versions of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (book and CD-ROM), *Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia*, his collection, *Look at the Evidence*, four essays, and 14 of the essays included in *Look at the Evidence*. But most of that book, and most of Clute's considerable contribution to sf criticism, comes in the form of reviews and review articles. So does the vast majority of sf criticism from every source. Why, for instance, cover *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *Amazing*, *Analog*, *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Interzone*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Tomorrow Speculative Fiction* and *Weird Tales* 'in depth' when the vast majority of the non-fiction material in all of these magazines is in the form of book reviews, which are excluded from the index? At the same time, the distinction between essays (included) and reviews (excluded) can seem strangely arbitrary: my essay-review of *The Ascent of Wonder* (in *Vector* 182) is included but not my essay-review of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (in *Vector* 173). Come to that, neither is Andy Sawyer's article about Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* which appeared in the same issue, and that hardly counts as a review.

Having said that, the amassing of articles, interviews and obituaries is quite considerable, and it is very encouraging to see that not only BSFA magazines but also fanzines such as *Lan's Lantern*, *The Metaphysical Review* and *Quantum* are covered. Serious critical coverage of science fiction really started in the fanzines, yet they have been shamefully ignored by many academic critics. Arranged by Subject and by Author this remains, despite my very serious criticisms, a valuable resource for anyone researching any aspect of our genre.

Peter F. Hamilton The Neutronium Alchemist (1)

Macmillan, 1997, 996pp, £17.99 ISBN 0333 66935 5

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

In which: Ione sends Joshua in pursuit of Mzu; Rubra hides Dariat and reveals a secret; Gerald locates Marie and tries to rescue her; Ralph fights against dreadful odds on Ombey; Louise and Genevieve flee from Norfolk; Syrinx seeks the meaning of death; Jay makes friends with Haile and Kelly makes a connection between the Sleeping God and the Kiint. Meanwhile Dexter Quinn prepares to bring eternal dark to Earth.

Of course, if you haven't read the previous volume in Peter F. Hamilton's trilogy, none of the above will mean anything to you; which is a short way of explaining that *The Neutronium Alchemist* is neither a stand-alone novel nor a sequel, but rather the central third of an extremely long novel going by the overall title of *The Night's Dawn Trilogy*. There is no precis of *The Reality Dysfunction* and, happily,

the text is not overburdened with cumbersome back-references. The book simply continues where the first volume left off, in full flow of story. This makes it essential to have read volume one, yet even if you have, the year and a half gap can sometimes make it difficult to recall exactly what is going on. The ideal way to read these books, presuming you have the stamina, would be to wait until *The Naked God* is published and then read all 3000 pages straight through.

In the current volume, Hamilton continues the adventures of the surviving main characters of his sequence, while introducing many new players and adding considerable richness to his fictional canvas. The Possessed have spread from Lalonde and other planets and habitats start to fall. The entire human civilization is threatened by the returning dead, and killing the possessed only sends more souls into the Beyond, ready to return again to further the exponentially escalating crisis. Containment is only a temporary solution, but Hamilton develops the situation effectively by introducing the notion that all intelligent species eventually have to face such a crisis, that there is a solution, but that it is

different for every species. He also complicates the idea of the Beyond – it is not for all souls the dreadful place of torment of *The Reality Dysfunction*, and not all the dead remain trapped in the Beyond, even when they can not return to 'reality'. Further adding to the supernatural/metaphysical dimension of the narrative is the introduction of benign possessors (including the spirit of Fletcher Christian of *HMS Bounty* fame), traditional ghosts, a dark nemesis for Dexter Quinn and some enigmatic observers who are 99% human but centuries old and invulnerable to the powers of the Possessed. The most memorable new character comes in the form of the spirit of Al Capone, who ingeniously uses 20th century gangster techniques to build an empire of the Possessed.

The Neutronium Alchemist is a book filled with story. It is more tightly constructed than *The Reality Dysfunction* and, with the advantage that the scenes and situation have already been set, gets on with matters much more quickly and effectively. Only very occasionally does it struggle for a few pages under the weight of exposition. Not only is the book more thematically interesting than the previous volume, but Hamilton has made a serious effort to develop Joshua Calvert into a human being rather than a selfish sex-machine. In fact,

this book contains only the slightest fraction of the sex which often made *The Reality Dysfunction* so laborious. Here events are too urgent to allow time for much in the way of pleasure.

In my review of the first volume of *The Night's Dawn Trilogy* (V188) I concluded by saying 'Hamilton has set himself a formidable task, we must hope that the remaining two volumes demonstrate that he is equal to it.' I am very happy to report that I think he probably is. This volume is a considerable improvement on the first, it still doesn't have quite the level of pure space opera thrills one might reasonably expect from a project of this scale, but it ends with 200 pages of splendidly epic adventure and leaves so many intriguing possibilities that the finale, *The Naked God*, promises to be a marvelous entertainment.

Peter F. Hamilton makes no great claims to profundity with his sf, and the political ideology implicit in his work appears to have alienated some readers, yet as a pure storyteller his organisation of his material is unsurpassed, and is breathtaking in scope and invention. *The Neutronium Alchemist* is a remarkable achievement. The completed *Night's Dawn Trilogy* will almost certainly come to stand as a science-fiction classic.

Stephen Lawhead

Grail

Avon Books, 1997. 453pp. \$24.00 ISBN 0380 97526 2

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

I have a friend who writes extremely good science-based sf, but so far has had no luck in placing any of his stories. 'I know how to get published,' I told him the other week over a pint, and showing him *Grail*. 'Stick a middle initial into your pen name, and write Celtic fantasy, they'll print any old crap.' Unfortunately, his artistic integrity won't allow him to change his name, style or genre! I've mused in reviews before about why American authors feel such great urges to fill volumes with tales of the Sidhe, the Tuatha De Danaan, and especially the Arthurian legends. In Lawhead's case he has even moved himself and his family to these isles in order to get into deeper commune with his muse.

So here comes *Grail*, book five of the 'cycle' preceded by *Talesin*, *Merlin*, *Arthur* and *Pendragon*. And I haven't read one of them! That made getting into *Grail* hard work, as Lawhead creditably doesn't waste pages at the beginning of the book with huge infodumps of what's gone before – you have to pick it up. The tale is narrated by Gwalchavad, Lord of Orcaedy, and one of Arthur's Cymbrogi (Round Table?), the best warriors in Britain. In the previous book, Arthur defeated the Saecens and the Vandali, but was mortally

wounded. He was restored to life by the power of the Holy Grail, which he vows to put in a specially-built shrine.

However, evil Morgian, the Queen of Air and Darkness, has other plans. She sends her daughter Morgaws to bewitch Arthur's champion Llenlleawg. Llenlleawg is coerced into stealing the Grail, along with Arthur's queen Gwenhwyvar and his sword Caledfwlch. The rest of the story follows the quest by Arthur, the sage Myrddin, and his men into the accursed land of Llyonesse to retrieve the stolen queen and talismans, and to foil the plans of Morgian to dominate the land of Britain.

Actually Lawhead *can* tell a tale, and once I was into the book it was pretty involving, with a satisfying and suitably ambivalent conclusion. I didn't find the 'strength and resonance, passion and richness' promised by the blurb, nor did I find it 'more vibrantly real than its predecessors' (have you read *The Once and Future King*, Mr/Ms Blurb Writer?), but it isn't really the 'any old crap' that I prejudged it to be. From this evidence he is doing a good job of retelling the Arthurian legends with a different twist. Now, if Lawhead could shake off the baggage of formula/classic fantasy, and create an original setting instead of Celtic or cod-mediaeval, then he would do even better for me. And I hate the bloody 'authentic' spelling! Give me Guinevere, Merlin, Lancelot and Excalibur, any day!

John Light

The Lords of Hate

Photon Press, 1997. 226pp. £5.00 ISBN 1 897968 03 5

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

The Lords of Hate is the sequel to an earlier novel by this author called *The Well of Time*. As I had not read the first, this new book was a little difficult to follow in places.

The story concerns Prince Alorn, his wife Annalor, their father Machanat and their uncle Merian, along with sundry other characters related variously to this core. Troubled by

dreams of an ice-race calling his wife, Prince Alorn and his relations travel to the planet of Ua, where they discover a maze of plots, including a man-machine controlling a planet, the sinister saurians known as the Lords of Hate, and various other quirky people and races. Eventually, after sundry physical and metaphysical travels, there is a satisfactory conclusion.

The plot begins well enough, with a couple of nice twists concerning how the two sides perceive mystical figures of the other race, but towards the middle there is a certain amount

of wallowing, as the characters go off on their own tangents. Usually they go off on their own, which reduces considerably the potential for narrative; the author is forced to describe what happens rather than allow different characters to speak with one another, and in places, notably when Prince Alorn enters the metaphysical universe of the emotions, this makes for somewhat unconvincing reading.

To counteract this occasional stodge there is an amusing inventiveness that reminded me of Jack Vance's earlier work, but also of *Mindsail* by Anne Gay. Nobody takes an ordinary space vehicle in this book: Prince Alorn himself travels through interstellar regions in a cottage-and-garden protected by a force field. The most human-like characters in the novel have red skin and hair, and live on a realistically portrayed planet with a blue sun, red sky, and azure earth. The alien creatures (one species of which Alorn transforms into on his way to rescuing the ice-people from the saurians) are well conceived, although they have a curious nineteen-fifties quality to them that made me think of the more unusual

creations of, say, Stanislaw Lem. In fact, the feel of the novel as a whole reminded me of Lem.

The tenor of this book is science fiction made to appear as fantasy. Many of the characteristics of the latter genre, even down to the title, *The Annals of Lavandrel*, were noticed by this reader, yet there is a clear science-fictional underpinning. The author is obviously keen on music, too, if the frequent references to melody and harmony, and the musicality of some of the characters, is anything to go by.

The writing is in a few places a little clumsy, but nothing too bad, and in some sections the prose, and the ideas, positively flow. However the proof reading is not all it could be. Having said that, I should point out that *The Lords of Hate* is a small-press publication. I would imagine that it is unavailable in the typical bookshop, so to anybody interested in quirky science-fiction I would recommend this curious novel, in which case they should write direct to Photon Press at 29 Longfield Road, Tring, Hertfordshire HP23 4DG

Jane Lindskold *When the Gods are Silent*

Avonova, 1997, 266pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0380 78848 9

Roger Zelazny & Jane Lindskold *Donnerjack*

Avon Books, 1997, 503pp, \$24.00 ISBN 0380 97326 X

Reviewed by Andy Mills

Two novels, one fully from the pen of Jane Lindskold, one her completion of the late Roger Zelazny's draft. In her solo effort an old farmer is intent on rediscovering magic, lost to the land. He gathers together a mixed bunch of adventurers – the female warrior, Rabble, and her troupe of itinerant entertainers – and so begins their quest... Alas, 'tis one the average fantasy reader has journeyed on many times before. *When the Gods are Silent* contains stock characters in stock situations: Lindskold has produced a cosy tale, and she seems to go out of her way to try to avoid offending anyone. No earthy sex here, and little real violence either, for all the fighting that goes on. When, for instance, she writes '... a throng of children of that delightful age too small for serious work and yet too large to need supervision ran along the departing caravan' one has the impression she is concerned not to have the reader worry that a small child might come to harm. Still, the book as a whole is an entertaining piece of confectionery, with the tale nicely rounded off at the end. So at least there's no hint of a trilogy, which itself is original.

One expects a lot more of a novel with Roger Zelazny's name on it, and in terms of bulk this certainly delivers. Alas,

the content is disappointing. It is a pity that *Donnerjack* was not edited to the same length as Zelazny's classic *Jack of Shadows*, with which there is a resemblance in theme. In the latest novel, two worlds exist side-by-side: our world (Verité), and the virtual reality world of Virtù. The latter is thought to have been formed by the former, but evidence builds that this may not in fact be the case. In Virtù, John D'Arcy Donnerjack pledges his unborn son's life to Death in order to save his wife. He then tries to renege on his bargain, but his son Jay has to face his destiny. In the meantime other interlinked stories unfold (some of) which come together at the end. There's a lot here, but while parts of the novel are both interesting and powerful, others do not work at all and the whole is something of a mess.

I wouldn't presume to state throughout who – Zelazny or Lindskold – was responsible for which section of this book, but Lindskold's somewhat basic descriptive style is occasionally evident, as is a cloying turn of phrase. I'll bet my life the introduction of ghosts to Donnerjack's castle, and their attendant role in the novel's resolution, is Lindskold's: such a plot-turn occurs in her own novel. But I don't know who to blame for the highly unsatisfactory climax, an attempt to tie all the threads of this complex work together, nor for the hilarious, (American) stereotypical depictions of Bonnie Scotsmen, who even end up singing *Brigadoon*. *Donnerjack* is not a book to enrich the Zelazny canon, I'm afraid.

Eric Lustbader *Dragons on the Sea of Night*

Vovager, 1997, 291pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Susan Badham

This is the fifth book in Lustbader's *Sunset Warrior* series which has seen the evolution of its hero into a Moorcockian demigod, capable of defeating chaos single handed. I'm sure Lustbader had a lot of fun describing the various trials and tribulations that made his hero so godlike but in this book he is faced with the major problem with having transformed his hero into a demigod: it becomes a bit difficult for the reader to believe that he can be defeated, even by all the powers of

darkness. In fact, I found myself feeling a bit sorry for the dark forces of chaos, it looks as though they don't stand a chance.

Lustbader is aware of this problem and ignores the favourite Moorcockian tactic of giving the forces of chaos a demigod or hero of their own, instead he spends most of the book concentrating on the struggles of two lesser characters, Moichi and Chiisai, who are only amazingly competent, as opposed to godlike, and can actually be hurt and killed. Meanwhile the Dai San hovers in the background brooding (presumably) on matters of cosmic import and watching the progress of chaos's resurgence.

Lustbader also goes more deeply into the structure and history of his universe, as his characters find out more about their own pasts and the magical species that exist. This book is setting up the characters for new adventures and challenges and there's a lot of well handled exposition, while the varied adventures are well written and showed a fertility of imagination that reminded me of Robert E. Howard.

Lustbader's unifying vision shows in the book's oriental feel, both in its basic setting but also in its attitudes, so chaos's return to the human universe for its revenge feels like a recurring yin-yang struggle, not just a plot device. The two

sides are opposing and morally neutral; one happens to be more comfortable for humanity but there is no intrinsic difference between them. The characters are pragmatic, rooted in their own concerns and there is no obvious moral code to which they all adhere. After the simplistic views of some other fantasy this potential for ambiguity is both refreshing and different.

Overall I can recommend this book, though I'd suggest that you read the others in the series first if you don't want the main character to be rather opaque. You'll be in the hands of an accomplished storyteller.

Michael Moorcock

*Legends from
End of Time*

Orion, 1997, 404pp, £6.99 ISBN 075280 649 1

Robert Silverberg

Ring the Changes

Voyager, 1997, 359pp, £6.99 ISBN 0586 21373 2

Reviewed by Chris Amies

These two collections reprint a small number of the works of two of the genre's most prolific writers. Moorcock's *Legends from the End of Time* is volume 11 of the Tale of the Eternal Champion, though these stories are baroque and often whimsical, hardly the stuff of heroic legend. In his introduction, Moorcock places them within the tradition of George Meredith and Aubrey Beardsley, and dedicates the book to David Britton, Mike Butterworth and Savoy Books; the reader expecting the kind of controversy to be found in either Beardsley's drawings or Savoy's publications is to be disappointed. These stories are, by their author's own admission, farces, in whose writing he took tremendous pleasure. By drawing a bizarre and decadent end-times civilisation he is able to bring in travellers from across the sea of time to confront a world very different from their own, and the bored immortals play but never really win or lose.

Silverberg's story introductions are a gleeful inventory of success and the emergence of the 'distinctive Silverberg voice'. Unlike the Moorcock, these stories are seminal to

their author's success and what he has been trying to do as a writer. Aliens, memory loss, physics, biology, insanity are the elements of high fiction in the sf/fantasy multiverse that his stories inhabit, without (usually) losing sight of their need to remain coherent works of fiction. He says, regarding the xenobiological speculation 'Sundance' (1968), 'I think everything remains clear despite the... derailments of the reader... I don't regard myself as a 'member' of any school of SF, and I don't value obscurity for its own sake'.

More recently, Silverberg the storyteller has dominated over Silverberg the experimentalist, but the reader should realise that for their time these stories were a lot more experimental than they may seem now. For example, the amusing tale of a mixed-species marriage 'Bride 91' (1967) was berated by Fred Pohl as 'tedious crap' and its author was harangued for his and other authors' apparent obsession with sex in their stories. 'How it Was When the Past Went Away' tells of a memory-destroying drug in the San Francisco water supply; when it was written, in 1968, there was a popular panic about terrorists putting LSD in the water. It, 'Passengers' (1966) and 'Ishmael in Love' (1968) read like signposts towards the sf that would develop through the 1970s towards the present day. It is credit to Silverberg, Moorcock, and the other experimentalists of their time that the themes and treatments they pioneered now seem smoothly familiar.

At the Movies

Michael Crichton

The Lost World

Arrow, 1997, 431pp, £5.99 ISBN 009 92462 9

Michael Jan Friedman

Batman & Robin 113

Warner Books, 1997, 219pp, £5.99 ISBN 07515 2001 2

Jim Mortimore

Space Truckers 113

Boxtree, 1997, 239pp, £4.99 ISBN 07522 2218 X

Reviewed by Daniel O'Mahoney

Here we have two movie novelisations and one movie anticipation. One is bland, another quirky, the third unreadable and none have much faith in their celluloid counterpart.

Batman & Robin, the movie, has two outstanding qualities: it is intensely visual; it is also deliciously awful. The ideal novelisation would crystallise in loving prose the film's overblown rhetorical imagery and kitsch kinetic drive. Michael Jan Friedman's attempt is too conventional,

moderating Akiva Goldsman's brainless screenplay with cliché-studded prose and a half-hearted glossing of characters with respectable motives. Sometimes he allows flashes of critique to show through where Goldsman is wholly adulatory, but Friedman is too much a Batfan to subvert his material. Like Alfred the butler, he's aware that he's collaborating with something awful but he's too loyal to say it.

Space Truckers has a giveaway of a title. The story may turn on a grand old skiffy plot but submerged under this surface is a wholesale pinching of genre signatures – truckers alongside pirates alongside cowboys. Unlike Friedman, Jim Mortimore seems unimpressed with his material and aims to inject some character into this third-hand mush by writing in the second person. It is as if the story is being retold to its (male) protagonists in real-time by an omniscient barfly with a superficial grasp of what goes on inside people's heads. Mortimore turns this to his advantage in widescreen action

sequences but his testosterone-charged interpretation is too stale to entertain. Canyon (cowboy hero) and Macanudo (pirate villain) rise out of the monotone – the book sparks to life when they banter – though this has less to do with Mortimore's meagre delineative skills than their resemblance to characters from livelier movies.

This also describes Ian Malcolm. Suspended between Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* novel (he dies) and Spielberg's cinematic turn (he lives), it is disheartening to find that in the novels' sequel... he *lives*. This is a shameful admission: the film is the more potent of the two texts and *The Lost World* is fishing for a sequel. There are times when Crichton's Malcolm is pleasantly obliterated by the performance signature of Jeff Goldblum. More often he

comes across as the author's mouthpiece: when he argues that humans are not self-aware, he admits he has no inner life. This is not a book that entertains anything quite so *ambivalent* as characterisation. The opening scene – a lecture – sets the tone and *The Lost World* infodumps all the way. This exposition is not a pin driven into healthy flesh; it is all that holds the decaying text together. Spielberg might make insubstantial entertainment of Crichton's work but he at least *knows* what we might really think and feel if confronted by rampaging saurians – and makes a fair stab at translating that onto the screen. Crichton's monsters (human and otherwise) are data to be processed. Malcolm is a zombie, a dead man walking, and – like much of *The Lost World* – he smells.

Stephen Palmer

Glass 111

Orbit, 1997, 341pp, £5.99

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

The crazy, old and confused city of Cray is in trouble, turning into glass, and the leaders of the city's ancient institutions are disturbed, ignorant and impotent to change things. In another land a strange beast claims that 'it is a wholly artificial city of metal and plastic bursting with ancient memories', and it may be that the beast means not just memories in the sense of thoughts of the past, but ROMS and ferrite cores as well. I found it hard to be sure: the world of *Glass* is hard to understand.

The city is Cray, whether this has any connection to the Cray in which Stephen Palmer set his first novel, *Memory Seed*, I can't say. After I read about the Blistered Quarter, the Empty Quarter, but then discovered a Triad Tower in the Nocturnal Quarter I stopped trying to understand the geography of Cray. I doubt if most of the characters could say either – they're fine examples of the Peter Principle, men and women who have reached the level of their incompetence. Anyway, it is home to a society in dissolution, semi-barbarous, in which guards roam the streets and scavengers are out looking for antique memories to reclaim. Meanwhile, in addition to the leaders of the three ruling bodies – the Archive of Noct, of Gaya, and of Selene, each in their towers and strongholds – and their followers, there are other characters of an uncertain kind – Pyuters and Gnosticians. Due to one of Palmer's peculiarities – avoiding physical descriptions while including internal descriptions, so that you know what someone is thinking without ever being told what they look like – I went to the end uncertain whether Pyuters were computers, though Gnosticians seem to be semi-sentient anthropoids.

Umia, the Reeve of Cray, head of the Archive of Noct, and first among equals of the three archives, is unable to deal with the vitrification of the world. Subadwan of the Archive of Gaya, who also works as a plumber unblocking pipes stopped by slow glass blockages, is more competent, and unknown to herself has been identified as a creature who can be used in the virtual countries beyond Cray. When her mistress, the Lord Archivist of Selene, is assassinated by a headbreaker, Subadwan becomes one of the Triad ruling Cray, but she refuses to participate in their corrupt Cyberocracy. (The numbers in the Triad seem to have been calculated on an early Pentium processor – there are five of them).

Meanwhile in the swamps something stirs. A being with the body of a man and the head of a pike (the fish), is determined to rule the whole world and more. Outside the select world of the Archivists Pikeface is soon achieving power: 'Pikeface is enamoured of the mob and the power they give him'. But why is Pikeface here, in this disintegrating and re-integrating world? When Subadwan meets Zelenaid she learns something of the origin of the world, the sixteen beings who created it and the duration of some of its inhabitants. Then, somehow, she learns that the three Archives represent three aspects: Gaya, Noct and the third as she elaborates are three aspects – the Wise, the Chthonic, the Vivid, the Blue, the Green – and there is a fourth, the male, represented by Druids. (Back to the Pentium processor?)

Before the adventure ends the Reeve will meet Pikeface, and the world will end like radio batteries running down and turning cold. *Glass*, as some of my account may suggest, recalls the complexities of post-cyberculture life in the far future, and vaguely recalls Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*. It is only a vague recollection, though, seen through a glass darkly.

Tim Powers

Earthquake Weather 111

Legend, 1997, 565pp, £17.99

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Earthquake Weather is a sequel to *Expiration Date*, which I reviewed in Vector 188. The earlier novel had wit, invention, narrative drive, auctorial cleverness – but this later one, astonishingly for Powers, is downright boring.

The chief problem is that it doesn't have the plot complications and recomplications of the earlier novel, which both pushed events forward while adding depth to the unfolding scenario. This one, by contrast, has just the one plot strand: Scott Crane, the king of the US West Coast, has been killed by a woman with several ghost personalities in her head, and therefore has to be resurrected if order is to be restored to the land. Eventually, he is; but readers will have guessed that anyway, so where's the suspense?

The novel's plodding progress towards this end is interrupted only by several botched attempts to keep him dead by a Los Angeles psychiatrist who seems to be in uneasy alliance with unnamed but probably ghost-driven forces; and delayed by some inserted cod mysticism, not present in the earlier novel, about Dionysus, the cycle of nature and the history of viticulture. Further delay arises from the incredible freight of description Powers requires every act or thing to bear, which in consequence smothers whatever narrative drive there might have been.

Tim Powers

The Anubis Gates

Legend, 1997, 464pp, £6.99 ISBN 009 963421 X

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

Fictional journeys into the future have, in the matter of suspension of disbelief, an advantage over journeys into the past. Their parameters of extrapolation and speculation are more manoeuvrable than are history's sterner constraints. If the journey is into the Black Death or the Renaissance, the author neglects research to the damage of her credibility. There are, however, some fictions which avail themselves with gusto of the licence of fantasy to build for the past a theatrical set, to use the artefacts of history as stage props, and to flood the whole with colourful, impressionistic, hallucinatory lighting.

The Anubis Gates, first published in 1983, is such a book. You are simply required to suspend disbelief on its terms, to accept the covered wagon trundling around London to reach an opening time gate, accept the extravagant Roman presence, accept the glittering procession of the Mameluke Beys in a Cairo of 1811 (which Doyle 'never got into researching'), and just settle down to relish everything. It

It struck me about halfway through that *Earthquake Weather* is just the sort of book one expects the middle volume of a trilogy to be – a book in which new plot devices have to be manufactured and the characters given things to do, but in which nothing substantial can be allowed to happen in case it detracts from the denouements to come. There are no overt hints of a further volume in this series; but then *Expiration Date* gave no hint that there would be a sequel, either. I hope, nevertheless, that Powers writes something else instead.

doesn't seem to matter that boats pass under a Blackfriars Bridge half a century before it was built, or hansom cabs over it a decade before they were invented. The magical adventure is all.

The mainspring of the adventure is, of course, the misadventure of the American writer Brendan Doyle, who finds himself in the role of literary guide to a tourist and immortality-seeking expedition by sorcery to explore/exploit Regency London. He encounters Byron and Coleridge, but not the missing poet Ashbless, whose life he has been engaged in researching, until a convoluted but effective time-travel twist.

For all who revel in the fast-moving, violent and kaleidoscopic picaresque, the story is riveting. Others may find it too hectic, too arbitrary in action and pace, but none can resist being caught up in the big set pieces like the feast of the underworld community, slung in hammocks and swinging on ropes in that underground cavern formed from the collapsed sewers; or like the chase on the frozen Thames of 1684 (another time-jump). A book that doesn't promote contemplative speculation, but one to bring a lot of roller-coasting enjoyment, and now happily on the racks again.

Paul Preuss

Secret Passages

TOR Books, 1997, 381pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0312 86346 2

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Secret Passages is a sequel to the ultra-hard sf novel *Broken Symmetries*, in which physicist Peter Slater was caught up in a web of scientific and political intrigue following the discovery of a new subatomic particle predicted by his theoretical work. In the new novel, Slater is himself the prize in a complicated game played by the enigmatic Manolis Minakis, who hopes to tempt him into collaboration in a series of experiments designed to prove that a realist interpretation of quantum mechanics put forward by John Cramer is correct and the more orthodox instrumentalist 'Copenhagen interpretation' false.

Most people faced with a task of this kind would simply explain what it was they wanted and why, but Minakis hatches an elaborate plot which involves the careful (but scrupulously non-sexual) seduction of Slater's wife Anne-Marie. Although Minakis's apparatus does eventually go through its paces, producing an interesting result, the real substance of the novel is Minakis's life-story, which extends from an exceedingly difficult childhood in a remote part of Crete, via a stint at Cambridge and guerilla warfare in World War II to the acquisition of great wealth and greater wisdom. Anne-Marie Slater, hearing all this, finds echoes of its crucial

lessons in her own life-history, and the reader is invited to find further echoes in the theoretical physics which provides the novel's very marginal science-fictional content.

Secret Passages is not the first novel to draw analogies between the uncertainties of quantum mechanics and the existential predicaments of human beings, nor is it the first to suggest that solutions appropriate to one realm might be aptly mirrored in the other. It does the job as well as any novel of its kind could, but some readers may wonder whether it also contains a reflection of its own probable fate in the scene where Minakis deliberately insults Slater by saying that if the paper he is presenting is only doing what Slater says it is doing he (Minakis) cannot help but wonder whether it was worth the bother. Who, after all, is going to be impressed? The audience which supports the marketing of popular science fiction – even that tiny fraction of it which is interested in hard sf – is unlikely to find much interest in a lengthy description of the trials and tribulations of being a social outcast in rural Crete, and the audience which supports the marketing of grimly realistic books about the rigours of peasant life is unlikely to be able to figure out why anyone gives a damn about rival interpretations of quantum mechanics.

It is possible, of course, that there may come a day when everyone will be routinely educated in the unravelling mysteries of quantum mechanics as well as the unravellable

stubbornness of the human heart, at least to the extent that their aesthetic sensibilities will readily embrace both. When that day comes *Secret Passages* might well be recognised for what it is: a pioneering work of considerable quality. It will

also be possible, in that glorious future, for those who are so inclined to find their sport in hunting genetically-engineered flying pigs.

Queen *The Art of Queen: The Eye*
 Bantam, 1997, 160pp, £15.99 ISBN 07522 0376 2

Paul Darrow *The Novel of Queen: The Eye* (1)
 Bantam, 1997, 408pp, £6.99 ISBN 07522 0371 1

Reviewed by Stephen Deas

Queen: The Eye is a computer game, and yes, it's linked to Queen: The Band (though there's not much evidence of that in the novel or the artwork). So what we have here is the novelisation of the computer game and the book of the artwork of the computer game. Got that?

I'll start with the artwork since that's easy. It contains a CD-ROM full of interviews and clips (check you have the software to run it), a dozen quite interesting pages on motion capture and other game-design techniques, and a lot of pictures. Some of them are quite pretty, but for sixteen quid I could do a damn sight better. If computer game art is your thing, then it may be worth a look. Otherwise forget it.

Now for a bit of background. Some time in the next hundred years, the world suffers an environmental catastrophe. Only a few million will survive, split into the North, the South, the East and the West, with the North (Europe) dominant. The North is run by four people, each with their own army - The President runs the Arena, The Leader controls The Works, The Mother has The Theatre group (do laugh, it helps to ease the pain) and the Notary is the boss of Innuduo. These four are all at each other's throats, trying to seize complete control of the North. Enter

the Eye, an immortal supernatural being who, for reasons never explained, has spent the last few thousand years living in an ice mountain at the source of the Amazon. 'Ah Hal' thinks the Eye, 'I'll never have a better chance to take over the world. I'm bored. I think I'll do it.' And so he does. The novel of *Queen: The Eye* is the story of how it happens, the prequel to the computer game.

You've got to have some sympathy for anyone trying to turn that into a half-decent novel. Sadly, Darrow didn't try: it's awful. The first few pages are interesting enough, introducing the Eye as it watches the world develop, civilisations rise and fall, invoking a sense of mystery - what is this Eye? And that's it. Sure, it's got pace, probably in an attempt to disguise the fact that nothing interesting is happening. The plot is a shambles and the cardboard cutout shrubs in the Magic Roundabout had more depth than most of these characters (who nearly all have ridiculous names, but that's just as well, because it's about the only way you can tell most of them apart). IQs rise and plummet as the plot demands - this world deserves everything it gets - the people who run it behave like they're twelve years old most of the time.

Then it hit me: that's who this is being written for. Twelve-year old (male) computer games geeks. That's why the women (with the thankful exception of the heroine) are all sex-slave victims. So if that's you, you might well like this. I've got a copy. Any offers?

Mary Doria Russell *The Sparrow* (1)
 Black Swan, 1997, 506pp, £6.99 ISBN 0552 997773

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The Sparrow is a first novel that earned dazzling reviews when it was published in America last year and then went on to win the James Tiptree Award. It appears on these shores loaded with the sort of praise most authors would die for, yet it comes from a publisher not normally associated with science fiction. Is this, then, just another piece of the mainstream muscling in on our patch?

Emphatically not! The science fiction is fully-formed, carefully thought-out, and absolutely inseparable from the rest of the book. It would collapse without its future setting, its journey between the stars, its alien races - it just doesn't happen to be about any of these things. What it is about is a compelling and disturbing analysis of the nature of religious belief, a recasting of questions ages old as to the character of God. And it does this without once failing to recognise that it must be an involving and entertaining tale that grips from the very beginning. It is a somber book, there are passages that are chilling, passages that demand serious thought, passages that make you question your own attitudes and beliefs. That does not mean it is dark or difficult or high brow, it does mean that it is a book which will entrap and

entrance you, a book that will challenge you in the way the best novels should.

Let us be careful here, I am not saying this is a great work of literature. There are places in which the central relationships are viewed under the golden glow of a romantic novella more than the harsh light of day. But it is never less than competently written, and in places it is very powerful indeed; it is a book you will read for the sheer pleasure of it. Nor am I saying that it is great science fiction. The journey to another planet takes place with all the ramshackled impatience of an old-fashioned back-yard spaceship; Russell needs to get her characters from here to there and does so with the least possible attention to detail. But where it matters, in the nature and character of the aliens that our expeditionary force encounters, there Russell does pay very close attention indeed, these are good, solid aliens, as vividly realised and as coherent in their social and evolutionary roles as any you will find in the genre.

It is what Russell does with these aliens that hits you where you live and breath and feel. This is a novel to take any moral and ethical doubts you may harbour, turn them inside out and leave them on the line to dry.

It begins with Father Emilio Sanchez, a Jesuit priest who is still arguing with himself about God and belief. Sanchez happens to be there when the first signals are detected from another world and, enthused by what this might tell him

about God's creation, he persuades his Church to mount an impetuous scientific expedition to visit this new planet. He staffs his spaceship with a small group of his closest friends and colleagues, it is their mutual love and support which is going to be important in illustrating the issues at the heart of the novel, though their mutual love and support can at times be so sweet as to rot the teeth.

Years later, the more carefully considered and organised UN expedition arrives on the planet to find Sanchez the sole survivor. He has been horribly disfigured (every muscle in his hands has been removed), he is working as a male prostitute, and his first act upon discovery is to kill a young girl who clearly worships him. The UN team manage to get

him back to his ship, but are themselves killed, so Sanchez spends months alone in space before arriving back on Earth relativistic years later. There the Jesuits have to nurse him back to health, mentally and physically, while probing to find out what really happened to turn a charismatic almost saintly figure into a global villain. The revelations come slowly and are very skilfully controlled, but in the end love of God becomes an ambiguous solution.

This is not a book for anyone who wants their faith to come neatly packaged and unquestioned; but if you want science fiction that raises fascinating ideas and challenges your views, you want to read *The Sparrow*.

The Force is...

Michael P. Kube-McDowell

*Star Wars:
Tyrants Test*

Bantam, 1996, 366pp, £4.99

Steve Perry *Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire* (1)

Bantam, 1997, 385pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

In a recent talk, John Richards made the point that most TV series writers are restricted by the need to reset the characters at the end of each episode. You can do what you like with them for forty-five minutes but at the end of that time you've got to leave them pretty much as you found them, ready for the guy who's writing next week's episode. Steve Perry has given himself an even greater restriction by setting his *Star Wars* novel between the second and third movies. Leia, Luke and all the others set out to rescue Han Solo who was frozen in a block of carbonite at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*, but any dramatic tension in what is essentially an action adventure novel is somewhat lessened by the fact that anybody who has seen *Return of the Jedi* (and it's a valid assumption that most if not all his readers will have seen it) knows that they must fail.

In a bid to overcome this predictability, there are a couple of new characters – Prince Xizor, a new villain and leader of a sort of intergalactic Mafia, and Dash Rendar, who is

fulfilling the Han Solo role due to the latter's enforced inactivity – but even so one suspects that these guys are ultimately doomed by virtue of their non-appearance in *Jedi*. There is some explanation of a throwaway line from that film, something which will please the hard-core fans, but ultimately we know exactly where all the major characters will be at the novel's end.

Michael Kube-McDowell pursues the more usual route of the latter day *Star Wars* writer in the third volume of *The Black Fleet Crisis* which is set twelve years after the original cinematic trilogy. By this point, the Empire is pretty much defeated and a New Republic has been established. However, just to keep things interesting, there's a succession of new bad guys to carry on where Darth Vader and his evil Imperial Master left off and, more to the point, go around being far more comprehensively dangerous than the original Han in Black. This time it's the Yevetha, and the usual cast of heroes and heroine go rushing around the galaxy trying to avert the threat, although for once this does not involve the tried and trusted tactic of flying a one-man fighter along a narrow trench and dropping a bomb down a small hole. It's a perfectly OK sf adventure story, but it offers nothing to make it stand out from other examples of the form and is of extremely limited appeal to anybody who has not read the preceding two volumes.

Jane Welch

The Runes of Sorcery (1)

Voyager, 1997, 466pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Susan Badham

Somebody should tell this author to lay off the adjectives. When you have to read the first paragraph twice to get the meaning clear, the prose style needs to be cleaned up. And of course, once you've got past The Adjective Problem you find yourself in that familiar realm: Fantasy Land. Slightly shop worn, dead predictable, but hey, when you buy a book subtitled "Book 3 of the blank trilogy" you know what to expect, right.

Some fantasy novels – despite being set in medieval worlds where magic works that the reader has already encountered at least twenty times – are still worth reading. They have interesting characters, an intriguing setting, a plot that keeps you interested; they may use the time-honoured

quest format but there will be a convincing reason why the main characters have been sent on the quest and a believable excuse for why it needs to be carried out. If the author can also write and make you care about what happens to the questors, you're on a winner. (Let's face it, the reason so many quests are The Only Hope To Save The World As We Know It is because that is the only way to invest the characters with significance).

Unfortunately *The Runes of Sorcery* does not score on any of these scales of quality. The characters are stereotyped (step forward the callow youth who will mature during the quest, the grizzled old mercenary with a thousand battles, the priestess of the mother goddess and the older youth who is afraid to reveal his feelings lest he become a woman's plaything); the main relations are thinly disguised versions of Christianity and witchcraft/paganism and of course good resides in the pagan religion. As for the barbarian invasion

that forms the mainspring of the plot's action... Only one barony thinks it necessary to fight it off? Even in medieval times they believed in domino theory – look at the reaction to the Mongols. I don't believe that this would happen.

This is definitely one to miss.

Douglas E. Winter (Ed)

Millennium •

Voyager, 1997, 454pp, £16.99

Reviewed by John Newsinger

This collection is less than the sum of its parts. This might seem a somewhat unusual state of affairs, but the fact is the book as a whole seems to actually diminish the individual stories: a sort of reverse Tardis effect. The original idea must have appeared quite promising: 'to mark the close of the twentieth century and the birth of the twenty-first, the end of the second millennium and the start of the third... through a sequence of stories, each one set in each decade of the past hundred years'. Each contributor can do his or her own thing, but the chronological imperative would provide 'the framework and continuity of a novel'. The result according to Douglas Winter, would be 'the first anthology/novel'.

It doesn't work, at least not for this reader. The collection actually has less holding it together than most thematic volumes, meandering along without really getting anywhere. It needed more than chronology to pull it together. Confidence is not restored when one arrives at Winter's 'Afterword' to be told that the volume was going to be called *Millennium*, but they changed it to *Revelations* because of the TV series!

As a collection it fails, but what about the individual stories? Is there anything here that it would be worth buying the whole book for?

Most of the stories are workmanlike efforts. Joe Lansdale's 'The Big Blow' and David Morrell's 'If I Should Die Before I Wake' both come into this category. But there are also disappointments. Two attempts to confront Nazism (F. Paul William's 'Aryans and Absinthe' and David Schow and Craig Spector's 'Dismantling Fortress Architecture') are pretty miserable failures. More surprisingly Poppy Z. Brite and Christa Faust's 'Triads' is also distinctly forgettable. Even Clive Barker's contributions do not succeed in saving the volume.

There are, however, two outstanding stories: Richard Christian Matheson's 'Whatever' and Ramsey Campbell's 'The Word'. Matheson's contribution is the story of the rise and fall of a cult rock band, put together as a collection of magazine articles, taped conversations, radio broadcasts, private letters and author's notes. This slice of the '70s works really well: a radical counterculture rock band imploding. Even the lyrics are OK. Good stuff! My own favourite, however, is Ramsey Campbell's 'The Word'. This really quite ludicrous account of one lone madman's attempt to resist societal insanity, the power of *The Word*, is carried by the ferocity of its obsessive protagonist with his delicious line in sarcasm, abuse and insult. 'Comic readers' are a contradiction in terms, SF Conventions are variously titled as 'Contraception', 'Constipation', 'Convulsion' etc, while a TV arts programme has the usual content: 'an Eskimo rock band and an exhibition of sculptures made from used condoms and a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* where all the performers are women in wheelchairs'. The best snarl, however, is the definition of 'cretic': a cretin who thinks he's a critic! Point taken Ramsey, point taken.



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*.

Peter Atkins

Big Thunder Ⓜ

HarperCollins, 1997, 273pp, £16.99 ISBN 000 224596 5

A gentleman vigilante in tux and top hat is awakened from the pages of a 1930s pulp magazine into present day Manhattan, but his crime fighting builds up towards a bloody apocalypse. A horror novel that really is dark fantasy.

Chaz Brenchley

Light Errant Ⓜ

Hodder & Stoughton, 1997, 314pp, £16.99 ISBN 0340 68556 5

The sequel to *Dead of Light*, this horror novel is another outing for wonder-worker Ben Macallan who, having found

there is no-one else with his powers, returns home to face another great evil.

David Gemmell

Winter Warriors Ⓜ

Corgi, 1997, 412pp, £5.99 ISBN 0552 14254 9

All the terrifying forces of evil range against a pregnant queen at bay in a haunted forest, with only the last remnants of the Drenai army to protect her. The latest Drenai novel was reviewed by Stephen Deas in V195 as 'brain candy' which left him 'wondering exactly what the point of the previous two hundred pages was'.

Ken MacLeod The Stone Canal

Legend, 1997, 322pp, £5.99 ISBN 009 955901 3

MacLeod's second novel, set on Mars and telling the story of Jonathan Wilde, the anarchist philosopher behind the events of his acclaimed first novel, *The Star Fraction*, is as startling and as involving as its predecessor. Writing in V192, Joseph Nicholas said: 'Few sf authors exhibit such political awareness; to find one as intimately familiar with politics as he, is a rare pleasure.' This paperback edition also includes, as a taster, the first 20 pages of MacLeod's next novel, *The Cassini Division*.

Jim Mortimore, with Allan Adams & Roger Clark Babylon 5 Security Manual

Boxtree/Channel 4, 1997, 160pp, £15.99 ISBN 07522 2271 6

This is strictly for anyone who wants to play at being Michael Garibaldi. Crowded with stuff, plans and diagrams, this book rehases most of the things we all know about Babylon 5, all from a shoot-em-up perspective.

Melanie Rawn, Jennifer Roberson & Kate Elliott The Golden Key

Pan, 1997, 1073pp, £7.99 ISBN 0330 34776 4

Three authors collaborate on this immense fantasy novel set in a pseudo-Renaissance realm and focussing upon artists who

can manipulate reality through their painting. In V195 Sue Thomason described it as 'an absorbing read, an unabashedly escapist magical romantic fantasy.'

Robert Silverberg Sorcerers of Majipoor

Pan, 1997, 629pp, £6.99 ISBN 0330 34269 X

The fifth Majipoor novel is actually a prequel to the series, set a thousand years before *Lord Valentine's Castle*. Even so, it is so long since humans arrived on this huge planet that the old sciences have been forgotten. Welcoming the book in V194, Lynne Bispham concluded: 'Readers have waited ten years for another Majipoor novel, but the wait has been worthwhile.'

Ellen Steiber The X-Files 5: Empathy

Voyager, 1997, 140pp, £3.99 ISBN 000 648328 3

This is a novelisation of the episode in the series originally written by Charles Grant Craig in which a waitress appears to be psychically linked to a young kidnapper victim.

Vector 195 – Index of Books Reviewed

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