

# Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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March/April 1998

## The Most Dangerous Territory



**N. Lee Wood interviewed**

Nichola Griffith • Tricia Sullivan • Primo Levi • Alien<sup>3</sup> • Permutation City

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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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.

## FIFTY YEARS OF BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION: A POLL

We are looking for nominations for the best novel published by a British-born writer between 1948 and 1998. Please send a ranked listing of your own top five (by whichever criteria you choose) to Andrew M. Butler, 33 Brook View Drive, Keyworth, Nottingham, NG12 5JN or email [vector-bsfa@rocketmail.com](mailto:vector-bsfa@rocketmail.com). Please feel free to annotate your listing.

Deadline: June 30 1998.

For inspiration why not see Paul Kincaid's indispensable *A Very British Genre?* To order your copy, please write to the Maureen Kincaid Speller, BSFA Administrator, 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent, CT19 5AZ.

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## If you're not paranoid, you must be one of them.

If it's true that we get the politicians we deserve it is also true that we get the SF we deserve? Look at the popular face of SF at the moment and you will see a rather ugly reflection, probably hiding around the corner and pretending it doesn't know what you're talking about, and anyway, has a perfectly good alibi. The sheen of the glossy future SF once confidently expected has become very tarnished. The only sense-of-wonder in shows such as *The X-Files* is that the characters survive a single episode, let alone several series. Mainstream SF currently has one over-riding concern, and it is far from any of the definitions which for years have served for what SF is and what it is about. That concern is fear, more specifically, paranoia. Paranoia born of confusion, doubt, and above all mistrust.

Once upon a time you knew where you stood. We were the ones who looked like us, and they, the aliens, came from somewhere else and didn't. They came in rockets, they came in silver ships. They had the wrong number of tentacles and definitely the wrong skin colour. Yet by and large they did play fair. They might have had better weapons, but they knew the rules and they stuck to them. The invasion came in the open and led to a good old fashioned stand-up, knock-down fight. In the end decency, ingenuity and courage won the day and we sent the nasty interstellar vermin packing, safe in the knowledge that Britannia, or at least Uncle Sam ruled the spaceways.

So then, the aliens, god sneaky. They started to come quietly and to look like us. Although this saved a fortune in special-effects and stopped the audience laughing at men-in-rubber suits, that was not the only reason for this transformation. It may have even just been an unexpected dividend. We all know now because we've read the theory often enough that it was to do with the Cold War; the paranoid fear of a secret infiltrator. The Red under the Bed. The commies sure looked human, but that only made the threat of their godless anti-American collectivism all the more disturbing. At least they still came from somewhere else. You could still trust one of your fellow country men or women, even if in *Quatermass II* [1955] the aliens started to take over the British establishment.

Something very radical has happened since. It's three weeks after week in the biggest genre show of the '90's, *The X-Files*. Trust no one. The very government, the defenders of Truth, Justice and the American Way are now insidious collaborators with malevolent aliens whose purpose remains a mystery wrapped in an enigma. All we know for sure is that no good can ever come of it.

It's there, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek way in the biggest American box-office hit of last year. *Men in Black* was built around the simple conceit that not only have the aliens, good, bad and indifferent been here for years, but the US government even has a special department set-up to regulate them. As the movie acknowledges, some of our most famous citizens are aliens.

The paranoia has crossed the Atlantic and infiltrated the ITV network's recent foray into 'serious' SF. Screened last autumn, the four part serial *The Uninvited* updated the *Quatermass II* formula with a very contemporary dose of distrust. Again the aliens are here, they look just like us, because this time they're not even really alien. They are us, but changed, unknowable, cold. They have penetrated the government and commerce to the highest level. They manufacture the computer operating system that everyone uses. They can assume control of any PC over the net in a moment. They can cause nuclear meltdown at the press of a key. *The Uninvited* was bad SF as Science Fiction, but that wasn't the point. As an exercise in paranoia it was compelling, thrilling, chilling nonsense.

What are all these popular manifestations of SF saying? They are certainly capturing a mood of the time. On one level they suggest a distrust of what we assume, what we think we know, on a fundamental level. That we distrust our very own minds, that we have become alienated from the world we thought we knew. Once there was a rough consensus as to the nature of the world and it's ordering, but that has long ago evaporated. There are no accepted givens anymore, even science itself has recently come under attack as just one specialized way of looking at the world. As science facilitates ever more fantastical technology who knows what is possible, what might be happening behind laboratory doors? Just what the truth about anything at all might be? The media feed this speculation with gleeful dire warnings, technobabbled pseudo-science and New Age nonsense. The edges of the world are as blurred now as they were before Columbus set sail.

This same anxiety drives the endless conspiracy thrillers which once dominated the best-seller lists and TV shows, and still do to a lesser extent. The very sad fact is that no intelligent person now trusts anyone in authority. Figures who would once have been respected and now almost automatically regarded with contempt. No one believes a word a government minister or spokesperson says. We automatically look for the lie, the evasion, the cover-up, and we do so with good reason, as any perusal of a decent newspaper or quality news program reveals. The truth is always out there, but too late, after the knightshoods have been given, the pay-offs taken, the damage done and the bodies buried.

So what does this say about us and our society? After all, we put the liars into power, or at least, we allow them to stay there even when we know they are rotten to the core. Is it because we don't think anyone else would be any better? Is it because we think all people are like that, that we really do trust no one? Do we no longer expect truth, decency, honor, because we no longer believe in them? That this is human nature with our rose-tinted blinkers off? Or is the even less palatable answer that we deserve the politicians, the leaders, popular SF shows we get because we ourselves have become untruthful, indecent and dishonest? That paranoia is endemic because dishonesty is too? It may be so: according to a recent survey almost half of women aged between 18-34 said they were prepared to lie to get what they wanted, compared to around 20% of women aged over 34. Then again, some were almost certainly lying.

Is there any hope? Even in *Babylon 5*, by far the best SF show on TV in so many ways, suggests that the greatest, most deadly enemy to man is man. In the fourth season, recently finished showing on C4, an earth government turns against mankind explicitly using all the lies, conspiracies and media manipulation of the State as depicted in 1984. What made *Babylon 5* different was the insistence that our heroes, an old fashioned word, be better than our villains, that they be honest, that the voice of the resistance scrupulously stick to the truth, or else, what would they be fighting for?

We can't expect honesty and truth from our leaders unless we are prepared to be as honest and as truthful ourselves. That, of course, means making some tough decisions about not compromising. It also means not doing things you'd prefer other people not to know about. But perhaps all the conspiracy shows are themselves part of a conspiracy, one to alienate us from ourselves, to make us distrust, fear, doubt. To make us feel so disenfranchised against the overwhelming faceless powers-that-be that we do nothing to stop them, just sit at home and watch the end of the world. Terrify the subject population then divide and rule. It worked for Big Brother and it's the oldest trick in the book. If the aliens are already here, they're running network TV.



## LETTERS TO VECTOR

In response to **Gary Dalkin's** editorial in Vector 194, **Gary Wilkinson** wrote in a letter in Vector 196: 'anthologies have always been difficult to publish and sell'. Gary Dalkin suggested that 'the old pulps' were anthologies, and went on to note a number of anthology series which have thrived in the past. Now Gary Wilkinson writes again:

**From: Gary Wilkinson, South Witham, Grantham**

Regarding your comments about the sale of short-story anthologies in the past. My mistake – I should have made it more obvious that I was talking from my point of view as a consumer of sf over the last twenty years, during which time short-story compilations have not been as popular or numerous as they once were.

I still think, as others have said, that some of the best sf I have ever read has been published recently and it is easy to forget that not everything in the past was uniformly excellent. The problem, of course, is if the good stuff is entirely swamped by the mediocre.

**Andrew M. Butler replies:** Or, indeed, swamped by the crap. Eeh, well, you're obviously too young to remember the days of purchasing the latest copy of Popular Electrics from the station book stall (we're talking pre-Beeching), each issue of which would contain a classic by John Lymmington or Avram Davidson or John Benyon Harris Parkes Lucas Harris Wyndham Tom Cobleigh-Andall. Actually, so am I. True, not everything in the past was excellent (seek out the nearest Badger Book from the Rev. Lionel Fanthorpe), but hopefully we're able to forget the dreck as the passage of time, er, passes. It's dreadfully hard to pick out what will be a classic from today.

On the other hand, it would be extremely difficult for today's youngster to get any grip on what was excellent and published twenty, thirty or even forty years ago. To take a letter at random, how many books by Sladek, Simak, Sturgeon or even Shaw would you find in your average Waterstone's or Ottaker's? Remarkably there was a set of Dunes available for sale in the wake of Waterstone's poll of the century, but would you have been able to find a copy of The Space Merchants had that been in the chart? Dick comes in and out of print, selected Heinlein and Asimov is available, but that's probably about it. (Even The Dispossessed was out of print for about a year recently, despite being a set text on a number of courses). I agree on most of your names as innovators (add Gwyneth Jones, Ian McDonald, Nicola Griffith [and see the article on her and Tricia Sullivan elsewhere in this issue] and Graham Joyce to pick a random grouping), but even a reader coming to these writers might have difficulty – Egan's first novel *Quarantine* is not currently available. Obviously not everything can be in print all the time, but still, the back catalogue is vanishing with increasing rapidity. ✍

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.

## Red Shift Corrections and Clarifications

Due to pressure of space, the complete bibliographies were omitted from the articles on Mary Shelley in Vector 196:

A number of editions of *Frankenstein* are available. The articles by R J Frost and Thom Benjamin refer to:

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*. Edited and introduced by M K Joseph. (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1980)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*. Edited and introduced by Marilyn Butler. (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1994)

Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*. Edited and introduced by Morton D Paley. (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1994)

For Aldiss's comments on *Frankenstein* as the first sf novel:

Brian W Aldiss, 'The Origins of the Species: Mary Shelley' in *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973 and London: Corgi, 1975)

Revised as: Brian W Aldiss, with David Wingrove, 'On the Origin of Species: Mary Shelley' in *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Gollancz, 1986 and London: Paladin, 1988)

Further thoughts may be found in:

Brian W Aldiss, 'Science Fiction's Mother Figure' in *The Detached Retina: Aspects of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995) 52-86

For alternative views, try three articles in David Seed, ed, *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and its Precursors* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995):

Brian Nellist, 'Imaging the Future: Predictive Fiction in the Nineteenth Century' 111-36

Patrick Parrinder, 'From Mary Shelley to *The War of the Worlds*: The Thames Valley Catastrophe' 58-74

Brian Stableford, 'Frankenstein and the Origins of Science Fiction' 46-57

Apologies are due to R J Frost for the misspelling of his name in the contents page, one of a number of embarrassing errors on that page. For the record the editorial was written by Gary Dalkin (as signed on p. 3) rather than by Andrew M. Butler.

Daniel O'Mahony's name got rather buried in the heading to his article on Tim Burton. Again, apologies for any confusion caused.

Corrections for *Red Shift* may be sent to: Gary Dalkin, 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth, BN11 8SN OR Andrew M Butler, 33 Brook View Drive, Keyworth, Nottingham, NG12 5JN / email vector-bsfa@rocketmail.com



# The Most Dangerous Territory

An Interview with N. Lee Wood by Maureen Kincaid Speller

N. Lee Wood's first published novel, *Looking for the Mahdi*, was shortlisted for the 1996 Arthur C. Clarke Award. Her second, *Faraday's Orphans*, was actually written earlier. Maureen Kincaid Speller spoke to her about her novels, violence and the state of bookshops.

**Maureen Kincaid Speller:** Lee, you popped up out of nowhere with two books in a year ...

**N. Lee Wood:** I didn't exactly pop out of nowhere.

**MKS:** Well, from our point of view you did, though I imagine it was a lot of hard work for you.

**NLW:** The first novel, *Looking for the Mahdi*, was published in the States a year ago, and *Faraday's Orphans* comes out at the beginning of next year in trade paperback from Ace. But here they did a two-book deal and decided to bring them out at the same time, which is great. But you have to take two years to become an overnight success.

**MKS:** So, what prompted you into writing novels?

**NLW:** I've always wanted to be a writer. I wrote my first story when I was about seven. I think that must be common for anyone who ends up being a writer. But I've been writing professionally since I was about thirty. I don't know why people choose to write, they just do. I was writing when I was doing other things, I didn't decide I was going to be a writer, I just did it.

**MKS:** What sort of response have you been getting to the books over here?

**NLW:** So far, the reviews for *Mahdi* have been universally excellent – great for the ego. Reviews for *Faraday's Orphans* are mixed but nothing too terribly hostile. Reviews – you read them, you say okay, you go on. You have to be a professional once the book is done.

**MKS:** What made you choose the subject matter for *Mahdi*?

**NLW:** I started writing it because I wanted to write a short story. I had the two characters in mind and I wrote for a while, and finally came to Norman [Spinrad] and said there's something wrong with this story, what do you think? He gave it back to me and said the problem with this is it's not a story, it's a novel, write it.

I didn't know where I was going with it, it just happened. At that time we started to be interested in what was going on in the Gulf. It was before the Gulf War actually broke out but we were already beginning to see the storm clouds roll in. We also had friends who travelled quite a lot in the Middle East, Afghanistan primarily, and that political situation also interested me a great deal. So I just started to do the research and it grew out of that.

**MKS:** Did you actually visit those countries at all?

**NLW:** No, I haven't actually been there yet. I'm hoping I faked it well enough. I've had people who have been there

tell me that it's fairly realistic.

**MKS:** I review travel books, despite the fact that I've never left the country, and the ambience certainly does feel like something I've come across before.

**NLW:** I've also lived in the desert in California, so I've got the idea of what the desert is like there. And desert is desert, to a certain extent, so some of it may be conceptually leaning a little bit toward the deserts of California – but you don't have too many camels there. Though there's a herd of camels that were brought over during the Civil War to use against the Indians, and they escaped; there's still a herd of wild camels living somewhere in the deserts of America.

**MKS:** Apart from the political aspects of *Mahdi*, you manage to pack a lot of other things in. The idea of a woman masquerading as a man in order to get into a society that doesn't give much freedom to women. Artificial intelligence, biological constructs – fabricants – you seem to get a lot into one book. You haven't focussed on just one thing.

**NLW:** Nothing in life is just one focus. If you're building up a world, to give a feel of places that are real, you have to have a lot of things going on all at once.

But politics is still the most dangerous territory to write about. Dirty words and sex, okay; but politics people feel very uncomfortable with. And the only villain in *Mahdi* was a white male American. So it was a very difficult book to sell. The rejection letters were: this is wonderful, the characters are great, lovely lovely, but the ambience is a little ... we don't know quite what to make of it. Always the same reason.

Yet I sold it in Israel. I sold it in Russia, Romania and Israel. It's coming in Hebrew, which was surprising for me but I can see why they took it. It should be interesting to see what they make of it. Maybe I can get a cover quote from Perez, or Arafat.

**MKS:** Ian Sales tells me stories of various copies of *Asimov's* and *F&SF* they get over there and they've ripped whole stories out, and he asks what was the story? I think there was a Brian Aldiss story that got ripped out so I hastily photocopied it for him, and between the two of us we couldn't work out why. We think it might have been the artwork at the beginning of the story, but that was the only thing we could see. It is so arbitrary.

**NLW:** There is a little trepidation about it being published in Arabic.

It's not unsympathetic, but there are certain passages in there which are being said by people who are unsympathetic to Islam, that if taken out of context ... That was what it was with Salman Rushdie, it was taken out of context.

I gave a copy to a friend in Afghanistan. He was sort of amazed that Americans knew anything about Islam at all,

because I have a Koran quote in Arabic and English, that surprised him. And that we even knew where cities like Jalabad were, it astonished him that we even knew where these places were.

**MKS:** Given the statistics on where a lot of Americans place the towns and cities in their own continent. I've had to explain to someone that you have to take a plane or ferry from Ireland to Scotland because there's a piece of water in between. I don't think he's travelled very much.

Do you find living in Paris gives you a better perspective on what's going on in America?

**NLW:** A different perspective. I'll be going back in the summer and it'll be the first time I've been in the States for six years, so it'll be interesting to see what my own reaction will be to a country I haven't seen in six years. But I do know that talking to people in the States there are things they just don't know there that we take as common knowledge, we've seen on the news or whatnot. It's almost like a filter of information that Americans have, either voluntary or through the press. They just don't know anything. Outside a very narrow American spectrum they don't care or don't know or both. Why? I think we're an extremely large island and very isolated.

I think the British are still far more politically conscious of things than Americans are. I arrived with about five people – a German, an Australian, me and an American woman, and the American woman said, 'Oh, I love Margaret Thatcher'. And everyone else turned and stared and said, 'Why?' She said, 'She's just such a nice, strong woman.' She knew absolutely nothing about the politics, nothing about what she did, had no real basis on which to form an opinion other than: she's a strong woman and isn't it great to have a woman in government.

**MKS:** You chose to set *Faraday's Orphans* in America.

**NLW:** I was living in America when I wrote it.

I was talking to someone else a little while ago, about why it is more fun to write about things that you aren't an expert on, because you read a lot. I have a book that I've just finished writing where one of the characters is a female American medieval academic – which I have been – and the other one is a divorced Yorkshire policeman. Obviously I'm not that. But of the two characters to write, the policeman was a lot more fun.

**MKS:** You've got more opportunity to explore, whereas when you're writing about something you know you've been there already.

**NLW:** Right. If you can excite yourself by doing something new, it translates into the pages.

**MKS:** So writing about what you know is not necessarily a good piece of advice?

**NLW:** By the time I write it, I know enough about it that I'm not making too many mistakes. I know where to go to get it corrected. I go to the place that I write about and suss it out.

I'm thinking of writing a novel set in Paris now. Finally.

**MKS:** Let's get back to *Faraday's Orphans*. I was thinking, there was John Barnes's *Mother of Storms* and Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather* and now *Faraday's Orphans*. You're tackling the aftermath of the shifting of the magnetic pole.

**NLW:** This idea came out ten years ago, I think. It was something in *Scientific American* or *Science News*, something had triggered the idea, and it was: this happens? Wow, neat, what happens next? I called the local university and spoke to

the professor of physics there, and I said: can I ask you a question? Does this happen? When does it happen? Why does it happen? What happens when it happens? And how long does it last? There was a long pause and he said, gee I really don't know, nobody's ever asked me this before, come into my office on Wednesday. When I walked in he had a stack of books – he had gone and done the research for me. He was all excited because all he teaches are people who don't really want to be there for anything more than the grade, and for him it was fun to have someone looking for a piece of knowledge. And I learned a lot about magnetic shifts at that time, and I don't think anyone else has done that sort of stuff.

**MKS:** I'm interested in the idea that, particularly after the Cold War, it's a different devastation.

**NLW:** It's a bit like writing spy stories, what do you do when the Soviet Union falls down? You have to have new ways of telling the same stories, but there are no villains.

But *Faraday's Orphans* is not about the catastrophe, it's about the aftermath. The catastrophe has already happened, it's over, and the world is starting to rebuild. Everyone else is dealing with: everything's fine and bang the hurricane comes along and people have to survive. People have already survived and now they're coming out again.

Someone else was talking about the similarity between *Mother of Storms*, *Heavy Weather* and *Faraday's Orphans*, not so much with the forces of nature that seems to be popular at the moment, but with extreme violence. *Faraday's Orphans* is extremely violent. I look at the book myself and think, Jesus, where did that come from? There's a certain amount of violence in everyone, but what you see when you look under the rock of yourself makes you nervous.

Violence is very popular. Sex, not so... But if you look in a lot of books it's cartoon violence, it's ninja turtles violence. It's the kind where you can read it for the gratification and the thrills, but the difference between that and the violence in *Faraday's Orphans* is it's designed to make the reader hurt. It's not designed to give the reader thrills, it's designed to make him hurt.

When you start dealing with extreme violence in a realistic manner – I'm not saying that something like *Faraday's Orphans* is something that walks down the street every day – but if you deal with it as if it were real and make it hurt, then people feel squeamish.

For me, a lot of writing is an exorcism of personal things. It's not hugely public knowledge but I'm not ashamed of it, but I was raped at gunpoint in my apartment once. And having to deal with being a rape victim, then writing about rape, it is an exorcism of a sort. It's understanding why it happens, understanding why people have this impulse, or is it within us all, is this kind of violence universal and some of us just lose control of being able to keep it in? What happens with it? And I don't have the same kind of reaction... there was a time when I couldn't watch anything dealing with rape at all, ever, I just couldn't deal with it. But it's not an issue now anymore, it's been exorcised and I can write about rape in a way that hopefully makes people think. They're not villains out there, they're people.

One of the things that bothers me a lot – not in science fiction but something like Patricia Cornwell, I read some books by her and there was always something that bothered me and I couldn't put my finger on it until I realised all her villains are inhuman monsters. There's no humanity in them.

She writes in extreme black and white, these are the good guys these are the bad guys, the bad guys should be taken out and shot. This is not good fiction. It dehumanises people, and when you dehumanise another person you dehumanise yourself.

**MKS:** It's interesting that you choose her as an example. There's something else I notice about her work, that Scarpetta doesn't develop as a result of any of her experiences.

**NLW:** Scarpetta is a bitch who does not learn from her mistakes, she's rigid, she's not incompetent but intolerant. And I think this is a good example of what right-wing fascism is, Scarpetta is a right-wing fascist.

The problem I have with horror films, I suppose, is it makes you confront the monsters within yourselves, but in a way that makes you feel safe.

**MKS:** There's always the idea that at the end you can switch off the TV or walk out of the cinema and say that sort of thing doesn't really happen.

**NLW:** It's not really real.

**MKS:** I'll wrap up by asking you what you think about the current science fiction scene.

**NLW:** I haven't seen a whole lot that I get terribly excited about for a long time. You get a few here and there, but there seems to be an awful lot of books written and very few that I really have much time for. I don't know why that is, maybe I'm just not reading enough of them.

I find my own work, by virtue of having a name that starts with W, right behind *Star Trek*. In places like Waterstone's and Foyle's it really is heart-breaking. I know people who say they never go to the back of the store where the science fiction is because they don't want to wade through the shit. And if you're going to be a mid-list writer – someone writing serious adult fiction – you're not going to find the audience because the audience has been conditioned not to go to that section of the bookstore.

It's hard to come and do publicity here, because it has been pointed out by several people at several times that I'm not Terry Pratchett. It's like, either you're a huge megastar or you're just left to drift at the side and do the best you can.

I had a book launch at Glasgow and they had the American cover for *Mahdi* over, and Bob Silverberg was shaking his head and saying, 'Oh God, this is a disaster.' I loved it, the cover's beautiful, so I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'Oh it's horrible, horrible, what they've done to you is just unfathomable, I feel so sorry for you.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Look at it, it has no furry creatures, you've got no dragons. This cover says quality; quality never sells, you're dead.' That was a joke, but there's a certain truth behind it.

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*Maureen Kincaid Speller is the administrator of the BSFA. Mary Anne Lever's article on N. Lee Wood and violence appeared in Vector 193 — Eds.*

## Women Who Watch

By Ian J Simpson

Nicola Griffith and Tricia Sullivan are part of a new generation of sf writers who are taking us somewhere a little different. Using traditional – and in some cases clichéd themes – they are placing a new, female-orientated perspective on the world we live in today, by warning of the world we may end up with tomorrow. They write strong, hard sf and are, to varying degrees, feminist.

Nicola Griffith has been a familiar name for longer than Tricia Sullivan, having had several stories published in *Interzone* before writing her debut novel *Ammonite* (1993), which won the 1994 James Tiptree Jr. Award. Her second novel, *Slow River* (1995) won the 1997 Nebula. Both novels have also won the Lambda Literary Award. A story 'Song of the Bullfrog, Cry of Geese' recently appeared in the collection *The Best of Interzone*. With Stephen Pagel she has edited a three-part landmark anthology: *Bending the Landscape*.

Tricia Sullivan has received several award nominations, including, for her first novel *Lethe* (1995), a nomination for the 1996 John W. Campbell Memorial award for best new writer. Her second novel is the highly praised *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1997). In addition to gaining publicity from positive reviews in the popular sf press, she has reached a wide audience by appearing on the Channel 4 sf comedy game show, *Space Cadets*. She has had little other than her two novels published; apparently only one short story and an extract from *Lethe*.

Nicola Griffith is a native of Yorkshire who now lives in Seattle with her partner, sf author Kelley Eskridge. In

contrast, Tricia Sullivan is an American living in London. However, although they have swapped sides of the Atlantic, it is in the literary field that their paths cross and divide and cross again.

*Ammonite* is a hard-sf novel written from the perspective of a nature-loving artist; it includes detailed descriptions, which could be from a field journal. The book is set on Jeep, a planet inhabited by forgotten Earth colonists, on which a mysterious virus kills all men, and some women. Certain critical reaction has been unfortunate – notably Dan Chow in *Locus* – some critics suggesting that here is a gay feminist killing off all the men in order to write a lesbian novel. This is not at all true. This is not lesbian wish-fulfillment, nor lesbian pornography. Whatever relationships develop on Jeep do so out of love and respect; nothing else is insinuated.

Men are, however, implied. They are the ones who can be said to watch. From high above the planet, and through a spy network on the planet, these Company men watch the women evolve from operatives to free spirits. The Company has a vested interest in Jeep, and they send Marghe to find a cure for the virus, in order to exploit the planet. This leads to a number of adventures; journeys both geographic and personal.

Some have said that this is a thinly disguised fantasy novel. This may be the result of Griffith exploring the spiritual traditions of the natives of Jeep, and of the journeyman plot structure. Although the focus of the novel may be the adventures, the novel has more in common with the paranoid sf of Orwell than the rites-of-passage and

voyage-of-discovery approach of many fantasy novels. An attention to detail is focused on the peoples and places, and not on the science, or even on the plot motives.

*Ammonite* is a delight to read. The text flows like a gentle river. So much so that the science is often forgotten. It becomes less a focus on the search for a virus, or a Company conspiracy, than a story about people struggling to survive.

*Slow River* is about one woman's struggle to survive, and like *Ammonite*, is beautifully written. Although the book may seem autobiographical – with its (unidentified) Hull setting and partly relating to her move to the States – Nicola Griffith stresses that it is fiction, and the abuses suffered by her protagonist are fictional: 'Should anyone be tempted to assume otherwise, let me be explicit: *Slow River* is fiction not autobiography. I made it up' (Author's Note, *Slow River*).

*Slow River* is about the wealthy Lore, who becomes a stranger in a city of the future. It is a city on the edge of environmental disaster, something that is balanced by Lore's erstwhile family. The book is a marked contrast to *Ammonite*, set in a cybervision world of drugs, sex and information. That is not to incur memories of Sterling, Gibson or even Dick. Nicola Griffith has a very poetic style of her own and her descriptive texturing tends towards a realism not often achieved in computer-enhanced future fictions. You can comfortably relate to the setting, as well as to the characters. The author's attention to detail here shifts from the landscape to emotion. The natural world does feature, especially in the flashback sequences, such as with Lore and her time on Ratnapida.

In contrast to *Ammonite*, there are male characters in *Slow River*, such as Hepple and Lore's father. They seem to be attempting to control the women, but ultimately they are failing. The text flows more like an estuary than a river. Lore's childhood catching up with what happened yesterday, swirling around a first person stream of the present. That may sound daunting, but as with every estuary, the ocean arrives with ease.

Tricia Sullivan writes about our immediate future, and what might happen if we're not too careful. This is a classic sf approach. *Lethe*, titled after the river of forgetfulness in Greek mythology, is memorable. Well-written and well thought-out, the book mixes sf cliché (such as live brains in tanks, or the reservations: protective enclaves from the deadly environment) and originality (attempts to deliberately evolve humans to become more like cetaceans) in equal parts.

At first the writing is a little staid, like that of a science writer, writing about what they know, expecting everyone to be able to understand. After a few chapters, the narrative becomes more familiar, and you follow with ease and, indeed, speed along to keep pace with this ecological warning.

The narrative is told from two points of view: Jenae, who has become part-cetacean as a result of a virus, and Daire, a researcher who has passed through a wormhole to a planet inhabited by the products of corporate gene wars. The plot is centred on the Heads, brains belonging to those we have forgotten, who hold the keys to the past and the future.

Without warning the scene moves to Oxford: suddenly the whole tone changes. This is the only real flaw in the book. 2166 often feels like 1966, with its pubs and ballpoint pens. This is deliberate in context, and yet still feels a little out of place. Fortunately it doesn't detract from the overall enjoyment of the story.

The follow up to *Lethe* is the remarkable *Someone to Watch Over Me*. Set nearer the present, this particular warning is potentially a classic. As with *Lethe* the language is quite complex. It's like the difficult album from a favourite band. After the first few listens, you're not too sure. A week later, and it's never off the stereo.

The world is dominated by HIT – Human Implant Technology. People can piggyback-ride others, experiencing their lives, emotions and experiences. C is in Adrien's head. Sabina wants to use HIT to experience music like she never has before. As the relationships develop, we realise C is not all that we imagine. That plot development tantalises, and this is where I find the book a marvel. Towards the climax, the perspective of the book changes from third person, to first, as seen from Sabina's eyes. Who is watching and why?

At first glance you may wonder why I feel there is a comparison between these authors. They both bring a more realistic view of possible futures than many male writers I have read. This is the result of the particular attention to detail and emotion that both writers employ. The focus of their stories is on the people involved. With Nicola Griffith, this much is fairly obvious. The science is quite clearly the passenger. However, while it is the science that definitely drives Tricia Sullivan's work, that doesn't mean that these stories are not about real people. Just as Lore may describe herself as an environmental biologist, and the narrative features complex microbiological and chemical arguments, these in themselves are not the *raison d'être*.

Both writers use unusual character names, such as Lore, Hepple, Jenae, Daire, Sabina, Marghe. They aren't unusual in the traditional sf sense, but they definitely are unusual. Both writers also balance the strange by using a variety of familiar settings: Hull, Oxford, Wales, Australia, Zagreb, Den Haag, amongst others. This use of familiar places with not-so-familiar people has a pleasing affect. Whereas many sf writers use harsh, and often unpronounceable, names, these writers use words that flow and feel comfortable. These are names you can relate to.

As well as the detailed descriptions of surroundings, the spoken language is very real. The words are open and honest, especially when dealing with relationships, such as Sabina's feelings for Adrien in *Someone to Watch Over Me*, or Marghe's relationship with Thenike in *Ammonite*. For instance, I don't recall ever reading about partners playing with each other's hair in novels by male sf writers.

There are very few stereotypical characters in any of these books, and very few white males. There are Asian and Eastern European characters aplenty. Women are dominant. They are not attempting to exert any form of conscious control over others. In Tricia Sullivan's work Sabina dictates Adrien's actions. The childlike Tsering controls Daire, while Jenae is the key to memory in *Lethe*, and Tien intimidates Dr Peake. It is a theme which is even stronger in Nicola Griffith's books. We believe Lore's father thinks he has control, but in truth he doesn't, while in *Ammonite* the unseen males of the Company ultimately fail in their goals.

Both authors use the issue of pregnancy to promote the strength of the female. In *Lethe*, the children of the Lywyn distort into a new species after childbirth. The presence of Daire signifies change, which is underlined by Tsering carrying his child. The fathers are cursed with cannibalistic urges towards their newborn children. In *Ammonite*, conception is by parthenogenesis, without any male contact

at all. A trance-like state is brought about through which pregnancy is induced spiritually.

Not all female science-fiction writers write feminist fiction. The novels of Tricia Sullivan and Nicola Griffith can be read as non-feminist sf, but ultimately they are promoting very real and positive images of women, and, in Nicola Griffith's books, positive images of lesbianism. In the not-so-serious Martin scale of feminist content in sf (as devised by Diane Martin, editor of *Aurora*), I would place Tricia Sullivan around level three (where ten is totally feminist) which is women are better than men on some levels, while Nicola Griffith would be around nine or ten where there is a positive depiction of lesbian utopias combined with parthenogenesis.

Finally, both authors are warning us about the dangers of tampering with humanity. Whether it is the usage of implants or the dangers of genetics and virii, the message is one of taking control. Not control over the opposite sex, but of our actions, for the sake of our children.

### Works by Nicola Griffith

- 'Mirrors and Burnstone', *Interzone* #25 (September/October 1988)
- 'The Other', *Ignorant Armies* edited by David Pringle (Brighton: GW Books, 1989)
- 'Down the Path of the Sun', *Interzone* #34 (March/April 1990)
- 'The Voyage South', *Warhammer: Red Thirst*, edited by David Pringle (Brighton: GW Books, 1990)
- 'Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese', *Interzone* #48 (June 1991) / *Aboriginal SF* (July/August 1991)
- 'Wearing My Skin', *Interzone* #50 (August 1991)

- Ammonite* (London: Grafton and New York: Ballantine Del Rey, 1993)
- Slow River* (London: HarperCollinsVoyager and New York: Ballantine Del Rey, 1995)
- 'Touching Fire', *Interzone* #70 (April 1993)
- 'Yaguara', *Little Deaths*, edited by Ellen Datlow (London: Millennium, 1994)
- 'Alien in Our Own Tongue', *Terra Incognita* (Winter 1996)
- 'The New Aliens in Science Fiction', *Nebula Awards* 30, ed. Pamela Sargent (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996)

Edited with Stephen Pagel:  
*Bending the Landscape: Fantasy* (: White Wolf, 1997)

### Works by Tricia Sullivan

- Lethe* (London: Gollancz and New York: Bantam Spectra, 1995).
- 'The Question Eaters', *Full Spectrum* 5, edited by Jennifer Hersh, Tom Dupree and Janna Silverstein (New York: Bantam Spectra, 1995)
- Someone To Watch Over Me* (London: Orion and New York: Bantam Spectra, 1997)

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Nicola Griffith's third novel, *The Blue Place*, will be published in July 1998 at the same time as the sf volume of *Bending the Landscape*. For an interview with her conducted by Carol Ann Green see 'Pretty Bloody Happy!', Vector 173.

Ian J Simpson lives in London where he is training to become a journalist — Eds.



## Cognitive Mapping 13: Humanity

by Paul Kincaid

Mary Shelley did not invent the notion of man creating other men; there was Talos, the man of bronze made by Hephaestus in Greek mythology, and the golem raised from clay by Jewish mystics. What was new about *Frankenstein* was two-fold: in the first place she made the story Gothic, in the second she made it science fiction.

What made *Frankenstein* Gothic was that it concentrated not upon the creation of a mechanical or chthonic slave, but on the cost of playing God. Ancient legend and contemporary scientific ideas (notably galvanism) are brought together, but the result is a tale about the defiance of nature. In the numerous film versions of the novel, Dr Frankenstein generally brings his creature to life by harnessing an electric storm; an attempt to tame the forces of nature that is doomed to failure. Although such a spark of life is not

explicit in the book, many of the key scenes are played out against the sort of untamed and untameable landscape beloved of the romantic Gothic imagination: from Alpine peaks to Arctic wastes.

What made *Frankenstein* science fiction, or rather (to sidestep the question of whether it was indeed the first sf novel) what it has contributed to the history of science fiction, is the question of what it is to be human. What is the unique characteristic that makes us what we are? Throughout the history of the genre, science fiction writers have been pitting humans against other beings — intelligent apes, robots, aliens, neanderthals, beings from the future, cyborgs, doppelgangers, AIs and a host of others — in an attempt to find humanity in something other than ourselves. Logically, whatever is in them cannot be unique to humans — or it will mean that they are human too?

I entered the cabin, where lay the remains of my ill-fated and admirable friend. Over him hung a form which I cannot find words to describe; gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions. As he hung over the coffin, his face was concealed by long locks of ragged hair; but one vast hand was extended, in colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy. When he heard the sound of my approach, he ceased to utter exclamations of grief and horror, and sprung towards the window. Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome, yet appalling hideousness.

*Frankenstein (1818) — Mary Shelley*

By this light, the whole history of science fiction is a sort of extended Turing Test, seeking not intelligence but humanity. But like the Turing Test, the outcome can be dependent upon the observer – how do we recognise humanity in others if we are not sure what it is in ourselves? Dr Frankenstein set out to create a thing of beauty, but turned his back upon the Creature when he saw it was ugly. Even when the rationalist discovers the Creature leaning over Frankenstein's coffin, he notices the 'appalling hideousness' and so misses the humanity suggested by its 'exclamations of grief and horror'.

This dichotomy between appearance and feeling, between the humane and the monstrous, first explored by Mary Shelley has become one of the most significant themes in science fiction. If we cannot recognise the human within the uncouth and distorted proportions of Frankenstein's Creature, can we recognise the monstrous within the couth and even proportions of civilised man in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)? Still more, how can any of us know what might be hidden by such a being as H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897)? Throughout the history of the genre, scientists have been creating others, or experimenting upon themselves to drastic effect, precisely to ask such questions of humanity.

Sometimes a person is physically separated from humanity, as with the man transformed into physical monstrosity to fit life on Mars in Frederik Pohl's *Man Plus* (1976) or the scientist given a featureless metal head and a consequent lack of identity in *Who?* (1958) by Algis Budrys, though generally in such cases they cling to some element of humanity. Others happily abandon it, if they already feel themselves to be an outcast they are usually more ready to become something other than human, as the woman transformed into machine in James Tiptree Jr's 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' (*New Dimensions* 3, edited by Robert Silverberg, [New York: Nelson Doubleday, 1973], collected in James Tiptree, Jr., *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* [New York: Ballantine, 1975]) and Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* (1969). Nevertheless, to abandon that last gasp of humanity is to surrender to something truly monstrous and ultimately catastrophic, as Greg Bear demonstrates in *Blood Music* (1985), at least from a human point of view.

Sometimes, the monstrous is itself transformed into something

humane by the acquisition of some human skill, whether it is the neanderthal who learns to express his feelings in Michael Bishop's *Ancient Days* (1985) or the robot who becomes human by dying in Isaac Asimov's 'The Bicentennial Man' (*Stellar* 2, edited by Judy-Lynn del Rey [New York: Ballantine, 1976], collected in Isaac Asimov, *The Bicentennial Man and Other Stories* [New York: Doubleday, 1976]), though often enough self-awareness is sufficient to bring some level of humanity, as the computer that writes its autobiography in R.A. Lafferty's *Arrive at Easterwine* (1971) or the space-probe AI that evolves into full independent consciousness in Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels* (1990).

More often, the question is unresolved. Michael Bishop made

Frankenstein's Creature into an immortal, and brought him back to play minor league baseball in *Brittle Innings* (1994). He served as a means of bringing out the humanity of the other characters in the book, but the immortality was one more point of separation and in the end he simply disappeared without really resolving the question of how human he had become.

In the end, appearance is a large part of it: it's easier to accept as human something that looks human. Frankenstein wanted his creation to be beautiful, and it was ugliness that made him first turn against it. So N. Lee Wood's 'fabricant' is beautiful and can ask: 'Do I seem like a monster?' But appearance alone is not enough, and when all

is said and done we still don't know by how much or how little we can change the basic pattern of mankind and still have a human being at the end. As Wood's fabricant says, each small change can have countless unknown knock-on effects. Where along the line would this creature start to be human? And what, exactly, would that mean?

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For more on Mary Shelley and Frankenstein see the articles by R. J. Frost and Thom Benjamin in Vector 196 (and please note the additional bibliography in 'Red Shift' in this issue). An interview with N. Lee Wood can also be found in this issue.

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'The point I was leading up to,' he said, addressing his plate, 'is that if you fiddle with the design in one area, there may be other changes along the chains of integration. Do fabricants feel the same emotions in the same way that humans do? I don't know. Their brains are different; it's possible that the way they interpret emotions is different as well. One side affect of my language capability is that I don't have a dominant hemisphere. I'm truly ambidextrous. That in itself has no particular significance, but I believe the designers themselves don't know to the last detail what effects other alterations might ultimately have.'

That chilled me. 'Frankenstein and his monster, hmm?' He stopped eating. 'I don't think it's quite that drastic,' he said quietly and looked me straight in the eye. 'Do I seem like a monster to you?'

*Looking for the Mabi (1996) – N. Lee Wood*

## I'm not I: Putty Race

by Andrew M. Butler

Andrew M. Butler examines the life after death in – and of – cyberpunk by getting all philosophical about Greg Egan's *Permutation City*. Those who wish to avoid having the ending spoilt for them should stop reading at the asterisk, three paragraphs from the end.

In the case of cyberpunk, there is a peculiar sense of content imitating form. Almost as soon as it was identified and named, it was declared dead, outdated, outré. Such a cultural move had already been anticipated by at least one postmodern commentator; once artists had reacted against the styles of a previous epoch, then a previous generation, then something produced the same year and now

it almost seems as if artists are reacting against works which haven't yet been produced. Novelty has obsolescence as a given. Yet seemingly paradoxically, fourteen years or so after the Death of Cyberpunk, the genre continues to thrive in what can only be assumed is a kind of afterlife or zombie state.

In retrospect, this only seems appropriate, as a closer

inspection of the genre reveals that the encounter with the realm of the dead is central to cyberpunk. This encounter, once traced, can actually be observed in all manner of other works, throughout history, but it seems particularly predominant in the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s. (I have elsewhere coined the term 'cyberpunk-flavoured fiction' to designate such works as *Vurt*, *Mythago Wood* and *Dreamside*; within certain thematic criteria they look like cyberpunk, feel like cyberpunk and even taste like cyberpunk, and yet steadfastly remain not cyberpunk).

Life, in phenomenological terms, is an encounter with otherness; we perceive it through our senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch) perception of a combination of the four basic dimensions: height, width, depth and duration. Death thus becomes defined as the end of perception: the act of dying may be perceived but not the moment of death itself. Death is therefore the ultimate in otherness, always ungraspable, always out of reach. As a limit to life, it is a means of defining and denoting the boundaries of life, and thus of defining the self.

Compare and contrast this version of death as the ending of perception of life with the reaction of Thomas Riemann, in Greg Egan's *Permutation City* (1994), to impending death:

This body was always destined to perish; he'd accepted that long ago. *death* was the irreversible dissolution of the personality; this wasn't *death*, it was a shedding of skin. There was nothing to fear. (211)

Death as the end of personality, as the end of the body, as the end of space and being. To encounter death, to actually experience death – rather than to experience dying – is to move beyond the four dimensions of being, to go – literally – beyond being.

And yet, we still talk of dimensions in relation to an afterlife, whether it be in terms of an underworld or in transcending the body in the ascent to Heaven or the descent to Hell. The directions we have to take metaphorically; exploration has failed to find heaven or hell on this planet, nor does further exploration seem likely to locate these realms. The heavens and hells are only encountered in fictions, in reported visits to afterlives, or in the occasional Lazarus returning home.

The pattern is set in the Orpheus myth: the hero in search of a lost female goes in search of her in the realms of the dead, at risk to his own life. The mission almost always fails, whether the hero is stuck behind in the underworld, returns empty handed or the female is granted only limited parole.

Since *Neuromancer* (1984) we have been increasingly finding our afterlives in cyberspace rather than in some quasi-religious realm. Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* has perhaps been the most open about the mythic origins of its version of cyberspace. The story of Joanna being trapped on the Raft (a 'real' world underworld) maps onto the myth of Inanna trapped in a watery underworld – and computer hacking is necessary to retrieve her. Such visits to the afterlife recur throughout Jeff Noon's work, whether it is Scribble searching for Desdemona in *Vurt*, Sibyl facing Hades in *Pollen*, Alice going through the grandfather clock to a surreal future in *Automated Alice* or tracking down Miss Sayer in *Nymphomation*. In each case the hero (or heroine) is put at risk by their move from our dimensioned reality to the

cyberspatial realm of non-being, and this putting at risk confirms the identity of the individual.

So it is we come back to *Permutation City*, where a cyberspace realm once more acts as an afterlife, and where this realm both calls self-identity into question and reaffirms it.

In a world that is secular, when death occurs that would appear to be it. Death remains an undiscovered country. Scientific – especially medical – advances continue to delay the moment of death for as long as possible. But after a certain point, all that survives of us is a memory of our deeds in others, and our genetic heritage if we have reproduced. It is a natural defence mechanism to fear the unknown, whether it is death or anything else. The nothingness beyond or after life seems to take on a haunting form. But then non-being can flare into being; a universe is conjured out of a handful of equations.

Take the thought experiment devised by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, to see how being can come by way of non-being. Imagine being in a room in total darkness. The room will not remain dark. In the nothingness in the corner of one's eye lurks... something. In the silence there is the howl of... something. An impersonal being, which comes to the individual, which exceeds one's perceptions:

He lay paralysed, in darkness. Wishing for sleep; terrified of sleep. Wishing for anything that might distract him [...]

The blackness in his skull seemed to open out, an invisible view expanding into an invisible vista. Any sense of being in the hospice bed, merely numb and sightless, was gone now; he was lost on a plain of darkness. (211)

It might be argued that this is merely a manifestation of the brain's mechanisms, that the something which comes from nothing actually comes from within, but in phenomenological terms it becomes impossible to distinguish between the assumption that there is something being perceived and the act of perception which is entirely the product of senses. (The lack of distinction between subjective and objective worlds becomes even more apparent if the personality is computer code existing within a computer-generated environment: how do you distinguish between different kinds of 0s and 1s?)

What is more terrifying: the fact of being – of being thrown into a world – the thought of not-being – of the self coming to a point of extinction – or the possibility of something coming from nothing – of the self losing mastery over its domain?

In Egan's *Permutation City*, the Copy is one means for the individual to survive beyond the death of that individual. The Copy is identical to the mind of the original, at least to itself; it perceives its surrounding environment in much the same way that the original would. The sequence where an Original is led to believe he is a Copy suggests that the difference between the perception of their environment is merely one of medium: three-dimensional solid reality or putty-like binary computer code simulation. Copies arose from the technological improvements in medical simulations designed to model neurology:

Imaging technology steadily improved [...] by 2020, it had reached the point where individual neurons could be

mapped, and the properties of individual synapses measured, non-invasively. With a combination of scanners, every psychologically relevant detail of the brain could be read from the living organ – and duplicated on a sufficiently powerful computer. (38)

But these computer simulations run into exactly the same arguments about consciousness as an artificial intelligence argued over by Turing or Searle. Are these simulated alter egos really egos in their own right, possessed of consciousness, or are they merely computer programs, riffling through noughts and ones.

For Searle there was a distinction between organic thought processes and the operation of a computer. The computer may well be manipulating data and producing a result which simulates the output of thought processes, but isn't it merely simulating awareness? To prove his assertion, Searle suggested the idea of the Chinese Box. A person writes down questions in Chinese symbols on a card and slots them into a box. Inside the box is a person with a Chinese-English/English-Chinese dictionary who translates each individual card, answers the question, and returns an answer in Chinese. The person clearly does not know Chinese – only symbols are being manipulated. But surely the system as a whole does 'know' Chinese.

Perhaps the assertion that the flesh and blood of neurons has a self-knowledge of their own processes of a different order to the impersonality of the flow of neurons (or, rather, electrons) in even the most sophisticated program, is too thin a hair for most of us to split if the end product is someone or something which appears to be thinking. The map may very well not be the territory, but if something seems to produce something that looks like the process of thinking, albeit by a different kind of process to that of the brain, most of us would still call it thinking. My understanding of the Turing Test is that if you can't distinguish between a human and a computer simulating a human, it is probably wiser to treat both as human.

Egan is able to side step this endless, unresolvable argument by positing the self-awareness of the Copy as a given within the fiction. One extended sequence in the novel has the Copy Paul Durham experience life as a program at a number of different speeds of times, with – as – it were the equations of his perception being solved at distinct intervals. The perception seems to hold constant, despite the discrete units of duration:

For time to pass for a Copy, the numbers which defined it had to change from moment to moment. Recomputed over and over again, a Copy was a sequence of snapshots, frames of a movie – or frames of computer animation. (43)

The persistence of vision enables us to perceive synchronic pictures or frames as a diachronic film sequence; the Copy has an analogous persistence of experience.

These Copies allow the original to cheat death, albeit on a limited scale: a version of the original will survive, although the original may die. Francesca, dying of cancer, may have a virtual afterlife. But better a virtual afterlife than no life at all; as one character has it: 'I'd rather be a software mongrel than dead'. (101) So the Copy can continue to exist, subject to not being terminated and subject to available computing power, indefinitely. As far as it is possible to tell, it will simulate the

reactions of the original, and learn and subtly alter over time. Far from cyberspace being an analogy for the afterlife, here cyberspace is a literal afterlife.

This becomes most evident in the work of Paul Durham to establish a computer-generated, self-sustaining reality which will form another universe. A number of millionaires with copies have been approached to invest in a new realm, which will not be subject to the same power fluctuations or band width limitations as the old cyberspace:

a city [...] thousands of square kilometres – and none of it passive. Architectural detail everywhere down to visual acuity, or better. Pseudo-autonomous crowds – hundreds of thousands of people. Zoos and wildlife parks with the latest behavioural algorithms. A waterfall the size of nothing on Earth (65)

This not-on-Earth heaven will allow eternal life to those Copies whose details have been entered into the configuration of the new universe. The originals can have no experience of this new realm; they might as well be dead. Indeed, Durham commits suicide on the success of his experiment: 'his corpse lay in the bathroom, dead by his own hands, on his own terms; victim of his own seamless logic.' (205) It is surely an absurd logic: why live when you've got eternal life? Why putter through a short lifespan, when your Copy will live forever?

Whilst that particular Thomas dies, unable to escape from the guilt he feels at his life's actions, another Thomas has been cloned and sent into the new simulated universe:

He'd delivered the clone into Durham's hands, to grant it – like the flesh-and-blood it believed itself to be – the remote chance of another life, in a world beyond death, unknowable. (213)

Here, again, the terminology seems wrong: in what sense can there be a beyond to the non-being of death? How can there be a life beyond death? But from non-being, there is... something. Unknowable, because the I cannot be there.

One way of understanding this is through the ideas of the philosopher Levinas, in relation to 'paternity'. According to him:

Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me. [...] I do not have my child; I am in some way my child.

The Copy is a stranger, entirely other, who exists within a virtual realm beyond the being of four dimensions. But the Copy is also a myself, in being a precise imitation of an original me. The Copy can continue my experiences, my heritage, but I can have no direct access to them whilst I am alive, let alone when I am dead. As Levinas notes:

Paternity is not simply the renewal of the father in the son and the father's merger with him, it is also the father's exteriority in relation to the son, a pluralist existing (*Time and the Other*, 91).

The original remains in the outside world, the Copy enters the cyberspace underworld within The-Garden-of-



Eden configuration. The Copy may exist in a cyberspace which has dimensions for the Copy, but which is forever beyond the reach of the original.

Those who have read *Permutation City* to the end will appreciate that Egan offers a reading of the Copy-as-child which is not entirely certain as to what survives, and whether it isn't more likely that the parent survives; those who have not may wish to stop reading now.

\* \* \*

The *Permutation City* itself collapses, as the Copies seem expelled from their paradise by other beings who inhabit the realm, and the rules of this universe are altered. The Paul Durham Copy seems reluctant to continue; he has seen enough in seven thousand years. But he seems to rally, for one more attempt, or sacrifices himself in favour of a version of himself who wants to continue:

He beamed at her [Maria], like an idiot, like a child. 'I just made a few adjustments to my mental state. [...]

Had he granted himself transhuman resilience, and healed himself of his terminal despair...or had he died in silence, beyond her sight, and given birth to a companion for her, a software child who'd merely inherited its father's memories? (309; my italics).

A Copy of a Copy becomes indistinguishable from a Copy. Note, however, how the terminology used is that of parenthood. Note, as well, how in the next chapter Maria in the real world lays flowers in memory of Paul Durham and her parents. She has survived here; the future of her Copy is less certain, and certainly unknown to her.

In this case, cyberpunk's exploration of life after death leaves us much the same place as pre-cyberpunk fiction did. There may well be an afterlife, which enables us to go beyond death. But there is no way we can go there; what survives of us is not us. In the meantime we had better make the most of life in this world. At least, though, the afterlife of cyberpunk allows us to keep asking questions about what it is to live, or to die.

Greg Egan. *Permutation City*. (London: Millennium, 1994; quotations from 1995 paperback).

Emmanuel Levinas. *Time and the Other*. Translation by Richard A. Cohen. (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

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Andrew M. Butler is currently appearing in *Matrix*, having the mickey taken out of him by *Aleph*. Serves him right, too — Eds.

## The Beast Within: *Alien*<sup>3</sup> Reconsidered

by Gary Dalkin

'The word on the film is mixed, but some say it's visually brilliant, daring, a work of art.'

Premiere, UK edition, May 1992

The purpose of this article is to reassess *Alien*<sup>3</sup>, arguing that far from being a disaster, it is a fine film, the pinnacle of the *Alien* series. That true to the spirit of 'Real SF' *Alien*<sup>3</sup> is a serious drama concerned with the extrapolation of important themes. In order to argue this I am going to consider the place of *Alien* and *Aliens* in film history, before discussing how the development of the *Alien* franchise established expectations as to what a second sequel should be. When these preconceived expectations were not met reaction turned against *Alien*<sup>3</sup>, and the very considerable qualities of the film passed generally unnoticed. Finally I am going to consider the film itself, suggesting that the very factor which turned reaction against the film, its confounding of expectation, lends it greatness. For while *Alien*<sup>3</sup> offers considerable genre thrills, it is an enormously bold, iconoclastic film, quite unprecedented for a commercial Hollywood sequel. *Alien*<sup>3</sup> is the first \$60 million Hollywood European art film.

First it is necessary to dismiss the idea that *Alien* (1979) is an unassailable film classic. On its original release *Alien* was a commercial success but critical disaster, derided as a disgusting, expensive rehash of '50's B picture monster movies, particularly as an unofficial and unacknowledged remake of *It! The Terror From Beyond Space* (1958). Neither a great film nor a disaster, the truth was in between. *Alien* was a film with nothing to say, but in taking familiar material and presenting it realistically, seriously and with tremendous

style, it made what had been hackneyed fresh and terrifying. As an adult monster movie *Alien* was no laughing matter, but while it is very entertaining, it is also severely flawed. Two especially noticeable weaknesses seriously undermine suspension of disbelief.

First there is the considerable confusion regarding the extent of the involvement of The Company, and the presence of Ash, the android science-officer played by Ian Holm. Second is an enormous lapse, either of logic or continuity, between the disappearance of the infant 'chestbuster' and the reappearance, just hours later and without opportunity to eat, of the adult-sized alien.

The true significance of *Alien* must be seen in its threefold legacy. It would largely inspire the Stalk & Slash boom. Indeed, with hindsight *Alien* was the first up-market 'slasher' film, adding a high gloss studio production and SF trappings to material with the same intent as John Carpenter's *Halloween* [1978]. Between them, *Alien* and *Halloween* would initiate a cycle which would run well into the early 80's in the cinema, would continue to the present in innumerable straight-to-video features, and is currently undergoing a revival following the surprise hit of Wes Craven's *Scream* [1997].

Much more importantly, *Alien* changed the face of visual art. In 1979 no one had designed a film the way H.R. Giger designed *Alien*, and no one had ever lit and photographed a film the way Scott lit and photographed *Alien*. Those who noticed dismissed the look as an exercise in style over content. It was a style which would go on to influence countless other films, and eventually TV shows, adverts and

even computer games. *Alien* is one of those rare films which actually changed the look of film itself.

Finally, *Alien* laid the foundation for an entire film franchise. It was a slow start, but seven years later, simply by adding one letter to the title, (rather than the almost obligatory number), director James Cameron stated his intentions. *Aliens* [1986] would remember *Alien* for us, wholesale.

*Aliens* was an overwhelming film, delivering all the tension of *Alien* until that tension became unbearable, before exploding into as relentless and thrilling an action movie as the cinema had ever seen. *Aliens* left audiences drained yet exhilarated. Cameron had crafted a brilliant commercial film which was an utterly faithful continuation beyond the end of *Alien*, yet very much his own movie. From the ensemble-cast original he had taken the surviving heroine and thrust her center stage, giving Ripley, in her struggle to save the girl Newt, significantly more purpose than in *Alien*. Sigourney Weaver responded with a performance of such quality that even the SF-shy Academy Award's noticed, giving her an Oscar nomination for Best Actress.

This fore-grounding of Ripley would prove to be enormously significant in defining the future of the franchise. Until *Aliens* any potential sequel to *Alien* did not have to necessarily involve the sole human survivor of *The Nostromo*. In the horror genre the only indispensable element is the monster, which almost always becomes far more famous than the hero. The first *Alien* sequel could have lived or died upon its own merits while featuring an entirely new group of characters. However, when Cameron made Ellen Ripley the center around which *Aliens* revolved, he transferred the series from the rules of the horror genre to those of the action movie. In action movies it is the monster which is dispensable, and the hero who must return triumphant, time after time. Had Ripley died in *Alien* no one would have minded, that there was outrage concerning her death in *Alien* only reflects changed perceptions as to the nature of the franchise.

*Aliens* became the definitive model for the franchise. Ironically this was helped by the fact that the film is less visually distinguished than *Alien*, and thus, has less to lose when transferred to TV/video. *Aliens* was pragmatically shot in 1:1.85 widescreen, with no time for the stylish CinemaScope visuals of the original. Thus, while looking less impressive on the cinema screen, during repeated TV viewings the film actually played better, on the home screen the confined action having more impact than the diluted, elegant atmospherics of *Alien*. No frills thrills established precedence stylish grandeur, and after the video release of *Aliens* the film further established its standing as the definitive model for any further sequel.

In the late 1980's *Alien*, a series of comics and graphic novels, began to appear from Dark Horse, and in turn these were novelized. These material comprised unimaginative and repetitive variations on material from the two films. Dialogue and art were uniformly mediocre, and without the movement, sound, music and performances of the films these spin-offs resolutely failed to generate any atmosphere, suspense or excitement. Nevertheless, they began to reinforce the expectation following from *Aliens* that any *Alien* product should largely consist of firefights with swarming hordes of xenomorphs. The comics also introduced the idea of the

aliens invading Earth, and the aliens battling 'Predators' (from another 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox SF franchise.) These action-orientated concepts, however contrived, found much popular favor, and many fans began to hope that the second sequel movie would go in one of these directions.

In April 1992, four months before the UK release of *Alien*<sup>3</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox released direct to sell-through video James Cameron's original cut of *Aliens* as a Special Edition. This cut added 22 minutes of footage, including material which emphasized Newt as a surrogate daughter for Ripley and increased the suspense and tension even beyond that of the cinema version. At 154 minutes *Aliens - Special Edition* was the longest, most explosive Hollywood SF movie to date. Shortly afterwards a 'fairground' attraction based on *Aliens* opened in London and toured the country. In 'Alien War' members of the public could, for 15 minutes, role-play at being a survivor on an Alien filled space-station while a group of 'space-marines' led them to safety amid howling klaxons, stroboscopic lights and alien assaults. Along with the Special Edition tape, *Alien War* further reinforced the expectation that *Alien*<sup>3</sup> was going to be *Aliens 2*.

Given the build-up, together with numerous reports of a troubled shoot which appeared in film magazines that summer, When *Alien*<sup>3</sup> finally arrived [21-August-1992], the disappointment was perhaps inevitable. The result was some of the most savage, acidic and unbalanced reviews in recent film history. Reviews based not on what was on screen, but on what was not, reviews based upon preconceptions of what an Alien film now should be. Very few critics reviewed David Fincher's film.

In fact, under very difficult conditions, Fincher had imposed his vision on the Alien series in just the same way Cameron had imposed his six years previously. It was simply a vision which very few wanted, and Fincher was publicly damned for the film he didn't make, for instead doing all the things he would later be lavishly praised for repeating, less well, on his second feature, *Se7en* (1996).

We decided to make a delicate china cup. You can't say we should have made a beer mug.

David Fincher.

*Alien*<sup>3</sup> is not *Aliens 2*, anymore than *Aliens* is *Alien 2*. Like *Aliens*, it is a well imagined continuation of a story begun in the first film, yet bearing all the hallmarks a uniquely talented director. The three films, despite being made by three almost entirely different creative teams manage against the odds to form a remarkably coherent trilogy. Of these, *Alien*<sup>3</sup> is not the most exciting, but it is the most finely crafted, the most subtle, the most thematically sophisticated. It is also very much a true 'alien' film, taking elements from both previous films. *Alien*, with a single creature against a group of unarmed humans in a series of claustrophobic corridors, brooding atmospherics with stylish set-pieces of mounting terror and sudden death. *Aliens* in its concentration on further pushing Ripley to the fore and testing her to the very limit of endurance.

Looked at without preconceptions as to what it should be, *Alien*<sup>3</sup> not only has all the suspense and terror of the original, it is better performed, designed, lit and photographed.

I'm not making this film for 50 million people. I'm making it for 8 people, my friends, people who know cameras and lighting.

David Fincher.

True to Fincher's word every shot is beautifully framed, making full use of the broad CinemaScope canvas with stark attention to the smallest of visual details. There is even, in homage to *Alien*, a tacky 70's 'dunking bird' novelty figure making a brief, almost unnoticed appearance. The sheer visual brilliance of the film was disregarded upon release. Unfortunately this quality can not be appreciated now, for even the 'widescreen' video releases damagingly crop the picture.

Stand-out set pieces eclipse those of *Alien* in chilling cinematic power: the dramatically intercut main title, the stark autopsy, the powerful inter-cutting of the birth of the 'new' alien with the funeral in the iron foundry, the darkly poetic scene in which Charles Dance explains his crime, the attack in the hospital, the candles in the tunnel and the attack against the turbine, the firestorm in the tunnels, the attempted rape, the revival of Bishop, the confrontation in the very depths of the prison during which the alien recognizes that Ripley is incubating an alien, the final virtuoso entrapment of the creature, Ripley's plunge into the furnace and the arrival of the forces of Wayland Yutani. Purely as a dramatic SF horror movie these brilliantly crafted sequences make *Alien<sup>3</sup>* far superior to *Alien*.

Hollywood action pictures traditionally make death fun. *Alien<sup>3</sup>* introduces harsh reality. The strong script replaces the 'and then there was one' plot structure with intense character drama. The film is no more death fixated than any other Hollywood blockbuster, but it faces the consequences of its carnage with unflinching honesty. For those who wanted to enjoy neo-pornography with their popcorn this was too distressing. The most damning attacks on the film came from those who wanted the thrills, adventure and danger without the price, chaos without consequence, mayhem forever without ever hurting, without ever touching anyone the audience really cares about. This was to want the films to remain eternally sanitized, infantile, within safe perimeters where we know that the good guys will never get hurt, no matter how dangerous events on screen may seem. A future where we don't have to think, or confront the drama on screen, because it's anodyne, and we know what is going to happen anyway. We're only here for the ride. The ritual. Yet without real danger there can be no real suspense or excitement. Only the ersatz thrills of *Die Hard*, *Lethal Weapon*, the Bond series.

*Alien<sup>3</sup>* was the blockbuster grown-up, entering a world where loved characters can die, where even the golden Hollywood rule which states that children and heroines are indestructible can be broken. A world more familiar to the art-house than the multiplex. Unfortunately, after Ripley had fought so hard to save Newt in *Aliens*, critics felt betrayed that Fincher killed Newt so casually in the very opening of his film. It was suggested that her death negated the events of *Aliens*, rendered Ripley's battles meaningless and futile. This was to misunderstand that the events of *Aliens* were separate, part of a different film. That each is a separate film, not reality. That in *Aliens* Ripley did win. Subsequent events do not change this. No one knows the future, and everyone dies. The fact that Newt died sooner, rather than much later, does

not even imply that there was no point in fighting to save her. To argue this is to argue that there is no point ever in struggling to survive. It is nihilism not justified by the events of *Alien<sup>3</sup>*.

The most appropriate reference, stylistically and thematically, are the late films of the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski. *Three Colours: Blue* [1992] opens with Juliet Binoche losing her young daughter in a car crash, then rebuilding her life against much the same bleak atmosphere as that of Fincher's future. The adoption of this bleak, 'art-house' approach was roundly reviled, yet the subject matter of the *Alien* films is unremittably dark. To remove the gloss is to honestly present the true horror behind the original formula.

Immediately *Alien<sup>3</sup>* declares that it is not going to take the obvious, safe course. In the opening moments Ripley's new surrogate family is torn from her while she lies sleeping. Everything she has fought for is stripped away, making her a woman alone, left only with her inner resources. From here on Fincher continually raises the emotional and psychological pressure, shocking us into paying stunned attention. We watch, hoping that the film will have the courage of its premise, and are strangely thrilled to find that in its darkly apocalyptic heart, it does. In killing Ripley *Alien<sup>3</sup>* proves that anything can happen. That preconceptions can be overturned, the audience made to think the unthinkable, to confront a new and uncomfortable future which too many might prefer to sweep under the SFX.

Genre movies usually stop before the final curtain. What happens to the hero afterwards is not important, unless they return for a sequel. *Alien<sup>3</sup>* takes Ripley to the end, raising the idea that given choice, the importance matter becomes the manner in which she, and by implication, those watching in the audience, die. This confrontation with mortality is rightly uncomfortable, lucid in its engagement with absolutes. Early on the reality of the deaths of Newt and Hicks is brought home in a glacial autopsy sequence. Ripley has already outlived her own daughter, now she has survived her surrogate child. Bishop is resurrected, a ghastly, tragic parody of life. There is sympathy for the android, but no permanent ghost in the machine. Ripley's only companions are murderers, and inside her she is incubating an alien killer.

Against this Fincher juxtaposes human warmth. Ripley finds for the first time in the series the possible beginnings of romance, and the temporary comforts of sex with the doctor [Charles Dance] who performed the autopsies. Even he is a troubled figure, steeped in death, and quickly taken from Ripley, and set against the brief tenderness comes the dark side of human sexuality; an attempted gang rape. Ripley is truly alone in a literal visualization of medieval hell. Fire imagery abounds, Elliot Goldenthal gothic requiem mass fills the soundtrack, and the new Alien, born un-naturally from a beast, functions as an emissary of hell, sent to dispatch the unredeemed sinners of the 'asshole' of the universe.

Ripley is now a vengeful angel fallen to the worst place in the universe a lone woman could be; a prison colony for the worst criminals known to humanity; rapists, murders, serial killers... and again there is the Alien, but this time there is no possibility of escape. It is the logical end to the series to confront mankind's worst external nightmare with the nightmare of the worst that man can become. To face the brutal physical alien horror with the true horror of the darkness that can lie within the human heart. For *Alien<sup>3</sup>* is

not a movie about shooting bugs, or even about survival, but about redemption. In an era when it is unfashionable for movies to be about anything this is astonishing in itself in a Hollywood franchise. The alien has become literally and figuratively internalized, all most all of the characters divided from themselves by the depths to which they have fallen.

The script drives Ripley along with a relentlessly compelling logic. Knowing that death is inevitable, no one is going to come to the rescue this time, Ripley sets about binding the convicts into a force to destroy the Alien. Here the previous formula is inverted. There are no battles for personal survival. In a way these men have long ago renounced personal identity. They atone for former crimes by dying for a greater good. The ethos is mediaeval, man against hostile cosmos, almost willing instrument in the hand of a remote but interventive God.

The alien dead, the true climax, Ripley's plunge into the furnace, resolves the ultimate Alienating idea, a development worthy of the films of David Cronenberg, that after all her battles the alien should become internalized within Ripley's own flesh. Making the horror infinitely worse is that she is fully aware - unlike John Hurt's character in the first film - of what will happen to her. A defeated, agonizing death, unleashing the beast yet again. To this there is the perverse poignancy that this, in the third film, is Ripley's third child, and no matter how much she must loath it, and knowing it

must destroy her in its birthing, she can not help but love it a little too.

In choosing to sacrifice herself in the furnace Ripley defeats the alien. Her death is not meaningless, but has a redemptive rightness. Symbolically it is a near messianic act, the willing surrender of one human life to save untold others. It adds a depth and resonance to the film which elevates it to a level entirely beyond the two previous films, indeed, beyond almost all Hollywood films.

The final valedictory mood is set in the epilogue as we hear Ripley's voice for the last time, and Goldenthal's theme subtly evokes the quotation from Howard Hanson's Second Symphony, used at the close of *Alien*. The film ends with the suggestion that Ripley has at last found the sleep she previously found only temporarily. Even in death her voice lives forever on as radio waves. The Alien is merely dead. In such bleak and unremitting circumstances a life may end in triumph. Ripley has affirmed that living still has purpose, meaning, value, and a lonely heroine has at last found eternal rest.

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For a detailed account of the making of *Alien*<sup>3</sup>, including an interview with David Fincher see: John H. Richardson, *Premiere*, May 1992

## Bookspotting

In the second of an occasional series highlighting neglected books, both old and new  
**RICHARD KING** examines Primo Levi's, *The Sixth Day* (1990)

Primo Levi is not the sort of writer to immediately associate with the genre of sf or fantasy. His most important works are indubitably his memoirs of his Auschwitz experience; what he writes is generally directly autobiographical, clearly a means of coming to terms with the concentration camp. Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 1970s, fantasy provided him with a valuable medium for addressing this dark and most disturbing area of experience.

His collections of short stories were combined by Abacus as *The Sixth Day* (1990). His fantasies, like Kafka's, are imaginative workings of realist themes; the loss of individual identity and the frailty of humanity, its ready dissolution in the face of scientific enquiry, or its apparent absence in people of power. In these stories, some fantastic machine may be the means for showing this frailty, or some wild biological experiment à la *Frankenstein*. His interest in chemistry and biology recall the realism of his other works, but his imagination is stirred beyond the scope of mainstream writing.

The five NATCA stories, considered together, provide a good introduction to Levi's fantasy. The trappings of ordinary life seem to be in place. Mr Simpson works for the company NATCA as a salesman, genuinely committed to making a successful sale. Once the conventional sales world is established, the formula for each of these stories is the same. NATCA have developed a machine which becomes increasingly outlandish in its ability to enslave a living creature. As in Philip K. Dick's most paranoid writing, individual freedom is threatened by something that exists outside the realm of 'literary' fiction.

In 'Order on the Cheap', Simpson wants to sell the Mimer, a 'true' duplicator, able to recreate a die, a spider or a diamond

apparently from nothing. The process of duplication is essentially organic: the die is duplicated through the copying of its atoms, or perhaps even cells; veins are seen to sprout through the duplicate as it is created. As the narrator experiments with the Mimer, the effect is to minimise whatever we in the 1990s might still choose to call 'sacred' about life itself. By the time of 'Some Applications of "The Mimer"', an ethical taboo has been broken. Something more harrowing, more 'frankly disgusting' has happened. The narrator's friend Gilberto has duplicated his wife - she is in all ways identical to the original and shares her memories, although she regards the original as an elder sister - and he marries her off to a duplicate of himself. Levi has taken away the fundamental value we place on life, and it has become a mere commodity.

In other stories, NATCA also develop machines which quantify a woman's attractiveness ('The Measure of Beauty'), which control animal life by enabling people to communicate with a variety of dragon-flies, ants and other insects ('Full Employment') or which recognise and quantify the value of an individual with the VIP-SCAN ('Retirement Fund').

Such machines are commonplace in science-fiction writing. In Philip K. Dick's story 'Pay for the Printer' (published 1956), for example, we encounter a post-apocalyptic world struggling to take its last gasp among the ashes. The duplicators in this story - the Biltongs - are in fact alien life-forms that have landed on Earth to help humanity reproduce the goods needed to live in such an inhospitable environment. Levi's world is more familiar. Like Kafka, or Dean Swift, he seems to write about obscure corners of the real world. The message behind Dick's story is essentially up-beat. Although we exploit the Biltongs in the same

way that we exploit the Earth's resources, the story closes more positively with the idea that in order to live, people need to rediscover their early skills, learn how to build, to construct, to think for themselves. People need to stop feeding as parasites upon systems that are unable to support them.

In Levi's NATCA stories, people are capable of any crime. Simpson might react with horror at the idea of duplicating human beings, but the narrator shows none of his scruples. Simpson feels at perfect liberty to employ the animal kingdom for his own devices.

The lack of importance placed on life is criticised in 'Order on the Cheap': directly by Simpson and implicitly when the narrator compares himself to God, creating and recreating life without any ethical authority. On the sixth day of his experiments, the narrator duplicates a lizard and kills the duplicate because its skeleton is too weak, its bones are like rubber. And 'on the seventh day I rested'. Nothing appears to drive him but cold-blooded intellectual interest.

In 'Full Employment', Simpson conditions a crowd of dragon-flies to put on an aerial display as entertainment. He does a deal with the ants to keep away from his garden because his wife dislikes them, but sees them perish in their new environment.

Levi highlights the insensitivity of the mind that denies others free will, leaving condemnation of such insensitivity frequently implied. Simpson recognises the rights of ants – they are socially 'useful' – but still denies flies anything because of their intrinsic stupidity. Life is not precious. The right to govern falls to the strongest and not necessarily the most intelligent, certainly not those with the most highly developed consciences.

The loss common to all these stories is of some essential ingredient in humanity following the evil of Auschwitz. Levi poses a number of interpretations. Professor Leeb in 'Angelic Butterfly' suggests that we are like the axolotl monster from Mexico. People are not in their 'final state'. We are stopped by death from evolving to our perfect state, our butterfly state; we are prevented from becoming angels because we do not live long enough. In the world of the story, the idea is given credibility when cases of hundred-year-olds are cited who grow a third set of teeth, when the hair regrows in extreme old age on a bald scalp. Levi argues that in our angelic state we all possess full humanity. In the state of the caterpillar, we fall short of being the human version of a 'perfect insect', and as if to underline this message, Leeb is found to have conducted vile immoral experiments on living creatures which look like vultures and have the wings of roasted chickens. Leeb's assistants try to slaughter the creatures brutally, rather than be discovered – and are caught in the act.

In another story, bizarre experiments on a young woman begin in 1975 and go on for another one hundred and forty years. Patricia is frozen alive and re-animated every generation or so. (The comparison with *Frankenstein* is particularly appropriate here.) The purpose of the experiment is not clearly defined. She is a freak, designed only to satisfy intellectual curiosity. A family 'possess' her as if she is some kind of curio, demonstrating the nature of the existence of a creature whose life contains no moments of lethargy, only 'essential' moments. Since Patricia does not age when on ice (she recalls thirty years in terms of three months) she remembers incidents which take place a century before the other characters were born, although she only seems to be twenty years old.

The title of the story is revealing in itself. 'The Sleeping Beauty in the Fridge' carries with it a certain brutal black humour, and carries with it the feminist criticism of male adoration of women, who aim to create impossibly perfect women in fairy-tales. The desire to take away the individual's

autonomy with the coldest of intellectual motives is further criticised by the juxtaposition of fairy-tale and the image of the mass murder or serial killer – or even the fishmonger – preserving their victims on ice. The hostility felt by many feminist theorists against those who enslave them is also referred to in the story, when it becomes apparent that the head of the house is used to raping Patricia when she is unable to defend herself at 33° C.

In Levi's stories, human beings have lost their humanity – and in some, the concept of humanity is mistaken from the first. They'd not even have the ability to hope as Philip Dick's characters occasionally do.

I'd like to conclude this brief look at Primo Levi with an examination of arguably his most fantastic of stories, the title story of the Abacus collection: 'The Sixth Day'. A committee of scientists meet to discuss the creation of 'the man model'. It is never made clear what species of life these scientists are – it does not matter. The shock the reader grows used to with chilling speed is that humanity is the subject of other creatures' gross meddling. Forget the Biblical idea that Man is made in God's image. We are a mistake. All our selfishness, our thoughtlessness, our insensitivity and our evil, the story argues, come about because the world is not constructed to support a 'mammal man'. The ideal model, the scientists eventually agree, is a sort of bird. They fear 'a male Man who leads his people into a war to conquer a female Man who distracts a male's mind from noble enterprises and thoughts to subjugate him.' Thus they neatly 'anticipate' with horror that story which is a bastion in western 'culture' (it is inappropriate to suggest here a synonym with 'civilisation'), Helen of Troy's capture and the subsequent Trojan Wars. If the scientists make a mistake, Ormuz says, it will be felt for centuries to come. All subsequent generations of Man will feel the effects of any mistake.

All Levi's themes are present. The interference of someone unqualified to interfere in the rights of individuals suggests how little importance is placed on individuals. The idea of the reduction of humanity as a mere biological specimen, to something less than human, is present. We see how arbitrarily massively influential decisions are made and the amorality in the personalities of those in positions of power, their insensitivity to the effects of their powers. The scientists themselves in 'The Sixth Day' are over-ruled, after all their planning, by nameless superiors (God? Or Gods?) who recklessly ignore their research and make Man according to the 'wrong' model. They absolve themselves of all responsibility in the final paragraph of the story and go to lunch. This botched creature, Man, is a mistake of others. There is a nice joke, too, at the expense of the Old Testament, when the scientists puzzle over the mystery of how they managed to create Man's females out of a male's rib.

Levi borrows from fantasy to explore his experiences of the Holocaust further. He does not create an alternative world. His visions of the world of 2115, where Patricia makes her escape from the fridge, and the dawning of time in 'The Sixth Day' are so similar as to be indistinguishable from his vision of the world in the 1950s and 1960s. In his world people are capable of creating an Auschwitz, committing genocide and thinking nothing of it. His fantasies do share one feature of *sf* however: the posing of 'what if →' questions (What if humanity was created by rationally-thinking scientists? What if humanity could control more directly all species of animal life?)

The fantastic occurs most horribly in an everyday world instantly recognisable to everybody living in the twentieth century. In these stories, Levi marries fantasy with Auschwitz and creates a troubled and uncomfortable vision.

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Richard King is a former teacher who now works in sales – Eds.

# 'Zine Sifting

Magazines reviewed by Helen Knibb

**Fantasy and Science Fiction 48th anniversary issue** [£2.50, 240 pages. Editor: Gordon Van Gelder.]

Now under the editorship of Gordon Van Gelder, after the resignation of Kristine Katherine Rusch, this issue is a star-studded affair. Kristine Katherine Rusch and Jerry Olton present a novella, 'Deus X', a tale of otherworldly visions diagnosed as mental illness, with a cast of modern monsters: a politician and his aide, doctors, all making disastrous decisions. The second novella is a new story by Stephen King, 'Everything's Eventual'. A conspiracy of psi-murder, it features Dink, who eventually turns against the people who control his odd powers. Witty and fast moving, fans will love it.

Another notable story is 'God is Thus', by the late Walter M Miller Jr. This is an excerpt from the novel left unfinished at his death, *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horsewoman*, since completed by Terry Bisson. The tale features armed clergy, genetic mutation and priestly population control.

Nancy Springer's 'Transcendence' is a stylish story in epistolary form, exploring the relationship between a poet and a fan, with an unexpected outcome. 'To Church with Mr Multhiford', by Robert Reed, tells the tale of crop-circles, weather forecasting and a farmer's victimisation by local boys, one of whom is the minister's son. 'Like the Gentle Rai', by Lewis Shiner, is a story of state control over children. Scientists are tubed and clawed cyborgs on wheels who take a child to be made into their own likeness. The story concerns the mother's fight to get the child back. This tale manages to be witty and tragic at the same time.

In all, there are seven short stories, plus the novelette and novellas; the non-fiction includes 'Books to Look For' by Charles de Lint, 'Books' by Robert K J Killheffer, 'Forgotten Treasures', a look at old books by Mike Resnick and 'A Scientist's Notebook: Selfness' by Gregory Benford.

**Interzone #124 (October 1997)** [Science Fiction and Fantasy, £32 for 12 issues from 217 Preston Drive, Brighton, BN1 6FL. Editor David Pringle.]

Just at the moment, the letters page 'Interaction' features a lively debate about mainstream sf, with readers contributing their impressions of books that are not generally sent to the sf press.

The first, long, story by Ian Watson, 'Secrets', follows the story of two jigsaw makers who become entangled in a web of Nazi human sacrifice, mysticism and reincarnation, and a crazy impulse to child abuse. Watson is interviewed by Barry Forshaw, revealing that 'Secrets' will be the prologue of his present novel-in-progress, < < Mockymen > >.

David Langford's 'Ansible Link' reports strange, notable and improbable news in science fiction; and as ever Thog's Masterclass mercilessly quotes the unquotable. The story 'Write Me', by D G Valdron, is a neat reversal of parent-child relationships and responsibilities, in a society that demands that children are 'rewritten' so that they have useful skills from the age of three. Alison Sinclair's 'The Bardic Version' is a short Arthurian story which foregrounds the problem of viewpoint and historical expediency.

'Quinn's Shanghai Circus', by Jeff Vandermeer, features an interesting take on art, the desolate cityscape and genetic recreation. Nicola Caines's 'Civilisation' is a post-apocalyptic tale about a bioengineered ship which is befriended by a 'simple' boy who helps it to merge with a train.

This issue features twelve pages of reviews from regular reviewers and the always fascinating lists of books received.

**Peeping Tongue #28 (October 1997)** [£8 for four issues from Yew Tree House, 15 Nottingham Road, Ashby de la Zouche, LE65 1DJ. Editor: Stuart Hughes.]

A small press magazine with a tight editorial policy, *Peeping Tongue* attracts big names, established and beginning writers.

My favourite story was easily 'Worgum's Courting', by Dallas Goffin, which traces the love-life of a ghoul; it is a good example of 'dark wildlife' narration. All of Worgum's acquaintances have names like Putrescence (the object of his desire), Lickspit and Hagspew.

Madeleine V Finnigan's 'All Meat is Prey' is a post-apocalyptic story of girl-gang rivalry and survival on the streets. The author illustrates her own story elegantly. 'Dog Days' is a short tale of violent death and Frankensteinian canine revenge by Chaz Brencley. Ashley Thomas's 'The Sea and the Statues' is a new spin on Medusa with a nice twist. 'Bullseye' by Guy N. Smith features two Nazis digging up the grave of a buried, if not dead, SS officer. 'Striking Shona', by Carol Fenlon, takes a serial killer's obsession to chilling extremes, whilst 'The Black Chip Game' by John Moralee is a tale of high stakes, revenge and suicide poker.

*Peeping Tongue* #28 includes two pages of readers' comments and even the adverts manage to surprise—the Samaritans have a small box advert. *Peeping Tongue* is a reliably good magazine with good artwork; the illustrations are often as disturbing as the stories.

**Visionary Tongue #9 (Hallowe'en 1997).** ['Dark Fantasy for the Millennium'. £8.60 for four issues from 6 St Leonard's Avenue, Stafford, ST17 4LT. Editor: Eloise Coquo. Cover by Chesca Potter and interior artwork by Ruby]

*Visionary Tongue* has a tough editorial policy which is apparent in the high quality of the writing.

'Dancing Day', by Liz Williams, is a skilful and witty retelling of Lilith's Mirror; Lilith treats her errant daughter like any other annoying teenager when she gets into difficulties possessing a mortal woman. 'Chance Meeting', returns to Lilith; this time in a mannered retelling by Andrew Peregrine in which the spurned wife makes an alliance with Lucifer.

'Metanoia' explores the stranger in the night who confers rebirth; an atmospheric vampire story by Caroline Higgins. Philip MacCormac's 'Roses are Dead' features a guest who changes a vampire's nature irrevocably (and not necessarily for the better). Lachesis January offers 'Hungry Children of the Spirit', a long story about a different kind of vampire. Jiri, the main character, is haunted by guilt over a lost lover and betrayed, only to find his powers increased.

'Sea of Lillies' and 'The House by the Lake' both explore drowning and obsession in different ways. Jeni Barker's 'Last Dance' begins with a meeting of lovers and ends as something far more sinister. 'Leviathan', by R A Murphy allows whales a cold revenge on the crew of a whaling ship.

*Visionary Tongue* has a website at:

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/vtongue>

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We hope to resume reviews of magazines on a regular basis, something which Vector has neglected to do for a number of years. Potential reviewers should contact the features editors — Eds.



# First Impressions

## Book Reviews edited by Paul Kincaid

### Babel Handbooks

Sylvia Kelso	<i>A Glance from Nowhere</i>
David Lake	<i>Darwin and Doom</i>
Rosaleen Love	<i>Michael Frayn and the Fantasy of Everyday Life</i>
Yvonne Rousseau	<i>Mimmers Marooned and Planet of the Marsupials</i>
Norman Talbot	<i>Betwixt Wood-Woman, Wolf and Bear</i>

Nimrod, 1997. 35pp, 23pp, 32pp, 26 pp, 28pp, A\$10.00 for all 5

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

This is an interesting attempt to create a series of 'Readers' Guides' to specific writers: slim (20-30pp) but acute studies of important writers by a stable of critics familiar to readers of the late *Australian Review of Science Fiction* and contemporary Australian journals such as *Sirius*. David Lake has the difficult job of kicking off the series with a look at *The Time Machine*. His problem is dealing with the volume of material on Wells, distilling themes and setting the book in its context. Lake does this well – not surprisingly as he is a Wells critic who has edited *The Invisible Man* and *The First Men in the Moon*. On the basis of this and what follows the series would make a useful resource not only for general sf readers but for schools and first year undergraduates. How many of them would be reading William Morris or Cherry Wilder is a different matter, but they would certainly find Lake's handbook a useful introduction to a book still to be found in the academic canon.

Talbot on Morris, whose prose romances are very much an acquired taste, perhaps gives the most problems. The summaries are good, offering interesting readings (e.g. *The Roots of the Mountains* as alternate-history in which the Romans never conquered) and sideline glances at Morris's contemporary class struggle in both that and *The House of the Wolfings* which certainly illuminate the novels. However, there is a slight sense of incompleteness about the account and references to the ex-Valkyrie Wood-Sun as having 'broken her vows and gone into the environment business' are unfortunately rather leaden attempts at wit. Yvonne Rousseau offers a well-researched and fascinating account of Cherry Wilder's science fiction (partly adapted from an article in *Foundation Spring* 1992), locating Wilder's human/alien scenarios in the strangeness of Anglo-Celtic settlement of Australia and New Zealand. In doing so, she makes the valuable point (for readers in this hemisphere) that the Australian/New Zealand experiences were quite different. There is a thought-provoking section linking lostness and abandonment to the Australian colonial experience. As Rousseau focuses on Wilder's sf, there is naturally no room to do more than mention Wilder's superior fantasy trilogy beginning with *A Princess of the Chameleon*.

Michael Frayn is a writer whose links with sf and fantasy as we know them are tenuous but Rosaleen Love shows us that they are very real. She succeeds in putting Frayn on my personal 'to be read' list, discussing his gentle, fantastical satire as examples of science-fictional extrapolation. She seems to suggest, without using the term, that Frayn is almost a 'magic realist' writer who comes to sf's conclusions

by the roundabout way in which do many mainstream British writers (particularly writers of comedy). Finally, Sylvia Kelso looks at the fantasy and science fiction of Sheri S. Tepper, who has somehow become one of the more controversial women sf writers. She puts a convincing case for Tepper's inventiveness and importance as a social fantasist, although a couple of unfortunate typos ('The World for Word is Forest', 'Randall Jarrell') seem to have crept in.

Further handbooks – on C. S. Lewis, Michael Moorcock, Tanith Lee and Damien Broderick among others – are planned, may even be out. This is a publishing venture which deserves support: there is a dearth of accessible, reasonably-priced introductions to many popular writers and these handbooks should fill a gap.

Babel Handbooks on Fantasy and Sf Writers 1-5, A\$10.00. Available from Nimrod Publications, PO Box 170, New Lambton 2305, Australia

## J.G. Ballard

## *The Drowned World*

Indigo, 1997, 175pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 40129 X

## *The Terminal Beach*

Indigo, 1997, 221pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 40131 1

## *The Voices of Time*

Indigo, 1997, 197pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 40130 3

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Starting from the outside in, these new softbacks have some of the finest original covers I've seen on Ballard and the trade-size shows them off. The 1994 Phoenix edition of *Voices Of Time* had a Salvador Dali cover, and designers used Max Ernst on his early Penguin editions, but the Gary Day-Ellison covers on the two short-story collections *Voices Of Time* (1963) and *The Terminal Beach* (1964) are superb. Although Ballard is an authority on the surrealists, Day-Ellison's style is closer to the pop artists such as Richard Hamilton. (Ballard would recognise this anyway, through his work with the Institute of Contemporary Art where he held his own exhibition of crashed cars).

There is a page of bibliographic information about the publishing history of the stories in *Voices Of Time*, but none in *Terminal Beach*. Unfortunately, the bibliographic information is inaccurate, unlike that in the 1994 Phoenix edition. When *Voices Of Time* first appeared, Ballard had not collected all his tales of Vermilion Sands and two of them appeared in the original *Voices* in 1963, which was called *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*. Later, he took the two stories out and replaced them with two new works, and it is that de-

Vermilionised collection printed here despite the implication otherwise.

The inspired covers lead to the inspired contents. There is an early chapter in *The Drowned World* (1962) called 'Towards a New Psychology', and in many ways the two short story collections are the best way into Ballard's appreciation of it. But you can also do the opposite, because while these three books give you clues to Ballard's world-picture, they do not give the solution to his puzzling attitudes. Ten years after these stories, you could see a continuum through to *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, but it is not apparent in them.

But then take chapter titles such as 'The Causeways Of The Sun' and 'The Paradises Of The Sun', and cross them with the story 'The Reptile Enclosure', which is set on a summer beach as the crowds wait like Gadarene Swine. In the story the waiting is satisfied by the launch of the last of the Comsats that will cover the Earth, and the crowds walk into the water as these satellites form an Innate Releasing Mechanism which the crowds cannot resist. The seabed becomes the ultimate dumping down of the media revolution, and this is the sort of beach to which Ballard would return, not just as a 'Terminal Beach' where nuclear nightmares are worked out, but also as the concrete dystopia of *Cocaine Nights* – the holiday beaches seen from another angle.

If you have read Ballard then re-read him, and see all these different approaches joining and forming a bigger picture. If you have not read Ballard then this novel and two collections are a great way to start.

## Ben Bova

## *Moonwar*

Hodder & Stoughton, 1997, 531pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 340 68250 7

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

*Moonwar* is the second volume in Ben Bova's Moonbase Saga and follows on a short but unspecified time after the events of *Moonrise*. The Moon is now the last bastion of nanotechnology and, under the pretext of eradicating the outlawed science and backed by the Yamagata corporation which has a rival moonbase, the UN sends in a 'Peacekeeping Force' to occupy the moonbase run by Doug Stavenger and the Masterson Corporation. Leading the political opposition is UN Chief Georges Henri Faure who, while publicly fronting the populist moral high-ground, privately schemes to assume control of nanotechnology for himself. With Stavenger on the Moon are all the surviving characters from *Moonrise*, now with the added romantic interest of Edith Elgin, another of those do-nothing-for-a-story blonde lady reporters who are now a staple of every other would-be hard

sf blockbuster series (see *Mars*, also by Ben Bova, *Rama II* by Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee, and Peter F. Hamilton's *Night's Dawn* trilogy). Stavenger declares the Moon independent and therefore beyond the terms of the treaty outlawing nanotechnology. Faure suppresses the declaration of independence and 'peacekeepers' with orders to shoot-to-kill besiege the moonbase, while inside the base a mercenary assassin prepares to kill Stavenger.

It is to damn with very faint praise to say that *Moonwar* is a considerable improvement upon its predecessor, for *Moonrise* was a truly execrable book. Here the American TV-style soap-operatics of bed and board meetings are considerably less to the fore, with the plot focused around an escalating conflict which develops from psychological manoeuvrings to outright violence. At this level, although presented in simplistic terms, the narrative does generate a degree of tension and excitement.

Unfortunately, the book is as badly written as *Moonrise* and the false premise which destroyed the final section of that novel here underlies the entire plot. It is clearly not



plausible that a world-wide ban on anything as potentially useful and lucrative as nanotechnology could either be agreed upon or, even if it was signed, enforced. Yet this condition is necessary for Bova to have a story at all. At least he has moved a degree closer to reality in having Faure exploit the treaty as a mere pretext, rather than act upon it out of ideology. However, the novel is often little more than a polemic for Bova's espousal of American right-wing pro-the-exploitation-of-science-at-any-cost libertarianism.

All the most competent characters are Americans, and all the foreigners are either well-meant stereotypes, incompetent or villains. Anyone who disagrees with Bova's point of view is a 'nano-luddite', which roughly translates as a brainless murdering crackpot zealot. The great irony is that Bova

shows the very real dangers of nanotechnology as part of his plot: our heroes use it to defend the moonbase and are very careful indeed not to let any nanobots get inside the base. Even so, anyone who opposes technology is an emotive reactionary religious fanatic. Clearly this is a technology which really does allow you to have your cake and eat it.

What we have is a perfunctory 531 pages – less padded than *Moonrise*, but still bloated by gratuitous descriptive passages and inconsequential dialogue. The publishers have further expanded the text by using an excessively large font, giving the book something close to the look of a library large print edition. Ironically, this makes *Moonwar* very difficult to read. Having now twice suffered for Bova's art, I can assure you that you don't need to.

### Tony Bradman (ed) *Sensational Cyber Stories*

Doubleday, 1997, 190pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 385 408 366

Reviewed by Andy Mills

*Sensational Cyber Stories* is an anthology aimed firmly at the primary school age range, and thus is unlikely to be of interest to *Vector* readers, except perhaps as a potential buy for a child. Tony Bradman has collected ten short stories by different authors, all with a computing theme. Each story is told from the viewpoint of a child, which presumably meets a need of its audience for an identifiable hero but does make it more difficult for the authors to make their story stand out from the crowd.

This reviewer, removed as he is from the 8-11 year-old he used to be by a considerable number of years (and having to hand no spog of that age to provide expert comment) is perhaps not best placed to say whether or not these stories would excite their intended audience. On the whole, they seemed flat and predictable (and mostly, it must be said, too short); these are considerations which may or may not impact on children new to sf. All the stories are illustrated, and there is actually a fair spread of both subject matter and approach.

Bradman's own story, 'Project Nemesis', is firmly in the now tired and well-worn *War Games* mode – two hackers access a Government computer and find only they can save the world. Others, such as Sara Vogler and Janet Burchett's 'Brian and the Brain', try a humorous approach; Laurence Staig bravely tackles the subject of parental loss ('K'), whilst Narinder Dhami, just as bravely (given the target audience), tackles computer addiction with 'Off-line'. Emily Smith, too, points out the dangers of technological reliance in her more serious 'Across the Millennia'. Best of the bunch for this old fogey were the final two stories. Helen Dunmore's 'The Weather Man' has a genuinely menacing feel to what is quite a quirky tale, and I have to hold my hand up and say that I really didn't spot in advance the twist in the tale of Malorie Blackman's 'Artificial Intelligence'.

Perhaps the safest bet would be to borrow this anthology from the library. Given the rapidly changing nature both of computer technology and childhood, most of these stories will in any case date quickly. But if this book does succeed in leading at least a few children interested in computers into our wonderful world of written science fiction, then it will have been of value.

### Scott Bukatman

BFL 1997, 96pp, £7.95 ISBN 0 85170 623 1

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

### *Blade Runner*

*Blade Runner*, along with *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca*, must be one of the most written about films ever, and it seems at times that there can't be anything left to say. But the obsessive eye for detail that director Ridley Scott demanded of his scriptwriters, designers and technicians, along with just the right kind of continuity errors, seems to have granted it the status of something which demands to be written about.

Scott Bukatman had written about *Blade Runner* before, as part of his doctoral thesis published as *Terminal Identity* (1993). This excellent and thought provoking book revealed that he was at home with situationist theory as with graphic novels, as well as having a sardonic way with footnotes. His next project was to be an examination of the sublime; of how the act of viewing a spectacular event is foregrounded in the process of viewing. Dave Bowman is seen watching the stargate; Roy Neary is seen watching the Close Encounter.

Bukatman's twin themes in his short study of *Blade Runner* come together in a shot right at the start of the film: an eye staring over the city. Eyes permeate the film: the red eyes of the replicants, the sights seen by replicant eyes, the blinding of the replicants' creator and so on. Even the use of a voiceover can be seen to be a complication of viewpoint – how can Deckard narrate the film given that he's not in every scene?

Along with *Metropolis* and *Things to Come*, *Blade Runner* is one of the best sf films to be dominated by the cityscape rather than outerspace. The film's recycling of old sets, is part of its postmodern texture; its nostalgic use of 1940s noir to represent forty years in the future perfectly illustrates the postmodernist collapsing of history which was being formulated in the early 1980s.

And yet, rightly, Bukatman makes a case for the film as modernist. The unreal city of Eliot, Conrad, Woolf and Joyce among others forms one blueprint; more importantly there were the metropolitian visions of European, especially German expressionist, cinema, whose directors formed the heart of 1940s film noir. The modernist city is 'disordered, heterogeneous, street-level'. *Blade Runner*'s hovering between the modern and postmodern, forty years ago and forty years hence, are part of what has given it its critical longevity.

This is no more so than in the issue of whether Deckard is a replicant or not. Bukatman makes a convincing case for the undecidability of the proposition, and the leaving of the choice to the audience. He notes a shift from 'humans have feelings' in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to the film's 'what has feelings is human'. Bukatman oversimplifies the book here, and I suspect is blind to Dick's own use of deliberate ambiguity, not to mention his habit of being sincere only at the time of speaking.

This is a compelling book, although at times one is overwhelmed with erudition – one moment the startling

information that Ridley Scott directed episodes of *Z-Cars*, the next a brief thesis on *Dune*. Certainly the assumption is there that the reader is very familiar with the film. The colour photos bring a sense of the beauty of the film, although their placing and captions may be less than perfect at times. A complete credits list and extensive bibliography is very useful, but alas there is no index nor comprehensive contents list. But in the end, through erudition and brevity, the book serves up *Blade Runner* as something to argue and debate about all over again.

### Glen Cook

### *She is the Darkness*

TOR Books, 1997, 384pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0 312 85907 4

Reviewed by Colin Bird

After five years of silence, it says in the blurb, Glen Cook resurfaced in 1996 with *Bleak Seasons*, the long-awaited continuation of his popular cult series, 'The Black Company'. This period in the wilderness contradicts *The Encyclopedia Of Science Fiction's* description of Cook as a 'writer of considerable energy but little patience.' But now he's set to bombard fantasy fans with another sequence and no doubt will expand the tally of more than half a million 'Black Company' volumes currently printed.

It's difficult, as always, to review the second volume in a fantasy sequence when one is unfamiliar with the backstory, but in this case Cook's *She Is The Darkness* is anything but a plot-choked middle volume. Cook is no prose stylist and the

scatological modern dialogue is a bracing change from the normal off-the-shelf archaic dialects that so many fantasy writers use without thinking.

*She Is The Darkness* follows the fortunes of the Black Company as related by Murgan, annalist and standard bearer, who is able to utilise a sort of out-of-body-experience to roam above the battlefields. This unique perspective doesn't seem to translate into as much of a tactical advantage as you would think, a lapse in Cook's otherwise admirable grunt's-eye view of military fantasy. The sense of an army warily advancing into enemy territory is very believably portrayed, although this lends an aimless quality to the narrative as a series of indecisive battles and incidents seem to lead nowhere until the story gets back on track at the climax.

It's unlikely that Cook will widen his audience much with this new addition to the series but long-term fans will be well-served by another measure of street-smart fantasy.

### Charles De Lint

Macmillan, 1997, 448pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 333 67212 7

### *Mulengro*

Pan, 1997, 488pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 330 32113 7

### *Someplace to be Flying*

TOR Books, 1998, 380pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0 312 85849 3

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

*Mulengro* is a reissue of a book which first appeared in 1985 and while it would be unfair to say that it's showing its age, I think de Lint is a more accomplished writer now.

*Mulengro* begins as a kind of detective story: someone is murdering, horrifically, members of the city's gypsy community and there is evidence that the murderer has supernatural help. In the first half of the novel some characters are under threat while others try to discover the truth; I found this compelling, but the impetus slackens in the second half where the characters begin to converge on the forest where the climax is to take place. There's too much to-ing and fro-ing; the death of at least one important character slips by without the sort of emphasis a reader would expect, and the final confrontation between good and evil seems curiously weak. *Mulengro* looks at the theme of the outside with some success, except perhaps in the identification of the murderer – I can't say more without spoiling the mystery. Another theme, of leaching out evil through forgiveness – an idea which I believe in profoundly – is less successfully embodied: it's easy enough to forgive someone you have already defeated.

*Trader* I found much more impressive; in my opinion this novel stands with de Lint's best work. Max Trader, a maker of musical instruments, wakes one morning to discover that he is inhabiting an unfamiliar body. The novel traces his attempt to recover his own identity, which becomes the discovery of what that identity really is. The story embodies thought-provoking ideas of how far identity depends on the physical body and how far outward appearance can be trusted. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and of the three it's the one I would recommend most highly.

There are places in *Someplace to be Flying* where the style is less accomplished, but the novel as a whole is challenging. It takes the idea of animal people – the first inhabitants of the world, shapeshifters who are both animal and human – who appear also in *Trader*. In this novel they take a central place and de Lint imagines what would happen if their world began to encroach on the everyday. It has the suspense of *Mulengro*, except that this time we're not trying to find the truth about a crime but to put together different aspects of the whole and discern a pattern.

All three of these novels cover what might be thought of as typical de Lint territory: the creative power of art, particularly music; understanding of the outsider, whether that means an ordinary person cut off for some reason from normal society or someone cut off because they are not ordinary; along with that there is the realisation that we cannot survive alone. If you only wanted to read one of these, I'd go for *Trader*, but it would be a pity not to read them all.

## Doctor Who?

**Justin Richards & Andrew Martin** *Doctor Who: The Book of Lists*

BBC Books, 1997, 220pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 563 40569 4

**Mike Tucker & Robert Perry** *Illegal Alien*

BBC Books, 1997, 279pp, £4.99 ISBN 0 563 40570 8

**John Peel** *War of the Daleks*

BBC Books, 1997, 277pp, £4.99 ISBN 0 563 40573 2

Reviewed by Daniel O'Mahoney

The non-fiction title here sums it up. *The Book of Lists* is exactly what it claims: it tabulates facts – interesting, quirky and dull – indiscriminately. The result reads like a final stocktake, it's an acknowledgement that *Doctor Who*, as an unfolding text, has been exhausted. All that's left is brandname packaging, from which no idiosyncrasy, no life can escape. The sin of the sharecrop is that it betrays its source.

*War of the Daleks* epitomises sharecropping. It's not immediately apparent – the long passages recounting Dalek back-story at first seems like poor infodumping – but in fact, as comes clear when the plot finally unravels, the whole book has been constructed to smooth over some bad continuity from the TV series. Unsurprisingly, the result is a contrived and spiritless space adventure (similar to some half-dozen Dalek serials by Peel's mentor, Terry Nation). The only sensibility in evidence (aside from guilty moments of sexism) is the satisfaction of a word-count filled. Many pages are given over to pointless 'interludes' designed purely to show off the Daleks, who here come in multiple shapes and colours, rather like action figures. Like Nation, Peel's respect for his monsters outweighs his ability to lend them substance; the effect is reductive as everything else in the story is subsumed to them in an effort to puff them up. Even the Doctor – the sharecropped-for-TV McGann model – is lifeless alongside them.

*Illegal Alien* also recycles old enemies – the Cybermen – but is too canny to let them dominate the text. Nor do they overshadow Tucker and Perry's chosen location: London during the Blitz is too real a place to be subordinated. The result is amiable if not entirely successful: the plot is, if anything, even more contrived than Peel's and something of his laziness infects the prose. The authors also lose marks for deploying film-Nazi clichés while explicitly congratulating themselves on treating the evil of fascism seriously (it bears no comparison whatsoever to Lance Parkin's similarly-themed *Just War*). But while much of the story is stereotyped – a mad scientist meddles with the unknown in a fun subplot – the setting allows for some variety and the occasional evocative passage. At its best, *Illegal Alien* generates a sympathetic echo of an iconic city at a definitive historical moment, and even that little light is precious when all the other lifetimes have dimmed.

**Peter Anghelides**

*Kursaal*

BBC Books, 1997, 282pp, £4.99 ISBN 0 563 40578 3

**David A. McIntee**

*The Face of the Enemy*

BBC Books, 1997, 281pp, £4.99 ISBN 0 563 40580 5

Two more in the ongoing series of *Doctor Who* novelisations coming out from the BBC. *Kursaal* features the eighth Doctor and Sam and is set on the pleasure-world of Kursaal where a conflict between big business and eco-terrorists are only a blind for the real story, the Doctor's discovery that the long-dead wolf-like Jax are not extinct at all. *The Face of the Enemy*, meanwhile, doesn't even feature the Doctor (he and Jo have headed off for what would be the TV adventure 'The Curse of Peladon'). We are left with UNIT contemplating co-operation with The Master in order to overcome an even greater threat.

**Gardner Dozois (Ed)** *The Best New SF 10*

Raven, 1997, 676pp, £7.99 ISBN 1 85487 971 5

Reviewed by Edward James

Dozois has now established himself as the best of the editors of annual 'Best of' collections: in part, of course, because he is allowed so much space. There are 660 pages of stories here, together with lviii pages of introduction, assessing the state of science fiction in 1996. It was a year which saw the magazines go through their worst year for a very long time, and also saw a slump in the sales of mass market paperbacks. Nevertheless, Dozois found some room for optimism: such as a small increase in the number of science fiction books being published (in the USA) and a small decline in the fantasy and horror genres. But these stories, too, might offer grounds for optimism: the standard is very high and, if my memory and judgement serve, rather higher than in Dozois's collections of the last two or three years.

A few statistics. There are twenty-eight stories. Nine of them were first published in Dozois's own magazine *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*; one (Stephen Baxter's 'In the MSOB' – which its title-page cleverly ascribes to Bruce

Sterling!) comes from *Interzone*; and three (from James Blaylock, Robert Silverberg, and Cherry Wilder) come from *Omni Online*, thus published on the Web rather than in print. Stephen Baxter, Gwyneth Jones and Ian McDonald are the only British writers (assuming that British-born Charles Sheffield has his American citizenship by now); and two (Damien Broderick and Cherry Wilder) come from Down Under.

Picking out the highlights is not easy, and is obviously going to be very personal. I very much liked the first story by Tony Daniel (the only author represented by two stories), 'A Dry, Quiet War' (from *Asimov's*), but didn't like the second, 'The Robot's Twilight Companion' (also from *Asimov's*). I loved Gwyneth Jones's 'Red Sonja and Lessingham in Dreamland', from Ellen Datlow's second collection of stories about *Alien Sex*, partly because the opening was so unexpected. (Had I remembered that Lessingham was the 'hero' of E.R. Eddison's fantasies – which I have always found unreadable anyway – I might possibly have anticipated the twist.) I also very much enjoyed Gregory Feeley's 'The Weighing of Ayre', while at the same time wondering why on earth it was there. It was a tale of

the Anglo-Dutch War of the early 1660s, and of the pioneer microscopist Leeuwenhoek. A wonderful story, and, yes, a fiction about science and the possibilities of science, perhaps, but a fiction about science is not necessarily science fiction.

The longest story in the collection, at 52 pages, was Gregory Benford's 'Immersion', from *Science Fiction Age*: a gripping story that could easily have been expanded into a novel (perhaps it will be), about a man who becomes addicted to living inside the brain of a chimpanzee. Benford has obviously been reading a good deal of primate sociology and psychology, and, inevitably, there are comparisons

between ourselves and the high primates: in a sense, then, a somewhat predictable story, but none the less, very effective. It is interesting how many of the stories seem to go against the trend of the later 1980s and early 1990s, and deal once more with the exotic worlds of the far future. Toby Daniel's 'A Dry, Quiet War', which I have already mentioned, was one of those. Robert Reed's 'Chrysalis' was another: a story set in a time of exotic star-ships and species, a little reminiscent of Cordwainer Smith. But everyone should find something in this collection; everyone seriously interested in contemporary science fiction ought to buy it.

## All Kinds of Fantasy

**Poul Anderson**

*War of the Gods*

TOR Books, 1997, 304pp, \$22.95 ISBN 0 312 86315 2

**Marion Zimmer Bradley**

*Witchlight*

TOR Books, 1997, 303pp, \$13.95 ISBN 0 312 85831 0

**Graham Edwards**

*Dragonflame*

Voyager, 1997, 441pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648233 3

**Yves Meynard**

*The Book of Knights*

TOR Books, 1998, 222pp, \$21.95 ISBN 0 312 86483 5

**Harry Turtledove**

*Between the Rivers*

TOR Books, 1998, 381pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0 312 86202 4

**Janny Wurts**

*Fugitive Prince*

Voyager, 1997, 565pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 00 224076 9

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

These six novels are all fantasy, yet between them they show just how diverse the genre can be. Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Witchlight* is what has recently come to be known as 'New Age' fantasy: that is, its story encompasses New Age belief in the occult, crystals, meditation and the like. Winter Musgrove, former Wall Street dealer, can remember little of her past, but she comes to realise that the gaps in her memory, the poltergeist activity that surrounds her, and the conviction that she is threatened by some intangible horror are connected to the arcane rituals performed by her and her friends back in college. Her attempts to defeat the occult forces that assail her make for a suspense-filled novel that grips from start to finish.

In complete contrast to a fantasy set in contemporary America, *War of the Gods* by Poul Anderson is an historical fantasy, a retelling of Scandinavian legend that evokes the brutality (not to mention the grime) of the Viking age. It describes the life of Hadding, a Danish king who is raised by giants until he is old enough to claim his dead father's throne. Anderson's frequent use of archaic words may not appeal to all readers, but the novel is both atmospheric and graphic, it is also refreshing to read a fantasy drawn from a body of myth that has been less plundered by modern writers than, say, that of the Celts.

*Between the Rivers* by Harry Turtledove is not based on an actual historical epoch, but its scenario does bring to mind the early civilisations that grew up in the Middle East at the dawn of recorded history. Sharur, a Smith's son, lives in a land of rival city states, most of which are ruled by gods who actually walk the streets and intervene directly in the lives of their worshippers. Rivers are ruled by lesser powers, demons and dust-devils infest the desert wastes, most human activities – carpentry, baking, brewing – are governed by minor

deities; only the arts of the Smith are without a tutelary god, being too young for their 'great power to have coalesced into deities or even demons'. Sharur's city, Gibil, has won a degree of autonomy from its god and has a human ruler, but this arouses the ire of the gods of other cities who fear that their worshippers will also throw off their control. It is Sharur who must find a way to divert the gods' anger – and raise the bride-price for his intended wife. This is an extremely readable novel, original, credible and more thoughtful than it at first appears.

The world evoked by Yves Meynard's *The Book of Knights* is that of medieval romance. Adelrune, a founding, is raised in a small, dull village under a repressive religious regime. His discovery of a book, an enchanted book, containing stories of the valorous deeds of knights, inspires him to run away from his village and become a knight himself. This is an exquisitely well-crafted book written in elegant prose – few writers in English show such mastery of the language, yet Yves Meynard, a Canadian, has already published six novels in French!

More sweeping in style and scope is Graham Edwards's *Dragonflame*, the concluding volume of a trilogy which tells of the ending of an age of magic when the skies were filled with dragons. Now the world has turned, nature replaces charm, and only in a few places does magic linger. Those dragons that are left, those who have not succumbed to the power of the Cult, must seek the secret of the Last Circle to defeat the evil of the Flame. Despite its stirring depictions of volcanoes, comets and battling dragons, and a rather clever ending that explains the place of dragons in legend(!), I did find this novel difficult to get into without having read its predecessors – if dragons are your thing, read *Dragoncharm* and *Dragonstorm* first.

*Fugitive Prince* by Janny Wurts is another later volume in a series – volume four of *The Wars of Light and Darkness* – but it is also the first book of *The Alliance of Light*. Being a new chapter in an ongoing saga does make it accessible for a new reader, particularly as anything vital that has gone before is referred to in the text. Two half-brothers – Lysaer, Prince of Light, and Arithon, Master of Shadow – have been cursed by the Mistralth that they defeated to be always at war against one another. To the dismay of the Sorcerers of the Fellowship of Seven, Lysaer does seem to be inciting people against Arithon, using their fear of Arithon's mage-power. Meanwhile, the Koriani enchantresses have their own agenda. This is probably what most people think of as fantasy: a heroic tale of Sword and Sorcery featuring warriors, kings and magic. Unlike many such books, it is a well-told, many-stranded tale that leaves the reader wanting more.

**Michael Flynn****Rogue Star**

TOR Books, 1998, 448pp, \$25.95 ISBN 0 312 86136 2

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Near future sf seems inevitably to revolve around the space program as the totemic representation of 21st Century progress. Writers pay lip service to terrestrial events, weaving a bit of earthbound politics into their future histories, when they really want to be *out there*; drifting in those shiny metal canisters, grappling with delicious technical problems and staking claims on all the unexplored real estate scattered throughout the solar system.

Michael Flynn is no different. His Future History series, of which *Rogue Star* is the second entry, centres on space exploration but viewed from a surprisingly unglamorous perspective. Whilst one plot strand, dealing with a manned mission to an asteroid, is dealt with almost perfunctorily, another, concerning the ramifications of a hawkish US President reawakening the Star Wars program is more fully realised. Despite tantalising glimpses of an 'arc' story revealing possible extraterrestrial interference in the asteroid belt, Flynn is much more at home with the nuts and bolts of men toiling in space. Indeed, the story of Flaco, an orbital rigger working on a new space station, is the most convincing portrayal I've come across of the blue collar work ethic transferred into space.

*Rogue Star* boasts a four-page *dramatis personae* of 95 characters, and Flynn manages to imbue depth into more of the cast than you would think possible. For a hard sf writer

he has a surprisingly light touch and it's not necessary to have read the previous novel, *Firestar*, to follow the story. The foreshadowing of future events is handled subtly and Flynn clearly has some sort of grand plan around which to develop this complex series of novels. Sure enough, the words 'future history' are bandied about on the blurb and accompanying literature and comparisons with Heinlein are inevitable. For my money, Flynn is a much better writer than Heinlein but lacks some of the sheer storytelling panache of his predecessor. *Rogue Star* is never heavy going, it's too well realised for that, but it is difficult to focus on such a fragmented, multi-viewpoint story.

When the story is earthbound and Flynn deals with his flawed heroine, company chairman Marieta van Huyten (no silly, politically correct nomenclature from this author), then the persistently right-of-centre viewpoint does become a minor irritant. But Flynn's aversion to the State doesn't make *Rogue Star* an apologist text for rampant Capitalism. Although his politicians are all untrustworthy and embroiled in intrigue, the van Huyten Corporation, who are altruistically reawakening the US Space Program, aren't much better. It's left to the good old rugged Heinleinian individual to save the day in a rather rushed action climax.

In this fascinating book, full of incidental speculative detail, Flynn even has room for the fashionable 'will a big rock hit the Earth?' question. Hard sf is often authentic but rarely this well-written and Flynn's future history looks on course for enlivening the genre with intelligence and subtlety.

**Richard Grant****In the Land of Winter**

Avon Books, 1997, 340pp, \$24.00 ISBN 0 380 97465 7

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

*In the Land of Winter* is the story of Pippa Rede, a single mother whose daughter is taken into care as a result of a charges laid against her by a Fundamentalist Christian, to the effect that she is a practising Satanist intent on delivering her child to the devil's untender care. Actually, she is a witch, but of a purely pagan and entirely virtuous kind; her accuser has followed an age-old pattern by which anyone paying homage to gods other than the ever-jealous Yahweh is held to be a demon-worshipper capable of any imaginable evil.

Given the widespread popularity of modern paganism and the fervour of American Fundamentalism, one supposes that this sort of conflict must flare up at irregular intervals in many of the United States. Pippa's astonishment is, however, excusable given that she lives in an insular small town in the north-east, comfortably remote from both California and the Bible Belt. The text dutifully points out that there are legal precedents in place which permit this kind of crazy accusation to be fought, and even takes care to place the details in the hands of Pippa's eccentric lawyer, but this is not a novel of due process. Nor is it a wholehearted fantasy, although the decor includes a dignified werewolf and a few haphazardly-answered prayers. The author does not take any great trouble to explain how things come out right – he is content to send his heroine to the depths of despair and bring her back again, carefully mapping out the psychological phases of her ordeal, ensuring that events fall into step with her changing moods by the simple expedient of saying so.

*In the Land of Winter* belongs to a species of sentimental fantasy which is as thoroughly American as the kind of

witchcraft its heroine practises and the kind of malign fury which tries to punish her for it. It pays out its treacle by the barrel and pitches its melodrama to match, like a Frank Capra movie – in fact, very like the Frank Capra movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, which is also set at Christmas in a winter-afflicted small town. The virtues and values the story supports are a trifle less conservative than those which Capra embraced but just as homespun. It is impossible actually to dislike books of this kind, because their whole *raison d'être* is to stoke up a fervent feelgood factor and watch it burn, but it is worth bearing in mind that miracle-working is extremely easy for writers, who have godlike power over the worlds within their texts. If a writer decides to answer his heroine's prayers, he can do so without breaking sweat – but single mothers and their lawyers have a far harder time of it in the real world, and fantasies which simply choose to ignore that fact always run the risk of seeming counterfeit. I found the book thoroughly readable and thoroughly inoffensive, but my carefully-suspended disbelief kept lashing out with its steel-capped boots, trying to remind me that all the touchingly nonsense in the world can't really cut through cold, hunger and misery without solid material aid.

**Elizabeth Hand****Glimmering**

Vovager, 1997, 415pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 00 648027 6

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

The millennium is naturally too good an sf opportunity to be ignored and Ms Hand uses it to create a novel of fairly downbeat doom which is, nevertheless, a pleasure to read. An apocalyptic starter is required, and this she places in a notional (alternative? paradigmatic?) 1966 when a

concurrency of ozone gapings and solar flares produces catastrophic meteorological upsets, a symptom of which is that the sky goes perpetually on the blink – the hectic aurora-like glimmering of the title. From this event flow interacting consequences, the magnification of all our ills: viral proliferation, ultra violet radiation, intensification of cult practices and terrorism, breakdown of transport and services, depletion of resources. Deterioration escalates in the course of a few years so that, as the millennium nears, life in New York (the novel's main setting) becomes barely recognisable.

The cast of this erotically rich and infernal comedy (its epithet is from W.H. Auden's 'Hell') includes a boyishly-arrested singer of pop-piety, a green terrorist mole, a gay, self-made but now rundown millionaire, a practitioner of alternative medicine and her alcoholic husband, and a beautiful teenage Polish refugee, protégée of a ruthless media communications queen. The main locations are the millionaire's decaying family mansion, the coast of Maine, and a vast, golden, pyramidal media centre near Times Square. All of these, characters and locations, are in the grip of changes accompanying the glimmering.

The millionaire and his remnant family – grandmother and housekeeper – live precariously in their fortified Yonkers semi-ruin perched high above the Hudson. It provides a grandstand view of metropolitan desolation. They find on their overgrown estate, and take under their wing, the wandering Polish girl who is then pregnant by the pop-goseller. He is washed up half-dead on the shores of Maine

but, revived, sails the mutated-monster-teeming sea to find her. There's a lot of death and disaster, the characters and events ultimately converging on the Pyramid Centre where a partying extravaganza is taking place as the century turns. Those bare bones are all of the plot I will reveal, save to say that at a rarified experiential level there is something like an upbeat ending.

While most of the action takes place in New York, the rural Maine and sea voyage episodes are powerfully complementary – subsistence rural living, matched by the *fellahin* life of Manhattan's poor observed as the small craft finds harbour amid 'a shabby tartan of decayed buildings, collapsed roads, twisted girders and makeshift landings, glass and steel towers erupting from behind the ruins like spaceships from the desert'. The wasteland imagery is often reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which is quoted and evoked several times. One quote from that poem not made but which would be apt is: 'These fragments have I shored against my ruins'. It describes what Eliot does in garnering the past to offset in beauty or irony an observed desolation, and also what is done in *Glimmering* through a wealth of quotations and allusions – ballads, pop songs, folk songs, *Patience*, Einstein, Nostradamus, *The Crock of Gold*, Bertrand Russell, *The Blue Danube*, the Dalai Lama. When I say 'quotations' I don't imply arbitrary inserts, but an integration which makes the novel (as a similar practice does *The Waste Land*) both a dirge for and an echo of not only its own decades but a century's, even a millennium's.

## Diana Wynne Jones

## Deep Secret

Gollancz, 1997, 383pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 575 06479 X

Reviewed by Chris Hill

You could never mistake a Diana Wynne Jones book as being by any other author. There is a certain quirkiness of setting and style which makes her stand out from the usual three-volume-generic-fantasy fare. Her new book is no exception.

In an infinity sign-shaped multiverse the worlds are secretly guided and protected by the Company of Magids. One of Earth's guides, Stan, has died and it is the job of the junior Magid, Rupert Venables, to find his replacement (although a disembodied Stan is still around to advise, spending much of the novel restricted to Rupert's car, listening to the stereo...). His first contact with a candidate, Maree Mallory, ends inauspiciously so he uses magic to arrange for all the others to be at a science fiction convention over Easter. Unfortunately Maree's uncle is one of the guests of honour. In the meantime the world at the centre of the multiverse is having a revolution which will have a serious effect on Rupert's plans.

I am a big admirer of Diana Wynne Jones's work so it is quite difficult for me to be as objective about *Deep Secret* as I would like. It has the usual mix of humour and horror, magic and reality. As always, family is important. Maree is adopted, her step-father is dying of cancer and she is living with her fantasy-writing uncle, his rather sinister wife and charismatic son. Rupert's two brothers are also Magids and both have their part to play in the story.

For many people, it is the depiction of the sf convention which will hold the most interest. DWJ has captured the

atmosphere of a convention pretty well, mainly with affection. There is the normal difficult-to-navigate hotel (although this time there is a magical rationale for never being able to find your room in the same place twice in a row). Although I could not identify any of the members with any fan in particular, most of the attendees are recognisable types (the Dutch attendee with an incomprehensible sense of humour, the woman evaluating everyone by their auras and determined to give anyone and everyone a back rub, the irritatingly energetic and cheerful gopher, filkers, and so on). Mind you, there is the 'eccentric old man with the deaf aid'. I wonder...

Of course the masquerade makes a useful cover for the occasional centaur ('Great costume!').

Apart from the age of most of the protagonists (and a few bits of strong language) there is very little to difference between this and DWJ's children's novels. Ultimately she is a law unto herself (and long may it continue!). On the whole this is a good novel. The climax is resolved a little too easily perhaps and there is a coda (which explains something vitally important which we do not see) which might have been incorporated into the main body of the text, but these are minor quibbles.

An enjoyable, fun read which I highly recommend.

## Stephen Jones (Ed) *Shadows Over Innsmouth*

Gollancz, 1997, 342pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 575 06572 9

Reviewed by Chris Amies

In 1931 the American author H.P. Lovecraft published what may be his best-known work, and certainly one of the most typical of his style of dark paranoid fantasy: 'The Shadow

over Innsmouth'. This story takes us to a decaying New England seaport where, since the 19th century, the inhabitants have been enacting unholy rites brought back from the South Seas by Captain Obed Marsh. As a result they have developed a hideous form of bodily transformation in which they become less than human, and more adapted to an aquatic life in the depths of forbidden Yha-Nthlei...

This seminal and nightmarish vision has influenced such as Stephen King (in 'Jerusalem's Lot') and Bob Leman (in 'Feeters in the Lake'). Neither of those stories is to be found here, in this volume which starts with Lovecraft's original and follows the fate of others who have become embroiled with the story of cursed Innsmouth. What is here, as well as a handful of chilling illustrations, is a collection of stories by British authors such as Neil Gaiman, D.F. Lewis, Ramsey Campbell, and Kim Newman. Some, like Basil Copper's 'Beyond the Reef', largely continue the story where Lovecraft's ends; others, like Michael Marshall Smith's 'To See the Sea', reasonably assume that other parts of the world,

e.g. the coasts of England, could equally have been affected by the Innsmouth heritage. 'Jack Yeovil's' 'The Big Fish' reprises its author's fascination with the world of the movies and puts a 1940s private eye up against something worse than the Japs. Nick Royle's 'The Homecoming' abandons Marsh and his cult entirely and treats the Deep Ones as a symbol of the 'Invisible Hand' and the paranoia it engenders. (Given the year of the original novella's appearance, it may itself have been a metaphor for fascism and its growing appeal to the middle classes of Europe).

Very often the Innsmouth legacy is all too attractive to the seeker: although at first repelled, the protagonist is then drawn in to the web of the Deep Ones and wants nothing more than to be one with watery Yha-Nthlei and to evolve beyond rough humanity. It is this, the sense that it is not a purely external threat but one that comes from within, and invites humankind's collusion, that gives Lovecraft's paranoid mythos its power, and that of the stories that follow it in this volume.

**Frederik Pohl**

***The Siege of Eternity***

TOR Books, 1997, 319pp. \$22.95 ISBN 0 312 86375 6

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

*The Siege of Eternity* is the second volume in a trilogy, and follows directly from the first, *The Other End of Time*. Those who haven't read that needn't worry, since sufficient of its gist is conveyed in the first chapters of this one for the reader to grasp its essence. However, it's impossible to take the story seriously.

Pohl's inspiration is astrophysicist Frank Tipler's recent *The Physics of Immortality*, in which it was postulated that when the universe has reached its moment of maximum expansion and begins to recollapse to its original point singularity, everyone who has ever lived will be reborn and live forever. Needless to say, Tipler's colleagues promptly dismissed his idea as utterly lacking in scientific rationale – never mind basic plausibility and plain common sense.

One means of dramatising the idea might have been to concentrate on it as an idea approached through (say) the discussions of far future astrophysicists observing the beginning of the recollapse. Instead, Pohl sets his story in the near future, and introduces two species of aliens fighting each other for the right to be worshipped as the gods who are bringing about immortality (why, if it's going to happen anyway?) and exterminating those species who either refuse to bow the knee or prefer to worship their rivals (so that when they are reborn in future they can be properly grateful, perhaps?). As if this wasn't unlikely enough, the aliens speak perfect American and are identified by the names of American cartoon characters – which merely compounds the silliness.

In an *X-Files/Dark Skies* twist, one set of aliens is revealed to be interfering with human DNA, planting bugs in humans' heads, and may already be under cover on Earth preparing to take over. The chief problem with such alien conspiracy theories, however, is that while they can be made to work on television where forward narrative momentum is often sufficient to carry viewers over lacunae in plot logic, they cannot be made to work in print where readers have the luxury of reflection and the slightest auctorial stumble will

bring down the whole fabric of the story. Frankly, I think Pohl was stumbling from the very first page.

One further point concerns the amount of time the characters spend making and drinking coffee. Fifteen years ago, *Interzone's* film critic Nick Lowe suggested, half seriously and half tongue-in-cheek, that the number of references to coffee was a useful index of the author's degree of interest in their story and that the more coffee the characters drank the more the author demonstrated their own desire for a break from the wordface. (It was called the Thentis Index after 'the black wine of Thentis', i.e. coffee, in one of John Norman's *Gor* novels.) The first third of *The Siege of Eternity* is dominated by coffee and, just like the author, I had trouble sustaining any interest in the story. Only in the second third, where the characters stop having conferences with one another and start doing things, do the coffee references disappear; but no sooner have we entered the final third than the coffee is back (and intrusively so: after one hundred pages without it, it's the sole subject of pages 208 and 210). With additional references to food – in the first third it was merely sandwiches with unidentified fillings, in the final third we get Caesar salads and Mexican *frejitos* – if Pohl was as bored with his story as all this suggests, why didn't he abandon it altogether?

**Terry Pratchett**

***Jingo***

Gollancz, 1997, 285pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 575 06340 0

***Soul Music: The Illustrated Screenplay***

Corgi, 1997, 127pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 552 14556 4

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

On Radio 4's *Kaleidoscope* recently, Kim Newman suggested that *Alien Resurrection* is probably the best fourth entry in a film franchise. Given that this is an elite which includes *Omen*, *Police Academy* and *Friday the Thirteenth*, this is not necessarily complimentary. To say that *Jingo* is probably the best twenty-first entry in a book franchise is similarly feinting with damned praise – we're here in the league of *Perry Rhodan* and TV tie-ins. Beyond twenty-one novels we also have a quiz book, stage adaptations, maps, diaries, audiobooks, compactbooks, figures, two cartoon films and

even an illustrated screenplay. This latter is particularly cynical: it loses Pratchett's prose which is as vital to his style as his dialogue, and most of any visual or aural gags that could compensate for the loss.

At the same time, the *Discworld* series has come of age. Both the *Daily Mail* and the *Observer* have been fulsome in their praise, even if the latter's literary editor hasn't yet been convinced that Pratchett is a Shakespeare and Dickens for the 1990s. Who cares? Criticising Pratchett feels akin to criticising a glacier: it still keeps coming.

Many of the earlier *Discworld* novels were *bildungsromans*: a young character being tossed into a difficult situation and finding the strength within themselves to survive and triumph. Background texture and plot situations were provided first by memories of hack fantasy and fairy tales, and then by Shakespeare, silent comedy, police procedural and so on. At least two of them – *Pyramids* and *Interesting Times* – have taken an everything-you-thought-you-knew approach, co-opting Egypt and China into the *Discworld* mythos. (The latter, as Andy Sawyer has pointed out, misfires as it features the 'surprise' reappearance of a character who had been established as a Japanese tourist.)

Children are banished from *Jingo*, as the potentially serious subject of war re-enters Pratchett's palette (after a narrowly avoided skirmish in *Pyramids*). Given the context of the 1990s and the *Discworld*, this offers us everything you thought you knew about the Gulf War, with JFK and Lawrence of Arabia thrown in for good measure. The

appearance of a new island brings conflict between Klatch and Ankh-Morpork, further escalated by a political assassination. Captain Vimes of the City Watch views both assassination and war as crimes, and thus as part of his brief to solve and stop respectively. The City Watch regulars seem to have replaced the Witches in Pratchett's repertoire and certainly their antics are enjoyable enough to read about.

The Lawrence of Arabia parallels best display the strengths and weaknesses of this novel. Pratchett's strength lies in an elasticity of realism. At one point Vimes holds a burning ember in his hand: 'The trick is not to mind that it hurts'. Peter O'Toole played the same trick over thirty years ago, but here it's undercut by Vimes obviously minding: 'Damn damn damn! Has anyone got any cold water?' The novel contains dozens of moments such as this; but at the same time, a decades-old movie hardly seems a brave target for satire. Similarly, despite Saddam Hussein's best efforts, the Gulf War and the supergun affair have made that transition from current affairs to recent history that means the satirical parody is a toothless pastiche – nostalgically amusing in its own way, but too comfortable to change or challenge the world.

And yet, I look forward to the twenty-second entry in the series and hope that, in his move to Corgi, Pratchett will continue to grow in stature as writer and satirist, and resist the leavening commercial pressures that threaten to engulf his comic enterprise.

## Charles Sheffield *The Cyborg from Earth*

TOR Books, 1998, 288pp, \$22.95 ISBN 0 312 86407 8

Reviewed by John R. Oram

Jefferson Kopal is a member of a very influential family whose interests are firmly linked to the space navy. 'What's good for the Kopals is good for the navy' – and both the navy and his family are firmly steeped in tradition. To become a member of the board of the family firm he first has to become an officer in the navy, and he fails. For political reasons, however, he finds himself accepted into the navy, and is sent on a perilous mission to subdue a race of cyborgs who want independence from Earth. But all is not what it seems, and Jeff is forced to decide between his family, the navy, and the 'cyborgs'. Soon he is at the centre of a political

intrigue, with himself as a pawn whose life is expendable. In fact, as far as his family is concerned, he would be better off dead. How he resolves the situation, and turns it to his own advantage, is something I will not go into.

This story is another of the 'Jupiter' series of Young Adult novels, but, like the previous book (which I reviewed in *Vector* 197), it's a well written story with believable characters. The science is not just info dumping, but is well explained as part of the conversations of some of the characters. Even I could understand what was being said, and I'm not exactly a hard science fiction fan. If the authors of a certain book with *Tiber* in the title had written even half as well as this, I wouldn't have fallen asleep. Forget the Young Adult tab, this is good writing by any standards.

## Judith Tarr *Avaryan Rising*

Orb, 1997, 851pp, \$19.95 ISBN 0 312 86388 8

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This is a single-volume edition of three novels by Judith Tarr: *The Hall of the Mountain King* (first published 1986), *The Lady of Han-Gilen* (1987) and *A Fall of Princes* (1988). We're in familiar fantasy country here: small, hierarchical, pre-industrial societies of human magic-users. Each novel deals with a standard theme. In *Hall*, the hidden heir brought up in Foreign Parts returns to claim his kingdom, pass from childhood to adulthood, and reveal himself as a hero and a magic-user (he's the son of the Sun, which helps). In *Lady*, the hero wins his bride, and in *Fall* the son of the original

hero achieves his own destiny and the end of his parents' rule.

All three books are 'growth stories', in which a central character passes from youth to adulthood, unskillfulness to mastery of a craft, ignorance to wisdom, and innocence to ethical maturity. The structure and certainty of such stories makes them comforting and instructive reading for people who aren't sure of their own place in society, who feel the world often doesn't make sense, who feel stupid, clumsy or valueless and who are looking for an escape from all this. Adolescents, in other words, and all who haven't yet healed from adolescence.

And these three novels have another debt to adolescence: the animating energy of each story is desire, that characteristic mode of adolescent sexuality, an intense,



passionate but somehow diffuse feeling whose goal is not consummation (orgasm, marriage, whatever) but simply to prolong the imaginary, almost-perfect, delicious torment. It's an essentially passive state; daydreaming as opposed to doing anything about finding or creating a real-world relationship. I have no idea how the spectrum of women's sexuality 'really' differs from men's, but I'm sure our culture sees this kind of erotic fantasy as women's country – I'd expect more women than men to enjoy Tarr's novels.

Obviously, to prolong desire over 250-odd pages per novel, there needs to be some believable barrier to consummation, so Tarr gives us three different takes on Young Forbidden Love. *Hall* sets social and gender barriers between the squire Vadin and his king, the young hero Mirain. *Lady* shows Elian of Han-Gilen torn between attraction to her foster-brother and to the heir of the enemy Asanian Empire (she also has to resolve conflicts between duty and desire). And *Fall* centres on the relationship between Mirain's son, Sarevadin, a celibate priest of the Sun, and Hirel, son of the Asanian Emperor who has been given the finest training in the Art of Lovemaking a decadent court can provide. (After an early chapter wandering naked around the countryside together, they spend nearly 300 pages trying

not to think about lovemaking, until Tarr cheats and lets them get married when, of course, the plot promptly deflates. Perhaps some women have more fun thinking about Two Men Not Making It than some men have thinking about Two Women Making It?)

Like many fantasies, Tarr's novels express moral values in terms of Light and Darkness. Mirain, the young hero of *Hall*, is the son of the Sun, the God of Light, and his task is to suppress the worship of the Dark Goddess (we know this must be Evil because it involves blood sacrifice) and to unite the world under enlightened rule. *Lady* suggests that continuous uninterrupted (sun)light might not be an ideal state, and starts talking about a balance between light and dark, day and night. In *Fall*, a structure of paired light and dark mages is evolving, but the book never really gets to grips with whether 'light' and 'dark' must, or should, equate with 'good' and 'evil', though it does suggest that 'evil' may necessarily have to exist in order to define 'good'. Sadly, there is no more complex ethical discussion anywhere in the novels – an opportunity missed.

In summary, these are B+ examples of their genre; not over-written, with a reasonable depth of setting and characterisation, and competently plotted.

**Sheri S. Tepper**

***The Family Tree***

Vovager, 1997, 377pp, £11.50 ISBN 0 00 224668 6

**Reviewed by Steve Jeffery**

Tepper is always an interesting writer. Her strengths, and her faults, are considerable, but there is always something to engage with.

Her strength is sheer storytelling. Her faults are a tendency to twist her characters out of their roles to deliver loaded eco-political messages out of the author's own mouth. The two have become inseparable through almost all her work since the True Game series. Tepper is a political writer with a strongly feminist agenda in planned parenthood and the ecological consequences of unrestrained growth, and her novels can be seen as a series of arguments and questions posed through the medium of fantasy. When the two are in balance, as they are in the 'Hobbs Land Gods' trilogy, *A Plague of Angels* and, more arguably, in *Beauty*, Tepper can be both a delightful and provocative fantasist.

The problem with *The Family Tree*, if it is such, is that it is almost impossible to discuss the plot without dumping in a huge spoiler. The central theme of the book rests on a wonderful sleight of hand and a moment when you realise Tepper has pulled a delightful double bluff to subvert a number of genre expectations.

Of all things, it is the reaction to a small and persistent weed growing out of the doorstep that shakes Dora Henry out of her loveless marriage to the fanatically neat and orderly Jared. In frustration, Jared attacks the weed with an arsenal of chemicals and ends up fighting for his life in Intensive Care. Then the suburbs around the city are overtaken by a fantastic outbreak of trees which appear to spring up overnight. The growth follows a strange pattern: roads are blocked except to buses and bikes; unused buildings and rooms are taken over; the trees defend themselves against attack but otherwise seem benign.

A second storyline then opens in what seems a more traditional fantasy setting of a Middle East caliphate, where a young slave, Opalears, is instructed to accompany the Sultan's eldest son, Saphir, on a quest, and to keep him out of possible harm's way of a number of the Sultan's wives. Elsewhere, Prince Izakar, trainee sorcerer and secret historian, discovers some intriguing – and probably heretical – things about the past, and sets out on his own quest. This is fairly traditional quest fantasy plotting. The two groups will meet and join up, friendships and distrusts will develop. Along the way they will take in a small group of odd, but charming, commoners as companions, and who hold a series of prophecies that would seem pertinent to others in the band. At this point you are tempted to start ticking off the entries in *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*. But Tepper is too clever for that and she's already ahead of you, with enough clues that this is not to be taken at face value. And when Old Mock, the librarian, remarks to Prince Izzy that his intended journey has all the signs of a standard Hero Quest and makes a distinctly post-Freudian comment about the phallic symbolism of the Hero's sword, you know the game is up.

But the real cruncher comes when the companions reach the end of their journey and their story intersects with that of Dora Henry's, and I'll leave that to you if you (as I didn't) spot any of the scattered clues leading up to it. From this point the story then takes off at a complete tangent until you feel Tepper may have run out of surprises to pull out the bag. She hasn't, although the ending is rather weaker and more traditional than it might have been, but entirely in keeping with the several fairy tale elements on which she has structured this tale.

Like Michael Swanwick, in *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, and her own *A Plague of Angels* and *Beauty*, there is both a playful and subversive use of fairy tale and fantasy elements to tell another story. This is Tepper back close to the top of her form, with the sheer strength of a master storyteller shining through.

**Martin Wilson*****The Castle of Oblivion***

Christofel Press, 1997, 140pp, £4.99 ISBN 0 9527723 2 9

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

*The Castle of Oblivion* is a strange little book and one which, given the subject matter (a deserted Earth on which there is but one building inhabited by three people, one of whom is a prisoner), I did not think I would enjoy. And yet, from the moment I encountered the 'hero', Almeric, and his sinister servant/jailer, Manes, I found myself unable to put the book down.

Initially, Almeric struck me as a rather pitiful figure, exclusively dependent on Manes for his every need, but it does not take him long to begin asserting his independence,

something which disconcerts Manes and results in him formulating a plan of action to stifle any ambitions Almeric has in this respect. Unfortunately, he reckons without Almeric's accidental discovery of a means by which to combat anything Manes can do to him, and the ways in which Almeric rebels are ingenious and intriguing. Because of this, by the end of the novel I found myself actually pitying Manes while at the same time admiring Almeric for his enterprise.

Told in a simple, direct style, the story is fast-moving and enthralling, and ends very much on a cliffhanger, making it a worthy start to the trilogy. Martin Wilson is a new author to me, and I look forward to reading more of his work.

**Ronald Wright*****A Scientific Romance***

Anchor, 1997, 352pp, £9.99 ISBN 1 86230 011 9

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In 1885, Richard Jefferies's *After London* presented a post-catastrophe future in which London has been reclaimed by wilderness, and the surviving fragments of humankind have created a rough, quasi-medieval society. In 1997, Ronald Wright's *A Scientific Romance* presents a post-catastrophe future in which London has been reclaimed by wilderness, and the surviving fragments of humankind have created a rough, quasi-medieval society.

Wright openly acknowledges his debt to Jefferies, and also quotes Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). The title, *A Scientific Romance*, is very carefully chosen. But this novel is more than simply a hodgepodge of references plundered from the science fiction of the last century, though it is, perhaps, let down in the end by following its models too closely.

We begin in contemporary London, a city, indeed a time, presented in dismal colours. Our narrator was a student at Cambridge where he entered into a friendship with Bird, a working class upstart with dodgy connections who never quite makes it, and has an affair with Anita, who had previously been Bird's lover. This complex relationship serves as the motive force for the novel, but is never resolved – testimony to the truth of the story, but unsatisfactory in terms of the structure of the fiction. In time Anita dies, of a disease that is never defined but which may be CJD: David, the narrator, tries to discover the truth but in the end only finds out that he also is suffering CJD. His eventual death is one of the few certainties hanging over the entire book.

In the meantime, David is the curator of a small museum of Victorian technology, and in this role comes upon a letter written by H.G. Wells shortly before his death. This reveals that the time machine was real, was in fact invented shortly after the publication of the novel by a Russian woman who was a student of Nikola Tesla, and the machine is due to return to an address in London at the end of the century. Convinced it is a hoax, he nevertheless decides to investigate, and lo, the time machine does reappear, sans its Russian passenger but with all her clothes (still warm). He decides to

repair the machine and follow her into the future.

Thus the first, most complex and most satisfactory part of the novel. In the next section we are transported 500 years into the future to find a London choking in tropical jungle and not a single human soul in evidence. Our narrator's only companion throughout this lengthy section is a jaguar. *A Scientific Romance* is Wright's first novel, but before this he has written two books about the Americas, one of which, *Time Among the Maya*, was notable for some superb descriptions of life in the jungle. That sense of colour, of the richness of tropical life, does not desert him here and this section is beautifully written as David slowly begins to discover enigmatic clues about the nature of the catastrophe. Unfortunately, it is difficult to sustain a story with only one character and eventually Wright sends him North in a quest for other human survivors. These he finds in the third and least successful part of the book in the wilds of Scotland, one tenuous little community that is clearly on the edge of dying out. Here he finds himself written into a sacrificial role in their drama of barbarian life washed with memories of civilisation.

Each of these sections seems to tell a separate story, and none is fully or satisfactorily resolved. A brief coda brings the novel to a conclusion, but we are left wondering about the Russian tempunaut who has not put in an appearance, about the circularity of David and Anita's CJD where the circle has not been completed, about the romance of the title which hangs forever incomplete. These are not quibbles, they are fundamental flaws in the structure of the novel. At the same time, we should not let these problems distract us from the very real virtues of the novel. It is, for a start, a very fine piece of writing; the sheer enjoyment of reading is enough to carry you through the book without being other than peripherally aware of its shortcomings until you think back on it later. The characterisation is good, the descriptive power of the middle section is superb, and the drama of the first section keeps you eager for more (and all the more upset that so much remains unresolved). Moreover, no small thing, here is a novel from outwith the genre that does not stomp heedlessly through its sensibilities but which displays a very thorough knowledge of its traditions and motivations. It will be interesting to see where Ronald Wright goes from here.

# Articles

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

## A.A. Attanasio – *Centuries*

NEL, 1997, 437pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 340 66600 5  
Reviewing this novel surveying the next millennium in V197, Jon Wallace said: 'Attanasio handles this breadth of vision with breathless ease. His portrayal is almost off-hand, his characters are as bewildered or at ease with the events swinging round them as they should be in the circumstances. The events themselves are as plausible as any that can be inferred for the next thousand years.'

## Mark Chadbourne – *Scissorman*

Gollancz, 1997, 352pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 575 06480 3  
A new horror novel by a British author who has twice been nominated for the British Fantasy Award. In this instance, a burnt-out city whizz-kid recuperates in an old house where he spent part of his childhood, only to disturb a childhood nightmare.

## Ted Edwards – *X-Files Confidential: Second Edition*

Little Brown, 1997, 326pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 316 64358 0  
First published in 1996 and now revised to include Series 4, this is essentially a detailed episode-by-episode listing, along with 'The X-Files Encyclopedia' and articles about the two main stars and Chris Carter, the creator.

## Steve Erickson – *Amnesiascope*

Quartet, 1997, 225pp, £10.00 ISBN 0 7043 8053 6  
Erickson's fifth novel brings together elements, characters and obsessions from all his previous books. As ever it is a tale about the failure of the American Dream, played out in a ruined landscape, in this case a curiously post-apocalyptic Los Angeles ringed by fire and broken into a series of distinct time zones. Reviewing the book when it first came out in America, Paul Kincaid said, in V191: 'Amnesiascope is an uncomfortable comedy, but as always there is a mythic power underlying Erickson's shattering vision and sometimes awkward prose which makes this a forceful and involving book.'

## Dean Koontz – *Fear Nothing*

Headline, 1997, 373pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 7472 2055 7  
Since he changed from writing science fiction to horror, Koontz has become one of the world's top-selling authors. In this new novel he tells the story of a man suffering a rare genetic disorder which means his skin and eyes cannot be exposed to sunlight, so he lives exclusively by night.

## Joe R. Lansdale – *Bad Chili*

Gollancz, 1997, 292pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 575 06534 6  
The latest in Lansdale's series of novels about

disillusioned idealist Hap Collins and black, gay, Vietnam vet Leonard Pine. Reviewing one of the earlier novels in the series in V193, Antony J. Shepard said it was: 'well-paced, violent, but never gratuitously, and full of some of the funniest dialogue you're likely to find in a serious novel.'

## Ursula K. Le Guin – *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*

Vista, 1997, 191pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 60239 2  
A collection of eight stories, including three that return to her earliest of universes, the Ekumen, which featured in almost all her fiction up to and including *The Dispossessed*. The collection is also notable for a typically thoughtful introduction Le Guin. Reviewing the collection in V193, Barbara Davies concluded: 'It looks like Le Guin's inventiveness and playfulness are still thriving. I'm glad to say.'

## Tanith Lee – *Vivia*

Warner Books, 1997, 395pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 7515 2135 3  
First published in 1995 and only now seeing a paperback edition, this is another lush, decadent novel from Tanith Lee of which Paul Kincaid said (in V184): 'This is life – or living death – as a torture garden, a place of amoral sexual cruelty where excess is the norm simply because no-one, characters or author, has retained any grip on reality. This is a fevered trip into a fevered imagination.'

## Brian Lumley – *The House of Doors: Second Vision*

Hodder & Stoughton, 1997, 409pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 340 70823 9  
In this sequel to *The House of Doors* the alien Sith of the Throne is back with a deadly new game that will, once more, decide the fate of the Earth.

## Ian McDonald – *Sacrifice of Fools*

Vista, 1997, 286pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 575 60059 4  
Belfast-based writer Ian McDonald uses alien visitation to dissect the Troubles in Northern Ireland in what is probably his most personal book to date. The arrival of the Shian has imposed peace between the communities, but has not healed the divisions, and when a Shian family is ritually murdered it highlights how many divisions there are. Writing about the book in V193 Gary Dalkin said: 'It is a bleak vision which hovers on the edge of despair, but thankfully refuses such cowardliness. A provisional report from the midst of an uneasy peace, perhaps? But only a small story from a much more promising world.'

## George R.R. Martin – *A Game of Thrones*

Voyager, 1998, 695pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 647988 X  
Book One of Martin's ambitious fantasy series, which tells of dynastic struggles for the Iron Throne, it was hailed by Steve Jeffery in V192: 'This is pretty much the stuff of widescreen epic fantasy, well delivered and competently told. Martin manages to keep track of a sizeable cast ... and it finishes, if not on a cliff-hanger then with enough threads left hanging to carry the action through into the next volume.'

## Mark Pepper – *Man on a Murder Cycle*

Hodder & Stoughton, 1997, 404pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 340 69623 0  
Horror novel about a failed author who at last finds success with a book he didn't actually write. Of course, the real author is dead ... then people start being killed by a character straight out of the book.

## Anne Rice – *The Feast of All Saints*

Arrow, 1997, 640pp, £3.99 ISBN 0 09 926497 3  
First published in this country in 1982, this is a typically exotic, Gothic tale set, as ever, in New Orleans and concerning the Free People of Colour in this slave state in the years before the Civil War.

## Sci-Fi Channel: True Life Encounters:

**Alan Baker – *UFO Sightings***  
Orion Media, 1997, 298pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 75281 218 1  
**John & Anne Spencer – *Alien Contact***  
Orion Media, 1997, 314pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 75281 217 3  
**Keith Tutt – *Unexplained Natural Phenomena***

Orion Media, 1997, 310pp, £9.99 ISBN 0 75281 216 5  
It is, it has to be said, disturbing but all too predictable that the Sci-Fi (sic) Channel's first outings into publishing should be not science fiction, as their name might suggest, but Fortean or, more accurately in our modern age, X-philia. That said, these three introductions to some of the most common types of strange encounter are written by recognised authorities, and serve as good introductions to anyone taking an interest in this sort of subject.

## Thomas Richards – *Star Trek in Myth and Legend*

Orion Media, 1997, 180pp, £14.99 ISBN 0 75280 799 4  
A critical study of *Star Trek* and its various spin-offs which looks at how the series uses story devices drawn from or reflecting literary, mythic and legendary sources, how the social history of the Federation parallels actual world history, and how the tales of wonders, marvels and miracles appeal to the sense of religion.

**Sheri S. Pepper – *Gibbon's Decline and Fall***

*Voyager*, 1997, 465pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 648268 6  
Shortlisted for the 1996 Arthur C. Clarke Award, this novel starts as a detailed portrait of the very near future and ends up as an epic struggle in the eternal war between men and women. In V193 Steve Palmer commented: 'don't let these weighty topics put you off: the author is renowned for her storytelling ability, which seems to her as natural as speaking... Though it is certainly worth reading, it carries a heavy punch.'

**Michael Williams – *Allamanda***

*New English Library*, 1997, 436 pp, £6.99  
ISBN 0 340 67449 0

The sequel to *Arcady*, an elaborate fantasy with

clear references to the work of William Blake, was reviewed by Cherith Baldry in V195, who concluded: 'Though the book is difficult, it repays the effort magnificently. I felt deeply involved in its world, even though, as with *Arcady*, I feel that there's much more to be picked up from a second reading. And though the book's conclusion is stunningly satisfying, there are enough questions to suggest that Michael Williams might be planning a third volume. I hope so.'

**Douglas E. Winter (Ed) – *Millennium***

*Voyager*, 1997, 630pp, £6.99 ISBN 0 00 649833 7  
A collection of linked short stories exploring the course of this century by Poppy Z. Brite, Joe R. Lansdale, Ramsey Campbell and Clive Barker among others. In V196, John Newsinger

described it as 'less than the sum of its parts... The collection actually has less holding it together than most thematic volumes, meandering along without really getting anywhere.'

**Timothy Zahn – *Star Wars: Specter of the Past***

*Bantam*, 1997, 344pp, £12.99 ISBN 0 593 03990 4  
Yet another novel set in the *Star Wars* universe. In this one the Empire is on the brink of final collapse, but that has set new strains in the system of alliances that is the New Republic. Han and Leia have to battle to preserve the New Republic in the face of an inexplicable threat from the past.

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**Reviewers Key:** AM – Andy Mills, AMB – Andrew M. Butler, AS – Andy Sawyer, BS – Brian Stableford, CA – Chris Amies, CB1 – Cherith Baldry, CB2 – Colin Bird, CH – Chris Hill, DOM – Daniel O'Mahoney, EJ – Edward James, GD – Gary Dalkin, JN – Joseph Nicholas, JRO – John R. Oram, KVB – K. V. Bailey, LB – Lynne Bispham, LH – Lesley Hatch, LJH – L. J. Hurst, P – Particles, PK – Paul Kincaid, SJ – Steve Jeffery, ST – Sue Thomason