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The Critical
Journal of
the BSFA

Cover photograph of Tricia Sullivan at the 1999 Arthur C. Clarke Award presentation, by Tony Cullen.

Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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COVER: Tricia Sullivan at the 1999 Arthur C. Clarke Award presentation. Photo and digital jiggery-pokery by Tony Cullen.

VECTOR

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RENEWALS AND NEW MEMBERS – PAUL BILLINGER,
1 LONG ROW CLOSE, EVERDON, DAVENTRY, NORTHANTS NN11
3BE EMAIL: PAUL@EVERDON.ENTERPRISE-PLC.COM

USA ENQUIRIES – Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred Street, Detroit,
MI 48213 USA

EDITORIAL TEAM

PRODUCTION AND GENERAL EDITING

Tony Cullen – 16 Weaver's Way, Camden,
London NW1 0XE
Email: tony.cullen@dfce.gov.uk

FEATURES, EDITORIAL AND LETTERS

Andrew M. Butler – c/o Dept. of Arts and Media,
ASSH F Floor, Buckingham Chilterns University
College, High Wycombe HP11 2JZ
Email: ambutler@enterprise.net

Gary Dalkin – 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth,
Dorset, BH11 8SN
Email: gsdalkin@connectfree.co.uk

BOOK REVIEWS

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

PRINTED BY:

PDC Copyprint, 11 Jeffries Passage, Guildford,
Surrey GU1 4AP

BSFA Officials

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

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY – Paul Billinger, 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry,
Northants NN11 3BE Email: billinger@enterprise.net

PUBLICATIONS MANAGER – Vikki Lee, 44 White Way, Kidlington, Oxon, OX5 2XA
Email: peverel@aol.com

ORBITERS – Chris Rodgers, 98 Greenland Avenue, Maltby, Rotherham, S
Yorks, S66 7EU Email: chris@orbiter.freemove.co.uk

AWARDS – Chris Hill, The Bungalow, 27 Lower Evingar Road, Whitchurch, Hants
RG28 7EY Email: cphill@enterprise.net

PUBLICITY/PROMOTIONS – Claire Brialey, 26 Northampton Road, Croydon, Surrey,
CR0 7HA Email: cbsfa@tragic.demon.co.uk

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

LONDON MEETING COORDINATOR – Paul Hood, 112 Meadowside, Eltham, London SE9
6BB Email: paul@auden.demon.co.uk

WEBMISTRESS – Tanya Brown, Flat 8, Century House, Armoury Rd, London, SE8
4LH Email: amaranth@ns1.avnet.co.uk

Other BSFA Publications

Focus

Simon Morden, 13 Egremont Drive, Sheriff Hill, Gateshead, NE9 5SE Email:
focus.editor@cableinet.co.uk

MATRIX EDITORS

Andrew Seaman (General), 128 Pickhurst Rise, West Wickham, Kent, BR4
0AW Email: a.seaman@talk21.com

Janet Barron (Books), 3 Ullswater Road, Barnes, London SW13 9PL Email:
ullswater@compuserve.com

Gary Wilkinson (Film & Media): Email: gary_wilkinson@yahoo.com

Avril Brown (Internet): Email: avril@ednet.cc.uk

Glenda Pringle (Magazines), 22 Mead Way, Kidlington, Oxon, OX5 2BJ Email:
chris@kidlington66.freemove.co.uk

BSFA WEB PAGE:
<http://www.bsfa.co.uk/>

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<http://www.orbiter.freemove.co.uk/>

The View from the Science Museum

They let me out in public for the Arthur C. Clarke Award ceremony at the Science Museum on May 17. At one point in the festivities Molly Brown declared, before a witness, Cherith Baldry, that "his name is Gary Dalkin, and he exists". The point being that there was once some dispute over both my existence and my identity in the in the letter pages of *Vector*. I mention this because as a judge of the Arthur C. Clarke Award I found myself briefly sitting next to Tricia Sullivan, who was then still for another few moments the current winner of the Award. This issue we feature a major interview with Tricia Sullivan by Tanya Brown (herself an ex-Clarke judge, as well as a contributor to this issue's conclusion of our survey of recent decades of UK SF) and an in-depth examination of two of Sullivan's novels by Nick Gevers. Sullivan's work is largely about identity, memory and perception, though when Gevers describes the Clarke Award-winning *Dreaming in Smoke* as "a negation of hubristic Purpose", I do wonder then what the point might be. (When thinking in a science fiction content rather than a musical one, the title of Sullivan's second novel, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, unavoidably reminds me of Ridley Scott's film of that name, and hence of Scott's *Blade Runner*, and it's questions of identity, memory and perception.) Equally, Sullivan says in her interview, "I don't believe that the conscious mind is really worth two shits." Which intrigues me because if she don't believe that, then it follows that her fictions, to the extent that they are products of her conscious mind, are... well, you get the point. Sullivan's declaration has the paradoxical quality that if it is true it is worthless.

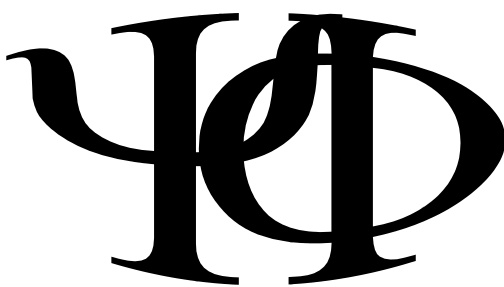
Gevers meanwhile writes that "The plot of *Dreaming* has summarised our myopic confusion." This must be some of that "secular beat of inclusivity" Syd Foster writes about in his letter below, for which I'd now like to play my Get Out of Jail Free card, because I consider myself neither myopic nor confused. It is

however, a very late 20th Century feeling. That we no longer know what is going on. Just last night BBC1 began a major series – nine fifty-minute documentaries – entitled *Soul of Britain*, the opening installment predicated around a survey indicating that as far as certainty goes, the only thing 75% of us are certain about is that we are no longer certain about anything. We live in a global, largely post-organised-religion society, where philosophical and spiritual beliefs are chosen, used and discarded like consumer goods. Clearly, if I am still allowed that word, an epic quest is underway. *2000: An Inner-Space Odyssey*.

I have just finished revisiting what is now officially known as the Odyssey Quartet. In *3001: The Final Odyssey*, the tension between mystical transcendence and cold hard science that often fuelled Clarke's best fiction really comes to loggerheads. Not just in the novel itself, but in the notes afterwards. Implicit in the Odyssey Quartet is the human need for higher purpose, without which everything is pointless. In this climatic installment Clarke posits that genuine religious belief must be a form of insanity – one he admits which paradoxically often makes people function better. This tension between the human need for purpose, identity and meaning and the often implacable meaninglessness explicit in the conclusions of much scientific thinking is a driving force for some of the most interesting of contemporary SF. It is, as Paul Kincaid noted in his review last issue, exemplified by Clarke's collaboration with Stephen Baxter in *Light of Other Days*.

And so we come back to the Arthur C. Clarke Award, which while it cannot provide any answers, allows us to shine a spotlight on some of the books which are asking the interesting questions. As a judge I cannot comment on the winner or the shortlisted books beyond hoping that you have, or will read them. They are good companions on a journey where it may indeed be better to travel than to arrive, and where the truth may not be out there at all.

by Gary S. Dalkin



LETTERS TO VECTOR

From Terri Trimble, Twickenham:

It may have come as a 'total surprise' to Lesley Hatch to find [revelation deleted] in Mary Doria Russell's *Children of God* ('Books of the Year 1999', V210) but it won't be surprising to anyone else after reading Lesley's review.

GSD replies: We've edited the above letter to avoid giving away what totally surprised Lesley Hatch. Apologies to Terri Trimble and anyone else whose enjoyment was spoilt. All concerned have been sentenced to Battlefield Earth.

AMB replies: This is a perennial problem in writing about sf, what

to assume our readers know. The ending of 'Nightfall'? Where the Second Foundation is? Precisely what is so frustrating about the last fifty or so pages of Stephen Baxter's *Titan*. Across the clear blue water in *Matrix* we've been having a similar debate – about the revelation at the heart of *Cube*. A surprising number of people do want to know the ending of a film before they see it, or what goes on in each episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Personally I'm having great difficulty persuading people not to tell me about that great bit coming up in series three of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As far as I recall, the revelation in *Children of God* comes only a couple of chapters into the novel, so it wouldn't remain a surprise for long. Even so, I was annoyed to find it out in advance.

From Syd Foster

Thanks for printing my last letter, but I regret to say that I still have not received the missing two pages which were blank in the previous issue of *Vector* so that I have still not been able to finish reading the MacLeod interview. Surely some oversight...

I've recently read Michio Kaku's book *Visions*, in which he makes informed prophecies about the future of the three main areas of hot action in modern science/technology: computing, bioengineering and quantum physics. It all makes thrilling, but terrifying reading! I highly recommend it for the sort of thoughtful chill I recognise from some of the best sf I've ever read.

Computing turns out to be the most hopefilled engine of the three, its ubiquity and immensely increased power and miniaturisation promising us a marvelous playground over the

next 20 or 30 years (and starting right now... in five years we'll truly be in the Future, Babes!) But as I was idly watching an episode of *Star Trek: DS9* last week, there was a sideways pan during which the old eye-twitching jerkiness of image manifested, (something I have always found truly destructive of the dramatic spell of collusion in the storytelling space, let me tell you!) and I leapt to the thought of how in the future the computers operating the digital broadcasts and the monitors in the home between them will prevent such technical glitches in the production of visual transmissions.

The immediate next thought, naturally, was the realisation of the inbuilt technological obsolescence of the whole Star Trek franchise, which will look every bit as dated in the computertechno future we're heading for in as little as 10-15 years as Buck Rogers did in the '80s. And immediately the *next* thought was that sf as an outlook and a shared cultural endeavour of mindplay will undoubtedly be as vital a field of dialogue as it is today. In the future, future written sf will be, despite all the retrotechnokitsch of *fin de siècle* visual conceptualisation, to the hip denizens of the 21st century circa 2025, a vital and *engaging* play of mind and of cultural muscle.

And why should that be? (Well I'm glad you asked, I happen to have the answer right here!) Written sf can simply do more with the science component of the sf compound. It has the arena in which to *consider*: it can sift data, it can draw tentative conclusions and form hypotheses. It can inform. It's *mindful*. It therefore touches us more deeply than the currently surface-led media. Because visual culture is a shifting design school of fashionable fish (which are like fissionable elements, but they radiate finshapes in everchanging patterns instead of packets of energy), whereas written sf is a focussing of mind, and the mind being focussed is the quintessentially human mind of curiosity and thrillseeking combined in having serious fun! In other words, there is a continuity at work in sf which cannot transmit so well between the generations in peripheral phenomena like sf on telly as it exists today. And I would like to claim that the continuity at work is nothing less than the humanity of the readers and writers of sf.

So we are safe, brothers and sisters, from the vicissitudes of the publishing industry, the warp and erosion of fashion, the chemical attack of technological change... as long as we retain the humane intelligence of our curiosity, and the secular beat of inclusivity in our hearts, our sf will retain the human dimension which will ensure it survives as long as humanity itself. And we *are* safe, seeing that the human dimension is deeper in modern sf than ever before, to judge by the work of authors like Paul McAuley and Bruce Sterling. (Chairman Bruce has gifted us with such a fresh delight in his thoroughly sfnal and unique and new novel *Distraction*, it's truly a shame it didn't make our shortlist this year. Please read it, everyone!)

GSD replies: *We apologise for the missing pages again, which hopefully you should have by now. It's inaccurate to assume we all have 'the secular beat of inclusivity in our hearts', excludes those BSFA members who hold religious beliefs, and implies that the religious beat is exclusive. There is no religion which does not*

aspire to include everyone within its fold. More positively, I hope you are delighted with Distraction winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award.

From Kev McVeigh:

It strikes me as odd that your discussion of the 1970s brushes over M. John Harrison so quickly. Admittedly Paul Kincaid is complimentary but nobody takes up the idea that in fact Harrison could prove to have had the most significant influence of all the writers. Look at his obvious acolytes, Ings, Mieville, Royle, Banks and even perhaps Gill Alderman and Storm Constantine. He has a new collection out, perhaps it is time for *Vector* to take another look at him?

Andrew M. Butler replies: *Given the improvised nature of the original panel, it is not surprising that certain authors got short shrift; Tanith Lee is another name that slipped through the net and none of the participants, given the opportunity to revise their thoughts, redressed the balance.*

You are right: Harrison deserves another look, and we solicit articles on him if anyone wishes to write one. I know I am going back to read the Viriconium collection alongside Perdido Street Station.

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



Corrections and Clarifications

As Dave Langford has already noted in *Ansible* (and therefore caused us maximum embarrassment before we had a chance to apologise publicly, the rotter!), the ISSN which we have been listing for *Vector* has been wrong for a number of years. This is entirely due to the propagation of a typographical error, for which none of the current *Vector* staff are responsible (apart from the continued propagation bit, obviously). Nevertheless, we apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused. Those individuals who are responsible for this error (they know who they are; we know where they live) will be hunted down like dogs and dealt with severely.

Please let us know of any factual errors or misrepresentations in Vector: email ambutler@enterprise.net or write to Andrew M Butler, 33 Brookview Drive Keyworth, Nottingham, NG12 5JN or Gary Dalkin, 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth, BN11 8SN

TRICIA SULLIVAN WAS A GUEST AT THE BSFA LONDON MEETING IN APRIL 2000, AND SPOKE TO TANYA BROWN ABOUT HER CAREER TO DATE.

A Conversation with Tricia Sullivan

conducted by Tanya Brown

Tanya Brown: Are you a cyberpunk author?

Tricia Sullivan: All my editors seem to think I am: it never occurred to me that I was, but ... what do *you* think?

TB: I'd say that your second novel, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, was certainly more cyberpunk than either of the others, in that it has somebody able to watch another human being via an

implant – not by magic, not by telepathy, but by a distinct physical device. In some ways that's become a cyberpunk cliché, but you had quite a different take on it. Your emphasis was resolutely on the people involved, their humanity – not their post-humanness, their integration with technology or their 'cyber nature'. You're still talking about faith and the unconscious, and the body, and humanity.

TS: I guess a big problem of mine is that I don't really know my science fiction. I'm not very literate in the field, and I'm fairly sure that a lot of the clichés that are in my books are actually there because I simply don't know any better. I'm just using that device because it helps me to get at something that I need to get at. Which is why the question 'are you cyberpunk?' makes me uncomfortable, because I don't really feel that I know what that means. I respect some cyberpunk authors – I certainly respect Pat Cadigan greatly – but the idea that I was working in territory that was already so well established by other writers... well, I was just too naïve to realise that. It's not so much that I had a different take on it, as that I didn't even know there was a take to have on it. Probably by that time it had seeped so much into the popular culture that I just thought, 'Well, I'll put a chip into somebody's head and that'll solve *that* problem, and then I can get at it.'

TB: You were writing a novel and that was a whole new way to get into it.

TS: Essentially, yes.

TB: So when we say 'it', what's 'it', in *Someone to Watch Over Me*?

TS: Identity and individuality. I think. When I first started writing *Someone to Watch Over Me* I thought that I was writing about how we all interpenetrate each other through mass media, the idea of whether you can really know another person, the idea of empathy: those kinds of issues. But by the time I got to the end of it I realised that the only thing I was really writing about was writing. I had written one novel already and I had the experience of people coming to me and saying 'you wrote this, you said this, you meant this' – and I'm going 'huh?' I didn't know how to deal with the fact that a reader could encounter me in such an intimate way, a way that I had absolutely no control over. Someone seeing things in my book that I don't know are there, that are probably unconscious and totally unintentional and maybe very embarrassing. Realising that it's so intimate and trying to come to terms with that: that's why I put one character literally inside another person's head, because when you read a book that's what you're doing. Every day I sat down at the typewriter I had to come to terms with the fact that I was actually engaging with people that I didn't know. I wasn't going to be able to hide anything from them, because no matter how hard you try when you're writing, the truth will out.

TB: There's a theme in all your books of the division between body and mind, and then the division between conscious and subconscious. In all three books there's someone who feels they're going mad, or who has very good reasons for thinking that somebody else is controlling their mental processes in some way. In *Someone to Watch Over Me* Adrien attempts to deal with it by taking more control of his body – he's doing karate to get back in touch with, or regain control of, the body. That was an image that really brought out the split between the mind as something that can be interfered with, and the body as something you live in.

TS: I have a lot to say on that because it's sort of a pet topic. I had an experience when I was about 12. I had a virus: it was Rey's syndrome and I was in the hospital and lost my memory for about two or three days. I remember waking up and around the bed were all these drawings of horses and things like that. I was really keen on art when I was a kid. I had done the drawings but I didn't remember doing them. It was such a strange thing to look at them, and have someone saying 'yeah, you did that, don't you remember doing that?' and not remember. I think maybe that was the seed to all of this that now preoccupies me; the realisation

that consciousness is such a thin membrane on such a big ocean. There's so much going on that you don't know: the body, the evolutionary history, all of those things that are in you are so mysterious. I have this 'inner Nazi', this internal control freak: I think I *am* that way because I know that I don't have a prayer of ever controlling anything. Physical instinct, I think, governs so much more of what we do than we like to acknowledge, or are comfortable acknowledging. I feel only marginally in control of myself at any given moment, and it's probably why a lot of my characters are like that.

I don't believe in the mind/body dichotomy. I wish I'd never been exposed to that kind of Cartesian split. Even language – we don't have a word for the two together. This separation, which is not a real separation, has somehow become inculcated into us so that we have to think in terms of '*this* is my body and *this* is 'me', I'm up here somewhere' – which is just not the case. I'm always trying to get away from that.

TB: Some of your characters demonstrate that there are ways in which that dichotomy could be real. In *Someone to Watch Over Me* there's an old woman lying in a bed, in a state of sensory deprivation: she is living through other people. In *Lethe*, your first novel, there are characters who can't trust their minds, and a whole group of people who can't trust their bodies.

TS: I grew up in suburban America. What you do there is essentially, you watch TV, and you live through what you watch on television and what you go to the mall and buy. The character 'C', in *Someone to Watch Over Me*, who's sensorily deprived, is living vicariously: that's just an exaggeration of

what we all essentially do in modern society. We're all – I won't say 'victim' to that, but we're all kind of complicit in that kind of relationship with the world. In *Lethe*, where they all turn into these aquatic baby-killing monsters at adolescence, is just a sort of exaggeration of what it feels like when things get out of your control. I do think that children have it in a way that we don't, and that somehow when you cross over that barrier between childhood and adulthood you lose something that I don't know if you can ever get back. Kind of an animal relationship with the world, an intuitive, natural relationship with the world that just goes. I think that maybe the tragic quality of the transformation in *Lethe* is just a reflection of what I feel happens.

TB: They lose everything, don't they? They lose their memories as well: their memories go into – I keep wanting to call it a collective unconscious, which it isn't really. It's a forest mind: a way in which the people still out on land can somehow tune in to the memories of those who've transformed.

TS: The way *Lethe* ended had a kind of romantic ending for me, with the idea that once they go out to sea they become something else, and maybe they have a shot at something different. There's the idea of a transition to some more primitive form, or some genetically engineered more primitive form. And maybe they're being relieved of consciousness, which on some level I probably perceive as a burden. Tsering, who is an old woman trapped in a young girl's body, is carrying the burden of being an adult, and taking care of children that she knows are going to leave her. To me, when she finally gets to make that change herself it's like being able to surrender to Nature.

TB: In *Lethe* there's been three big corporations fiddling around with genetics, and then releasing a series of viruses upon the world. That leads to a completely hostile environment and a very distinct separation of pure humans from the mutants and the modified, who are actually a lot better-adapted to life on the altered Earth. *Lethe* was written back in 1994, way before genetically-modified crops, and Monsanto and so on. What do you think now? Is the current panic about GM foods a kind of early-warning of the future that you painted?

TS: I hope not! I don't know. It's always weird when people ask me

**I don't believe
in the
mind/body
dichotomy.**

official science questions because I have a very limited grasp of these things. I find it difficult, emotionally, to get to grips with some of the things that I read in the popular science press about new things being done genetically. I suppose the theme in *Lethe* was the idea that nothing's really unnatural, and I guess there was a kind of feeling of the tail of nature lashing back, and coming right round and taking humans out of the equation. I definitely put a bit of a sting into that; it was wishful thinking. But I don't really dare to hope that there would be that kind of poetic justice in the real world: I think the likelihood of anything good coming out of it would be very slim. It's difficult, you feel like some kind of conservative religious figure if you don't like the idea of cloned sheep or whatever. I find it disturbing.

TB: In both *Lethe* and *Dreaming in Smoke*, you put your characters into a terribly hostile environment at various points. In *Lethe* it's the Earth, ravaged by disease and climate change. In *Dreaming in Smoke* it's an alien planet, T'nane, which looked just fine when they surveyed it. When it was colonised, though, it turned out to be completely different to how the survey painted it. The big problem on T'nane is the Oxygen Problem – how can they make enough oxygen to survive? In both of those novels you're playing with the ecology: is that a big concern, the ecological interaction?

TS: It's a simple result of when you try to think of an imaginary world. You have the reality as we know it and you want to play around with it, and as soon as you do that you've got to make some concessions: change one little thing and you've got to expect there to be big consequences. In research for *Dreaming in Smoke*, I read about the origins of life on Earth and how fragile the equation is to produce just exactly the right mix. When I was thinking about the ecology of another planet it seemed awfully unrealistic to expect that planet to be just like Earth. It seems to be bypassing one of the big questions. I was just trying to take the speculation a little bit seriously and not make it an alternate world, just like this world except in a galaxy far, far away. I have a little bit of trouble swallowing that. I had to be able to have people there, they had to be able to function: it couldn't be a complete pit of fire, but I had to do something to make it clear that it was another planet, where the rules are not going to be the same. There wasn't an overlying moral purpose there: it's just practical.

TB: There's an indication, no more, in both those novels, that there's a sort of planetary intelligence or mind. There's an ecology working on a larger level than just the cells – an interacting system. In *Lethe* it's the lywyn – a kind of vast forest-mind – and in *Dreaming in Smoke* it's the planet, right down to the unicellular lumae. In *Someone to Watch Over Me*, which is in some ways the odd one out, there's the Deep – an artificial collective unconscious.

TS: I was trying to nail down the idea of, if you had a mind that wasn't a human mind, what would it be like? And with the lywyn it was pretty airy-fairy: I didn't really have a grip of what I was doing. It was almost like a fantasy device, with the trees, and the race-memory idea. With *Someone to Watch Over Me* I tried to nail it down a little bit more by pulling in the whole computer idea and the idea of artificial intelligence. Then, in *Dreaming in Smoke*, there were two elements: the AI Ganesh, and the planet itself, and the interface between them. I think that maybe I got a little bit more focussed with that as I went along. I wasn't comfortable in *Lethe* with the idea of the lywyn because I couldn't put my finger on it rationally. It was a nice image, but it wasn't grounded in anything. As I went along I was trying to come up with some connection between the rational demands that my mind was making, speculating and extrapolating about a mind that was alien to mine, and the intuitive ideas that I had, which were unsubstantiated and unsubstantiable. But I feel a little more comfortable about the underpinnings of the intelligences in *Dreaming in Smoke*. In fact the whole point of *Dreaming in Smoke*, I think, was the idea that if you try to mesh these two kinds of mind, the human mind and this possible mind, this alien consciousness... as it gets filtered through the AI, maybe the

consciousness gets invented by that AI. There's this uncomfortable friction between possibility and actuality. What happens in *Dreaming in Smoke* is that the characters are trying to transcend their physical form. There's this one physical thing, which is this big pond of prokaryotes, and then there's this artificial intelligence Ganesh, which can be programmed to do things that theoretically, maybe, the human mind can't do. Then you've got humans: we're rooted in a biological intelligence which is our brain and our body. So it's this kind of consciousness wending its way from the human body through the AI and into something completely strange, and that's where you get this extreme friction and extreme physical and psychological states. I just find it difficult to imagine how you could have a nice chat with an alien.

TB: But in some ways it's happening at a subconscious level?

TS: Absolutely, because again I don't believe that the conscious mind is really worth two shits.

TB: That's when things happen – when people are asleep or in a different state of mind for whatever reason. And yet you're still throwing in the physical, especially in *Dreaming in Smoke* – there's an episode that several of us had problems with, the 'farming'.

TS: What do you mean, 'had problems with'?

Claire Brialey: The way I would describe it was that it was possibly one of the most horrible things that I had ever read, and the only reason to carry on reading was that I wanted to know what happened so much. It was quite revoltingly compelling; perhaps because it was very clear and clinical rather than gory. It actually made me feel physically sick but I couldn't stop reading. That's meant to be a compliment!

TS: I'm sorry! But really, it's so strange to hear that, because it's like – what I was trying to say about *Someone to Watch Over Me* – you write something and you really just don't know what it feels like to be on the other end of it. It wasn't that fun to write, for what it's worth.

TB: It was almost like the physical putting the boot into the whole mental, cerebral side of it. That was the way into the system. It had nothing to do with whether or not Kalypso Deed was a child genius or whatever.

TS: That's right, it was her cells in the end. I never really thought about it like that before, but she was in this culture which had everybody parcelled out as to what they were going to be, what their skills were going to be. You choose a team to go into space, you've got to make sure you've got everything covered. She didn't fit into that, she thought she was worthless, useless: and she ended up, not through any effort of her own, being the most important person on the planet. But not through any kind of genius whatsoever, just happening to be in the right place at the right time and getting herself sliced up.

TB: Kalypso's a good example of one of your non-feminist heroines, like Jenae in *Lethe* and, to some extent, Sabena in *Someone to Watch Over Me*. They sit there: well, they don't sit there, they fight back and they have attitude problems, but quite often it's the fact that they are helpless in the face of adversity or worse, and something happens to them. They don't take a gun in one hand and a petri dish in the other and go out and save the world: something happens to them. They all come across to some extent as victims. It sounds terribly damning, but all of them have nice little lives ticking along – for differing values of 'nice' – and something awful happens to them. For Jenae in *Lethe* it's when the Heads find out what she's been thinking, and try to burn out her brain. In *Someone to Watch Over Me*, it's the mental rape of Sabena, and in *Dreaming in Smoke*, Kalypso gets kidnapped, gets farmed, becomes completely alienated from the rest of her team, and then she gets blamed for most of it as well!

TS: That's really interesting, because I grew up reading fantasy and science fiction in which all the heroes were men and then I discovered Marion Zimmer Bradley and Amazons, and I thought that was really cool. I have a background in martial arts. I like to think I have quite an attitude about me: the idea that I would be

unfeminist is kind of shocking to me because I've lived my life in a very assertive way. From the age I was 7 until the time I was 12 I did not wear a dress or a skirt of any kind, I had short hair, I was often mistaken for a boy. When you say that these are anti-feminist role models ...

TB: Not anti-feminist, just non-feminist.

TS: I think that maybe I just have a different concept of what heroism is. I don't know what's so heroic about taking a big gun and shooting people. Survival is what's heroic. All of those characters are survivors. Sabena actually subverts the implant that's in her head ... she gets sort of raped, but she's not defeated by it.

I don't think they *are* victims: things happen to people. You can't control what happens to you, you can only control how you react to it. I think they all find strength in what happens to them.

TB: They all fight back, definitely. None of them sit back and say 'I must deserve it', or simply lament their fates. It was just something that struck me – especially about Kalypso, in *Dreaming in Smoke*: she was so powerless. There was nothing she could do at all, because the things that she was good at – apart from being a wizard cocktail mixer and so on – all seemed to be irrelevant once the AI went down. She was almost this parasite, this freeloader, because she wasn't using what she could do.

Let's move on from the non-feminist heroines to the romances, the relationships. In *Lethe* and in *Dreaming in Smoke* you have very young girls... I'm thinking of Tsering, who is effectively an adolescent.

TS: But she's 72 years old

TB: She's 72 and she looks about 12, and the male protagonist finds her extremely attractive while thinking that he probably shouldn't – and he hastens her descent into adolescence. In *Dreaming in Smoke*, Kalypso Deed is in a relationship that starts off as terribly antagonistic with a much older person, and in the end he is the only person to whom she can actually relate. It seemed to me that she'd grown out of her peers, and that they seemed irrelevant, and rather juvenile, to her after what she'd been through.

TS: With Kalypso and Marcsson I was very careful not to make that a sexual relationship. It wasn't meant to be romantic, even though she was female and he was male. It was more having been through something together. On the one hand, I always say that nothing's calculated in any of my books, but if anything was calculated I definitely made sure that those two never got it on: I didn't want to confuse the message I was putting out. I never thought of it: it just didn't seem right.

TB: I'd say that in the book, if there was anything unspoken between them, it was more a case of hostage syndrome, that she was starting to have sympathy for his views, sitting there trying to single-handedly save the planet. There was never any indication to me that there was anything sexual or romantic during the course of the book, but it just seemed that that might be one of the logical progressions of what might happen next.

TS: I suppose that's possible: it never crossed my mind. With respect to Tsering, it never occurred to me that that was the case. I think she was so much more together than him, so much more mature than him. The fact of her puberty being triggered and then her transformation, with all its implications, being triggered – I don't want to say it counted morally, but it counted for something. The idea that he was sort of taking advantage of her never really crossed my mind. If it did, I wanted to make it clear that he wasn't; he was the one left holding the kid, let's put it that way. She was the one that went on to the next stage and he was the one left to deal with the nappies.

TB: Another theme that comes up in all three books is music – not just as background, but as something with meaning, with

different levels of significance to the characters.

TS: Music is what I would be doing if I was any good at it. I studied it in college. I think music is the best intersection of the mind and body – I say I don't believe in the two but I can't find a better word for it. It's the best expression of the physical and all the other things about us that there is. When I was in school I had the opportunity to study music in a kind of very free and experimental way because I grew up with no talent whatsoever. I'm totally tone deaf, I have no rhythm, I have no perseverance when it comes to practising instruments: but I happen to have a degree in music because I was able to study it. I love the psychological, psychophysical spaces that you can get at through music. And then when I graduated life had to move on. I think some of the things that I was exploring musically – that were of musical interest to me – got channelled into fiction, because I could put words together no problem, whereas the tools of music were foreign to me because I didn't come to it from a young age. I didn't come to it with talent, and I was never going to really get it off the ground. So I turned to writing, but then there's always this kind of yearning about music, because music scratches the places you can't scratch with words, and words are really inadequate. So I keep referring to music in words, even though it's just a reference, it's not really the real thing. It's like talking about food: you can't actually taste it, but it gives you a little kick anyway.

TB: In *Someone to Watch Over Me*, music becomes a kind of path into the Self.

TS: Actually, I was interested in encoding things in general in *Someone to Watch Over Me*. I played with the idea of encoding meaning in moves from martial arts, *kata*, karate, dances – which, looking back on it, really wasn't suitable. I was just looking for some other way that you could encode yourself in an abstract way, that could then be translated back and experienced by somebody. 'C' is this woman who is in a sensorily-deprived state, and is experiencing life vicariously through other people. She's ultimately subsumed by the character of Sabena, who she mentally rapes – puts her entire consciousness into. And yet because Sabena is a musician, an artist, she ends up taking over the one that's taken over her. I was never really quite sure

who had taken over whom. Sabena, no matter what happened to her, always had this musical expression. Even when C was downloading all of her memories into Sabena, and she felt compelled to compose and write all these things down. In a sense she was a conduit, but by being the conduit she took over C and instead of being raped (going back to the 'passive heroine' thing) she was *eating* something. She was subsuming it within herself. I think that the feminine side of nature, the passive side of nature, passivity is not always what it seems. It can be power.

TB: I've heard rumours that you have written a fantasy novel under a pseudonym: is that right?

TS: Yes, I've been writing under another name for the past couple of years: the name is Valery Leith and I'm doing a trilogy. Why I did it? Let me try to justify my shameless commercialism by saying that I really started out reading fantasy, which is true! I don't have a strong background in science fiction but I read Tolkien when I was eight years old, and I have read *Lord of the Rings* over and over again. That's where my speculative roots lie. I started writing this fantasy and my agent liked it and there was more money in it than in the science fiction: the science fiction didn't, at that time, seem to be going anywhere. The fantasy's turned into science fiction anyway! I had a complaint from my German editor that you can't have wormholes and time travel in fantasy because it gives everyone headaches. So, if I want to make any money I have to have *another* name and try to get a bit baser, because I obviously haven't hit it the first time round!

TB: Did you write the fantasy novels in the same way that you did

**I just find it
difficult to
imagine how
you could have
a nice chat with
an alien.**

your science fiction?

TS: No. It's more free... I wrote it much faster, I wrote it much more casually, and because I was hiding behind this other name I didn't have to worry about whether or not it was clever, because nobody would know that it was me.

It's like putting on a mask: you get to free up other parts. The fantasy trilogy's got a sword-wielding female protagonist, and – even though through the whole book she's soaked in blood and wearing rags – they put her on the cover in a little leather corset, and her sword was really pretty!

I had a conversation with the American art director about the cover of the second book. She said, 'We want to go with the female warrior for the cover because everyone liked it the first time. Well, what would she be wearing?' Essentially, they went to the Village and got an S&M costume for the model to wear – this little leather thing – and I think they wanted to use the costume again. But she was standing in this ice cave: it's winter, she'd be wearing heavy furs. When I got the artwork back, it's all cleavage: just a cloak with a little fur collar to give in to it being winter, and bare legs...

TB: And the paperback of the first part – *The Company of Glass* – is just out?

TS: Yes, I've seen copies so it should be out soon

TB: Do you have plans for more science fiction?

TS: Yes, I'm working on something right now that I've been working on since 1992. It's a book about gender and – I think you'll quite like it, actually: it doesn't have any female victims in it, the victims are all male! It's examining what the world would be like if women really were in power... I'm really terrified of it: it's really psychologically confrontational stuff. I haven't managed to finish it: occasionally I have the courage to work on a little bit of it. I do want to get to it: I just have to finish off this fantasy thing. After people told me they liked the nastiness of *Dreaming in Smoke*, I've got a bit gutsier about going into the darker spaces.

TB: Questions from the audience?

Claire Brialey: I didn't actually read *Kalypso* as a victim: I read her as someone who was victimised but nonetheless found ways to get by. Since she's a teenager and the baby in her family unit, she spends quite a lot of time complaining that things aren't fair, but she's better at coping than she or anyone else expects.

Was there a wider theme you wanted to emphasise about the roles young people, young women, are expected to take in society?

TS: There was never a message or a consciously deliberated thing. At the time I was teaching... well, I had come from a background of teaching, but I had studied education of the gifted, and had studied definitions of giftedness and intelligence. I probably had some stuff on my mind about what society values and what society rewards. I think that was reflected in this constructed society that had been made: the idea that everybody has a place and everybody has a function and that you're supposed to stick to that. Obviously I don't quite get on with that idea, or I wouldn't have put *Kalypso* in, thrown her into the mix to

mess everything up in a kind of obnoxious way. Also, there's something that was said earlier that struck me about *Kalypso*: she was essentially no use, but she ended up having a value in that society. I didn't intentionally set out to do that, but I suppose when you come from an academic background, education, you see everybody trying to structure everything and create frameworks to get people to behave the way that you think they should behave. There's this tremendous urge to see a 2 year-old come in and just knock everything down and mess it all up, and that's probably what I was succumbing to a little bit there. Yes, it's okay to have these theories, but it's much more interesting to see what really happens. I don't like too much contrived order, it's safe to say!

Roger Robinson: At the start, regarding the question about cyberpunk, you said you hadn't read that much. What were your influences, and how do you come from whatever they were to writing hard sf?

TS: The only thing I was reading at the time that affected me (and it probably only affected my style) was Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*. The idea for the story came from seeing a play in New York, called *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. It had the Ella Fitzgerald song in it, and it was about these three guys who were in a prison in Beirut or Turkey or something. It's almost like a joke: an Irishman, an Englishman, and an American. They're all sitting there chained to the walls and they're all talking to each other. That's the whole play. At one point the American gets dragged off and presumably killed, but the rest of the play is just these guys talking. I had never seen a live play before, and it was brilliant. At the end of it I just remember how affected I had been by those performers and the playwright. The whole experience had been so physically and emotionally affecting that I felt that there was some kind of connection going on. With *Someone to Watch Over Me*, all I was trying to do was figure out what happens when I experience something that you've done and you experience something that I've done. That was what was really on my mind, and everything else was trying to find a way to get to tell it that would be acceptable.

Andrew M Butler: Has winning the Clarke Award had any effect on the way you write, what you write?

TS: I think it was a tremendous shot in the arm, a tremendous boost. This time last year I had no plans to do any more science fiction for the foreseeable future, just because the sales were so bad and it's so much harder to write. Then, when I got that award, people came up to me that night and told me that they really liked my work... You know, I never had an idea that anybody's reading it, so it always comes as a shock when someone actually says something about your work. So yes: it was a tremendous boost, and I feel a sort of obligation to try to continue doing that, because when you win something so prestigious, suddenly you realise that maybe you might actually be onto something that you ought to stick to. So, yes, it has had an effect. It's had no effect that I know of on my sales, or any of those obvious things: but it's definitely had an effect on me personally.

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IN THE LETTERS PAGE OF V209, SYD FOSTER SUGGESTED THAT WE RUN A FEATURE OR AN INTERVIEW WITH TRICIA SULLIVAN. KEITH BROOKE CONTACTED US TO MENTION THAT HE'D PUBLISHED SOMETHING ON HER ON THE INFINITY PLUS WEBSITE (AT <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk>). WITH THE AUTHOR'S PERMISSION, WE ARE PLEASE TO GIVE A SLIGHTLY REVISED VERSION OF THIS PIECE ITS PAPER PREMIERE.

Lights in the Darkness of Genre: Two Novels by Tricia Sullivan by Nick Gevers

When Tricia Sullivan's novel *Dreaming in Smoke* (1998) won the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1999, overcoming competition from the likes of *The Extremes* by Christopher Priest, there was widespread surprise. But Sullivan is an author of deceptive depth, of brilliant resourcefulness; her work fully deserves its widening

share of attention. This article, referring to *Dreaming in Smoke* and an earlier book, *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1997), investigates in detail the shrewd and innovative storytelling strategies that make Sullivan's books among the most intriguing sf had to offer in the late 1990s.

These two novels can be described as parables of vision. Sullivan's theme is commonplace enough: as the titles of these books imply, she is concerned with the near-impossibility of accurate perception, with the myopia of those who watch, the opacity of the world we dream. Sullivan's originality lies in the technique by which she simultaneously diagnoses and resolves human blindness: while writing science fiction narratives, she argues that the sf genre functions both as a blindfold and as a set of lenses allowing realistic insight. *Someone to Watch Over Me* and *Dreaming in Smoke* identify those elements within sf that confuse the reader's understanding of reality; having done this, the books recalibrate and reintegrate these materials, combining them in a revelatory synergy. The effect of this is both disorienting and illuminating.

One effect of this disorientation, of the sly upsetting of genre expectations that is Sullivan's hallmark, is the insusceptibility of these books to orthodox feminist readings. Sullivan's female protagonists, Sabina in *Someone to Watch Over Me* and Kalypso Deed in *Dreaming in Smoke*, are designed to be as open as possible to transforming experience, so they cannot be endowed with any ideological or psychological certainties. Consequently, they defy the norms of feminist sf's traditional characterisation, emerging as rootless, directionless, their mixture of fecklessness and feistiness amounting to a systematic evasion by their creator of any shaping imperative of political correctness. Indeed, the sense grows that for Sullivan, rape or violation, of the body or the mind, can function as a necessary 'door' to new and transforming perceptions; this unfeminist governing metaphor of both novels is wilfully disturbing, a strategy to confound the reader that is little mitigated by the fact that male characters like Adrien Reyes and Azamat Marcsson face violations of their own. Sullivan's revisionist mischief bites deep.

That mischief works similarly at the expense of cyberpunk. Sullivan, who might superficially seem to belong to the same class of Nineties neo-cyberpunk writers as Pat Cadigan and Neal Stephenson, in fact eats away at the subgenre from within, with a bold acidic gusto. She juxtaposes cyberpunk conventions with those of other varieties of sf and of fiction generally, showing up cyberpunk's shortcomings in that much larger context while achieving spectacular new effects through such conjunctions. Sullivan exposes sf's orthodoxies as blind alleys. Through drastic creative recombination, she then affords the tired standbys a new, illuminating potential. These two novels, then, resemble the fluid mental landscapes portrayed in *Someone to Watch Over Me*, and the alien ocean vividly rendered in *Dreaming in Smoke*: roiling, restlessly fecund of revolutionary hybrids.

Sullivan's second novel, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, operates very much in a territory of genre perplexity. With its early twenty-first century setting, its devices such as cerebral implants, and its 'noir' plotting, this work has the aspect of cyberpunk. But certain details and emphases contradict this appearance; and the direction of the central love story irresistibly compels the reconciliation of cyberpunk with more traditional romantic narrative. More specifically, *Someone* erects a love triangle, and then collapses this into a straight line; and this geometrical sleight redirects period- and technology-bound cyberpunk into a timelessly human domain.

One corner of Sullivan's love triangle is symptomatic of cyberpunk. The woman known as C is a Watcher: because she has become a perceptual cripple, her mind disconnected from all five senses, she employs Human Interface Technology (HIT) as a link to the minds of hired human proxies, whose experiences she can share, as some substitute for normal living. That this electronic existence makes her a voyeur and parasite is only one element of Sullivan's critique of cyberpunk conventions; more broadly, the

underground network of which C is a member, the 'Deep', side-steps the traditionally artificial concerns of such hacker elites in sf, ignoring virtual realities and the data landscapes of cyberspace in favour of the direct, telepathic communion of people's minds. The popular culture of this future centres upon 'wires', which permit the user to taste the sensations of others. Sullivan's moral – that technology must serve our social and empathetic impulses instead of replacing them – shapes *Someone's* narrative. The 'Deep' is a gestalt ocean, from whose copious interactions new and menacing technologies are emerging; one of these is I, for 'Immortality', a variety of implant permitting the full transfer of one individual's mind into the body of another. As C inhabits a living death of sensory deprivation, she intends to colonise another human being, one whose sensory faculties are intact. This awful covetousness is also a form of love, for the designated victim is C's loyal 'trans' or proxy, a handsome martial arts expert, Adrien Reyes; the subtext of their contractual relationship as Watcher and 'trans' is C's passion for Adrien, her desire to possess him mentally if she cannot love him physically. Such jealous love which cannot be reciprocated is classically a feature, and perhaps the cause, of a love triangle; and this duly eventuates.

Early in the novel, Adrien, who has just barely escaped with his life from a perilous mission for C, senses C's encroachment on his mind. In some panic and disgust, he removes his implant, severing their ties. This is wise; C has already violated others, most notably Max Niagarin, a powerful member of the 'Deep', whose strong capacity for religious faith she has excised (the continuing conflict between C and Max fuels much of *Someone's* plot). With most of the point of his life removed, Adrien must find reaffirmation and compensation; he falls in love with an

experimental composer, Sabina, whom he encounters in Zagreb and for whom he also is a source of new direction and meaning. C's strategy in response is both expedient and vengeful: she uses I to implant herself in Sabina, whom she has lured to New York. She will destroy her rival by becoming her; and, in an inversion of her previous situation,

while she may not now possess Adrien in the supernatural sense, she can possess him amorously, in the guise of his lover.

It is significant that C's implantation in Sabina occurs at a virtual reality party, where the decadent celebrants participate in the consensual hallucination of a fairy tale. One of the aficionados dismisses such 'pseudo-fairy-tale stuff' as 'passé', as 'pretentious' (p. 129); this is a cyberpunk dismissal of Fantasy. And yet the logic of Sullivan's plot is that of a fairy tale, involving in effect malicious sorcery, possession, threatened souls. The fairy tale form haunts and redeems cyberpunk here; from the existential horror of possession by interface (cyberpunk) stems maturation and reconciliation (fairy tale). The attempted conquest of Sabina by C – the description of which, involving dense depiction of surreal countries of the mind, is perhaps Sullivan's greatest achievement in this novel – becomes a process of integration, of the pooling of talents and the communion of emotions. This is an instance of Sullivan's tendency to represent violation as a gateway to renovation or transcendence; the rape of Sabina's mind makes her into someone deeper and better, a composer at last capable of genuine inspiration, as C's invasive music fills her. Both women are victorious: Sabina, originally a third-person narrative subject, acquires C's once-egotistical first-person narrative voice, while C, from being merely a bodiless Watcher, becomes able to act physically as well as to 'see'. In the fusion of C and Sabina, their rivalry is defused; the novel's love triangle is resolved, as two frail women become a single strong one; and the harmonious linear romance of Adrien and Sabina can proceed.

The counterpoint to this reconciliation is the disintegration of the mind of C's other 'trans', Tomaj, whose collapse is an omen of

Sullivan's revisionist mischief bites deep.

the threat posed by the end of individual and cultural boundaries in a postmodern age. It is in the face of that threat that Sullivan calls cyberpunk tendencies to account, repudiating the evolutionary or 'posthuman' ethic of such authors as Bruce Sterling. In *Someone*, radically transformative technologies like I may open new doorways; but their hallmark is exploitation, usurpation, the ownership of others. A moral and human centre must be retained; transformation must serve some just cause, like love. Traditional genres – the love story, the fairy tale – should, in their authentic humane truthfulness, govern genres of novelty. This is the conclusion of this parable of vision: that we must not Watch and covet, not harness the New for aggrandisement; rather, we should see and understand, employing novelty as a means towards sympathetic knowledge of the Other.

It is a measure of Sullivan's lucid flexibility that *Dreaming in Smoke*, her third novel, presents a very different assessment of the viability of traditional forms of behaviour, asserting the supremacy over us of the external environment, regardless of human concerns. Where *Someone* dealt chiefly with the subjective opacity of individuals to one another, relegating the human race's wider confusions to the status of vivid background, *Dreaming* discusses the deep inscrutability of the physical world, a barrier that applies impartially to all. In this novel it is pervasively emphasised that we exist within narrow perceptual walls; the fires of the world burn brightly outside, but we cannot see for the walls and the smoke. Perhaps we can glimpse Reality in dreams, but more likely Reality dreams us. This existential and scientific perplexity is that of sf as well: in this text, different narrative forms and ideological postures typical of the genre batter themselves against the enigma of Nature, and are found sorely wanting. Sullivan's design, before the resolution of her plot, is to leave her audience, with its grounding in sf's genre expectations, reading in smoke.

Dreaming's superficial allegiance is to the subgenres of planetary romance and cyberpunk. The setting is the alien planet T'neane; human colonists have long since arrived in the expectation of a benign and thus terraformable environment. But T'neane is inhospitable: CO₂ predominates in its atmosphere, and its world-spanning ocean is home to an alien biochemistry that is comprehensible and exploitable only in small ways. The settlers remain restricted to their base, First, and to various transport craft; the 'Oxygen Problem', the task of making T'neane's air breathable, seems insuperable, and the colony may stagnate and die. The conventional tale of colonisation, and its customary sequel, the planetary romance, with its supposition of the harmony of humans and the exotically alien, prove inadequate formulae in the face of a truly intractable ecology; neither the conquest of T'neane by human Competence nor a mystical communion with the alien World-Soul is feasible. Familiar sf types are defeated by T'neane. The sorority of Mothers that governs the settlement is a caricature of a feminist community, withdrawing in the face of the world's obstacles by means of drugs, alcohol, and nostalgic dreams of Earth; their conversations are hilariously glossolalic. Other matriarchs, known as the 'Dead', dwell in T'neane's wilderness, in some greater contact with the indigenous ecosystem, but they are mute, ruthless, destructive, a further invalidation of genre feminist assumptions. The class of male scientist-technicians known as Grunts (perhaps because they are subordinate to the Mothers and speak with monosyllabic practicality) is little better off; the type of the competent engineer cannot resolve the Oxygen Problem either. With these older resources of sf indicted as blind, can a more recent formula serve?

Unfortunately for the colonists, Sullivan continues her critique of cyberpunk in this novel. The heart of the settlement is Ganesh, a powerful Artificial Intelligence, which runs many vital life-support functions and allows the inhabitants of First to 'Dream' themselves into virtual reality environments that are

useful both as scientific simulations and as havens for escape. Ganesh's favourite visitor, the novel's protagonist, Kalypso Deed, is of escapist tendency: unmotivated, evasive, whimsical. She prefers the spaces of virtuality to the outer 'Wild' of T'neane, and is thus an extreme example of the impracticality of her generation, the bright but aimless young things who are restricted to First when they should be spreading across the planet. Sullivan resoundingly condemns the essential passivity, the reliance on information rather than experience, of the cyberpunk heroine through her characterisation of Kalypso: despite her surname, her deeds are few; she is consistently acted upon, initiating very little; and as she is the novel's sole viewpoint character, the reader's efforts to understand T'neane are not made easy. And as T'neane's strange ecology changes, threatening fatal disruption of First, artificial intelligence and virtual reality are no refuge: Ganesh is infiltrated by T'neanean logic, and increasingly breaks down. The psychological and technological riches of cyberpunk are a currency of little value in the face of Nature's fury.

In line with Sullivan's evocation of universal human blindness, the plot of *Dreaming* is deceptive and meandering, its vistas claustrophobic. Kalypso is in repeated conflict with a solitary and perhaps deranged 'Grunts', Azamat Marcsson, who believes he can solve the Oxygen Problem through direct manipulation of T'neane's flexible biological System, its rich organic soup. Azamat's schemes are opaque, his utterances bizarre; and he leads Kalypso into a succession of dangerous scrapes, not the least of which entails his use of Kalypso as an experimental human-alien tissue culture. The abduction of the helpless heroine by the mad scientist – *Dreaming's* primary expression of Sullivan's characteristic motif of violation and yet another deflating deployment of sf cliché – does not avail Marcsson much. He has hoped to *order* T'neane to change, to vary its ecology to permit easy human inhabitation; instead, the planet is taking charge. Sudden thermal surges, the activities of the 'Dead', Kalypso's involuntary interface with native organic matter, the infection of Ganesh with alien logic: all are parts of a strategy by T'neane's collective biology to transform itself, to offer humanity an ambiguous welcome. Clearly, we cannot discern much of the world's true shape; and where we would remake the world, the world remakes us. The plot of *Dreaming* has summarised our myopic confusion.

Where *Someone* is a fable of blind jealousy redeemed, *Dreaming* is a comedy of errors, a negation of hubristic Purpose. The interactions of its characters are affectingly farcical; this is well summed up in the novel's final scene, where Kalypso and Azamat, their conflict the basis of a slow involuntary empathy, wryly share a box of cigars. Around them, out of their control, the planet is metamorphosing in promising ways. Things may end well, but comedies always do; this springs not from the exercise of our will, but from convention, or destiny. This realisation, an acknowledgement of human blindness, is by that very acknowledgement a reversal of blindness: Sullivan allows sf, with all its claims to utopian and cosmic vision, to perceive its own limits of perception. This is humbling; but the clichés of feminism, of Competence, of colonisation, and of cyberpunk, duly chastened, can now again be guides to our perilous future adversity, can again shed some light in a gathering darkness.

Tricia Sullivan is a deft revisionist. Her understanding of the potentials and the pitfalls of the sf genre is luminously apparent; read in that light, her novels are exhilarating confessions, at once parable and parody. Her versatility of tone and of voice, her gift for sustained metaphor, her incisive characterisation, her often dense and witty language: these are all notable supporting strengths. Her plots may at times descend into a seeming bathos, allowing for too easy a positive outcome; but that can in itself be redemptive, a necessary light in an existential gloom. These two novels, deftly stark and stylish, are important pointers to the continuing vigour of sf on the verge of the Twenty-First Century.

Editions consulted:

Someone to Watch Over Me (Orion Millennium UK, 1998, paperback)

Dreaming in Smoke (Bantam Spectra US, 1998, paperback)

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A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO WE CONDUCTED A POLL TO FIND OUT THE BEST BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS OF THE LAST FIFTY YEARS. THE RESULTS APPEARED IN VECTOR 201, AND AT EASTERCON 1999 THE BSFA HELD A NUMBER OF PANEL ITEMS TO DISCUSS THE RESULTS, AND WHAT THE MERITS OF THE NOVELS VOTED ON. THE FOLLOWING IS AN EDITED AND REVISED TRANSCRIPT OF THE FOURTH AND FINAL OF THESE PANELS.

The Best of British IV: The 1980s and 1990s

Andrew M. Butler: We started by looking at British science fiction published immediately after the war and discussed the reconstruction of Britain, as well as the continual fascination with the destruction of Britain, in the cosy catastrophe, which in turn fed into various disaster novels of the 1960s. We realised that a lot of what we thought of as 1960s writing was in fact produced in the 1970s; far from being a desert of science fiction, it was a very fertile period. And now we close with what is a twenty year period, from the first issue of *Interzone* in 1982 to the present day, and perhaps speculating on what the trends are now, and where British sf is going.

One of the things which really stood out in the discussion of 1970s British science fiction was a lack of women writers compared to what was going on in the United States at the same time. In a small way the balance began to be addressed by The Women's Press. Tanya?

Tanya Brown: Ah yes, the short, happy life of The Women's Press Science Fiction imprint. When I first had money to buy science fiction it was when The Women's Press Science Fiction imprint was being launched. They produced a critical volume by Sarah Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine* (1988), which was a book about feminist science fiction writers, especially those who didn't do feminist utopias. They did publish the odd 'Wouldn't it be nice if all the men were locked up in a cage' volume. But the women were also subverting a great deal of the patriarchal mores of science fiction. They were publishing some very interesting pieces; they published Angela Carter, Josephine Saxton and they were publishing new writers. They were pushing female science fiction writers for I think the first time, at least in Britain. I don't quite know what happened, but they stopped.

Audience: The editor left.

AMB: Okay, the editor leaving is obviously going to put a spanner in the works. But if the market isn't going to support the publication, no editor is going to be able to publish them. I suspect the difficulty was that, quite a lot of them, by their nature, were experimental fiction, trying to find what a female as opposed to male writing looked like, a science fiction *féminine écriture* if you like.

TB: A lot of them were trying to write associative works. Rhoda Lerman's *The Book of the Night* (1984) springs to mind in particular. I don't think she ever published anything else.

Paul Billinger: There were a lot of individual novelists who didn't follow through.

AMB: I remember a whole series of them being reviewed – by male critics in particular – as being completely unreadable. At some point the imprint moved from grey spines to zebra spines, and started dropping the 'sf' imprimatur.

TB: They also published quite a lot of fantasy; the sf imprint covered Tanith Lee short story collections, as well as Lisa Tuttle's *A Spaceship Built of Stone* (1987), and I think there was some horror in there too. It was an interesting experiment, but I really wish it had been consolidated.

PB: Did any of those writers come through into the mainstream of science fiction?

TB: One of the things that struck me about the list of British women science fiction writers is that they seemed to have a very short career. They published, and then they stopped writing science fiction – that's pretty well the case with Lisa Tuttle.

PB: That's the case with Nicola Griffith, who has only published

two science fiction novels, and has already moved on from that genre onto crime. *The Blue Place* (1998) is actually a crime novel – although it's equally a romance – and an extremely successful one.

AMB: It has to be a case of solid economics.

Paul Kincaid: If you consider some of the longest lived career of female sf writers, they've also been writing children's books – Gwyneth Jones, Diana Wynne Jones are prime examples. They've both had long careers.

AMB: They've perhaps been able to have two parallel careers, being able to concentrate on one if the other is blocked.

TB: I seem to recall Gwyneth Jones saying that the children's books were where the money was, and that she found it a lot easier to write and sell those. They are published under her own name, some as Gwyneth A Jones, as well as Ann Halam. She's chopped and changed as to which she's used. It's a bit like Iain and Iain M Banks – but without the beard.

AMB: So she used the impenetrable pseudonym first; another example of the patriarchal theft of women's ideas.

TB: But to return to the economics; one of the writers missing from the poll was Molly Brown. She cannot sell science fiction novels, but her short stories have appeared in several magazines. She's won the BSFA Award, she gets shortlisted, 'Bad Timing' (1991) is being made into a film: but at novel length she can't sell. The science fiction novel which people would associate with her is *Virus* (1994), which was written as an adult novel but then had to be rewritten to make it into a children's book. She wasn't entirely happy about having to do that, but she could not sell it any other way.

PB: Otherwise she's had *Invitation to a Funeral* (1995) – a historical crime novel – and a *Crackernovels* novelisation.

Mary Gentle's another success, but she's worked in a number of genres as well; some of them are straightforward fantasies, but not always obviously fantasy.

TB: With Mary Gentle you think you are reading fantasy, but then you find that the series is actually turning into science fiction as you watch. She's building on the genre's tropes in a way that kind of foreshadowed Michael Swanwick; I'm thinking of *Rats and Gargoyles* (1990), with the five-sided square and strict – if non-Euclidian – geometry that's somehow also magical. There's a sound alternate science there too.

AMB: Are the male writers of the period doing a similar amount of switching around between genres? Robert Holdstock seems to collide science fiction and fantasy in the same book, and Garry Kilworth writes children's books, horror fiction, talking animal books and science fiction.

PB: Most obviously there is Iain and Iain M. Banks, writing different genres, although a lot of those published as mainstream contain fantasy or science fictional elements, *The Bridge* (1986) being a good example.

AMB: That brings us neatly to discuss the top three of the period. The leading book for the 1980s was Christopher Priest's *The Affirmation* (1981), which we talked about in terms of the 1970s, but second came Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas* (1987) which was the first of the Culture novels.

PB: It's a book which is sometimes hard going, certain parts of it are very unpleasant, the section on the Island is nearly as unpleasant, but not as memorable, as the death of the child in the hospital in *The Wasp Factory* (1984). It is particularly good. It does

big spaceships very, very well and towards the end there's a spaceship crash which is very vivid. Although he's writing in one series, there's a lot of variation in them. When you come to *Inversions* (1998), which is possibly a Culture novel if you spot the capital c among other clues, but it's not so obviously a Culture novel – it's certainly not labelled one.

TB: It is almost impenetrably a Culture novel, in my opinion. But I had real problems trying to define it as science fiction, because I could see this whole metatext going on that it was a Culture novel, and that at least one of the individuals in it came from the Culture but was slumming it in fantasyland. However it was, to me, much too obscure; I really think he'd overdone it and it felt rather as though there had been more of it from the Culture side, which had then been cut out.

AMB: The ambiguity keeps us talking about it, of course.

TB: The ambiguity in all his books keeps us talking about them.

PB: There's ambiguity in *Excession* (1996) which I think is probably his best book, with Big Dumb Objects and lots of spaceships all with those long rambling names.

TB: My favourite is *Against a Dark Background* (1993), which is explicitly not a Culture novel but has many of the same tropes and themes.

Paul Kincaid: One of the characteristics of British sf which we were talking about in relation to the 1970s was degradation, and that is something that Banks is doing as well. That moral ambiguity fits straight into that key track of British science fiction.

PB: He also fits into the theme of landscape. In *Against a Dark Background* the landscape is very obviously important, and similarly some of the memorable parts in *Consider Phlebas* the landscape is part of the character.

TB: And *Use of Weapons* (1990), as well. Reading that, I realised that whatever Banks was doing, it was also serious Literature. I was very impressed by it; the fact that it was set as a science fiction novel could have been irrelevant. You could have given it to a non-science fiction reader and said, "Pretend it's happening on Earth". The central moral theme is extremely powerful and extremely well put together. I really felt that Banks was the renaissance for literary skiffy.

PB: One thing he never forgets is a sense of wonder, a sense of fun, and it's enjoyable.

TB: Ken MacLeod has spoken about the sense of fun in British science fiction – it's there in Banks, alongside the urban decay.

AMB: In MacLeod you've got the same kind of moral ambiguity, particularly *The Cassini Division* (1998) where it ends in a genocide as troubling as the one at the end of *The Chrysalids* (1955). You begin to wonder whether you should be siding with Jon Wilde or Dave Reid.

There's a sense of landscape in MacLeod as well, Scotland and London in the 1970s in *The Stone Canal* (1996), a London, particularly a river Thames, out of William Morris's *News From Nowhere* in *The Cassini Division*, and the alien landscape at New Mars. The novels each seem to be set in a slightly different utopia or dystopia, and that politics is perfectly integrated with the science fiction.

But to return to Banks: he was one of a whole series of writers producing, for want of a better term, postmodern space opera. Most memorably there was Colin Greenland, who was one of the editors originally associated with *Interzone*. *Take Back Plenty* (1990) in particular is that kind of 'widescreen baroque', and in *Harm's Way* (1993) his version of the Victorian age offers a different vision of steampunk.

TB: *Harm's Way* is another fun book. There's that lovely scene when – I think it's Sophy, looking down at the English Channel from a wooden spaceship, and seeing the Channel bridge; it's just so fun. It reminded me of William Gibson's 'The Gernsback Continuum', being able to see a future that had been predicted in sf. One of the other things that Greenland does is have female protagonists – Tabitha Jute and Sophy. Tabitha Jute even has periods.

Maureen Kincaid Speller: I began to read one by him and thought

that it couldn't be a Colin Greenland book because I hadn't found a tampon reference. There gets to be a very slight self-consciousness about what he's doing.

TB: I think it's a healthy self-consciousness. Most male science fiction writers, if they have female protagonists, can have them on hundred-day trips and the characters don't have periods. It's wonderful, it subverts nature – it must be science fiction.

PB: There are many cases with the female main characters written by men where you could change the gender quite easily, and it would make very little difference.

AMB: One of the characteristics in male British science fiction of the late 1980s and early 1990s was the lesbian or female bisexual protagonist – it's there in Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* (1988), in Simon Ings's *Hot Head* (1992), it's there in Tabitha Jute.

MKS: During this time there was more exploration of what a hero or protagonist could be, more so than at any other time. To go back to the 1950s, Wyndham was in unusual in the prominence that the women played in the action, as real people, especially if you compare them to Isaac Asimov's characters, Susan Calvin, who I couldn't identify with at all. By the 1980s there was the possibility of exploring gender or sexual orientation and you didn't have to have the absolute polarity – male/female and straight/gay. It was quite a shock to those used to traditional science fiction in which only one gender was explored and there was only one sexual orientation.

AMB: In some cases, not any sexual orientation at all.

TB: There is Romance, but there isn't sex: there is Romance in that very high-minded sense that the hero gets the girl.

AMB: Perhaps this brings us to a point where we should discuss Peter Hamilton's treatment of female characters.

PB: I actually think there are two Peter Hamiltons.

AMB: Peter and Peter F.?

PB: I came late to reading Peter Hamilton. I'd read none of them, but I'd heard mutterings about the first three pseudo-crime novels, and the first one I read was *The Reality Dysfunction* (1996). I really enjoyed it as a huge space opera romp. It wasn't anything you could call art, but it was great fun and a great example of the storyteller's craft. Although it was the size of a breezeblock, I read it very easily. So I went back to have a look at his earlier Greg Mendel novels, featuring a sort of private investigator in Rutland, set a few years hence. There are also some cyberpunk references too. But I read them and thought they were much poorer. The female characters didn't really have characters. He could do the male ones, who were very macho, gung-ho. But the females were there as sidekicks, to be rescued.

TB: I've read quite a few of the short stories and I was not terribly happy with any of the characters. There were a couple of the short stories, collected in *A Second Chance at Eden* (1999) that worked better than others, and there is one where he is talking about female empowerment. But I still didn't feel he could do character, especially females.

PB: Some of the later short stories are better on that, so we need to give him credit for that. He is learning his craft and with the Night's Dawn trilogy has produced a work to be proud of, although I do feel it starts better than it finishes.

AMB: Paul, you mentioned cyberpunk in relation to Hamilton, and of course cyberpunk was a big movement in the 1980s, in particular relating to the writers associated with William Gibson and Bruce Sterling in America. How did British writers react to cyberpunk?

PB: Simon Ings has written some novels which could be described as cyberpunk – although *Headlong* (1999) feels more like it is going back towards Wyndham. There's a very strong sense of British countryside which works towards *Headlong* being a very strong work and one whose reputation is, I think, likely to grow. *HotHead* (1992) is much more cyberpunk and has appeared on lists of cyberpunk novels.

AMB: There's Jon Courtney Grimwood, one of several hundred writers hailed as being like Quentin Tarantino.

TB: But are his books worthy of that claim?

PB: He's growing up in public; his second book is better and the third even more.

MKS: The problem in cyberpunk is down and dirty writing hailing from around Austin, Texas. And they had a fine polemicist in the shape of Bruce Sterling. The response we had here was one to emulate. At first British writers just tried to imitate, but our measured response came later.

PB: Simon Ings did that, he's grown with it and realised that he can take some of those tropes and use them in a particularly British setting. Jeff Noon is also on the interface between that and many other genres.

TB: Jeff Noon is one writer who I'd pick out, not necessarily as being a good cyberpunk writer, but as being a measured response to a very American genre.

Audience member: But we, from the American side of the Atlantic, look on Britain as being a hot house of cyberpunk. I do not know why this is so. Bruce Sterling, in his introduction to *Mirrorshades*, credits *Interzone* as a point of origin.

PB: From our point of view, a lot of the writers which emerged from *Interzone* are more traditional sf, such as Stephen Baxter.

AMB: We clearly need to talk about him, but I'd like to say more about Jeff Noon, and that moral ambiguity we've been talking about. In the shift from *Vurt* (1993) to *Pollen* (1995), you also shift allegiances, from user to cop. In *Vurt* cyberpunk shifts from south central LA to south central Manchester, and the plotting is *Scooby Doo* meets William Burroughs, the Stash Riders drive around in the dream machine in search of the next fix.

TB: It's very rooted in Britain, especially in Manchester.

AMB: And very specifically Hulme and the area around Hulme, although it's since been redeveloped and prettified to some extent so it's already historical fiction.

PB: You can actually take a map and follow the book.

AMB: Sure, it's all there.

TB: There's a whole lot of British culture in it; references to Saturday night television such as Noel Edmonds and Paul Daniels, and to *Coronation Street*. You need to be familiar with British urban concerns; it doesn't have to be Manchester, it could be London in places. I don't think it's the same as American urban life or, to lump it together, European.

AMB: After sympathising with the druggie, the feather user, and being afraid of the Shadowcops in *Vurt*, you shift to sympathising with a cop as protagonist in *Pollen*. It flips between the different factions you care about, and that is very striking. Alas in *Automated Alice* (1996), he risks being a Piers Anthony and goes for the pun, which has always been there in his novels, but never as such a substitute for structure or symbol. In *Pollen* the whole playing around with the language – those who can't use *Vurt* feather are called Dodos and are seen as flightless, and Dodo goes via a stutter into the creator of the *Alice* books, Do-Do-Dodgson – is just a small part of the narrative structure, and it seems to work. In *Automated Alice* it feels to be the pun for the sake of the pun.

PB: I'm not usually very good with puns, and I enjoyed *Automated Alice*, so it probably means that they're not very successful ones, in that they're straightforward ones so I actually understand them.

AMB: I just thought that it was a novel which was all style and no substance.

PB: Which is possibly why I liked it.

AMB: *Nymphomation* (1998), on the other hand, is a definite return to form. It's a take on the National Lottery as the latest drug. Rather than the difficult second book, Noon hits a difficult third book. It's also a novel which acknowledges Manchester's Asian population, in a major character, whereas that community had only been referred to in passing as the curry shoot during a car chase in *Vurt*. It's much more of a multi-cultural Manchester coming through now. I certainly think Noon is someone we should champion and follow through, although his fifth novel, *Needle in the Groove* (2000) isn't science fiction.

TB: An American would not have been able to write those books,

specifically *Nymphomation*. He's widening out his scope after the first three books. He's talking about variations on the human, rather than variations within the human.

AMB: I guess in the first two books there are ghettos based on species or hybrids rather than on race, so it is there in terms of metaphor.

TB: Maybe he thought he'd been subtle enough and now it was time to be specific.

AMB: Having said I want to talk about Jeff Noon before we talk about Stephen Baxter, let's talk about Stephen Baxter. The most popular book of the 1990s in the poll was *The Time Ships* (1995), which in a sense takes us back to the beginning of British science fiction and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. Is *The Time Ships* his best book?

PB: I don't think it is, but I don't think he's yet written his best novel. I have to confess that before I read *The Time Ships* I hadn't actually read *The Time Machine*. So I read it first, and it was superb, so I read *The Time Ships* and it did start well, but it was too long and it lost it towards the end. I prefer his earlier, more traditional, hard science fiction novels.

AMB: He's one of those authors whose writing can't be squared with, for want of a better word, his ideology. In 'Darkness', there's a travel forwards or backwards in time to a location which resembles the Byron poem of the same name, throughout *Titan* (1997) there's this real sense of doom and the end of the world, and there's this almost Stapledonian sense of the scale of time and the universe compared to humanity's place within it, there's this sense of the fragility of humanity, the finiteness of life, the strength of entropy and that everything's got to end – just like the crab upon the beach in *The Time Machine*'s end of the world, and yet he still can't face up to the end of the world, he steps back from, gives us a happy ending capped on the end.

PB: Unlike Noon, Baxter is writing globally, from a British viewpoint.

AMB: If you read his alt.space stories, about the various possible space programmes and so on, where there's this odd nostalgia for this programme that never was, which we could have had, and yet at the same time shows how that would have failed as well, or the other problems they would have faced, how it could have been worse than what we've actually got. It's not a nostalgia for "Gee wizz, we could have gone to Mars or be driving around in aircars". There have to be problems, but it's quite depressing at points.

Voyage (1996) I felt shot itself in the foot, dramatically, by having the prologue being the Mars landing, so you know they got there if not all did get there, which removes a lot of the character motivation and suspense as to who's going to go. The first time through I just lapped it up, I read this seven hundred page novel in a day. But I found it hard to re-read with any enthusiasm – what's the point?

TB: I read *Moonseed* (1998) in a day, and I found it so depressing. But it is considerably more cheerful than *Titan*. I think Baxter might be single handedly responsible for the reputation British sf has for being miserable, morose or depressing.

There are moments where I fear he shoots himself, and possibly all of British science fiction, in the foot, because of this concern with the scientific aspects of the space programme, both in fiction and in real life, possibly to the exclusion of the human aspects. It summed it up for me when they put the first bit of the space station up and Stephen Baxter was interviewed for Radio One, and he said we should be sending an unmanned mission to Mars. I thought, "Yes, but that's no fun." Nobody is going to feel as attached to that as to the thought that maybe they could join up and be astronauts. There was the Chris Priest/Helen Sharman book, which showed the idea that people could go.

PB: I think because he is treating it seriously, he is looking at it over a much longer period, and not seeing the short term advantages of supporting that.

TB: He obviously has an eye for the tragedy that is, or was, the American space programme.

AMB: *Titan* is one where you do care about the characters. Even so, to return to that bit earlier in this discussion where we talked about sexuality, there are these two lesbian characters who get killed off a couple of pages after you find this out, almost as if he didn't then know what to do with them. Again he is a giant of the field, and I'm sure, as Paul suggests, he will write that great novel, the classic science fiction novel.

PB: Another *Interzone* writer who fits into that category is Paul McAuley. In a lot of his novels he's got very close. *Red Dust* (1993), *Pasquale's Angel* (1994) and *Fairyland* (1995) are very good novels, but I don't think they're quite great novels.

TB: He said after *Pasquale's Angel* that he felt he'd done his best work.

AMB: Tanya, you wanted to make a point about endings.

TB: One of the things I've noticed, having been an Arthur C. Clarke Award judge – this might be a millennial tension thing or a trend in modern British science fiction – is the amount of books that have difficult, problematic endings. Baxter is not very good at endings, he has multiple ones; it should be 'roll a dice, if you get a six turn to page 537'. You think it's about to end, but you know there's some more, because you can feel the pages that you haven't yet read under your hand. *Titan* has this sixty page happy ending, which I would have enjoyed more had he published it separately. I quite liked the fact that – up to that point – everything went horribly, horribly wrong. There was a kind of brutal honesty to that. Whether it was because of his publishers, or whether he thought it was narrow minded to focus on humanity, he tacked on this happy ending which I really felt spoilt the book. It can be justified scientifically, but it doesn't fit. It suddenly felt like Hollywood. Speaking of Hollywood, there's *Moonseed* being filmed, which is a disaster movie, and it's got a wonderful, spectacular, Wyndham-esque scene at the end of the book, and then it's got another three endings. Do these mean he cannot decide on his future? Does this mean he wants to leave it indeterminate in a very postmodern way? Out of the fifty books I read for the Clarke Award, I think about twenty had problematic endings; either 'wrong' (to me) in terms of the book or did not fit, multiple, unduly optimistic, unduly pessimistic, unduly detached – like Ken MacLeod's *The Cassini Division*, which I have to say was a better Culture novel than Banks's. There's this fragmentation of ending; like authors are saying, "We're not going to tell stories because that's been done. We're going to give you *possible* futures and let you the reader decide."

AMB: Of course *The Sky Road* (1999) comes along as a sequel to *The Stone Canal*, and it's as if *The Cassini Division* hadn't happened. It's an alternate sequel.

Baxter has his cake and eats it at the end of *Time* (1999) as well; having travelled through a series of parallel universes and

killed off a number of characters, the narrative brings them back from the dead and goes down another timetrack. The novel's an odd fusion of *Childhood's End* (1956), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Timescape* (1980), although the best bits are the squids in space. However, it has to be noted that it leaves Britain behind; I think all the human characters are American.

To get back to these multiple endings, I know from various things I've written that there are points when you can go one of two ways, and you can't decide. You can't have both and get away with it. It's as if the author is abdicating responsibility for choosing; I feel like this about some of the bigger books in sf which try to crowd everything into a thousand pages or more. I think it's the job of authors to select material for us. We've got this brave new world of on-line fiction and interactive fiction, which in Ryman's *253* or Kim Newman's *Life's Lottery* (1999) can be interesting, but I don't want it to be taken further so you get to decide the characters' hair colour or their inside leg measurements, and whether they go to Mars or die out. It's the author's job to choose and, more importantly, shape the material.

TB: In *253* it does make a difference what order you read it in, but you can do that as well in the paper version as on-line.

AMB: I ended the other panels by asking for the panellists' favourite novels, so I ought to do the same for you, for the 1980s and 1990s.

PB: I think one of my favourites was Nicola Griffith's *Slow River* (1995). It's a quite astonishingly strong emotional tale, with a very strong visual and structural style. Her first book, *Ammonite* (1993), was good but really doesn't prepare you for the intensity of *Slow River*, although having a Safety Officer for a hero helps. Her recent crime fiction novel, *The Blue Place*, is the most beautifully written one I've read this year.

TB: I find this really difficult, but I'll go for *Vurt*, because I do think it's a great book, and I spotted it before almost anyone I know, which is better still. For the 1980s, to be controversial (or possibly just wilfully obscure!), I think Rhoda Lerman's *The Book of the Night*.

PB: I have to say that it's incredibly difficult to judge many of these books, because we're still too close to them. We can see patterns in the 1980s, but not yet the 1990s.

AMB: Since we've said that there is this problem with endings, perhaps that uncertainty is a good point to end. Thank you to our panellists, Tanya Brown and Dr Paul Billinger.

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TANYA BROWN WAS A CLARKE JUDGE 1997–1999 AND IS THE WEBMISTRESS FOR THE BSFA AND PAUL BILLINGER IS THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY OF THE BSFA AND CLARKE JUDGE FOR 2000. OUR THANKS TO MAUREEN KINCAID SPELLER, PAUL KINCAID AND THE REST OF THE AUDIENCE FOR THEIR PARTICIPATION — EDS.

Hunting the Unicorn: Unicorns in Modern Fantasy Fiction

by Sandra Unerman

INTRODUCTION

Compared with dragons and other creatures, unicorns suffer from a serious drawback when they appear in modern fiction. The best known story about them is the embodiment of two deeply unfashionable themes: virginity and hunting. Once I started to look for unicorns, I found more of them than I expected, but their appearances are often brief and their nature remains elusive. There are not many full-length novels in which a unicorn is an important character in its own right, although there are plenty of short stories in which they feature. Nevertheless it is interesting to see what modern writers have made of them and their tradition.

There are three themes which make up the traditional

western image of the unicorn, although none is widespread in folklore or pre-twentieth century literature. First, a unicorn can purify water and expel poison with the touch of its horn. Secondly, it fights lions. Finally, men who wish to kill or capture it cannot hunt it by ordinary means: they need a virgin, usually young and female to sit out in the wilderness as bait. The unicorn will come and rest its head in her lap, so that the hunters can rush out from their hiding place and seize it unawares. This last theme, which has its roots in medieval Christian allegory, is the one most frequently taken up in modern fiction. The other two themes occur occasionally but some of the most interesting treatments do not use the traditional attributes except incidentally or as indications of the unicorn's essential character, not as a key element in the plot.

POISON

Odell Shephard's non-fiction *Lore of the Unicorn* contains a thorough investigation of the detoxification theme and its importance, particularly in Renaissance Italy, when powdered unicorn's horn fetched a high price. But so far, not many fiction writers seem to have made much of this. In Cherith Baldry's short story, 'The Unicorn Cup' from *Scheherazade* #18, the unicorn suffers for the sake of its horn, although it is not killed. This turns out to be more important to the characters than the practical business of detoxification. Susan Dexter's 'Butternut Ale' from *MZB's Fantasy Magazine* #46 contains a more light hearted treatment of the detoxification theme, featuring a unicorn which is a wild animal, dangerous and bad-tempered as well as beautiful.

HERALDRY

The lion and the unicorn feature in a number of tales, which almost treat the beasts as heraldry come to life. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the unicorn offers a bargain important to all fabulous monsters when it says to Alice, 'If you believe in me, I'll believe in you.' Otherwise, we are not told much about it, except that it has fought for the crown, according to the nursery rhyme. We gain less impression of its personality than that of the lazy, slightly grumpy lion.

The unicorn also features alongside a lion in Elizabeth Goudge's *Little White Horse*. This unicorn is beautiful but it is only seen at a distance (unlike the lion). Again, we do not learn much about it except that the heroine's family regard it as a symbol of the moon, as the lion is of the sun.

Other writers have used the heraldic theme without any connection to lions. The unicorn is the badge of the royal family in Roger Zelazny's Amber novels, one of which is called *The Sign of the Unicorn* and in the fifth book, *The Courts of Chaos*, the unicorn chooses the heir to the throne. But its appearance is unexpected and we are given no background information about how it lives or what it feels. In Fletcher Pratt's *The Well of the Unicorn*, drinking from the well is supposed to put an end to strife but the effects on the characters in the story are ambiguous. The unicorn does not appear, except briefly in a dream, and what it signifies is not clear.

THE HUNT

In Lord Dunsany's *King of Elfland's Daughter*, much of the plot turns on the hunting of unicorns by Orion, who has been brought up as a human, although his mother is the daughter of the title. No virgin is required: Orion hunts the unicorns with his hounds, as he had previously hunted stags. Hunting is seen as a healthy pastime for a young man and the unicorns, although magical, are seen as suitable prey. This must have been the common attitude to hunting when the story of the unicorn hunt first developed but it is difficult to read the book now without thinking about foxes and current debates.

A very different hunt is described by T.H. White in *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, the second book in *The Once and Future King*. The four teenage sons of Queen Morgause tie up a twelve year-old kitchen maid to act as bait, when they want to capture a unicorn, to reclaim their mother's affection. When the creature appears, they are entranced by its beauty and tenderness. But Agravaine kills it, for complicated emotional reasons. By the time they have skinned it and cut off its head, their feelings have turned to misery and disgust and the Queen, of course, barely notices them. The unicorn is a convincing presence for a brief moment but in death, it becomes like any other animal.

The hunt is primarily an excuse for a virginity test in Theodore Sturgeon's 'Silken Swift' (from the collection *E Pluribus Unicorn*) where a contrast is drawn between true innocence and technical virginity. But the two women concerned are seen very much from a male standpoint. The way they treat men seems to be the most

important thing in both their lives and the unicorn shares this perspective.

A hunt which expresses gallantry and pageantry takes place in *The Secret Country* by Pamela Dean. But this hunt is not intended to lead to death or capture. Instead, the climax is a riddle game, in which the humans set the riddles and the unicorns answer. These unicorns are magical beasts, whose presence makes flowers bloom out of season and who are regarded with great wariness by the humans. In this world, unicorn blood can make you immortal but to cause the death of one is regarded as murder. The unicorns live in herds and regard humans as a source of entertainment.

CHIVALRY

Some writers have moved away from the story of the hunt but kept the traditional image of the unicorn as the embodiment of purity and goodness. One of the most straightforward portrayals is that of Jewel, the loyal friend of the King in C.S. Lewis's *The Last Battle* but he does not have much to do except fight at the king's side and be courteous. As a personality, he makes less impact than Reepicheep the talking mouse, who embodies chivalry and valour in earlier Narnian books, maybe because we feel chivalry must come more easily to a unicorn than a mouse.

SPIRIT MESSENGERS

The collection of short stories, *Immortal Unicorn*, edited by Peter S. Beagle and Janet Berliner, features several unicorns in the role of spirit messenger. Some, such as 'The Devil on Myrtle Avenue' by Eric Lustbader or 'The Tenth Worthy' by Susan Schwartz draw on tradition by making an encounter with the unicorn a test of the true worth of the principal characters, rather than just a test of their innocence in any straightforward sense. In others, such as 'The Daughter of the Tao' by Lisa Mason or 'Stampede of Light' by Marina Fitch, the unicorn symbolises the innocence and vulnerability of childhood. And in another group, the unicorn seems more like a totem animal, a guide which might appear in different forms to different people. These include 'The Day of Sounding of Josh M'Bobwe' by Janet Berliner and Peter S. Beagle's 'Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros', in which the rhino provides the Professor with companionship during his life, although its true identity only becomes clear in moments of crisis and when he is ready for death.

The unicorn is a sort of spirit messenger in Tanith Lee's *Black Unicorn* (the first of a trilogy). The beast provides the means of travelling from one world to another more perfect; the unicorn can stay in the utopia, whereas Tanaquil, the young heroine, cannot. However, the most memorable appearances of the unicorn in the book occur before its function has been explained; in particular how it is accidentally brought to life by Tanaquil, and the reactions of alarm and fascination to its abrupt arrivals.

ORDINARY CREATURES

In *Split Infinity* by Piers Anthony (the first of a series), the hero enters a world where unicorns live in herds and behave much like horses, with extra attributes. He succeeds in riding one, a shape-shifting female, which becomes his friend. These unicorns live in a world of magic but they are natural to that world, not to be treated with awe or special longing. They might have been portrayed as horned horses without any change to their personalities or the atmosphere of the book.

The unicorns of *Unicorn Dilemma* by John Lee (also part of a series) can develop a telepathic relationship with humans, and the same theme appears in Joan D. Vinge's short story 'Hunt of the Unicorn' (from *Basilisk*, edited by Ellen Kushner). In both, the interest is in the humans and their fate and the unicorns are incidental, although in Vinge's story, the telepathic bond is questioned as a restraint on wild creatures. In both these worlds, virginity is mentioned but more as a plot complication than an important symbol.

THE QUEST

Some stories deal not so much with a hunt as with a quest for the unattainable, symbolised by a unicorn. In Alan Garner's *Elidor*, only the song of the unicorn can restore a magic land to fertility. But the four twentieth-century children who discover this have no idea how to induce the unicorn to sing and are afraid that it will be killed by hunters. The resolution of their quest is both painful and memorable. This is another story about the loss of innocence and about the price which may have to be paid for some achievements.

In Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, the story begins with the quest of the unicorn herself, as she sets out to search for the other unicorns which have disappeared from the world. But she is joined by human companions each on a search for what is missing from their own lives. Even their enemy, King Haggard, is consumed with longing for what he cannot have. This unicorn's relationship with the world is different from that of any natural creature. One of the powerful themes of the novel concerns the changes which come upon her when she is turned into a woman, to keep her safe. In the end, she and her companions achieve their desires but they are no longer what they were when they set out, especially the unicorn.

REVERSAL OF EXPECTATIONS

Not all unicorns are what they seem. The unicorn in Zelazny's *Unicorn Variations* is black and it has flames in its eyes. But its main interest is in playing chess and it keeps its bargain with the human in the story, so its diabolic appearance is misleading. In the *Mad Amos* stories of the Old West by Alan Dean Foster, Amos's mount is not only anti-heroic in appearance but liable to spit, kick and bite. Mad Amos keeps a leather patch on its forehead to stop its horn growing. But it fights monsters and villains, as well as bringing fertility to the land where it mates. The unicorn I would least like to face is the one in Terry Pratchett's *Lords and Ladies*. This one is white and beautiful but mad. It is in thrall to the even more unpleasant Queen of the Elves and it is a hunter, not the hunted, although Granny Weatherwax manages to get the better of it in the end.

REFLECTIONS

It is harder to write interesting fiction about virtue than villainy. In books where the unicorn is an embodiment of goodness, whether heraldic or otherwise, the interest is focussed elsewhere and the unicorn derives its importance from its effect on the other characters in the story. T.H. White and Alan Garner both create striking images with this approach but both are tragic and we see the unicorn briefly, learning very little about it.

Where writers have departed from this vision of the unicorn, especially where they have tried for a more detailed portrayal, the danger is that it becomes no different from any other creature, as happens in Piers Anthony's work and in John Lee's. At the opposite extreme, Pratchett's message about not trusting to appearances in *Lords and Ladies* is a bit heavy-handed but he creates an entertaining portrayal of a most alarming creature.

Where the unicorn functions as spirit messenger, the interest often tends to lie more in the message than the messenger. But in some stories, this role enables the unicorn to make a striking impression on the reader, as does the small, mysterious unicorn in Nancy Willard's 'The Trouble with Unicorns' (from *Immortal Unicorn*) or the Indian rhino in the Peter Beagle story. Tanith Lee and Pamela Dean both have created unicorns which are memorable because of their elusiveness and because their personalities are intriguingly ambiguous.

In *The Last Unicorn* the unicorn stays centre stage throughout the novel. Much of the story is about its effect on the people it encounters, many of whom cannot see it for what it really is, at least to begin with. They change but so does the unicorn, as it faces struggle and failure. But Beagle never treats it as an

ordinary creature: its concerns and the effect of its experience are always different from those of the humans: indeed, the differences and what they mean become important both to the plot and the underlying theme of the novel. Beagle makes reference to the story of the hunt but he also uses many other traditional motifs, including the story of Robin Hood, the hero who grows up as a foundling and the sorcerer's apprentice. He is interested in the study of folklore and the relationship between literature, folklore and reality. The way he uses this material gives us a powerful new vision of the unicorn, almost a new legend more appealing, at least from our present perspective, than the old one.

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SANDRA WROTE ABOUT DRAGONS IN FANTASY IN VECTOR 211 — EDS.

Bookspotting Bookspotting Bookspotting Bookspotting

The Wall Around the Concentration Camp: The Civil Engineering of *The Turner Diaries*

by L J Hurst

In one of his weekly articles in *The Guardian* in April 2000, Professor John Sutherland suggested that *The Turner Diaries*¹ is legally unavailable in Britain, but it is stocked by both Waterstones and Amazon.co.uk. Originally self-published by its author, William L. Pierce, and sold not through bookshops but through gun shows (where he got rid of 185,000 copies), Barricade Books have now obtained a wider distribution for a book infamous since the Oklahoma Bombings. It is clearly science fictional, though a hybrid work – part twisted Utopia, part Alternative History, consisting principally of the diaries of Earl Turner, lay ten years or more in Pierce's future. Readers now find it ten years in the past, so references to 'Gun Raids' in November 1989 to enforce the 'Cohen Act' (banning the private possession of firearms) passed in May 1988 mean that this has become Alternative History.

Pierce was a professor of engineering before he retired to run his Aryan supremacist church (presumably using his *nom-de-plume* to maintain his tenure), writing this book in the mid-70s (it has copyright dates of 1978 and 1980). Turner's first entry, dated September 16th 1991, lay ten years or more in Pierce's future. Readers now find it ten years in the past, so references to 'Gun Raids' in November 1989 to enforce the 'Cohen Act' (banning the private possession of firearms) passed in May 1988 mean that this has become Alternative History.

Turner begins his diary while in hiding from an increasingly repressive (as he sees it) government. His cell begins a series of bomb attacks on the capital area, on orders of a secretive revolutionary command. Turner is an electronics expert and it is he who helps build the nitrate bomb copied in Oklahoma City. It has exploded by page 44, destroying the FBI headquarters, where a computer database would have controlled a ubiquitous system of personal ID cards. Through his technical expertise and ruthlessness, Turner is able to advance through 'the Organisation', until he is accepted as an initiate into the central 'Order' where he reads 'the Book' which reveals the full truth to him. Unfortunately for him he is arrested and interrogated soon after, suffering in a prison camp until a mass breakout. With his partner Katherine, Turner continues as an urban guerilla until revolution breaks out in California, and the Revolutionary Command obtain nuclear weapons. Not only is the Organisation willing to exterminate tens of thousands, it are prepared to destroy large parts of the world (and thus millions) to obtain enclaves that are white only.

The Organisation is aware of the failings of earlier rebels – both left and right. For example, there are references to Vietnam that could mean the new resistance copies the methods of both the US Army and the Vietcong. And in a similar way the novel repeats earlier work, regardless of whether those earlier novels were favourable to Pierce's philosophy – entering a small leadership circle and reading 'the Book' seems a direct lifting from Orwell's dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (where Winston and Julia volunteered for terrorist duty). The final epilogue which describes a world made nuclear desert echoes Norman Spinrad's Nazi fantasy *The Iron Dream*².

Reading the first part of *The Turner Diaries* one notices Pierce's failings and inconsistencies, even though he must have re-written the book at least once. On page 22 he writes that the Organisation uses three digit codes, and then gives as an example '2006'. As an example of an incompetent government he says that no new highways are being built, but a few pages later the Washington subway system is being extended, with no clear reason why the government should extend one means of transport and not the other, except that Turner needs stolen explosives at that point. The

femininity of his partner is good, the femininity of liberalism is bad. Unfortunately Pierce's critics cannot rely on him making his mistakes on a bigger scale, and he is able to construct his plots without these errors. Turner is never a member of the Revolutionary Command, misses several seminal actions, and so these events come as a surprise. When the rebellion breaks out in California it is not clear how the rebels will hold out – the means by which the upper hand is reversed comes as a massive and horrific surprise. Nevertheless it has a ghastly logic. This must be one of the reasons why this novel was so popular – Pierce mastered plot and storytelling.

In the first chapter of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*³, first published in 1962, Frank Frink thinks of what has to happened to Africa after the Nazi conquest, only a few Negroes are left: 'Ogres out of a palaeontology exhibit, at their task of making a cup from an enemy's skull, the whole family industriously scooping out the contents – the raw brains – first, to eat. Then useful utensils of men's leg bones. Thrifty, to think not only of eating the people you did not like, but eating them out of their own skull.' In the seventh chapter another character is at a dinner party with his Japanese hosts. He thinks '*These people are not exactly human. They don't dress but they're like monkeys dolled up in the circus. They're clever and can learn, but that is all* (emphasis/italics in original). Dick, a political liberal, cast his satirical net in all directions. Perhaps it is familiarity with what others (Dick or Spinrad, for instance⁴) have done with racist imagery that only appears to weaken Pierce's political propaganda. Would readers not familiar with how other novelists have dealt with disasters of all kinds find Pierce's work more persuasive than someone used to reading, say, sf? Or is it the case, as John Sutherland wrote in his newspaper article, that Pierce was disappointed that he had not managed to found or inspire an organisation like the one in his book, but instead had to put up with a few low-brow rednecks? Is the unsustainability of the racist argument inherent and obvious any time it is put⁵?

George Orwell several times said that we should never think of the political right as being 'stupid'. In the construction of his novel Pierce was not stupid, nevertheless like a well-built wall around a concentration camp (another of Orwell's examples) it is worth condemning. Most of these systems contain the seed of their own destruction, and for Pierce it must be that a secret society that could tolerate a diarist on the scale of Earl Turner must have many looser mouths and lesser intelligences in it. That Turner cannot see his own contribution to their weakness, suggests also that the people attracted to this philosophy cannot see the conclusion to which it has always led.

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¹ Andrew Macdonald, *The Turner Diaries* (Second Edition) Barricade Books, 1996, 211 pp, \$12.00 ISBN 1-56980-086-3

² Re-issued in 2000 by Toxic Press

³ New York: Putnams, 1962; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965 and so on.

⁴ They have been able to put themselves in their characters' heads, I mean, not that they sympathise with these views. Nevertheless, someone like Dick saw what extending the Nazi vision must mean – keeping others as grotesque parodies, scraping brains out of skulls.

⁵ In the current controversies about immigrants and asylum seekers I have seen no reference to the prescience of Christopher Priest's *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (London: Faber, 1972), particularly given the subject matter (gun control) of his most recent fiction.



First Impressions

Book Reviews

edited by
Steve Jeffery

Note: All novels marked: 📖 are eligible for the 1999 BSFA Award for Best Novel. All collections and anthologies marked: ✍ contain stories that are eligible for the 1999 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction.

Federico Andahazi (translated by Alberto Manguel) – *The Merciful Women* 📖

Doubleday, 2000, 188pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-385-60053-4

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Although no one suspected it at the time, the enchanted evening in the summer of 1816 that the exiled Lord Byron and the eloping Percy Shelley spent amusing themselves and their companions with horror stories at the Villa Diodati was a key event in the evolution of modern fiction. As it turned out, it was their two companions, Shelley's mistress Mary Godwin and Byron's doctor, John Polidori – rather than the two poet geniuses – who stamped an indelible contribution on a newly emerging literary genre.

Mary produced one other novel and a couple of short stories of note, but the bulk of her published wordage was justly consigned – along with Polidori's only novel – to obscurity. Literary critics and historians were long inclined to ignore the legacies of *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* as mere froth on the brutish wave of popular culture, but the last thirty years in particular has seen an astonishing profusion of analyses of the historical and psychological origins of the Frankenstein monster and the vampire. How madly delighted John Polidori would be to discover that his name will be far more familiar in the 21st century, and his work more widely read, than Lord Byron's!

Proverbial wisdom assures us that those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it, first as tragedy and then as farce. The tragedy of the Villa Diodati has been played and replayed in such works as Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound*, Tom Holland's *The Vampyre* and Tim Powers' *The Stress of Her Regard*, and it is a shame that no one, until now, has got closer to the farce than Ken Russell in *Gothic*.

The Merciful Women, by Argentinian novelist Federico Andahazi, is similar to Powers' novel in the extent of its historical revisions and its resuscitation of the once-fashionable idea of the vampire muse, but there the resemblance ends. A far more calculated and more delicate farceur than Russell, Andahazi wisely brings the oft-despised Polidori to centre-stage, where he makes a wonderful sad clown.

Having set Polidori in the limelight, Andahazi then employs considerable artfulness in equipping him with exactly the kind of muse he requires: Annette Legrand. Her ancestry within the story is appropriately tortured and peculiar, but her literary ancestry is more apposite and straightforward; the prefatory quote informs us that she is distantly related to a minor character of Edgar Poe's. It transpires, late in the story, that the promiscuity of which Annette-as-muse boasts is rather more extensive than Polidori had allowed himself to realise. However, the reader comes to appreciate that her fling with the relentlessly untalented doctor really ought to qualify as the most prodigious achievement – and, perhaps, the truest love – of her unfortunate life.

As the history of its principal modern media (comic books and cinema) readily illustrate, horror fiction is fundamentally and essentially comedic, but always has some difficulty in confessing its own absurdity. *The Merciful Women* is explicit, not merely in the sexual sense but in terms of its own comedic nature. It does not in the least resemble those literally shameful vampire

movies like *Vampira* and *Love at First Bite*; it is, instead, a genuinely insightful and unashamedly witty account of the absurd origins of vampiric fantasy. As icing on the cake, the novel is accompanied by a remarkably apposite cover illustration: a sexually-ambiguous nude whose suggestive fig-leaf is replaced

by a carefully-posed bat. Everyone even remotely interested in vampires, literary history and/or the psychology of sex should make a determined effort to find and read this inordinately enjoyable book.

Blair H. Allen (ed.) – *The Cerulean Anthology of Sci-Fi/Outer Space/Fantasy Poetry and Prose*

Cerulean Press, 1999, 141pp, \$9.99 ISBN 0-917458-17-6

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

Poetry's utilisation of the musicality of speech, of rhythm and of the structures of prosody renders it a paramount way emotively to illumine the various content of experience and contemplation. Here, by definition, such content is that from which science and fantasy fiction derive; or else it can be those literatures themselves. Many of the themes are predictable (which is not to say necessarily clichéd in treatment). Man in space is an inevitable one: as pioneer or castaway, indelibly earth-conscious, as in Jon Davis's poems, and in Blair H. Allen's sensitively imagined 'Refugees', or spacemen suffering, even accepting, an alienated condition in Dave Calder's highly accomplished verse. But, in the equally though differently accomplished verse of Denise Dumar, her 'Muslim Spaceman' rises gloriously transcendent.

Aliens, as such, do not feature as much as might be expected. When they do appear we see them, like John Brander's Venusian zombies, as human reflectors, or, like Blair Allen's Martians, as human prototypes. The tenor of the anthology is away from hard

sf and towards galaxies of the imagination. There are poems which subject the inanimate to a fanciful animism: Robert Frazier addresses neutrinos as "Ancient brothers"; Michael Chandler writes synaesthetically, "The smell of Jupiter enters my body and becomes a dancing/ elf..." More metaphysically serious poems concern themselves with Man's status/role in the universe, as does Andrew Joron's 'An Illuminated Manuscript', where "The unageing man is kept a prisoner here/Who belongs to another chain of being". Many questioningly speculative ploys stay on in the mind – Marion Cohen's 'What Makes Things Tick', or Steve Sneyd's 'Carols on Trantor'. Bonuses are those tenacious, rich, fantastic images often found in the more maverick, magical, and even quasi-astrological poems: the interstellar trading wares of J.P. Reedman's take on 'Goblin Market' ("a crimson Mercury muff") and, in Suzanne Lummis's 'Bedroom Story', the many Einsteinian consequences of matching the speed of light, when "The stars would be like wax dropped from a hand-held candle, they would be so still..."

[Cerulean Press, 9651 Estacia Court, Cucamonga, CA 91730 USA]

Catherine Asaro – *Ascendant Sun*

Tor Books, 2000, 380pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86824-3

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Asaro's latest novel in her continuing 'Saga of the Skolian Empire' series takes place eighteen years after the events of *The Radiant Seas* (previously reviewed in *Vector* 206). Following the Radiance War – a catastrophic interstellar conflict between the Skolian Empire and the slave-based Eubian Concord – Skolian aristocrat and empath Kelric Valdoria flees captivity on the planet Coba to find that he is the sole remaining heir to his once-great empire. In the course of his attempts to rebuild his life and reunite himself with his surviving family Kelric is captured and sold as a slave to the hated Eubian Aristos, anti-empaths who derive pleasure from inflicting pain on others.

Although *The Radiant Seas* had strong romantic/erotic themes lurking beneath its conventional genre exterior they were firmly subordinate to the sf adventure elements of the plot. In *Ascendant Sun* Asaro struggles to integrate them with quite the same degree of success. The story of Kelric's imprisonment as the pleasure slave of his new owner, the Aristo Tarquine, threatens at times to make the book seem more an exercise in soft porn than a serious work of science fiction.

Although the relationship between the two characters does ultimately achieve a greater depth and significance than the

initial unpromising scenario would suggest, handling material like this is always a delicate business and, almost inevitably, the prose strays into the realm of the risible far too often for comfort. In consequence the novel suffers from a somewhat dull middle section, becoming bogged down in the titillating details of Kelric's servitude, before rallying with an action-packed conclusion in the wake of our hero's jaw-droppingly implausible escape from captivity. The final one hundred pages therefore feel rather overburdened with plot, as he not only overcomes life-threatening illness with the help of a new love, but also thwarts the Eubian Concord's dastardly plans while sowing the seeds of potential peace between the warring factions.

If this surfeit of action runs the real risk of straining the readers' credulity, Asaro's writing remains as robust as ever, and her handling of the social differences and political intrigues that divide her two feuding empires continues to convince. Ultimately, *Ascendant Sun* is a less successful and enjoyable work than *The Radiant Seas*, but despite its flaws those readers already hooked on her unpretentious blend of romance, hard sf and adventure story will still find much in this novel to please them.

Steven Barnes – *Iron Shadows*

Tor Books, 2000, 406pp, \$6.99 ISBN 0-812-54808-6

Reviewed by Scott T. Merrifield.

My initial reaction upon receipt of this book was "Steven Barnes, who's he?" The reason for this was quite simple; I thought of Barnes not a strict science fiction writer, but more of a thriller writer. For me this novel was slightly off the beaten track, but *Iron Shadows* was a track that I found most agreeable. And Steven Barnes is a most accomplished writer.

This is far from Barnes's first novel. He has several books under his belt (several published by Tor Books) and has collaborated with Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle on several occasions, and therefore quite accomplished in the creation of

utopian and dystopian sf. *Iron Shadows* fits well into the dystopian category, and whilst *Iron Shadows* is not by strict definition science fiction – however one defines science fiction – it has strong leanings to the genre.

Iron Shadows chronicles the escapades of the leading character, Cat Juvell (who is something of a lethal martial artist), in the employment of a wealthy industrialist to recapture the family fortune, and his sister, from the macabre clutches of a sinister cult called the 'Golden Sun'. The cult being run by two youngsters, called Tomo and Joy, whose main aim, at first, is to

reach a higher consciousness through erotic rituals, but underlying the façade lies a deep conspiracy of horror and manipulation.

As novels go this is high-octane material. Barnes's novel comes across as a tense, well-structured hybrid of Jeff Noon (acid tripping martial arts mysticism) and William Gibson (*Iron Shadows* is resplendent with all the latest pseudo-technobabble). But the novel proves more intricate than just Noon and Gibson

glued together. The characterisation and plot are superb. The characters are intricate and interesting, and the plot moves at a breathtaking pace.

Iron Shadows is a sophisticated novel without pretensions to being sophisticated. While it offers the reader nothing particularly new, it is a novel that screams to be read. So listen to the screaming.

Gregory Benford – *The Martian Race*

Orbit, 2000, 472pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-999-7

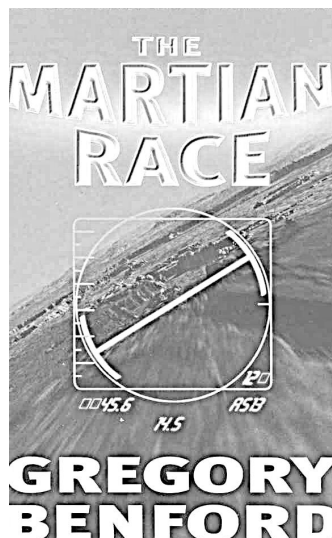
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

A new book from Gregory Benford; an occasion for your humble reviewer to get quite excited, since Mr Benford is a smart fellow and I've enjoyed – and, more importantly, respected – a lot of his work in the past.

The Martian Race is set in 2015. NASA's big manned Mars mission has just Challengered on the launch pad and the prospect of *anyone* setting foot on Mars is looking increasingly remote until a venture capitalist steps in. By renting, cannibalising, corner-cutting and some radical thinking, a new mission is soon up and running, aiming to win its backer, a genial American billionaire, the \$30 billion international prize for the first successful landing on the red planet.

Soon, four astronauts (a Tom Cruise look-alike American pilot, a macho Mexican engineer, a bearded cynical Russian captain (!) and a largely unrealised Aussie narrator – the only woman on board) are clunking their way to Mars on a mission plan that NASA could sue Benford for copyright over. The narrative covers this mission from inception to... redefinition.

The Martian Race is a most contemporary sf novel in its depiction of an interplanetary mission basically funded by the sale of marketing rights, sponsorship deals and advertising space (no pun intended). But it's an uneasy marriage; Benford's



speciality is the scientific community, not the business one, and the two are uneasily juxtaposed throughout. I couldn't escape the feeling that the media and big business were meant to be the bad guys, the valiant scientists and engineers struggling not only against the overwhelming difficulties of manned interplanetary flight, but also against media lowest common denominators and the demands of early 21st century capitalism (a slightly hypocritical stance, I thought, given the fact that the scientists and science agencies had tried and failed to send their own mission).

It's the scientific parts of *The Martian Race* that read best, particularly the later sections where it becomes apparent the title has a double meaning. But ultimately the book is disappointing. The best way I can describe it is that I found myself turning the pages eagerly enough but rather too quickly, not really very interested in the characters but just wanting to find out what happened next. There isn't enough detail; or rather, what is there is too unevenly distributed, such that the personal experience of being part of a Mars mission is stretched too thinly across the bare bones of the mission's technical aspects.

Now I think I understand the size of Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy; these days 472 pages are not enough to get your teeth into a planet we know (comparatively) as well as this one.

Richard Calder – *Malignos*

Earthlight, 2000, 359pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-671-03720-X

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Malignos brings to three the number of books delving into the subterranean that I've encountered in the last few months. Jokes about mining a rich seam aside, they've all been – at the very least – engagingly different.

It is 3,000 years since a slew of particles from a dying parallel universe clouded the minds of humanity, causing many of them to somehow mutate themselves into beings now known as *malignos*, who resemble mythical demons more than slightly, and retreat into immense artificial caverns underground.

In middle age, Dr Richard Pike is still a debonair swordsman, war hero and philanderer, now forced into exile with his *malignos* lover, Gala. But when Gala's relatives, unhappy at her choice of beau, return and force her to drink a potion which turns her into a vegetable, Pike is forced into a dangerous quest to the very centre of the Earth and the *malignos'* capital of Pandemonium, where a cure for Gala's state may be waiting.

This synopsis doesn't really do the book justice (my non-sf reading girlfriend was mightily sarcastic when she read it) because *Malignos* is stunningly written, using beautiful syntax

and imagery that perfectly evokes a decadent, faded future where ancient miracles sit easily alongside duelling swordsmen. The baroque language is a joy to read on its own, but also functions well to highlight the differences between our own world and this one – which certainly isn't the one you might expect such a stylised narrative to contain.

Pike himself, if not quite on a par with Oscar Wilde, has a dry wit only just beginning to be tempered by the doubts of age, and it's fascinating to watch the interplay between his frequently conflicting public and private personas, and Pike's increasing doubt as to which is the 'real' him as he steadily loses everything he owns on his quest.

The origins of this altered world are only tantalisingly glimpsed, which is maddening as it's a fascinating idea, and this leaves the book teetering on the very brink of classification as Fantasy.

Personally, I want to read a lot more about Calder's curlicued world.

Isobelle Carmody – *The Farseekers: Book Two of the Obernewtyn Chronicles*

Tor Books, 316pp, \$23.95 ISBN 0-312-86957-6

Reviewed by Penny Hill

After ambivalent feelings towards *Obernewtyn*, Book One (see *Vector* 207), I was pleased to find that in this volume Carmody really got into her stride. The writing style is less obtrusive because it is more polished and the pace of the plot fits better within the individual volume.

The plot is a successfully disguised quest; there are enough different elements to be pursued to prevent you reading this as just "Assemble characters and form alliances, then wander around until the grand climax". It was also a pleasant relief to be spared the split narrative. By staying with Elspeth, the first person narrator, tension was created when the travelling party separated; we genuinely do not know whether the other members are successful in their missions, although as sophisticated readers we can make some reasonably accurate guesses.

It is perhaps a measure of the Young Adult audience at which this volume is aimed, that occasionally the narrative tricks were a little obvious. I don't think I will be spoiling things for any

readers here if I observe that of course our heroine and hero are in love, they just don't realise it yet.

One slight disappointment was the use of disability as a plot mechanism. Elspeth's friends frequently describe, for the benefit of the readers, her legs as badly burned and scarred enough to hamper everyday walking. On every occasion when she overcomes her handicap, all her friends salute her physical courage, and yet there is only one time when the struggle is too much for her and she has to be rescued, leading me to wonder quite how bad her legs were, as she manages to overcome her difficulties so easily the rest of the time.

Although most of the book is carried out on the physical level, there is one section which moves onto a different, more mythical plane. When her legs finally fail her, Elspeth is removed from the here-and-now of her immediate concerns and instilled with a sense of the big picture. This change in tone is risky but successful, and reminds us of the concluding adventure that lies ahead.

Glen Cook – *Soldiers Live*

Tor, 2000, 496pp, \$25.95 ISBN 0-312-89057-5

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

"In those days the Company was in service to its own name."

At the end of *Water Sleeps*, the Black Company had fought their way out of Taglios, crossed the Glittering Plain, rescued their trapped comrades and then escaped to the world of Hsien. Where, we are told as *Soldiers Live* opens,

"Four years passed and no-one died."

Sleepy, who was the Annalist and narrator in *Water Sleeps*, is now the Captain of the Black Company (a band of mercenaries whose origins are lost to all but the keepers of the Company Annals). Her place as Annalist has been taken by Croaker, a former Annalist, Captain and Sleeper under the Glittering Plain... I know, I know. This is all getting very complicated. But what else can you expect. This is Book Four of Glittering Stone and the Ninth Chronicle of the Black Company, and a lot has happened in the eight volumes up till now.

This is epic fantasy, filled with dark forces, magic and swordplay. All the ingredients of a good 'epic fantasy noir'. And these ingredients have been pretty well stirred together by Cook. He doesn't need to resort to huge chunks of 'Previously in the

Black Company' style exposition, he prefers to let you pick things up as you go along, and it's a tribute to his skill that you can.

This is a talkier book than the last volume. The reason for this lies with Croaker, who tells us that he is getting on a bit, and he frets and worries his way along. And because he's less than happy that the new Captain doesn't always tell him what's going on, he speculates a lot. And gripes about it, but the Captain's closed-mouthedness sparks complaints from all Annalists (even Sleepy in her time).

So, what's the best way to read this? If the series is new to you, then let it go slightly out of focus and the underlying pattern will become clear. If, on the other hand, you're a seasoned reader, then let yourself be enticed along the side-roads of characters remembered from previous volumes and wrest the pattern from the interplay of the well-known faces that you'll encounter. Along the way you'll find yourself, like the prisoners-of-war taken by the Company, becoming a part of the Company and doing your bit to move the whole thing along.

Peter Crowther (editor) – *Foursight*

Gollancz, 2000, 216pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-57506-870-1

Reviewed by Paul Billinger

This is a collection of four novellas by four "masters of the fantastic" linked by, well, very little other than length – and even this is somewhat wayward, although they all fit into that publishing dead-zone between novel and short story. For this alone the collection is to be praised.

First is Graham Joyce's 'Leningrad Nights', set during the devastating siege of World War Two, and centring on a fourteen year old boy, Leo, and the mechanisms he uses to keep not only himself alive, but the very spirit of the city around him and the birth of hope for all their futures. Next is 'How the Other Half Lives' by James Lovegrove, showing the extremes that William North will go to for financial success in the City and for a magnificent life free from failure. But why is something alive in the mansion's cellar and what is his connection with the "metascientist" Dr Totleben? Kim Newman's 'Andy Warhol's Dracula' is a standalone story set in his ongoing alternative history in which Dracula was not killed by Van Helsing. Here, vampires are starting to move to America and the newly dead Johnny Pop takes full advantage of the decadence and sleaze of late '70s New York. Finally we have Michael Marshall Smith's 'The Vaccinator' set in contemporary Key West where semi-retired hoodlum, Eddie, is approached by a very nervous tourist who fears he is to be kidnapped by extraterrestrials.

Newman's is the standout story, brilliantly capturing the feel

of New York of the period (at least the New York we know from the films of Scorsese and Schrader), populated with real and fictional characters from the punk and disco cultures of the time. Intercut with the main narrative is the history of Warhol around the pivotal moment of his shooting by Valerie Solanas. It is, however, difficult to judge the story in the context of this collection, as it already has a well-formed background from the other novels and short stories set in the same world (and into which it fits brilliantly) giving it a head start over the others.

Smith's contribution is nearly as good, being as well constructed and enjoyable to read as his other works (whatever the length). His style and approach shows the strong influence of current American crime fiction – here in particular the novels of Carl Hiaasen – on his writing, resulting in his use of strong, lyrical, dialogue.

I found the other stories worked less well. Joyce's, although beautifully written with some strong, haunting images – the golden staircases of an overlapping city and The Whistling Shell – nevertheless felt as if something was missing. Lovegrove's tale appears slight compared to the others, being another Faustian Pact that, unsurprisingly, goes wrong and with a very dubious final message, despite some obvious attacks at the world of commercial finance.

Overall, a collection well worth reading for its high points,

with the lesser stories still interesting, and in its courage in presenting stories of this length. A companion volume of sf

stories is planned which I will definitely be searching out.

Dave Duncan – *Sir Stalwart: Book One of the King's Daggers* Avon Books, 1999, 238pp, £4.99 ISBN 0-380-80098-5

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Having created a magical fantasy world for adults in the King's Blade series, Dave Duncan has now written the first in a series of adventures for juveniles set in that world. (The joke in the series' title of Daggers being small Blades eluded me until the King explains it towards the end of the book.)

Although this is a fantasy novel, our hero and heroine spend most of the book undercover, experiencing the grubbier underside of the fantasy world; It's rather a shame, therefore, that the cover depicts them in high status finery rather than their evocatively described peasant garb. The adventure is nicely contained within this novel from set-up to resolution, with enough dangling threads to suggest further adventures for further volumes. The plot is well-paced and kept me intrigued as to what was going to happen next but suffered slightly from some badly chosen flashbacks which would have been less disruptive if simply told in sequence. Fortunately, Dave Duncan resisted the

current trend of split narrative alternating chapters in favour of longer sections for the principal characters where appropriate.

Part of the magical background is the establishment of 8 major alchemical elements, adding Love, Death, Time and Chance to the usual Earth, Air, Fire and Water. While this works well enough in the context of magic, it is less successful as a method of character development. Each character is seen as a mixture of two elements, leading to a two-dimensional feel to all of the secondary characters.

This is a reasonably successful young adult novel. Our juvenile protagonists bicker and mistrust each other, thankfully without feeling the need to fall in love. All the good adults seem to be trustworthy teachers and all the bad adults are unmitigatedly evil.

While I will not be rushing out to buy the next one, I would quite happily borrow someone else's copy to read on holiday.

David and Leigh Eddings – *The Redemption of Althalus* 

Voyager, 2000, 771pp, £17.99, ISBN: 0-00-224754-2

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

This huge slab of paper arrived in 'uncorrected proof' format and is hailed as "a new single-volume epic" by the "modern masters of fantasy" (David and Leigh Eddings).

Althalus is a thief, robber and murderer who has always had more than his fair share of luck. In fact, his luck is legendary, and so it is no little worry to him when this luck appears to be running out. At the end of a particularly bad spell of misfortune he meets a man called Ghend, who commissions him to steal a book for him. This book is no ordinary book however, and to steal it Althalus has to find the House at the End of the World which apparently is owned by the God Deiws – the author of the book.

Deiws is the maker, as Daeva, his brother, is the unmaker – and they have a sister called Dweia who simply wraps everyone else around her finger. When Althalus arrives at The House to steal the book it is Dweia he meets in the form of a talking cat. Althalus names the cat 'Emerald', and as his attachment to Emerald grows and deepens, she is referred to variably throughout as 'Emmy' or 'Em' depending on the mood each is in. Emmy, like all of Eddings' benevolent Gods in previous books, can do just about anything she chooses to, bearing in mind whatever she does do has an effect on something somewhere else.

The gist of this 'single volume epic' then is that Althalus, under

the guidance of Dweia, must prevent the evil God Daeva from altering the way the world is by messing around with time. To achieve this, Althalus's first task is to gather a group of unsuspecting heroes to aid him, and this is achieved by the use of a magical knife with an inscribed blade that only the 'right' people can read. The number of people he needs exactly coincides with the number of evil people recruited to aid Daeva in his cause – and each will of course be opposites and have their own personal battles to confront.

Oh deary, deary me! This is once again a re-telling of everything that Eddings has written before and his characters, although all very likeable (or irritating depending on your point of view), have all appeared in his previous books under different names and guises. The occasional lapses into archaic speech are more laughable than ever and his irritating habit of having a young character who invents childish words because he doesn't know the real ones is thoroughly wearing.

This book will no doubt please his most ardent fans, but it really is just a re-ladling of the soup that made him famous: *The Belgariad*. There is, however, one redeeming feature for this reader. You can now get your soup in one bowl for £18, instead of the usual £54!

David Feintuch – *Patriarch's Hope* 

Orbit, 2000, 488pp, £6-99 ISBN 1-85723-961-X

Reviewed by Mat Coward

I don't think I've ever encountered a character in sf like Nicholas Seafort: so big, so complex, so real. His personality, his constant, conscious struggling with his conscience, dominate the Seafort Saga to an extent and in a manner more often found in nineteenth century Russian literature.

Spiritually crippled by childhood indoctrination in an inflexible theology – an uncompromisingly binary view of right and wrong which is reinforced by his career as a spacefarer in the discipline-obsessed United Nations Naval Service – he lives a life of largely self-imposed mental torture. Because his anguish is so profound, it can only be lifted, to any extent, by the equally profound compensations of love and friendship.

Although five of the six books (so far) have Seafort as their first-person narrator, his own dismal view of his career is not shared by the reader. He's an unreliable narrator of an unusual kind, thanks to the subtlety and intelligence of Feintuch's writing.

In the first four books, Seafort, first as a teenage recruit, later

as a seasoned captain, faced interstellar crises. The fifth and sixth are set largely on Earth as, old now and retired from the Navy (but still at war with himself and his god), he becomes a reluctant politician, dealing with class warfare, ecological disaster, and rebellion.

Undeniably, the stories are in a sense repetitious; in each book, Seafort rescues his ship and/or mankind by (as he sees it) betraying his friends, his wards, or his oaths. To others – to his eternal horror – he appears a self-sacrificing hero. But this isn't repetition caused by any failure of imagination; it's a bold technique with which Feintuch develops his principle themes, of duty and of the nature of paternal and filial love.

And still, he finds room for so much more: well-realised future history, at least one long section in each book of nerve-shredding excitement, and occasional, carefully-rationed explosions of humour. This is a wonderful series; I wish it would go on forever.

[Note: The other books in the series are, in order: *Midshipman's Hope*,**Michael Flynn – *Lodestar***

Reviewed by Colin Bird

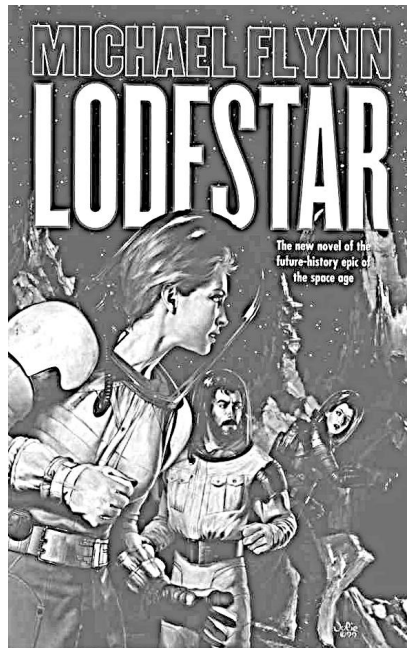
Tor Books, 2000, 365pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0 312 86137 0

Flynn forges onward with *Lodestar*, the third instalment of his precisely detailed future history, following directly on from events described in *Firestar* and *Rogue Star*. This is 'hard sf' in every sense. Authentically detailed, elaborately plotted and jam packed full of a bewildering array of characters.

The story focuses nominally on Adam Van Huyten, playboy and black sheep of the powerful Van Huyten family. In the last volume, the matriarchal Mariesa Van Huyten lost her grip on the family's industrial wing, the powerful tool which she planned to use to develop defences against the possibility of an asteroid colliding with the Earth. Adam took the blame for a series of backroom manoeuvres which stripped Mariesa of her authority just as a manned mission to an asteroid discovered evidence that aliens had tampered with the orbits, sending the occasional big rock spiralling inward towards Earth.

Lodestar begins in 2016 and humanity has established a permanent presence in space via the Low Earth Orbit Station (LEO), where commerce and science surge forward. Adam hires computer security whizzkid Jimmy Poole to help craft him an unbreakable net persona. Adam's plans for revenge involve a trip to LEO, now controlled by the Van Huyten's corporate rivals, and Jimmy Poole wants to crack a new security firewall which

protects LEO's computer systems so well that even a master hacker cannot breakthrough.



Flynn's huge story arc moves slowly forward with relentless, deliberate pacing and it's clearly not for all tastes. There is too little plot development to hit the thriller marks and the vast cast of characters works against any real identification with the various personal dilemmas they each face. The book has a fractured feel: just as one narrative strand grabs your attention it is abandoned and another, less interesting, storyline returns.

And yet *Lodestar* is set in such a convincingly well-imagined near future that it has to be judged an impressive achievement. Flynn's prose is well-honed and his characters are immensely believable and wide-ranging. The underlying story arc concerning alien influence in the asteroid belt continues to intrigue, although you can't help hoping Flynn will bring it more into the foreground in future volumes. Provided you can swallow the author's typically American faith in capitalism as a force for Mankind's advancement then you have to admire the scope of his ambition. Future histories normally range down the timelines with reckless abandon, but Flynn creeps slowly forward just over tomorrow's horizon.

Jocelin Foxe – *Child Of Fire*

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Avon Eos, 1999, 323pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0-380-79912-X

Child Of Fire is the second book in a series of self contained fantasy novels concerning The Wild Hunt: a band of men from different walks of life – and different times – who have been cursed to be "the Rensel Goddesses' tool". Each man, whether he be a knight, a merchant, a thief or a farmer, has committed some atrocity in life which has caused him to be condemned to a dreamless sleep for all time unless the Hunt is summoned by a woman to right a wrong done to her. Once awakened, the Hunt has just one moon to complete the assigned task successfully; if they fail they will suffer death by burning, and oblivion. The only way a man can break free of the curse is if he wins the love of a woman who will keep him from the Goddesses' vengeance.

As a literary device, this idea of the Wild Hunt works rather well as it provides a reason for a group of disparate, sharply delineated characters to be gathered together and to embark on a quest. The fact that either hundreds of years or just a few can pass between summonings gives the author a great deal of

flexibility in the way future novels in the series could develop, as the world through which the characters ride will obviously change over the centuries.

In this novel, the Wild Hunt is summoned by a farmer's widow named Marda who asks that they put her son, abducted by a tribe of nomadic horsemen, the Sueve, safe back in her arms. The search for Marda's son takes the Huntsmen to the Sueve camp and on into the Empire of Barajia, where the boy has been sold as a slave. In the course of their attempt to fulfill the task for which they were summoned, the cursed warriors become involved in the political machinations of the Barajians and the prophesy of the fabled Child of Fire who "will lead the chosen from the darkness into the light", a prophesy which has been used to foment rebellion for generations.

Child Of Fire does not stray from familiar fantasy territory, but if swords and sorcery are your thing, you might well find it an enjoyable read.

David Gerrold – *Jumping Off The Planet*

Reviewed by John D. Owen

Tor, 2000, 284pp, \$19.95 ISBN 0-312-89069-9

Jumping Off The Planet is a puzzling book. On the surface, it is a '90s Heinleinian juvenile, a tale of coming of age in a rather pessimistic future. And yet, what kind of juvenile (American in origin, at that) features a major character who gets into a homosexual relationship in the course of the story? Not a turn of events that is going to go down well with the librarians in schools across the Bible Belt, one suspects.

As a story, though, it doesn't satisfy as an adult read either. The central character is a thirteen year old boy in a totally dysfunctional family, one of three brothers who are 'kidnapped' by their father while on a vacation with him. It's all part of a messy divorce between the parents that has soured relationships in the family beyond all reason, and made Charles, the middle child who is the first person narrator here, a sharp-tongued little bastard

that only a mother could, well, at least *tolerate* without murdering.

And that is the problem for the story as a whole. For all the elaborate sf trappings, the tale at the centre of this is a custodial battle between two parents, with Charles and his brothers, one older (nearly eighteen), the other much younger, caught in the crossfire. Did it need all the sf elements (the over-populated Earth, the off-world colonies – hinted at but never visited – the trip on the Space Elevator, etc.), or were they just window dressing on a story that could just as easily have been told in a

modern context? My answer to that is 'No': this is a fake science fiction work. The ride is interesting, the imagination that has gone into fleshing out the Space Elevator is quite impressive, but the frame upon which these elements are hung is too insubstantial to sustain them. At the end, it all comes down to a courtroom scene with a typically Heinleinian 'cut-the-crap' judge pronouncing, exit losers whining, exit winners to a bright new future, ta-ra! Personally, the Simpsons have more interesting family conflicts than this lot.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood – *redRobe*

Earthlight, 2000, 360pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-671-02260-1

Reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn

Sometimes I wonder if I and the reviewers have been reading the same book.

Where Jon Courtenay Grimwood is concerned, this feeling is recurrent. Grimwood's books are tech heavy, but they are not cyberpunk (cyberspace does not seem to exist in his alternate universe) and the blanket use of the term distracts from some of the beautiful technologies he does envisage – the prayer wheel asteroid for example. They contain violence, but they are not gratuitous: characters act as they must or as they are taught, rarely out of sadistic delight. Grimwood's books are subtle but searing critiques of state violence, so it is ironic that it is the violence of individuals which attracts most reviewers' attention. Through his alternate universe Grimwood directs our gaze to the perversion of human mercy in contemporary refugee policies, the day to day violence of ill-health and vulnerability visited upon the poor, but reviewers continually focus on the violent acts of the maddened, the oppressed and the revolutionary, ignoring the internal strength and gentleness which many of these characters

display.

In *redRobe*, we meet at least four of Grimwood's trademark 'damaged' characters: Mia, an underage Japanese clone-prostitute; Alex, a street kid who made it out of the streets through that most traditional of routes: blood-thirsty entertainment; Father Sylvester, a dying priest, and Katherine, lover and companion of Pope Joan, martyred by the street children she tried to help. Each finds their own epiphany, constructed without the nauseating sentimentality all too often associated with redemptive fiction. In the wider world Grimwood's attack is relentless: politics is a form of entertainment and political decisions are made with an eye to the ratings – even the Dalai Lama is not exempt from the desire to create the newsworthy.

Grimwood's work has shown a sustained upward curve. In *redRobe*, he has finally achieved the careful meshing of plot, character and context to create fiction that reverberates in the mind, long after it has been read.

Harry Harrison – *Stars and Stripes in Peril*

Hodder & Stoughton, 2000, 330pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-340-68919-6

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

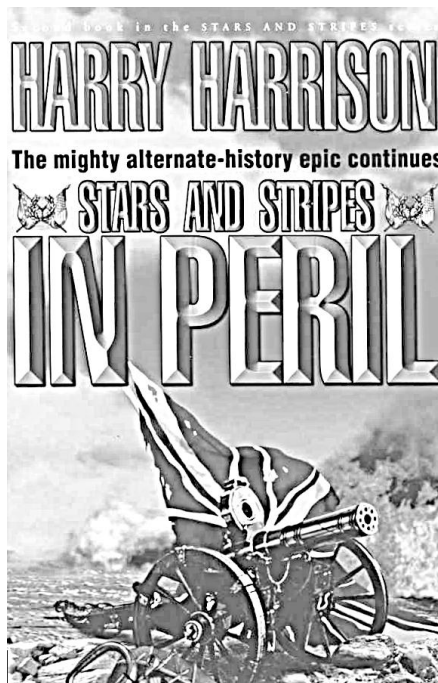
What is the point of alternative history? Surely it is to examine how things might have turned out otherwise, to see what might be different and, just as importantly, what might be the same. This lays certain demands upon an author: reasonable historical knowledge, truthfulness in portraying the genuine historical characters who appear in the fiction, a rational development from the point of change. Logic demands that no historical event that happened after the moment of change should be known to the participants in the novel; common sense demands that anything which did or did not work in the real historical period should not suddenly change its nature for the sake of fiction.

Harry Harrison, in the second volume of his 'Stars and Stripes' series (and, worryingly, this volume does speak of it as a 'series', the first volume called it merely a 'trilogy'), blithely ignores every one of those demands. Let's see, in the first volume the 'Trent' incident of November and December 1861 was not resolved and the USA, right at the start of its Civil War, found itself also at war with Britain. But the British military response was ludicrously bungled and at the mid-point of the battle of Shiloh, April 1862, Union and Confederate forces combined to defeat the British invader. From that moment the Civil War was effectively over, and within months, so the first volume told us, the country was re-united

under Lincoln, Sherman was appointed to overall command of both armies, and the British were soundly beaten.

This new volume begins with the British building a road across Mexico, which can be used to unite Pacific and Atlantic forces for a renewed invasion of America. Curiously, the incompetent British of the first volume are suddenly super-competent, setting up their defences so that they are invulnerable to army, navy or guerrilla attack. The American response: to set up an intelligence operation that is probably beyond what America would have been capable of even as late as the First World War; to employ technological innovations such as the Gatling gun (in reality the Gatling gun of the time was more dangerous to its users than to anyone else and so was never used during the Civil War, but in Harrison's universe every American innovation works perfectly first time), and to launch an invasion of Ireland.

Yes, invade Ireland! Despite the fact that the First World War, over fifty years later, showed how inadequate the American navy was for transporting large forces across the Atlantic, three full armies are landed in Ireland in complete secrecy. They are commanded by Generals Sherman and Lee, who spend a lot of time congratulating each other on their Civil War prowess, despite the fact that by the time this Civil War ended Lee had not commanded an army and Sherman is being praised for exploits which wouldn't happen until after the



supposed date of these events. And within days they have achieved what is, by the standards of the time, a bloodless victory, at one swoop uniting Ireland in a way that, given the centuries of violence and the current efforts to achieve peace, is nothing short of an insult.

Harrison's grasp of the events, characters and possibilities of the early 1860s is virtually non-existent, so let us just accept this as an out-and-out fantasy. Alas, even as a no-brain action adventure novel this book fails. The action scenes are passed

over in a few bloodless paragraphs that convey no tension, no thrill of involvement, no colour of drama; talk, on the other hand, drags on for page after page, yet not one single character knows how to hold a discussion. No-one opens their mouth except to deliver a lecture, often of the most mind-numbingly dull kind.

Why do we read alternative histories? There are hundreds, thousands of reasons – but not one of them applies to this woeful effort.

Peter Haining (ed.) – *Knights of Madness*

Orbit, 2000, 324pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-958-X

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

I was not too sure about this particular anthology, seeing that it started with a story by Terry Pratchett, who is not one of my favourite authors. However, the concept of chickens using audio tape (specifically *The Best of Queen*) to construct a *Star Trek*-style transporter to cross the road definitely amused me.

Having begun with a fairly modern author, Peter Haining proceeds more or less chronologically, and provides us with some intriguing fantasy stories written by some rather unlikely people, such as Jerome K. Jerome, G.K. Chesterton, Ben Travers, Evan Hunter, and Woody Allen.

Generally speaking, the collection works well, though there are one or two stories that cannot be said to fit the definition of comic fantasy, a prime example being Peter Beagle's 'Lila the Werewolf', which ends with a whimper rather than a giggle. Another is the Woody Allen entry, but that may be as much to my

personal indifference towards him and not any weakness in his story, 'The Condemned', in which a man gets wrongly convicted of murder and reprieved at the last minute.

Having got those minor criticisms out of the way, the stories included provided several interesting pieces of information contained in the introductions to each story: I had no idea that Mervyn Peake also wrote *Mr. Pye*, or that Evan Hunter, creator of the 87th Precinct police procedurals, could be capable of producing such a delightful fantasy as 'Dream Damsel', set in Camelot, in which Lord Larimar tries to get out of his tryst with the Lady Eloise, only to find that she is smarter than he realises.

By and large, this is an amusing, well-crafted collection. Although, as I said, some of the stories are not to my taste, I'd recommend this anthology if you want something to make you laugh.

John Harris and Ron Tiner (text) – *Mass: The Art of John Harris* Paper Tiger, 2000, 112pp, £20 ISBN 1-85585-831-2

Anne Sudworth and John Grant (text) – *Enchanted World* Paper Tiger, 2000, 112pp, £20 ISBN 1-85585-830-4

Ron Walotsky and Nigel Suckling (text) – *Inner Visions* Paper Tiger, 2000, 112pp, £14.99 ISBN 1-85585-744-X

Bob Eggleton and Nigel Suckling (text) – *Greetings From Earth* Paper Tiger, 2000, 112pp, £14.99 ISBN 1-85585-662-X

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Four very different and individual artists are represented here. Their styles, and markets in at least two cases) cross the boundaries between sf and fantasy illustration and fine art, and an equally broad range of subject and media.

Both Harris and Sudworth come from a Fine Arts background. Although their approach, subject matter and paths into sf and fantasy illustration are rather different, both share an almost compulsive fascination for the complex interplay of texture, form and light. What else they share is a rejection in their own work of modern, abstract impressionist techniques for a more traditional 'painterly' quality, and a conviction that a painting should hook the imagination of the viewer and at the same time evoke a sense of wonder.

Harris evokes that sense of wonder through awesome scale: immense masses (Harris's book, like Sudworth's, is perfectly titled) of hardware and masonry – sometimes combined, like James Blish's 'Okie' cities – that hang in the air "in the same way that bricks don't". His more purely illustrative book covers (for Haldeman, Barnes) are somewhat reminiscent of the brightly coloured 'Tonka Toy' hardware of Chris Foss covers, although intriguing, sometimes startling, use of lighting, angle and perspective avoid the cliché that image brings to mind. Remember that stunning opening scene in *Star Wars*, when the pursuing Imperial Cruiser seemed to fill the screen forever? There's a sense of that awesome scale in Harris's series of paintings entitled 'Mass', here brought together for the first time. The result is extraordinary, in both scale and scope ('Mass: Leviathan' is some 15 feet by 6), and resulted in number of other commercial commissions, paintings and murals, for Clive Sinclair and NASA amongst others.

More recently Harris has embarked on another project called 'Fire', a series of fantasy paintings of a city built around the rim of

an active volcano. One of these provides the most stunning painting in the book, the double page spread of 'Fire: Celebration of the Hive', an oil on canvas depiction of a set of immense bridges spanning the active caldera from rim to rim. The effect is strongly reminiscent of the Victorian painter 'Mad' John Martin. I cannot wait to see the rest of this sequence.

Anne Sudworth is the newest of these artists to enter the sf and fantasy scene, although her gallery work has always had a strong element of the fantastic and 'sense of wonder'. Much of her work is of evocative, brooding landscapes, of moonlit hills and paths, of standing stones or ruined abbeys, and such elements equally often form the backdrop to her more overtly fantasy paintings, with their crouched dragons, imperious wizards, or mysterious cloaked figures.

But absolutely unique to Sudworth is the series she calls her 'Earthlight Trees'. As John Grant says, most people's reaction (as was mine) when first encountering these paintings is to recall that startling ethereal effect when a car's headlights suddenly illuminate the trees at the side of an unlit road, throwing them into sharp, unearthly, relief. But in Sudworth's paintings, this is not merely mundane reflected light; her trees are illuminated from within by an organic incandescence and imbue their surroundings with their own ghost-fire. In many of these paintings, the trees frame a path which leads the imagination into the picture and just over the horizon (to where?). The same organic light dominates Sudworth's two beautiful faerie paintings, whose impish bodies shine, from the tips of their impossibly delicate butterfly wings to where the hems of their gauzy dresses evaporate into ground-mist.

In sharp contrast, the work of Ron Wolotsky can almost seem brash in its use of sharp, bright acrylics against Sudworth's subtle pastels or Harris's oils and shellac inks. Indeed, the effect

can be somewhat garish, but it combines well with Walotsky's style, which often involves surreal or unlikely juxtapositions. One of Walotsky's trademarks is a fascination with masks, and these reappear as a recurrent theme, from his cover work to the 'mythago' novels of Robert Holdstock and a subtle and complex optical illusion for the cover of *The Crow* anthology *Shattered Lives, Broken Dreams* to a series of 'warrior masks' painted on the shells of horseshoe crabs.

I have to admit I'm not a big fan of Bob Eggleton's fantasy work, but I'm clearly in a minority as the popularity of this five-time Hugo Award winning artist shows. Perhaps again it's the brash

and often garish colours of acrylics on canvas and board; there's a sequence of delicate watercolour land- and seascapes here, and studies in oils and in charcoal and chalk, that show a wonderful range of technique. But Eggleton is fantasy's dragonmaster *par excellence* and it is this work, from *The Book of Sea Monsters* to the covers of Bertin's *The Last Dragonlord* or Turtledove's *Darkness* series that is most instantly recognisable. Even Eggleton's spaceships, here reproduced from the covers of novels by Baxter, Vinge and Benford, have a distinctly 'organic' feel, as if they have grown rather than been designed.

Ian Irvine – *A Shadow On The Glass*

Orbit, 2000, 586pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-84149-003-2

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The good news is that *A Shadow On The Glass*, Volume One of 'The View From The Mirror' series is a first rate fantasy novel. The bad news is that it appears to be the first volume in one of those long running fantasy series that have a beginning and a middle, but never quite seem to reach the end. However, if you are happy to approach your reading with attitude of a Marathon runner, then this book is certainly recommended.

The novel is set on the world of Santhenar, one of three worlds, the other two being Aachan and Tallallame, inhabited by three different human species, old Human, Aachim and Faellem. Millennia ago, a fourth race, the powerful Charon, came out of the void and conquered Aachan. Rulke, a Charon prince, ordered the smith Shuthdar to make a device that would enable him to move freely between the worlds. Shuthdar made such a device in the form of a flute, but stole it and fled to Santhenar, breaking open the way between the worlds. He was pursued by Charon, Aachim and Faellem, and eventually destroyed, and the way between the worlds was closed by the Forbidding, trapping his pursuers on

Santhenar. The eponymous mirror is the Mirror of Aachan, an ancient device that, on Aachan, was used to see things at a distance but which, on Santhenar, became twisted and so was hidden away. Now, centuries later, it is found, and the action of the novel concerns the attempts of various factions and peoples on Santhenar to obtain possession and control of its powers to further their own ambitions, and, perhaps, find a way through the Forbidding.

As well as a fascinating world with a complex history revealed through the twists and turns of the plot, the author has created interesting well-rounded characters, particularly the main characters, Karan, who steals the Mirror from a warlord to repay a debt, and Llian, a chronicler, sent to aid her by his mentor, who has his own agenda for the Mirror. These somewhat unlikely heroes find themselves hunted across Santhenar, both of them caught up against their will in the contention for the Mirror. The novel ends on a cliffhanger, and I eagerly await the publication of further volumes in the series, three of which are already planned.

Sarah Isidore – *The Daughters of Bast: The Hidden Land*

Avon Books, 1999, 373pp, \$6.50 ISBN 0-380-80318-6

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

Set in the distant past, this is the story of Veleda, a young Celtic girl who, at the time of a deadly plague ravaging the Celtic lands, is sent to find a cat for sacrifice, but releases it and is made to find it again. She does, and the cat leads her to the Otherland, where she learns the reason for the plague and acquires the means to cure it. Here she also meets Bast and Sekhmet, sister-Goddesses of ancient Egypt, who are engaged in conflict. In addition, she acquires the cat she saved as a guide and helper. And so begins her extraordinary story, as she goes through her training as a Druid Seeress.

For Veleda, life is far from easy, beset as she is by Sekhmet and her familiars, and doubted by her people when she tries to tell them how best to deal with the Romans under Julius Caesar, who is engaged in subduing the numerous Celtic tribes. In this he is aided by a king of one tribe, who is also a Druid.

Although the story itself is an engaging one, I do have one or two reservations. The main one is that there were too many battle scenes, all of which seemed to be exactly the same as each other, apart from different locations and different tribes. In addition, for all that the novel is based on the actual history of Caesar's exploits in Gaul, I didn't find that aspect of it at all convincing. I prefer the parts of the novel dealing with Veleda's life as she grows to adulthood, with her Druidic powers increasing over the years until she becomes High Priestess. Her belief that everyone's life has a pattern stands her in good stead when she is killed and brought back to life to fulfil her destiny – to produce a child who will keep the memory of the Old Goddesses (both Celtic and Egyptian) alive, even though it means her death.

Despite its ending in Veleda's second death, it has an optimistic feel and, quibbles apart, I'd recommend this novel.

Guy Gavriel Kay – *Lord of Emperors*

Earthlight, 2000, 531pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-684-86156-9

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

The latest offering from this acknowledged master of the genre is the second book in 'The Sarantine Mosaic' duology, *Lord of Emperors* – a book that I among many others have eagerly awaited since the publication of *Sailing to Sarantium* [see *Vector* 203] some 18 months or so ago.

Crispin the mosaicist, having finally arrived in Sarantium from Rhodias in Batiara, wants nothing more than to complete the work on the Emperor's dome and in doing so leave something in the world that will mark the passage of his life for generations to come. Having been involved in momentous events in the city already, he has no idea how complicated life is going to get as the realities of life in Sarantium become more complex, and survival

becomes as important as his art.

A new arrival in Sarantium is Rustem of Kerakek, a young physician from Bassania in the east. Rustem is on a pilgrimage in search of knowledge to expand his medical expertise. This pilgrimage is to create a moral dilemma though for Rustem, as it also a spying mission for Bassania's King of Kings – whose life he saved after an assassination attempt by one of his sons. He too is drawn into the political machinations of Sarantium as the Emperor makes plans to invade Batiara and reclaim it for the ousted young Batiaran Queen who has sought political asylum in Sarantium.

As always with Guy Kay's books the full extent of the plot is far

too grand and complicated, and the characters too numerous, to do justice in a word-limited review. Suffice it to say that once again this is Kay at his very very best! The wonderful characterisation, the sheer depth of plot, the gradual pulling together of all the threads cunningly laid throughout, make 'The

Sarantine Mosaic' an example of fantasy that will stand the test of time and become required reading for new fans of the genre in the future. I recommend you read and savour just how fantasy can and should be done.

Daniel Keyes – *Flowers for Algernon*

Millennium SF Masterworks, 2000, 216pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-938-4

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

Told through diaries, *Flowers for Algernon* involves the reader in an intimate view of Charlie Gordon, a bakery boy with an IQ of 68, as he participates in an experiment to increase intelligence. As he becomes a genius, he is gradually exposed to new worlds but becomes isolated from his former companions. His only friend is the mouse, Algernon, who has been similarly experimented on. During an academic conference in Chicago, the two escape to New York, abandoning the academic world for a flat in the city. Algernon becomes more aggressive as the experiment fades, leading Charlie into a frantic search for an answer to his temporary, experimental salvation.

Following Charlie through his report gives the reader an intimate insight into his progress and decline. Through subtle clues to his development, the reader is taken on a roller-coaster ride through Charlie's emotions as he adjusts to his new experiences. The diary becomes more intimate yet also more sheltered, especially from his mentors in the laboratory, as he becomes more aware of himself and the world. Previously, Charlie had been outgoing and good-natured, but becomes

gradually more emotionally and intellectually isolated from the people that he cares for.

As Charlie moves through the various stages, from the bakery to academia, he seeks one goal: to be recognised as a human being. In a café, when he sees a retarded person drop a tray and get laughed at, he stands up to argue that the dishwasher should be treated as a person not an object of ridicule. However, the greatest part of his disgust is at himself for initially joining in with the 'humour'. As an outsider, he is aware of his own treatment by others and this isolates him further from society.

Flowers for Algernon is both enlightening but deeply troubling, though Keyes's finely-maintained sense of balance. The characters surrounding Charlie draw upon his good nature, balancing off each other, and the early elation is replaced by despair tinged with a forlorn hope. Charlie's development by the end of the novel draws it to a haunting close, but offers no respite from the sincerity with which the diary is written.

Stephen Lawhead – *The Black Rood*

HarperCollins, 2000, 437pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-224666-X

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The Black Rood is the second volume in Lawhead's *The Celtic Crusades* sequence, following *The Iron Lance*. Its central character, the Scottish lord Duncan Ranulfsson, goes on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the early twelfth century, to trace a fragment of the True Cross – the Black Rood – which has been used as a battle standard during the Crusades.

The book is written as a letter from Duncan to his young daughter, at a time when he believes he will not survive to see her again. On his journey home a copy of his manuscript is left in Cyprus, and in a 'frame' story, set at the beginning of the twentieth century, a descendant of Duncan translates this copy to form the book as we have it. This 'frame' is very slight, and considering this book as a single volume it doesn't seem to add very much, but it's obviously important to the pattern of the sequence as a whole.

I have mixed feelings about this book. The background is rich and detailed, and the settings in Scotland, on the journey, and in the Holy Land itself, come over as authentic. The characters are mostly interesting: Duncan himself, and those who help or hinder him on his quest. Lawhead, a Christian himself, avoids the trap of

making all his Christians good and everybody else evil – though I admit I'd like to read a novel like this where the Knights Templar are *not* sneaky villains.

Where I have my reservations is that after Duncan leaves his home in Scotland, the narrative impulse of the book falters. For many chapters the quest for the Rood is sidelined while Duncan is thrown into a series of picaresque adventures. Although he eventually gets where he is going – and in perhaps the only way that would allow him to succeed – the book doesn't have a strong sense of direction. And in spite of the clearly expressed faith of Duncan and his author, I didn't feel the Rood's transcendence. It could be any precious quest object, to be searched for, recovered, and then protected from those who would steal it away again.

The book is described as historical fantasy, and the historical aspects dominate. The fantasy elements are minor, and could be regarded as subjective visions; they're not an integral part of the book. I suspect *The Black Rood* will appeal more to those who like historical novels and adventure in the real world, rather than those who want fantasy that explores the depths of experience.

Morgan Llywelyn & Michael Scott – *Etruscans*

Tor Books, 2000, 335pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86627-5

Reviewed by Avril A. Brown

Subtitled *Whom the Gods Love*, this is a fantasy retelling of a tale of Horatius Cocles, legendary Roman hero.

In this novel, the Etruscans are the epitome of ancient culture, albeit one whose power and influence is on the wane following the establishment of Rome. Once the most feared warriors on the continent, the Etruscans can no longer even muster sufficient fighters to withstand the challenge of the foreign city.

Into this time of change is born Horatrim, the son of a young Etruscan noblewoman. Fathered by a supernatural being, the child proves to be a danger to all. Guided by their ancestors, his mother and grandmother raise him in the forest, where he grows to manhood in only six years. Eventually, Horatrim's fortunes

lead him to Rome where he is renamed Horatius by his adoptive father, a Roman trader impressed by his obvious talents.

When his mother is abducted by his demon father, Horatius is forced to confront the truth of his own existence and to cross the River Styx into the Land of the Dead, where he must overcome gods and monsters in the battle for ownership of his mother's soul. That he will succeed is never really in doubt, but at least the manner of his victory is relatively novel, as these things go. However, way too many of the hero's problems are solved by the conveniently ever-present shades of his ancestors, which is useful for him, no doubt, but too much of a cop-out for this reader.

This is a pretty straight-forward tale of high fantasy set in a

recognisably historical scenario. The book is competently written, even if the plot is a little unsubtle for my taste. I would have preferred a toning down of the supernatural elements in return for more attention to historical detail.

If you are looking for the Guy Gavriel Kay school of historical fantasy, this is not it. However, if you would like to read an undemanding but rattling good page turner, then this could be for you.

John Marco – *The Jackal Of Nar: Book One of Tyrants And Kings*

Millennium, 2000, 918pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-869-8

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Never mind the quality, feel the width! Over 900 pages, and this is only Part One of this "classic" fantasy tale from new American author John Marco. The obligatory map shows two continents connected by a narrow isthmus, the western being Nar and the eastern Lucel-Lor. The story starts in the centre of Lucel-Lor, where Richius Vantran, Prince of Aramoor (a small province of the Empire of Nar), is defending his camp against attack. The unloved Naren Emperor has sent an army to Lucel-Lor to help their equally unloved Emperor against the religious fanatics who have by now almost over-run the eastern continent. So we have a situation where the westerners are fighting far from home for a leader they don't trust, for a regime and a cause that they don't support, and where the war is going badly. (I feel an analogy coming on.) Another Naren force, led by evil Duke Blackwood Gayle from Richius' neighbouring province, tries on a bit of looting, pillage and rapine in a local village (on the grounds that the villagers are aiding the enemy). Richius stops them, preventing Gayle from raping a beautiful young woman, and earning his lifelong enmity. We learn later that this woman, Dyana, is betrothed to Tharn, leader of the sect conquering Lucel-Lor, and has fled to evade their marriage.

When the major part of the Naren army is destroyed by magic, Richius attempts to leave Lucel-Lor with Dyana, but she is taken from him by a magic storm. Back in Aramoor, he finds his father has been murdered and he is now King of Aramoor. Invited to Nar City by the Emperor for a coronation, Richius is 'requested' to lead a new army into Lucel-Lor to bring back the secret of Tharn's magic, which the dying Emperor believes will extend his life. Back home, with a beautiful but unwanted noble wife forced on him by the Emperor, Richius is visited by the image of a former ally from Lucel-Lor, and informed that Dyana is alive, but married unwillingly to Tharn, now ruling after killing the eastern Emperor. Ignoring his responsibilities to the Emperor and his new wife, Richius heads east...

After the first 100 or so pages, when I was very much confused about who was on which side and who was doing what to whom, the book became an easy read, so reaching the end wasn't as much of a chore I'd thought it would be. There's nothing here that fantasy readers will find inventive, but the characters and their dilemmas are involving, and there are a couple of truly evil baddies for us to hiss. It will be interesting to see if Marco can keep up the momentum, and maybe even improve on this.

Linda Nagata – *Vast*

Gollancz, 2000, 359 pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-575-06902-3

Reviewed by Robert W. Hayler

The very far future. A genocidal alien race, the Chenzeme, has ravaged the human diaspora. Four survivors, all heavily adapted and augmented by high-level technology, are journeying towards what they believe is the source of this race in the starship *Null Boundary*. Whether this quest is to satisfy curiosity or to exact revenge no one is entirely sure. Following them, and gaining ground, is a courser – one of the Chenzeme's sentient warships.

In using this set-up Nagata bravely faces an issue that has dogged many sf authors: the *Tau Zero* problem. How does one avoid an overly linear narrative whilst choosing to stick the cast in a spaceship pelting towards point B? Not easily, as it turns out. *Vast* does at times feel episodic, like a run of good ideas strung together. Nagata does realise this and comes up with some novel solutions. For example, at a point well in, with the most relationship variations spun out, she has her cast grow some new characters!

One might also wonder what happens to drama when the majority of the protagonists are able to copy and store their core personalities whenever faced with danger. It is to Nagata's credit that the action sequences are as compelling as they are, though poor Lot, the only character not capable of regeneration, has to suffer in order for us to take the threat seriously.

To focus on these structural issues, however is to be unfair to a book which is largely excellent. There is an interesting and startling philosophical tension examined in the relationship between the cast of post-humans and their project. They want to preserve what is essentially human yet are themselves, as a result of encounters and augmentations, barely recognisable as human in any 'natural' sense. Ostensibly the 'most' human, Lot is the carrier of a virus which causes him to seek communion and sublimation with others and other races and as such is considered dangerous. Interestingly, in this novel sublimation, an sfnal goal from Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953) to Banks's 'Culture' novels (1987 onwards), is viewed with suspicion and hostility. Nagata does not allow us a simple way of forming political or even biological allegiances. This philosophical content is not mere musing; it drives the plot and leads to a surprising, moving and properly tragic ending.

In *Vast* Nagata achieves a great deal. The highest technology is made tangible. The cast is fully developed and real despite them having modifications enough to make them as alien as their foe. The structural simplicity can easily be forgiven because of the depth of the content and the writing is as compelling and exciting as any mere page-turner. In many important ways, a triumph.

Kim Newman – *Dracula Cha Cha Cha*

Simon & Schuster, 2000, 291pp, £16.99 ISBN 0 – 684 – 85183-0

Reviewed by Paul Billinger

Rome, 1959 and vampire elders gather for the wedding of Count Dracula to a Moldavian Princess. The City buzzes with excitement as rumours circulate that this can mean only one thing – that Dracula plans to use this dynastic marriage to come out of the exile forced on him by the Allied Powers at the end of the Second World War and return to his previous position as a power on the world's stage. Also in Rome is the dying Charles Beauregard,

once Dracula's nemesis as an agent for the Diogenes Club, and now spending his last days watching and studying him to prevent just such a return. With Charles is his long time companion Geneviève, a very different type of vampire, helping him through his old age and hoping, at the very end, to prolong his life.

As Katie Reed, vampire journalist and friend of Charles, flies into Rome Airport to report on Dracula's wedding she soon

discovers the vampire community is under threat; the Crimson Executioner, so called for his outlandish Mexican superhero costume, is systematically slaughtering vampire elders. But why? Has he a personal grudge or is there another power behind him? And just who is it in the mask?

So starts the third of Newman's histories of an alternative Europe, in which Dracula was not killed by Van Helsing and vampires rose to be a powerful political force. Chronologically it comes after *The Bloody Red Baron* (set during the First World War) but is also a continuation of the first book, the Victorian *Anno Dracula*, continuing the lives of the characters over the last 70 years. This book is even less of a 'horror' novel than the previous ones, with much less violence and gore, and is all the stronger for it. Here his alternate history is used to tell the stories of very real characters, both warm and vampire, but always with a strong plot for them to work within. The success of the characters is most strongly shown around Charles when he is

surrounded by the three women who have meant most to him throughout his life, with the ghost of a fourth influencing them all, a truly moving and emotional scene.

The Rome shown here is deliberately based not on straight history books but on the literature and cinema of the period; characters in the novel are similarly both 'real' and 'fictitious'. Hamish Bond is a vampire version of James, with a number of scenes and characters taken from the Bond mythology, including the classic 'massive secret base in the middle of a volcano' for one of the villains. Tom is a very creepy character whose literary origin slowly becomes clear and is perfectly in tune with the period and feel of this book. It is a strength of the storytelling, and the writing, that the book works brilliantly whether or not the reader recognises these references; understanding them just adds to the enjoyment of this splendid book (first published in the US in 1998 as *Judgement of Tears*).

Adam Nichols – *The Songster*

Millennium, 2000, 488pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-578-9

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This novel starts off with a direct link to its predecessor, *The Paladin*, Book One of the Whiteblade Saga [reviewed in *Vector* 200], in which Elinor Whiteblade and her 'humanimal' friend Gyver leave the Settlement she helped found after a difficult time in Book One and (although they do not know it) embark on an adventure which spells danger for them both. At the same time, in another part of the world, Ziftkin, illegitimate son of a human woman and a Fey man, leaves the farm where he has lived and worked and been teased by his cousins, in search of a better life, and of his father. Both of them are given a gift by the Fey folk: for Elinor, a carved bone; for Ziftkin a magic flute. Back in the Settlement, meanwhile, the humans are gradually turning against the humanimals.

How these disparate events come together is a complex and occasionally confusing tale, switching between the three main strands at fairly regular intervals, and it does not really come alive until Ziftkin, in a strange town, tries to earn a living by

playing his flute, and discovers that it gives him the power to control people's feelings. He also discovers, when he is selected by the local ruling family's daughter to perform at a banquet and humiliate another musician, that he can use the flute to destroy as well as control. He ends up on the road once again, and ultimately meets Iryn Jagga, Elinor's sworn enemy. Jagga convinces Ziftkin to use his flute to lure in the humanimals, the humans from the Settlement and Elinor herself, which he duly does, having been brainwashed into accepting they are in need of Cleansing. Unfortunately the story's momentum falters at this point, and the book degenerates into a battle between Elinor and Iryn Jagga which ends in wholesale slaughter. Although Elinor discovers her enemy dead, she finds herself ostracised by the people she saves, and very much alone, and leaves them.

The basic premise of the story had potential, but somehow it lost its way, and the last few chapters were hard going.

Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle – *The Burning City*

Orbit, 2000, 486pp, £17.99 ISBN 1-84149-006-7

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

The Burning City is my first experience of the writing of these two collaborating authors who are much better known for writing science fiction.

Whandall Placehold is a young Lordkin struggling to survive in the brutal city of Tep's Town, a city which periodically burns when the fire God Yangin-Atep possesses one or more of the inhabitants. Whandall was too young to remember the last burning, but he knows that his father was killed by a wizard called Morth – reputedly the last wizard of Atlantis. Of course, Whandall can only rely on what he's been told because, unlike the Lords and the Kinless (the other two main classes of the populace), Lordkin are never sure who their fathers are and *never* discuss their origins in front of others.

The book is in three main sections, and as Whandall grows to adolescence he encounters the wizard Morth who tells him his destiny lies in some place other than Tep's Town. No-one though, ever leaves Tep's Town willingly because beyond the borders there is only the Lords, and rumours of the sea. And so it is that

Whandall one day finds himself on the road out of town heading for The Lordshills – ostensibly to seek new ground for gathering (thieving), but in reality he is taking the first steps towards his destiny.

This is a deeply complex and fascinating fantasy with a class structure in the city I found a little difficult to get a handle on at first. Once I did, however, it began to gather momentum as various significant events occurred. The setting, once the action moves out of the city, is reminiscent of the American pioneering days, with wagon trains, bison, and bandits (rather than Indians). Whandall does eventually return to Tep's Town and is instrumental in changing the ways of the city forever.

The Burning City is a well-written engrossing fantasy, and is a welcome change to much of the standard fantasy-fare of today. I don't know how many books are to follow this one (at least one more) but this reads well as a stand alone novel and I'd recommend it.

Darren O'Shaughnessy – *Hell's Horizon*

Millennium, 2000, 456pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 85798 918 X

Reviewed by Colin Bird

This novel follows *Ayumarca*, Book One in the author's 'The City' sequence [reviewed by John Newsinger in *Vector* 207]. I haven't read the preceding volume but assume from the series' subtitle

that the nameless city in which *Hell's Horizon* is set forms the connecting strand.

The City is a geographically indeterminate sprawl dominated

by the nefarious forces of The Cardinal, a powerful figure whose influence seems to penetrate every aspect of city life. Al Jeery is a guard at Party Central, charged with protecting his crimelord boss from assassination. When Jeery's girlfriend is found murdered in one of The Cardinal's properties he is assigned the task of investigating the crime by the big man himself. Soon Jeery finds himself mired in the city's Incan heritage, not to mention attracting the attention of a legendary assassin, the mysterious Paucar Wami.

Hell's Horizon is a standard crime thriller dressed up, rather unconvincingly, as sf. The Cardinal runs his city with strong-arm tactics, there is no mention of high-tech gadgetry. The story could be set a hundred years ago except for perplexing contemporary references to Leonardo DiCaprio and James Ellroy (a clear influence on the author's style). The only sf/fantasy story elements are some mystical Incans who remain on the periphery

for most of the novel. There's a sense that the author intended the city itself to be a character in the story, but a lack of adequate descriptive prose leaves the reader bereft of any insight into the elusive metropolis. The novel reads like a dark cyber-punk thriller with all the genre content bleached away.

Nevertheless, *Hell's Horizon* is an entertaining enough read with plenty of incident and a surplus of plot twists. Just about every major character becomes a suspect at some stage of the convoluted plot and it all builds to a suitably overwrought, and enjoyable climax. It feels like the writer has thrown all his favourite thriller clichés into the mix and stirred to see what happens next. The result is consumable but not very stimulating or challenging. A few glimpses of originality and the deliberate ambiguity of the book's locale hints that this writer may venture down more interesting literary channels in the future.

Paul Preuss – *Arthur C. Clarke's Venus Prime: Volume 1: Breaking Strain*

iBooks, 2000, 328pp, £9.99 ISBN 9-780671-038885

Reviewed by Chris Amies

A few years ago there were a number of novels developed from stories by top-name authors such as Isaac Asimov, Robert Silverberg, and Arthur C. Clarke. The present volume, *Arthur C. Clarke's Venus Prime: Volume 1: Breaking Strain*, originally appeared in 1987. iBooks have reprinted it, which is possibly good news for the charitable foundations Clarke set up and which he hoped to fund by embarking on collaborative ventures (according to Peter Nicholls in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*).

Is it good news for anyone else though? In trying to connect science fiction and the crime novel, Paul Preuss, who is capable of good writing at times but very often leaves the reader thinking, "could do better", has really provided a chapter of a much longer work. The novel can be divided into three parts: the first is the reawakening of the enhanced human Sparta and her entry into the world. The second is the unpleasantness aboard the Star Queen, a vessel which unavoidably bears a strong resemblance to the Jupiter probe in *2001*. This section is called 'Breaking

Strain' and is where Clarke's original story comes in, though the 'Breaking Strain' part of the book's title no longer appears on the cover. The third part brings the two together as Sparta investigates what happened aboard the Star Queen.

The back-story to the novel sequence is Sparta trying to discover her true identity (which places us firmly in Quest Fantasy space), but over six novels the interest may be strained rather than sustained. Because of the origin in a shorter piece, the pace is a bit uneven; Preuss does not rein in a tendency to over-elaborate, presumably to build the work up to proper novel length. Does the reader need all the technical details, or the gruesome detail of Sparta's awakening? But then again the intended readership is probably late-teenage and predominantly male, so perhaps the technical details matter, as do the diagrams ('Infopak' by Darrel Anderson) at the back of the book, and it'll sell to a readership starved of proper sf.

Kit Reed – *Seven For The Apocalypse*

Wesleyan University Press, 1999, 224pp, \$40.00 Cloth/\$16.95 pb ISBN 0-8195-6382-X

Reviewed by Kev McVeigh

Kit Reed is a writer whose work straddles several genres to the extent that despite a career spanning over forty years and twenty-five books she remains a peripheral figure in Science Fiction. *Seven For The Apocalypse* collects Reed's 1994 novella 'Little Sisters Of The Apocalypse' (a finalist for the Tiptree Award) alongside seven shorter pieces thematically linked by love, loss and isolation.

Even without the extra background of Reed's introduction it is obvious that the opening story 'Voyager' has deeply personal roots. Although not sf it subtly and forcefully sets the tone for what follows. 'Voyager' describes what happens when a major storm hits a retirement community in Florida. One resident, Bill, gets involved in helping the nurses care for the other elderly, only to find that his senile wife Sara has wandered off. Interspersed with the present day scenes are Bill's memories of their early marriage, their separation during the war and after, and Sara before her deterioration became overpowering.

'River' is narrated by a home security AI which finds itself falling for the head of the household, with murderous consequences. Again grief and loss are central to the story and River's meditations are both funny and sad.

'In The Palace Of The Dictator' sees a famous vampire-movie maker return from exile after the fall of a brutal dictator. Armed with silver stake and garlic he wants to be sure the dictator is really dead. Reed's ironic tone reveals that not only has very little

changed but that the director's actions ultimately make it worse.

The narrator of 'On The Penal Colony' is a would-be escapee from a futuristic prison where convicts portray scenes from American history in a theme park and are punished for poor performances. When two fall in love, retribution is extreme and an escape plan is hatched. Told in the form of a journal we are advised from the start that if they make it the journal will be destroyed.

The final shorter story, 'The Singing Marine' was nominated for a World Fantasy Award. It retells the fairy tale 'The Tinder Box' in a military context and concludes, as other stories here have, that death can be an escape, to be welcomed when the time comes rather than feared.

The 'Little Sisters Of The Apocalypse' are a group of vigilante motorcycle nuns but this is not the story you might expect. Schell Island is a community where all the men are off at war for five years, and the women are under threat from outlaws. Enter the Little Sisters. Meanwhile Reed intersperses brief sections about her own mother's slow decline and death. In a detached tone reminiscent of Sue Thomas' *Correspondence*, the main story sees the women of Schell defining themselves in relation to their absentee men, whilst the autobiographical sections see Reed and her mother defined by her father who died in WWII. Relations between the various women are depicted acutely and without concession to sentiment.

Seven For The Apocalypse may be downbeat, dystopic collection, but it is not without its dark humour and it is a welcome new volume from an under-rated sf writer.

[Wesleyan University Press, University Press Of New England, 23 South Main Street, Hanover, New Hampshire, 03755-2055, USA]

Frank M. Robinson – *The Power*

Tor, 2000, 222pp, \$12.95 ISBN 0-312-86654-2

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

The first chapter is rather confusing but we learn that Tanner is a scientist working on a project to test the limits of human endurance. One of his colleagues, Olson, is 'cracking-up'. At a committee meeting of all the scientists and others, such as members of the military, involved with the project, Tanner announces that the answers to a questionnaire indicate one of those present has extraordinary levels of intelligence and a very unusual background. Olson dramatically announces the human race is doomed. Tanner organises a practical demonstration of telekinesis to the astonishment of all present. It seems one of the committee members is a 'mutant superman' – but which one? Members of the committee start dying and Tanner must flush out the mutant before he is killed.

The edition had a rather strange provenance. Its original copyright is 1956. It was then renewed in 1984 and a 'revised version' is copyrighted to 1999. When I first started reading I assumed the story was set in 1950's cold-war big-science America. However I received somewhat of a jolt when one character incidentally mentions Vietnam. Later we have mentions of the Gulf War and have a character described as being born in 1967. So it seems that Robinson has taken the opportunity

to try and modernise his text. Unfortunately, he has not modernised it enough and the story has none of the trappings of modern society – no mobile phones, no PCs, no videos and we have characters still in post-WWII fashions such as Vaselined hair and slouch hats and raincoats. Reading it is like entering some alternative history America when time has moved on since the fifties but none of the fabric of society has.

The plot is bog standard 'hunted man' thriller territory. There are several plot twists but they are unremarkable. Certain parts do not make much sense until seen in the light of later developments and some do not make any sense at all. Towards the end, Tanner announces "the villain must be at X's flat". This had me flicking back throughout the book trying to find where X had been mentioned before to no success. I kept reading to see who the bad guy was but the characters were uninvolved and the final twist did not ring true for me at all.

Incidentally *The Power* was adapted as a TV special and later as a George Pal film (which I've not seen), and was a huge influence on David Cronenberg's *Scanners* which has always been a favourite of mine. Final assessment: don't bother reading it; rent *Scanners* instead.

Theodore Sturgeon – *More Than Human*

Millennium SF Masterworks, 233pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-852-3

Reviewed by Chris Hill

A young man, Lone, although mentally slow, has telepathic abilities. He finds a telekinetic girl, young twins who can teleport and a Downs Syndrome baby with an innate ability to solve problems. Together they form a single powerful *gestalt* entity. This book, through three novellas, charts their discovery of each other and their gradual development of a sense of moral responsibility.

If there is a downside for the reviewer of any of the volumes in Millennium's increasingly core SF Masterworks series, it is that some of the books are so well known and loved that it is difficult to approach them with an open mind. Take *More Than Human* for example. First published in 1953, it is widely regarded as possibly the finest book on the subject of the birth of the superhuman. How can one respond to that, especially if one finds it difficult to agree?

Luckily, in this case, it is not a problem. *More Than Human* has hardly dated at all, remaining a warm and humane story, beautifully told. While the story concerns a superhuman, it can equally well be read as a parable about how any group of the

abused and rejected can become greater than the sum of their damaged parts. But equally it is about how a superhuman might come to regard the race it developed from.

The only real problem I have is with the ending (if you have not read the book, then you may wish to skip to the end of this paragraph). Ultimately the *gestalt* discovers that it is not, as it had previously thought, the first and only member of the new race. Instead it had been quarantined by other members of its race until it had developed into a moral and ethical creature. I felt that this weakened the premise—a new and lonely entity was somehow intrinsically more interesting. Still this is a fairly minor quibble given the power of the rest of the book (another, even more minor quibble, is Fred Gambino's cover illustration which makes the parts of the *gestalt* it depicts look like *The Midwich Cuckoos*).

I cannot recommend *More Than Human* highly enough. It is a relatively early sign of a maturing genre and sf would be so much the poorer without it.

Judith Tarr – *Lady of Horses*

Tor Books, 2000, 415pp, \$25.95 ISBN 0-312-86114-1

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This book's cover blurb calls it "a prehistoric romance", and that's pretty accurate. It's apparently not the first book Tarr has written about the Servants of the Horse Goddess (*The Shepherd Kings* and *White Mare's Daughter* may be the previous books; the blurb didn't make this clear).

The White Stone People are wandering pastoralists on the great plains, following their herds of cattle and especially the sacred horses, whom only the men are allowed to ride. Sparrow is a young woman of the People – a visionary, who would perhaps be the tribe's shaman if women were allowed such a role. Sparrow's brother Walker is a powerful shaman, with ambitious and far-reaching plans for his tribe, but he has no visions of his own, believing that Sparrow's divinely-appointed purpose in life

is to do that for him. This nasty patriarchal state of affairs clearly cannot be allowed to continue, and Sparrow soon starts an illicit relationship with a white mare, a horse-and-rider relationship. Sparrow comes to believe that the white mare is an incarnation of the Horse Goddess, who will determine the destiny of the tribe... and so it comes to pass! After a long journey and many adventures, Sparrow and her patriarchally-brainwashed but basically good-hearted friend Keen reach the lands of the Grey Horse People, who have thoroughly enlightened views about nonviolence, women's rights, and non-possessive sexual relationships. The book ends with a climactic confrontation (nonviolent, of course) between the Grey Horse People and the White Stone People, and, fortunately, the will of the Goddess

prevails, and everybody lives happily ever after (except for Walker, and a couple of other people who get ritually sacrificed, in the nicest possible consenting-adults fashion).

I have very mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, it's a good read, well-written, the plot canters along, the

characters are interesting, it's full of positive, PC images of women, horses and men (in that order)... On the other hand, it's a totally unrealistic wish-fulfilment fantasy, it's mind candy, and it's far too *nice*. It's like this is the book you graduate to after "Girls' Own Pony" stories... Read it for fun, but not to transform your life.

Steve Sneyd and David Jones – *Gnawing Medusa's Flesh: The Science Fiction Poetry of Robert Calvert*

Hilltop Press, 2000, 44pp, £2.99 UK/\$7.00 ISBN 0905362-21-2

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

When Robert Calvert was a small boy he wanted to be a fighter pilot but his daddy wanted him to be a poet. Or maybe it was the other way around. To Lemmy, Hawkwind and later Motörhead bassist, he was "the man who threw crockery at Viv Stanshall, stabbed me with a sword on stage at Wembley Arena, and the man I knew as Raving Rupert." Despite his relatively short tenure in the convoluted history of the rock band Hawkwind, Bob Calvert was for many the quintessential and highly unstable voice of the band and, moreover, a writer who illustrated the often arbitrary nature of the distinction between lyricist and poet.

Steve Sneyd's opening essay in this volume, 'Gnawing Medusa's Flesh', begins by noting the near total absence of previous critical attention to Calvert's writing and moves through a selective analysis of Hawkwind lyrics to a detailed examination of more conventional poetry – with specific focus on those pieces using sf themes – in the two long-out-of-print collections and

elsewhere.

The second essay by David Jones, 'Working Down a Diamond Mine', is a more wide-ranging overview of Calvert's career, drawing heavily on quotations from books, magazines and fanzines. The whole is tailed with detailed discography and appendices.

The picture that emerges, especially through the Sneyd essay, elevates Calvert's poetic work above the more public role of lyricist and performer. You also sense a writer who makes free use of sf imagery without necessarily embracing it (in one quote he claims to not like sf all that much). Sneyd and Jones know their subject and their field, and provide a valuable and comprehensive overview of a writer whose work was often overwhelmed by his eccentric performer persona.

[Order from: Hilltop Press, 4 Nowell Place, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD5 8PB]

Robert Silverberg – *Lion Time in Timbuctoo*

HarperCollins, 2000, 390pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-651220-8

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

The stories in this sixth collection are from the early and mid nineties. In his story introductions, Silverberg is fascinatingly autobiographical as to how mood, weather and the market have impinged on writing practise. 'The Second Shelf' contains an avowedly autobiographical element: the sculptor's exotic creations mysteriously materialise out of his dreams, sometimes influenced – though not orderable – by his waking mind. Such interplay of levels of consciousness is represented in several stories by the crossing and re-crossing of boundaries, strikingly so in 'The Way to Spook City', where the protagonist, Demeris, crosses into an alien-occupied area of North America in fruitless search of a younger brother (self?) lost on his rite-of-passage incursion. Demeris's encounter with an alien anima figure is as full of strangeness as is the misty boundary between the realms. 'It Comes and Goes' is another story in which a siren-like figure beckons from a house, which, like Wells's Magic Shop, is not part of our common reality.

I mention Wells. Silverberg is not a borrower or copier of themes, but his wide knowledge of and sensitivity to myth, legend and literature constantly lead him to draw on universal

archetypes and to write in resonance with widely occurring metaphors. He is an imaginative creator of deliberate pastiche in 'The Martian Invasion Journals of Henry James', but is a far more effective and affecting writer in such a story as 'A Tip on a Turtle', where there is a seamless blend of motifs elsewhere to be found in, for example, D.H. Lawrence's 'The Rocking Horse Winner' and in many scenarios of ineluctable destiny (e.g. *The Seventh Seal*). The alternative world of the title story is a stage for merging, in a torrid rain-cycle setting, two ageless tales of conflict: the "star cross'd lovers" and the impatient royal heir. His dramatic presentation of the latter tacitly, but surely, evokes the Shakespearean Henry IV/Prince Hal 'deathbed' crisis.

What gives a distinctive flavour to this collection is a preoccupation with time: with the relentlessness of time, as in the disparity between mortality and 'immortality' in 'Death Do Us Part'; and with the relict palimpsests of time, as in 'A Long Night's Vigil at the Temple' and 'The Red Blaze in the Morning'. Where, as often, a time-story's ending is arbitrary or inconclusive, this invariably seems less a cop-out than a way of pointing the reader's imagination towards a further pondering.

Jack Williamson – *The Silicon Dagger*

Tor Books, 1999, 336pp, \$6.99, ISBN 0-812-54042-5

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

When Clay Barstow moves to McAdam County, Kentucky, to investigate the murder of his half-brother, a controversial author apparently targeted by members of a right-wing militia group, he discovers a community being torn apart by internal rivalries and suspicion of increasing federal government interference in the lives of its residents. As escalating disorder turns into full-scale rebellion, Washington dispatches troops to quell the unrest, but certain citizens have developed their own hi-tech means of striking back against the forces threatening to rob them of their accustomed liberties. Under the protection of the 'silicon shield', a force-field impervious to the might of the military, McAdam County delivers its own latter-day Declaration of Independence. Soon Barstow finds himself caught up in a struggle between rival factions to determine the very fate of democracy in the USA.

Williamson's latest novel uses the framework of a compulsively readable sf thriller to paint a frightening and plausible picture of a near-future America threatening to disintegrate under the social, political and economic pressures of new information technologies and their impact on age-old questions about the nature of liberty. In presenting McAdam County as a microcosm of the whole Republic, Williamson wisely keeps the focus of the debate on a very personal level. Complex issues concerning the relationship between the rights of the individual and those of society are raised, but are never allowed to swamp the narrative thrust of the novel which maintains a ferociously fast and gripping pace throughout. Most impressively, he creates a cast of characters representing every shade of political opinion and proceeds to handle them all with

considerable subtlety and sympathy. You may not agree with what some of those characters stand for, but you cannot fault the even-handed way in which their opinions are articulated.

That Williamson, a veteran of the genre now entering his ninth decade as a published author, is still producing work of this

quality is nothing short of astonishing. *The Silicon Dagger* is that pleasing rarity – a thoroughly entertaining work of fiction that also raises perceptive and troubling political and social questions destined to linger long after the last page has been turned.

Robert Charles Wilson – *The Perseids and Other Stories*

Tor Books, 2000, 224pp, \$22.95 ISBN 0-312-87374-3

Reviewed by Chris Hill

This, the first short story collection by Wilson, is a collection of loosely-linked stories, centred on a second-hand bookshop in Toronto called 'Finders'. The stories in this collection live in the borderland where urban fantasy shades in horror.

Three of the stories ('The Fields of Abraham', 'Ulysses Sees the Moon in the Bedroom Window' and 'Pearl Baby') are original to this collection. Of these, the first is the most effective. In 1911, Jacob, a young immigrant, nurses his mentally-ill sister Rachel. He forms a friendship with Ziegler, the owner of Finders and through their chess games Ziegler demonstrates a way of escape into an idealised world, home to the part of Rachel's mind which she has lost in her insanity. But what if Ziegler's intentions are not entirely honourable?

Another strong story is 'The Inner Inner City'. A group of friends have a regular wager, in which someone suggests a ridiculous task to perform. The person judged to have completed it most entertainingly wins the kitty. The latest challenge is to invent a new religion. Jeremy, a man who has always enjoyed walking the city at night, creates a religion based on a secret cartography of the streets. But he starts suffering from curious blackouts and gradually discovers that the person who invented the challenge has something sinister in mind.

'Divided by Infinity' is the probably the most well-known story.

It was first published in *Starlight 2* and was shortlisted for a Hugo. A sixty-year old man is contemplating suicide after the death of his wife. In Finders he discovers some books by famous early sf authors which he does not recognise, despite having been a fan in his youth. Investigating, he discovers a theory that consciousness is conserved over all possible quantum universes. Meanwhile, scientists are translating a message from space, which warns of the death-knell of the planet.

While being in the main a fine teleological mystery story, I felt that 'Divided by Infinity' was spoiled by a weak ending, vaguely reminiscent of Stephen Baxter's *Titan*.

Other good stories are 'The Perseids' (a divorced loner discovers that his new girlfriend is involved in a peculiar form of alien invasion), 'The Observer' (a young girl is sent to stay with her uncle at the newly opened Mount Palomar Observatory. She is haunted by visions of aliens and finds an unexpected ally in Edwin Hubble) and 'Plato's Mirror' (a mirror bought in Finders helps people see their true, Platonian, selves). While the remaining three stories ('Protocols of Consumption', 'Ulysses Sees the Moon in the Bedroom Window' and 'Pearl Baby') are not bad, they do not live up to the standards of the others.

Overall a fine collection of stories which leaves me hoping that Wilson will turn his hand to the shorter form more frequently.

Gene Wolfe – *Strange Travellers*

Tor, January 2000, 384pp, \$25.95, 0-312-87227-5

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

This collection of short stories is feast of many courses, with something to suit almost all tastes. In each tale, the central character begins or completes a journey, either physically or mentally.

In 'Bluesberry Jam' and 'Ain't You Most Done?', which open and close the collection, Wolfe tells the same story from two different perspectives. 'Bluesberry Jam' is a dysfunctional road tale, set in an eternal traffic jam. Aldo, a natural musician, is caught up travelling to the Spaghetti Bowl. Waiting in the food queue, he meets Tim, an outsider to the culture who is also a musician, and teaches him one of his songs. But it is Tim who leaves with a documentary crew and talent scout whilst Aldo remains. In 'Ain't You Most Done?', Tim, a blues fan, is in hospital. In a dream, he joins the traffic jam and meets Aldo. When he is taken up by the documentary crew, he thrusts himself into his dream of fame. Both stories create a framework for this collection, moving from frustration to release in intensely personal ways.

Wolfe reuses standard tales, such as the Haunted House, yet

turns them to his own ends in this collection. In 'The Haunted Boardinghouse', he uses the traditional ghost story at first to terrify his main character, but ultimately to offer him contentment. Enan Bambrick leaves university due a lack of funds, but is offered a position at a small school. After nearly drowning in a river, he recuperates in a small boarding-house and eventually embraces the chance to lead a ghost Roman army. The science fictional ghosts of 'And When They Appear' are created to offer the lonely child, Sherby, happiness, but his refusal to believe in them ultimately leads to his downfall when a rampaging mob invade the intelligent House in the middle of a hologram-filled Christmas party staged for him. In both stories, Wolfe appears to celebrate the ghost as a form of freedom.

Gene Wolfe constantly crosses genre boundaries in this collection and yet maintains complete control over the different forms he employs. His travellers are indeed strange and varied, but the journeys they make are a definite treat and repay several readings.

Gene Wolfe – *In Green's Jungles*

Tor Books, 2000, 384pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-87315-8

Reviewed by Dave Langford

In book two of the 'Short Sun' – or book six of the 'Long and Short Suns'? – some of the tantalising mysteries from the very fine *On Blue's Waters* (1999) are unveiled while others become more mysterious.

For example, the puzzle of narrator Horn's hinted physical and mental changes since his quest began is now quietly clarified, incidentally adding irony to his insistence that the mission (to bring back the great leader Silk from the 'Book of the Long Sun') failed, and leaving the question of why he seems to be in denial

about one of his identities.

Despite the title the main setting is planet Blue, where Horn has returned after visits to the sister planet Green and the orbiting starcrosser *Whorl*. Wolfe's love of multi-levelled narrative emerges early, with a storytelling contest whose participants have agendas going beyond the game. Horn, for instance, relates a harrowing episode from Green, home of the bloodsucking, shapeshifting alien 'inhumi'. Casting this as fiction allows the reporting of events too horror-filled for Horn to

record as autobiography, and discussing the inhumis conveys a message to the storytelling competitor who is merely passing as human.

It's easy to misrepresent Wolfe by over-condensed summary. Bloodsucking shapeshifters: oh, how very 'sci-fi'. The artfully fragmented text expends much effort, indirection and implication to suggest the nature of the inhumis (still partly enigmatic; they have a deep racial secret which Horn knows but has promised not to reveal), and although they are indeed bloodsucking shapeshifters, they're also thinking, suffering beings who constitute a subtle and complex moral problem. Even Blue's superhuman 'Neighbours', vanished folk whose ghosts or avatars have considerable traffic with Horn, failed to solve the Inhumis Question *despite knowing the secret*. Just as Silk's real task proved very different from his original aim of redeeming church property, so the reluctant, self-deprecating Horn is emerging as the person best equipped to tackle the intractable issue of

human/inhumis coexistence.

Another label which Horn keeps repudiating is 'sorcerer'. Earnestly he explains that the alleged spells he cast to win a small war in the previous book were mere tricks, side-effects of deals done with inhumis; yet no one else seems able or willing to make such bargains. Now a new and again seemingly inhumis-mediated power has come upon Horn: the ability to take others into his lucid, solid dreams of far-off places. These include the hated cellar where he was imprisoned on Green, and even the dim 'Red Sun Whorl' – Earth/Urth itself – visiting the fog-wreathed necropolis gate where Severian's journey began in *The Shadow of the Torturer*. Meanwhile another petty war looms, and Horn, though almost no one else, still hears the far-off singing of the siren Seawrack from book one....

This is wonderful, richly crafted storytelling. Now I need to read *On Blue's Waters* again, and maybe the whole 'Book of the Long Sun'. It'll be a pleasure.

Particles

THESE ARE SOME OF THE OTHER BOOKS WE HAVE SEEN RECENTLY. A MENTION HERE DOES NOT NECESSARILY PRECLUDE A REVIEW IN A LATER VECTOR ISSUE

Brian Aldiss – *When the Feast is Finished*

Warner Books, 2000, 230pp, £7.99 ISBN 0-7515-2995-8

Reviewed in hardback by Andy Sawyer in V207, this "haunting exercise in autobiography" is a memoir of Aldiss's last weeks with his wife, Margaret, before her death in November 1997 of pancreatic cancer. This is a deeply personal, often nakedly self-revealing account of Aldiss and his wife coming to terms with the implications of terminal illness, and yet is also a celebration of a joyous thirty-year marriage, even when, as Aldiss reveals from extracts from his wife's journals, you sometimes don't know each other, or yourself, as well as you might.

John Barnes – *Apocalypses & Apostrophes*

Millennium, 2000, 349pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-85798-855-8
Reviewed as a Tor hardback by Gary Dalkin in V203 (and trade pb reissue in V209). This is the UK mass market publication of a mixed collection of fiction and non-fiction, from the wryly humorous to the bleakly disturbing. A mixed bag in more senses than one, but more than sufficient here to entertain, stimulate and challenge almost everyone.

Gregory Benford – *Timescape*

Millennium, 2000, 412pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-935-X
Number 27 in Millennium's SF Masterworks series, Benford's 1980 novel established him as a significant voice in hard sf, winning the Nebula and John Campbell Memorial Awards. The setting is 1962, and a scientist in California finds his experiments disrupted by a stream of subatomic particles, a tachyonic message sent back through time in an attempt to alter history and avert a world-threatening disaster.

Ray Bradbury – *Long After Midnight*

Earthlight, 2000, 275pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-671-03769-2
A collection of 23 short stories from Bradbury's vintage period between 1946–1952, during which he also published much of his classic work, *The Illustrated Man*, *The Golden Apples of*

the Sun, *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Earthlight are re-releasing a number of classic Bradbury titles, including *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and *I Sing the Body Electric!* (*The Halloween Tree*, also published by Earthlight, was reviewed by Kathy Taylor in V211)

Hal Clement – *Mission of Gravity*

Gollancz, 2000, 203pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-07094-3

Eric Frank Russell – *Wasp*

Gollancz, 2000, 175pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-07095-1

Robert Silverberg – *Tower of Glass*

Gollancz, 2000, 206pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-07097-8
Three titles in Gollancz's new Collectors' Edition series, in a distinct nod to the nostalgia of the old Gollancz 'yellowbacks'. The uniform design on these is eye-catchingly (or eye-wrenchingly) bright, with flap covers and a central 'Gollancz SF' colour stripe. Clement's 1954 novel is set on the strange disc-shaped planet of Mesklin, whose gravity varies from 3 to over 700g, and on a collaboration between Human and Meskilite teams to recover a crashed unmanned probe. The 'wasp' of Russell's title is James Mowry, trained and surgically altered to be dropped on the Sirian Empire planet Jaimec with a mission to wage a one-man war of distraction, irritation and havoc among its eighty million inhabitants. *Tower of Glass* (1970) comes from what many regard as Silverberg's best period of sustained creativity, in which he wrote such works as *Thorns*, *Dying Inside* and *Nightwings*. Here, wealthy visionary Simon Krug is constructing an immense tower rising out of the Arctic tundra, to communicate with the stars. The android workers who are building the tower have made a god out of Krug but he is about to betray their faith in him.

David Farland – *Brotherhood of the Wolf*

Earthlight, 2000, 610pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-7434-0827-6
This is Book 2 of the Runelords, which started with *The Sum of All Men* (reviewed by John

Oram in V200). John Oram thought the first book "rivetting" with a fast-paced plot, good characterisation and motivation and a welcome originality. In that, Farland introduced the idea of 'endowments', the transfer, voluntary or otherwise, of abilities (health, strength, wit, glamour...) from one person to another. The Wolf Lord, Raj Ahten, would take this to its extreme and become the Sum of All Men. Against him are Gaborn Val Orden, the newly crowned Earth King, but also the inhuman Reavers, and Gaborn may have to offer Ahten – the man who killed his father – his fealty to oppose them.

Terry Goodkind – *Soul of the Fire*

Millennium, 2000, 643pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-854-X
Mass market reissue of the fifth book in Goodkind's 'Sword of Truth' series which began with *Wizard's First Rule* and is a direct sequel to *Temple of the Winds*. Sue Thomason reviewed this in Tor hardcover in V207 and found it intelligible enough without having to read the previous volumes (while for those who have, some of the large amounts of 'what happened earlier' info-dumping might prove tiresome). However, in her view the book relies over-heavily on strained coincidence and characters being almost wilfully thick to keep the plot moving long enough to reach the end of the book.

Barbara Hambly – *Knight of the Demon Queen*

Voyager, 2000, 0pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648373-9
A third book in the linked sequence that includes *Dragonsbane* and *Dragonshadow* (reviewed and highly recommended by Kathy Taylor in V208). After returning to the Winterlands, Jenny and the dragon Morkeleb go south to investigate rumours that someone is raising the dead. Meanwhile, John Aversin is drawn into a bargain with the Demon Queen who sets him a journey through a series of terrifying Hells.

Paul Kearney – *The Iron Wars*

Millennium, 2000, 255pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85798-942-2
Third volume in 'The Monarchies of God', reviewed in hardback by Vikki Lee (V205). The fact that the jacket blurb details an incident that only occurs in the final half page epilogue (the return of Richard Hawkwood who sailed off at the end of the first volume, *Hawkwood's Voyage*, to discover a New World) led Vikki Lee to wonder if this third, and noticeably slimmer, volume had been truncated to extend a trilogy into a longer series.

Valery Leith – *The Company of Glass*

Millennium, 2000, 397pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-857-4
This debut fantasy, billed as 'The First Book of Everian', comes from an author better known (under another name) as an award-winning sf writer. Unfortunately, the transition to fantasy does not always work well according to Vikki Lee, who reviewed this in trade paperback in V208, as "something of a mish-mash" of a slew of standard fantasy plotlines and gaming clichés and whose unsure (or inexperienced) handling "spirals out of control and borders on the farcical" to wreck the early promise of the book. A shame, as Vikki Lee was forced to conclude, "*The Company of Glass* is not really a bad book as a pointless one"

Gene Wolfe – *The Book of the New Sun, Volume 1: Shadow and Claw*

Millennium Fantasy Masterworks 1, 2000, 603pp, £7.99
ISBN 1-85798-977-5

Lord Dunsany – *Time and the Gods*

Millennium Fantasy Masterworks 2, 2000, 584pp,
£6.99 ISBN 1-85798-989-9

E.R. Eddison – *The Worm Ouroboros*

Millennium Fantasy Masterworks 3, 2000, 520pp,
£6.99 ISBN 1-85798-993-7

Jack Vance – *Tales of the Dying Earth*

Millennium Fantasy Masterworks 4, 2000, 741pp, £7.99
ISBN 1-85798-994-7

Compared to the slimness of many of the SF Masterworks, the first four volumes of Millennium's Fantasy Masterworks series are huge, chunky tomes, although several are collections of a number of books. *The Book of the New Sun, Volume 1* comprises the first two books of that series, *Shadow of the Torturer* and *The Claw of the Conciliator*; the Dunsany brings together all the stories published in *Time and the Gods*, *The Book of Wonder*, *The Sword of Welleran* and *The Last Book of Wonder*; and the Vance collects *The Dying Earth*, *The Eyes of the Overworld*, *Cugel's Saga* and *Rhiato the Marvellous* in one volume. The fifth in the series will be John Crowley's brilliant magical fantasy *Little, Big*. I would start reserving another shelf if I were you.

James Mallory – *Merlin: The End of Magic*

Voyager, 2000, 287pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-651291-7
The fourth and final part of James Mallory's (presumably no relation) novelisation of the four part TV mini-series starring Sam Niell as Merlin and a kooky Miranda Richardson (seriously in need of throat pastilles) as Queen

Mab. It is the end of Camelot, and Merlin finds his loyalties torn between Arthur and his lover Nimue as Mab uses them both to bring about Merlin's downfall and to hold on to the Old Ways against the coming Age of Man.

Anne McCaffrey – *The Tower and the Hive*

Corgi, 2000, 396pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-552-14629-3
Even McCaffrey fan Lesley Hatch, reviewing this in V207, found this a disappointing, slow-paced and unbalanced novel, perhaps more of an exercise in filling in the gaps of her worlds than a true sequel to the fourth volume in the Hiver series, *Lyon's Pride*. One, perhaps, for committed fans and completists only.

Will McCarthy – *Bloom*

Millennium, 2000, 310, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-856-6
Hard sf and a "highly readable Space Opera, rich in thought-provoking content" said Colin Bird, who reviewed the hardback in V207. A deadly plague of self-replicating man-made microorganisms – or mycora – in the 21st century has caused Earth and the inner planets to be abandoned, and humanity now clings precariously to the asteroids and the moons of Jupiter. The threat of a new 'bloom' of mycora into the outer solar system, and rumours that there are still humans alive on Earth, sends John Strasheim on a dangerous mission to the inner planets. Sf adventure is here mixed with scientific and mathematical speculations on what constitutes a definition of life.

L.E. Modesitt – *Gravity Dreams*

Orbit, 2000, 502pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85723-974-1
John D. Owen, reviewing the Tor hardback edition in V210, described this as a rite-of-passage novel, although the hero, Tyndel, is somewhat older than the typical protagonist of such stories, and his passage, to let go his past and accept a very different future, takes a different form. Earth is divided between a conservative, religious culture who have stepped back from technology and those who have embraced it to go to the stars. Tyndel is a teacher of the former but becomes infected with a nanotech virus and is expelled, and gradually has to come to terms with the new starfaring culture which has taken him in. Perhaps not a great book "but a fascinating one, with enough ideas in the mix to keep the interest up to the very end".

Elizabeth Moon – *Rules of Engagement*

Orbit, 2000, 500pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-964-4
Book Five of 'The Serrano Legacy' and again Esmay Suiza finds herself in trouble, suspected of having a hand in the kidnapping of her rival Brun Meager. Unfortunately their enmity is too well known for Esmay to convince anyone that she is probably the person with the best chance of rescuing Brun.

K.J. Parker – *The Proof House*

Orbit, 2000, 499pp, £10.99 ISBN 1-85723-966-0
This is the third and final volume of Parker's 'Fencer' trilogy (the first volume, *Colours in the Steel*, was reviewed by Vikki Lee in V204, and

followed by *Belly of the Bow*). Bardas Loredan, fencer-at-law and now suddenly a hero following the siege of the apparently impregnable Ap' Escatoy. So he is given a numbing administrative post, watching armour being tested to destruction in the Proof House.

However, after Ap' Escatoy, the Empire is getting restless again, and Bardas is bound to be hauled from his desk and back into war and politics.

Sheri S. Tepper – *Singer From the Sea*

Gollancz, 2000, 426p, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-06905-8
Tepper can be a supremely irritating writer. When she is good, she is an almost unparalleled storyteller (*The Awakeners*, *Sideshow*, *The Family Tree*) with interesting and sometimes provocative things to say. But too often, as here, she lets her politics hijack the plot to the detriment of both, resulting in simplistic cardboard characterisations, desperate plot lapses and authorial soapboxing. This, while not as bad as the awfully misjudged *Shadow's End*, is a disappointingly flawed book which tries too hard to be too many things at once, packs in too many plotlines, and ultimately falls over itself before arriving at an extremely dubious conclusion.

J.R.R. Tolkien – *Unfinished Tales* (edited by Christopher Tolkien)

HarperCollins, 2000, 611pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-261-10215-X
A 20th anniversary edition of a collection of tales and related pieces, including notes, appendices and a very substantial (74 page) index, from the Elder Days of Middle-Earth to the end of the War of the Ring. The cover of this edition is a painting by Tolkien himself, from 1927, of Glóruind, the Father of Dragons. A definite scholars' and collectors' edition.

Harry Turtledove – *Into the Darkness*

Earthlight, 2000, 607pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-671-02282-2

Harry Turtledove – *Darkness Descending*

Earthlight, 2000, 594pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-684-85827-4
Mass market reprint of the first book (reviewed by John Wallace in V207) and the trade paperback of the second volume in this epic fantasy of a war across countries and continents, fought with magic and dragons as well as the sword. Now, Algarve's king, Mezentio, in desperation, opens the way to the use of the reviled and shunned blood magic, whose consequence is genocide.

Harry Turtledove – *Walk in Hell*

NEL, 2000, 694pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-340-71548-0
Turtledove seems to be pursuing a grim fascination with total war, both in a series of alternate histories: the *Worldwar* 'Balance' series, *The Great War* (of which this is the second volume, following *American Front*) and the epic fantasy 'Darkness' sequence. Here it is an alternate 1915 America where the South did not so much rise again as never fell, but is now besieged on all fronts, as well as internally from a Bolshevik revolution of its slaves, while the USA is pinned between the Confederacy and its other enemy, Canada.

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