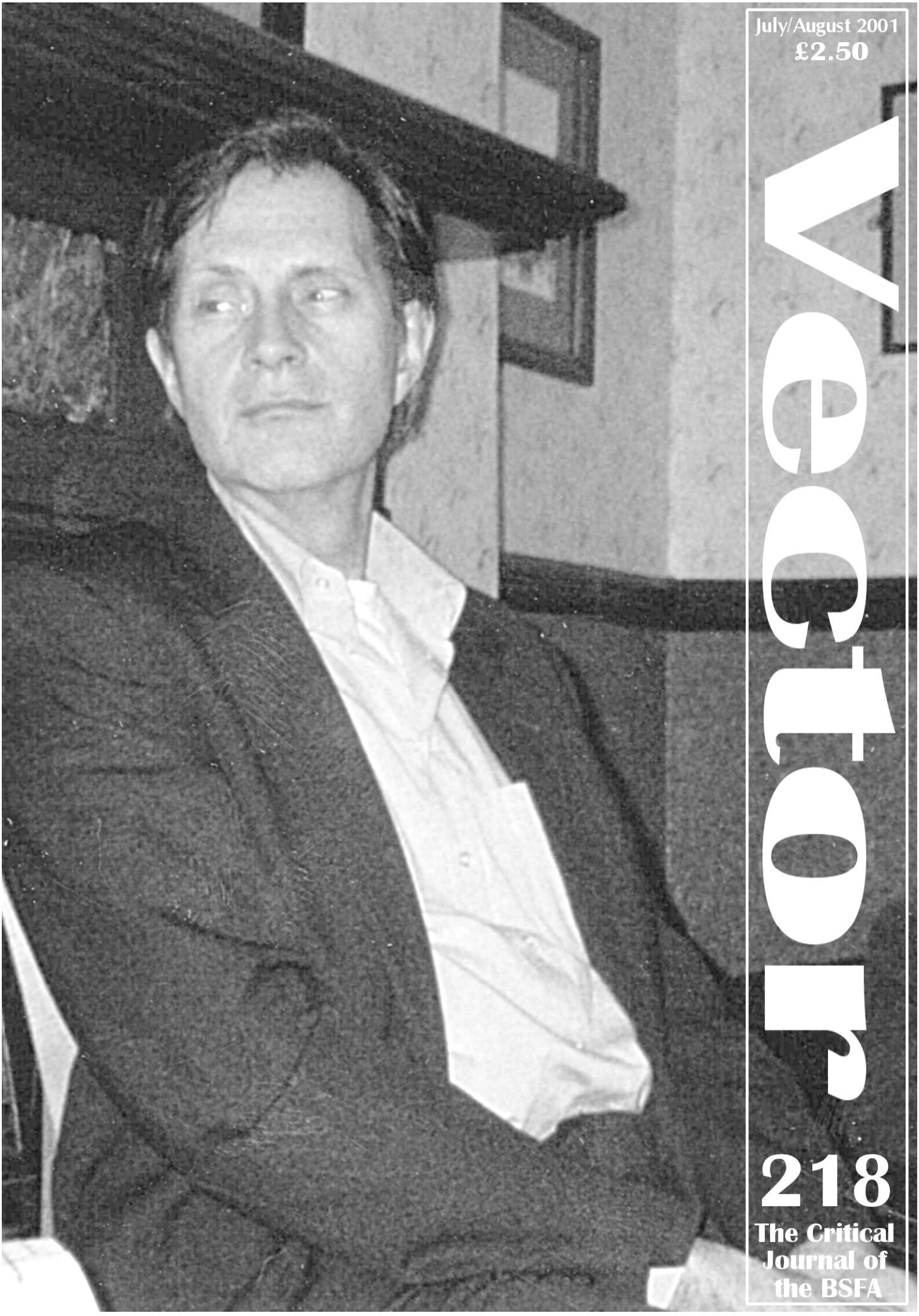

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The Critical Journal of the BSFA

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"Woo the muse of the odd." – Lafcadio Hearn

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The View from the Science Museum

It is slightly shameful to consider that for me the annual Arthur C. Clarke Award has become a major date on the calendar for two reasons rather than one. Firstly, with the arguable exception of the BSFA Award, it is the most significant date in the British sf world. Edward James's contention, in a *Foundation* editorial about ten years ago, that the Clarke would eclipse or replace the BSFA Award has been borne out only in controversy; for every *The Sparrow*, *Take Back Plenty*, and *Vurt* there's been a *Handmaid's Tale*, *Body of Glass* or *The Calcutta Chromosome*. The shortlists of both the BSFA and Clarkes have included most of what has been great over the last decade, with perhaps the edge going to the BSFA for being the more interesting. Are the collective heads of the BSFA wiser than a committee of five?

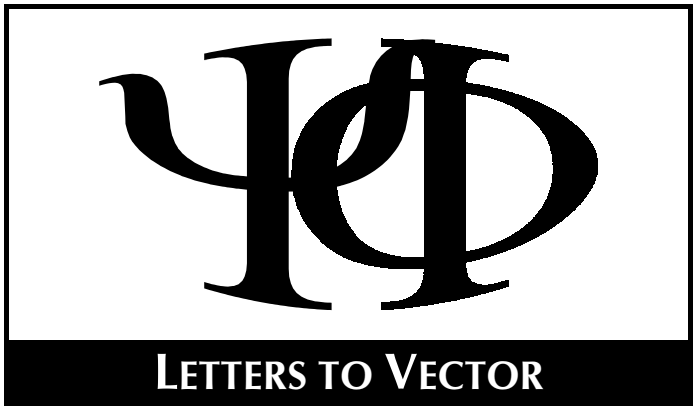
And every year there's the game of second-guessing that jury to play. *Distraction* wasn't the novel I feared would win last year, but it was the one I'd least expected. On the whole sequels or parts of series don't do well; so Ken MacLeod's *Cosmonaut Keep* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents* seemed likely to be discounted. First novels do well, so Adam Roberts's *Salt* and Alastair Reynolds's *Revelation Space* stood a good chance. And as for Mary Gentle's *Ash: A Secret History* and China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, well, the generic police have been out in force and sceptics have voiced the thought that neither of these two are properly sf and therefore unsuitable for a Clarke Award.

Gentle and Miéville have stood out as rivals over the last year, Gentle's weighing in at a couple of hundred pages more, but both of them tying for first place in the BSFA reviewers' poll. In the Eastercon's interminable awards ceremony (interminable because of the 'entertainment' we were subjected to), Miéville was robbed of novel and best artwork, so the second round was taken by Gentle. A triumphant return to form outclassed an impressive sophomore effort. And thus to the Clarke Award in the remarkably blue Wellcome Wing of the Science Museum, South Ken, and a ceremony which has outgrown the auditorium. A drum roll, a ripped-open envelope, and finally the boy done well. *Perdido Street Station* takes the title. So back to a draw then.

And the second reason it's marked on the calendar? Well, the beers in the pub before and after the event, and the available hospitality in the museum, keeps leading to the largest hangover of the year. I used to think it was something to do with the prawn cocktail crisps, but these weren't visible this year so must be ruled out. No, I feared it's the pressure of the freebie, and glasses demanding to be drunk. So with the faint sense that bits of the event have been erased from memory irretrievably, and a large surprise that the train I caught home didn't end up in the wrong place, and with a swollen tongue and parched throat, welcome to a rather hungover *Vector*.

We have two interviews, one with first time novelist Neal Asher and another with Clarke Award-winning Geoff Ryman. We have extended looks at books by John Morressy and by and about Curt Siodmak by *Matrix* media editor Gary Wilkinson and L.J. Hurst respectively. And Clarke Award administrator Paul Kincaid looks at Manifest Destiny in the Cognitive Mapping sequence. Plus we have letters on Philip Pullman and a whole raft of reviews. And I'm off for a lie down in a darkened room...

by Andrew M Butler, May 2001



LETTERS TO VECTOR

From Mike Brain:
Thanks for publishing my LoC, and it was great to see that so many reviewers agreed with my choice for the BSFA Award 2000, and my second choice of *Ash*.

'Books of the Year 2000' compiled by Steve Jeffery [V216] was a 'revelation space' and left me curious to know more about some of the books mentioned. So could you invite Steve to do a review of Jeff VanderMeer's *The Hoegbotton Guide to the Early History of Ambergris by Duncan Shriek* (it's not an April Fool's item is it?), and for Paul Kincaid to review *Daemonomania* by John Crowley? Incidentally, I still need an answer to if, or when, China Miéville's *King Rat* was reviewed, and is it out in paperback?

I was disappointed with *The Amber Spyglass* and thought it had a much 'darker theme', with a blatant 'anti-Christian' message, considering it's a children's book. However, I know nothing of his 'Sally Lockhart' series. Perhaps this calls for a review/retrospective by Edward James?

One way to further publicise sf and the BSFA is to join a 'Readers' Circle', often run by a County library, and nominate some sf, quoting from *Vector* reviews.

AMB replies: *Two of the books you mention have been reviewed: Steve did indeed review* The Hoegbotton Guide to the Early History of Ambergris by Duncan Shriek *in V211 where he wrote 'This is splendid' and notes that Brian Stableford listed it as a book of the year 1999 (V210) – Brian Stableford called it a 'peculiar masterpiece of baroque horror/comedy'. Order from Necropolitan Press, c/o Jeffrey Thomas, 65 South Street, Westborough MA 01581-1628, USA, www.necropolitanpress.com, email necropolitanpress@email.msn.com. Meanwhile* King Rat *was reviewed by Iain Emsley in V209, who noted that 'Miéville creates a dark, close atmosphere compacted through the horror and sewage of subterranean London.* King Rat *is a well-realised debut novel'. There is a paperback – but it's probably racked with horror. We'll take your two suggestions on board.*

It wasn't the anti-Christian message that disturbed me about The Amber Spyglass. *Instead it was the consolation about the afterlife that the book offered, which was at odds with the book's quasi-atheist theme.*

Pullman is also the subject of the next letter:

From Katherine Roberts:
The 2000 polls in the latest *Vector* were interesting. I'm always fascinated by the way certain books cross boundaries, such as Philip Pullman's work becoming recognised and raved over by an adult audience.

I seem to remember that Pullman first crossed this boundary with *Northern Lights* (which, in my opinion, is still the best book of the His Dark Materials trilogy). J.K. Rowling, of course, managed the crossover more or less straight away with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. I can't comment on the Harry Potter series, because I've yet to get around to reading the later books. But with Pullman, it seems that making this crossover to an adult audience has somehow been detrimental to his children's

writing. I watched His Dark Materials develop from the wonderfully engaging characters and fast-paced adventure of *Northern Lights*, through the equally interesting, but somehow less engaging, characters of *The Subtle Knife*, to the imaginative but rather high-brow theme of *The Amber Spyglass*. Of course, I enjoyed the entire trilogy, and there are certainly many teenagers out there who will appreciate it too, but *The Amber Spyglass* is definitely an adult book dealing with adult concerns. The ending is contentious, as some of your reviewers point out, and the book comes across as a work where theme has taken over from story – maybe part of the reason it took so long to write?

While I admire Philip Pullman's work immensely and dream of the day when I can write with just a fraction of his skill, I can't help wondering – and fearing – if he is preparing to leave children's publishing behind entirely. That will be a sad day, indeed.

AMB: *From interviews I've heard, he doesn't seem to see his books as being for children, but for the people that read them. He seems to side-step the issue there, although obviously he cannot police who reads his books. Somewhere along the line I think a responsibility has to be taken if your work is likely to be read by children, although the nature of a responsible attitude will vary from time to time and person to person. I know some parents read everything before their children do.*

Given recent works by Melvyn Burgess, David Almond and from the last two decades by Aidan Chambers, there is clearly a market for children's fiction with a dark twist, whether sf/fantasy or 'mainstream'. For that matter S.E. Hinton and Robert Cormier wrote rather adult children's books in their day. We'll return to Pullman in a future issue, and would like to hear from you if there's any children's or young adult fiction that we should be reading.

Letters to Vector *should be sent to* Andrew M Butler, D28, Department of Arts and Media, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, High Wycombe, HP11 2JZ *or emailed to* ambutler@enterprise.net *and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.*

A Fireside Chat with Geoff Ryman and Tanya Brown

Tanya Brown: You've published six novels so far. The first was *The Unconquered Country*, which started off as an *Interzone* short story. Did it actually *start* as a short story, or did you write the novel – novella – and then strip it down?

Geoff Ryman: No, it started as the story in *Interzone*, which was slightly cut down to improve it. Then it came out in the longer version, which had some pictures to beef it up and also a little bit more about the heroine when she was a child. That made it all the more poignant, and I like those bits.

TB: Which version works best for you?

GR: Oh, the novella. I would have loved to have gone back to the original version, just to compare, but I could never find it again. The one I submitted to *Interzone*, I don't know where it is. I asked them more or less immediately afterwards where it was, and they didn't know either. Somewhere in my bundles of paper there will be a manuscript, but I haven't been able to find it. What was cut was an awful lot of the stuff when the city's falling and she's walking across the equivalent of Pnomh Penh, and that was a much, much longer walk, and more stuff happened. That's all been cut, and it stayed cut, because I couldn't find it again!

TB: There's a lot of rewriting going on in Cambodian history at the moment. The author of a revisionist text was quoted as saying, "We don't want people to remember too much". They're rewriting their history books to recount what might have happened to particular people, rather than what was going on politically. That ties in to the whole rewriting, to some extent the fictionalising, of a really grim bit of history. What do you feel about that?

GR: It's a bit like this thing that's coming out about surrendered wives. In principle it's really objectionable. Women give up. But on the other hand, people find it works, and I think the reason it works for them is, not that they're giving up, but that what they give up is resentment. They place a different interpretation on the same events within that relationship. If only the men did it too, presumably the relationship would go along much better. I can quite see why, if you're trapped by history, you might want to change the interpretation of it. If you don't, then you let the past control you. It is only an interpretation, and any interpretation of history *is* a fiction, and it *is* just made up. The thing we have to hold onto is what actually *was*. You then look at what your interpretation of it is. I'm not sure – I hope nobody will be too offended – but I think possibly some of the difficulties we're having in the Middle East right now is because one of the interpretations placed on the Holocaust is that last time we didn't fight. This time we will. And maybe you could take what happened in the Holocaust and turn it around, and say 'well, *we* won the war. The war was won.' And there were Jews in the army of Britain, there were Jews in the army of America, there were Jews who got out of the camps and fought in resistance armies in the woods of Czechoslovakia. And maybe if they didn't say 'we were chickenshit and let ourselves be gassed' – *if* that's what's going on, I'm not a hundred percent sure – maybe then you would complete that past, and get away from it. And I can quite see why 'hey, we killed anyone who wore glasses' is something you'd want to complete. I doubt whether it's actually going to heal if you lie about it, because it's just going to be suppressed. It's actually going to be something you talk about all the time, in different ways, if you suppress it.

TB: That was very much the point that the article was making: children were learning about the atrocities and the genocide from their parents, rather than learning about it at school. It seems to me that if they can learn about it through fiction, however fictionalised the experience is, at least they're learning.

GR: That's when the myths come up, as well. That's when it doesn't add up, and the sense of shame gets even worse. Then you're not looking at your interpretation, questioning your interpretation; you're even more trapped in whatever myths you've created about it.

TB: Your next novel was *The Warrior Who Carried Life*. It's the Gilgamesh myth, with a twist: the protagonist is a woman who's been mutilated by the invaders, and by magic she takes on a male body and a male role. She has living armour, a living sword – both effectively parts of her body. She goes to the land of the dead... Why the Gilgamesh myth? You've also written a short story using the myth, and a version of the saga for live reading.

GR: My partner is very involved with Middle Eastern archaeology. He didn't dig up a missing bit of the first tablet of Gilgamesh: but he identified it. It had been sitting, unidentified, in some professor's drawer for some decades, and he found it and said "Oh my god, this carries on at the end of the Gilgamesh epic." His colleague was a brilliant woman called Joanna Firbank, who I acknowledge in *Was*... for other stuff that she did: she said, "No, it's not the end, it's the beginning." And they slotted this missing

bit among the other versions they had. What it meant was that they finally understood that the epic of Gilgamesh starts out exactly as it ends: it starts out as it ends, it ends as it starts out, it's a whole circle.

TB: What was the missing bit?

GR: There's a brilliant new translation – it really is very good: it's not only being able to understand the words, it's knowing what the words meant idiomatically and culturally – that's come out in Penguin. It replaces one that Nancy Saunders did, that was (a) a translation from the French and (b) someone looking at the Babylonian and Assyrian versions and just scrunching them together to come up with a complete legend. This one is actually much more precise about where each bit comes from. It advises you to go to the corner of the temple and dig down to the foundation stone, and there you will find a certain kind of box, and there, carved in tablets of lapis lazuli, you will find the original, totemic version of the Epic of Gilgamesh. It just ends up as the epic ends. It was something I got very interested in, and read about a lot. It's a wonderful story.

TB: You refer to the Gilgamesh epic in *Was*... as well. Dorothy is compared to Gilgamesh...

GR: First off, I think Baum was trying to write an American fairytale, so he was taking images that suited the American landscape – machine men, a scarecrow, which is a very American image – and that didn't have anything to do with the Indians. There's nothing Indian or of any ethnic group anywhere in Oz, really. But he took these very American images, but he was putting them in a fairytale environment, and they somehow resonated with these ancient images. The Cowardly Lion is obviously intelligent, bipedal, walks around – like the beast-man Enkidu. There is a plant-spirit, a Straw Man if you like, who Gilgamesh fights: he goes into a garden where the trees grow jewels and meets men who are made out of stone, who are rowers. That's vaguely Ozzy: there's resonances to me there of the Oz characters.

My own personal theory about Dorothy is that she's coming to terms, in the dream, with the death of her parents.

TB: That's right at the end of *Was*... isn't it?

GR: My theory about why the film is so popular is that, without knowing it, it's the great Joseph Campbell thing about the hero going down to the Land of the Dead. My own personal theory about Dorothy is that she's coming to terms, in the dream, with the death of her parents. There's all these parent images everywhere, and they all die, they all have houses dropped on them... There's all sorts of wonderful death images.

TB: *Was*... is quite often called your most successful novel. You've said it's the one of which you're most proud.

GR: That or *253*.

TB: One review said it should be a Booker Prize nominee. Maybe it's the apex of your literary success, as far as the critics were concerned. Why did that novel work then? Was it a case of good timing, of meeting a public demand?

GR: Well, it didn't go down a bomb with the British public, I have to say. They didn't rush out and buy it. It's got legs, and it keeps turning up in America. It's about America, so Americans resonated with it. It's about the movie – it's about a *favourite* movie – and it's about themes that were very prevalent at the time. We haven't got away from the whole question of child abuse and the role of children in society. I think that's still a theme... and we'll never get away from death. I think one of the things that was good about it was that I actually went and did some research for a change. I went to Manhattan, Kansas, so there's a lot of nice stuff about Manhattan, Kansas. And I grew up in a small Canadian village, and I went to school in a schoolhouse that was built when the novel happened; there's an awful lot of that small Canadian village in Zeandale, and the life and times... It all hangs together as a package. It was sort of post-modern but it wasn't, because I didn't really do that much about the movie. It was post-modern, or a little bit beyond post-modern. I just think it's, for me, a very good book.

TB: I wondered how much of it was timing. It was a novel that dealt with AIDS when the epidemic was at its height, before better treatment became available.

GR: That was the big thing about AIDS, wasn't it? There were an awful lot of people who thought they were going to live until their seventies and die of cancer, and suddenly found they were going to die a whole lot sooner. You started losing friends when you just didn't expect to lose them. It's a shock: we were back in the era when people that you knew who were not yet scheduled to go, people who you thought you'd be spending your old age reminiscing with, were just not going to be around. It was a big thing for the gay movement; a lot of people in the gay movement don't have families, so their friends are very important to them. It really was this thing – you thought you and your friends would still be getting together for a drink when you were all seventy, and it wasn't going to be like that. That was a shock, you know: ten years before they were saying, "Sexually transmitted diseases? They're sporting injuries: you go in, have a shot of antibiotics, what's the problem?" That's a quote. From a doctor. So it was a shock when death came back in.

TB: Going back, in chronological terms, to *The Child Garden:* that is your most science fictional novel.

GR: I think *The Unconquered Country* and *The Warrior Who Carried Life* are vaguely in the genre too: sword and sorcery... they're fantasy novels.

TB: *The Child Garden* is set in a future London, with photosynthesising people, and the more-or-less computer-based Consensus...

GR: Yes, it's a sort of biological computer.

TB: I think maybe looking back on it from the perspective of *Was*... it's tempting to turn it into a metaphor for AIDS, even though it's not the same thing. There are characters in *The Child Garden* who are walking cancers.

GR: I think I was vaguely aware at the time that viruses had suddenly become a lot more important. I think it's not so much the cancer as the viruses, and the viruses as a learning experience. At a very simple level, it's just the kind of metaphor that collapses as soon as you start to write a novel about it.

TB: Although the viruses are meant to be benevolent, they actually destroy some people's personalities.

GR: I think what I was aiming for in the novel was something that was neither dystopian nor utopian. That you could look at it either way and say, well, there's a lot of benefits to this. People are actually a lot brighter. If you *have* suddenly discovered that human lifespan is not going to be what it was, then getting education over with very quickly and very thoroughly is probably a neat thing to do. They've got a neat world, too. The thing I liked about it was, it had these houses that grew, and everything was biological.

TB: That takes us back to *The Unconquered Country*: it's a fairytale image, the hut on legs, Baba Yaga and so on. People in *The Child Garden* are living for about thirty-five years, rather than our accustomed span. Curing cancer, however they've done it, has also cured the factors that allow people to get to a reasonable age. And the climax of the novel is that Milena gets cancer, and becomes a living cure for cancer. But you also have all these people who are walking around who are effectively immortal –

the Tumours – because they're walking cancers. I found that a really interesting idea. The viruses can change personality, and cancer becomes almost the opposite, a form of stasis.

GR: It's one of the things in the novel I really like. I like the Tumours. I like the fact that when the viruses start to mutate you get people who st-st-st-stutter and the only way they can speak is to sing. It's been a long time since I thought about *The Child Garden*, actually.

TB: I still maintain it's your only proper science fiction novel. That's not a criticism, by the way!

GR: My next novel's going to be a proper science fiction novel.

TB: The next novel you had published was *253*. Wasn't that one of the first interactive novels?

GR: I would never say it was the first, because the history of interactive fiction is unwritten, it's all very debatable... you can't really verify what's happened online.

TB: It was an early one, though: 1995?

GR: For a hypertext fiction on the web it's reasonably early. But you had all the Storygate stuff that was on disk, so there was a market long before that.

TB: There were also the 'Choose your own adventure' books.

GR: Yes. There was really a very informed, interesting debate going on in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. There was quite a lot of debate about what you could use this kind of fiction for.

TB: I was interested to see how well it did in paperback. Why was that, do you think?

GR: There's a number of factors in that. First it was Internet, and Internet was trendy. It meant that when they interviewed you, you could talk about something other than 'author writes good book! Shock horror!' You could talk about the Internet, and there were some interesting things to say about the Internet and fiction that sounded reasonably new at the time. I think it was a book that was very light in tone, even though it had some dark bits: it had some joviality to it. It was very structured. It got quite popular with younger readers because each character was real short and very controlled. It was an easily perceived structure, and sometimes the structure of a story's very difficult to perceive. It's the most important thing about it, and it's the last thing you see. I think a lot of younger readers found it quite fun: 'oh, this paragraph's just describing what you see; this one's filling you in on the background; and this paragraph's what's actually going on now'. They use it a lot in schools to help teach writing. A couple of times I went to schools where what they'd done as a way of teaching people to think about writing issues was to have them do characters in *253*: one of the schools – this brilliant story that I wish I'd used – is trying to write the sequel. They're stuck on a train: this is the train *behind* the one that crashes...

TB: You've just given away the ending of *253*!

GR: No, it does say at the beginning that the train's going to crash. And at the time, it was almost unbelievable – a British [tube] train crashing? The last one was the Moorgate tube crash. What this story was, that the kids came up with, was this guy who's been busking on the Underground for years, and hasn't got any money for it. He comes in; he's got a saxophone: he says, "Right. For years I've been playing you music and you haven't paid me any money. And now I'm going to make the most God-awful racket you've ever heard, and you're going to have to pay me enough money to stop." He just starts blasting away. What happens is, he's doing this and he suddenly sees this disappointed schoolkid, looking really hurt, and the kid's carrying a saxophone case... It's a nice little story. I feel very bad about the sequel, and all sorts of stuff I wanted to do with *253*. I wanted to write the next novel, but I had to get back and do real work instead. I never got around to doing the sequel, and I feel very bad about that. The other great thing was that one of the schools did a whole bunch of musical pieces based on the characters. We were going to get them online, and you were going to be able to follow links through to them. The music was fantastic. It was all done with computers and sampling.

TB: Is there any chance of that appearing?

GR: Well, I'm still in touch with the music professor who got them to do that. They've left now, and they've taken the music. The other thing was, the sequel had Colin Greenland, and Susannah, and Jenny Colgan who wrote *Amanda's Wedding*, and all sorts of people wrote characters for the sequel.

TB: So we won't see it now?

GR: No! I've got to write the next novel...

TB: In one of the ads in the book you have the updating of great works of literature for the interactive age: pointing out the metaphors of cages and prisons in *Casablanca*, and so on. Have you ever seriously thought about doing that?

GR: No. What a horrible thing to do!

TB: Phew! But do you think it might be fun?

GR: I think it might be fun as an exercise in lit crit, or as a game – to see how many different images you could come up with. The challenge is not to do lit crit online, the challenge isn't to write poetry online, the challenge is not to be surrealistic online: all of those things have been done really well. The challenge isn't to create collections of stuff via hypertext. There was a really great exhibition in Paris, and one room was filled with every single telephone directory in the world. You'd go in, and you could look up a number in Amazonas, Brazil. Another one – they gave this work of art away free, and it had been a sort of online thing – and that was a photograph and biography of all two hundred and fifty people who were dead from gunfire in America in a week. Every single person who'd been killed by gunfire, and how they died, and who they were.

...other people saying, "You must be English, you're such a miserable git!"

TB: I'm actually surprised there were only two hundred and fifty.

GR: It was very interesting: the number of completely casual slayings, the number of suicides... but that was a collection work of art. It's actually really difficult to think about what text fiction online is going to be about, unless it's going to be participative, gaming-type fiction, where the story comes out of a world, and it's a game. I think that works pretty well. But reading online is not fun. It hurts the eyes and you don't have much time. We still have a lot of work to do on it.

TB: Are you tempted to rewrite *253,* or to do extra things with it, like turn it into database-driven fiction?

GR: No, not at all. HarperCollins want to do it as an e-book, which is a proprietary format that you load into a particular reader. I have said it so often: it really was very interesting for me to do the web version first. I just had a text file editing package: I didn't have Dreamweaver or anything. I thought it would teach me HTML to do it by hand. It didn't: it just taught me how to type! The online version... well, I'm afraid I think it works better as a book. It was meant to be about the variety of life in London. I think what all those hypertext links did is trapped people, following through from characters who were linked to one another – so they all worked at Shell, or they all lived in the same street, or they all knew each other, or they were all in love with the Big Issue salesman... It was only online that I got people writing to me and saying "It's so much fun to have a nice, light-hearted online romp, thank you!;" and other people saying, "You must be English, you're such a miserable git!" On the upside, you

could say it was about the hidden similarities that people have, so one person's wearing somebody else's jacket second-hand. You don't *know* your lover's on the same train. All the things you don't know about, but there are similarities that link people. But in print, without the hypertext, two things happened. It was much closer to what I thought it would be like. It's an urban kaleidoscope – that's a genre...

TB: Are there any other examples of that?

GR: Georges Perec, author of *Life, A User's Manual*... there are loads. It was much more of an urban kaleidoscope, which is a chance to show the variety and how different everybody is. Of course, going through character by character, they seem very different from each other, which is what I wanted. And the other thing I found out is that irony is too easy in hypertext: two lovers, different cars, one's just decided to break the relationship off, the other's just decided to propose marriage and has left his wife... Now, when you're reading it, you read through and two cars later you recognise who it is. 'Oh, I know who this is! I understand, I get it!' That's fun.

TB: It's like a memory game when you're reading it.

GR: All fiction is a memory game, and all irony is enhanced if it's you seeing it. But hypertext links make it just too easy. They sort of slam it in your face. I thought maybe it reduced the impact. I decided that I didn't like hypertext links in the middle of the text, because (a) it inevitably emphasises stuff – it's a different colour, and it's underlined – and it may not be the most important thing in the description. And (b) as soon as you have a hypertext link in a piece of text, you're faced with confrontation: the user's saying 'Am I going to click on that or not?' If the answer is 'I'll read to the end', they're going to read everything much more quickly, because they want to get back to the link. It actually bounces you out of it. My advice for anyone writing anything for the web is, don't have hypertext links in the copy. Save it all up till they've read what you want them to read, and then have the links underneath, or to the side, or above.

...somebody uses a courgette for a completely unspeakable purpose.

TB: But the title's a bit of a fib, isn't it? There are 254 passengers on the train. There's William Blake...

GR: Ah, but he's a footnote. He's outside the rules. He has more than 253 words. He's not one of the 253 people sitting on the train.

TB: That's the other thing: they're all sitting down, on a rush-hour train. It must be science fiction!

GR: Yes! It's a game! You have to grant me that it's a perfectly filled train: if there's an empty seat, it's because someone's turned it down. Everyone who wants a seat has one. And you also have to grant me that everybody gets off, nobody gets on. It's a game. It's a train of fate.

TB: Veering back slightly to *The Child Garden*, as well as *253*: they're both novels that are very much rooted in our London. There are architectural footnotes: the HarperCollins offices in a building modelled on a Scandinavian prison, and the School of Oriental Studies... It's also true of *Lust:* very much, if not London here and now, at least a London that we can recognise. It's almost a love story to London.

GR: That's what *253* was meant to be. If people go away and say 'gosh, London's neat', that's one of the things that I wanted to happen. Just south of the river, just past Waterloo, is a really neglected, and often quite ugly, part of the town. It's just not very lovely. Not many people would go there clutching a guidebook. There's actually quite a lot of interesting stuff there if you poke a little bit.

TB: Have you ever thought of doing the Geoff Ryman Literary Walk?

GR: No... I've had a couple of people ask me to write guidebooks. Judith Clute and I tried to do a series of books about London, but it just all fell through.

TB: You put her house in *Lust* instead?

GR: I put her house in *Lust*. I put *her* in *Lust*! Well, sort of... she's the French Canadian who's selling the flat.

TB: Justina Robson said about *253*, here in *Vector*, that "it looks and feels like a friendly and shallow kind of book, not a trawl through the heart of darkness." Is that also true of the way they've marketed *Lust*?

GR: Well, they marketed *253* right. When they showed me the cover of *Lust*, I was speechless. It's a very dark book. It is *not 253*. It's got very dark things in it... you can be dark and sexy. You can have a nice black cover, which just says *Lust*. Even in gold foil! But that looks like a poster for a Farrelly Brothers film, called something like *What You Did with the Courgette*. Basically, in the novel you think you're buying, somebody uses a courgette for a completely unspeakable purpose. His mother's making the salad. Before he can stop her she's chopped it up raw and put it on the salad, and the guests arrive. And everyone says, "It's absolutely delicious. I've never tasted a salad like it. What have you done?" And he sits there... You know, I saw this cover, and I just said it was jejune. (Unfortunately, I didn't know what jejune meant at the time: later I looked it up in the dictionary and realised it was the wrong word. I meant naïve.) What is it? It's like every dumb joke you've ever seen. You look at the cover and say 'oh God, there's a penis on the cover. Oh – no – it's a couple of vegetables.' And that's not funny. There's just no joke there. It's quite stylish without it. Because it's heavily about fathers – but *not* like *Man and Boy*, which was a very different take on father-son relationships. The cover was kind of based on *Man and Boy*. The marketing department never read the book. The original idea for the novel was that it would be a lot happier than it turned out. I don't write happy books. Though it does have a happy ending. It's actually about someone who gets his act together. It's encouraging, you know: if he can do it, maybe I can. But it isn't a light, fun, jokey read, and that's what they thought they were getting.

TB: Some of it is very funny, though.

GR: The kind of word that gets used to describe those books – it is a kind of marketing genre – is 'sparkling'. It means that it's funny, it's got some depth to it: they're not bad novels. They're all very funny. They're about very close to home, often romantic relationships. They're called 'breezy'. The covers are awesome: they look like the kind of animations you used to get at the beginning of 1950s Doris Day movies, little jokey animations that are quite stylish. It's a kind of sub-genre. HarperCollins is a great publisher, they know what they're doing, and they did think they'd got one of those. I think the marketing's been proved wrong. There isn't a review – and there haven't been many – that doesn't mention that the cover's misleading. There isn't a review that hasn't said "Don't be put off by the cover." I think they got it wrong, and it really does mean you should stand and fight your corner. I should have fought harder.

TB: Is it selling?

GR: They never tell you if your books sell. Or rather, they haven't said "This one's another best-seller," so the answer is... well, we don't know yet. It is in every bookshop. I was very impressed with the way they got it into the shops.

TB: It's more exemplary than your other novels: it's a demonstration of how somebody can change their life. The protagonist learns and changes all the way through. You can see how he's growing and changing just by the effect he's having on his Angels, the beings he summons up in order to have sex with

them. He's coming to terms with his past, as well: he's coming to terms with another of your recurring themes, which is fulfilment of potential. There's a bit in *Was*... with Judy Garland's mother dying of a heart attack in a car park.

GR: I was aware of this really neat idea and I just loved it. It was so Platonic it wasn't true: that basically you had an ideal you, somewhere else, and that this ideal you was what, if you did everything that was in you, you would become. You're born with certain proclivities and potentials, and either you fulfilled them or you didn't. One of the worst things you could do was block them. I just found that a really neat idea, because I like the idea that somewhere out there there's a spirit life. One of the things that bothered me about a spirit life is, if it's outside time, then does that mean you were there before you were born? If it's outside time, there can't be a beginning, a middle and an end. It can't be that there's no you, then you get born and suddenly the spirit life has been there all along. Fulfilment of potential was quiescent, and flared up in that book. Michael is good. Like most of my people he's a miserable git, but he comes out OK in the end. It takes a miracle to do it!

TB: Though apart from the Angels, quite an ordinary, everyday miracle.

GR: I'm just wondering if he could have done it without the miracle. It's *A Christmas Carol*, it's *Groundhog Day*: the miracle comes, the miracle exactly suits how limited the hero is, and it's the thing they need to complete or break away from who they are. Actually, most of us do not change. We're stuck, really very badly stuck, and when we try to change it's like dieting – dieting makes you fat. Most of us, the more we try to change, the more we're trapped with ourselves. Sometimes you see people who really do change, and you wonder how they do it.

TB: You say elsewhere, though, that you have to accept things in order to move on, to change. If you just keep saying 'no, that's not right, that's not fair', you won't change at all.

GR: That's what I've learnt recently about people close to me. I was complaining about them, and I realised that I was actually terribly fond of them – exasperated, but fond of them.

TB: On to more general themes. You explore the theme of immortality in several places – people who can't die, or people who can only die under particular conditions. In *The Warrior who Carried Life*, Cara has immortality conferred upon her. The Galu can't die unless they are killed by someone who is, effectively, in the right frame of mind: that's how they reproduce. The Tumours, in *The Child Garden*: the Angels, in *Lust*. Very often they're sterile, and that's an integral part of their immortality.

GR: You don't want to be immortal like the folk in *Gulliver's Travels*, who just get older and older, and more and more feeble. You want to be immortal and young and fit, but if you're young and fit you'll probably be able to reproduce, and that's a very bad recipe for the ecology of the planet if, every thirty years or so, you have another generation of kids. It's possible to lose sight of just how useful mortality is. We don't like it when it happens to us, but it's like market forces: nobody likes market forces, but they're very useful things.

TB: In *The Child Garden*, you've got children who've been deprived of childhood, and adults who've been deprived of old age. The whole parent-child relationship disappears. That struck me as another take on the same problem.

GR: That society is full of orphans. The ones who have some parent around for the whole of their childhood are very, very lucky. A typical person in that society grows up in an orphanage, which is a very different experience from growing up in a home. I think that does give you a very different take on people. I say that at close hand, because my Mom grew up in an orphanage. I was stuck on orphans for a good long time.

That society is full of orphans.

TB: In *Was*... you have Dorothy, whose mother is dead and whose father is absent. To some extent, even in *The Warrior who Carried Life* and *The Unconquered Country*, there are missing or dead parents.

GR: I do have a very strong tendency to end up writing about orphans. In the end, I promised myself with *Was*... that it was a habit, and it was going to stop. So in my next novel, which will be called *Air*, the heroine's problem is she has too many relatives: she's got family coming out of her ears. This is a novel about the Internet. I finished the first draft in December 1995, and went back to *253*. It actually has in it something called Last Minute Rescue, which is not that far away from Lastminute.com: it has things like portals and so on, which in 1995 wasn't too bad. The novel's about the last village in the world to go online. The Internet's about to be supplanted by a brand new and very exciting technology, and the village fashion expert comes down from the hill into the local town, and realises that they'd better get their act together and find out about all of this, or they're just going to be nowhere once this new technology comes in. A lot of the novel's about how she gets her village online and up to date. Another part of the novel's how she keeps getting betrayed by everyone. An awful lot of the story centres on these people: either how they betray her early on and they end up friends, or they're her best friends and then they betray her. It's a wheels-within-wheels novel of village life, as much as anything else.

TB: Another female protagonist?

GR: Another female protagonist, and another vaguely oriental one. When I started writing this, I was aware that it's not unlike *The Unconquered Country*. Most of it's pretty down-to-earth stuff. It's a village in a landscape: it's not unlike Yemen, which is very hot, but it's very hilly and high up, so you get lots of terraces. Very hard agriculturally, very isolated because all the roads go down the valleys.

TB: Another recurring theme that I noticed is autism. In particular, you seem concerned with the way that the gifts of an autistic, or unconventionally intelligent or talented child – both Milena and Rolfa in *The Child Garden*, Jonathan, and to some extent Dorothy, in *Was*..., Third in *The Unconquered Country* – can be destroyed by well-meant education or treatment. You also focus on the rich inner life, the intuitive skills, creativity and so on of the autistic or damaged person – whether child or adult. Why's autism so fascinating? Do you think that more emphasis should be placed on understanding rather than 'curing' this sort of condition? And, in *253*, you have the data analyst Lisa Sindersley realising that her research implies that all men are born mildly autistic – "their elaborate systems of logic, their narrow focus, their lack of emotional understanding." Is there a real-world basis for that? It's terribly convincing!

GR: I'm not so sure I swallow autism as a source of creativity. If anything, by removing the ability to interpret human behaviour, communications, gestures, it can destroy creativity. I did definitely go through a phase of wondering what hidden losses were involved in inculcating children with a vast and complex range of cultural tools and beliefs. There is some evidence of a loss of creativity as most people age, usually while still subjected to the educational process. I did very much go through a phase of wondering whether the setting up of authority figures in education, science, and the arts was good for our ability to think clearly. So there was a strong tendency in my work to show rebellious or withdrawn children defending or losing creative skills or more holistic ways of thinking. Re the character in *253*... it was a made-up nightmare SF scenario – that there would be a scientific basis for some kind of sexism. It is hopefully not true.

TB: In an interview on the Books Online website (www.bol.com), you talk about the gradual demise of literary science fiction, and its replacement by film.

GR: I'm not sure about literary sf. I remember when I was at Milford, and we all shared our favourite ever moments in science fiction. It was all images like the hot air balloon going round Jupiter in Arthur C. Clarke... All very, very visual images that you just didn't get outside books. You needed books to see these things. Now, of course, so much of that stuff is done very well by films. I love the special effects in movies, and I actually think that some of the television series think in very broad terms about the format. Unlike the old television stories where you were back at square one every week, you begin to see different themes coming out in different seasons. All that's very clever. It's obviously drawn an awful lot of the energy away from science fiction books into science fiction media. Then the backwash is that about half the books on the rack are media tie-in. But then there's the Science Fiction Masterworks list. Those are great. That is just such a timely thing to do. Our heritage restored!

TB: So, whither literary science fiction?

GR: I think it's going to be around, but it's going to be like really challenging jazz, or interesting new serious classical music: there will be a following, and I think it's going to be quite easy to get reasonably well known in that following fairly quickly. You could arrive and make your mark very quickly, have people who are interested in your work, talk about your work very knowledgeably – I think all that is a wonderful part of it, but I'm just not sure that it's going to have massive market impact. Given that a hundred thousand books were published last year, I think that no one's seeing the death of the book. It's just the death of the individual book.

...they get distracted by the frocks...

TB: Are you a science fiction writer?

GR: That's like asking me whether I'm a gay writer. I'm a writer who writes things that are about gay people, and I write novels that are science fiction.

TB: But you don't ghettoise yourself as an sf author.

GR: I'm not only a science fiction author, because plainly I don't only write science fiction. You've just said I only wrote one science fiction novel! I am a writer who writes science fiction.

TB: Do you feel your roots lie in the science fiction genre?

GR: It just depends what decides it's going to be written. If that's science fiction, then great. I always felt that science fiction *was* fiction. It never occurred to me that it was something separate from fiction. I had a couple of run-ins with the *Irish Times*: they don't review science fiction. It's very interesting: when *Was*... came out, I was surprised to discover that the marketing didn't say 'winner of the following awards', and that they were promoting it to the gay market. The one thing they didn't tell bookshops was that they were also promoting it in *Interzone* and to the science fiction market. It never occurred to me that it's actually less socially acceptable to be a science fiction writer than to be gay. But this is the case. Don't tell them at work that you're a science fiction fan!

[Audience]: Did you see the episode of *Frasier* where they go to a science fiction convention because there's an actor there that they saw doing Shakespeare, and now he's on an sf television show. They're trying to save him from the science fiction show by bringing him back to the stage. The whole thing was 'Science fiction! Aargh!'

GR: Mind you, have you been to the Seattle convention? It's the one at which Thomas Disch invented the Philip K. Dick award. It used to have guests of honour like Ursula Le Guin and Vonda McIntyre. Very suddenly it is the most media-driven 'dressed up as a Martian bunny-rabbit' convention anywhere. If the writers knew anything about Seattle, if that was the convention they went to, maybe it figures. It's the only science fiction convention I've been to where I went to the dealers' room, and I wouldn't say there was a bookshop there. There was a bookshop that specialised in Terry Goodkind special editions, and another that sold really old Edgar Rice Burroughs novels, but there wasn't a good bookshop.

TB: You've worked in theatre, and you were a member of Mind the Gap – Tube theatre that took place on the Tube itself, as apparently real-life incidents. Is that still going?

GR: I don't think so, because it was all a product of the comic genius who actually liked doing that to himself. It was a great idea.

TB: Did you enjoy it?

GR: I loved doing it – yes, that incident in *253* [where 'Geoff Ryman' sits in the wrong person's lap during a performance] actually happened. I hadn't realised that playing a complete fool in public is awful. We all like to look reasonably good in public, and to look like the biggest Charlie on the planet, to an audience that doesn't know that they're seeing a performance... If you're funny and it's a performance, there's admiration for the fact that you're being happy, and there's an appreciation of what you're doing. He was doing the most brilliant tease of people who just thought they had a loony on their hands. It's so humiliating, really genuinely humiliating: I was surprised how much I hated it. Other stuff happened: he did run off when the police finally stopped us, he just bolted –

TB: Leaving you to answer the questions?

GR: Yeah. 'We have a letter somewhere...'

TB: How about more traditional theatre? Have you ever acted on stage?

GR: One of the things I wanted to be when I was younger was an actor, and I started out as a Theatre Arts major before I decided it wasn't an education. Living in apartment houses in Los Angeles, where there are actors, is enough to really convince you that you never want to be an actor. It's just a miserable life.

TB: And film... you've said elsewhere that you've tried to write films.

GR: I keep trying to write films and I think I'm possibly one of life's novelists.

TB: That's not necessarily a bad thing!

GR: They've taken an option out on *Was*... and the number of scripts it's gone through – talk about development hell! There's been a play version in Chicago which was completely faithful to the book, and that was very educational because it was terrible. The acting was great, but if you take something that works in 400 pages and you jam it all into two hours... First off, you think they're all on a donkey cart that's broken free, and it's going downhill faster and faster, and there's no brake. And secondly, it's too jammed together. There is Dorothy being fucked from behind by Uncle Henry, and in walks the show's sponsor, who's paid to get it staged because he loves *The Wizard of Oz*. It's slightly out of context... and then you're introduced to him at half time, and it's all rather awkward. I went off faithful adaptations of novels in a big way after that. I told the filmmakers that they would have to combine characters, and would they please change as much as possible. I did that (a) so that it might possibly be a good film, rather than a terrible play, and (b) I figure if the movie of *Was*... is very different from the book there'll be some reason to read the book. I also remember a good television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. That was wonderful except, like every adaptation of Jane Austen – except *Clueless*, which is Beverley Hills – they get distracted by the frocks, and it becomes 'hey, wasn't it wonderful to live in that era?' That's not what she's on about. So, as an antidote to that, I went back and read *Pride and Prejudice* again. All that happened was that I was re-screening this movie in my head, that I didn't like. It wrecked *Pride and Prejudice* for me, which was awful. So change as much as you like: (a), my novel's safe; (b) it stands a chance of working as a movie.

TB: And (c) they're going to change it anyway, so you may as well give them permission.

GR: The great thing was, they've done this huge exercise of combining all the characters and changing the dates and changing everything, and now they're doing a completely faithful adaptation again.

TB: Finally... in *Was*... you have an author being asked "What's your worst nightmare?" – and he laughs it off with a crowd-pleasing answer. So, what *is* your worst nightmare?

GR: I have a lot of nightmares... Aside from horrible physical illness, aside from somebody I love dying horribly, aside from really screwing up at work, being so incompetent that I want to die... some of my worst nightmares are in *Lust*. Being killed by a lover would be pretty godawful.

[Audience]: You're a writer who's expressed interest in acting, and I know quite a few actors who write. What are the similarities?

GR: It's the same job, exactly the same job. The public are quite right to be most interested in who's starring in a film, because the actors are the storytellers. What a writer does in a novel is a whole bunch of imitations of the tone of voice of his characters. The main action of any story is when somebody makes a decision. Nobody talks when they make a decision, and nobody does anything while they make a decision, but that's the most dramatic bit of any story, when someone decides, because that's when they change. After they've decided, then they go and start shooting people, or write the letter that breaks up their relationship, or whatever. The most important bit of any story is in the hands of the person who's telling the story. If you're a novelist, what you're doing is you're acting being that character to yourself, and you're mimicking their experience of going through that silence. What you're doing as a writer is taking the silence and giving it words. You're slowing time down, you're imitating that person: you're talking in their tone of voice, trying to bring alive the experience of that decision. I think in movies, what a really good actor is doing a lot of the time is filling in the gaps between the dialogue. They're putting the little tip of the iceberg that is the dialogue into the perspective of all this history that the audience are never going to know. They're showing you what's going on in that character's eyes, and how they feel about things... I find myself doing it when I'm re-reading, I get very attached to certain ways that those characters I've made speak, and certain emphases, and certain ways they move. It's a very important part of communicating what an experience is for someone, and I think actors do that. My experience of being a writer is that I can do a performance once, and I get it in words. If I try to do it too often, it goes flat and dead and I don't have the technique to sustain it.

The most important bit of any story is in the hands of the person who's telling the story.

[Audience]: What about the acting experience? A writer gets to make the character's choices, whereas for an actor the choices are made, but they have to communicate to the audience to make it seem like they're spontaneous.

GR: They have to work their own way, imaginatively, into role. They will never get it identical with the author. They have to work their way back into the same territory that the author was in. With the play of *Was*... the actors sat and talked to me. They were all very professional Chicago actors. They had these tiny parts and they did wonderful things with them. They'd ask, 'Uncle Henry: he fought in the Civil War, didn't he?' I could visibly see the good ones working their way back into the play.

[Audience]: What about computer-generated actors?

GR: The person who'll be acting will be the animator.

[Audience]: But when they recreate the greats...

GR: I'd love to have Marilyn back. I'd remake *Breakfast at Tiffany's* starring Marilyn Monroe.

[Audience]: You think it could be made to work? It wouldn't be Marilyn Monroe.

GR: What would happen is, there'd be certain star animators. That's how animation works. They base it a lot on the person who does the voice. For the dragon in *Dragonheart* they filmed Sean Connery reading the dialogue, and mimicked his actions. I'd love to see Cary Grant. Work your way into the Cary Grant part, give yourself that persona: Cary Grant on screen is a persona that Archie Leach created. Get into that fiction and reanimate it: it'd be great.

Justina Robson interviewed and wrote about Geoff Ryman in Vector 203, *an issue which also contained Elizabeth Billinger writing about* The Unconquered Country *and Cambodia – Eds.*

Hourglass – John Morressy's 'Del Whitby' Trilogy

by Gary Wilkinson

Some books you read and forget them the next day. Some books you read and they never leave you. The 'Del Whitby' trilogy by John Morressy are three books that, for me, definitely fall into the latter category.

The series is set in a future universe where mankind has expanded in a series of waves to conquer the stars. On the way they have encountered a number of humanoid aliens, some of which are, or almost are, indistinguishable from humans, and with some of these they have interbred. The events of the novels themselves take place in a post-expansion phase, when space travel has become a much rarer event than previously. What little there is, is in ships up to two centuries old as new ones are no longer being constructed, the technology having been lost. Space travel is also somewhat dangerous, not from mechanical failure of the old ships which were crafted to last, but from the slavers, pirates and the ultra-mysterious ultra-alien Rinn that lurk out in space. The books centre on several very different examples of some of the few starfarers of this time.

Although the three slim books can, as will be seen later, be read in any order, the first to be written, and the first I read myself, was *Starbrat* (1972). The book tells the story of Deliverance-From-The-Void Whitby. Thankfully his rather longwinded name is usually shorted to just Del, although there is a running joke throughout the novel over how long and complicated his name eventually becomes as various awards, titles and honorifics are added to it. Del lives among a community of simple devout farmers descended from the Amish, and the book begins with him about to reach the age of maturity. He discovers that he was adopted, originally being born in the hold of a starship in transit – thus a starbrat – to unknown parents before arriving as an infant in an escape capsule along with a tantalising note hinting at his origins. At first Del rejects this information, not wishing to learn

any more of his real parents, and wants to remain with his adoptive parents and marry his girlfriend. Unfortunately events conspire against him when he is captured by passing slavers. After a chance fight his natural ability for combat is revealed and instead of serving in a mine, he ends up fighting in an arena on a Roman Empire-style planet. Eventually Del wins his way to freedom and the rest of the book follows his wide-ranging adventures, during which he tries to return to his fiancée while he simultaneously investigates his origins and searches for his father, climaxing in a *Magnificent Seven*-style showdown against a horde of space pirates. He manages to finally achieve both of his aims but it does not bring the fulfilment and happiness that he was expecting. In the final coda we see Del, now much older, wiser and happy, leading an exhibition to discover the universe via a trip across the 'great void' to the nearest galaxy.

The book written second, *Nail Down the Stars* (1973; variant title *Stardrift* 1975), has a similar plot line to the first. Jolon Gallamor, who will change his name many times, is the young son of a notorious gangster: "He used to tell Jolon, 'Son, in all this galaxy, there's just two kinds of property: ours and theirs. And whatever isn't nailed down is ours. You remember that'". The novel starts with Jolon fleeing from his father's murderers by stowing away on a departing spaceship. He soon discovers that, rather fortuitously, he has run away with a circus. Jolon thus begins his career as a 'skillman': a glorified acrobat, musician and actor. At the insistence of the ship's owner, who virtually adopts him, he also learns the rare skill of reading. However, he eventually realises he is being exploited by the spaceship's owner. So he jumps ship for a pure acting company, assumes a new identity, and eventually develops to become a successful and famous playwright rewriting the works of Shakespeare that had been used to teach him to read in the first place. He leaves all this behind when he finds happiness and love among the people of a primitive planet that the acting troop's leader uses as a regular stopover. The acting troop leaves Jolon behind to be married. Unfortunately this blissful period is not to last. His pregnant wife, along with all her community, are massacred by the space pirates whilst he is away from their village. Marooned, he is eventually rescued by a military ship who chase and destroy the pirates – almost destroying themselves in the process. Jolon has a further series of adventures, including being enslaved on the desert planet Xhancos, then helping to lead the rebellion against the slavers. He escapes the bloodshed that ensues when the slave rebellion collapses into in-fighting for more adventures. He returns to Xhancos to finally find happiness at the end of the novel with a new native wife and children – but not before using his bardic skill to finally end for good the endemic slavery that had returned when the natives regained the planet after the rebellion's collapse.

The third novel, *Under a Calculating Star* (1975), takes a slightly different tack from the previous two. The first third is taken up with a mission to retrieve a legendary long-lost hoard of treasure from an enormous trap-filled temple on a 'forbidden' planet. This ends in disaster with only two members of the team surviving and the vast majority of the riches still unrecovered. The remainder of the book covers the adventures of the two very different survivors. Kian Jorry, the leader of the mission, is a k'Turalp'Pa. Identical to humans, they prize cunning and cleverness above all else, being born 'under a calculating star.' Like both Del and Jolon he will change his identity. His manservant and protégé is Axxal, a Quespodon, a strong, heavily muscled race of near-human humanoids with distinctive mottled skin. Axxal is blessed with above-average intelligence for his race, the majority of whose members are the dim pack-horses for the rest of the galaxy. Seeking to sell the few gems that they had managed to salvage from the temple, they arrive at Xhanchos, the same desert planet as featured in the second book, this time once the initial rebellion had finished. Both are caught up in the scheming of the survivors and eventually separate to achieve their own individual destinies.

Convergence

As stated earlier, the books are all set in the same universe and the events run more or less concurrently. In fact, though all three have widely different beginnings and endings, one of their most intriguing aspects is that during certain events the plots of the books merge and flow into one another. We have already seen that the desert planet rebellion is shown from two different viewpoints, both before and after. Also, and perhaps more interestingly, one key event in all three novels is seen by each of the main protagonists from a very different perspective.

In *Starbrat* Del, having gained a spaceship and a friend, soon after obtaining his freedom from the arena, meets a stranded 'ragged old spacebum' named Gariv who tells him the following hard-luck story: Gariv was once a powerful warlord on the planet Skorat who left his new wife Nikkolope to lead a mission against the Rinn to avenge his own father's death on a earlier mission. However, after a great victory the journey home was total calamity and following a series of various mishaps, taking years trying to return, he finally lost everything, including his ship, when he was captured and enslaved. Del agrees to take him home as it is on his way. They arrive at Skorat just in time for Nikkolope's new wedding, Gariv assumed to have been lost. They managed to get themselves invited into the pre-wedding celebration feast hosted by Nikkolope and her future consort Souritan. During a lull in the proceedings Gariv declares himself. When Souritan denounces him as an impostor and orders him arrested and taken away to be impaled Gariv attacks him, throwing a javelin. Souritan grabs it straight out of the air and fatally returns it. In one quick moment it is all over and Gariv is dragged out dying, before Del and his friend have a chance to back him up as they had promised. Back on their ship, Del and his friend discuss whether Gariv was really who he said he was, before finding they have a stowaway.

In *Nail Down The Stars,* whilst Jolon is enslaved on the planet Xanchos, he meets a likewise enslaved Gariv just before he leads the rebellion against the slavers. Gariv tells Jolon his story about leaving his wife for the Rinn expedition. Jolon, with some sympathy for his plight, becomes his Anthem-Maker, creating songs to fill the slaves with fighting courage. However, Jolon is disgusted with the excessive bloodshed of the rebellion, and with the carnage of the reprisals against the slavers that follows. He has also found love again with a native woman. He escapes to avoid the obviously forthcoming anarchy and also overt threats to his life. At the last moment his new love says she cannot leave; according to tradition their son must be born on the planet. Jolon promises to return. After some further escapades he finds himself heading to Skorat after hitching a lift with some traders. He meets Nikkolope and informs her of Gariv, and speculates that it was highly unlikely that he would have survived the uprisings against him that were about to take place as Jolon left. Jolon becomes a bard on Skorat but finds court life confining. He also wants to return to Xanchos. Gariv's arrival prompts his departure and Jolon scurries away before the repercussions. He stows away in a handy starship which just happens to be Del's. This incident and their subsequent travels together occur in both of the first two books and we see them from two very different viewpoints. In Del's eyes Jolan appears very much the foppish and effete artist, while from the opposite direction, Del at first looks very much the fierce warrior. It is only by reading both accounts from both perspectives and by living alongside the characters do we learn that they are much more rounded personalities and have more in common than we first think. This is something that both protagonists eventually realise to their greater wisdom.

We only learn the final truth about 'Gariv' in *Under a Calculating Star*. Jorry arrives on Xanchos after Jolon has left but while Gariv is still very much in charge. Jorry proceeds to insinuate himself with Gariv, planning to steal his 'throne' at an opportune moment. He even starts an affair with Gariv's new lover, Santrahaar, whom he finds he genuinely loves. Jorry's hand

is forced, not only by the start of the infighting, but by Gariv's declaration to Jorry that he had suspected Santarhaar of having an affair so killed her. In revenge Jorry kills Gariv after first provoking him, Jorry's skill in devious knife-fighting easily beating the blustering swordsman more used to a fairer fight. Jorry leaves the planet as fighting erupts again. He wants to return to the forbidden planet to loot the temple but loses his ship and money in a series of mishaps. It is then, after realising how much he looks like the late Gariv, that he decides with supreme confidence to go to Skorat to reclaim 'his' old bride, Nikkolope. He therefore looks out for a suitable mark to convince that he is in fact Gariv and finds Del. Unfortunately in playing the part of Gariv, Jorry has to use a javelin, a weapon he is not used to, which proves fatal. He dies mumbling about Keoffo the Trickster, the Quespodon god.

Time

Given the necessarily brief overview of the novel's events they may appear to be nothing more than space-opera pulp and to some extent they are. However, although they are firmly within the pulp tradition, they stand head and shoulders above the usual fare. They are well written with, as I've already indicated, intricately braided plots which are full of memorable imagery, great characters both major and minor and, although I first read them at perhaps an impressionable age, almost a sense of poetry that others of a similar type certainly lack. In fact there are numerous examples of real poetry in the text, mostly Jolon's 'song lyrics', which are excellent.

In addition, a number of themes run through the three books, one of the main being Time. The first two books effectively cover two lifetimes and the third has the idea of the passing of time very much at the heart of it. The books also capture the immense gulfs of space between the stars and the hard lessons from relativity which result from travelling at high speed between them. When Del finally gets back to his home planet after much travelling he sees his fiancée aged away from him into middle-age and happily married to another man for many years.

Another major theme is loss and disillusionment and the books can be very down-beat, almost horrific at times. Towards the end of *Starbrat* it becomes rather obvious that, instead of being a noble commander against the Rinn, Del's father has turned renegade leading the pirate horde that Del fights against. On learning this Del breaks down. Jolon undergoes a similar trial when his first family is killed. The irony being that he was away from home to study native carvings, trying to recover a lost language, but before returning he realises he will never be able to read them. In the third book, Axxal the Quespodon discovers that, for generations, his race has been 'poisoned' by its home planet's sun, another 'Calculating Star', in a handy, long-forgotten, conspiracy to keep them stupid and subservient to the other races. Only those who have been born to descendants who emigrated from the home world generations ago have regained their intelligence. Even the legends of their 'Over-Being' – Keoffo the trickster – were invented to increase their inferiority complex.

This may give the impression that the books are unremittingly grim, but they are not all doom and gloom and are leavened with some well-placed humour. This is mostly character-based. We have Del Whitby's naïveté, as the first book is largely written as a memoir looking back with some wry amusement on his immature actions. Jolon's rakish love of the 'fairer sex' often gets him into humorous, almost farcical, scrapes. Morressy has fun with the Poeite religion with its "maelstroms and pendulums and ravens" which crops up from time to time along with its heretical offshoot, the Lovecrafters, which gives poor Del terrible nightmares when he is informed of its teachings.

All three of the novels have largely optimistic endings. In *Starbrat* we have the recommencement of ship-building and the mission to explore the universe. In *Nail Down The Stars* Jolon ends generations of slavery and, like Del, finds personal happiness. Jorry's end is not good but Axxal becomes the saviour of his race, giving them restored hope and pride and setting up a new colony beyond the bondage of their star – the final irony being that he does it in the shadow of 'Jorry's' temple.

Well, the sands of time have passed for me and the three books obviously have a different feeling now to when I first read them many years ago. However, throughout the years, some images have been forever with me: fighting a hopeless battle on a rock outcrop on an abandoned planet drenched in endless rain; a row of gigantic pyramids on a desert planet, constructed over generations by slave labour, the distant ones crumbled through age as they reach the far horizon; lethal creatures circling just beyond the light in an immense subterranean hall of pillars; Valkyries, descending to gather the fallen off a battle field, that are in fact medics (in drag) on robot flying horses, tending to the survivors of a tournament on a Scandinavian descendant's planet; Del sharing the brain of a truly alien creature to remotely investigate the mysterious disappearance of a whole race on a 'forbidden' planet.

Finally, a quote which may perhaps best illustrate why these books have remained so appealing to me throughout the years and perhaps why you should seek them out yourself. In *Starbrat*, on an abandoned spaceship that Del Whitby has recovered, he is taking time out to educate himself. Del learns of Wrobleski, a Pole who originally discovered the interplanetary drive, then stole it from his government, fled into space and beamed the instructions for its creation back to the whole world. Del reads on:

> "...the book... contained the last recorded words of Wroblewski, received from somewhere in space two years after his departure. The two messages came, about five minutes apart. The first was, 'I've given you the key. Use it, or to hell with you all.' After a silence, his final words arrived: 'To hell with you all anyway'."

An Interview with Neal Asher

by Sandy Auden

He is blatantly excited.

The smile on his face speaks of heady delight as he answers the lady's questions about his new book. There isn't a trace of boastfulness in his voice; he's simply happy that his first novel, *Gridlinked*, is now available as a trade paperback from Pan Macmillan. Nothing more, nothing less.

The name badge identifies this enthusiastic, denim-clad stranger, standing next to me in the Dealers' Room, as one Neal Asher. We are both attending Eastercon and his name brings memories of short stories surfacing from the back of my mind. I'd enjoyed reading his stories in the small press and as his conversation with the lady at the Dealer table ends, I introduce myself and ask him if he would mind going for a drink and chat in the nearest Convention bar. Checking his watch, he tells me that he's due on a panel soon but he's got some spare time.

As we weave our way through the books and exotic jewellery

for sale on the tables, I remark that I liked the way he had several of his stories set against the same carefully detailed background. It reminded me somewhat of Larry Niven's Tales of Known Space. Had Niven been an early influence for him, and did he find repeatedly creating these highly detailed backgrounds for his stories a bit laborious?

"I loved Niven's Tales of Known Space," he grins at me. "I started reading his work after receiving a copy of *Ringworld Engineers* when I was about eleven and I've read almost everything he's written. And for me, the creation of the background is one of the most difficult aspects of writing sf – something people might say is the easiest bit: 'Don't you just make it all up?' – so once I've created a background, why not use it again? The reason for the proliferation of backgrounds is that I often have story ideas that just don't fit the ones I've already created. Also, I don't want to be locked-in, and I don't want my stuff to become formulaic. So really there's a balance here between laziness and its obverse, in that I don't want to go to the trouble of creating a new background for every story, but I don't want to be limited by this either."

We reach the door and turn into the corridor and I have to ask: But *isn't* it easy to make the backgrounds up then? He gives me a 'what do you think?' kind of look. I smile, undeterred. So which does he find the easiest to create – the background or the foreground?

"When is a gun not a gun?" he starts cryptically. "The answer to that is: in an sf story. It's all about world-building and setting limits and I think in this case 'background' was not a good word-choice, for background and foreground blur together and are both integral to the story – which is of most importance. Let's use the word 'world' instead, though in sf even that can start to get confusing."

It's been a fact throughout history that when someone says, 'No, that's not possible,' someone else comes along and makes them look like an idiot

We stroll past the film-set Victorian shop fronts that line the corridor in this part of the hotel. The windows are full of little teddy ornaments you can buy in reception and their eyes follow us as we walk past.

"Quite simply, in contemporary and historical fiction the 'world' is already there for you," he explains. "Going back to the gun we see that in historical fiction we have muskets, duelling pistols, cannon. And most people know what they can do – inaccurate, large hole, lot of time to reload. In contemporary fiction we have the likes of AK47s, Uzis, automatic pistols – accurate, repeating, quick reloading. With these, the parameters are already there for you." I nod my understanding, as he looks at me, then continues.

"But in sf you have to really think about the capability of your gun. What does it fire? How accurate is it? For how long can it keep firing? And," he pauses, "such wonderful twists as: is it intelligent and might it decide not to fire? Of course you have the added difficulty of putting all this information across to the reader without info-dumping on them too much. Here I've just chosen one example – boy's toys – but in sf you have to think about everything like that and you are still absolutely certain to get most of it wrong. Hence slide rules on spaceships in much of the older sf." Another thought occurs to him, "You can also get into huge trouble with your plotting. For example, now your Hero has the Carlos Fandango megagun with pinpoint accuracy to a hundred kilometres, a mind that makes Einstein look like a moron, and a power pack with an output equivalent to Bradwell power station... oops there went the story: the baddy just got creamed in the first paragraph. Silly, I know," he says as we both laugh, "because for your story you give the baddy the same weapon, but you see what I mean?" I nod, still grinning.

"Other things to think about," he expands, "include the ecosystem of an alien world, how people might have changed, political systems, financial systems... *everything*! In other fiction a table is a table is a table. In sf, a table can be made of materials we can only imagine, it might follow you around the house like a dog; 'Hey, do you like my Parker Knoll dog-table? It doesn't have to recharge itself as it eats coffee-stains and breadcrumbs. It also acts as a security system. I heard the other day about a guy who had his house broken into – he found the burglar's fingers in his table's mouth!'" He shakes his head in mild disbelief. "Endless, just endless. But it has to be coherent and it has to work."

We reach the door of the bar and he holds it open for me.

I ask him how long has he been prone to these attacks of spontaneous fiction? Do these kind of Parker Knoll dog-table concepts turn up all the time in his conversations? I pass him and enter the bar.

"Only when I'm drunk... so fairly often really," he answers from behind me.

I can hear the humour in his voice as he follows me in and can't help but smile at his joke. So, would he ever write a story *without* creating a very detailed world to set it in first?

"With this genre, the detailed world is inherent in the story but I don't create the detailed world first – its creation runs concurrent with the creation of the story. All my stories have said worlds as part of the scene-setting. It's why I write sf."

He orders the drinks – a lager for himself and bitter for me, then we find a couple of seats and settle under the soft lights and low, wooden beamed ceiling.

His attention to detail really shows in his stories, in the depth of his vivid structures and characters. But how important is the *scientific* detail in his stories?

He swallows his mouthful of lager. "Scientific detail is very important," he says, licking the froth from his top lip. "One of the many parts of *Gridlinked* I enjoyed was the detail concerning the very low temperatures on the planet Samarkand. Much of this I obtained from books and programs concerning cometary ice, and what stirred my imagination here was the fact of water ice turning into complex ices below a certain temperature, then fluorescing when raised above that temperature." He sits back, and gets comfy. "Of course, as soon as you get into this kind of territory you have to know even more detail: freezing points of CO_2 and other gases, hailstone formation, all sorts of lovely stuff. And *then* you have to imagine what it would be like, and describe it. The other important point to remember is that if you get it wrong, one of your readers is definitely going to take the greatest pleasure in telling you. I try not to get it wrong, but have no doubt that somewhere in there I have."

Does he like to extrapolate current science just a little, or take it forward in leaps and bounds?

"Oh, taking current science forward in leaps and bounds is another really enjoyable aspect of writing this stuff," he grins again. "I firmly believe that in no way do we have the intelligence to decide what is possible and what is impossible... yet. So why not FTL drives and 'runcible gates'? Why not anti-photon weapons and antigravity? It's been a fact throughout history that when someone says, 'No, that's not possible,' someone else comes along and makes them look like an idiot. But let's be honest here, many of the ideas in *Gridlinked* are not exactly groundbreaking – though I do think I've had some new ones – and for me what is most important in the end, is the story, taking the reader somewhere else, that *sensawunda*. I guess that what I'm after is the best of all these elements and the weaving of them together to create a kind of synergy." He stops and blinks. "After all that I think I'll have to go and lie down."

Leaning back for a moment he takes out his cigarette rolling

gear. He looks up and asks if I mind. When I shake my head, he takes out the last paper in the Rizla packet and starts rolling his nicotine fix.

I'm curious. He didn't say he wanted to inform or entertain with his stories – though that will be implicit in the wunda side – but why is that *sensawunda* so important to him?

"I definitely want to entertain and, as you say, that is implicit in the sensawunda but..." he trails off, thinking and drawing smoke. He waves his cigarette at me. "Examples of what creates that sense of wonder, for me, would be the General Service Vehicles of Iain M. Banks's stories. It's a rather prosaic name for enormous spaceships and a wonderful demonstration of the use of understatement. Then there's how in *The Player of Games* merely knowing about the vast 'Culture' would cause a small stellar empire to implode. Why is this *sensawunda* so important? I guess that an sf story without it is just a story, whereas one that has it is very often a good story. But, of course, this is only one element."

He leans back again, blowing smoke away from me, and we're quiet for a while as I digest his answers. It takes solid ideas to create that sensawunda and his short stories have never been lacking in those, but I enquire whether he's ever had an idea that has refused to weave onto a blank page?

He sighs. "The nearest I get to banging my head against a wall over an idea is when I've written myself into a corner with the plot. Strangely, this usually occurs when the get-out clause is too simple. For example, in 'The Line of Polity', I had the plot more-or-less completely worked out, but found upon reviewing it that it was just too damned simple and too easy for the good guys. So I scrapped half of what I'd written, threw some very large spanners into the works, and ended up facing the wall with a bottle of aspirin for a week or so. Overall, I find ideas rarely refuse to weave onto a blank page because if they are difficult, they stimulate the imagination and produce further ideas." He pauses, frowning: "But then, what do you mean by *idea*?"

He starts stubbing out his cigarette, then reaches for the empty Rizla packet as I answer.

I'm assuming that there's *one* idea that starts the ball rolling on any particular story. He nods agreement as I meet his eyes. But does he find most of his stories start with an idea about science, or about the politics of the new world? Is there a pattern to them?

"What starts the ball rolling for me is normally, but not always, an image and thereafter I try to put it into some sort of logical framework. For example, the story 'Spatterjay' started with a guy looking into a stream and seeing what he first took to be trout swimming against the current, until one of them raised its horrible mouth out of the water, and he realised he was seeing huge leeches, not trout. Building from that, I conceived of someone who had come from Earth – hence the trout comparison – and who was now on a world where these leeches were a common life form. Having quite an interest in parasites – I read a veterinary book on helminthology – and an interest, through my sf reading, in immortality, I put these three things together." As he speaks, he's separating the cigarette paper packet into layers, slowly and with infinite care. He looks up. "Digressing slightly, but relevantly, there is a parasite on Earth which lives inside snails. Altering the snail's internal workings, it causes it to grow a thicker shell, thus increasing its own and its host's survivability." I can only stare at him as he continues. "What I came up with was the idea of leeches that carry a virus with which they infect those they feed upon. This virus increases the survivability of the leech's food, hence creating a reusable food resource – harvesting it rather than killing it. And from that came the story, and the particularly horrible ecology of a world."

And from that came the story, and the particularly horrible ecology of a world.

He detaches a second layer from the packet.

"The ideas in my short story 'Snairls', on the other hand, have two sources: parasites (only in this they are the genetically altered humans living inside giant floating snails) and a particularly persistent hornet." He smiles at the memory. "A job I had some time ago was the repointing of a three-storey Victorian house. While I was standing at the top of the scaffold tower I looked to my right and saw what I took to be a helicopter out over the Blackwater estuary, until I realised that it was a hornet that seemed intent on landing on my shoulder. This hornet swung in an arc around me as, shitting myself, I turned round. It hovered close to the wall, inspected my pointing, and dipped over the mortar bucket for a look in there. When, yelling, I scrambled down the tower and swung in through a window my workmate was repairing, it followed both of us into the house. The thing was quite persistent and we had to watch out for it all day. What struck me most was how 'intelligent' it seemed – its actions were not the mindless bumblings of a bee or a wasp. From this sprang the thought that maybe our belief that dolphins and the like are the next most intelligent creatures to us stems simply from how cute and lovable they seem. What about hornets, then? What justification could I give for them not communicating with us previously? Ah, social insects like them communicate using pheromones... how about Hive minds that think at the slow rate of pheromonal transfer in which each hornet is merely a synapse? And so it goes." He shrugs, arranging his pieces of paper on the table between us before continuing. "Both of these ideas went into my latest novel, *The Skinner*. Another idea in that book comes from another source. Very often sf writers take old monsters and reuse them – vampires, werewolves etc. The one in *The Skinner* is a high-tech zombie who I made a policeman fanatically pursuing criminals even after his own death."

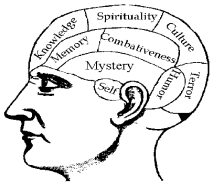
Not satisfied with the paper layers, he starts ripping them into the smallest possible squares.

"Now, to try and answer your questions more specifically, it is usually just one idea that sparks a story off. For a novel it can be more than one. Patterns of ideas? Usually about weird life forms or systems, immortality, 'technology like magic' and lots of other things. I have to add, though, that after an initial idea everything else occurs during the writing process. I find sometimes that if I have an idea for a whole story it very often prevents me from writing it... It is almost as if the writing of a story is as much a voyage of discovery for me as it is for the reader."

He's quickly finished with the tiny pieces of paper and they're sitting in a small heap in the ashtray as his wife walks over to join us. Her presence wafts the tiny squares onto the wooden table top. She's come to fetch him for the panel he's due to appear on so we shake hands, exchanging the usual pleasantries, and as he walks out into the busy corridors of the convention, I hope it won't be the last time I get the opportunity to discuss his work with him.

Since then, I've read *Gridlinked*; if there's any justice in this world, Neal Asher has one bright future ahead of him.

NEAL ASHER HAS BEEN PUBLISHED EXTENSIVELY WITHIN THE SMALL PRESS FOR THE LAST TEN YEARS. HIS SHORT STORIES HAVE BEEN IN MANY SMALL PRESS MAGAZINES, TWO NOVELLAS, 'MINDGAMES: FOOL'S MATE' (GORDON MCGREGOR) AND 'THE PARASITE' (TANJEN), HAVE ALSO SEEN PRINT, ALONG WITH SEVERAL COLLECTIONS INCLUDING *THE ENGINEER* (TANJEN) AND *RUNCIBLE TALES* (PIPER'S ASH). HIS STORY 'AFRICA ZERO' IS SOON TO BE RE-PUBLISHED BY COSMOS BOOKS AND HIS FIRST TRADE PAPERBACK, *GRIDLINKED*, IS AVAILABLE NOW FROM PAN MACMILLAN AND REVIEWED ON PAGE 17 OF THIS *VECTOR*.



Cognitive Mapping 22: Manifest Destiny

by Paul Kincaid

John O'Sullivan's editorial in the *New York Morning News* came at a time when American immigrants to the Mexican province of Texas were clamouring for self-government. Like many expansionists of the time, O'Sullivan supported their claim, and in so doing he gave America a new slogan: 'Manifest Destiny'. The past was irrelevant, in this new nation the future was a strong enough title for any territorial claim they might choose to make. It was Manifest Destiny that, in the decades after the Civil War, white Ameri-cans should spread across the plains, dispossessing the Indians. It was Mani-fest Destiny that America should involve itself in wars from Cuba to Viet-nam to Iraq, should sub-vert governments and prop up regimes through-out South and Central America in defence of Mom, apple pie and the American Way. It was Manifest Destiny that has informed so much of American popular culture, from the dime novel of the Old West to the modern Hollywood blockbuster, in which a lone (usually white) hero saves the world and the girl from the villains. Those villains might be variously Red Indians, wily Chinese, Nazis, Communists or, these days, Islamic terrorists; their one unifying characteristic is that they are non-American and (often) non-white.

> Away, away with all these cobweb tissues of rights of discovery, exploration, settlement, contiguity, etc... The American claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self-government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny and growth... It is in our future far more than in our past or in the past history of Spanish exploration... that our True Title is found.
>
> John O'Sullivan, *New York Morning News* (1844)

In the 1920s and 1930s, when first Hugo Gernsback and later John W. Campbell were transforming the young science fiction genre into a predominantly American literature (a position that wouldn't even begin to be challenged until the 1960s), it was perhaps inevitable that the future should be American. When early space operas were casually dismissed as 'Cowboys and Indians in space', it was in fact an accurate description as pesky aliens were cleared from the spaceways that were the manifest destiny for mankind's expansion into space. E.E. 'Doc' Smith epitomised this expansionist urge, this confident, optimistic notion that the future belongs to us, that right is inevitably on the side of humans, in his series of *Skylark in Space* (1946-1966, but mostly written much earlier) and *Lensman* (1948-1960, part written in the 1930s) novels. It is notable that his aliens were always the enemy or the sidekick, and though they were meant to represent the whole of humanity Kimbal Kinnison and his cronies were almost invariably white, male, and American in everything but name.

> Space, the Final Frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to seek out new life and new civilisations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.
>
> *Star Trek* (1966-69)

But even the more sophisticated writers who emerged on either side of the Second World War tended to infuse their stories with much the same attitude. America had, after all, just won the war and was busy propping up the old European powers; such confidence was clearly well placed. Robert A. Heinlein's competent heroes, for instance, were almost without exception male, and the shock of discovering half way through *Starship Troopers* (1959) that the hero is black is not simply due to the fact that there had been no prominent black protagonist in science fiction before that date, but also to the fact that up to that point and beyond he was a statesman for the attitudes and interests of white, middle-class America.

Attitudes began to change during the 1960s. Growing opposition to the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, improved global communications, a new affluence that allowed more people to travel abroad, even the space race, all allowed particularly the younger generation to see the world no more as exclusively white and American. Nevertheless, that underlying sense of Manifest Destiny persisted in much American science fiction, even in that rep-resentative of contemporary youth attitudes, *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* was a translation of space opera directly to television, and brought many traditions with it. Despite the studied mix of race and sex and ethnic background that populated the Enterprise, they were an Americanised crew; nothing of the culture of Russia or Japan or Scotland actually affected their actions or their speech. They were there to represent the interests of the Federation, a latter-day continuation of O'Sullivan's 'great experiment of liberty and federative self-government'. Moreover, the heritage of Manifest Destiny was clearly there in those famous opening words – 'Space, the Final Frontier' – which consciously compared the adventures of the Enterprise with the opening up of the American West. (It is probably no coincidence that at the time *Star Trek* was made the American networks were inundated with Westerns; promoting this space opera as Cowboys and Indians in space was clearly designed to appeal to the audience.)

The challenge to Manifest Destiny and to American dominance of science fiction came at the same time. First the British New Wave dared to suggest that the future may not belong to us, a unconfident stance that opened it to the familiar charge of pessimism. This was taken up by a new generation of American writers sympathetic to the liberal and humanistic mood of the times, such as Thomas M. Disch who, in stories like 'White Fang Goes Dingo' (1965) and *The Genocides* (1965), showed that humans may not be inherently superior. Later, feminist writers presented the idea that the competent hero need not necessarily be male, or even, come to that, white or American. The (black, female) American writer Octavia Butler, for instance, presented a tale of alien contact in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-89) in which the future clearly belongs to anyone but us.

Such challenges to the confident, outward-looking stance of American science fiction didn't entirely win the day, of course. The cyberpunks claimed a new internationalism for their brand of

post-New Wave, post-feminist science fiction in which America was often presented in decline and Pacific Rim countries, notably Japan, were shown to be the coming world order. Nevertheless, it is significant that in a typical story, 'Red Star, Winter Orbit' (1983) by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, the Russian cosmonaut has to be rescued by the Americans.

Those who follow a more traditionalist route in science fiction have never wavered from the path of Manifest Destiny. David Brin in his Uplift series (1980-), for instance, presents a scenario in which races are 'uplifted' to interstellar civilisation by other races which serve as a sort of sponsor. But the upstart humans have just gone ahead and uplifted themselves, their competence, their right, their manifest destiny among the stars not in need of help from any alien race. Indeed, a supreme example of Manifest Destiny in science fiction is presented in the film *Independence Day* (1996) in which not only do the Americans present the only credible opposition to the aliens, gracefully taking on the role of saviours of the world, but one American armed only with an Apple Powerbook is able to defeat the aliens who are clearly technologically far advanced over humankind. Of course, they have the inescapable weakness of being alien, they could not possibly stand in the way of our Manifest Destiny.

Bookspotting

Curt Siodmak – *Wolf Man's Maker: Memoir of a Hollywood Writer*
Scarecrow Press, 2001, 455pp, £42.75 ISBN: 0-8108-3870-2

Alexander Stephen – *Communazis: FBI Surveillance of German Émigré Writers*
Yale University Press, 2001, $29.95

reviewed by L.J. Hurst

Siodmak's is a long autobiography, but then he was born in 1902, and died only in the last year of the twentieth century. His name is best associated with the trilogy that began with *Donovan's Brain* (1943), but his science fiction was only a small part of his output. He was an engineer by training, but never practised due to the vicissitudes of the slump in Germany, and later fled with all the other Jewish émigrés. He lived in England for three years at the beginning of the thirties, struggling to work as a screen-writer, and then took his wife's advice and moved to Hollywood to struggle in a warmer climate.

He found his opening at Universal Studios, and in 1940 he produced the screenplay for *The Invisible Man Returns*, followed by *The Wolf Man* (1942). This latter provides the title for Siodmak's memoir, first self-published in 1997 as *Even A Man Who is Pure in Heart*, the phrase coming, of course, from the verse quoted in the film saying that anyone may become a wolf. Siodmak had faith in himself as a writer (great faith in himself, indeed, because he was a writer: no one remembers the names of Shakespeare's directors from the last four hundred years, he reassures himself, when told he is only a writer), and he tells many stories to fill in the background of his experiences, but he also misses some interesting details. In the case of these early films he fails to compare his experiences with those of other screen-writers. There is a detailed account by R.C. Sheriff in his autobiography *No Leading Lady* of how he arrived in Hollywood after the success of his stage play *Journey's End* (1929, filmed by James Whale 1930), ten years before Siodmak, and was eventually given *The Invisible Man* (1933) to adapt for the big screen. Siodmak notably makes no reference to Sheriff's experiences. And by chance, the original novel was by H.G. Wells, who more recently had written *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), later filmed in England by Alexander Korda. Siodmak's last big work in Germany had been on *FP1 Does Not Answer* (*F.P.1 Antwortet Nicht* 1932), another massive science fiction work (his engineering training showing its uses). In fact, just as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Solaris* (1971) were seen as rival offerings from the Cold War, so *Things To Come* (1936) and *FP1* were earlier films from rival nations. The Babelsberg Studios were to make no more films like *FP1* for years, and perhaps, while re-assuring himself with its potential, Siodmak found some of its memories too painful to expand upon and explore. It is now little more than an entry in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

The Wolf Man, however, remains a potent force – as Siodmak says now the third part of a triptych of horror (Frankenstein and Dracula the other two), the only one created fresh for the screen, and yet as much as the Vampire a symbol that has meaning in literature, psychoanalysis, and in popular culture. Again Siodmak leaves a strange omission – *The Wolf Man* is set in Wales, somewhere he never mentions visiting. He worked mainly in London when he lived in Britain, and apart from being sent to do some research in Scotland on a potential Rob Roy movie, seems not to have left the city. He does not mention why he chose Wales as his setting.

During the remaining war years he worked on movies such as *Son of Dracula* (1943), *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *Frankenstein Meets The Wolf Man* (1943), and also adapted *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943). He then found himself being signed up by the OSS (the CIA predecessor) for training in sabotage, but never left the USA, and worked on propaganda instead. He was in his mid-forties, and could not have known that his best years of film work were at an end. His filmography now starts to crossover to the B-list, and then quickly moves to some of the absolute turkeys of all time. He tried directing, but I would not want to see the results. He started to move into television but while he could write episodes his attempts to produce pilots for series never turned up the goods. As he reached his sixties Siodmak moved up-state and returned to novel writing.

Several times Siodmak remarks on his reliance on others for help with his English – when he first started to work for Gaumont, for instance, he was given a co-writer, and he often had co-writers in Hollywood. *Wolf Man's Maker* shows a different problem. It shows the lack of an editorial hand, as throughout the book Siodmak develops the habit of telling a story or quoting someone several times as if it were the first, but far worse is his extra-ordinary malapropism. He has an almost incredible ability to chose the wrong word – the strangest is when he talks about a "Father Brown Bible", presumably meaning a King James Bible, and does it repeatedly. Recalling his visit to Scotland, he says that much later came a film called *Rob Roy Prince of Thieves*. He stayed up all night after a funeral at sea, he says, until it was dusk – well, dusk and dawn both begin with the letter 'D'. Perhaps not every page has all of these features, but there is a strong chance that you will find at least one.

This is the seventy-eighth in Scarecrow Press's Filmmakers Series – the first was on James Whale, the director of the original Universal *Frankenstein* (1931), friend of R.C. Sheriff, and also not mentioned by Siodmak.

The film *Gods and Monsters* (1998) revealed Whale's homosexuality to a wider audience, while Sheriff's was more uncertain, but there may well be a dissertation in how horror was taken away from its original gay genesis, but moved to the B-list as its makers became more sexually straight.

As his conscription suggests Siodmak was never investigated as a possible Red – even though he was vehemently anti-Nazi. Ian Hamilton's *Writers in Hollywood*, and now Alexander Stephen's *Communazis* (the word was coined by J. Edgar Hoover), reveal the problems he could have faced. Did Bertold Brecht have Ronald Reagan round to his poker parties, though, or Robert Heinlein as a neighbour?

First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Steve Jeffery

All novels marked: 🕮 are eligible for the 2001 BSFA Award for Best Novel. All collections and anthologies marked: 🖉 contain stories that are eligible for the 2001 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction.

Neal Asher – *Gridlinked* 🕮

Pan, 2001, 426pp, £10.00 ISBN 0-333-90363-3

Reviewed by Scott T. Merrifield

According to the inside cover, Neal Asher has four other published titles to his name [*The Engineer* was reviewed by L.J. Hurst in *Vector* 205] and if previous reviews in *SFX* and by writer Stephen Gallagher are anything to go by then Asher is a name to look out for in the future. With such impressive claims, I was interested in finding out more. However, on the evidence of *Gridlinked*, while Asher may well be a writer to look out for in the future, the present text is far from desirable.

The plot synopsis runs briefly as follows: Cormac, an Earth Central agent, is sent to Samarkand, a planet of 'frigid cold', after a technician causes an explosion within the planet's atmosphere, killing thousands of people. Why is Samarkand immersed in perpetual cold? How did the technician cause a 'fusion explosion' in its atmosphere? Who is responsible for the ever-increasing wave of sabotage and who is the mysterious Mr Crane? The answer? Who cares?

Gridlinked reads like a strange hybrid between Isaac Asimov, E.E. 'Doc' Smith and Philip K. Dick (but minus Dick's flair, drugs and paranoia). The book nods its head, no doubt subconsciously, throughout the text to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. The basic storyline never reaches beyond shallow, whilst Asher's characterisation, in places positively fluid, overall leaves the reader cold and unsympathetic, perhaps due partly to a lack of feeling on the author's part for his own creations. The simple fact being that the characters are *unlikeable*; even the main protagonist is a cardboard cut-out parodying himself – stiff and one-dimensional. If no affinity is reached between character and reader then the text, frankly, is not going to work.

If the reader desires to read about a pseudo-philosophical, part-android, part-human detective character immersed in an ecological futurescape he does not understand, then I would point the reader's attention to the works of Dick and leave Asher alone. *Gridlinked* is a novel that one cannot help feeling aspires to the heights of Dick's *Do Androids Dream…?* with its own peculiar mixture of science fiction and fantasy. If so, then sadly it falls far short of its intended target.

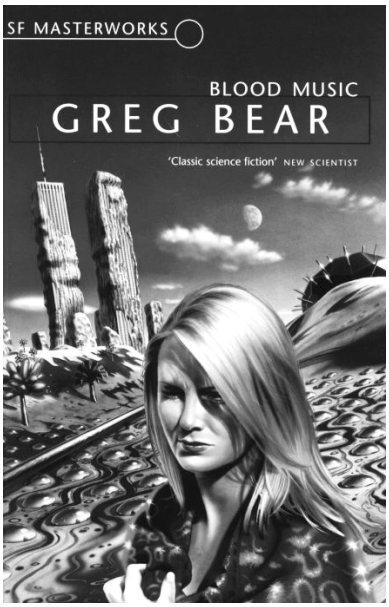
Greg Bear – *Blood Music*

Millennium, SF Masterworks 40, 2001, 262pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-762-4

Reviewed by Avril Brown

Vergil Ulam is employed by a company based in California which is involved in the development of biological computers. When his unorthodox, not to say illegal, research gets him fired, he chooses to steal the end result of his last endeavours for the company. Unfortunately, Vergil has been working on human genetic material, and the only way to get it out of the building is by injecting it into himself.

And it is here that this particular book in the SF Masterworks proves the value of its particularly timely reissue. Vergil Ulam has found a way to unlock the potential for microscopic human cells to develop intelligence and self-awareness. Here truly is the spectre of genetic manipulation gone out of control.



When we are first introduced to Vergil, he is portrayed as the typical science dork so beloved of a certain kind of American sf – bespectacled, overweight, bad teeth and worse dress sense. But Vergil is changing. Inside his body, the mutated cells he has developed are quietly working away, engineering sufficient beneficial changes in their host to better accelerate their evolution. And that's when the fun really starts.

Not only are the newly-named Noocytes communicating with their host as they rebuild him in an image pleasing to their world view – the 'blood music' of the title – but when they cross the blood/brain barrier they finally comprehend that their world is actually a host which is part of a much larger macro universe. As the Noocytes' perception of the macro world is limited by their concept of the microscopic envelope that is their home inside Vergil's body, the transformations wrought are so dramatic that the North American continent is promptly sealed off by the rest of a very frightened world.

This book is about much more than the selfishness of scientific obsession and the dangers of meddling with genetic material; it's also about the potential for change that resides at the microscopic heart of what we are. Perhaps ultimately the book also serves as a metaphor for human evolution, for rising from the extinction of one dominant species is another lifeform which will change the face of the planet for ever.

Highly recommended. And you don't need to understand the science in order to enjoy the story.

Alice Borchardt – *The Wolf King* 🕮

Voyager, 2001, 375pp, £11.99 ISBN 0-00-224717-8

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

The first of Alice Borchardt's 'Wolf' novels, *The Silver Wolf*, introduced Regeane – a nobly born young lady who becomes a wolf by night, living in the eighth-century ruins of Imperial Rome with an ambitious uncle and a lecherous cousin. Borchardt ably conveyed the sense of a different time and place: the extreme poverty of Dark Ages Europe, the lawlessness of the mean streets of Rome, and the crumbling remnants of a great civilisation.

With her second novel, *Night of the Wolf*, Borchardt was revealed as sister of the rather better known author Anne Rice. *Night of the Wolf* focussed on the earlier life of Regeane's centuries-old fiancé, Maeniel – also a werewolf, with the important difference that he began life as a wolf, rather than a man. At the end of *The Silver Wolf*, Regeane and Maeniel had recognised one another's true natures, and were apparently about to embark upon a romantic idyll.

The Wolf King tells the story of Regeane and Maeniel's new life together. It's a thrilling tale of black magic and pagan spirits, chicanery and blackmail. The cruelty and uncertainty of everyday life in Charlemagne's fledgling empire is demonstrated anew as Regeane's patron, Lucilla, is captured and tortured: as Maeniel and his fellow wolves join forces with the Frankish army: and as the two werewolves (not to mention Maeniel's merry band of followers, and Regeane's mysterious Saxon admirer) become inextricably wound into the political affairs of ambitious petty rulers.

It's not, quite, the romance that was implied at the end of *The Silver Wolf*. Maeniel and Regeane spend more time apart than they do together, and both are headstrong individuals who attract loyalty and love from many of the mere mortals who cross their paths. If anything, they are less affectionate towards one another than their reputations, and their repeated avowals of love, suggest.

That lack of romantic closure, as much as any of the other loose threads left hanging at the end of the novel, suggest that this is the third volume in an ongoing saga, rather than the culmination of a trilogy. There's certainly plenty of scope for more character development – and Borchardt could reasonably follow her sister's example and explore the lives of the 'supporting cast' of werewolves.

Unfortunately, the author's tendency to lecture is more evident in this third volume than in her first. Her knowledge of her setting is broad and detailed, but she doesn't wear that learning lightly. There are page-long expositions of aspects of everyday life (the scarcity of decent cloth, for example) that add nothing to the plot, and detract from the narrative flow. 'Show, don't tell' may be hackneyed advice, but Borchardt could do with heeding it a little more.

Andrew M. Butler – *Terry Pratchett*

Pocket Essentials, 2001, 96pp, £3.99 ISBN 1-903047-39-0

M.J. Simpson – *Hitchhiker's Guide*

Pocket Essentials, 2001, 96pp, £3.99 ISBN 1-903047-40-4

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Two further volumes in Pocket's neat, cheap and useful reference guides on literature, film and media. *Vector* Features editor Andrew M. Butler, author of two previous Pocket Essentials on *Cyberpunk* and *Philip K. Dick* and co-editor of *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (reviewed in *Vector* 214), presents a complete (to date) run down on TP's fiction, from an early (mis)start with 'The Hades Business' (*Science Fantasy*, 1963) at the tender age of fifteen, and his first novel *The Carpet People* (1971, revised 1992), to *The Thief of Time* (Gollancz 2001, and reviewed in this issue).

As well as the Discworld novels (like me, Butler is less impressed by the slapstick of the Rincewind novels, and finds more depth and, consequently, a sharper edge of humour in the 'Witches' and 'City Watch' series), Butler looks at the children's books, the various spin-offs, maps, guides, plays, and even a cookbook (though mercifully no one has thought to market CMOT Dibbler's sausages).

The shocking and unexpected death of Douglas Adams was announced while this issue was being put together. The news places M.J. ('Simo') Simpson's book in the odd position of being both a celebration and a tribute for an author and

work which largely shaped the course of (British) humorous sf from its first broadcast on Radio 4 in March 1978 and continued through two radio series, a play, the books, audio cassettes, the TV series, a computer game, and the ongoing saga of a movie almost continuously 'in preparation' since 1982. ("unless something startling happened while this book was at the printers", writes Simpson, but not in a way he would either have expected or wished.) Only a few days before the announcement, Adams could be heard on Radio 4 in splendidly irreverent form on a series about communications and the Internet – "technology is our word for things that don't quite work yet".

Both books, like the others I've seen in the Pocket Essentials guides, are informative, quirky and a highly useful addition to anyone's reference library. Recommended.

Orson Scott Card – *Alvin Journeyman*

Orbit, 2001, 400pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 84149 029 6

Orson Scott Card – *Heartfire* 🕮

Orbit, 2001, 336pp, £6.99 ISBN 1 84149 032 6

Reviewed by Graham Andrews.

Mumblety-mumblety years ago, I reviewed the first three 'Alvin Maker' novels for *Paperback Inferno* and/or *Vector*. It took me some time to get back into this particular Cardiverse – not least because the author himself had unforgivably neglected his real *magnum opus* in favour of the 'Homecoming' and 'Ender' series.

I don't usually like trilogies, and that goes double for double trilogies. But I'll make a happy exception for Card and Maker, who are doing for intelligent fantasy what Gene Wolfe and Severian did for intelligent science fiction.

Card's multi-volume novel unrolls its narrative mat in a parallel universe where the American War of Independence and the Restoration of King Charles II never took place; along with just about everything else we take for recorded history. The European scientific Enlightenment has forced many wild-talented (i.e. 'magical') people to seek refuge in the north-eastern New World, which can still boast significant French, Spanish, and Native American sub-divisions. So endeth my necessarily shallow dive into the deep-background detail.

Seventh Son (Tor, 1987) introduced us to the Alvin Miller boy. Alvin, as 'Taleswapper' explains, is "a Maker... you aren't at peace until you put something together." Alvin becomes embroiled in "the great war between the Unmaker and everything else." *Red Prophet* (Tor, 1988) pits Alvin Miller/Maker against the aforesaid Evil One. Andrew Jackson, Napoleon, river pirate Mike Fink, and Ta-Kumsaw (Alvin's red-prophet chum) make their first bows. Alvin serves his time as a blacksmith in *Prentice Alvin* (Tor, 1989), while looking forward to the eventual 'Crystal City' of near-perfect peace. I've left out a bit here and there, but that's the general idea.

In the years between *Prentice Alvin* and *Alvin Journeyman* (Tor, 1995), Miller/Maker has passed the North American equivalent of his City and Guilds examination, becoming a fully qualified blacksmith. Alvin also forges ahead with teaching anyone teachable the art of being a Maker, as the Crystal City can only come about through enlightened collaboration. At the same time, he must contend with the machinations of his younger brother, Calvin, who has conceived a jealous dislike of him – possibly inspired by the Unmaker. Then Alvin marries Peggy Larner, a Torch who is knackishly aware of the 'heartfires' marking people "like sparks of light that she could see even in the brightest part of noon..." (p.28).

Peggy Larner-Miller has been protecting Alvin with her clairvoyance and character-reading abilities ever since the Unmaker first tried to kill him, back in *Seventh Son*. But *Heartfire* (Tor, 1998) sees them going their separate Crystal City-mission ways. Alvin travels north into New England, where 'witchcraft' is a capital offence, meeting many other historical personages: John James (*Birds of America*) Audubon, for one. Peggy (as 'Margaret') heads south, to the British Crown Colonies and the 'Camelot' of King-in-exile Arthur Stuart. She also encounters the seemingly unreconcilable Calvin, whose particular real-life sidekick is an aspiring French writer named Honoré de Balzac. Alvin and Peggy rejoin each other at the end of Book Five – but for how long?

There we are, then – and it's a case of so far, so good. (Sidelight: 'Grinning Man' appeared in Robert Silverberg's *Legends* anthology (1998, Tor). The eponymous grinner is none other than Davy Crockett.) I can only hope that Card doesn't leave us up the creek without a paddle steamer, as Philip José Farmer did with his equally promising 'Riverworld' saga. And if the much-vaunted Crystal City turns out to be a Mormonitic settlement in Utah, I'll go looking for him.

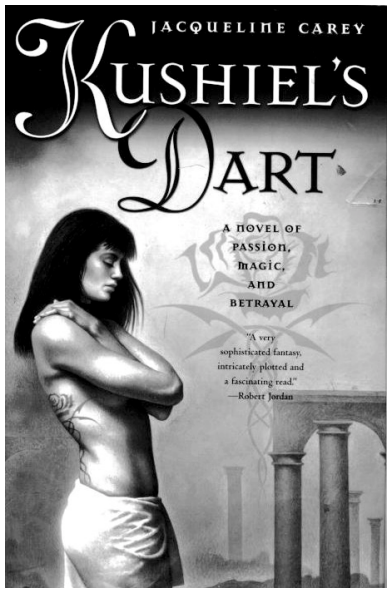
Joking apart, the Alvin Maker books remind me of these wise words from Jack London: "That which made for more life, for physical and spiritual health, was good; that which made for less life, which hurt, and dwarfed, and distorted life, was bad" *(The People of the Abyss*, 1903).

Jacqueline Carey – *Kushiel's Dart*

Tor, 2001, 701pp, $25.99 ISBN 0-312-87238-0

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

This is a debut novel that comes with some quite extraordinary praise from writers such as Eric van Lustbader, Delia Sherman, Emma Bull and Storm Constantine.



It's certainly different. You don't get many fantasy stories (well, genre fantasy stories anyway) with a heroine who is a full-on masochist by both inclination and training. This may not be for everyone, and in places it does get rather disturbingly graphic.

Phèdre nó Delaunay, raised as a child in the House of the Night Court, is marked by a blood-red fleck in her eye, known as Kushiel's Dart, which marks her as a rare *anguisette,* one chosen by the god Kushiel to find pleasure in pain. Such a talent proves useful to her new bondmaster Anafiel Delaunay in a subtle and dangerous game of Machiavellian court politics as an old king lies dying and various factions look to contest the ascension of his granddaughter Ysandre to the throne of

Terre d'Ange – the land of angels. (The D'Angelines, who pride themselves on their beauty and skill in various arts, believe themselves descendants of the angels of the Fall, and much of their religion does seem to evoke echoes of the gifts of the Nephilim. It is interesting that Carey's other, non-fiction, book is titled *Angels: Celestial Spirits in Legend and Art*.)

Delaunay, playing a dangerous game between spy and whoremaster, gradually uncovers a plot that threatens the sovereignty of the realm, and puts his life and those of his two young protégés in danger, and turns Phèdre into a most unlikely ambassador to the distant land of Alba.

There are problems with the book. It is overlong at 700 pages, and could probably lose 50 or more pages which would tighten it up. There's an overt fantasy sequence concerning the Poseidon-like Master of the Straits which sits oddly in the middle of the book and doesn't really come off. Indeed, I get the impression it's only there because of the necessity to take one major character out of the action to avoid later complications, but Carey balks at actually killing him off. Unfortunately it interrupts the main flow of the story, and doesn't really add anything.

Carey does at times tend to stray dangerously into the clichés of Fantasyland, that generic realm documented by Diana Wynne Jones's *Tough Guide*, where drink is always quaffed, and quips and tunes are always merry ('merry' is an annoyingly overused adjective throughout this book). And Carey has an irritating habit of picking up 'significant' aspects of a character's appearance or costume (like the "glint" or "flashing" of Josselin's polished vambraces) and mentioning it every time they appear.

Against this, *Kushiel's Dart* is mostly a genuine page-turner and an astonishingly assured debut. The plots, intrigues and conspiracies are wonderfully labyrinthine, and the relationships between the characters are often equally complex, and sometimes unexpected. This is particularly true of Phedre's relationships with her clients, where the unique nature of her inclination and training (and its darker flip side in those such as D'Essoms and Melisande) draws a very fine line between passion and pain, desire and fear. This is the real strength and power of the book. It's not often a debut novel comes along that startles because it ventures into places you wouldn't normally expect generic fantasy to go. I'll be really intrigued to see where Carey goes with her second novel.

Robert Cowley (ed.) – *What If?: Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*

Pan, 2001, 395pp, £7.99 ISBN 0-330-48724-8

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

'Counter-factual' historians come in two varieties: those who study the big possibilities, but restrict themselves to the rivalries every one knows, and those who recognise that some of these Points of Division are not recognised today.

Swedish schools teach that the Viking Age ended on a certain date. No one outside of Scandinavia has an idea of what it is, though Swedes become annoyed when other Europeans assume that they are all the descendants of berserkers, in that same way that Australians deny their forebears' attraction to other people's sheep. Sometime after the Vikings had passed, Sweden was growing into a major European power, and then in the fourteenth century that just faded away. No one mourns the loss of the Swedish empire in the way that they mourn the Dark Ages following the collapse of Rome, but no one wonders why.

Robert Cowley's collection, *What If?* offers essays covering the earliest times to the latest – a long, disproportionate essay on the American Civil War is the only evidence of this volume's origins. The contributors include British historians, and other authors, including Caleb Carr, the author of *The Alienist*. Carr's short contribution makes interesting reading: asking what would have happened if Napoleon had won the Battle of Waterloo, he looks at Bonaparte's politics controlling his demands at the Congress of Vienna.

But just consider that Swedish example: it is mentioned as a throwaway reference to one of Arnold Toynbee's examples in *A Study Of History*. While Niall Ferguson's 1997 *Virtual History* (reviewed in *Vector 195*) had a similar throwaway reference to Gibbon describing the Battle of Tours, it was massively contemptuous of the earlier man, as Ferguson was to too many other authors. Now Barry S. Strauss has returned and shows how correct was Gibbon's appreciation. However, the contributors to this volume clearly appreciate other historians, and sf authors of alternate history; Geoffrey Parker's discussion of the Spanish Armada starts with an analysis of Keith Roberts' *Pavane*.

No volume like this can be complete, but *What If* can be recommended. If the other authors knew Ross Hassig's account of Hernan Cortez's close brush with death they could not have sat comfortably in their American homes as they wrote.

Warren G. Rochelle – *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*

Liverpool University Press, 2001, 195pp, £15.95 ISBN 0-85323-886-3

Janice C. Crosby – *Cauldron of Changes: Feminist Spirituality in Fantastic Fiction*

McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000, 205pp, £27.10 ISBN 0-7864-0848-0

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Rochelle's book is an attempt to examine the use of myth in the work of Ursula Le Guin as a tool to express ideas about society and our place in it. This is a challenging concept, and one with scope for a deep analysis of Le Guin's work. I looked forward to reading it, but I was sadly disappointed.

My heart sank a few pages in when Rochelle began grounding his subject matter with an attempt to define language. I appreciate the need for a critic to establish a context, but here and later, particularly in his presentation of American theories of society and education, Rochelle strays so far away from Le Guin's work that his book seems to be about something else altogether. There's a notable reluctance to engage with the text; too often Rochelle ends a summary of a particular idea or mode of thought with words to the effect of: 'This idea appears in Le Guin's fiction', without demonstrating where and how it is used.

It's also a pity that having stated his intention of examining Le Guin's fiction as a whole, Rochelle is actually quite restricted in the number of texts he analyses in any detail. The study is weighted heavily towards Le Guin's later

work, and of her earlier novels *The Dispossessed* gets most attention; Rochelle seems more comfortable in considering work in which the ideas are closer to the surface. Given this limitation, when he begins to talk about the novels and short stories themselves, as opposed to their social or philosophical context, he offers some valuable insights, and I only wish he had given them a greater proportion of his book.

Crosby in *Cauldron of Changes* analyses a number of novels in which the issues of feminist spirituality are dramatised, particularly in the areas of women's revision of history and legend, women's quest for power, and the worship of the Goddess. Among the writers whose work she includes are Marion Zimmer Bradley, Octavia Butler and Mercedes Lackey.

Crosby's view of these novels is that they will act as an inspiration for women to seek empowerment, and therefore to change society. With this utilitarian end in view, she concentrates on how plot and character embody spiritual ideas, and gives little attention to the novels as created objects, and whether or not they succeed as works of literature. She has also selected texts which conform to the ideas of spirituality which she herself holds; although this is reasonable, given that her area of study had to be defined in some way, it would have been interesting to contrast, for example, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* with Fay Sampson's *Daughter of Tintagel*, a study of Morgan le Fay from a very different perspective.

I am perhaps not the best person to review Crosby's book, as I have little sympathy for the ideas of feminist spirituality, in particular the assumptions that belief can create reality, that women cannot be fulfilled in traditional religions, and that only men who worship the Goddess can respect the autonomy of women. I can imagine that someone more closely in tune with Crosby's ideas would find this book more valuable than I did.

Sara Douglass – *The Nameless Day* 🕮

Voyager, 2001, 584pp, £11.99 ISBN 0-00-710844-3

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Although this novel looks like a standard generic fantasy, Sara Douglass creates an excellently believable medieval world in this, Book One of The Crucible. She is careful to point out that it is an alternative past, extrapolated from what we know of this period rather than a faithful recreation. It shares, however, the same vivid reality of Mary Gentle's *Ash* and Connie Willis' *Doomsday Book*. Like them, it points out clearly how unusual the strong women characters are that influence the action.

This is a world of male power and authority in which women are automatically considered to be less than fully human. Brother Thomas Neville, the hero and viewpoint character, divides the world into traditional oppositions, ranking hierarchy, rigidity and Catholicism on the side of good, against democracy, flexibility and evangelism on the side of evil. His encounters with the angelic reinforce these beliefs and incorporate his ideas of male/female and angelic/demonic. Thus he comes to interpret any criticism of the church or himself as demonic.

Although his angelic visitor claims to be the archangel Michael, come to impose a mission upon Thomas to save the world from demons disguised as humans, Thomas's medieval mindset leads the reader to question this. Are we to believe Thomas's perception of the world? How real are the angels and demons he sees and are we to believe their traditional alignment? As a modern reader, it is disconcerting to find most of our civilised concepts regarded by the orthodox as tools of the devil. It will be interesting to see how Douglass develops this in future volumes; will it remain an unsettling influence or will the author give us a moral judgement different from that of her viewpoint character?

For her other principal characters, Douglass is happy to borrow famous and influential characters of the period and alter their relationships slightly. With the ascension of Richard II in England, most of the English characters are recognisable from Shakespeare's history plays. Having seen *Henry VI* most recently, I found myself identifying the parents and grandparents of the significant players and also the founding causes of the Wars of the Roses. However, I do not know the period well enough to be annoyed by any historical inaccuracies and am not sure how convincingly this may be covered by arm-waving about 'alternate histories'.

I found the story fascinatingly created but was rather let down by the blurb which indicated rather a different narrative from the one actually contained in this volume. Thus I expected this novel to be more about Thomas Neville's direct confrontation with the demonic, rather than the build-up to it and manoeuvring around that actually happens. The result was that I am left impatient to find out what happens next.

Dennis Fischer – Science Fiction Film Directors 1895-1998

McFarland & Co, 2000, 759pp, £157.10 ISBN 0-7864-0740-9

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

The problem with reference books is that, no matter how much you put in them, you are always judged by what you leave out. With a tome this size (marginally smaller than a double-decker bus) you'd be forgiven for thinking that most omissions would be minor, but you'd be wrong. John Carpenter, Inoshiro Honda, Robert Wise and David Cronenberg are among the plethora of directors who do not appear here, on the basis that they are included within the author's companion book on Horror Films. This is understandable, but surely coverage of their sf output would be more than appropriate; it would be essential, especially as people interested in science fiction might not seek out a horror volume.

The book's remit is to cover the work, life and critical reaction to a number of key players, which results in an eclectic choice of directors. Each chapter is generally decent, albeit inconsistent in scope – Spielberg (does *The Color Purple* really warrant a page of analysis?) gets 30 pages, Shinya Tsukamoto just one. However coverage of the early directors, such as William Cameron Menzies and Val Guest, is incredibly useful and this is one of the best compilations available for information on such lesser known visionaries as Mamoru Oshii, Eugene Lourie and Ib Melchior. Similarly the inclusion of such names as Andrei Tarkvosky, Brian Yuzna and Jeunet & Caro is eminently satisfying. Each entry is well researched and comprises biographical and career information as well as coverage of each film and the particular director's other roles within the film industry, such as writing credits. The book also gives an interesting history of the science fiction film and mops up any anomalies in the closing chapters to

showcase important films (e.g. *Fantastic Planet*, *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, *Forbidden Planet, Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*) that might otherwise have slipped the net. Hence Tim Burton, the Wachowski brothers, Joe Dante and Francois Truffaut manage to get a look in, albeit through the back door. And finally there's the Internet Movie Database's listing of the 100 most popular sf films (rated by the public), which can serve as a basis for many a heated debate.

Science Fiction Film Directors is a valuable resource for anyone who finds science fiction movies fascinating, but it is burdened primarily by one thing – its cost. Giving scant change from £160, the price tag limits its market considerably. Presumably it is intended as a resource book for undergraduates but the prose belies academic intent (the interesting clippets of contemporaneous analysis generally comprise national newspaper reviews rather than journals and the author takes the 'public face' of auteur theory to heart and assumes that all directors are auteurs – whoops). This leaves the book perched uneasily in a no-man's land between the usual puff we've come to expect from a book on sf movies (Bring more pictures! Increase the font size!) and the more analytical approach favoured by media studies publications (No words less than four syllables. No sentence without an -ism or a psychosexual reference). As such, it is ideally suited for the intelligent non-media student or fan and wholeheartedly recommended as the de facto reference book on the subject... if it were £130 cheaper, that is.

Paul Fraser (ed.) – *Spectrum SF 3*

Spectrum Publishing, July 2000, 160pp, £3.99 ISSN 1468-3903

Paul Fraser (ed.) – *Spectrum SF 4*

Spectrum Publishing, November 2000, 160pp, £3.99 ISSN 1468-3903

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Spectrum SF is a paperback-format magazine, published in Aberdeen, which aims to appear four times a year. (Subscriptions £14.00 for 4 issues from P.O. Box 10308, Aberdeen, AB11 6ZR). Both of the issues I saw follow what seems to be a standardised contents plan: part of a serial story, two novelettes, one short story and a small non-fiction miscellany of readers' letters, sf book and magazine listings, etc. Both issues also state that the magazine is not currently accepting unsolicited submissions – writers with previous professional publications are invited to query the editor.

Spectrum SF 3 contains works by Keith Roberts, Eric Brown, Charles Stross and Jack Deighton, and *Spectrum SF* 4 works by Keith Roberts, Eric Brown, John Christopher and Mary Soon Lee. Clearly the magazine is trying to 'play safe' in its early days by featuring the work of well-known writers.

Spectrum 3 opens with 'A Colder War' by Charles Stross, a novelette based on the premise that the Chthulu Mythos is real, and that the various entities mentioned therein are being more or less clandestinely 'developed' or 'investigated' by the Cold War superpowers as weapons of mass destruction. 'Shift' by Jack Deighton is a short story about the attempts of a man who's made redundant by technological progress to find something meaningful to do with his post-work life. In Eric Brown's novelette 'The Miracle at Kallithea', limited access to an alternate world (in which a particular personal tragedy didn't happen) gives an alcoholic artist the opportunity for healing. The final piece of fiction is the concluding part of 'Drek Yarman' [reviewed by Paul Kincaid in *Vector* 211], a serialised Kiteworld story by Keith Roberts (no summary of the two previously published parts is given).

Spectrum 4 opens with the first section of 'Bad Dream' by John Christopher, a bitter look at a near-future European Union. 'Pause Time' by Mary Soon Lee proposes an uncomfortable technological solution to the dilemma many women face in trying to combine a career with childcare. 'Virtual Reality' by Keith Roberts is set in the Kaeti milieu; it's basically a rant. Finally Eric Brown's 'The Ultimate Sacrifice' is a story about loss, faith, and a relationship gone sour.

It's an odd selection of fiction. 'Bad Dream' and 'Virtual Reality' are both very insular, nationalist stories, lamenting the loss of Real British Identity (whatever that was). 'Shift' is also rather backward-looking. Nearly all the stories hinge on loss, regret, bitterness, and (particularly the Roberts) an almost petulant anger. The exception is the Stross, which manages to be simultaneously horrific and funny, relishing the deadpan dehumanising jargon of the military and government administration and laughing at the idiotic futility of its mindset.

David Garnett – *Space Wasters* 🕮

Orbit, 2001, 375pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-84149-012-1

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This novel begins peacefully enough, with Wayne Norton and his wife Kiru on a desert island on a distant planet, happy and very much in love. This blissful state of affairs does not last very long. Kiru goes for a swim and disappears, and when Wayne approaches an old friend, he is led to believe that Kiru has been abducted and taken to the Algol star system. Moreover, the only way Wayne can save her is if he becomes ambassador to Algol. He agrees, though somewhat reluctantly. In the meantime, Kiru returns to the island to discover Wayne gone, and wrongly concludes that he has gone back to Earth. She, in turn, approaches their old friend, who turns out to be less than helpful, and eventually decides to go to Earth.

Thus, unbeknownst to the two of them, their friend, who has his own agenda, sets both Wayne and Kiru off on separate journeys which lead, through numerous twists and turns and quite a few perils, to an eventual reunion under extremely unusual circumstances.

Garnet has created a group of memorable characters who each have their own aims and aspirations, and whom I could empathise with – even the 'villains'– and I found myself hoping that they succeeded with their various endeavours, however problematical that seemed at various times during their travels through the galaxy. They are all also connected with each other in totally unexpected ways, which takes quite a lot of unravelling, for the reader as well as the protagonists, and the book concludes in a complex way that I never expected.

Space Wasters reads like Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* in space, and I recommend it as a thoroughly enjoyable romp.

Peter Haining (ed.) – *The Mammoth Book of Haunted House Stories*

Robinson, 2000, 576pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-84119-160-4

Neil Wilson – *Shadows in the Attic: A Guide to British Supernatural Fiction 1820-1950*

The British Library, 2000, 554pp, £45, ISBN 0-7123-1074-6

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

Over the years, all manner of fictional places and objects, from canals to Buick cars, have been portrayed as haunted, and yet the most powerful, the most resonant image in supernatural writing is still that of the haunted house. As Peter Haining shows in this anthology (bafflingly hailed as 'the first major anthology of the best tales about haunted houses,' as though the world is flooded with minor ones) the haunted house comes in all shapes and sizes, from the classic ivy-clad country seat to dingy town apartments, from opulent stately homes to the meanest of tumble-down cottages, with perhaps a village pub or two thrown in for good measure.

And here I encounter a difficulty with this anthology. Some haunted house stories are more haunted than others, if you follow my meaning. Every ghost story has to be set somewhere, but the very fact of it being set in a house, as opposed to a railway carriage or on board shop, doesn't necessarily make it a story about a haunted house. It is, I admit, a very fine distinction, but in a number of stories in this collection, the setting is almost incidental, and I would include here examples such as M. R. James' much-anthologised 'Lost Hearts', a fine story but it could be set practically anywhere... the focus of the action is the ghosts, not their setting. Much the same might be said of Hugh Walpole's otherwise delightful 'A Little Ghost' in its generic country house, or Penelope Lively's 'Uninvited Ghosts' and several other stories in this anthology.

You'll see what I mean if you contrast them with stories such as Sheridan Le Fanu's magnificent 'Authentic Narrative of a Haunted House', Charlotte Riddell's 'The Old House in Vauxhall Walk' or, to take a more recent example, Ramsey Campbell's atmospheric 'Napier Court'. In stories like these, the house is a character, is often *the* character, setting the tone and pace of the story. Even Bulwer-Lytton's relentlessly turgid 'The Haunted and the Haunters', when stripped of its overwhelming desire to examine the philosophical mechanics of a haunting, is dominated by the menace of the otherwise highly desirable residence at 50 Berkeley Square.

There is also a faint air of desperation about Haining's categorisation of the stories in this book, neatly divided up as they are into unnecessary sections such as 'Shadowy Corners: Accounts of Restless Spirits' or 'Psychic Phenomena: Signs from the Other Side' (as though the earlier ghost stories weren't?). Ignore this and concentrate on the stories themselves. Even constrained by a dubious theme as he clearly was, and also missing out a number of perhaps more appropriate stories, Haining has nevertheless assembled a collection which includes some of the finest writers the genre ever saw (L.P. Hartley, W.F. Harvey, Mary Eleanor Freeman) as well as some unusual modern examples from the likes of Ian Watson and William F. Nolan, and provides some genuinely thrilling and spooky moments.

The ghost story was a distinct genre phenomenon, probably reaching its peak during the early part of the twentieth century. Nowadays, we most often remember M.R. James's stories, but he was a prodigious talent among many gifted writers. Neil Wilson's *Shadows in the Attic* attempts to catalogue these authors and their output in what turns out to be a monumental (and extremely expensive) work but one that's informative rather than useful. The bibliographical nature of this work means that while it is an excellent tool for establishing an author's output, it's much less helpful if you want to discover what may be currently available. Clues exist in the notes, pointing the reader towards the output of, in particular, the Ash-Tree Press, Sarob Press and Tartarus Press, all of which are republishing many hard-to-find volumes or else producing collected editions of popular authors, but these references are incidental and not always thorough. (This uncertainty extends to the addresses included in Sources Consulted, at least one of which is now defunct.) Having said that, for the devoted scholar of ghost stories, this is surely an essential volume. Each entry includes a brief biography and a listing of the first publication of all known stories by each author, with full bibliographical references and their British Library call number, and an indication of their contents. The bibliography also provides a useful introduction to the subject.

Jan Lars Jensen – *Shiva 3000*

Pan, 2001, 405 pp, £5.99 ISBN 0 330 39237 9

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

"The Buddhist sat watching the tide." So begins the 'Baboon Warrior' prologue of *Shiva 3000* by Jan Lars Jensen – a valid claimant to the late, lamented A.E. van Vogt's place as Most Demented Canadian Fantasy Writer. Tide-watching Anil is the sole survivor from among twelve peripatetic monks who broke their journey at Hindu-and-hostile Mangalore, India. "Not the India of some bygone era – but a magical period in the distant future, when demons and deities again roam the earth ..."

Much later... Rakesh, an oriental version of Captain Ahab, has dharma-ed himself to killing the aforesaid Baboon Warrior, a seemingly renegade Hindu demi-god. ("A Brahmin's gotta do what a Brahmin's gotta do.") He meets up with Vasant, Chief Engineer and 'Zeppelin' maker for the Royals of Delhi, who has been ousted and set adrift aboard a rudderless airship by the rascally Kama Sutran sect. Life gets even worse for these two Dharma Bums (thank you, Jack Kerouac) when the Sovereign back in Delhi is murdered – by his first wife, or So Rumour Has It.

As if things weren't bad enough, Rakesh and Vasant briefly encounter the city-destroying Jagannath and the white-wormish Nega: "Her head rested on the male Kama Sutran, who lay squeezed between two segments of her. One of his legs appeared thoughtfully damaged – twisted out of socket – so he could not squirm away" (p.60). I like the "thoughtfully damaged" bit, don't you? Then the real trouble starts.

Comparisons with *Lord of Light* are impossible to avoid, even if Larsen has somehow never read Roger Zelazny's classic 1967 novel about super-scientific Hindu god impersonators. Despite unfailingly expert thinky-bit writing, however, *Shiva 3000* reads like a novelisation of some hyperactive Bollywood movie (possibly starring 'The Look' actor from *Goodness Gracious Me*). But don't let cynical old me put you off – it's a lot better than most latter-day Zelazny.

Jensen has covered his ethical/legal/actual ass with this emphatic disclaimer: "The author respects all religions and does not intend, in his story, to cast any in a negative light". I don't suppose the Dalai Lama would have let slip his Hare Krishnan hatchet-men, but one never knows with those heathenish Hindoos. Remember *The Moonstone*...?

Geoffrey A. Landis – *Mars Crossing*

Tor, 2000, 331pp, $24.95 ISBN 0-312-87201-1

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

I'm going to cheat and quote from the book blurb.

> "By the middle of the twenty-first century, after decades of setbacks, humanity has finally achieved a manned landing on Mars – only to watch helplessly as the members of the mission perish in a catastrophic accident. When a second mission ends tragically as well, the world begins to turn its back on manned space exploration."

OK, it's not giving anything away to say that there is one more try. I mean it *is* a book about Mars exploration, right? In one last-gasp throw, an international expedition is sent, and in the first few pages, they arrive on Mars.

Of course, nothing is that easy…

This novel is quite a mix. On the surface, (and on the strength of the cover blurb) this is a pure science adventure story. Heroic travellers arrive on Mars, something horrible happens and only the stiff upper lip of their commander and Science can get them home! And to a certain extent that's true. Where it takes off is that Landis takes these bare bones as his starting point and fleshes them out with the sort of stuff that pulls us out of the realm of sixties hard science and into the new millennium. This century we are interested in people.

As the crew of the ship find ways to overcome the obstacles that threaten to strand them on Mars, Landis explores their history in a series of flashbacks which fill out the back story and bring the reader to the point where the book starts. Along the way we are gradually brought to an understanding of who these people are, and just why they are where they are.

Geoffrey Landis writes about the science with the assurance of a man who's been involved at the sharp end of space exploration for years, giving us a healthy dose of current technology blended with informed speculation as to developments to come. His background with the Mars Pathfinder mission means that his depiction of the Martian landscapes, and the natural forces which combine to sculpt them, are equally accurate and plausible.

Does it all come together? Some of the characters are as familiar to us as to be almost cliché: the stiff, by-the-rulebook, astronaut commander; the space enthusiast scientist with an instinctive grasp of technology. Balancing that are the less familiar characters: the driven Brazilian geologist and the enigmatic "kid that called himself Trevor Whitman". The interactions of these people as they strive for survival in a place where everything can kill them help push the story forward in a more positive way than if we just followed their journey. The personal flashbacks help to show us their motivations, and Landis uses them to illuminate the society that sent them to Mars, that *needed* them to go to Mars in the first place. Does it all come together? Yes, I think it does. This is one to keep and re-read.

Miller Lau – *Talisker* 🕮

Earthlight, 2001, 498pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-7434-0893-4

Reviewed by Nicky Browne

Talisker is now not only the name of a great whisky but of a pretty good fantasy novel. The eponymous hero is a man just released from a fifteen-year stretch in an Edinburgh prison after a false conviction for the murder of six women. He is also the last descendent of a clan that fought an historic battle in another world, Sutra, which ended in the imprisonment of an evil god, Corvus. Now Corvus's bonds are weakening and his influence and destructive allies threaten both the 'Fine' people and the exiled Sidhe of Sutra. In order to fulfil prophecy to save their world, Deme, one of the Sidhe, forces Talisker through the gateway to Sutra. She awakens the ghost of another of his dead ancestors, Malky, to befriend and advise him. Malky is given the means to move between worlds in the event that Talisker's life is threatened. This happens repeatedly, as dire things keep happening to him, and the switch between his involvement in Sutra and his life in Edinburgh is the most interesting feature of the book. Talisker's ostensible task is to return the jewel Deme gives him to another Sidhe, Mirranon. Talisker is also followed through the gateway by the policeman responsible for his imprisonment, his former friend, Chaplin, who believes he has murdered again.

It's a complicated plot involving gods, magical jewels, kelpies, dead heroes, demonic couplings, berserker rage and second sight, and I did feel that having all of these fantasy ingredients in the one volume was excessive. The writer is good enough to work with less.

The great strength of this novel is Talisker, his relationships with those round him and his firm anchorage in the contemporary world. The disadvantage of such an overstuffed plot is that good ideas are underdeveloped. Talisker's soul is split between worlds (as, apparently, is Chaplin's). Some version of Talisker continues to function in Edinburgh while Talisker is also in Sutra. He is as oddly accepting of this as of his transition between worlds, injuries that appear and disappear, corpses that can't die and his own berserker status. In Edinburgh he vomits on being shown a photo of a dead girl, and I found myself wanting more evidence of such human distress when he was in Sutra. But this is only a minor criticism, which may well be addressed in the next volume. I'm looking forward to it.

Paul Levinson – *Borrowed Tides*

Tor, 2001, 238pp, $22.95 ISBN 0-312-84869-2

Reviewed by John Newsinger

One of the benefits of reviewing for *Vector* has been being sent books that I might not otherwise have read. Paul Parks' *Soldiers of Paradise* springs to mind (whatever happened to him?), and more recently Adam Roberts *Salt*, a book well worth re-recommending. Occasionally though, one receives a book that only the call of duty can see one through, a book so uncongenial that every minute spend in its company is regretted, the sort of book one dreads being stuck on a train with. Such a book was Paul Levinson's *Borrowed Tides*. Now I am very conscious that this might well be a matter of taste rather than a question of quality and certainly Levinson's previous novel, *The Silk Code*, is recommended on the back cover blurb of this volume by Connie Willis no less. Moreover, Levinson is President of the Science Fiction Writers of America and is apparently reaching into Philip K. Dick

territory. For my money though this must refer to the Philip K. Dick of an alternative universe where the man was a portentous bore who could not write. I'm afraid that I can find nothing to recommend about this novel at all.

The story concerns an expedition to Alpha Centauri, headed up by two elderly eccentrics, Aaron and Jack; a most unlikely pair, indeed Jack's only qualification for the journey is his belief that American Indians might well have made it already. After this inauspicious start, the novel goes steadily downhill with various cod philosophical conundrums spinning out the tedium. Nothing more to say really. And to think I postponed reading Paul McAuley's *The Secret of Life* to plough through this.

Eric Van Lustbader – *The Ring of Five Dragons*

Tor, 2001, 576pp, $27.95 ISBN 0-312-87235-6

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

A rare return to fantasy for this well-known author, *The Ring of Five Dragons* is the first book in a series (trilogy?) called 'The Pearl'.

The Kundalans have been under the iron fist of the V'ornn invaders for 101 years. A technologically superior alien race, the V'ornn have a complicated caste-system but are ultimately ruled by the Gyrgon, the seekers of knowledge and the scientist and inventor caste of the V'ornn. They supply their race with the weapons, often implanted and neurally connected, that have allowed them to conquer and desolate worlds throughout the universe for aeons. Kundala, however, is a mystery to them, and holds secrets of magic the Grygon must obtain before they can move on again to another world. To complicate matters, all is not well in the Gyrgon hierarchy, as some Gyrgon begin to question their methods and reason for being.

The Kundalans are a conquered race, but not solely because of the superior technology of the V'ornn. Their Goddess Miina has deserted them, and over the century or so of V'ornn rule her worship has almost disappeared – to be gradually replaced by a darker forbidden magic, Kyofu. This dark magic is drawn from the netherworld and its growing practice is good news for the demons who await their inevitable release from banishment...

The story revolves around several main characters, the most important of which is a Kundalan sorceress called Giyan. As a teenager she is captured by the V'ornn and ends up as concubine to the Regent, Eleusis Ashera. She rears his son Annon, and although he is V'ornn, manages to influence both his and the Regent's attitudes to Kundala and Kundalans alike.

When a coup against the Regent is led by Wennn Stogggul, Giyan flees with Annon into the Marre Pine forest. Unfortunately, Wennn has allied himself with a Kyofu Sorceress, and her magic ensures Giyan and Annon do not remain free for long. They are captured again, but not before Giyan has made contact with her twin sister Bartta, and they enact a ritual that will fulfil a prophecy. They create the Dar Sala-at, who is the prophesied saviour of Kundala.

Meanwhile, back in the capital of Axis Tyr, things are going from bad to worse. The fabled 'Ring of Five Dragons' has been discovered and has found its way into the hands of the Gyrgon. Legend has it that this ring will unlock the doors to the storehouse of all the secrets of Kundala. The missing bit, though, is that this can only be wielded in dire need by the Dar Sala-at, and its use by the Grygon set in motion a chain of events that will end in the total annihilation of all life on Kundala – both V'ornn and Kundalan alike.

This is one of those books you could write a book about. It's a wonderful blend of magic and technology with well-drawn characters and a complicated, layered plot which seems infinite in complexity. The author hooks you from the start, then keeps you running along after him collecting all the little scraps of information he tosses over his shoulder as the bigger picture forms.

This really is going to be one of those series that will be up there with the best. I was sorry it ended and look forward to the next.

Ken MacLeod – *Cosmonaut Keep*

Orbit, 2000, £16.99, 308pp ISBN 1-85723-986-5; Tor, 2001, 300pp, $25.95 ISBN 0-765-30032-X

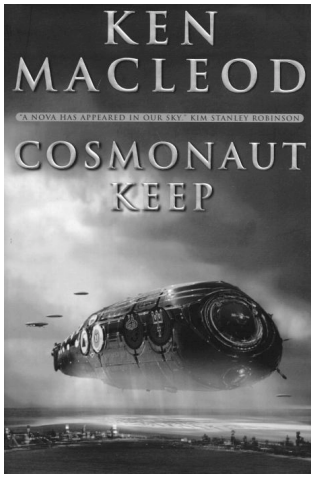
Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Writing convincing near-future political sf is arguably one of the harder tasks an author can set themselves, but, done well, it's potentially one of the most rewarding for readers. Bruce Sterling is the acknowledged US master of the sub-genre, but it's rapidly become clear from his body of work to date that we have our own Great White Hope of British (or, rather, Scottish) sf in the form of Ken MacLeod. After four subtly inter-related novels that deftly married speculative politics with space opera dramatics, his new work, *Cosmonaut Keep*, is the first volume in a planned trilogy (Engines of Light). Given more room to manoeuvre, this is a less densely organised, and arguably more accessible, work than his previous outings, though existing fans can rest assured that MacLeod's trademark complex ideation and humour survive intact.

In a late twenty-first century EU dominated by a resurgent Soviet bloc, cosmonauts in the asteroid belt report First Contact with aliens, and soon, amongst growing turmoil on earth, Scottish computer hacker Matt Cairns finds himself in possession of the plans for what can only be described as a working flying saucer and spacedrive. Meanwhile, in a separate narrative strand, human settlers on the planet of Mingulay live amongst the reptilian saurs, existing in the gaps of a cosmos plied by starships piloted by the squid-like kraken, in a galaxy teeming with mysterious 'gods' whose intent seems to be to limit human expansion into the universe. Gregor Cairns, descendant of Matt, becomes drawn into the colony's

Great Work – a project to rediscover the lost secret of interstellar navigation and once again take a human-crewed ship to the stars.

MacLeod weaves these two narratives in typically assured and compelling fashion. Part of the considerable fun of this novel lies in spotting the parallels between them and their respective protagonists. The story is spiced with sufficient clues as to the underlying relationships, but much still remains to be revealed in the second and third books of the series. In the meantime readers will be entertained by MacLeod's playful appropriation (and subsequent rationalisation) of skiffy clichés like Area 51, flying saucers and alien abductions, and his customarily astute take on the global and personal politics of what appears at first sight to be a rather implausible alternative future. Although obviously not designed to be read as a standalone, *Cosmonaut Keep* is a fine and refreshingly intelligent novel, the quality of which is sure to whet readers' appetites for the concluding volumes in what promises to be an important work of contemporary sf.



Juliet Marillier – *Son of the Shadows* 🕮

Voyager, 2001, 585pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-00-224737-2; Tor Forge, 2001, 488pp, $25.95 ISBN 0-312-84880-3

Reviewed by Fiona Grove

The second of a trilogy by Juliet Marillier, following on from *Daughter of the Forest* (reviewed in *Vector* 211), *Son of Shadows* takes up the tale of the Sevenwaters family, following the story of Sorcha's children, Niamh, Sean and especially Liadan, the younger daughter, and Sean's twin.

The book is set in the forests of Erin, and the surrounding country. Like her mother, Liadan is a healer, and she also has the dubious gift of 'sight', the ability to see, often bleakly into the future – or possible future. She is looked upon as special by the Tuatha de Danann, who consider her, or rather her child, to be an important link in their prophecy. However, she is not particularly happy to follow blindly the wishes of the fair folk, and has a mind of her own. This causes conflict on several occasions during the book, as Liadan is kidnapped and released, and then opts to follow her heart rather than the prophecy that some would have rule her life. Finbar, the brother of Sorcha, who was not fully returned to human form following his days as a swan, supports her in her views. He acts as her teacher, and mentor, when times get rough.

Son of Shadows also introduces 'The Painted Man', a wildly tattooed stranger, and his band of Fianna. This disparate band of mercenary outcasts and strangers help Liadan during the trials of her story. The story of the Painted Man rapidly entwines itself in Liadan's, and for those who have read the first book this adds an interesting twist to the tale.

The book picks up the threads of other stories, begun in *Daughter of the Forest*, and twists the story line and Celtic mythology together in an enjoyable book.

I will look forward to reading the third of these books, which will no doubt give further glimpses of mythology and round off a story which, although of no great depth, is a light and entertaining read for those who like the fantasy format mixed with legend.

George R.R. Martin – *Dying of the Light*

Millennium, 2000, 365pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-897-3

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Dirk t'Larien and Gwen Delvano were once lovers and before they separated they made two 'whisperjewels' and promised that if one ever received the other's jewel they would go to the sender.

Seven years later Dirk receives Gwen's jewel and so travels to Worlon to find her. Worlon is a rogue planet which had wandered into a star system and for a while was the site of a festival. But now it is dying and only the cities and a small number of people remain.

When Dirk arrives he finds that Gwen is 'bonded' to a High Kavalaan historian Jaantony Vikory and his *teyn* Garse Janacek. Dirk thinks that he is still in love with Gwen, but her reactions to his arrival are confusing and he is left to wonder quite why she bothered to summon him.

Eventually Dirk's misplaced love and misunderstanding of the Kavalaan traditions will put all of their lives in danger.

Dying of the Light (first published in 1977) reminds me of nothing so much as a C. J. Cherryh novel. In many of Cherryh's books an individual, usually a human, is put in a position where he has to understand the beliefs and mores of an alien culture. The story then depicts the protagonist's gradual assimilation of the alien culture. Similarly Dirk fundamentally misunderstands the meanings of the relationships around him and only gradually works out quite what is going on and why his actions cause so much trouble.

You may gather from this that *Dying of the Light* is a fairly talky novel. While it is not devoid of action, that action is a secondary consequence of the relationships between the characters. Frankly it is a little slow getting off the ground. It is difficult to understand quite why Dirk goes to Gwen, given that she had not come to him when he requested it. However, once you start to get involved with the characters and the society they represent, it becomes quite gripping. The puzzle of Gwen's summons is a little irritating but when the reason becomes clear much that confuses earlier in the book falls into place.

In summary, this is an enjoyable and rewarding science-fictional romance – as long as you bear with the rather slow first quarter.

Stephen May – *Stardust and Ashes: Science Fiction in the Christian Perspective*

SPCK, 1998, 168pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-281-05104-6

Reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn

The last time I reviewed a book which tried to link science fiction with religion, Mike Alsford's *What If?* (in *Vector 214*), I was less than convinced by the project. In contrast, Stephen May, an academic theologian at the College of St. John the Evangelist, Auckland, and clearly a long term sf fan, has produced a very readable and erudite book.

May's argument is that theology and science fiction have certain fundamentals in common: chiefly their sense of wonder at the universe. The science fiction reader might at this point say "yes but..." and go on to add that s/he is wondering at the universe's physical properties, and not its miracles, but in a sense that is beside the point, for May's principal purpose, as evidenced by his choice of publisher, is to convince not the sf reader of the affinities with theology, but the Christian that science fiction is not inherently irreligious. This is a very odd problematic which only arises in a fundamentalist or puritan context.

However, this is all rather a relief after, say, John Houghton's *A Closer Look at Harry Potter* (Kingsway, 2001), which seriously suggests of a young girl that after watching *King Kong*, "the gorilla walked through the bedroom wall and entered her head" giving her epilepsy (p. 33). Instead, May takes the view that as "Christ abhorred not" the womb of the virgin, so he wouldn't have been too choosy to read sf. Well, it's an argument and no worse than the commonplace about sf and gutters. However, the need to convince a Christian audience, and perhaps his own beliefs, do add some interesting glosses about which I am still musing. May's argument, on p. 49, for example that sf is inherently uncreative seems to me to be more about the Manichean heresy, and the idea that creation is solely the prerogative of God, than it is about any literary notion of creativity he may have. He doesn't mention it, but this has been a problem for some science fiction and fantasy writers: Tolkien nursed the idea of the writer as "sub-creator" while James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* of course tackled the problem directly.

The problem with trying to tell non-sf readers about science fiction is the need for background. If you have read John Clute, Peter Nicholls and Edward James on science fiction, you aren't going to need to read the first three chapters. Having said which, May does a marvellous job of summarising these and other major critics, and illuminates his summaries with a lifetime reading of Really Good Stuff: there are no embarrassments here. And once through this background, the book begins to take off. From chapter six onwards May argues that science fiction is largely hostile to religion – which considering his opening salvo is slightly bizarre. Given my own view that it should be regarded as a creative tension, he makes his arguments too strongly for my personal taste but he makes them well, pointing to the ease with which early sf practised its science on the sapient's body. However, for May science fiction does not have to exclude Christianity and he is quick to point to the presence of avowedly Christian fantasists and sf writers such as C.S. Lewis and Walter Miller. In this vein, May also argues that Christianity offers a counter to the "materialist" and gnostic positions of science fiction and can thus influence the science fiction that is written, challenging the mind/body divide which he feels the generally atheistic genre promotes. Again, this seems both too strong and curiously at variance with a religious tradition which has had a number of problems with the body's influence on the mind and spirit, but the argument is made lucidly and with a broad net, pulling in science fiction from the 1920s through to the present day (and without skipping the magazine period, as far too many texts feel free to do). If I have a criticism, it is less about the argument, which I think is fascinating even when I disagree vigorously, than with the structure. I haven't attended enough to bible study to be sure, but this text feels more like a group study book than anything else. The chapters are fascinating but each ends with an oddly leaden summary which seems designed to tell you what you should have learned (and I couldn't always make them match). It isn't there to ask questions or to promote argument.

The relationship of science fiction and religion has never been tackled in a really satisfactory way, in part because of the tendency to see the relationship as either wholly antagonistic, or to see it as simply a creative exercise: how is religion portrayed, how does one write a new religion, what parallels can one make and so on, but in terms of what it sets out to do, this is an exemplary and fascinating book.

Sean McMullen – *The Miocene Arrow*

Tor, 2001, 418pp, $15.95 ISBN 0-312-87547-9

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Sean McMullen's latest work reminds me of nothing so much as reading Jack Vance – the opening pages are almost incomprehensible with names and terms that slowly shade into familiarity. But if Vance's familiarity never bred contempt then McMullen conversely isn't eventually able to produce the requisite wonder either.

The Miocene Arrow is set in the middle of the 39th century, almost two thousand years after the Call has devastated humanity. The Call robs anything much larger than a cat of all conscious volition and draws them off to the west. As if this weren't problematic enough, any powered vehicle bigger than 29½ feet is automatically destroyed by orbiting "Sentinels". Oh, and electricity is somehow forbidden too.

In a depopulated North America the Call permanently blankets almost all the known world (which, admittedly, is not much of it). The only pockets of civilisation survive in Havens where the Call sweeps in at random for only a few hours daily, allowing a stable and surprisingly civilised culture to thrive.

One of these, Mounthaven, has retained powered flight technology using microlight aircraft (pretty handy bearing in mind that the Call only extends 50 feet above sea-level) and is carefully ruled by Airlords and their technocratic Guilds, who monopolise the skies for typically lunatic but entertaining upper class rituals.

Thus have things been for millennia, but now dastardly

Ozzie agents immune to the Call have infiltrated the Havens to cause not just a little mischief but quite possibly genocide.

Sean McMullen can weave a complicated yarn with the best of them. *The Miocene Arrow* is a long book that begins as *The Anome* or *Emphyrio* and turns into a science fictional version of Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad* – but inevitably falls in comparison because the real *Stalingrad* is quite fantastic enough.

This bizarre future Earth is a superb and enthralling creation, a strange sort of Middle Ages with planes. But these planes are lovingly-crafted and individual works of art that make chivalrous knights of their gallant pilots whose existence and codes of honour and warfare seem quite as stylised as their mechanical steeds.

If the large cast of characters never leap off the page at you then they're adequately portrayed and not infrequently hilarious. There's romance, evil, courage and revenge in large enough spoonfuls to keep your head firmly ensconced in the 39th century. The first half of *The Miocene Arrow* is a cracking and intriguing read.

Unfortunately McMullen completely blows it right in the middle, going off half-cocked with a decidedly wishy-washy explanation of almost everything that had worked to build up the previous 190 pages, and from then on *The Miocene Arrow* wends its way toward a disappointingly *Boys Own* conclusion. The explanations behind the Call and even the much-vaunted Miocene Arrow itself fall very flat, as these things so depressingly often do, leaving the derring-do of the pilots to carry the rest of the book. And 418 pages are a heavy weight for any microlight to lift.

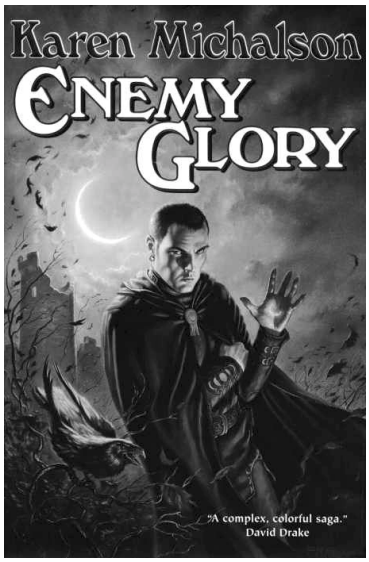
Karen Michalson – *Enemy Glory*

Tor, 2001, 304pp, $24.95 ISBN 0-312-89061-3

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

> Try to keep all world energy, everywhere, flowing in one direction and your efforts will burst and fail into enemy glory.

Enemy Glory has taken me at least a month to read. Even though it comes endorsed by heavyweights such as Samuel R. Delany and is described as "a new fantasy saga in the dramatic tradition of George R. R. Martin's *A Game Of Thrones*", it's one of those books which, when you take it up to read, you soon find yourself reading the local paper, the TV listings magazine, anything but this! Karen Michalson's prose is dense and quirky, full of unlikely metaphors and similes that sometimes work startlingly well, but at other times just seem far-fetched. Even so, she's good at painting a scene or creating a texture – that's not the problem with the book.



Enemy Glory is set in a land where the North is the realm of the supernatural, and the South is made up of warring states with a Greek-like pantheon of gods and goddesses. The world not only has Earth's moon but also its fauna and flora (woodchucks, even!). Out from the cover glowers a dark young man clad in black, holding up his left palm marked with the crescent of the waning moon behind him, a sign of evil. Llewelyn is from one of the Southern kingdoms, a magician and a priest of Hecate. (In Greek mythology Hecate was indeed goddess of the lower world, and of magic, ghosts and witchcraft, although the moon was only subject to Hecate before rising and after setting, not when waning.) At the start Llewelyn is captive in the North, not only dying from a curse laid upon him when he was a boy, but also facing the death penalty for treason and murder. To plead for his life he recounts his life story, here covering his boyhood, his education and training, and his latter itinerant life as a priest and magic user as the war ravages the South.

Now here's the problem. Llewelyn quickly reveals that he is a creep. He boasts to us of how clever he is, how he quickly surpassed the other students in school, and how well he mastered the arts of magic. However, none of this is evident from most of the tale – Llewelyn staggers from crisis to crisis, often causing the deaths of completely innocent people as he does so. (Although, if we can believe him, he has become an adept magic user by the end of the book.) We can take an out-and-out rogue like George MacDonald Fraser's Flashman, even though he's a coward, a liar, and a double-crosser, because he does it all with such flair. Llewelyn, however, is just a creep. We can easily believe he's guilty of the crimes of which he's accused. There are plenty of other characters in the book who could be interesting, but Llewelyn never gets close enough to them for us to find out.

Enemy Glory ends with Llewelyn's narrative still unfinished, and further books are promised from Karen Michalson, a new writer from Massachusetts. Maybe another reviewer will find the next one more congenial.

L.E. Modesitt – *The Octagonal Raven*

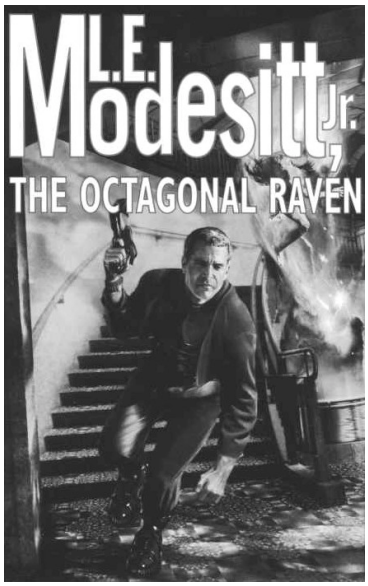
Tor, 2001, 398pp, $27.95 ISBN 0-312-87720-X

Reviewed by Mark Greener

I can't find a bad word to write about *The Octagonal Raven*. Mind you, I can't find a good word either. *The Octagonal Raven* is just about the most mediocre book that I've ever read.

Someone is trying to kill Daryn Alwyn, an edartist (an underground VR artist) and a methodizer (a VR computer consultant). There's no lack of suspects. Alwyn is the son of the richest and most powerful man on earth – and the brother of the second – who together run the leading VR network. And his sister is a senior executive in a rival network. So, a commercial rival might be using Alwyn to threaten his family.

Once, Alwyn was a pilot flying interstellar missions using hyperspace 'gates'. During his first mission, he discovered the forerunner gates, which suggests some species used the method before humanity. So perhaps Alwyn knows too much. And Alwyn is genetically enhanced, which some 'norms' resent. So, he's a high profile target for terrorists. Alwyn decides to discover why someone wants him dead…



This summary makes this novel, which has a foot as firmly in the political thriller market as in the sf camp, seem more interesting than it actually is. It's not that *The Octagonal Raven* is a *bad* book. It's just… so average. The plot doesn't crack along, but neither is it dull. In the first part of the book, the plot jumps backwards and forwards in time, from the narrative present to Alwyn's past as a pilot in the Federal Service. And that's just about the most interesting aspect of the narrative.

There's just enough tension for you to want to know what happens next, but it's easy to put the book down. Indeed, the chapters are short and ideal for commuting or a few pages before bedtime. The characterisation and societal background are drawn in just enough depth to serve the narrative's aim – no more, but no less. There's no future shock lurking here: *The Octagonal Raven*'s tomorrow doesn't seem that different to today. Indeed, in several places, the sf element seems almost superfluous. Much of the plot and the boardroom intrigues that dominate the latter part of the book could have come from any competent thriller. And it's fairly well – but not brilliantly – written.

Don't get me wrong: I found *The Octagonal Raven* an effective enough, diverting, undemanding read, but it's also instantly forgettable. As you've probably guessed, I think you'll find a lot worse than *The Octagonal Raven* on your local bookshop shelves. Buy it and you'll get your money's worth. But you'll find a lot better on the shelves as well.

Andre Norton and Sasha Miller – *Knight or Knave*

Tor, 2001, 318pp, $23.95 ISBN 0-312-87337-9

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This is the second in the series which centres around the events taking place in the Kingdom of Rendel, and starts with the Three Weavers in their cave, working on the Web of Time, and thus managing the lives of the protagonists. The action soon switches to the capital city of Rendeisham, where the Dowager Queen Ysa is receiving reports from her Queen of Spies on the progress of Ashen, illegitimate daughter of the late King. At the spy's suggestion, plans are made for Ashen to marry Obern, the Sea-Rover whom Ashen rescued from certain death, but there is a problem in that Obern believes his wife is alive and he is in a dilemma – whether to set her aside, as he does not really love her, or remain her husband. At the same time, the young King Florian is made to marry a young noblewoman whom he has impregnated. And Snolli, Obern's father, on receiving news that his son is alive, and being invited to the wedding, decides to visit Rendetsham earlier than requested. All of this sets in motion a chain of events that no-one, not even Ysa, schemer that she is, can foresee.

From this point on, life becomes complicated and dangerous for the protagonists, and it would appear that the only person who remains unaffected by events is Zazar, the Wysen-wyf who raised Ashen, and who gets called upon, on several occasions, by her and the family she has married into. And, in the background, there is a mysterious threat from the north which no-one knows the nature of.

The events contained in this novel include weddings, abductions, a fencing exhibition which becomes a double murder, numerous plots and counter-plots, and a full-scale tournament, all of which are skilfully described and handled so that the reader's interest is sustained throughout. In addition, there is the presence of a mysterious Magician who has his own hidden agenda, one that is so well-concealed that Ysa, the Magician's employer, finds herself in a difficult situation, one that she had not anticipated. By the end of the novel, the threat from the north has finally manifested itself, and the Kingdom of Rendel is facing grave danger: the revelation of the threat provides an excellent cliff-hanger ending, and I look forward to the next volume.

Lance Olsen – *Freaknest*

Wordcraft of Oregon, 2000, 258pp, US$12.00 ISBN 1-877655-35-X

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Rykki, Jada, Oran, Tris and Zivv are orphans discovered in a Central London apartment when their bloated 'owner', perhaps a representation of the patriarchal state, falls off his perch. *Freaknest* is a rite of passage in which naive characters discover a world around them that is baroque in a way that is less like any descendant of our world than of the universes of William Burroughs and Gibson.

This book by an American writer is set in a kind of early-21st Dickensian London which suggests alarming possibilities that American writers see England as a kind of alternate universe for their fabulations. Be that as it may, *Freaknest* is a kind of biopunk extravaganza, what happened to Cyberpunk when it kept going on the drugs and sparepart surgery. It isn't a bad world, just very chaotic, and much reference is made to the Wild Boy of Aveyron and Kaspar Hauser (as told in Herzog's *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alles,* musicked with Pachelbel's Canon in D like so much else). It's a largescale enabling of a Candide viewpoint which knows nothing of the world outside, which therefore allows Olsen to write about his imagined world, which isn't too bad really despite his unimaginable foreshortening of placenames such as Bri'n for Brighton, and Dickens references such as Tymm Tai-ni (everyone wants to meet *her*). Every so often there is a breakthrough

in the children's consciousness and this is documented as if by scientific paper. In order to prepare myself for reviewing this I read Olsen's collection of stories *Sewing Shut My Eyes*, which underlines that Olsen is well into the media landscape and brings in repeated tropes like Klub Med, that's to say Club Medellin, the ultra-rich scions of the Medellin Cartel who bear trophy disfigurements. Nobody is really without scars here; his characters, like those of cyberpunk earlier, have made accommodations with disease and been linked into machines or the Machine. It's a free world though, very often a literal freakshow as Rykki and those who gather around her make their own life on the edges of an already very blurred reality.

Terry Pratchett – *Thief of Time* 🕮

Doubleday, 2001, 316pp, £16.99, ISBN 0-38560188-3

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

The Discworld has been filling up of late. In one corner we have the witches, Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg and Agnes Nitt, with occasional assistance from Magrat. In another corner we have Vimes and the fine men, werewolf and dwarves of the City Watch. Popping up all over the place we have Rincewind the Wizard, while Death still pays housecalls, sometimes to his granddaughter Susan. In recent volumes we've been seeing more of the City Guard, and a whole series of Igors, the patchwork assistants of mad scientists and vampires from Überwald, ideas that Pratchett seems determined to wring the last drop of humour out of, with no sign yet of the well drying up. In *The Truth* we had a shift in perspective, seeing the City Guard in general, and Vimes in particular, from a fresh angle. The result was not comfortable; do we really want to see a much-loved character as the head of a repressive state apparatus?

And a few months later, another Discworld novel, the tube posters of the last barely covered over, and the first of three this year. This time it is Nanny Ogg we see from a new perspective, through the perspective of time, at different points in her life. Time is going to end, in fact, next Wednesday to be precise, and Death is rather concerned about it all, alerting Susan to the danger before rounding up the other three horsemen for one last ride. Jeremy Clockson, like many of Pratchett's protagonists a foundling, has been hired to make the most accurate clock ever, a clock which is more likely to control time than measure it. And up in the monastery of the History Monks, a new novice (and foundling), Lobsang Ludd, has been passed onto Lu-Tze.

Of course the threads have to come together, and Pratchett has long been able to weave together several narratives whilst putting the Discworld itself under threat. He tries a dangerous balancing act, giving us a taste of familiar characters whilst introducing us to new ones. From experience, though, these characters are as likely to drop out of sight (think Esk, Mort, Eric, and so on) as to become familiar. Susan, however, welcome her return, seems increasingly prim and proper, and she seems the least interesting part of the story, whereas her grandfather continues to interest and astound. Lu-Tze emerges as a sage Chinaman, not quite invoking Grasshopper and 'Confucius, he say,' but coming close. His wisdom derives rather from a landlady, and his fighting abilities are straight out of the last ten years of Hong Kong action movies – with space for a swipe or two at *The Matrix*. In fact given echoes in *The Truth* of *Pulp Fiction* and here to *Reservoir Dogs*, as well as Igor's increasingly resembling a character from 1930s Universal horror movies, it seems as if Pratchett's inspirations are increasingly filmic in origin.

The best bits of this book – Death rounding up the old team, Jeremy making the clock, and especially Lu-Tze and his skilful time-chopping novice Lobsang Ludd – are very funny indeed, but there's something not quite right about the way it falls together. Too many of the characters seem to be marking time until the narrative comes to a climax. And perhaps we've had the metaphysical crisis which threatens the entire Discworld once too often. At the same time (there's no avoiding this word) the rationale for the linkages is perfectly logical and compelling within the framework of the narrative, and has a surprisingly scientific flavour. Cautiously recommended.

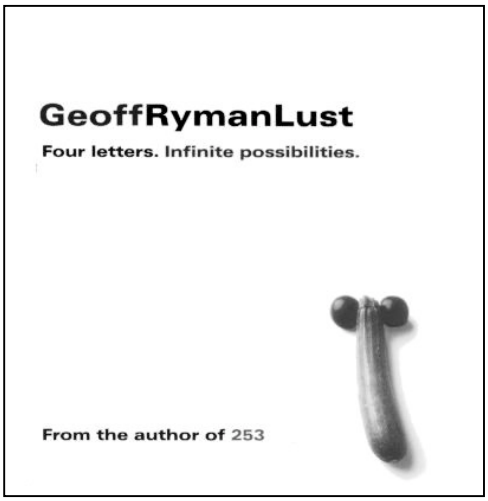
Geoff Ryman – *Lust* 🕮

Flamingo, 2001, 400pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-00-225987-7

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

Geoff Ryman's latest novel, though not strictly science fiction, is based on a simple scientific hypothesis: what if you could sleep with anyone? And, in the best scientific tradition, this is no mere thought experiment.

Michael Blasco has a more-or-less comfortable life. He's a government-funded scientist investigating neural pathways in chicks, and his partner, Phil, is a successful artist. True, Michael has more than a few unresolved problems, but they don't intrude into his daily life – until one evening when his gym instructor performs an impromptu strip on the platform at Waterloo, apparently as a direct result of Michael's unspoken wish.



Experimenting with his new-found gift, Michael discovers that he can call up an avatar, or Angel, of anyone – man or woman, alive or dead, real or imaginary, gay or straight. Other people can see the Angels, but forget them instantly once Michael's banished them.

If this were a pornographic novel, the plot development would end there, with Michael dealing with his assorted sexual problems in a remarkably pragmatic fashion. (This is a man who's got himself a Viagra prescription to enable him to enjoy the Angels properly).

Michael has great fun summoning up cartoon siren Taffy Duck ("I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way"), Alexander of Macedon (a filthy, drunken barbarian), and Lawrence of Arabia (barking mad). The cameo appearances of cultural icons – occasionally pseudonymous, as with the thuggish Castro brothers from popular soap *Down Our Way* – are keenly observed and richly comic.

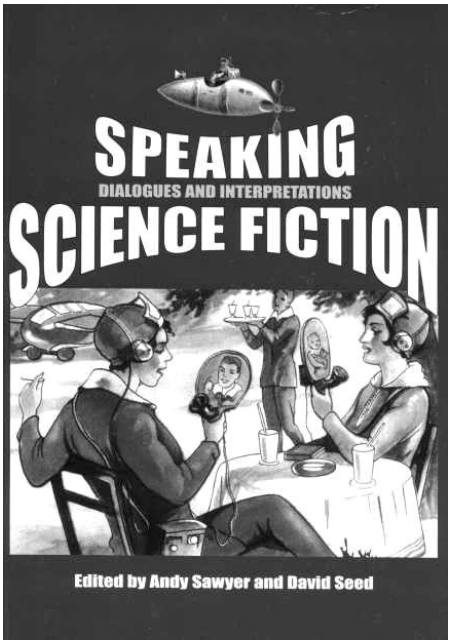
Because *Lust* is a novel by Geoff Ryman, applauded for his unflinching examinations of the horrors (as well as the humour) of the human situation, it is not only a sexual comedy, but also an experiment concerning morality and maturity. Gradually, instead of playing, Michael becomes more critical of the miracle and begins to use it to ask questions that ultimately lead him to know and accept himself. The darker aspects of his past are brought into the light, and – with the help of the Angels and the changes they've inspired him to make in his real-world life – he is at last in a position to live life to the full, unhampered by past mistakes and pain.

Lust is a light-hearted novel with an unexpectedly happy ending, but it has its own heart of darkness. Many readers, unfamiliar with Geoff Ryman's previous work and enticed by the glossy, *Man and Boy*-style cover, will abandon the story when Michael confronts the worst spectres of his past. It's not fun: it's not *supposed* to be fun. Only by coming through that experience, though, can Michael achieve his full potential: this is an exemplary as well as an entertaining novel. Few authors have the skill to weld the nastier aspects of human life so delicately into a larger story: that Ryman achieves this with compassion and poignancy is even rarer.

Andy Sawyer and David Seed (eds.) – *Speaking Science Fiction: Dialogues and Interpretations*
Liverpool University Press, 2000, 248pp, £32.99 hardback ISBN 0-85323-834-0, £14.99 paperback ISBN 0-85323-844-8
Kurt Lancaster & Tom Mikotowitz – *Performing the Force: Essays on Immersion into Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Environments*
McFarland and Company, 2001, 207pp, £30.40 paperback ISBN 0-7864-0895-2
Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Talk about chalk and cheese. Both these books, produced from an academic perspective but accessible to lay readers, should be of interest to readers of *Vector*, and yet while one can be recommended without hesitation as an essential addition to collection of anyone interested in sf, the other comes across as a study of missed opportunities and lacklustre editing.

Speaking Science Fiction takes its title from a 1996 conference sponsored jointly by the University of Liverpool and the Science Fiction Foundation. "Who", asks Roger Luckhurst (quoted in Andy Sawyer's introduction) "has the right to speak (of/with/for) science fiction?" Whose is the authentic voice of the genre – the writers, the fans, the critics, scholars and academics? The inevitable conclusion to be drawn from *Speaking Science Fiction* is that it's all of these; sf's particular, and almost unique, generic strength and vitality at its best being the way its practitioners, fans and critics take from and feed back to each other in an extended and complex series of dialogues. And, indeed, by the way that several of the contributors to this book cross between the various categories. The essays collected here range from science fiction as language (José Manuel Mota), language and gender (Nickianne Moody, Gwyneth Jones, Brian Attebury, Helen Merrick and others), language in science fiction (Andrew Butler on Jack Womack's 'Dryco Chronicles' and Veronica Hollinger on Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*), the complex interaction between writer, narrator and reader (Danièle Chatelain and George Slusser) and on a literal embodiment of sfnal posthumanism in the work of Australian performance artist Stelarc (Ross Farnell).



On the face of it, Lancaster and Miktowitz's *Performing the Force* should be fascinating. How fans and fandoms become participants in as much as consumers of their chosen genres, through role play, computer games, web sites (there is very little on literary participation, in fanzines, reviews, apas or even convention panel discussions). Partly, as becomes very evident after a handful of articles, this lack of balance is because most of the contributors seem to have come from the same media studies course. That has another effect, too. Well over half these essays, on films, film directors, web sites etc., trot out the same reference to Richard Schechner's 'performance theory' and that fan participation can often be viewed as embodying "scripts of behaviour" (which is never fully explained). That, plus the inconclusive brevity of many of these pieces, gives the overwhelming impression of a collection of undergraduate tutorial essays. And C average ones at that.

The ones on fan and author web sites are particularly dire, concentrating on appearance almost to the exclusion of content. Is it really helpful to know what colour background a web site is, that it loads with a graphic which you can click to enter, and contains highlighted links that will take you to other pages? The 'essay' on the *Godzilla* web site in particular is pointless, and should never have been allowed in. A short piece on a Robert Jordan signing, with the author queuing for six hours to be "awestruck" with "reverence" when finally ushered (one book only, and no talking allowed) before the god-like figure of the author had me in hysterics.

But there are some (few) pieces that contain ideas.

Christine Witmer's essay on Kubrick is actually a nice deconstruction of the way the presentation of Kubrick's reputation is manipulated (in LoBritto's biography) through leading phrases and coded words. Unfortunately it then just stops., without coming to any real conclusions. And the piece on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as being as much about fans' participation and interaction in a 'cued' event as viewers of a film probably comes closest to the intention of the book. But three or four short essays, none more than about 4 or 5 pages long, are woefully insufficient to justify a recommendation for a 200 page paperback with a £30 price tag.

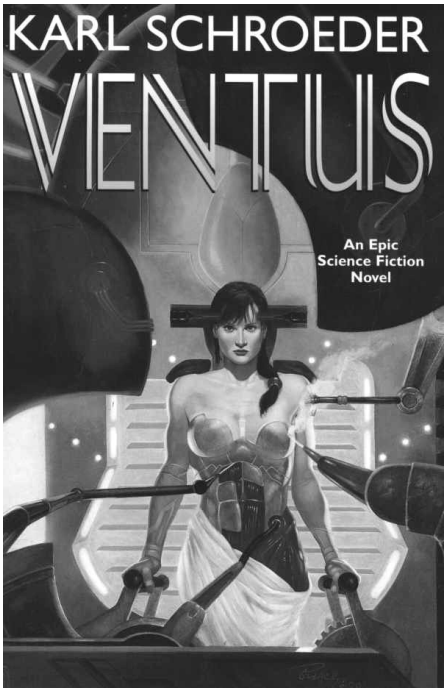
Speaking Science Fiction, though, can be thoroughly recommended as an excellent addition to Liverpool Press's impressive 'Science Fiction Texts and Studies' series.

Karl Schroeder – *Ventus*

Tor, 2001, 477pp, $27.95 ISBN 0-312-87197-X

Reviewed by Robert W. Hayler

Ventus appears to be a fantasy world full of occult spirits. A few know, however, that in fact it is a world terraformed by being drenched in climate controlling and sentient nanotechnology. This nanotech seems to be at war with itself and that it does not respond to the descendants of the human colonists is a mystery. The race to find out the answer to this riddle involves many different characters, some from off-world, with many different motives. Who gets there first could have terrible consequences for the whole human diaspora.



This book is a joy to read. The pace is beautifully tempered and the structure tight, while allowing for the development of various diverting ideas – many of which are worthy of book-length treatments themselves. Some gruesome fights and well-handled, flash-cut action scenes make it a page-turner. The characters that make up a large cast are well-differentiated, interesting and the relationships between them believable.

Philosophically, the book is refined. Some considered musings on tricky topics actually drive the plot. We are treated to language games, a discussion of 'platonic' essences and the problems of identity and emergent intelligence are dealt with over and over again from many satisfying angles. The reconfiguration of a spaceship into a 'thinking' human(oid) character, for example, dropped my jaw. The moral sense of the book is highly developed and we are well served again with examples of the importance of duty and respect, the 'humanising' effect of love and so on. Don't worry though – none of this sophistication is ever 'dumped' on us to the detriment of the action; all this is interwoven into the fabric of the book as invisibly and importantly as the nanotech in the soil of Ventus itself.

Schroeder has attempted something very ambitious and has succeeded. I admit to feeling apprehensive as I started reading what appears to be a stock fantasy opening but this soon spirals out to encompass the purist science fiction and some top-notch action. I don't think I have read a better thought-experiment concerning the possibilities inherent in nanotech and it is certainly the most unusual treatment of terraforming as a theme that I have seen. This book thoroughly deserves your attention (and a UK paperback – hop to it, someone!).

Brian Stableford – *The Cassandra Complex*

Tor, 2001, 320pp $23.95 ISBN 0-312-87773-0

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

This is the fourth as published, but chronologically the first, of Stableford's fine 'emortality' sf series, begun with *Inherit The Earth* and continued through *Architects of Emortality* and *Fountains of Youth* (reviewed by Chris Hill, Paul Kincaid and Steve Jeffery in *Vector*s 201, 209 and 213 respectively). Each of the books incorporate, or are expanded from, previous short stories, including 'Inherit the Earth', *Analog* July 1995, 'Fleurs du Mal' (*Asimov's* 1994) and 'Mortimer Gray's History of Death' (*Asimov's* April 1995).

The Cassandra Complex , which is also based on an earlier story 'The Magic Bullet' (*Interzone* 29) opens some forty years into 21st century, in a world that lives under the constant threat of World War 3, the biotech war.

Lisa Friedman, a 60 year old police forensic scientist, is attacked in her apartment by three masked intruders, apparently women, on the same night that somebody has firebombed the university labs and incinerated half a million mice in a decades-old experiment called Mouseworld. They have also, apparently, abducted the research director, Morgan Miller.

Lisa suspects her boss, Judith Kenna, who already believes Friedman is past her retirement date, is going to have a field day, both for Lisa's previous professional and romantic relationship with Miller, and that her attackers have unhelpfully sprayed the word 'Traitor' on her apartment door before breaking in. Luckily, she is co-opted by a Man from the Ministry, Peter Grimmett-Smith, for his own investigation.

The Cassandra Complex thus becomes part a police procedural, part conspiracy thriller and part scientific mystery as Friedman and Smith try to work out why anyone would want to so comprehensively barbecue 500,000 mice (to destroy something, or destroy evidence of something else?), whether Miller is involved or, like Lisa, a victim of the attack, and why Miller had apparently arranged meetings with both

the Institute of Algeny and the Ahaseurus Foundation – whose political aims would seem incompatible, to say the least.

Stableford's mid 21st century is intriguing. There's the whole paranoid insecurity (highlighted by the nano-filter "smart suits" everyone wears) of both global and local terrorist/activist biotech warfare. There are pointers to a balkanised political landscape reminiscent of *The Star Fraction*, and a post post-feminist backlash in which militant factions like Real Women have decided there is no point in stopping at notions of sexual equality and whose aim is to grab as much power as possible after a century of promises and disappointments.

However, to get all this in, Stableford has to resort to some occasionally clunky info-dumping, split between 'Interludes' (presented in a different typeface) and rather too many extended "as you know" conversations. That said, much of it is fascinating, and *The Cassandra Complex* (when you know the world is going to hell in a handcart but no-one seems to be listening) is a neat sf mystery-thriller along the lines of Bear's *Darwin's Radio* or Robert Sawyer's *Frameshift*. On the other hand, what Stableford is doing with the 'emortality' series may be the best thing he's done for a long while, and while each of them does stand alone, they gain an added depth as part of the series.

Bruce Sterling – *A Good Old-Fashioned Future*

Millennium, 2001, 279pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-710-1

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

Sterling is one of those authors whose longer works I have never been too fond of but, funnily enough, I have never had any problems with his short fiction (or non-fiction for that matter). What we have here are seven stories originally published from 1993 to 1998, one co-written with fellow cyberpunk Rudy Rucker ('Big Jelly').

All of these tales take place in various post-cyberpunk landscapes; messy futures on the verge of chaos and there has been a move on from the monolithic AIs and mega-corporations of old-skool cyberpunk. At one point Sterling name-checks the slogan of the artificial life gurus, "fast, cheap and out of control", and this is exactly what we have here: following the rules of the complexity theorists, pushing systems – especially social systems – as far into disorder as you can, without breaking them down completely, and seeing what new stuff emerges out of it. Or as he and Rucker have said in the past: "Way gnarly!"

A prime example of this is the co-written 'Big Jelly'. A mad Texas oilman funds a gay techno-nerd to produce artificial jellyfish from the "primordial ooze" that suddenly starts spurting from the oilman's wells. The results go very much 'out of control'. But perhaps this one is a bit too mad, even acknowledging its obvious satire. And another that doesn't really pay out is the 'Littlest Jackal' which transfers proto-Yugoslavia politics to a terrorist campaign for Finnish independence. The rest? Mostly excellent.

The best are the first and the last: 'Maneki Neko' and 'Taklamakan' – both nominated for Hugos. 'Maneki Neko' is a sly witty tale, poking fun at the Japanese tradition of gift-giving along with the problems of information overload. The last three stores – 'Big Eddy', 'Bicycle Repairman' (a Hugo winner) and 'Taklamakan' – are linked together to form a loose novella. They give three glimpses into a mid twenty-first century world with such tasty gadgets as sugar-driven bio-drills, going neuter as a psycho-social or physiological advantage, and the Wende (think of the recent May Day/Anti-capitalism riots crossed with the mayhem of the last European soccer championship, but encouraged by the host city as urban renewal). 'Taklamakan', more action-packed than the others in the collection, sees two spies – urban punk climbers, 'spiders' – investigating a forgotten experiment hidden in the middle of an Oriental desert.

Some of the oldest stories have dated slightly. 'Scared Cow', about an Indian director in a future Britain devastated by BSE, no matter how ironic – all the Hindus survive because they do not eat beef – does not ring true. Though there is good fun to be had by mentally cut-and-pasting 'foot and mouth' for 'BSE'

All in all, beneath the razzmatazz, these are subtle tales with unconventional closure. The undertone of humour creates perceptive social commentary and adds to the technical invention. Recommended.

H. N. Turteltaub – *Over the Wine-Dark Sea*

Tor/Forge, 2001, 384pp, $25.95 ISBN 0-312-87660-2

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

The pseudonym, with its Greek transliteration, barely conceals the true authorship of Harry Turtledove, an appropriate ingenuity since this is a straight (as distinct from fantasy or alternative world) historical adventure novel set in the Mediterranean arena, as it was in the year 310 BC during the carve-up of empire following the death of Alexander the Great. The title is also most appropriate, embodying as it does Homer's well-known descriptive phrase, for the voyage narrated closely follows that of the *Odyssey*, and apt quotations from the epic, spoken by the novel's character Menedemos, occasionally appear. (A note reveals the translation to be the author's, who disclaims literary intention or merit, but it is, in fact, excellent.)

Menedemos is the more precipitately adventurous, Sostratos the more cautious of two cousins who sail the merchant ship *Aphrodite* out of Rhodes on a trading mission to the Italian and Sicilian colonies of Magna Graecia. It is a twenty-oar-to-a-side vessel, with a big square mainsail and a bronze ram at the bow. Its merchandise is reminiscent of Masefield's Quinquireme of Nineveh rowing home with its cargo of peacocks, sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white wine, save that the exotic woods are replaced by perfumes and bales of silk. The last-named finds favour with the whores, flute girls (and wives) with whom the heroes disport when in port, but the peacocks (a cock and harem and eventually a flock of chicks) are the prize commodity. Bought from an oriental trader in Rhodes, their incident-filled transportation, the wonder they arouse, the bargainings and changes of ownership, constitute one of the story's two mainsprings The other is the involvement of the *Aphrodite* in the wars and piracies then and there endemic. The war episodes have a specific historical basis: the depicted strategies of Syracuse in its war with Carthage were actual, as was the solar eclipse seen over Carthage. The Romans as a sea power were marauding southwards, the fact providing occasion for a fictional encounter off Pompeii, where, by virtue of Menedemos's audacious seamanship, *Aphrodite* disables a Roman trireme.

A back-cover blurb claims status within the Patrick O'Brian tradition. Fair enough, in that it recounts a maritime adventure played out against an authentic historico-geographic

background. The naval technology is also well-researched, but characters and characterisations are slight compared with O'Brian's. The cousins apart, only one stands out: Diodes, the reliable oarmaster, whose mallet-stroke and shanty-chorus "Rhyppapa! Rhyppapa!" rhythmically rings through the narrative and moves it along.

Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman – *Well of Darkness*

Voyager, 2000, 450pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-00-224746-1

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Well of Darkness is the first book in 'The Sovereign Stone Trilogy', and is a welcome return to collaboration by these two authors who, perhaps unfortunately, are best known for their 'Dragonlance™' series writing. The seven-book 'Death Gate Cycle' is, in my opinion, a better illustration of what these two can do when teaming up.

Gareth is the young son of an insignificant minor noble family, and his only claim to fame is that (unbeknown to him) he was born on the same day as Prince Dagnarus of Vinnengael. The palace in Vinnengael has a problem; how does one punish the headstrong young Dagnarus when it is a capital offence to lay hands on a royal personage? Gareth is therefore selected to be the Prince's whipping boy and against all the odds, Dagnarus takes to Gareth, finding him intelligent, timid, and above all, extremely malleable.

Vinnengael itself lies at the hub of a network of magical tunnels that allow instantaneous travel between the realms of humans, elves, dwarves and orken. The Gods select the Dominion Lords, magical knights whose sole purpose is to protect these magical ways from invasion, and therein lies a problem. The elves are agitating and war amongst the races is on the horizon. Dagnarus' father King Tamaros seeks guidance from the Gods and they deliver the Sovereign Stone to him – a magical jewel which when split into four allows the other races to create their own Dominion Lords.

Things settle for a while but all is certainly not well. Dagnarus, with the help of Gareth, who is now studying to be a Mage, has discovered forbidden Void magic. Jealous of his elder brother Helmos' elevation to Dominion Lord, as well as his being heir to the throne, Dagnarus decides to become a Dominion Lord himself and sets in motion events which could destroy the whole kingdom.

This is a riveting read, though much darker than I usually prefer. One starts by feeling very sorry for Gareth who is completely in the thrall of the charismatic, yet clearly vindictive, selfish and volatile Dagnarus. This slowly ebbs away though as the story builds and all but Gareth can see the hole he is digging for himself. The ending is a complete surprise, and in fact, one wonders where on earth the next volume in this trilogy is going, ensuring that I for one will want to read it and find out.

Highly recommended, and if you've not read these authors before, don't be put of by their reputation for writing gaming-related fantasy. This is dark fantasy at its very best!

Gene Wolfe – *Return to the Whorl*

Tor, 2001, 412pp, $25.95 ISBN 0-312-87314-X

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

A while back I reviewed *On Blue's Waters*, volume one of the Short Sun trilogy – of which *Return to the Whorl* is the final part, and those that remember will recall I wasn't exactly too enamoured by it. Could I have been wrong? After all the cover quotes of this volume include things like 'literary giant', 'novel of the year', 'compelling' and 'triumph'. Well...

Like *On Blue's Waters, Return to the Whorl* is narrated by Horn in his quest to find to find the legendary heroic leader Patera Silk. Horn is writing this book we are reading like his personal diary, including his personal petty worries and asides – he's not *quite* as irritable as he was in the first volume but not far off. But who is the mysterious person written in the third person who slots in between Horn's early sections? The novel's coherence (or lack of it) is not helped by the fact that it is explicitly about ambiguity and shifting realities.

At the beginning of the 'Proper Names in the Text' we have: "Many of the persons and places mentioned in The Book of the Long Sun to which the reader is referred." This volume not only wraps up the current trilogy but also apparently the previous series of the *Long Sun* and refers back to the *New Sun* series from twenty years ago. Now my comprehension is probably not helped by the fact I have not read either of these two series – but should I have to?

I am fully prepared to admit that this could be a personal thing but I find Wolfe's prose to be totally off-putting. He is no hack – occasional sentences have a dash of poetic beauty to them. However, overall, the work has this strange dream-like muddiness to it and you get no sense of place; I could never really see what was happening in my mind's eye. Time and time again references are made to things I just did not have a clue about. This is complex work, all right: complex to the point of incoherence.

Okay, I am going to say it – and some of the lit-crit crowd will probably want to take me out and shoot me for this – but *Return to the Whorl* is awful. Michael Swanwick: "Gene Wolfe is the greatest writer in the English Language alive today." No, he is not. Not even close. I'm not afraid of complexity – or challenge. I've read and enjoyed Pynchon, for God's sake! Perhaps it would all make better sense if I started right from the beginning, but I'll need some convincing. Until then, like Rab C. Nesbitt, "I will walk alone."

Jack Womack – *Going, Going, Gone*

Voyager, 2001, 218pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-651105-8

Reviewed by Mark Bould

Going, Going, Gone returns us, after a seven year wait, to the cyberpunk-flavoured universe of Womack's Dryco sequence. Primarily set in the near-future New York of an alternative present, the earlier novels–whose internal chronology runs: *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* (1993), *Heathern* (1990), *Ambient* (1987), *Terraplane* (1988) and *Elvissey* (1993) – trace the aftermath of a millennial financial crash and the growing domination by the Dryco corporation of everyday life in the ruins. *Terraplane* and *Elvissey* also feature time-travel to the 1939 and 1954 of another alternative world, and it is in that world's 1968 that the new novel is mostly set.

Walter Bullitt, freelance *agent provocateur*, is employed to do the US government's dirty work: little things, like introducing antiwar protesters to narcotics. His refusal to undertake an ominous venture involving the Kennedys, one of

whom is running for President, leaves him unemployed. Seeking alternatives, he becomes involved – in the capacity of supplier – with a weirdo personal motivation cult, the Personality Dynamos. None of this would be too traumatic, if he wasn't involved with a pair of gorgeous but deadly and mysterious women of mixed race, if his Nazi ex-employers weren't onto his own mixed heritage – and if he wasn't being haunted, sort of, by a floating see-through man who keeps asking for help.

After some initial straining for a tone halfway between hard-boiled and beatnik, *Going* settles down into a brisk, fairly effective, reasonably standalone thriller, laced with comedy and the casual inventiveness of language, detail and description which distinguishes Womack at his best. It is, however, difficult to anticipate how his readers will receive this novel. With the exception of *Random Acts*, it is more accomplished than the others in the series – but its accomplishment feels at odds with its forerunners. In them, the linguistic fireworks, and their impact on perception, that Womack claimed as central to his project and which critics frequently praised, often seemed to be concealing failures of technique. It is a great pity, then, that having become more proficient as a novelist, he should abandon, more or less, the evolving language of the Dryco universe. Consequently, despite its merits, *Going* seems less like a conclusion or summation than an afterthought or an obligation. And this is born out by the apparent intention of the denouement, which fits this novel rather better than it does the series.

Particles

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

Stephen Baxter – Icebones 🕮
Gollancz, 2001, 278pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-07214-8
Jumping several thousand years since the saga of the bull mammoth *Longtusk,* it is now the third millennium after Christ. Mammoths roam the red steppes of Mars, abandoned after the failure of the colony who brought them there as frozen embryos. Icebones, daughter of Silverhair, alone carries the accumulated knowledge of the great story cycle of the mammoths, and may be their one hope for survival in a hostile world.

James Blish – *The Seedling Stars*
Gollancz, 2001, 185pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-07239-3
Robert A. Heinlein – *Orphans of the Sky*
Gollancz, 2001, 187pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-07237-7
Phillip Mann – *The Eye of the Queen*
Gollancz, 2001, 264pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-575-07238-5
Three further additions to Gollancz's 'yellowjacket' Collectors' Edition series of sf reprints. *The Seedling Stars* contains four related stories of the Adapted Men, changed in shape and chemistry to survive in alien environments, and includes the classic 'Surface Tension' (1952) alongside 'Seeding Program' (vt 'A Time to Survive') (1955), 'The Thing in the Attic' and 'Watershed'.

Orphans of the Sky (1941) is Heinlein's story of a generation starship bound for Proxima Centauri but whose original purpose has been long forgotten. A strange civilisation, based on superstition, repressive religion, rigid class structures and social outcasts has developed over hundreds of years of its voyage.

Mann's *Eye of the Queen* dates from 1982, and describes mankind's first encounter with an alien civilisation, the Pe-Ellians, which is not only technologically superior, but one that understands and has mastered the power of thought.

Marion Zimmer Bradley – *Priestess of Avalon*
Voyager, 2001, 382pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-648376-3
Although only Zimmer Bradley's name appears on the cover, the title page and copyright credit Diana L. Paxson, who, as Cherith Baldry notes in her review of the hardcover edition in V216, carried out much of the historical research and completed the novel after MZB's death. *Priestess of Avalon* is a linked novel in the series that started with *Mists of Avalon*, *Lady of Avalon* (reviewed by Jan Malique in V202) and a prequel to the series, *The Forest House* (reviewed by Tanya Brown in V180).

Jonathan Carroll – *The Wooden Sea* 🕮
Gollancz, 2001, 247pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-575-07060-9
The third of a linked series of novels, comprising *Kissing the Beehive* (1998, reviewed in V201) and *The Marriage of Sticks* (1999, reviewed by Paul Kincaid in V207). The Tor edition of *The Wooden Sea* was reviewed by Cherith Baldry in V217.

Arthur C. Clarke – *The Space Trilogy*
Gollancz, 2001, 506pp, £7.99 ISBN 1-85798-780-2
An omnibus collection of three early novels, *The Sands of Mars* (1954), *Islands in the Sky* (1951) and *Earthlight* (1955, 1973), with a foreword by Clarke and new introduction to *The Sands of Mars*.

Robert E. Howard –*The Conan Chronicles, Volume 2: The Hour of he Dragon*
Gollancz Fantasy Masterworks 16, 2001, 575pp, £7.99 ISBN 1-85798-747-0
Michael Moorcock – *Elric*
Gollancz Fantasy Masterworks 17, 2001, 416pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-743-8
Completing the chronological collection of Howard's 'Conan the Barbarian' stories. Volume 2 collects eight stories, a map and 'Notes on Various Peoples of Hyborean Age' and a short poem, 'Cimmeria', rounded off with an Afterword, 'The Final Years' by Stephen Jones. The first volume was published as Fantasy Masterworks No. 7, and reviewed by Chris Hill in V214.

Elric combines two early books, *Stealer of Souls* and *Stormbringer*, in Moorock's adventures of his doomy and haunted albino barbarian, the exiled Prince of Melniboné, caught in the war between Law and Chaos.

Paul Kearney – *The Second Empire*
Gollancz, 2001, 294pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85798-751-9
Book Four of 'The Monarchies of God', following on from *The Iron Wars* (which was reviewed by Vikki Lee in V205).

Katherine Kerr and Kate Daniel – *Polar City Nightmare*
Gollancz, 2001, 357pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-783-7
A sf thriller (presumably set in the same location as Kerr's *Polar City Blues*) focusing on two groups of people in the hunt for a stolen alien artifact. Previously reviewed in Gollancz trade paperback by Sue Thomason in V214.

John Marco – *The Grand Design*
Gollancz, 2001, 755pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-87598-781-0
Book Two of 'Tyrants and Kings', previously reviewed by Alan Fraser in V214, who also reviewed the first volume, *The Jackal of Nar*, in V212.

Book Three, *Saints of the Sword* is currently published in trade paperback by Gollancz (£12.99 ISBN 0-575-07160-5)

Juliet Marillier – *Daughter of the Forest*
Voyager, 2001, 538pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-648398-4
Tor, 2001, 411pp, $14.95 (tpb) ISBN 0-312-87530-4
Volume One of the Arthurian-flavoured Sevenwaters Trilogy, previously reviewed by Cherith Baldry in V211. Book Two, *Son of the Shadows*, also available in both Voyager and Tor editions, is reviewed by Fiona Grove in this issue.

Stev Pavlou – *Decipher* 🕮
Simon and Schuster, 2001, 616pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-7432-0857-9
"Mankind had 12,000 years to decipher the message. We have one week left…."

Echoes of Steven Erikson (*The Deadhouse*

Gates) abound in the press pack for Pavlou's first novel. A first novel from a 29 year old off-license shop assistant, and now a "major new author" with six figure Hollywood screenplay rights (will he be going back to work on Monday morning?). *Decipher* is a techno thriller in the Crichton mould (or a "stunning high concept book for the twenty-first century"). Complexity theory, geomagnetic reversals, solar flares, messages from beyond the solar system and the Lost City of Atlantis combine in 2012, the year the Mayan calendar predicts the world will end.

Frederik Pohl – *Jem*

Gollancz SF Masterworks 41, 2001, 300pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-85798-789-6

When a new habitable world is discovered it might prove the salvation of a resource-starved Earth in the 21st century. But when representatives of Earth's three competing power blocs arrive on Jem to discover multiple intelligent species they also find the opportunity to export their own bitter rivalries.

Alastair Reynolds – *Revelation Space*

Gollancz, 2001, 545pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-748-9

Mass market paperback of Reynolds' impressive debut novel, previously published (2000) in both hardcover and trade paperback editions, and shortlisted for this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award. Reviewed by Paul Billinger in V212, whose hopes that Reynolds would return to this Universe are born out by the recent publication of *Chasm City*, which we shall be reviewing in a future issue of *Vector*.

James White – *Beginning Operations*

Orb, 2001, 511pp, £19.95 ISBN 0-312-87544-4

A trade paperback omnibus of the first three of White's 'Sector General' novels (*Hospital Station* (1962), *Star Surgeon* (1963) and *Major Operation* (1971)), with an introduction by Brian Stableford.

This is the first of two planned volumes collecting White's charming, funny "*Emergency Ward 10* in space" stories (or *ER* crossed with *Babylon 5* for those whose memories don't go back quite that far). Recommended.

Kim Wilkins – *The Resurrectionists* 🕮

Orion, 2001, 503pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-793-4

Romantic gothic horror (Wilkins is hailed as either a new Anne Rice or "the new queen of the dark side") tale set in the Yorkshire. In the coastal village of Solgreve, Maisie hopes to discover the secret of the life-long feud between her mother and grandmother, Sybill, but in adiary discovered in an old trunk in her grandmother's house, gradually uncovers something darker and more threatening.

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