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COVER

The cover of *Comeback Tour* by Jack Yeovil (aka Kim Newman). A Carnes Workshop book, published by Boxtree Ltd in 1993. Art by Cary Walton 1993

The first time Vector has had Elvis on the cover, I think.

EDITORIAL TEAM

- Production and General Editing: Tony Cullen 16 Weaver's Way, Camden, London NW/11 OXE Email: tcbsfa@gummmittch.aviators.net
- Features, Editorial and Letters: Andrew M. Butler c/o Department of Ants and Media, D28 ASSH Faculty, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, High Wycombe, HP111 2JZ

Email: ambutler@enterprise.net

- Book Reviews: Paul Billinger 1 Long Row Close, Everedon, Daventry NN111 3BE Email: billinger@enterprise.net
- Associate Editor: Tanya Brown Flat 8, Century House, Armoury Road, London SE8 4LH Email amaranth@ amaranth.aviators.net

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BSFA OFFICIALS

• CHAIR(s): Paul and Elizabeth Billinger – 1 Long Row Close, Everedon, Daventry NN11 3BE

Email: billinger@enterprise.net

• MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY: Estelle Roberts - 97 Sharp Street,

Newland Avenue, Hull, HU5 2AE Email: Estelle@lythande.freeserve.co.uk

• TREASURER: Martin Potts – 611 Ivy Croft Road, Warton, Nr Tamworth B79 OJJ Email: mtpottts@zoom.co.uk

Publications Manager: Kathy Taylor –
Email: kathytayllor@blueyomder..co.uk

• Orbiters: Carol Ann Kerry-Green – 278 Victoria Avenue, Hull, HU5 3DZ

Email: metaphor@metaphorkanoo.co.uk

• AWARDS: Tanya Brown – Flat 8, Century House, Armoury

Road, London, SE8 4LH

Email: awards@amaranth.aviators.net

• PUBLICITY/PROMOTIONS:

Email: billinger@enterprise.net

• LONDON MEETING COORDINATOR: Paul Hood −11112

Meadowside, Eltham, London SE9 6BB Email: Paul-Hood@mtllworld.com

• Webmistress: Tanya Brown - Flat 8, Century House,

Armoury Road, London, SE8 4LH Email: bsfaweb@amaramth.aviators.net

BSFA MEMBERSHIP

UK Residents: £21 or £14 (unwaged) peryear. Please enquire, or see the BSFA web page for overseas rates.

RENEWALS AND NEW MEMBERS - Estelle Roberts - 97 Sharp Street, Newland Avenue, Hull, HU5 2AE Email: Estelle@lythande.freeserve.co.uk

USA Enquiries – Cy Chauvin, 114248 Willfred Street, Detroit, MI 48213 USA

PRINTED BY

PDC COPYPRINT (Guildford), Middle Unit, 77-83 Walnut Tree Close, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4UH

OTHER BSFA PUBLICATIONS

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

MATRIX

Commissioning Editor: Mark Greener – 16 Orchard End, Bluntisham PE28 3XF Email: markgreemer1@aol.com
Production Editor: Martin McGrath – 91 Bentley Drive,

Harlow, Essex CM17 9QT

Email: martinmcgratth@mttlworld.com

Web/Internet News: Martin Sketchley – 232 Alvechurch

Road, West Heath, Birmingham B31 3PS Email msketchley@blueyomder.co.uk

BSFA WEB

BSFA Web page:

htttp://xwww.bsfa.co.uk

Editorial

The View From the Empty Bottle

A year ago I was writing about the International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts and pondering about making a return visit. I wrote: "Would I go back? Well, controversy rages over loutish behaviour at the closing awards banquet, so I'm not sure what form the event will take next year, or whether the people I hung out with will go. But the combination of sun, sea, science fiction and, er, tequila, was a very appealing one, and I feel the call to go back to Fort Lauderdale. Except that next time I think I'll lay off the tequila. Yeah, right." It needs to be stated first, as a matter of record, that I did indeed go back. And whilst to the untutored eye much of it may look like sitting next to a pool, drinking, actually much of that time was really working. Debating. Discussing. Networking.

Once more I skipped the banquet, which apparently passed with the minimum of racism (some amusement over pronouncing non-angliophone names). A number of people that I'd seen last year were actually at a conference on technology in Hong Kong, and were spending time in arguably the second most dangerous spot on Earth, thanks to some incurable disease or virus which is doing the rounds. Given that I'd seen no advance information relating to that conference, I did begin to speculate about the Secret Masters of Academia, to which I have not yet been admitted.

I say second most dangerous spot, because it is impossible to ignore the international events which have been unfolding over the last year, and which went into a new phase the day after I got to Ft Lauderdale, Florida. Of course I should avoid using the magazines of the BSFA as a soap box for my own political opinions, but this is an editorial and my views don't necessarily reflect those of the management. All I want to say is that I just can't see how bombing a country that was the cradle of (western) civillisation back into the stone age can really help liberate it from a dictator. It's sort of having to destroy the Shire in order to save it. I suspect that there may be such a thing as a just war – but that is much more about self-defence and clear and present danger than future threats – and this isn't one.

Over the last few months I've been writing an article on war in children's science fiction. It began with being asked to write something on children's sf, and my initial thought was to examine the treatment of war in Terry Pratchett's Johnny Maxwell trilogy, with half an eye on Gillian Rubinstein's Space Demons as a comparison. Then I came across Robert Westall's Gulf and the emphasis shifted to the ethics of war, with a particular emphasis on the Gulf War. All of the time I was working on it, and re-reading Jean Baudrillard's The Gulf War Did Not Take Place, I was aware that the politics of criticism

were about to intrude. In fact, rather than deciding that such real world events made criticism dangerous or wrong, I felt that it was more vital than ever.

Flashback to a moment last year in Ft Lauderdale, when we were returning through the pool area from some meal at a restaurant, and a young woman stopped me to compliment me on my Doc Martens – these rather stand out when you are wearing shorts. I don't know who she was, she didn't seem to be part of the conference. She recognised my nationality through my accent and thanked me for my support for the bombing of Afghanistan. I wasn't clear what to say, in part because I didn't have the energy. But I should have said not in my name.

This year I was also wary, wondering whether it was safe to express my point of view in a country on the edge of war, or at least on the edge of bombing a country to smithereens. In fact I encountered the same kind of anger and frustration I've found in Britain; anger at the mindlessness of it all, frustration at the inability to stop the process. No one I spoke to wanted to make a case for war, or to link 11th September to Iraq. In many ways I wish I'd been giving my children's sf and war paper at the conference.

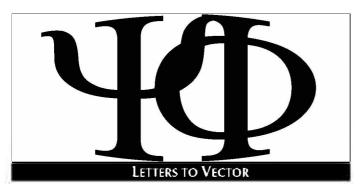
Life has to go on, of course, and although security at airports was noticeably tighter, I see its point. And having lived through decades of a bombing campaign which could have struck any point of the British mainland at any point, I don't give in to terror. We have to get on with life – although I remember long nights just over a decade ago, watching the war being fought out under the choreography of General Schwarzkopf, I've not felt the same impulse this time, nor indeed have the terrestrial television channels given the war such blanket coverage.

There are perhaps clearer and more present dangers: for example the impact of a significant amount of a bottle of tequila on my body. Would I punish my body in much the same way? The signs were good; a group of us made a pact to bring a bottle of our favourite spirit, and so in duty-free at Heathrow I purchased a litre of Laphroaig. Unfortunately nobody else kept their side of the bargain. There was a rumour of bottle of Vodka, but this never emerged. Perhaps this was just as well, and the single malt was appreciated over two nights.

Clearly, however, I must go back to find out what we would have drunk if the others had brought their favourite drink. It's a dirty job, but.

Finally I must thank Steve for his sterling work on editing reviews over the last few years, and to hope that somehow he finds ways to fill the void left by no longer working on *Vector*. Paul Billinger now assumes the vacant chair, and I'm sure he'll live up to the standards set by Steve. I'm sure you'll let us know if we fall short.

Andrew M. Butler, Spring 2003, High Wycombe



A while back, Syd Foster (V220) mentioned Linda Nagata's Vast, in comments that were reproduced on the BSFA website (www.bsfa.co.uk).

From Peter Stenlake via email:

I will certainly have to check out Linda Nagata's *Vast* on Mr Foster's recommendation. However, can I please log a small objection – his review goes on to say the following: "and all kinds of *Dr Who* which never gets a good review, and yet the clones keep buying it... aaargh!"

I would very much like Mr Foster to know that I'm not a clone, and if he thinks that current *Dr Who* publications never get a good review, then he is reading the wrong publications! If he wants to see just how adult and thoughtful current *Dr Who* fiction is, he could do worse that peruse Lance Parkin's recent Who novel *Father Time* – a mature novel that can happily compete with any nontie fiction you care to name.

Please remember, Mr Foster, just because it's a tie-in novel, doesn't make it worthless!

Readers with long memories might recall the interchange between Gary S. Dalkin and myself "Watered-Down Worlds: 'Wookie Books': The Case for the Prosecution" and Daniel O'Mahony and "Dances with Wookies: The Case For the Defence" over the issue of Wookie books (V200), and the later response from Kevin J. Anderson (V202). Back issues are available... Daniel O'Mahony wrote a pretty damn good Who novel himself.

From Stephen Baynes via email

As an sf fan with a 3 year old child I was very interested in Farah Mendlesohn's article on science fiction for under sevens and disappointed to find that there is so little good stuff out there.

One book I can recall from my own childhood with an overtly sf content was one of Orlando the Marmalade cat's adventures where he and his family travelled into space. Despite the subject it was really pure fantasy – for example the Milky Way was made of milk, much to the pleasure of the cats. Despite that, it was still very enjoyable reading. I have no idea if it is still in print.

More interesting for a discussion are the Thomas the Tank Engine books. These are not overtly sf but they have much in similar with hard sf. Science/technology provides an important element to the plots and it is handled in a detailed and accurate way. You can learn a lot about the practical application of friction, momentum and gravity etc. to railways from these books. I expect a lot of it goes over the head of the intended audience and even some of the parents. The difference from sf is that at the time of writing it was real current (or even past) technology rather than imagined future science and technology. Maybe the term 'Technology Fiction' could be used. I wonder if there is any correlation between those who are sf fans as adults and those who are Thomas fans as children. For older children the Swallows and Amazons books are a similar sort of Technology Fiction but the domain is sailing rather than steam railways. Again I would expect a correlation between their fans and sf fans.

Andy Sawyer has pointed out in a number of places that the Swallows and Amazons sequence can be read as fantasy, in the way that the various lakes and lochs expand to encompass pirates and various adventures. We also heard from Hal Hall with a long list of children's sf.

Freedom in an Owned World

Warhammer Fiction and the Interzone Generation by Stephen Baxter

"Curse all manling coach drivers and all manling women," muttered Gotrek Gurnisson, adding a curse in Dwarvish ...

hat's the first line of 'Geheimnisnacht' by William King, the first story in the first book of *Warhammer* fiction, the anthology *Ignorant Armies*, published in 1989. Since that beginning there has been published a whole string of books, magazines and comics, set in the universes of the highly successful war games and role-playing games marketed by Games Workshop (GW).

Partly because of the involvement of *Interzone* editor David Pringle, who was editor of the GW line from 1988 to 1991, over the years several prominent British writers of sf and fantasy have contributed to the various series, many from what used to be known as the *'Interzone* generation'. My own involvement was modest, two short stories published in 1989 and 1990; there have been much more significant contributions from David Garnett, Kim Newman, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and others. Today GW publishes new and reprinted fiction – great mountains of it, in fact – under its 'Black Library' imprint.

But over the years GW fiction itself has been the subject of a saga of gamers and business suits, of orthodoxies and heresies, of Stakhanovites and rebels, of collapses and recoveries, of intriguing lost possibilities, and of struggles for literary freedom in an 'owned universe'.

I've been arguing for some time that somebody ought to do a proper study of this saga. Well, nobody more qualified than me took up my challenge, and if you want something done ... My aim here is to set out an informal history of GW literature, especially that of the Pringle period, based on the personal recollections of those involved, told as far as possible in their own words. I'd love to see a proper academic study of this body of work some day.

My own first exposure to the GW fiction project came in autumn 1988, with a phone call from David Pringle.

W was started in south-west London in 1975 by a group of enthusiasts, including Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, who had got into wargaming as ramdætæradBætæd. vBidhedhevithmaliæitrenamnstagajjobslay jobsAfter trading at first behind closed doors, in April 11978 they contine wed necessived company or Chames Carlesh Monthshop, the Hammersmith shop, the first GW store, was opened would develop and sell innovative games. They began by making such traditional games as backgammon and Go, but their passion was for fantasy games such as Lensman (1971), based on the E.E. 'Doc' Smith novels. These had precursors in games rooted in real-world warfare - such as Diplomacy and Warlock.

To publicise GW the friends began a fanzine called Owl and Weasel. A copy of this fell into the hands of the American games developer Gary Gygax, who sent over for review a new game called Dungeons and Dragons.

Published by TSR Hobbies, D&D, as the first game commercially available role-playing revolutionized tabletop gaming. A RPG

like D&D has a 'world' - the fictional setting in which the game takes place defined in a set of handbooks. Players define and control 'characters', with whom they often identify closely. You could use lead figurines as character position markers and so on, but in the early RPGs the real interest for the players was in the scenario and the extensible rule sets, not the related merchandise.

Jackson and Livingstone, immediately enthusiastic about D&D and other RPGs, quickly signed an exclusive 3-year European distribution agreement with TSR though they didn't know at the time that TSR was just another fledgling company, and that D&D had already been turned down by the big games manufacturers. From the beginning GW had serious business ambitions. Cheryl Morgan, an old school friend of Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne, was involved in role-playing in the early days: 'While Steve [Jackson] and Ian [Livingstone] were both enthusiasts, they ... both wanted to make lots of money ...' Their instinct over D&D was right, and the orders began to roll in.

Up to May 1976 GW was run out of a flat in Shepherd's Bush. As the business grew Jackson and Livingstone opened their first real office, at the back of an estate agent in south London, but again that was quickly

outgrown and in 1977 GW moved to a shop in Hammersmith. From 1978 GW sold all the major RPG titles, such as Traveller, RuneQuest, Middle Earth Roleplay. Marc Gascoigne - who would join GW as an editor in 1984, and is now publisher of the modern Black Library - says that at the time a UK edition through GW became almost the norm for any RPG.

Meanwhile GW began publishing White Dwarf, an A4 gaming magazine. While Owl & Weasel had been a photocopied fanzine, White Dwarf, designed for much wider circulation, was of similar quality to *Interzone*, and within eighteen months was selling through newsagents. Dwarf featured GW and other manufacturers' products. and was popular with the gaming community. Charles Stress's first publishing credits were there: 'D&D monster designs, I blush to recall, from back when I was 113-15 years old A couple of years ago I was gobsmacked to discover that they were popular enough to have spawned an entire game of their own - one with a rather outré reputation even among gamers.'

to the public. From the beginning it included specialist gamer staff to help create a 'hobby' atmosphere. Thanks to the publicity from White Dwarf it was a success from the beginning, and was quickly followed by sister stores in Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Nottingham and elsewhere.

In 1980 GW launched its own board games - one was based on Doctor Who, another on Judge Dredd - under the slogan 'The British Empire Strikes Back!' (though George Lucas forced a change of advertising policy, the first but not the last legal tangle in this story). The first GW RPG was Judge Dredd - The Roleplaying Game

> released in 1985, co-written by Marc Gascoigne, soon followed bγ superhero RPG Golden Heroes.

> It was soon clear that there was a high profit margin to be had in selling character-related figurines, to which younger gamers (10-14) were partiicularly partial. Driven by the need to enter this growing market for miniatures, GW satellite manufacturing spawned а

company called Citadel Miniatures, based in Nottingham. Citadel was funded by GW, who sold the models through mail order and their growing store chain. Citadel was headed by Bryan Ansell. Ansell, who 'began his career as a toy-soldier manufacturer,' according to David Pringle, had previously developed the popular Asgard product line, though like many in gaming he had begun by running a fanzine, in Ansell's case called, sweetly, Trollcrusher.

In 1983 Citadel launched the first Warhammer war game. Warhammer was a Tolkienesque heroic fantasy, co-authored by Ansell.

By the mid-1980s the market was changing. Sales of RPGs were slowing, while sales of Warhammer miniatures were growing very quickly. Though there were high initial set-up costs, the margins on lead miniatures, if marketed through a chain of stores like GW's, were likely to be far higher than on roleplay books or board games.

'The British **Empire Strikes** Back!'

This was the logic, in early 1986, which impelled the Citadel management team, led by Ansell, to complete a buy-out of the parent company from its original founders. The business was to be relaunched to focus on selling lead figurines and game accessories. Cheryl recalls that Livingstone and Jackson had anyhow done well with another profitable venture, the Fighting Fantasy 'gamebook' series, RPGs in book form. 'Having made their fortunes, they sold out to Bryan Ansell ... Bryan was even more focused on money than Steve and lan, and he gave Workshop a very tight mission which seems to have been very successful (though credit for it working may belong to Tom Kirby [Ansell's second-in-command]) ... [Ansell's] whole policy was built around selling figurines through the games.'

There was controversy among the fans as GW appeared to lose its old hippy-ish, student-enthusiast feel and embraced corporatism, and White Dwarf became more obviously a glossy marketing machine. The change

of management wasn't entirely welcome inside the company itself: in the last issue of White Dwarf that was produced by the original team, if you read down the table of contents page, the first letter of the description under each item spells out 'Sod Off Bryan Ansell'! But as Marc points out, such a buy-out, of a Londonbased firm by a provincial manufacturer with a relocation to Nottingham, would never be universally popular. Some London staff were happy to accept the change, including Marc himself (though he survived only a year under the new regime, then moving on to work on the Fighting Fantasy books).

Under the new management new character-rich games were designed, to serve as platforms for selling figurines and accessories. In 1986 an RPG, Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay, was published; by now the Warhammer wargame itself was in its third edition. The Warhammer RPG was a success – according to Marc it was the best-selling RPG of 1987 in the UK, and the best-selling UK-sourced RPG for many years.

By 1988 GW had largely abandoned selling other manufacturers' games to focus on their own lines. The most significant GW games were: Warhammer, developed into a wargame and RPG; Warhammer: 40,000 (40K), a dark space opera wargame; and Dark Future, a tabletop game played with wargames miniatures set in cyberpunk-tinged alternate world featuring serious urban decay and a lot of car chases. Dark Future, coauthored by Marc Gascoigne, was evidence of a concentration on miniatures-related games as the way forward.

Meanwhile, more commercial opportunities arose. Manufacturers of RPGs had begun generating associational fiction set in their game worlds; TSR had been especially successful with their Weiss and Hickman Dragonlance series. In January 1987, with the Warhammer RPG successfully launched, GW decided to try to launch its own range of 'literary tie-ins'—anthologies of stories, perhaps even novels, set against

this background.

The saga of GW fiction had begun.

W first approached Richard Evans (sorely missed), then editor at Macdonald, and asked him to recommend a 'prime fantasy author' to develop a based drastdarban Wanha Richard Richard and Anidated Mike Scott Robatt, Rohan readle, redailing 'Aimthe time (blush) (blush) Macdonald's best-seller, so he asked me; I said I'd look at what they had, but I didn't want it to mess up my other writing, so could I bring in my occasional collaborator and Viking scholar Allan Scott? The answer was yes, and we went up to their HQ for a series of increasingly bizarre meetings ...' The two got on well with the original editor, whose real-world research on sixteenth-century Germany had underpinned the Warhammer universe, impressing Mike.

Mike says, 'Al and I ... were offered pretty good sums and signed up. We had no qualms about it, because we

felt we had plenty of scope for being creative. We figure we can produce a plot which operates on the periphery of the Warhammer universe, and avoids using as much of their game characters as possible - and, if at all possible, sends them up unmercifully Unfortunately, however, authors found their editorial contacts coming and going, and some in the GW hierarchy seemed to have little idea how to handle authors and the world of book publishing: one executive, says Mike, 'made it clear he wasn't interested in quality, and indeed

didn't believe it was possible in anything like fantasy fiction; authors and indeed anybody creative were long-haired pooves you could pick up in the gutter for ten a penny ... We decided [the book] could only be written in a wholly unserious, picaresque vein, and even included outrageous caricatures of each other among the main characters, and of certain GW jerks as the villains....'

GW nevertheless approved Mike and Allan's synopsis, but there were disputes with GW over such items as possible infringements of Tolkien copyrights and over foreign rights. Finally the publishers abandoned the GW contract. Mike and Allan rewrote the book, removing the Warhammer references and inventing a new world and rationale. Mike says, 'Retitled A Spell of Empire, it appeared from Orbit – now owned by Little, Brown – in 1992. It was actually quite popular, appearing in four foreign editions as well. It's still one of the books for which I most often get asked about a sequel.'

After this debacle GW tried again. This time Penguin was approached as a possible publisher, and to seek out willing potential professional writers David Langford was recruited.

David was known to GW through his book reviews for White Dwarf, and was then, as now, the greasy hub at the heart of the rickety wheel that is British sf, and so was a good choice for the job. In January 1987 David sent out a form letter to twelve senior figures in the field – established 'names' were needed to sell the proposal to

Penguin. The letter was tinged with Dave's unique humour about the 'sleazy proposition' he was outlining, and honest about the nature of the project: 'A god of death called Morr suggests intermittent study of etymology; a god of disease called Nurgle sounds more like the Goon show ...' Payment, said David quoting GW managers, would be 'the usual rates plus maybe the odd percentage point, based on this having a greater sales potential than usual ...' In February David reported back the mixed results to GW. 'In summary: three YES, seven PISS OFF, and two responses still awaited.'

Among the PO's were John Brunner, who 'strongly disapproved', Chris Evans, to whom it was 'a wholly derivative mishmash ... which offers precious little imaginative scope', and Chris Priest, of whom David said, 'I asked him in person and was lucky to escape with my life'. The other PO's were Rob Holdstock, Tanith Lee, Lisa

Tuttle and Ian Watson; the late replies were Bob Shaw and Ramsey Campbell, who later said no. David himself was another gentle refusenik: 'I doubt I could write this flavour of fantasy other than with tongue visibly in cheek.'

Two of the yeses were from Garry Kilworth and Brian Stableford, who were endearingly honest about their motives: 'Your letter arrived on the same day as my bank statement,' said Garry. The third yes came from Terry Pratchett (!): 'What a delightful world, with many original touches. In Robert Robinson's telling phrase, it looks as though the writers learned the language in a hurry in order to sell beads to the natives. But provided no one expects me to take it as seriously as it clearly takes itself, count me in as interested at least as far as knowing what the "usual rates" in this case

are.' In a later note Terry wrote, 'I feel a bit like King Herod being invited to write the newsletter for the Bethlehem Playground Association.'

In the end, though, this venture failed when the draft contract proved unacceptable to the writers involved; GW evidently still hadn't got the hang of the business they were trying to enter – and Terry Pratchett never would write for GW.

In 1988, however, GW made yet another attempt to establish a line of tie-in fiction. This time it would be published by GW itself, through a new subsidiary called GW Books. GW recruited David Pringle as series editor and lan Miller as art editor.

David Pringle recalls, 'lan Miller ... was the person responsible for getting me the job with GW in the first place ... Ian set up the office in Brighton, and he was employed full-time as art editor, on a higher salary than me.' Miller had been an art school tutor of GW art director John Blanche: what Marc describes as Blanche's 'demented Bosch-esque art' became the core of Warhammer imagery.

In 1988 Interzone was six years old, and David

Pringle's was a very respectable name in the field of sf. Clearly he would be able to draw on a 'stable' of established and upcoming *Interzone* authors. David says his own objectives were: 'To get as much money, and publishing opportunities, for the authors as possible. And, of course, it was a living for me as well. I think I started on a salary of £13,000 per annum in October 1988, which rose to £14,000 by the time I left in October 1991.'

There may have been more benign motives too. As lan Watson recalls, 'Bryan Ansell yearned to read real novels by real novelists set in his beloved domains. David Pringle persuaded Bryan that this could happen, using the stable of *Interzone* writers, if these writers were offered ten thousand quid in guaranteed royalties per volume.'

Given earlier experiences, one of David's first tasks would be to produce a new contract for his authors; Brian

Stableford assisted in this.

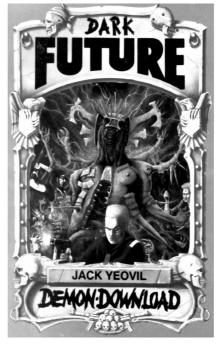
As the fiction franchise loomed, there was a sense among some observers that GW's corporatism was worsening. David Langford says that in October 1988, 'I moved my book review column from White Dwarf to GamesMaster ... They'd already dropped all independent game reviews in favour of GW product plugs, and it seemed likely that independent book reviews would go the same way - which indeed they eventually did ... David Pringle took over the Dwarf book review column after I left, though I believe that stealing my title "Critical Mass" was something imposed on him by GW rather than his own choice! His reviews appeared in #107-#109 and #111. David V. Barrett then got the job – still with my title – from #112 to #115. My run stops with #116,

which has no review column; DVB told me (though I don't remember exactly when) that he'd resigned following editorial pressure to dumb down the reviews coverage.'

David Pringle, meanwhile, began to contact potential contributors.

was at an early stage in my career when David Pringle's call came. I'd published a number of short stories in *Interzone* and elsewhere, but I wouldn't finish my first novel (*Ralt*) until 1990, I had no experience of writing fantasy, and I wasn't even a RPGer! But I liked the challenge of taking on something new, and the money on offer was certainly good: no less than a cool £1,000 (paid as a minimum royalty) for a seven thousand word story, far in excess of the rates offered by *Interzone* itself, or all but a handful of markets internationally. But this was work for hire: the copyright of the fiction was owned by GW, with the authors waiving moral rights, though with rights to royalty payments. I would be paid well, but anything I created would belong to GW.

David sent me a stack of GW gaming manuals, which



I conscientiously went through. The first stories were to be set in the Warhammer fantasy world, which turned out to be roughly like fourteenth-century Earth, though well stocked with wizards, elves, dwarfs and such. There was much disruption from 'Chaos', the primal stuff of the universe. The material struck me as largely cobbled together from familiar sources, not least Tolkien - Cheryl remarks that Warhammer was 'desperately derivative'. David Langford detected 'oddments from all over the shop', including traces of Lovecraft.

Whatever the origins of the mythos, this was certainly a complex world with a lot of room for stories. I came up with a couple of ideas. The first, a novella called 'The Star Boat', was based on a science fictional nugget I'd noticed inside Warhammer about a long-vanished technology race; the story would be about a 'Norse' -Erik the Were, tormented by a trace of werewolf blood seeking the eponymous ancient spaceship. The second story would be called 'The Song', a light fantasy caper about an elf 'detective'. David liked the ideas, and filtered them through Andy Jones, his games-scenario contact at

We had to

imagine our

ideal reader as

'an intelligent

18-year-old'...

GW, who asked for minor changes in setting. I began writing the stories working on trust, as I didn't yet have actual contracts for either of them. I delivered 'Star Boat' by Christmas of 1988 and 'The Song' by the end of January 1989.

In January 1989 David produced 'a few rough guidelines' for us writers. We had to imagine our ideal reader as 'an intelligent 18-year-old', we should avoid sadism and explicit sex, and 'the keynote above all

should be fantastic adventure'. The nature of 'Chaos' confused us all, I think. 'It is important to bear in mind that "Chaos" and "evil" are not synonymous. There may be good Chaos gods (in fact the gods of Law themselves derive from the Realm of Chaos ...

Marc Gascoigne says that the 'Chaos' concept was inspired by Michael Moorcock's Eternal Champion books, which had also influenced Dungeons and Dragons; but the GW designers had an ambition to do the Chaos concept justice - unlike D&D, as they saw it. Marc says that the designers were aware of the debt owed by Moorcock in turn to Poul Anderson's Three Hearts & Three Lions. The Warhammer elves were, says Marc, as much derived from Anderson's The Broken Sword as from Tolkien.

Eor us authors, though, this kind of thing could be baffling, and not always derivable even from the gaming manuals. But it wasn't arbitrary; we writers learned that the Nottingham priesthood, led by Bryan Ansell himself, guarded their lore carefully. I'd already had editorial comments on my stories from David, but now more comments came from Andy Jones, and also from Ansell. Some of these comments were to do with obscure details of the game world, but others were about the story structure itself, which you would think would have been David's domain. Later, still more comments came in, from William King. Bill was an Interzone writer but he was also a Warhammer gamer with a lot of specific

knowledge who would shortly go to work for GW himself. Alex Stewart remembers these experiences with annoyance: '[Bryan Ansell would] issue these pointless dictats like "stories must never be written in the first person" after you'd already delivered a perfectly serviceable draft, for instance.

With hindsight I can see this wasn't unique to GW; the source material of other franchises like Star Trek is equally tightly controlled. At the time I found it hard to hold my stories together, with one revision after another demanded by a clamour of different voices. But it was all part of the job, I supposed, and I put it down to experience. As it happened, the hardest change I had to make was to turn the elf protagonist of 'Song' into a 'halfling', a character introduced by Alex in another story!

It was difficult for David Pringle too, however. Details of the games 'kept changing from On High, so it was difficult. I was working from an office in Brighton ... I used to go up [to Nottingham] about once a month, at least in the first year or so, but on the whole I was cut off from the centre of things and all the day-to-day changes in

> the games set-ups. Mind you, I wouldn't have had it any other way - it would have driven me crazy to work in Nottingham, in the rather strange

atmosphere of GW's main offlice."

After such a long gestattion, in 1989 GW publications at last began to appear in the bookshops. The first of them were set in the Warhammer fantasy universe.

My 'Star Boat' appeared in the first anthology, called Ignorant Armies,

along with stories by William King, Charles Stress (as Charles Davidson), Nicola Griffith, Brian Stableford (as Brian Craig), Kim Newman (as Jack Yeovil), and Paul McAuley (as Sean Flynn, pen-named after Errol Flynn's dead son!). Authors in other early anthologies included Storm Constantine, Eugene Byrne, Charles Platt and Alex Stewart. It was a respectable line-up by any standard.

The book itself was a paperback original but handsomely produced, with a full colour frontispiece and internal illustrations by artists including Jim Burns although some would think that the 'idiosyncratic cover design may have affected [the book's] general visibility' (Peter Garratt in Interzone 70, March 1991). Marc notes that the first print runs were in the larger B-format, before that format became common in the bookshops, which may also have led to marketing difficulties.

Not everybody used pseudonyms. I used the cunning disguise of 'Steve Baxter', intending an 'lain M Banks' device of showing it was me but doing something different. I didn't see the point of concealing myself from readers who might be drawn to my other writings, and anyhow I wasn't ashamed of the work. Nicola Griffith similarly recalls, 'I chose not to use a pseudonym for the work-for-hire writing. Almost everyone else thought I was mad ... For me it came down to this simple belief: that I shouldn't ever publish anything I wasn't proud and pleased to hang my name and reputation on.

As for other of the newer writers (including myself), for

Nicola the GW work was a learning experience. 'Writing the Warhammer stuff was nothing but good for me ... Most importantly [I] learned how to consciously put a story together. By story I mean the character's internal journey plus plot. Up until working on Warhammer, I had used the sit-around-and-waitt-to-be-struck-by-the-muse method of story generation (which tends to rely upon the uncertain movement of vast psychological masses which are largely hidden from my conscious perception). In other words, I used to feel a story rather incoherently, then try to write it down. Obviously if you're doing work for hire, that just won't do. With money and deadlines and certain constraints as my goad, I learned to harness feeling (all that lovely literary stuff, the themes and metaphors and interior yearnings, etc) to a sturdy little plot cart. I thought it was a pretty neat trick, and it would have taken me a lot longer to figure out without an imaginary David Pringle hovering over my keyboard saying, "Yes, yes, that's all very well, but something has to happen."

We enjoyed a launch party for *Ignorant Armies*. Nicola recalls, '[It was] my first ever book signing – I remember it clearly: me and you and Bill King and Alex [Stewart] and Kim Newman and others signing away in a row at some nasty hotel in Birmingham, drinking free beer. The free beer is why I remember the evening.

"Beer" and "free" were two words that in my experience had never been linked before. I'd never done a signing, either, and thought it was all pretty cool.'

The anthology was gemerously, if a bit incestuously, reviewed in Interzone (no. 33, Jan 1990), by Neil McIntosh and Neil Jones. The latter would later go on to work for GW itself, and the former would one day write for the line. They said, 'So the verdict is a success ... It's a well-balanced and highly entertaining read, both for the gamer (on whom the book must primarily be targeted), and for the orthodox sword-and-sorcery fan.'

The first GW novels meanwhile, also published in 1989, included the first of Brian Stableford's 'Orfeo' trilogy, Zaragoz, and Kim's

Drachenfels, the start of his 'Genevieve' vampire series. Brian Stableford enjoyed the work: 'The Warhammer scenario provided me with a golden opportunity to sell work of a kind that I had always been enthusiastic to do, and some of the short stories I did within that scenario are among my most from the short stories I did within that scenario are

Kim's *Drachenfels* was reviewed by no less than John Clute in *Interzone* (no. 35, May 1990). Clute railed a bit about the corporate nature of the project, but detected a subtext in Kim's plot about actors, and in apparent references to various movies, as if 'the whole plot ... manages to acknowledge its relationship to the owned world, while at the same time asserting a final freedom'. Kim himselfsaid the plottwas inspired by Busby Berkeley.

Something about the Warhammer air inspired Kim. With enviable fluency he would produce seven novels for GW in those first years, as well as contributions to the anthologies. Kim was certainly inventive and playful with material others found constricting. 'I thought [playfulness] was inherent in the matterial, which had some jokey aspects - the town in the Warhammer version of Spain which is equivalent to Bilbao is called Bilbali, the history of the Empire features an Empress Magritta who came to power in 1979 and oppressed everyone, and in 40K there was some talk that the immortal emperor should be revealed as Cliff Richard.' Marc contrasts this aspect of Warhammer - British and wryly sarcastic - with the humourlessness of D&D. Kim says, 'I naturally responded to some of that and put in the odd satirical or silly touch from my limited experience of role-playing, I remember that most groups would include a comedian who'd try to be ridiculous, so I guess I was doing the equivalent of that. I also put in some "serious" material as well, mostly about social problems or political corruption, which perhaps balanced the whimsy.' Marc recalls affectionately a section from Genevieve Undead entitled 'The Cold Stark House', a parody of Cold Comfort Farm with vampires. Few readers noticed such touches, however.

Not everybody was polite about the enterprise. In a column for *The Face* (March 1990) on the state of British

sf. Colin Greenland sensed reinvention of the pulp tradition. 'GW's list is being filled by eager, aspiring novices hiding behind pseudonyms, turning out formula fantasy to editorial direction, just the way it was when Michael Moorcock started 30 years ago'. And in a generally favourable review Drachenfels in his August 1990 GamesMaster International book column. David Langford wrote: 'Owing to misgivings, I've delayed dipping into Games Workshop's books based on, or set in the world of, or gemenally tainted by, their Warhammer games. Long ago I was invited to contribute, but after reading the sourcebooks I just couldn't. Perhaps the game plays brilliantly, but its literary background basic junkfood fantasy

desperately derivative ... "Well," said one author who signed up, "sod all that. I did a straight adventure novel and scattered a few *Warhammer* references to keep 'em happpy."

Even the process of reviewing itself engendered controversy. In an *Interzone* review (no. 70), Peter Garratt touched on cynical expectations that David Pringle would fill *Interzone* with GW reviews, noting that on the contrary the books had actually received 'surprisingly little attention considering that they are intelligent, well-crafted modern fantasies'. David Pringle had actually been gratified by the books' wider reception. 'What was partiicularly pleasing was the excellent reviews several of the early books, partiicularly Kim's *Drachenfels*, got in

The free beer is why I remember the evening.
"Beer" and "free" were two words that in my experience had never been linked before.

Locus. Obviously, the Locus reviewers had no axe to grind, and they thought the books were pretty good of their sort. So if they were worth reviewing in Locus, for a general sf/fantasy readership, then they were worth reviewing in Interzone too.' An Interzone review by Gwymeth Jones of two 40k books (in no. 46, April 1991) was much more hostile, showing a certain evenhandedness.

As for me, I visited the GW headquarters in Nottingham with David in February 1989. I was shown around the small factory, Prince Charles-like, where the game models were painted by hand, and met Bryan Ansell and others. The sense of ownership of their imagined worlds was tangible; it was like a visit to the

I continued to develop ideas. As I reworked 'Star Boat' I proposed a long follow-up tale I called 'Wood and Iron'. about an invasion of Erik's medieval-fantasy world by high-tech bandits from the 40K world, and for a further follow-up called 'Titan vs. T Rex', in which I would pitch a 40K ambulatory robot against the king lizard. Also by March 1989 I had come up with a 40K novel idea, called Assassin. David took all this stuff in for consideration, and

asked me to go ahead with 'Wood and Iron', though again in advance of a contract.

Behind the scenes, though, things were already changing. David Pringle recalls, '[lan Miller] only lasted a year or so. There was some sort of blazing row between him and Bryan Ansell and Tom Kirby ... But I don't know the full details, or I've managed to forget them. I just kept my head down and carried on editing books. So eventually Ian left in a bad temper, and the guy he had brought in as an assistant to us bottlm... also

left. So, by late 1989 or early 1990, I was in the Brighton office on my own. After the dust had settled, I suggested to the powers that be that I be allowed to bring in Neil Jones as assistant editor, and that was okayed."

n 1990 more books appeared. David Garnett, writing as 'David Ferring', was an old hand at such assignments and had a brusque approach to the volvoniumo insoure fereforcen create atteithe liberal sevil novælvellsælutoluits litierheritsolikændradhælusitnepihypbyegængænritviniging thin, there was a lot of latitude to make stuff up, and 'Konrad starts off at a similar age to the majority of the Warhammer clientele, GW's target audience being 11-14 year olds. Konrad grows up in a small village, knowing nothing about the outside world. Through the first book, he learns more of the Warhammer world, so do the readers - and so did I (as I read more and more of the background in all the gaming manuals)."

David was another writer with a playful attitude to the material. 'Character names - often when choosing a name, I'll invent one by taking the first syllable of a surname and adding the last syllable(s) of a different one. Warhammer having such a Germanic influence, I devised various names by using a list of the 1990 (West) German World Cup squad. When we had a couple of German friends staying here, they helped me make up some names which had a partticular resonance in German - one of these names being "Litzenreich" (a renegade wizard in the trilogy). Because Gertraut and Rita helped me with these names, I used their names for minor characters in Shadowbreed IBook 21. But when the book came out in Germany, as Schattenbrut, "Gertraut" was changed to "Gertraud" (but non-Teutomic Rita is still Rita)."

The first book, Konrad, appeared in 1990. David Garnett's strategy had worked; as an Interzone reviewer remarked (no. 74, August 1993), the reader is '[lulled] into the world-view of his central character, who for a long time has little idea of what is going on around him', but the result was that 'the general feel of a complex, fantastical world is impressive'. The 'Konrad' books were less well received critically than some others, but seemed among the most popular with the target market.

Also in 1990 the first books in the Dark Future universe appeared. Kim Newman's Demon Download was the first of a projected series, set up by Kim's novella 'Route 666', published in an anthology of that name.

Dark Future inspired some of the most interesting GW work. Cheryl Morgan recalls, "Dark Future ... started life

> as a plan for a cyberpunk style roleplaying game inspired by books like Neuromancer, Stand on Zanzibar, Make Room Make Room, Bug Jack Barron, Fhe Sheep Look Up, Fhe Space Merchants and so om.' This had been Marc Gascoigne's pet project in his year in Nottingham, and would have been the first cyberpunk RPG, launched just as Gibson's Count Zero was due to hit the shelves. But, Cheryl recalls, 'Then someone at Workshop decided that what they really wanted was a Mad Max style car

fighting game. In retrospect that was far more in line with their stated policy of catering for teenage boys who had not yet discovered girls or motorbikes. And of course it would sell a lot more miniatures.' Still, as Marc recalls, as the game's rules editor he was able to transfer much of the background to the original RPG into the car game's rulebook. This echo of the original concept then fed into the novels, especially Kim's.

Kim recalls, 'Because the basics of the game were so David Pringle, Alex Stewart, Eugene Byrne, Brian Stableford and I all filled in lots of things. It gets complex because I know Alex and Eugene wrote books that didn't come out in the Dark Future line; my original plan was for two trilogies, but five books - there would be two books about Sister Chantal (my Demon Download, and Eugene's finished but not published Violent Fendency, which we plotted together) and two books about Krokodil (Krokodil Fears and Comeback Four), with a final collaborative volume (United States Calvary) in which the characters meet and all the plots are resolved. This was to be a collaboration between me and Eugene and we did an outline (it might easily have ended up as more than

one book, since there was a lot to get through).' But with the publishing travails to come, this programme was never completed. 'I looked at the outline [of the saga] again recently, and the time has probably passed for it – it's set in the year 2000 and has a lot of now-old-hat millennium material.'

I had been worried by the fact that *Assassin* would be my first novel, and asked for a year to complete it. But at the time Kim could produce a 70,000-word final draft in just *four weeks:* 'The schedule I stuck to for most of the GW books was something like this. 7,000 words five days a week for a fortnight, then a week off, then a week to revise. ... It did help if I could clear the decks of all other commitments to get a good run at the individual books,

hope that the momentum I got from writing quickly compensated for the odd rough patch of prose." Kim said of his Dark Future novel Comeback Tour that three weeks was about as long as he was interested in the idea of Elvis mercenary anyhow! Kim's strategy worked, as noted by Peter Garratt in Interzone (no. 70, March 1991): 'The author is said to spend far less time on his writing as Yeovil than as Newman; yet as an inheritor of the pulp tradition, he does best as Yeovil'.

Meanwhile the first 40K books appeared.

Given my hard-sf credentials, David had asked me to pitch ideas for this space-operatic universe. But I had found 40K a challenge from the start. In the face of overwhelming threats almost all freedom has been sacrificed, and humanity is

controlled by the telepathic powers of a bloated, grotesque Emperor. My novel idea, *Assassin*, was about a rogue imperial guard who hatches a plot to assassinate the Emperor himself. But the GW theocracy said that a rogue guard would simply immediately be killed by those around him, or if not *they* would be killed in turn. I couldn't see how to generate story ideas in an environment where conflict is impossible and any change suppressed; it was like trying to write stories about an ant hill.

Clearly other writers had the same difficulty. Barrington J. Bayley turned in a few stories on spec, and visited Nottingham to meet Bryan Ansell and others. Seeking room to work in, Barry pitched ideas about non-human 40K characters: the Tyranids, intelligent social insects, and the Eldar, hyper-technological elves. Nothing came of these interesting suggestions, however, despite David Pringle's support. David recalls, 'We had terrible

trouble getting GW to accept Barry's stuff. I don't think Bryan Ansell liked it. Luckily, they were willing to take him on later, when they started Black Library, so all his earlier efforts didn't get wasted.'

Charles Stross recalls, 'I remember being sent an invitation to a day-long seminar and being trucked down to Nottingham on a coach to sit in on a session at which [Bryan Ansell] and his minions explained how the spiky space wombles' ethos (which could be summed up as Total! Maximum! Violence! Now!) worked, and how we weren't to take any liberties with their intellectual property. Which they gloated over eerily and at length.'

I did think there was some intellectual depth to it all, though. In Nottingham I had argued with Bryan Ansell

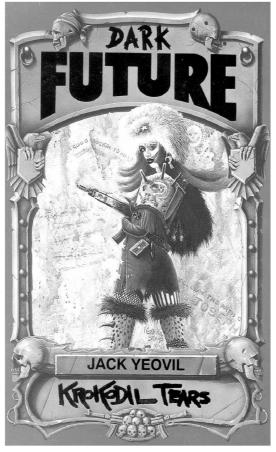
40K. over saving it lacked humanity. Ansell pointed to such examples as teenage Iraqi boys riding scooters across minefields ahead of advancing troops, secure in their belief in a reward in paradise. Even our modern world is full of belief systems quite alien to those assumed by most western sf, he said. Ansell clearly had a strong mind, and a certain vision of what he wanted. But some felt that the design of his 40K universe, and perhaps the Warhammer fantasy universe too, might have been influenced by his personal politics: Cheryl recalls, 'I only met [Ansell] a few times, and the thing that struck me most was his desire to live in a gated community with machine guns on the gates so he could keep the riff-raff out. He had a very Texan view of life.' As Marc recalls, even for those within the company, Ansell was a difficult boss, driven but at times erratic and given to varying impulses; Tom Kirby seems to have exerted a controlling influence.

For me, Ansell was not an easy

customer. He exerted a strong ownership of his imaginative domains, and he was certainly not a man to fall out with. I did feel he might have got more out of the high-calibre writers David Pringle had attracted to the project, and to whom he was paying handsome fees, if he had allowed them more creative freedom.

Others found Ansell more nurturing, though. Kim says, 'Bryan Ansell... really liked *Drachenfels*, and I think overruled some nit-picks about the specifics of the rulebooks, which were changing all the time anyway. I remember one of my few meetings in Nottingham, based on the outline of *Drachenfels*, when someone said that their rules for vampires precluded having one as a heroine and suggesting that Genevieve be an elf and Bryan saying it would be better to change the rules. I used that "couldn't she be an elf?" line in the book, when the nasty actress doesn't want to play a vampire.'

Meanwhile Ian Watson had begun to find his own



way through the 40K maze. When initially approached by David Langford in January 1987 he had passed. 'I would have this terrible ethicopolitical problem of writing for a vol to be called Warhammer. Had it only been called Peacefeather V But, he says, 'Time drifted by till I realized that I rather urgently needed thousands of quid. (This was before Stanley Kubrick came into my life.) ...

'When David [Pringle] originally asked me to join in, he tried to steer me towards 40K because I'm an SF writer not a fantasy writer ... So I learned the Encyclopaedia Psychotica Galactica and I wrote a trial 40K short story which initially read a bit like a piss-take. Scourged by David, I then hallucinated myself into the 40K milieu, and began to have enormous mad fun in broodingly, Gothically, luridly going over the top. That's when it all gelled, and the "Inquisition War" trilogy came about."

Inquisitor, the first of lan's projected trilogy, was published in 1990. The design of lan's books was cunning. All stories need conflict; the conflict for lan's hero, Jaq Draco, comes not externally from theologicallydubious cracks in the GW universe itself but from within, as Draco has to shed his humanity to become a tool of the Emperor. Peter Garratt said (in Interzone 70) that Ian delivered 'a convincing portrayal desperately flawed society which has to be defended for fear of even worse'. Ian was, said Garratt, 'the Jack Yeovil of the far future'. Ian was pleased with his work; he was another who didn't use a pseudonym for his GW writing.

visited lan Watson Nottingham a few times, 'most

importantly for a meeting aflow with wine and canapés where various of us writers were supposed to thrash out a collaborative novel about Space Marines. One writer would establish the characters and background, then the other writers would follow on in turn. I did the set-up ... and nobody else did anything, so I wrote the whole novel, Space Marine, and again had enormous, lurid, hyperbolic fun with it. This was actually in between writing Inquisitor ... and writing Harlequin ['Inquisition War' Book 2], into which I recruited one of my space marines as a main character. So really Space Marine belongs with the "Inquisition War" trilogy."

As for me, I continued to wait for a reaction to my novella 'Wood and Iron', and to my other ideas. But unfortunately, in 1990, I fell out with GW over a late payment. GW promptly cancelled my future projects including 'Wood and Iron', to my annoyance, which I had completed pre-contract, on trust. GW eventually completed the late payment.

GW could be hard-nosed and even now was not an experienced publisher, and I wasn't the only person bruised in this sort of way. David Pringle recalls, 'Angus Wells ... wrote a whole GW novel in the space of a few weeks ... I advised him not to, until a contract was signed - and it was duly rejected by Ansell & co. Angus was extremely angry."

Since I had basically enjoyed the work - indeed I still find it interesting - I thought this was all rather a shame. I was eventually able to rework 'Wood and Iron' and sell it elsewhere. 'Titan vs. T Rex' never saw the light of day, alas; I still think it was a neat idea! Still, I learned some lessons about professionalism for the future.

But the 'Interzone' days at GW were numbered

hough the critical reception of the books had been reasonable. sales of the first titles were disappointing. Perhaps the core market was miljudged. David Pringle recalls, 'I think it was largely to do with poor marketing, too-high pricing

....1 then

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into the 40K

milieu, and began

to have enormous

mad fun in

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going over the top.

insufficiently commercial covers. But behind it all, mainly, was the fact that GW just didn't know what they were doing when it came to marketing Perhaps this wasn't helped by the involvement of an independent book sales team called ABS; Marc notes that such independents often struggle to sell books into high street chains. 'Also,' David Pringle recalls, 'I think there was some pulling two ways between Bryan Ansell (who was all for the books) and Tom Kirby (who tended to be against them - I remember him telling me that he hated fantasy and that his favourite writer was Jane Austen).

Then came more changes at GW, as Tom Kirby led a new

management buy-out. Bryan Ansell, who had wanted to realise some wealth from his assets, retired to Jersey, and went on to run a small wargames company called Wargames Foundry. Though with undoubted strengths, Ansell had been a difficult boss and customer, and some welcomed his departure.

But with Ansell no longer running the operation, the support for the books project reduced further, and the writing opportunities rapidly diminished. Charles Stress says, 'I'd written two stories but failed to convince Dave [Pringle] that maybe he should commission a novel (probably a mixed blessing), and then the supply of anthology contracts dried up ... So I was about to start a second 40K story when I got the news: sorry, but only a select few Stalkhanovite types were going to stay on, and I wasn't one of them.'

After his single Warhammer story, Paul McAuley had been approached about further work. 'I ... had some discussion about doing a space opera series with them, following up Ian Watson's success. I had a jolly nice visit to the offices, and the home of the very hospitable Bryan, admiring his collection of cars, Van Morrison bootlegs, etc. All very civilised ...' But this intriguing prospect was

never followed up, and Paul did no more work for GW.

As the list went quiescent, authors with unpublished but completed titles became alarmed. David Garnett and Ian Watson both had uncompleted trilogies. Eugene Byrne in fact already had one Dark Future book left in limbo after the game had been discontinued, as did Alex Stewart - though Alex feared he had fallen out with Bryan Ansell over not 'treating his sacred game worlds with the appropriate reverence ...' Alex had been quoted in Colin Greenland's Face piece: 'They told me to take out the character development and put in more violence. It's no good learning to work to a formula if it runs counter to everything you're interested in writing about.' As a result, Alex fears, 'My Dark Future novel was dropped from the schedule ... the official excuse was either that they were axing the game so they weren't continuing with the books or that Kim's development of the world had moved so far from the source material that it didn't quite fit any more, depending on who you talked to, but I heard from a couple of sources that Ansell had decided to spike it ...' Alex negotiated a satisfactory 'kill fee', but there is nothing an author hates more than to be left sitting on unpublished work.

The fact was, however, that there would be no more book commissions. Pringle had been left isolated in Brighton by early 1991, after Neil Jones had completed his planned oneyear contract and gone back to his teaching work. And then a freeze was imposed by GW. David recalls, 'The third year [of my employment] was in effect a salaried sinecure for me, because I just carried on my Interzone work from the GW office for that final year - they wouldn't let me publish any more books!' What turned out to be the last GW Books titles were published in May 1991: Brian Stableford's Dark Futures title

Ghost Dancers, and Kim Newman's Beasts in Velvet.

In October 1991, David Pringle was made redundant. By November there were rumours that GW Books would fold altogether. GW said they would revive the list in a few months, but this didn't happen.

The story was far from over, however.

early a year passed before there was talk of a new publisher taking over the titles: Boxtree, whose 'entire catalogue consists of TV spin-offs and brooks allowed fishing, fishing he as Ansidale Ansidale poroders spondenthis recalls comments by Barrington J. Bayley in a groused grouted grouted ground and the state of the ground publish a range of media tie-in books from 1991 to 1998, and there were surely far worse partners GW could have found.

David Pringle was consulted. 'I went up to London for a meeting with them, and they offered me a consultant editor's position on the revived line. But there was to be no salary, nor retainer, just a vague promise of a few hundred pounds fee for each new novel successfully commissioned - so I said "no."

There were ambitious plans to publish the Garnett

'Konrad' books and Watson 40K titles in January 1993, and then Dark Future titles in August 1993. But then the story took another twist. In November 1992 a legal battle broke out between GW / Boxtree and the publishers Bantam/Tramsworld. The latter had begun to produce a young-adult sf series by the author Laurence James called Dark Future. It was actually Kim Newman who pointed out the coincidence of names. Even though their game had by now been discontinued, GW sought and won an injunction; in early December Transworld were ordered to remove their books from the shops within a week, and were landed with £60,000 costs. With appeals, though, the legal battle dragged on into the next year.

The relevant law, on trademarks and copyrights, is confusing at best, and in this case downright obscure. Laurence James himself compared the wrangle to the Schleswig-Holstein dispute. The result, and what was seen by some as heavy-handed tactics by GW, met with some controversy (for details see Ansible 66 and 67). Kim says, 'The dispute struck me as silly, partly because Dark Future was an inactive game and there were no plans to do more with it. The name wasn't so strong or appropriate to the series (which was set in an alternate world anyway rather than the future) that it couldn't have

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been changed for something better - my several times since."

In all this controversy the launch of the first Boxtree titles was put back to February 1993, when Boxtree published David Garnett's 'Konrad' trilogy, including its stranded last Warblade, Ian Watson's Inquisitor and his unpublished 40K novel Space Marine, and a Jack Yeovil book. We had enjoyable launch event at a bookshop in Oxford, as I reported for Ansible (no. 68): 'The lead authors gave

brief talks and answered questions from a tolerant audience. D. Ferring told us how he'd taken all the jokes out of the "Konrad" books, J. Yeovil told us how the lead in Drachenfels is based on Orson Welles, and I. Watson told us how war-gaming dates back to H.G. Wells in 11913, and went on to explain to the startled gathering that Warhammer fiction has a certain integrity because - just as in the Warhammer game - for most of history humanity has been driven by mass psychoses based on power fantasies. "Yes, but look on the bright side!" we all cried.'

of the detailed 40K background there was 'a lot of labour ... before you can even start [working in the 40K universe]', but 'I ... like it for its unadulterated grimness. All that's horrible about the 20th century – the murderous authoritarianism, the ruthless racism - are there but are necessary. Humamitty would perish without them.'

Over the next couple of years Boxtree reprinted Brian Stableford's 'Orfeo' books and the Pringle Warhammer anthologies, and published for the first time the second

vote was for Route 666, which has been used by books, movies and t-shirts

13

and third parts of lan's trilogy, Harlequin and Chaos Child.

As for original titles, David Pringle had recommended Neil Jones as a consulting editor to Boxtree. 'However, I think Neil found it very frustrating and didn't get a penny out of Boxtree for his efforts. I know he worked with Bill King, commissioning the first of the "Gotrek & Felix" [books] ... and he also worked with his friend Neil McIntosh (whose first novel has just now, years later, appeared from the Black Library). I remember I tried, with Neil, to get Boxtree to commission John Meaney as a writer of 40K fiction. I still think John would have been ideal for 40K – that mixture of mysticism and martial arts, hard science and weird ideas, that he goes in for and, indeed, at one point John was primed and willing (I think I got him to read Ian Watson's novels) ... but it wasn't to be...'Amother intriguing lost possibility!

Boxtree did commission Kim's fourth and last *Dark Future* book, Route 666, in October 1993. Kim recalls, 'Route 666 was an expansion of a novella that sets up the whole series ... A lot of readers skipped [the novella] and started with the books and got confused by the backstory, so when Boxtree republished I transformed the novella into a novel. This means that the saga now has a beginning, but no real end ... Boxtree, who had no gaming background, were perhaps keener on *Dark Future* than the other, more popular franchises because they could relate to the material more ... I liked the people at Boxtree and even talked with them about other things that never happened.'

There was always some tension, however, between GW and its publishing partner. In October 1994 Ian Watson attended a gaming event in Birmingham to celebrate the launch of Harlequin. Boxtree bravely took along three hundred copies of an expensive hardback collectors' edition of the book, wondering whether they could possibly sell so many. All the copies sold out before the signing session ever started. GW promptly banned the sale of the hardback from all of their shops, declaring that it was the wrong size for the shelves (though Ian surmised that at that price maybe it conflicted with the sale of games, on which there was a much higher profit margin). But Ian also feels the keepers of GW truth were hostile to his books for their deviancy: 'The various 40K games were evolving (alternatively, I'm told by various gamers from the High Goth times, they were devolving to capture a younger market), and my books came to seem to GW (a) too idiosyncratic, (b) too wide-ranging, because the focus shifted to more localised actions, and (c) unrepresentative of the state of play, and selling the games was what it was all about."

Perhaps the relationship between GW and Boxtree could never last; their objectives were too different. In the end Boxtree's licence with GW expired, Boxtree were taken over by Pan, and the project was over. Ian Watson's Chaos Child was the last new GW / Boxtree publication, in June 1995.

On the whole Boxtree had showed its heart was in the right place, even though (as reported in *Ansible* in December 1993) one PR rep would boast: 'We commission the very best writers – authors like Ian Newman and Kim Watson'.

his still wasn't the end of GW fiction, however. In 1997 GW began a new publishing programme called the 'Black Library', largely inspired by Tom Kirby. Kirbyas Itowas to be printing fibrack Black ry Brary is Authorise houst be invited by Tom Kirby. Kirbyas Itowas to be printing fibrack Black ry ibrary is Authorise houst be invited by Tom GW group of companies. Marc Gascoigne rejoined GW in 1997 to serve as Publisher, with old hand Andy Jones as CEO. In July 1997 GW launched a magazzine of original Warhammer fiction called Inferno! (sic). The first story, just as it had been in Ignorant Armies, was a Bill King piece about Grotek the Trollslayer and his human companion Felix. In August 1999, GW began to publish new Warhammer novels under their new imprint, and would soon republish older titles too.

In the intervening years the core GW business has grown spectacularly. GW has become a multinational, listed on the Stock Exchange, with annual sales of more than £100 million - a long way indeed from its studententhusiast origins. Iromically GW now markets Lord of the Rings games, thus returning to the heavily mined source of much of its fantasy world. Today Black Library **Publishing** comprises Black Library, Warhammer Historical Wargames and GW Partworks. The Black Library itself is divided into three units: GW-licensed novels, magazines and special projects. In the future it plans to publish non-GW novels, such as tie-ins with other sf/famtasy franchises.

The Black Library is a much more slick marketing operation than in the past, and its output is enormously more voluminous. The Black Library programmes two releases a month, one Warhammer and one 40K. The books are published in the US and Australia through Simon & Schuster, and are licensed into eight other languages (German, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Russian, Finnish, Czech and Hungarian). Also, in 2002 alone, there were five graphic novels, thirteen comics, six editions of Inferno!, and four background/art books. White Dwarf is not a Black Library title, but it continues to support the GW wargames; it sells more than seventy thousand copies in the UK every month, and nearly a quarter of a million worldwide. There is even a Warhammer comic. The books are fairly central to the GW project these days. David Garnett says, 'I've recently been told by one of the GW shop managers that the big, detailed manuals [which we used as reference] no longer exist - and that the best way for gamers to find out the background to the Warhammer world is through the novels."

Nowadays, though, the books are reviewed in *SFX* rather than in *Interzone* – I suppose a sign that **Bl**ack Library know their market better – though GW do send David advance copies of all their novels. *SFX* reviews are not unintelligent, however: 'Although all the *Warhammer* authors are working within the same universe, it's interesting to see how each of them finds their own corner of it to mine and explore ...' (Eddie Robson, *SFX* December 2002). And they can be critical: 'Writing according to a predetermined codex of monsters, weapons, spells and tortuous clichés seems, well, like literary karaoke' (Sam Croft, January 2003).

Over 2001-2 many of the old GW Books works were

brought back into print - including my own story 'The Song', in a collection called The Laughter of Dark Gods and books by Kim Newman, Brian Stableford and Ian Watson. David Garnett's 'Konrad' books have been republished. Kim has published a short story collection: 'I proposed that all my shorter Warhammer fiction be - there was an unpublished novella collected ("Warhawk") from the first run and I did a new one ("The Ibby the Fish Factor") to make the collection book length and provide some sort of closure for a few of the overall plot threads I was working on. It also means I could follow the Tory-bashing of the old books with a few digs at New Labour ... The Black Library folk seem to be enthusiastic and interested in a way GW missed after David Pringle and Neil Jones left the set-up.' As the Dark Future game remains discontinued, arguably Kim's best

books as Jack Yeovil have been long out of print; but Marc Gascoigne says that a reactivation of *Dark Future* is a possibility for the future.

Meanwhile the challenge of complying with the Warhammer universes continues beyond the grave, so to speak. For a long time Black Library remained reluctant about Ian Watson's 'Inquisition War' books. 'My books looked as though they would never be reissued, despite me receiving umpteen emails from Desperately Seeking in America. Australia, Germany, wherever. After I had banged on at the Black Library for several years about all these e-mails I had to answer, GW finally decided to reissue my "classics" with fictional prefaces denouncing the books, my suggestion, as tissues of heresy and lies, the ideal solution ...

This was preceded by a bit of a tussle between the Black Library and the games designers. In the reprint

of my earlier story "Warped Stars" in the new *Doathwing* anthology, my lovely Grimm the Squat with nits in his beard, a comic foil, was altered to boring Grill the Tech Priest without me being consulted. The games designers insisted on this because the Squats had been expunged from the *40K* universe and were no longer current in games. If the same thing had happened to my "Inquisition War" reprints this would have seriously damaged them because Grimm the Squat plays such a central narrative role as a foil. But the Black Library held out successfully for retaining him ...' The books eventually reappeared, though *Inquisitor* was retitled *Draco* to avoid confusion with a similarly-titled product.

lan says, 'I think I probably would do a fourth book in the ... "trilogy" because I had intended to (Boxtree certainly wanted me to). My characters are left in a bit of a predicament, one mad, one dead, and I should do something about this since I rather care for them. But I would have to do the book in the same spirit as the previous three, or else it wouldn't make sense, so it

would need another preface denouncing it.' Marc says that a conclusion to the 'trilogy' is under discussion. Space Marine won't be returning as, apparently, its central concepts are too far from the changed world of the game, but Black Library are considering making it available online.

But lan's more literary efforts no longer sit so well in this somewhat more downmarket milieu, where more basic story-telling qualities are prized. 'There's a mannered quality to Watson's writing that runs through the whole novel, to the point of distraction,' opines Eddie Robson, in a review of the reissued *Harlequin* (*SFX* December 2002).

Brian Stableford has published two new books, including a 40K novel called *Pawns of Chaos*. But the old constraints remain. *Pawns* was 'rather unsatisfactory from

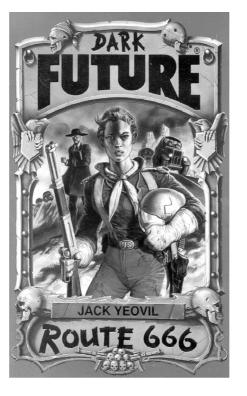
everyone's viewpoint, but [i] was unable to do any more because I found it impossible to adapt my working practices to the straitjacket of their guidelines.'

Alex Stewart has also gone back to GW. '[After GW] reprinted my old Warhammer story in The Laughter of Dark Gods ... I ended up being invited to do some shorts for Infernot ... They liked the first one so much I'm doing a series for the magazine about the same [the Flashman-esque character : Commissar Ciaphas Cain], and I've just signed a contract to spin him off into a novel [to be called For the Emperorf]. I have to say they're a lot more professional and easy to deal with these days ... The Stalinist horrors of the Ansell era are long gone ... Feedback is quick and supportive, rewrites are requested for continuity reasons or to make something work better, and I'm positively. encouraged to

subvert the source material if I feel like it."

Other familiar names show up in the Black Library from time to time. Though he didn't sell to the original GW Books line, Barrington J. Bayley contributes to the fiction magazine, and has published a 40K novel called Eye of Terror. He had plans for a sequel, but this has not been commissioned. Intriguingly for me, one of Bayley's stories, published in 1999, is a 'Titans v dinosaurs' story called 'Battle of the Archaeosaurs' ...

One member of the *Interzone* generation who never emerged from his immersion in the GW universes is William King. Now in his forties, Bill continues to write for the magazines and novels in both the *40K* and *Warhammer* worlds. That innocent-looking first story in *Ignorant Armies* fourteen years ago, about Gotrek and Felix, has spawned a series of seven books so far (some of this material developed from the short stories), starting with *Trollslayer*. Bill is also working on a *40K* series about a warrior called Ragnar, whose 'ancient primal instincts [are] unleashed by the implanting of the sacred Canis



Helix' (to me, Ragnar sounds a bit like my Erik the Were!). Bill dabbles with original fiction still, but gaming was his love long before he was a published writer. I am pleased for him, but I admit I'm happy I'm not still writing about Erik!

There are also many new names, however. Marc lists his key current authors as Bill King (Cotrek & Felix, Space Wolf, the Eldar series), Dan Abnett (Gaunt's Ghosts, the Eisenhorn series), Graham McNeil (the Ultramarines series), Gav Thorpe (Last Chancers, the Slaves to Darkness series), with another dozen new writers on their second or third title. Dan Abnett, who has written for a variety of franchises from Scooby Doo to Thunderbirds and 2000AD, has contributed (to date) some nine 40K novels and two Warhammer novels to the Library, along with various graphic novels. Marc says Abnett is the Black Library's best-selling writer; the first Gaunt's Ghosts book sold more than 50,000 copies and his total sales are fast approaching 325,000 copies, with Bill King not very far behind those figures.

Abnett's Honour Guard, a 40K epic published in 2001, is perhaps typical of the modern output. The premise is intriguing enough, as maverick commander Ibram Gaunt leads his loyal band of 'Ghosts' on a questto save the relics of the ancient saint who first led humanity to the stars. The core of the book's appeal is surely soldiering's black and timeless glamour: Marc says that Abnett's original brief was 'Sharpe in space', but Gaunt has grown into a war-set Band of Brothers soap opera: through endless battles, the Ghosts are welded together by loyalty to each other and their commander. Even in this tightly controlled universe these troopers will argue with the pig-headed buffoons back in HQ, and will defy orders to save each other. The characters are not cardboard; one soldier submits to a kind of shell shock, and when things go wrong, Gaunt is willing to drink himselfto oblivion.

But this is no ordinary war-porn shocker; inhabitants of the 40K universe, the Ghosts are soldiers of the God-Emperor of Mankind. Endless war is seen as man's natural condition: 'The Imperium is great, its wonders are manifold, but what of it would remain but for war? ... Nothing ... War is eternal. It is only mankind that is finite' (p. 210). Civilians envy soldiers, and the small things of 'normal' life – markets, churches, homes – are just the backdrop forthe soldiers' biographies.

And in the 40K universe – as in Greek dramas – saints and demons are real entities who intervene in mortal affairs. The 40K pantheon may have a space-operatic justification in alien intruders and ancient technologies – 'We have detected an enemy fleet massing and moving through the immaterium towards us' (p. 92) – but 40K has little to do with the rational tradition of much hard sf. In this universe, to misquote Arthur C. Clarke, technology is indistinguishable from miracle. Gaunt and his crew are deeply religious: they really believe that 'the Emperor is god in flesh, and [they] live to serve him in peace and war'. And so they have absolutely no moral doubt about what they're doing. Perhaps they are like the more zealous of the Crusaders.

You have to admire Abnett's achievement in

generating conflict, essential for any story, without violating the rules of the 40K universe: Gaunt will break orders, for instance, if they conflict with his faith, which supersedes everything else. And Abnett certainly succeeds in giving you a sense of what it would be like to inhabit such a universe. But in the unironic depiction of Gaunt and his warriors I sensed resonances with the modern world, in which the troops of Bush's America, armed with high technology and, it seems, unshakeable conservative-Christian faith, descend on places like Bosnia and the Gulf. Perhaps Barry Bayley and Ian Watson were right; perhaps the nightmarish vision of 40K is more like our own world than I am comfortable admitting.

However I'm not decrying the achievements of the GW fiction project. Marc says the Black Library ethos today is to produce 'solid, pulp entertainment that harks back to the books that lured us all into sf and gaming (Moorcock, Leiber, Anderson, etc) – but not cheap, slapdash junk. We have to be proud of what we produce, and we are. And these are books to be sold to all fans of sf/fiantasy entertainment, in bookshops. In 2000 GW won a National Library Association gold award for services to literacy – it seems we're helping 14 year old boys to come back into libraries. We're rather proud of that. Oh, and some of our novels are most assuredly written in the first person, and very good they are too.'

GW fiction is 'mere' tie-in work, and it may be that few writers deliver their best work in somebody else's imaginative universe. But the original GW Books project was a brave effort by David Pringle to produce good work in a constricting environment, and to boost the careers of ever-needy authors. The GW material certainly casts a light on the wider output of the contributing authors; we all approached the raw material offthe GW universes, and the constraints of working in them, in different ways. And the GW project in its first few years saw a unique bringing-together of the 'Interzone generation' – the contents lists of the anthologies are like snapshots of the time.

Many of the writers involved look back with reasonable fondness at the GW experience. Brian Stableford says, 'I am very grateful to Games Workshop for the crucial contribution they made in enabling me to become a full time writer (all too briefly, alas) in 1989. Any slight problems that have arisen over the years some because they had little experience in publishing when they first set out, others in consequence of changes in their overall policy dictated by events and fashions in the game market - pale into utter insignificance in my eyes by comparison with the enormously beneficial effects they have had, from time to time, on my evermeagre finances ... The Warhammer scenario has shrunk considerably over the years, and the opportunities for invention have shrunk with it, but I was still able to work productively within it until very recently; I am very glad to have had the opportunities that it provided ... I hope their publishing arm (and, indeed, their entire operation) continues to flourish.'

Nicola Griffith is considering a return to her Warhammer tales, but on her own grounds. I've been

thinking about writing a big ol' sword-swinging fantasy novel based on some of the characters I created for "The Other" (which was in *Ignorant Ammiess*) and "The Voyage South" (Red Thirst). The people at Games Workshop were kind enough a few years ago to give me permission to use the characters and plot as long as I change their names and leave out any proprietary Warhammer stuff ... I've been thinking more and more about the young woman in "The Other", who she is, what it must have been like to live in that milieu, how it might feel to go through that kind of change, to constantly fight to maintain a kind of interior balance, and I want to see what happens. But that's what all my work is about, in the end: change.'

Writers cherish all their work, whatever the marketplace. Kim Newman says, 'I like the [old GW] books. Maybe because I did them so fast, I can be surprised by what I've forgotten was in them. I was also pleased that readers and critics responded to the fact that they weren't cynical crap – which, in my igmorance, I assume the average role-playing spin off or even

"original" fantasy trilogy to be. I think it's a shame that they never "crossed over" and were read by a general fantasy audience outside GW's already-devoted role-playing lads (I always tried to write stuff girls would enjoy as much as boys), but I suppose that could still happen.' (Marc says, though, that this kind of crossover is happening in the US, where perhaps 50-60% of sales are to people who are not familiar with the games.)

Ian Watson says, 'My 40K fiction, which is rather unlike anything else that I write, is possibly my most popular in terms of sales and fan-mail ... So I feel no qualms at all about having written 40K fiction and putting my own name on it ... The interaction I've had, and still have, with a whole different range of people beyond the core SF community, is rather rewarding. I have actually had fan-mails from some readers of my 40K fiction saying that I had "changed their lives." For me, that's what writing is about.'

*

Acknowledgements: Thanks, for responding so generously to my requests for reminiscences go to (in alphabetical order) David Carnett, Marc Gascoigne, Colin Greenland, Nicola Griffith, David Lamgford, Paul McAuley, Cheryl Morgan, Kim Newman, David Pringle, Mike Scott Rohan, Allan Scott, Brian Stableford, Alex Stewart, Charles Stross and Ian Watson. Charles, Alex and Marc were especially helpful on the prehistory of gaming and GW; Charles pointed me to such online resources as http://www.flightingfamtasy.com/fftale.htm, a first-person account by Steve Jackson of the founding of GW, and Marc pointed me to http://www.eidkosinteractive.co.uk

/ianjitivingstome//biography, a biographical resource on Livingstone. There is also information and further references in the Clute / Nicholls Emcyclopaedia of Science Fiction (Orbit, 1993). I relied heavily on Ansible for some of the background story; thanks again to Dave Lamgford, who also kindly showed me his 1987 GW correspondence. David's relevant review columns can be found in The Complete Critical Assembly, Cosmos 2001. Any errors or omissions are my sole responsibility.

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First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

All novels marked: All are eligible for the 2002 BSFA Award for Best Novel
All collections and anthologies marked: All collections and anthologies marked: All collections and anthologies marked: All collections and anthologies marked:

Lynn Abbey (ed.) – Thieves' World: Turning Points

Tor, New York, 2002, 317 pp, \$25.95, ISBN 0-312-87517-7

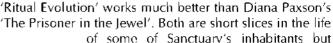
Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

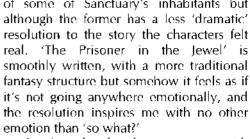
Thieves' World: Turning Points is a new Thieves' World anthology of ten short stories. Each of the stories is set in

Sanctuary, a grungy medieval-type fantasy city of political intrigue and magic where survival can be a full time occupation. Each story is based loosely around the concept of a turning point and several have overlapping events seen from the perspective of different characters, a device that works well.

The stories themselves are a mixed bag. There are several very good ones including 'Duel' by Dennis L. McKiernan, 'Ring of Sea and Fire' by Robin Wayne Bailey and 'Doing the God's Work' by Jody Lynn Nye. All of these maintain a strong pace, with interesting, believable characters and a satisfying dramatic resolution.

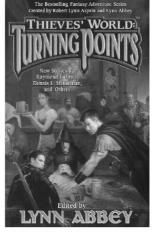
A story does not necessarily have to have a great dramatic resolution to work but it does have to make me feel I care about what happens to the characters. This is why, for me, Selina Rosen's story





On the other hand even a story with great characterisation can be marred by an unsatisfactory ending. Mickey Zucker Reichert's 'Home is Where the Hate is' is for the most part a good story. It is written from the viewpoint of Dysan, a very lowly inhabitant whose perspective on events is convincingly coloured by his past

experiences. This perspective leads to the other characters seeming less defined, but that works well within the story. Unfortunately the Disney-like happy ending rather jars for



Sanctuary. I've nothing against a happy ending but this one seems much too sudden and pat.

Other stories include Lynn Abbey's entertaining 'The Red Lucky', Jeff Grubb's original and gently amusing 'Apocalypse Noun', Andrew Offutt's tale of apprentices 'Role Model', and Raymond E. Feist's 'One to Go'.

If you enjoyed the original Thieves' World books this

is certainly worth a look. Although it's unlikely all the short stories will appeal equally there should be enough to keep most *Thieves' World* fans happy. I'd recommend, however, that newcomers to *Thieves' World* start with the original stories rather than with this collection.

Kelley Armstrong - Bitten

Time Warner Paperbacks, London, 2001, 460pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-7515-3094-8

KELLEY

Armstrong

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Are you the sort of person who reads for intellectual stimulation and betterment of self? If so you might as well skip this review. If, on the other hand, you like a rollicking good romp without a scent of pretension then read on...

It has to be said that *Bitten*'s opening does not bode well: a werewolf changing form and running through the city streets, eventually reaching the outskirts. It's meant to make you empathise with the differing perspectives of life as a shape-shifter. It doesn't. But, skip the first chapter and things start to get much better. The story concerns Elena, the only female werewolf in existence, who has left the sanctity of her Pack and is trying to live a normal life in downtown Toronto, if that's possible. She has a normal job and a normal boyfriend, who has a normal family. Heaven

forbid, they even talk about going shopping together. But this idyllic existence cannot continue and she is called back to her Pack to help sort out the mystery of a number of errant werewolves causing problems in the locality and threatening the sanctity of the Pack itself.

If you've read the Anita Blake novels (by Laurell K.

Hamilton), you'll have a good idea of what you might expect from *Bitten*. Our heroine is a sassy, independent woman who just happens to be a supernatural entity – with a perverse need to note the brand and condition of

her footwear (Reeboks here, trainer fans, none of your Nikes with a blue swoosh). There's an unwanted (but we all know she secretly desires him) ex-lover, who turned her into a werewolf – the cad – but wants her back, and has to play for her affections against the sensible boyfriend, who naturally has no idea about her lycanthropic disposition. All the appropriate werewolf myths are confirmed or dispelled and to cap it off, there's lashings of sex and gore. Hang on, let's pause for a second; werewolf sex sounds slightly dodgy (or should that be doggy?) and potentially

furry too. Fortunately the sex remains strictly human but suitably mongrel in nature.

It's not the greatest prose in the world, but it's a fun story that keeps the pages turning at a sprightly rate, surely no bad thing. Give it a go, you might end up a touch smitten with *Bitten*.



Tor UK, London, 2003, 547pp, £10.99, ISBN 0-333-90365-X

My dictionary defines polity as "system of civil government", and Asher has used his benevolently expansionist version of a galactic regime (run by Artificial Intelligences) as the backdrop for several previous books. The Polity strikes me as a more interventionalist version of Iain M. Banks' Culture.

But one gets the impression what Asher really loves is good old-fashioned world building and the most inventive aspects of this book concern the strange synergistic life forms which inhabit the hostile world of Masada where most of *The Line of Polity* takes place.

The story begins when the space station Miranda is destroyed by a nanomycelium, a weapon used previously by the alien entity 'Dragon.' Agent Cormac is sent to investigate on a Polity warship, accompanied by Golems, artificial bodies hosting dead personalities. There is also a mad separatist, Skellor, who wants to break up the Polity and pursues Cormac armed with a powerful, alien weapon system and a burning vendetta.

Most of the action takes place on the aptly-named planet Masada, named after the site of a Jewish revolt

against the Romans in 66-70AD (because they didn't want to become slaves). Masada is a world the Polity hopes to incorporate into its territory as soon as the subjugated people rise up against their autocratic religious leaders and overthrow them. But the Theocracy rule the surface of the planet from their orbiting stations using orbital lasers to quell any sign of rebellion. For the surface of the planet lacks breathable air and is infested with a colourful array of vicious animals forcing the rebels to stay underground.

This is an action-packed and inventive space opera, and fans of Asher's previous work will find plenty here to enjoy. He has certainly constructed a fascinating alien world which is colourfully imagined. However, because the characters are emotional cripples, artificial constructs, enigmatic aliens or outright lunatics their actions are strangely uninvolving and sometimes confusing. The last third of the book was too heavily dominated by interminable battle scenes for me but fans of militaristic hard of will enjoy this.

Ashok K. Banker – Prince of Ayodhya 🕮

Orbit, London, 2003, 532pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-84149-186-1

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

The prince in question is Prince Rama, protagonist of the Ramayana, that great romance-epic so perennially popular and influential throughout India. Its creator, Valmiki, was writing somewhere around 400 BC. Ashok Banker, an established author living in Bombay, has novelised this massive Sanskrit poem in the hope of making the original accessible to the imaginations of anglophone readers: not an easy task, because the Ramayana combines mundane and quasi-historical narrative with an element alien to western minds – the god- and demon-haunted cosmos of the Vedas. In

incorporating the latter, Banker succeeds astonishingly well. With the former, he certainly succeeds in that the story flows readably and convincingly, although the juxtaposition of ancient oriental speech and contemporary western jargon sometimes strains the bounds of anachronistic licence.

The scene is the thickly forested central Ganges valley, site of Ayodhya, a royal capital, where the five-day festival of the spring full moon is in progress. The ailing king, Maharaja Dasaratha, intends to mark the festival by announcing and installing the eighteen year old Rama, son by the senior of his three wives, as heir-successor; this to the fury of his demoncontrolled Second Queen, Kaikeyl, who

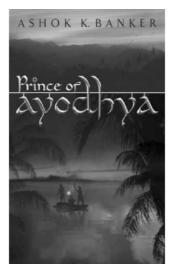
covets the succession for her own son. Portents and intelligence tell that the evil asura (demon) armies of Lanka are mustering for the siege of the city, already infiltrated by spies and subversives. Forestalling any succession announcement, there enters the Brahmarishi Vishwamitra, a priest of highest status and authority, who

claims Rama to accompany him to his ashram, there to contend with demons who threaten the completion of his holy rites. Rama's success, against admittedly great odds, would benefit not only the ashram, but Ayodhya and the whole world. So far, the action has been in the city and adjacent hunting forests. Later chapters detail the southward journey of Vishwamitra, Rama and his devoted brother Lakshman. In these chapters the spotlight alternates between that journey, which culminates in Rama's victorious super-bowman feats when he encounters the demons in the awesomely terrible

Southwoods, and palace intrigue which is now rife in Ayodhya, where, as Rama journeys back, the Maharaja is dying and Kaikeyl is craftily scheming. There this volume ends, with two more to go. This is not the place to do more than mention the main body of the *Ramerana* (Rama's marriage to Sita, his exile, her abduction, the epic monkey-army-aided wars) to which this volume is but a (possibly added) prelude. Banker's completed two-volume novelisation of those later events awaits publication.

Although this volume perforce ends abruptly, the mission on which Rama and Lakshman are engaged is a complete episode. Its demonic intrusions are extravagantly and grippingly horrific,

while its depictions of the sybaritic and civilised routines of court life are wholly appealing, as are the descriptions of natural beauty and especially those of animals, trees and unspoilt river scenery. In these respects very true to the original, the book offers a most pleasurable entry into one of the world's great classics.



Stephen Baxter - Riding the Rock

PS Publishing, Harrogate, September 2002, 61 pp, £8/\$14. ISBN 1-90288059-5.

Reviewed by Graham Andrews.

Gregory Benford has, in the introduction to *Riding the Rock*, provided me with the ideal Whole Thing for the book's review:

"...Baxter evokes the vast landscape that is uniquely available to hard sf, whether in its semi-realistic mode (typical of Clarke) or in the breed of space opera (often a derogatory term, peeled off from 'soap opera') I think of as involving baroque immensities. The tone is ...remorselessly realistic, against a background baroque in its strange hostilities and gaudy physics."

In more devilish detail, however, *Rock* forms a commendably compact part of Baxter's epic Xeelee Sequence, which started with 'The Xeelee Flower' way back in 1987. Any eventual omnibus edition could be over-titled *Starship Troopers: with added intelligence*. In

operatic terms, Baxter is more akin to W. S. Gilbert than Sir Tim Rice. That's a compliment – honest.

Rock takes place some 18,000 years after the events of Reality Dust, Baxter's earlier PS Publishing novella. Novice Luca, of the Earthbased Commission for Historical Truth, becomes involved with Captain Teel, a female officer in the Green Navy, and a "rock-throwing" attack on the Xeelee's galactic heartland. An innocent aspace, Luca must solve the perennial problems of coming to terms with himself and the society into which he has been so randomly born.

Baxter's novella is remarkably dense. The telling Dedication reads: "For my grandfather, Frederick William Richmond, 22514, 20th Battalion of the King's Regiment (the Liverpool Pals)." As Commissary Dolo explains to Luca: "Of course it is inhuman. All that matters is the numbers, the probabilities and cost of

success. This is a statistical war - as wars always have been".

The Xeelee/Terran conflict is, then, the Great War written cosmically large; and much, much more besides. Baxter hints at the most likely outcome, but it probably

won't be along the casual lines of van Vogt's War Against the Rull: "While these matters developed, the galactic-wide Rull-human war ended."

Stephen Baxter - Phase Space - Stories from the Manifold and Elsewhere

Voyager, London, 2002, 426pp, £17.99, ISBN 0-00-225769-6

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Phase Space is a collection of stories published between 1997-2002, which, since collections don't sell as well as novels, is, according to the publishers, "Tied to Baxter's masterful Manifold trilogy." (Time, Space, Origin). True, some of the stories are related to those novels, being pendants, often occurring in worlds parallel to those described in the main works. The volume is topped and tailed by a new two-page prologue and powerful end-of-the-world story – 'Touch Centauri' – featuring Reid Malenfant from the core sequence. But then the volume's

coda, 'The Twelfth Album', is an enjoyable stand-alone featuring the discovery of an unknown-in-our-reality Beatles album on board a ship moored at Liverpool dock, a luxury liner which we know to have sunk in April 1912...

For the record (pun intended) nine of the tales relate to the *Manifold* series, while 'Sun God' is a pendant to the novel *Titan*, and 'Marginalia' a pendant to *Voyage*. This latter suggests a secret history, an unknown manned mission to Mars, presented as if we can only know the truth of history at second hand. In keeping with the post-*X Files* zeitgeist everything is a conspiracy, usually wrapped inside a cover-up. For

instance, 'Moon-Calf' is the story of an ex-astronaut uncovering clues which suggest the Chinese may have sent a rocket to the moon in the 16th century. Winner of the 1999 *Analog* award for best short story, it's intriguing but barely memorable.

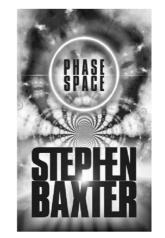
Much more striking is the 1998 BSFA Award-winning 'War Birds', a darkly comic tale of America destroying the

world to protect its homeland security. Reading this in the 17 hours between the Blair-Bush press conference which amounted to a declaration of willingness to declare war on Iraq (America nukes Iraq in 'War Birds') and the Columbia shuttle disaster (the Chinese shoot down Columbia II in 'War Birds'), no SF story has ever felt so directly, immediately and chillingly relevant. Read it now before it all comes true.

Throughout, Baxter ventures across time, space and parallel worlds, all the while making meta-references to

science fiction itself - sometimes quite explicitly, as when James Blish is namechecked in 'Barrier' - and concentrating on characters who either lose their humanity or find their reality questionable. 'Glass Earth is an excellent epoch-spanning Clarkian tale with a neat and fearful symmetry to its resolution, 'Povekhali 3201' is a sophisticated variation on alien abduction stories, centred around Yuri Gagarin's landmark first flight into space. 'Dante Dreams' has something of Greg Bear's classic Blood Music, an ingenious investigation into the suicide of a lesuit scientist who unlocks the secrets of Dante's Divine Comedy in her DNA. So it goes,

ingenious ideas everywhere, the same themes of disaster, deception and loss of reality recast with endless invention. Baxter's *Phase Space* is a dark place to be, a hostile labyrinth offering little hope, yet paradoxically infused with a rich sense of wonder in the very act of imagination; a quality which makes these tales often exhilarating and deeply enjoyable.

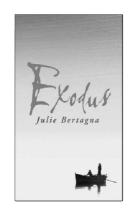


Julie Bertagna – Exodus

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger

Exodus is a very issues-led novel, which is perhaps the main thing that marks it as Young Adult rather than adult fiction. Bertagna focuses on environmental concerns, exploring what might happen if global warming is allowed to continue unchecked. She also envisages the next steps in the development of the world wide web and the progress of engineering.

Mara is a teenager living a difficult life on the island of Wing where the islanders struggle to subsist on their storm-battered and ever-shrinking land. As the oceans rise inexorably and more of Wing is lost, the



Young Picador, London, 2002, 343pp, £9.99, ISBN 0-330-40096-7

islanders are faced with a stark choice between staying on the island and drowning, or launching themselves into the unknown in frail fishing boats.

Mara plays a key role in convincing the rest of the community that there is hope if they leave. As a result she feels responsible for all that subsequently happens to her family and community.

Bertagna's descriptions are convincing and evocative. Wing is a place where people live close to nature and understand the land and Mara later finds herself adopted into another community where survival is achieved by living

in harmony with the surroundings – treating nature with respect, gathering flotsam and making careful use of it. By contrast Mara explores another city in which technologies and virtual realities have raced ahead and where everything, including the food, is artificial.

Bertagna resists the temptation to make this contrast black and white: each life-style has its own merits, and to ensure a future for all is conceptually and morally challenging. What does weaken the book somewhat is Bertagna's inability to resist cramming all of her good ideas into a single novel. Mara encounters five different communities in her wanderings; we have the contrast between technological advances and a return to more basic ways of living, into this are woven stories of love and sacrifice, a drowned Glasgow, and the creation of a modern myth.

Overall the book feels old-fashioned (in the best sense), exploring different 'worlds' through the eyes of a teenaged hero who is on a quest and ripe to discover her first love. Bertagna's style is accomplished and this is an enjoyable novel which has been short-listed for the Whitbread Award.

Charles Dickinson - A Shortcut in Time

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

Never having heard of an sf author by the name of Charles Dickinson, I wondered whether this was a first novel. But it's published under the Forge imprint of Tom Doherty Associates rather than Tor. And the inside cover blurb of this novel refers to the author's previous works and then goes on: 'Now Dickinson slips beyond the bounds of mundane realism to create a poignant fantasy that bears comparison to the works of Jack Finney and Jonathan Carroll.' My heart sank. Surely this is a novel by

a mainstream author who wants to use an sf device to make his plot. But of course it isn't science fiction because [insert favourite putdown about the inferiority of sf here].

All too often the novel which follows this path really isn't science fiction. But this one is, albeit in the Jack Finney mould of time travel in which the phenomenon by which time travel becomes possible is never properly explained; it just exists, and some people can use it, and no one has any idea – or much curiosity – about how it came into being in the first place. This novel does more than just bear comparison to the works of Jack Finney as regards its stance on the merits of the past and the present.

Dickinson's main time traveller from the past does very much want to get back to her home, but despite her distress is impressed by some of the developments of the intervening century. And the protagonist's similar recognition of some of the advantages of the past is always clouded by the way that this is a time in which people can die from simple infections – and that's just

what will happen to his daughter if she doesn't come back.

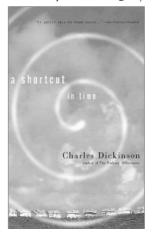
Forge, New York, 2003, 288 pages, \$24.95, ISBN 0-765-30579-8

The reference to Jonathan Carroll is quite apt too, although none of the characters are either as bizarre or as exposed by their author to malevolent fates as this comparison implies. Nonetheless, there's a cloud hanging over this novel; its prologue demonstrates the more usual way in which the past can affect the future as it reveals the tragedy which brought together the protagonist, Josh,

and his wife and ruined his brother's life. This is a time travel novel, so it seems inevitable that Josh will spend all his time hunting for a way to turn back the tragedy in his past while protecting the parts of his present life which he values. It hangs over the narrative although it never explicitly hangs over him; it would be too obvious to spell it out, but that in itself seems to prefigure the surprise happy ending. But he never has - well, time. There's always another crisis to deal with first. But he does eventually change time, and there is indeed a surprise happy ending. It doesn't close down the narrative; it leaves quite a few loose ends and possibilities. But it

resolves the puzzles set in a satisfying way.

And for once, someone goes into the past prepared with the results of some horse races. If that's not progress for you, it is at least a good study in human (if not mundane) realism. This book may not call itself sf, but it's a good time travel novel and – even more surprisingly – an original one.



Catherine Fisher – The Oracle 🗐

Hodder Children's Books, London, 2003, 361pp, £5.99, ISBN 0-340-84376-4

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The Oracle is the story of Mirany, one of a group of girls dedicated to the ritual service of their god. When the land's Archon – considered to be the god incarnate – accepts death in an attempt to bring rain, Mirany finds herself forced to oppose a plot to manipulate the choice of his successor. Implicit throughout the book is the knowledge that the drought will continue and the land will die unless she succeeds in discovering the real identity of the new Archon and making sure he is chosen.

The novel uses standard fantasy tropes: the protagonist

is timid, convinced she is the last person who should have been chosen for the task, while those who oppose her are powerful adults with authority over her. Yet these ideas are used with originality, both in the portrayal of other characters who help or hinder Mirany, and in some genuinely surprising twists of the plot. There are one or two elements that I thought could have been resolved more clearly, and I wondered whether Fisher would face up to the chilling implications of her story, or cop out at the last minute; she succeeds triumphantly in what I

found a very ominous ending.

The background draws on both ancient Egypt and ancient Greece, and comes over as vivid and convincing. I was especially impressed by the depiction of religion and the worship of the god, which is satisfyingly complex instead of the kind of stereotype which appears so often in fantasy. The novel's structure is based on the days of mourning for the old Archon, so that events mirror the ritual.

I don't think this novel would appeal to the child who wants fast action from start to finish. There is excitement – one or two nail-biting passages – but there are also quieter and more reflective sections, especially as Mirany comes to a fuller understanding of what the god is. It would be a very satisfying read for young people who want some depth to their fiction, and the depiction of an unusual and interesting world.

Ursula Le Guin – The Birthday of the World and Other Stories

Gollancz, London, 2002, £9.99, ISBN 0-575-07479-5

Reviewed by Carol Ann Kerry-Green

In her latest collection of short stories, Le Guin returns to her Hainish cycle, to bring us tales of Gethen, of O, of Werel and of the other worlds of the Ekumen. In her introduction, Le Guin says she blundered into the universe and is still blundering around in it now, 'dropping a millennium here, forgetting a planet there'. One example of this is Werel; which first featured in her short novel *Planet of Exile*, that Werel is a totally different planet to the one featured in her book *Four Ways to*

Forgiveness and the short story in this collection 'Old Music and the Slave Women'. Werel in these books is a planet divided between the Free State and the Legitimate Provinces, the Free State having come into being when the assets rose up against the owners, the rulers of the Legitimate Provinces. In 'Old Music and the Slave Women', Old Music is a Hainish representative at the Embassy on Werel. Having been secluded in the embassy for several years, Old Music relishes the opportunity to get out, and talk to representatives of the Free State; but before he can meet with his contacts he is kidnapped by a faction of the Legitimate Provinces.

In 'Coming of Age in Kharhide', Le Guin returns to Gethen, the planet she first visited in *Left Hand of Darkness*. In this story, we follow Sov, a 14 year-old Gethenian as he comes into Kemmer for the first time. This is a gentle examination of puberty where Sov first starts to feel the pull of kemmer and first visits a Kemmer

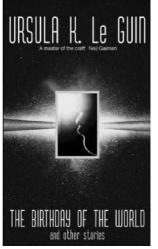
House. Le Guin also visits the theme of different sexuality with her story 'The Matter of Seggri', set on the world of Se-ri, where the women live in villages and the men live in Castles and live a life of games and entertainments; they are kept secluded and ignorant, whilst the women become educated and rule the planet.

The last, long story, 'Paradises Lost', is not a Hainish story, instead, it is set on a Generation Starship. It tells the story of the middle generations, the fourth and fifth since

leaving Earth, and how they live knowing they will be old people or dead when the ship reaches the destination planet, Sindychew, Hsin Ti Chiu or New Earth. As the fifth generation grow up, the new religion that started with the death of the last first-generation member grows as well, until the very idea of reaching a destination planet is put into question: the purpose of the voyage is the purpose of the voyage, they claim. In this story Le Guin explores the conflict between the angels (the adherents of the new religion) and the nonangels. As Hsing and Luis grow up, we learn with them about the destination and Earth and the angels. Then they discover they are closer to Sindychew than they should be. Will they land on the planet,

how will they cope with all that space, will the angels make them go on into infinity?

Le Guin is the master of story telling, and these tales are no exception. I found this latest collection hugely enjoyable and I can only highly recommend it.



Diana Tixier Herald and Bonnie Kunzel – Strictly Science Fiction: A Guide to Reading Interests Libraries Unlimited, 2002, 297pp, \$55, ISBN 1-563-8932

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

Strictly Science Fiction is part of an American series of guides for readers' advisors and collection development specialists in libraries, but the general reader new to sf should find something of interest to help them develop their own reading. There are, though, flaws.

After some introductory matter setting out a brief history of sf and a list of its classics (which can be quibbled with, but so can all such lists), there are five chapters of annotated lists covering type, motif or theme plus chapters on short stories, sf for young readers and resources for librarians and readers. Appendixes offer

(selected) award winners and a 'core' collection list.

SF readers, the editors say, can be either gender or any age, which makes the opening 'General Adventure' listing perhaps a little populist for the purist fan, with its nod to the *Star Wars* sensibility. On the other hand, this is the genre which "snares young readers" and novice readers are what the book's all about. Generous latitude is given when assigning books to category: the first books in this section are Brian Aldiss's Helliconia trilogy. No quarter here! The second chapter is centred upon sf's relationship to technology: cyberpunk, robots, computers, nanotech

etc. Chapter three focuses on 'Our Strange World,' possible futures (often involving disaster through nuclear war, plague, or ecological breakdown), utopias and dystopias and sf with social and political themes. It's here we find stories featuring alternate histories and parallel worlds, but here the eclectic approach to category becomes something of a mess: too many stories qualify for multiple inclusion in very similar categories. Chapter Four, 'Us and Them,' shows sf covering our fascination and with human alien otherness: evolution, bioengineering, immortality, aliens and First Contact.

Chapter five, 'Genreblending' shows sf intersecting with other genres; mystery, horror, fantasy and romance (although 'military sf' is seen as a subsection of Adventure). The Romance sub-section is interesting, with writers known for this fusion such as Catherine Asaro listed along with Iain Banks (*Inversions*) and George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty Four*). Here we see maybe some of the dangers (but also potential surprises) of a 'theme' approach. Another sub-section is sf with a specifically Christian theme, which oddly follows after that on 'humorous' sf and even more oddly hardly crosses over at all with 'Religious' sf. Apart from C.S. Lewis it contains none of the field's major Christians, being mainly taken up by the Left Behind series which seems to be Bible Belt propaganda.

Religion apart, the section on sf for children and young adults is perhaps the one in which the divide of the Atlantic is most notable; there are familiar names such as K.A. Applegate (Animorphs) and Madeleine L'Engle, as well as names like William Sleator who ought to be more familiar, but Peter Dickinson and Diana Wynne Jones are surprisingly thinly represented. More surprisingly, Robert Cormier's Fade isn't listed (and on checking, I find that 'invisibility' isn't in the subject index). The lists of short stories and anthologies are highly selective. Some very useful anthologies are listed, such as Hartwell/Cramer's The Ascent of Wonder and the 'African Diaspora' anthology Dark Matter, but the 'best of year' anthologies

such as Gardner Dozois's could have been cited.

The quality of the annotations is high, and it's heartening to see that attention is given to recent and British sf. Occasionally, though, there are some problem areas. Dick is rightly flagged as a humorous writer, but it might have been useful to point to some examples of his humour. The creature in *Frankenstein* isn't a 'cyborg' simply because electricity is used to create it (or we'd all be cyborgs: electricity is found in all our bodies). Ken MacLeod's political undercurrents are hardly suggested by the bland summary of *The Sky Road*. And the relic that survives to be copied and illuminated by monks in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is not Leibowitz's "shopping list" but a blueprint.

Obvious consideration has been given to the resource section for people wanting to find ways into the realm of history, criticism, bio-bibliography and review. But again there are gaps and errors. The BSFA is mentioned but with directions to an outdated and unavailable website, and while the Foundation journal and the Science Fiction Foundation Collection at Liverpool University are both mentioned, the Science Fiction Foundation itself is not (and Foundation appears as an 'online resource' rather than as a journal). Nor are the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, the Science Fiction Research Association or the very useful source of information and education for librarians the 'Reading for the Future' website. The few lines on 'conventions' are not terribly helpful (and the words 'conventions' and 'conferences' are used as synonyms).

It's a shame that this last section is not as full or as accurate as it could be. It may be due to shortage of time and space more than lack of knowledge because the compilers have tried to provide a useful and – with limits – comprehensive guide. A librarian with little basic knowledge of sf would be able to use the book to build a pretty fine library, but it is no substitute for the more scholarly handbooks and guides.

Robin Hobb - The Golden Fool 🖾

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

HarperCollins Voyager, London, 2003, 632pp, £11.99, ISBN 0-00-716039-9

This novel, the second in *The Tawny Man* series, begins with Tom Badgerlock, in reality FitzChivalry Farseer, coming to terms with the loss of his Wit-

coming to terms with the loss of his Wit-Companion, the wolf Nighteyes, and finding it hard to do. He feels, despite the fact that he has friends and a foster son, that he can never share companionship with anyone in the way he did with his wolf. The fact that Prince Dutiful, heir to the throne of the Sic Duchies, has also lost his Wit-Companion does little to assuage Tom's feelings.

However, he has other concerns to keep him occupied: the threat from the Piebalds – Witted people who want freedom from persecution for all those with the ability to bond with animals –

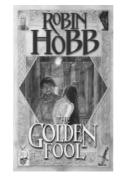
is still evident, and there are also extra tasks for him to perform, one of which is to teach his Prince how to use his mental powers – called Skill – in a proper manner. The fact that Tom is a novice himself, having to seek out the necessary information in order to give proper lessons,

does not help matters. Neither does the addition of two further pupils, one extremely unwilling, the other too eager.

Add to this the challenge laid down by Dutiful's bride-to-be, the Narcheska Elliania and the presence of a delegation from Bingtown seeking assistance in a war they are involved in, and the situation gets more and more complicated for all concerned. The novel ends with plans for an expedition to fulfil the aforementioned challenge.

As a counterpoint to all this, there are further complications and revelations, some

mundane and some mysterious – and some downright dangerous to Tom and others. Against this backdrop, the Queen of the Six Duchies is working to ensure that



Witted folk have the freedom from persecution they desire by welcoming them openly to her court.

Espionage plays a big part in this novel, as does intrigue and the presence of several new characters. In addition, there is an element of mystery provided by the Narcheska's serving-woman, who may be a lot more than she seems: the same can be said of more than one long-

term participant in the action.

The result is an exceptionally well-crafted novel, with believable characters who behave in ways we can all empathise with and for whom we can feel sympathy. I enjoyed this novel, can recommend it, and look forward to the next volume in this enthralling series.

Thomas Holt − A Song for Nero □

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

A Song for Nero is narrated by a Greek called Galen, in a fiendishly rambling style. After a couple of chapters, he says "It's just dawned on me I've been talking for half-anhour and I haven't even started the story properly". This is something of which the reader has become painfully aware! Galen also starts chapters with "Where was I? Oh

yes..." or with anecdotes that go off at tangents, so I was frequently confused as to what was going on and where I was in the story. Holt may be reproducing accurately just how an old man tells a long story, but it doesn't half annoy the reader! As poet Simon Armitage says: "Narrative disruption... is a powerful tool. Even Homer knew that. But its effectiveness relies on clarity." Quite.

This book is not an alternative history, even though it is about an Emperor Nero who didn't die when he was supposed to; it's a secret history of what really happened in our timeline. Galen and his brother Callistus

are two Greek conmen on crosses awaiting execution in Rome when they're rescued by the Emperor Nero because Callistus is his spitting image, and therefore the ideal double. Callistus and Galen become part of Nero's household in Rome for several years, until the coup that topples the Emperor. Of course, it's Callistus who perishes, not Nero, and Galen and the ex-Emperor go on the run.

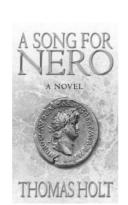
Little, Brown, London, Feb 2003, 470pp, £16.99, ISBN: 0-316-86113-8.

In a book called A Song for Nero where we're asked to believe Nero's only ambition was to be a song and

dance man, he does little of either. It's not until more than halfway through that Galen and Nero, after many scrapes and failed attempts to earn a living without working, set out to scam a harp and set up Nero as a wandering musician. Even after that, his music-making doesn't have much bearing on the story. In fact, Nero is hard to accept. We're told that history has given him a bad press, and that all that assassination and fiddling while Rome burned was spiteful fiction, but then we find out that he was really rather a nasty Emperor after all.

Final verdict: I didn't really enjoy this book. Firstly, the tortuous start nearly put me off

permanently. Secondly, it's written in the style of a comic novel – both dialogue and narrative are rendered in contemporary colloquial English – but it isn't very funny. And thirdly, I didn't like Nero much and I came to loathe the endlessly garrulous Galen!



Walter H. Hunt - The Dark Path

Tor, New York 2003, 413pp, US\$27.95, ISBN 0-765-30606-9

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

Set hundreds of years hence, when Earth has an Empire among the stars and many humans as well as the bird-like zor have harnessed psychic abilities, *The Dark Path* is the

sequel of *The Dark Wing*. It follows 80 years on from when humans and the zor made peace after Admiral Marais died, the legendary "Dark Wing", responsible for so much death and also the end of the war.

The story begins with the unusual disappearance of two ships resulting in an abortive rescue mission under the command of Admiral Horace Tolliver. Tolliver is a wheelchair-bound exile from the Earth Empire for the genocide during the war, but revered by the zor and honoured with the gyaryu, the zor symbolic Sword of State.

Tolliver's ship returns with the Sensitives and Tolliver himself mad, paranoid that everyone is a member of the insect-like aliens foretold in zor racial memory. The *gyaryu* is also lost, causing alarm among the zor. Soon Commadore Jackie Laperriere of the Cicero naval base,

and her executive officer, the zor Ch'k'te, find that a number of shape-changing, powerfully psychic aliens have infiltrated the naval base assuming the form of

various commanding officers, including Jackie and Ch'k'te. Though they rid the base of these aliens, they are only the first of the swarm yet to wreak havoc upon both humans and zor. Meanwhile, the High Lord of the zor is convinced that Jackie embodies Qu'u, the zor warrior hero, and sets in motion a plan for Jackie to recover the *gyaryu* from the aliens.

The Dark Path is part of an adventure series concerned with xenophobia and genocide, allegorical of the differences between the West and the Japanese during the Second World War. Although, in this

book we are constantly told the zor mindset is impossible to understand, I wasn't convinced, no matter how many apostrophes the author used in zor words and names. I felt the zor were less alien to us than the samurai in James Clavell's *Shogun*. However, it possibly didn't help that



Hunt had to make the swarming insect-like aliens even more alien, a feat in itself, which he handles almost by numbers. Ultimately, the novel, if not taken too seriously, is entertaining and fast-paced though often formulaic. It appears to try to fill a *Babylon 5*-shaped gap but lacks the class, though I doubt the author was aiming to write a classic in the first place. It will almost certainly be followed by others exploring Jackie's quest for the *gyaryu*, but I haven't decided if I am interested enough to continue with it myself.

Tim Kenyon – *Ersatz Nation*

Big Engine, Abingdon, 2002, 247pp, £9.99, ISBN 1-903468-07-8

Reviewed by John Newsinger

I really wanted to like this book. It is a duty to support independent publishers such as Big Engine and to welcome, with as much enthusiasm as one can muster, the books that they publish. Unfortunately, Tim Kenyon's *Ersatz Nation* successfully defied all my best intentions. It

is not that it is a terribly bad book, but rather that, at least for this reader, it altogether lacked any distinction, whether good or bad. It just left me lamenting the time spent reading it, time that would have been better spent reading any number of more rewarding novels. I still have not got round to the latest Ken Macleod or Robert Holdstock!

In *Ersatz Nation*, our world has a parallel, the Unation, that is ruled over by Mother Necessity, an all-powerful entity that both provides for and dominates humanity. Mother Necessity saved humanity from itself

but now she demands unquestioning obedience, the subordination of all desires, hopes and longings to herself. The inhabitants of the Unation find fulfilment in serving her purpose, contributing to the expansion of her understanding and willingly accepting their place in her order. This is a rigidly hierarchical society where promotion is absolutely at the discretion of Mother. Independent thought is discouraged and independent

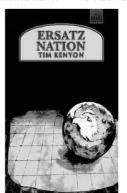
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But Mother Necessity is fascinated by a parallel world that she has gained access to. Here, in our world, human beings live difficult but independent lives, display initiative, form attachments, go their own way. Mother

> sends her agents to this parallel world to bring back human specimens for observation and study, in effect to kidnap people.

> The book's main protagonist, Patrick Dolan, is one of these agents. He is doing his best to satisfy Mother Necessity, but in the process is being ripped apart by the stress of an independent life on Earth and a dependent life back in the Unation. He can barely tell what is real and what isn't any longer. Overlapping with his predicament are problems back in the Unation where there is a conspiracy underway to overthrow Mother Necessity.

According to the blurb what we have here is 'a gripping narrative' that provides 'adventure and great reading' and explores 'themes of illusion versus reality, environmental degradation and the limits of freedom'. Not for me, I'm afraid. The story completely failed to come to life and neither Patrick Dolan or anyone else inspired the slightest interest. Just glad when it was over.



Tanith Lee – Black Unicorn

ibooks, New York, December 2002, 138pp, £7.99, ISBN 0-7434-4512-0

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger

Once upon a time, way way back in 1991, *Black Unicorn* was first published. It was, for the most part, a delightful

fairy tale written with humour and a light touch. It told of a very ordinary, red-headed but down-to-earth girl, daughter to a powerful sorceress, who lived in a fortress miles from anywhere. It was just as well the location was so isolated, given the carelessness of the sorceress and the way her magic spilled out and changed the environment around her. Our heroine, however, was clearly destined not to follow in her mother's footsteps having no facility whatsoever for magic. What she did have was an astounding skill at repairing all things mechanical.

It was her ability to repair things that lead to her leaving home, after the debacle with the reconstructed skeleton of a unicorn. And it was the same skill that enabled her to make her way across the desert to the city, and there find a means of making a living (disguised as a

boy, naturally). At each moment of extreme danger, the unicorn appeared, wreaking havoc but providing the girl

with a way out of her predicament. One such appearance of the unicorn concluded with her being rescued by a Princess, which in turn lead to the discovery that she herself was also a Princess (as we suspected all along) and not the ordinary girl she thought she was.

Her mother's fortress in the desert was a chaotic place of uncontrolled magic. Her father's palace in the city was equally chaotic and filled with equally uncontrolled mechanical devices. Not content in either place, the girl continued to generate her own chaos and disruption through her connection

with the black unicorn, until one day she learned how to set it free and restore order to her world.

And finally, in 2002, the tale was reprinted so that everyone could read it and live happily ever after.



Roger Levy - Dark Heavens 🗔

Gollancz, London, 2003, 389pp, £10.99, ISBN 0-575-07245-8.

Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger

Roger Levy's new novel, *Dark Heavens*, returns to the environmental collapse of future England. Set some years after the events of his debut novel, *Reckless Sleep*, we are here introduced to a new set of characters trying to live as best they can in a society on the brink of collapse. The country is riven politically, religiously and physically with tectonic rifts splitting the landscape. Pollution is also worsening, resulting in food shortages and necessitating

the wearing of breathing masks to journey outside. Hope is similarly collapsing with only two possibilities of escape: either finally to colonise the planet Dirangesept or to seek salvation in the Leavings, consensual mass suicides.

Cy Auger works for the body overseeing the Leavings, charged with ensuring that the suicides are truly consensual and not a cover for religious mass murder. Cy is a deeply troubled character, suffering the consequences of an event at his wedding which left most of his friends and family dead and his wife hospitalised and

constantly re-living the aftermath in a never-ending cycle. Cy is drawn into an investigation of a number of suspect suicides at GenMed, the same medical establishment in which his wife is hospitalised. This leads him into conflict with the Administration, a civil service dictatorship now running the country, and its links to another attempt to colonise Dirangesept, further complicated by the latest

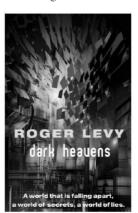
cult leader, Dr McCrae.

Levy's first novel was perhaps somewhat overshadowed in a year (2000) of stunning debuts, although Vector gave an encouraging review (Jeffery, V211). This novel builds on the strongest elements of the first, especially the vivid realisation of a collapsing England, while at the same time improving the weaker ones. In the first book the extent of the real and the virtual

worlds was similar, with an even time spent in both. This, however, unbalanced the book, with a constant unresolved tension as the real world sections were far the more engaging. Most of *Dark Heavens* is set in the physical world, only occasionally accessing the virtual, via the use of bLinker technology. This makes them much more integrated and it is only towards the end of the novel that this breaks down, with one virtual section feeling very intrusive.

This is a very English novel, but a very specific type of English one, with Levy's future being in the tradition of those created

by Wyndham, Ballard and Priest, though still uniquely his own: praise indeed given the quality of the others. The characters populating Levy's England are similarly well realised, all damaged to some extent but all very human. This is a finely realised, engaging novel.



James Lovegrove – Untied Kingdom 🗐

Gollancz, London, 2003, 405pp, £16.99 (hb)/£9.99 (pb), ISBN 0-575-07385-3 (hb)/0-575-07386-1 (pb)

Reviewed by Mark Greener

An 'unlucky gamble' by the government brings the International Community's wrath down on the UK. Flattened by bombing and starved by sanctions, much of our green, and now not very pleasant, land is centred on isolated communities, while the cities rest in the hands of rival gangs. One of these, Lewisham's British Bulldogs led

by King Cunt (sic), attacks the small market town of Downbourne seeking women for their 'recreation zones'. They kidnap Moira, the wife of local teacher Fen Morris. Despite a failing marriage, Fen resolves to rescue his wife.

Untied Kingdom is a marvellous book, perhaps even a contender for one of the SF novels of the year. It's tightly plotted, with well-drawn characters and a strong undercurrent of humour. At one point, Fen breaks his leg and is nursed back to health by a cult created around a B-list writer. Each day

the cult discusses their literary endeavours – only to face savage, vindictive criticism from the other members. It's any writers' workshop taken to a logical, and witty, extreme. And, perhaps, there's a sideswipe at some of the more obsessional fans an author can collect. You see

them at any large con.

Despite a number of interludes, the pace never lets up. Indeed, *Untied Kingdom* is one of the few recent books that I wished was longer. I found the ending something of an anticlimax. Lovegrove plays a slightly obvious card to resolve all the issues rapidly, which was a

bit of a shame. I wanted the story to go on. But it's a slight blemish on a cracking yarn.

Inevitably, perhaps, Lovegrove's been compared to Ballard; well, he's English and writes about journeys. But this is disingenuous. Fen's journey isn't an allegory for a mental transformation. Ballard often follows a narrative technique T.S. Eliot described as objective correlatives: changes in the external physical world symbolise alterations in subjective moods and emotions. There is an element of an internal journey in *United Kingdom*: the UK is as broken as the

Morris' marriage, for example. And through their journey and the need to contend with the reality of a destroyed country (and relationship) Moira and Fen find, if not peace, a certain psychological closure.

But neither Fen nor his wife really seemed to change



fundamentally as a result of their experiences. Rather they seem to have come full circle, rediscovering the people they were before their marriage. Moira's depression, although triggered by tragedy, seems to be perpetuated by her circumstances and environment, for example. Forced into a harsh, brutal world she's able to rise above the situation by drawing on strengths alluded to before she moved to Downbourne.

Rather than Ballard, *Untied Kingdom* is more akin to Wyndham. It's traditional of with motifs and plot elements familiar to anyone who has seen *The Ultimate Warrior*,

Mad Max or read post-apocalypse literature. In style and basic narrative Untied Kingdom reminded me strongly of Damnation Alley. That's not to say it's derivative: rather Untied Kingdom gives these old, familiar elements a new, uniquely British spin, creating an engaging and hugely enjoyable novel. Indeed, I'd be amazed if Untied Kingdom doesn't make it onto several 'best of' and awards shortlists at the end of the year. This is the first book I've read this year that I can unequivocally recommend to everyone reading Vector.

William Mayne - The Animal Garden 💷

Hodder Children's Books, London, 2003, 103pp, £4.99, ISBN 0-340-85425-1

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The animal garden is part of an ancient Indian city, where once the king kept a zoo. Now the water has dried up,

and the city has long been deserted. Philip goes there to visit his father, an archaeologist, but on the day following his arrival he discovers that his father and the rest of the adults have disappeared, leaving him with Shanya, a high-caste Indian girl who despises him.

William Mayne develops this situation into a story of danger and mystery, in which Philip and Shanya must come to terms with a newly discovered intelligent race, and with each other. This new race, the pugs, poised between human and animal, have an

intriguingly different way of thinking, and Mayne exploits their potential for humour without making them farcical. There's an enormous richness in the way the background is depicted, and a powerful imagination at work as Mayne explores his themes and brings his characters at length to safety and a new understanding.

William Mayne has been a critically acclaimed writer

for children for many years, and this novel is likely to enhance his reputation. However, I've always felt that he appeals more to adults than to his child audience. For any children's writer, there must always be a tension between writing for the expectations of a young audience, and writing for oneself. I'd like to think that there is a way to do both, and still be true to the material. In the case of this book, I feel that Mayne's pared-down, poetic style might be off-putting for many children. This is a short novel, but not because it's easy or simplistic or aimed at younger children. A

more conventional writer might have developed many of the situations at greater length, and while this might have been less successful in a purely literary sense, the resulting book might also have had a greater appeal to a young audience.

Richard Morgan - Broken Angels 🗐

Gollancz, London, 2003, 394pp, £17.99/£10.99, ISBN 0-575-07323-3 (hb), 0-575-07324-1 (tp)

Reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn and Paul N. Billinger

In his first book, *Altered Carbon*, Morgan reintroduced us to splatterfest science fiction. This isn't common in UK sf. The nearest, and the comparison for which some reviewers reached, is the work of Jon Courtenay

Grimwood, but there are fundamental differences which in the end come down to that uneasy word, morality. In Grimwood's work, all deaths diminish us; however unpleasant a character is, someone will miss them. But despite the anti-war rhetoric, reading Morgan's work is like donning an avatar to participate in a computer game.

Broken Angels continues the adventures of Takeshi Kovacs, but with none of the gusto and pace of the debut novel. Substituting complexity for subtlety, the plot is straight out of *Indiana Jones* or an episode of *The A*

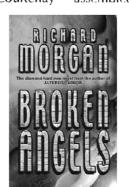
Team, but is most reminiscent of the Conan adventures. The story – rescue an archaeologist and head off to dig up an alien space ship that might help someone to win a war – is merely the skeleton around which the shoot-'em-up is

draped. In classic *A Team* style, Kovacs decides to go AWOL from the army in order to pursue a private adventure; the archaeologist is rescued, and a team is assembled, a la Mission Impossible, to perform the job.

Most of them are killed. Permanently dead. We don't care. Kovacs doesn't care very much either, although we have an obligatory roll call of the dead at the end of the novel. At the end, like Conan, he shrugs his shoulders and walks away leaving the prize and the damsel unclaimed, a romp in an adventure playground in which nothing can harm the ones that matter.

But Kovacs's world is even less real than was Conan's. Kovacs walks away from hundreds, if not thousands of corpses. Some of them are dead, many will be revived into

new 'sleeves', the discarded bodies of other uploads. The uploaded brain and the revived body, have become standards in si – an insurance policy for the permanently adolescent - but Morgan has remade this into a matter of



convenience, a mere Game Over, Reload. The moment of death is deprived of meaning. There is clearly some irony here, Kovacs's cynicism is driven in part by the essential pointlessness of it all, but Morgan skates over some of the most intriguing issues which he hinted at in the first book. Clones are expensive, synthetics shoddy; these are real bodies, that someone vacated, and not necessarily voluntarily. There is no exploration of this, although the appearance of a matched set of Maori sleeves makes one wonder about the vulnerability of oppressed groups in a commodified world. Sleeving is itself simple, dysmorphia momentary, reducing bodies to the equivalent of the semi-sentient ceramic suits of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* and stripping away any more philosophical meaning.

Morgan has replaced the Chandleresque structure of Altered Carbon, reminiscent of The Big Sleep in its complex relationship between investigator and client, with a more simplistic war story. Much of *Broken Angels* feels familiar: the alien artefacts could be from Reynold's *Revelation Space* but here they have no gothic splendour and the 'war is hell' view of the combat is, superficially, reminiscent of Haldeman's *Forever War*, though without its underlying morality. *Broken Angels* is further hampered by some intrusive bad sex scenes, making this a depressing and soulless read.

Altered Carbon appeared to a blaze of strongly positive reviews, including Vector (Carter, V223), and also made the national press when the film rights were sold for serious money. The expectations of that book are sadly not realised: Altered Carbon showed that Morgan is clearly a talented writer and can do much better than this.

Stephen Palmer - Muezzinland

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Nshalla, daughter of the Empress of Ghana, is on a journey across Africa to find her sister Mnada, who is on compulsive search for the semi-mythical Muezzinland. Both daughters are being hunted by agents of their ambitious and manipulative mother.

The trek is an epic one, taking Nshalla and her friend Gmoulaye north from Ghana to Timbuktu and from there on across the Sahara to Morocco. A large proportion of the journey is on foot. This is also the Africa of the 23rd century, but the future date has significance only insofar as it allows the technology of the aether. This is a sort of telepathic cyberspace that is populated by a wide variety of virtual people, gods, spirits and even personifications of the dead. The aether intersects with, and has a direct impact on, the real world. The

effect of this is to create a technological rationale for a landscape where the realm of legend has become real; the tribal tradition provides the underpinning of the Als within the aether. It is even able to alter the perceptions of people to such an extent that your view of your own body becomes questionable.

The first part of the novel consists of the journey to Timbuktu, pursued by various agents of the Empress (not Cosmos Books, Canton, 2002, 278pp, \$17.95, ISBN 1-58715-450-1

all of them human). This section draws most heavily on the African landscape, using the aether to overlay it with the feel of a mythic journey. The traditional skills and beliefs of the tribeswoman Gmoulaye simply add to this,

and in fact still have a very significant role to play in the unfolding of the story.

After this, though the journey continues, the story picks up considerable pace as the protagonists start to close in on one another. It is clear that Mnada is the key to what is taking place. Brief flashbacks early on tell us that The Empress had something done to her as a child that has caused the obsessive search for Muezzinland, and as a result she is the key to Muezzinland

While the plot can be read as a relatively straightforward thriller, the book as a whole

is considerably more than this. It succeeds in integrating the elements of myth and high technology, producing something of a hybrid that feels right. *Muezzinland* is at its strongest when dealing with the journey, which is fortunate as it is the journey that takes up most of the book. Ultimately, it's the journey that matters.



M.J. Simpson - Hitchhiker: A Biography of Douglas Adams

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2003, 393pp, £18.99, ISBN 0-340-824883

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

We read some biographies because they are about people, say Churchill or Napoleon, so influential they helped make the world we live in. Other people we read about because their lives were so extraordinary, Ernest Shackleton or Leonard Cheshire, they tell us about human nature tested to its limits. Writers sit around typing, so we read about them only if we have a particular fascination with their work.

Douglas Adams may have been remarkably successful, and may have lived an unusual life by the standards of

many, but it was not the great, stirring, rousing adventure which would result in a biography had he not written *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

M.J. Simpson is scrupulously even-handed in recounting Adams' life, but he is able to tell us remarkably little about the author's childhood. In his foreword John Lloyd notes, "The initial conditions with which Douglas was saddled were rather more trying, I suspect, than the author of this book has been able either to discern or to put in print." It is not until almost halfway

through that we get a hint of a personal life; Adams has an affair with married novelist Sally Emerson (inspiration for Fenchurch in *So Long, and Thanks For All The Fish*), and eventually marries barrister Jane Belton.

Otherwise this is the life of a writer who did not like to write, and dare one say it, was not all that good at it. (Yes, like almost everyone else I loved the original *Hitchhiker* radio episodes, but the books just aren't funny in the same way; the later volumes are depressingly mediocre.) Concerning Adams' originality, Simpson does use the S. word, as in Sheckley, as in Robert. But if in a 393-page book (including notes and index) Simpson stops short of pointing out specific parallels, there is certainly not space to do so in a 500 word review.

Adams grew up profoundly influenced by *Monty Python*, and John Cleese in particular, going to Cambridge with the express intention of joining the Footlights and becoming a writer-performer. His lack of coordination limited his skills as a performer, ensuring he had to settle for the half of the equation he least preferred. What then emerges is a portrait of a man who was undoubtedly excellent company, a very funny and

charming man who was perhaps only too well aware of his creative limitations, "I do find writing terribly, terribly difficult, and I think it's because there's a bit of me that cannot expect that anything I've written is going to be any good."

The book is a labour of love from the man who may be Adams' number one fan, and it is a book for fans, telling the inside story of Adams' work on *Doctor Who*, recounting in precise detail how the various incarnations of *Hitchhiker's...* came about. Diligently Simpson finds the truth behind anecdotes which became famous in the retelling – the first *Hitchhiker's* novel did not enter the best-seller lists at No.1 – offering a level of minutiae which only a fan could be interested in. And I mean that in the nicest possible way. An honest, commendable book with much to intrigue those who grew-up with post-*Python* comedy, *The Guide...* and *Doctor Who*, but in all honesty one has to ask, would Hodder & Stoughton ever have seen a market for this volume had Adams not died so tragically young in 2001?

Norman Spinrad - The Druid King 💷

Little, Brown, London, February 2003, 439pp, £10.99, ISBN 0-316-86158-8

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

The Druid King is a historical novel with perhaps a little dash of fantasy, built around Julius Caesar's campaign to conquer Gaul. It portrays a clash of cultures — the organised and disciplined military might of Rome against a collection of 'barbarian' Gallic tribes in which personal honour and bravery are prime determinants of status and

shifting inter-tribal alliances. The conflict is seen in its most concentrated form in the personal struggle for ultimate victory between the two war leaders; Julius Caesar, cunning statesman and psychologist, civilised amorist and brilliant military strategist motivated primarily by a Machiavellian desire for personal power, and Vercingetorix, an initiated Druid driven by a vision of his own and his people's destiny, with a deep personal commitment to honour and individual liberty. Both Caesar and Vercingetorix have a touch

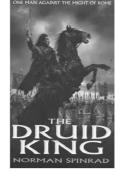
of the other's cultural makeup with them; Caesar's 'falling sickness' renders him prone to visions of his own, and he has a keen sense of personal destiny as the spiritual heir of Alexander the Great. Vercingetorix, in contrast, is forced by circumstances into thinking rather than feeling, adopting his enemy's logical but culturally alien tactics in order to counter them.

As one might expect, this is a very plot-driven book, with a clear exposition of both war leaders' campaign strategy, and much detailed discussion of the tactics of specific actions. There is also a good deal of "guess what my opponent is up to" speculation, of the type commonly found in war stories focusing on a struggle between two

individuals – submarine and destroyer captains are a favourite pair. You know the kind of thing: "He is obviously doing x because he thinks I will respond by doing y - so I will outwit him and do z instead – but wait! Perhaps x is a feint and he is expecting me to do z - so I will doubly outwit him by following the obviously stupid plan y... or would q be even better?"

There are only two 'also featured' female roles, and both are types rather than individuals; Rhia is Vercingetorix' Virgin

Warrior Sword Teacher (lean and scarred but curiously attractive), and Marah his Childhood Sweetheart/Trophy Wife (blonde). Male supporting roles include some Buddies, a couple of Lying Traitors, and a Wise Old Druid. This is not a book to read for its sensitive character development or deep cultural background, but is commended to late-adolescent action-adventure fans, and highly recommended to Classical wargamers.



Patrick Thompson – Execution Plan

HarperCollins, London, 2003, 310pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-00-710523-1

Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger

It's tough living in Dudley. At least it is if you are Mick Aston: your job, programming for business databases, is going nowhere, your few friends are all hiding something and your life revolves around computer games. This would be just normal for Dudley but when you see characters from computer games (no, not at all like Lara Croft) running down the High Street you know something is seriously wrong. The only possible answer lies in the past and your participation in a psychological experiment when at college, which you can't explain and can't fully

remember.

Mick starts to retrace his life back to the North Wales college, accompanied by his friends, the psychotic and unpredictable Dermot and the enigmatic Tina, trying to discover why his real and virtual lives are overlapping. When Mick finds that he may be able to control this merging a whole new set of problems confronts him.

Through the book we are shown Mick's life as a child of the seventies through to the current day, interwoven with the history of computer gaming – from *Pong* and the ZX Spectrum to sophisticated games consoles – and the wisdom of the mysterious Les Herbie, columnist with the *Dudley Star* (definitely not the *Express & Star*). It is the

journey which is more interesting than the conclusion as, although little is new, the light touch of the writing gives a freshness to the description of Mick's life and the strong use of the West Midlands landscape makes a refreshing change. The interaction of the real and virtual game worlds has been done many times before, more successfully in Christopher Brookmyre's recent crime novel A Big Boy Did It and Ran Away, but it is well integrated here and Thompson resists the all too easy mistake of info-dumping.

A light, but interesting, book which although it runs out of steam towards the end still manages to avoid a straightforward resolution.

Keith Topping - Beyond the Gate (The unofficial and unauthorised guide to Stargate SG-1)

Telos, Ely, 2002, 285pp, £9.99, ISBN: 1-903889-50-2

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Way back in 1994, Stargate was a moderately successful

movie. In 1997, MGM created a spin-off TV series (without Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, who were offered the chance, but turned it down). Here in 2003, we're into season 6.

Okay, that's a lot of episodes, how do you keep stuff like that straight? Well, you could buy this book.

Keith Topping presents detailed listings of episodes up to 121 (about half way though

season 6) and potted synopses of the remaining unscreened episodes, making this book about as up-to-date as you can get.

Is it any good? The episode listings are split into

headings, giving cast details, plot synopsis (which don't

give away the plot...) and then goes on to offer items of trivia ("Kawoosh! Productions is named after the description the scripts give to the plume that comes out of the Gate when a wormhole is established"), notes on alien cultures ("The Nox are fairy-like and seemingly in touch with nature, but also very advanced"), bits where the logic falls down ("Virtually every planet designation in the series is a six figure one;

Argos (P3X8596) is seven..."), interesting, fannish stuff like that. All in all, if you're interested in that sort of detail, then this book is for you. According to my resident *Stargate SG-1* fan...

Joan D. Vinge – *Catspaw*

Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

This is a reprint by Tor books. It's slightly odd in that this is the second of two books written by the author yet the

preceding volume (which initially introduces the main character and setting) is listed as "forthcoming". Weird, but anyway...

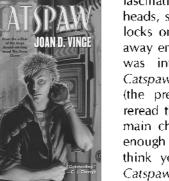
This is a classic 'psionics' tale. Cat, the main character, is psionically gifted. In a rough universe he's got to use his talent to survive. Forced into working for people he'd rather not work for, he can only survive by his wits, his determination and his psionic abilities, in some very tight corners.

Five years ago this sort of space opera might have appeared slightly dated. This subgenre seems to be making a comeback

though, with new works such as Julian May's Perseus Spur trilogy. The idea of government versus the corporations seems to be in vogue again (maybe it's the anti-trust cases by Microsoft bringing people back to the 'corporate space' idea). Anyway, Vinge's writing stands up to the test of time.

The other side of this, the 'psionics', is another subgenre that's never gone away. From Wilson Tucker's *Wild Talent* and the Campbellian ideal of the super-human, through Julian May's epics and Anne McCaffrey's mining of old shorts, to spin-offs from TV's *Babylon 5*. The fascination with people who can see into our

Tot Books, New York, 2002, \$15.95, 409 pp, 0-765-30341-8



heads, set fire to things at a distance or pick locks on their handcuffs never seems to go away entirely. As a fan of this type of stuff it was interesting to go back and reread Catspaw, although since I had a copy of Psion (the predecessor) I must admit to having reread that one first. Catpsaw introduces the main character and his initial situation well enough for the new reader though, so don't think you have to wait for Psion to read Catspaw. I'm just a completist that way.

Nothing to write home about, but a solid tale of psi against the universe in a rip-roaring adventure tale. Nothing deep or philosophical here. Not for a European audience, anyway: the anti-big business angle may seem refreshing and different to some US readers. Worth a look but don't bust a gut for it.

Still wish I could figure out exactly why they're reprinting them in the wrong order, though.

John Wilson - Guardians of Alexander

Big Engine, Abingdon, 2002, £9.99, 265pp, ISBN 1-903468-09-4

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

Towards the end of his campaign Alexander the Great had sacked the Persian capital and found a hidden cache

of treasures. Amongst these treasures was a rare artefact, which Alexander believed held divine power. He kept this cache secret, telling only two of his rival generals. Ptolemy and Theopolytes, of its existence.

The story opens with Alexander's army camped outside Babylon in 323 BC. He gives Theopolytes the sacred task of secretly transporting the treasure back home to Macedonia. Shortly afterwards Alexander dies and Ptolemy takes the army to conquer and hold Egypt. Theopolytes believes, as do many others, that Alexander was an immortal God and that he will be reborn again in human form. Thus he decides to form the Guardians

Alexander to hold and protect the treasure and artefact until Alexander returns.

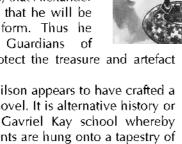
For most of the book Wilson appears to have crafted a well-researched historical novel. It is alternative history or fantasy only in the Guy Gavriel Kay school whereby fictional characters and events are hung onto a tapestry of historical fact. It is only in the last section that any hint of sf appears and it only becomes apparent in the last few pages. This appearance of sf appears to be a device to link this book to the rest of the series. In itself it adds nothing

to the story.

John Wilson is an experienced writer and this shows. The prose runs smoothly the physical landscape atmosphere are clearly evoked without breaking the flow of the story. The characters are well written. They are not, as is all too often the case, twentieth century people placed in a medieval surrounding. Their beliefs and values appear consistent with what we know of the period and their actions arise logically from this. In places this leads to behaviour we would consider unacceptable; for example the rape of a boy by two soldiers is wrong only because they are wasting

time. The violence is for the most part callous and offhand but it is not graphically described and there is no gore for the sake of it. The well-paced plot appears to arise naturally, in places inevitably, from the events and characters of the book.

I recommend this book and look forward to the others in the Goldbane series.



Chris Wooding - The Weavers of Saramyr

Gollancz, London, May 2003, 375pp, £17.99/£10.99, ISBN 0-575-07441-8/0-575-07442-6

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger

For someone who is still only 25 years old, Chris Wooding has a remarkable number of books - for children and young adults - under his belt. His novel The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray, an imaginative gothic fantasy, well-plotted and well-written, was one of the most enjoyable books of 2001.

The Weavers of Saramyr is Wooding's first adult novel, though given its subtitle, Book One of The Braided Path, it is clearly not going to be his last. The opening chapters of the book, fast-paced and focusing on young adult protagonists, give no real clues that this is not another YA novel. What gives the game away is the sex scenes; sometimes perverse and repugnant acts that demonstrate a loss of sanity and humanity, sometimes simply bad sex badly written.

In a country that seems initially to be medieval Japan, 20 year old Kaiku survives, in a manner of speaking, a demon attack on her family. In the process of escaping she discovers she possesses hitherto dormant powers, not a thing she desires nor something she knows how to control. She heads for the

into a very skilful player at the court of the Empress.

city and her childhood friend, Mishani, who has grown

This, we learn, is a feudal society which does not tolerate genetic deviation and in which each powerful family, constantly jostling for power, retains a Weaver. The Weavers are empowered by the witchstoneimpregnated masks they wear, but the masks slowly warp

> and destroy the men who don them, giving a sublime high whilst the Weavers use their powers and correspondingly dark and insane needs when the Weavers return to their bodies.

> Kaiku, with the help of assorted hangerson whom she collects along the way. attempts to discover the reasons for the destruction of her family. In so doing she finds herself not only embroiled in a complex web of politics and power, but also the discoverer of the deepest and darkest secrets of the Weavers.

This isn't a bad fantasy novel, but it's certainly not a great Chris Wooding novel. The writing is more careless than that in Alaizabel Cray; the perversions and the bad sex (straying way too close to the idea that women don't really mean no when they say it and that physical abuse is a turn-on) seem too much like badges pinned on the text as evidence that the author can do adult.



Guardians of

Alexander

JOHN WILSO

Reviewed by John Newsinger

Science fiction, it is often argued, is a literature of estrangement. Indeed, some academics go so far as to argue that this is in fact the proper definition of science fiction. When confronted with the many novels and stories that do not fit the bill, they generally retreat to the argument that it is true of the best, the most interesting, the most challenging. As determined by themselves, of course. The reality is, however, that while much of science fiction does indeed defamiliarise the world, much does the exact opposite, makes the exotic familiar, the alien safe. This science fiction provides reassurance and stability, validates traditional verities and promises that even in a changing universe things can still go on the same. Most of contemporary American science fiction, in particular the huge quantities of military science fiction consumed over there, performs this familiarisation role.

Timothy Zahn's *Manta's Gift*, while certainly not a militaristic novel, nevertheless is a good example of science fiction as comfort blanket. Although marketed as an adult novel, it is, in fact, a competent example of juvenile science fiction, not particularly inspiring, but nevertheless I can quite imagine myself having enjoyed it when I was twelve or thereabouts.

Manta's Gift is set in the atmosphere of Jupiter where explorers from a dystopian Earth have encountered sentient aliens; the Qanska, part manta ray, part dolphin, that swim the currents looking for food. In order to establish proper contact with them and to discover their secrets, a project is put underway to place a human consciousness into the body of a Qanska foetus. Young Matt Raimey, recently crippled in a skiing accident, is persuaded to volunteer. He is born into Jupiter's toxic clouds where, as Manta, he must learn to survive and eventually do the will of the oligarchy, the Five Hundred,

that controls the Earth.

What readers discover is that the Qanska are not really aliens at all: they're Americans. The young Qanska are American teenagers, at loggerheads with their elders, getting into scrapes, beginning to exert their independence and even developing feelings for each other. When Manta proposes to the female Qanska, Drusni, the dialogue makes clear that they are really both from Ohio:

"Drusni...look, I don't know how to say this. I wish...but I don't. Maybe it doesn't matter."

She had gone very still. "Yes," she asked softly.

Raimey braced himself. "Drusni... will you... will you bond with me?"

For a long moment she hovered motionlessly, only her fin tips undulating slowly to hold her position in the air.

"Wow," she murmured at last, "I don't know what to..."

Another dead giveaway occurs when Zahn is searching for some way to describe the Qanska Counsellor, Lantranesto, and comes up with: he "would have made a great executive sales manager". Now, of course, the notion of a 'great' executive sales manager might well be perverse, but it is not estrangement.

Eventually Manta realises what the Five Hundred are about and does the right thing, taking the side of his new people, his new family, his new friends. Once again this is all very reassuring and a project that 'had started in desperation and greed' ends 'in peace and a minor miracle'. The novel is very much on the side of the peacemakers rather than the warmongers.

An undemanding read for a young reader.



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

Brian Aldiss - Super-State

Orbit, London, 2003, 230pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-84149-211-6 The 'super-state' of the title is Europe forty years from now, a Europe at risk from both war and global warming, but still able to support a mission to Jupiter aboard the starship *Roddenberry*. Described, by the publisher' as his "darkest and funniest work to date". When reviewed in hardback (*Vector* 225) this was described as a very "English" book, a genre description also used in two of the reviews in the 'First Impressions' section of this

edition (see reviews of books by Levy and Lovegrove) and which could easily be applied to some of the most critically acclaimed novels of recent years, for example Jones's *Bold as Love* or Priest's *The Separation*. Is this a developing trend? If so, it's to be encouraged.

Lois McMaster Bujold - The Curse of Chalion

Voyager, London, 2003, 490pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-00-713361-8 After 10 years Bujold returns to the fantasy field (having spent the intervening years on the multi-award winning

Vorkosigan space opera sequence) with the story of Lord Cazaril: courtier, castle-warder and captain but most recently galley slave. Finding himself promoted to tutor of the heir to the throne he is soon returned to the dangers of political intrigue. Although well received in *Vector* 225, "fast paced, well-written, a marvellous fantasy", other reviewers have not been impressed, "flat, pedestrian and dull, very disappointing, wastes Bujold's considerable talents" (Billimger: www.thealienonline.net).

Raymond E. Feist - Talon of the Silver Hawk

Voyager, London, 2003, 390pp, £11.99, ISBN 0-00-716082-8 This is the trade paperback edition of the first novel in Feist's new series Conclave of Shadows, and is the story of Talon, who will be familiar to fans of Feist's earlier Riftwar books. Although Vikki Lee (Vector 226) found this a very enjoyable read, "as with all of Feist's books it is a page-tummer", the integration of this new series with the earlier novels may be problematic because there is little element of surprise as events unfold.

Jude Fisher - Sorcery Rising

Earthlight, London, 2003, 502pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-7434-4040-4 The first solo novel from the author (who is, in 'real life', Jane Johnson the publishing director of Voyager) and the start of the Fool's Gold saga. What appears to be a typical fantasy novel is, in the view of Vikki Lee (Vector 224) anything but, with a "convoluted plot, beautifully paced", the characterisation "a joy" and summarised as "a damn good story" and "the reader wants to know more".

Brian Herbert & Kevin J. Anderson - Dune: The

Butlerian Jihad

New English Library, London, 2003, 615pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-340-82332-11 Frank Herbert - Children of Dune

Gollancz, London, 2003, 426pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-575-07490-6

Frank Herbert - God Emperor of Dune

Gollancz, London, 2003, 454pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-575-07506-6
The Dune franchise rolls ever on, with reprints of the third and fourth books of the original series (published 1976 and 1981 respectively) and the paperback release of the first of a new series, The Legends of Dune. As with Herbert & Anderson's earlier series, Prelude to Dune, the new trilogy is set prior to the events of the original and tells of the origins of the breach that started the conflict between House Artreides and House Harkonnen which was so pivotal to the original Dune.

Robert Holdstock - Celtika

Tor Books, London, 2003, 349pp, £25.95, ISBN 0-765-30692-1 American edition of the first part of Holdstock's *Merlin Codex*, published in the UK by Earthlight in 2001. Set some centuries before Merlin meets Arthur, Merlin wanders the Earth encountering Jason and joins him in his search for the Golden Fleece. But this is only the start as that voyage goes tragically wrong and years later Merlin journeys north, towards the lands of Arthur, again seeking both Jason and his ship. Reviewed by Steve Jeffery in *Vector* 215 who described the complex interlocking structure as giving "all of Holdstock's creations a feeling of continuity, of remembrance, without ever quite being sequels".

Tom Holt - Little People

Orbit, London, 2003, 374pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-84149-185-3

Tom Holt - The Portable Door

Orbit, London, 2003, 4004pp, £16.99, ISBN 1-84149-158-6 More comic fantasy from Tom Holt. Little People is the story of Michael who saw his first elf at the age of eight and since then they have never left him alone, which isn't surprising when it's his stepfather who is responsible for causing them so much misery. The Portable Door describes Paul Carpenters' first day at work, but in an office which may just be an elaborate front for the Dark Forces of Oddness. Both are described, by the Mail on Sunday no less, as "brilliantly funny".

Valery Leith - The Way of the Rose

Gollancz, London, 2003, 452pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-575-07303-9 Third book in the *Everien* series but one which makes no allowances for any umfamiliarity with the others. Reviewed favourably by Kathy Taylor in *Vector 222*, the novel has a deliberately fragmented structure, multiple viewpoints, place and settings to reflect the descent of the world of Everien into chaos, a difficult approach to carry off successfully but this novel is "excellent and complex, with well-drawn characters, their actions arising logically from their backgrounds, needs and goals, recommended".

Eric van Lustbader - The Veil of a Thousand Tears

Voyager, London, 2003, 627pp, £7.99, ISBN 0-00-648608-8 Mass market edition of the second volume of *The Pearl Saga*. Described as a "richly imagined epic fantasy" our hero Riane must go in search of the fabled Veil of a Thousand Tears to prevent the sorceress Giyan being possessed by a powerful daemon. Unsurprisingly he's not the only one seeking the mystical object and his quest will soon bring him into conflict with the sinister Batioxxx.

Richard Matheson - The Shrinking Man

Gollancz, London, 2003, 201pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-575-07463-9 Latest Gollancz SF Masterworks reprint (number 51) last reviewed as the Tor US edition in *Vector* 217. Originally published in 1956 the story will be familiar, from the film if not the book, with our very human hero starting to shrink, following exposure to a cloud of radioactive spray, and having to cope with the inevitable consequences (which yes, do include the fight with the 'giant' spider). This short novel has, with others by Matheson such as *I Am Legend*, been highly influential on the development of sf and is well worth revisiting.

Michael Moorcock - The History of the Runestaff

Gollancz, London, 2003, 646pp, £7.99, ISBN 0-575-07469-8 Fantasy Masterwork reprint (number 36) of the four Dorian Hawkmoon adventures, *The Jewel in the Skull, The Mad God's Amulet, The Sword of the Dawn* and *The Runestaff.* This was last published as a set in 1995 under the title *Hawkmoon* when it was reviewed and recommended by L.J. Hurst (*Vector* 186) asserting "there are people writing today who've had twenty five [now thirty-three] years to read this fast-paced, reasonably closely plotted high fantasy and they still can't do it".

Adam Roberts - Stone

Gollancz, London, 2003, 338pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-575-07396-9 Gollancz are re-publishing all of Robert's back-catalogue, Salt, On and Stone, in stylish, modern mass-market editions to match his new novel, Polystom (reviewed in the next Vector). Stone was reviewed in Vector 225 getting high praise from Stuart Carter, describing the book as "absorbing, intelligent and lucid". As described by Carter this is high-concept sf: "In a society that has forgotten how to commit crime, who could possibly aspire to genocide?"

Roger Zelazny - Changeling

ibooks, NewYork, 2003, 244pp, £9.99, ISBN 0-7434-5819-2 First published in 1980 this is a fine quality paperback reprint, continuing a series of new editions of the work of this Hugo and Nebula award-winning author. When the wizard Mor defeats the tyrant Det he finds in the ruins a baby, Det's son. Rather than kill the child, Mor takes him from a land of magic into a more mundane one, called Earth, where he grows up to become a very strange

nightclub guitarist who must return to his original home to claim his birthright.

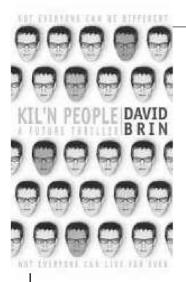
Sarah Zettel - Sorcerer's Treason

Voyager, London, 2003, 595pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-00-7114000-1 Reviewed in hardback in *Vector* 223 this is the first volume of the *Isavalta Trilogy* and although it uses a familiar fantasy approach – that of a character in our world travelling to a fantasy world and discovering they have magical powers – it does so with considerable skill. It starts with an ostracised lighthouse keeper in the Wisconsin of 1899, who may have murdered her bastard child, and moves into the land of Istavalta at the behest of a dark stranger. Carol Ann Kerry-Green described this as "a brilliant and intriguing fantasy using elements of both Russian and Chinese folklore" and concluded that it is "highly recommended and the second volume is awaited with anticipation". In a crowded genre this is high praise indeed.

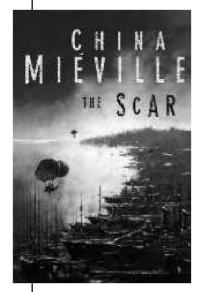
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