THE VECTOR REVIEWS SUPPLEMENT

ISSUE 1 : FEBRUARY 1977

The VECTOR REVIEWS SUPPLEMENT is a periodic supplement to VECTOR. Produced by Christopher Fowler for the British Science Fiction Association Limited. EDITOR: Christopher Fowler; Typing by Colette Broadbank (pp 2 - 6) and Chris Fowler; Duplication, etc by the BSFA Publications Group. Address of publication: 73, Kenilworth Avenue, Southcore, Reading RG1 3DN. Tel: 0734-594890. ISSN request pending

---

MERLIN'S MIRROR by Andre Norton; Sidgwick & Jackson; London; 1975; 205 pp; £3.95; ISBN 0 283 98328 0

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

The world of Arthurian legend has been one of the most prolific sources of inspiration for fantasy writers since the days of Malory. The mythology has worn extremely well, supplying a stream of excellent works. It is not surprising to find that Arthus's world is a constant feature of British fantasy - it is, after all, home-grown - but it is perhaps surprising to find that it holds a similar attraction for American fantasy writers. There is a kind of comfortable homeliness in stumbling across Merlin in The Crystal Cave, That Hideous Strength, or The Weathermonger, but Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee, who visited Arthur's court in 1889, was surely so utterly out of place that his unfortunate accident did not bear repeating. And yet, we have seen in recent years Arthurian fantasies by H. Warner Munn (Merlin's Ring), Sanders Anne Laubenthal (Excalibur) and Robert Nathan (The Elixir). Now Andre Norton has joined in, and one is bound to ask: is there really anything new to be added?

The answer it seems is no. There are grave risks involved in re-working a myth so well-known, and the gimmick by which Andre Norton tries to invest it with new life is tediously feeble. (There are these two alien races, you see, and their agents - Merline, Nimue, et al. are begotten by miscegenation...and their magic powers are - you'll never guess - really their alien superpowers...)

Andre Norton is a pedestrian writer at the best of times, and can so easily fall into hopeless dullness. Here, alas, she has fallen hard - her prose is quite bland and the action sadly routine. Against competition as strong as The Once And Future King, The Elixir and The Crystal Cave Miss Norton could hardly expect to shine in performance, but the extent of her failure is really quite tragic.

Sir Lancelot does not appear. I hope she isn't saving him for a sequel.

*

SKYFALL by Harry Harrison; Faber & Faber; London; 1976; 270 pp; £3.50; ISBN 0 571 10962 4

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Enclosed in the review copy of this book is a note which reads: "Harry Harrison asks us to point out that unlike his previous books Skyfall is emphatically not a work of science fiction". It is signed: "Publicity Dept". I pass on this message without comment, as I feel that any debate arising from it would be unnecessarily wasteful of space.

Skyfall is a suspense thriller about a joint Soviet-American spaceshot which takes off in trouble and gets deeper and deeper as problems stack up neatly like a pile of pennies. Melodramatic moments follow one another in perfect military order and the tone of the book covers uneasily (but effortlessly) between matter-of-fact toughness and soap-opera schmalziness. It features boy-meets-girl, conscience-meets-politics and back-to-the-wall heroics. The final casualty figures are 21,000 plus.

This is a book written very much according to a recipe. (Movie pudding, I believe, is what they call the dish when it comes out right.) Gourmets might find it unsatisfactory because it has the unmistakable smack of metaphorical monosodium glutamate, but those out for a good, solid meal might do worse - lots of lovely roughage here. Harry Harrison is nothing if not competent, especially in the entertainment business, and the target audience for this particular book (see above note) will undoubtedly get their money's worth.

*

SCIENCE FICTION DISCOVERIES edited by Carol and Frederik Pohl; Bantam; New York; 1976; 65p; 272 pp; ISBN 0 553 08635 9

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Here is yet another anthology of original stories which, if successful, will probably turn into an annual series. As an experiment in publishing policy the original anthology has probably not yet been fully tested despite the vast number which have been issued in the last six or seven years. The mortality rate has been high, but New Dimensions and Universe both seem established now as considerforces within the field. SF Discoveries is a fat collection, consisting of seven short stories and a short novel that might easily have made a paperback in its own right, but there is nothing in it which strikes me as truly outstanding - and that is a failing that an anthology, unlike a single issue of a magazine, cannot really afford. The standard that has to be reached in this medium is very high.

The one poor story among the shorts is a trivial effort by Roger Zelazny, but three of the others fit patterns which are becoming disturbingly standardised. George R. R. Martin's "Starlady" and Scott Edelstein's "Age of Libra" are fashionable but unconvincing, while Robert Sheckley's "Never-Ending Western Movie" is so typical of Sheckley's work that every word seems familiar as it slides past the eye. Fred Saberhagen, by contrast, contributes an atypical piece which is eminently readable, and Doris Piserchia contributes a stomach-churning black comedy which draws out yet another inch of her sick sense of humour - I wish she would set aside her morbid preoccupations a little more frequently, for she is a fine writer. My favourite among the shorts is actually a fairly unassuming piece, a variant on the old-man-who-grew-young theme by Arthur Jean Cox called "An Incident at the Owl Creek Rest Home", which is very neatly handled.

I confess that I don't know what to make of the long story - Babette Rosmond's "Error

(cont p 6)

WHO'S WHO IN SCIENCE FICTION by Brian Ash; Elm Tree Books; London; 1976; £3.95; 220 pp ISBN 0 241 89383 6

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

This book, according to its introduction, "is designed to provide a comprehensive guide for the newcomer to science fiction, to widen the horizon for those who already know something of the genre, and to be a useful, but less than exhaustive source of reference for the scholar and the committed devotee". And all in 60,000 words.

The remainder of the introduction scrupulously follows L. Sprague de Camp's advice to would-be magicians: always prepare your excuses beforehand. Ash defends his omissions and his errors in advance, and perhaps one can sympathise with him. Errors do creep in, omissions for one reason or another have to be made. What's more, in 60,000 words total many of the entries have to be reduced to such a bare minimum that they contain no real information at all. He has every right to be defensive.

As a source of reference Who's Who is defeated first by its slimness and secondly by its calculated triviality. It is easy-going and lacks the terseness necessary to come abruptly to the point in every case. Most of its information is culled from Robert Reginald's Stella Nova bibliography and Tuck's Encyclopedia, and when the updated version of the former and volume two (M-Z) of the latter manage to work their way into print Ash's volume will be wholly superfluous. In this respect, therefore, it has a life expectancy measurable in months. Where Tuck and the bibliographical sources are weak - on commentary and analysis - Ash is so weak that his efforts are laughable.

In its more modest claims - widening horizons for sf readers and guiding newcomers through the tangle of available works - Ash is perhaps on safer ground. But to my mind the newcomer might appreciate a guide which says a little more about science fiction in general and dwells less on trivia, and horizons are not so likely to be widened by a book which deliberately omits so many new authors and is so very inept in its comments on the established ones. The competition in this area is very weak, but even so I must rank Who's Who in SF among the also-rans.

I find that what offend me most about this book is its determined attempt to pervert the English language. Any habitual reader of sf criticism should be used to this by now, but for some reason I find Ash's semi-literacy even more grating than most. In Who's Who in SF we meet J. G. Ballard, "an expert in slow choreographies of physical and mental disintegration"; Ray Bradbury, "a highly gifted writer and a constant bone of contention in the science fictional arena"; Larry Niven, "a noted arrival of the last decade and a sophisticated updater of space opera"; and Theodore Sturgeon, "a gifted and provocative writer, almost in a school of his own". There are at least three American critic/historians who can now sit back with contented smiles upon their faces, secure in the knowledge that they are no longer leading contenders for the title of World Champion Metaphor-Mangler.

There has always been a great deal of worthless and ephemeral writing about sf, but once it was confined within the fanzines. It is very depressing to discover that the proportion of good and useful material appearing from commercial publishers is no greater than that appearing in second-rate amateur journals. A lot of people are getting money for old rope, and the publishers will soon have collected enough old rope to strangle the market completely.

*

THE EDWARD DE BONO SCIENCE FICTION COLLECTION edited by George Hay; Elmfield Press; Leeds; 1976; £4.95; 217 pp; ISBN 0 7057 0068 2

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

I am quite a fan of Edward de Bono, the champion of lateral thinking. His book on The Mechanism of Mind is a neat and elegant example of analogical analysis applied to the problem of how minds work, and is to my mind an admirable piece of work. His demand that minds should occasionally be jolted out of the ruts that help them run smoothly, so that they may be forced to confront new concepts and create new perspectives, is a very healthy one. And I think, too, that science fiction may help this process - that by its very nature it helps create new perspectives. It seems to me, therefore, that an Edward de Bono collection of science fiction might be a good idea.

I am not so sure, though, about a George Hay anthology which calls itself an Edward de Bono collection.

We have here a good, but very brief,ccomment on sf in general by de Bono, plus twelve stories selected by George Hay. There is no comment of any kind on the individual stories, and no attempt at all to bind the fiction to the context which de Bono's name and ideas are supposed to provide for them. This lack of integration is, I feel, a total cop-out. I'm not even sure whether there has been any attempt on George Hay's part to choose stories which might specifically illustrate or embody anything in de Bono's thesis, or whether these stories just happen to be ones he likes. There is the classic "Noise Level", in which a group of scientists is confronted with the notionally impossible (arranged by fraud) and then forced, via lateral thinking, to create a new theory in which the impossible not only becomes possible but practable. This would have been an appropriate story to lead off the collection. Unfortunately, it is placed second to Katherine MacLean's excellent pyramid-selling story "The Snowball Effect", which seems to me to have little to do with the presiding genius of the collection.

There are good stories here - it is nice to see Norman Kagan's "The Mathenauts" and Sprague de Camp's "The Warrior Race" rescued from obscurity - but nothing has been done with the idea behind the project. It has not been followed through and it has not been used to make a book any different from all of the other reprint collections which will creep into print this year.

*

WAMPETERS FOMA & GRANFALLOONS by Kurt Vonnegut Jr; Panther; St Albans; 1976; 75p; 255pp; ISBN 586 04256 3

Reviewed by James Corley

Possibly this collection of speeches, essays and magazine articles was meant to expand Vonnegut's reputation from youth cult novelist to universal guru.

Venturing inside the dark recesses of the guru's head one finds a region wild, indisciplined and exceedingly strange; in places an impenetrable jungle and in places a morass, everywhere uncompromising and writ on the large scale, rather like the upper amazon in fact.

There is a powerful talent on display here but something has happened to its sense of discrimination, from Madam Blavatsky on the donkey of American New Journalism.

In common with many humanitarianists he is astonishingly naive and simplistic about human nature; like many deeply committed men he is prepared, consciously or unconsciously, to use polemic and propaganda with minimal regard for truth. He is inconsistent and self-contradictory yet his mind is more closed than open.

He admits to irrationality but here as well I believe him wrong. He is only that hopeless figure a rationalist at odds with an irrational world and the battle has turned him into a model of Langian craziness.

The book will be of more interest to students of Vonnegut as a literary figure rather than as an sf writer which he again, rightly, claims not to be. What he has to say about sf here is patent idiocy, his views on almost everything else are witty, facile and profoundly irritating. As a novelist he was revolutionary, as a commentator he is Citizeness The Vengeance knitting as the Guillotine falls.

*

THE EARLY LONG by Frank Belknap Long; Hale; London; 1977; £3.50; 211 pp; ISBN 0 7091 5854 8

Reviewed by Brian Griffen

This covers Frank Long's virtuoso word-spinning career from 'Death Waters' (Weird Tales, 1924) to 'The Peeper' (W.T. 1944). Seven of the stories come from W.T.; the rest are divided between Astounding, Marvel Tales, and Campbell's Unknown Worlds, and consist of fantasy, plus a few experiments with more recognisably SF-type ideas.

To describe Frank Long, I choose the adjectives 'virtuoso' and 'word-spinner' with care. He is a virtuose, with formidable powers of association and invention (he sometimes confesses, in the short preambles to the stories, that he would sometimes sit down and make up a story on the spot); and there can be no doubt that he's given countless readers lots of good unhealthy fun down the years. On the other hand, a lot of this early material is word-spinning, produced at so many cents a word. The resulting product is always easy to read, entertaining, and usually lies as light as a feather on the mind, ready to be blown away by the next breeze. This is, in a way, a pity, for he is plainly capable of striking ideas. In 'The Hounds of Tindalos' --- by far the best story here, and Long's most frequently anthologised piece, as up to date in spirit as Fritjof Capra's The Tao of Physics --- he was able, for once, to treat

date in spirit as Fritjof Capra's The Tao of Physics --- he was able, for once, to treat his idea with something like due care, and the result is uniquely memorable: anyone who hasn't read it should somehow get hold of it. Likewise, in 'The Space Eaters' --- one of the earliest Cthulhu Mythos tales --- he makes a deep impression, drawing on the basic Lovecraftian obsession: Suppose Imagination is Reality? (Nigel Kneale must have had stories like this at the back of his mind when he wrote Quatermass and the Pit).

As for the rest of the stories here ---. Well in the better of these --- 'The Elemental' (loosely resembling Wells's 'The Man Who Could Work Miracles'), 'Dark Vision' (in which the protagonist experiences a kind of photographic negative of Life) and 'The Fame Midget' --- The basic idea is striking, haunting even, but has to fight against the crudities of word-spinning. 'The Flame Midget posits the invasion of our world by a being of microscopic size from a tiny star, possessing terrific mass and energy. So far, so good. But Long the Word-spinner has a deadline to meet; so the story ends with an incredibly comic climax, in which the microscopic spacecraft, having landed in the right kidney of a mad scientist, finally blasts off and takes the scientist with it ! Marvellous! Trouble is, I don't think it's supposed to be funny. Or if it is, it still doesn't fit in with the rest of the tale. This kind of incongruity can be found, in varying degrees, throughout this collection. In 'A Visitor from Egypt', an eminent Egyptologist is transfigured into the form of Osiris --- in a museum loo! It's as if Bob Shaw were to start making Shavian jokes in the middle of The Palace of Eternity: Long just isn't in control, artistically-speaking.

But you have to admire the sheer invention: in 'Fisherman's Luck', the rod of Hermes becomes a fishing rod with which the protagonist literally hooks a girl from the nineteenth century, plus the troublesome severed head of a Chinese suicide. The result is half-whimsical and half-impressive, as if Long hadn't made up his mind what he wanted, Some of the other stories are merely zany --- 'The Census Taker' and 'Step Into My Garden' --- or predictably sinister, like 'The Ocean Leech'. These are perhaps the least satis-factory.

Basically, Frank Long is a crazy, bumbling magician who likes jiggling ideas round at random, and occasionally hits the right proportions. There's quite a bit to please the lazily-indulgent reader here; but I suspect that Frank Long has had more fun, over the years, than any of his readers.

The author provides a 21 - page auto-biographical introduction, which is pleasant, occasionally interesting, and excusably longwinded --- after all, it was no doubt commissioned, together with the egoistic preambles to the stories. I suppose Asimov started all this, and I don't like it. As persons, authors are no more interesting than anyone else, and these personal inter-polations tend to destroy whatever fictional magic might be happening.

*

WILL O'THE WISP by Thomas Burnett Swann;
Corgi; London; 1976; 60p; 160 pp;
ISBN 0552 10358 6

Reviewed by Brian Griffin

In one of his essays, Chesterton says that Puritanism, far from being a specially English phenomenon, can be regarded as a sort of alien invasion, or mass psychosis. In Will O'the Wisp this suggestion is taken literally: the first Puritans, the real instigators, were non-human beings called Gubbings (a corruption of 'Sky-Kings'). Originally, they had been airborne, bird-like creatures, feathered and hatched from eggs, and worshipped by the ancient Celts. Then they were cursed with 'the feather-blight' and lost the use of their wings. Around this time the first Christian missionaries arrived in England. They persuaded both the Sky-Kings and their worshippers that these birdlike beings were fallen angels, doomed to mortify their flesh and torture their souls for all eternity. The Sky Kings came to believe this: they to mining in Devon, and became the sinister Gubbings of Devonshire folklore. And once the Tudors were dead and the gloomy Stuarts were on the Throne, the Gubbings' hour came. Witch-hunting was in the air, the Elizabethan wholeness of vision was fractured, and the Gubbings twisted it all to their own use. On the one hand, by hiding out on Dartmoor and spreading rumours of their own bestial atrocities (they crucified at the least sign of 'the Flesh') they made sure no-one visited their stronghold. On the other hand, they infiltrated towns and villages (being careful to hide their feathers and vestigial wings) and became witch-hunters in their own right -- for the first to cry 'witch' is never suspected.

Sustained by the zeitgeist, the Gubbings spread: the captain of the Mayflower was a Gubbings ---.

Swann pits against the Gubbings the figure of Robert Herrick --- 'poet, vicar and pagan' --- who makes a last stand for Elizabethan England as against their age-old psychosis. Here wider issues are raised: have we all been suffering from a dark delusion? Is the Christian God some terrible perversion of the real thing?

This is an ingenious idea, with plenty of possibilities; and I wish I could say that Swann had exploited it to the full. Actually, I found the book slight in impact. Swann's style is very much that of an old-fashioned historical novelist, and his characters never really came alive for me. He is naive, and sometimes downright soppy. He combines a certain care over local colour and the poetic mot juste with a surprising sloppiness in basic storytelling technique.

Still, the implications of his tale are worth taking seriously, as long as you're not prepared for anything really revelatory. If you want revelation, I suggest you read John Buchan's Witch Wood.

*

MORWYN: THE VENGEANCE OF GOD by John Cowper Powys; Sphere; London; 1977; 95p; 271 pp; ISBN 0 7221 6980 9

Reviewed by Brian Griffin

This is a wild, lengthy, rhapsodical-philosophical fantasy, and I liked it a lot. The chief dramatis personae are a horny ex-army captain, his black spaniel, a vivisecting scientist and his young daughter --- the Morwyn of the title, and the object of the captain's scarcely-sublimated passion. This quartet may suggest the main characters in Olaf Stapledon's Sirius (which came out seven years later, in 1944), and not without reason; but whereas Stapledon makes no comment on the methods whereby his scientist produces super-sheepdogs,and indeed seems to give his tacit approval, Powys thunders his apocalyptic anger at the whole urge to 'murder and dissect' throughout the length of this book, which is considerable.

Anyway, these four main characters are caught on the hills in the wilds of Wales (again, very like Sirius), when some apocalyptic physical-psychical event, involving a giant meteor and heightened consciousness, opens the earth beneath them, and they plummet down into a very literal Hades, a vast underground kingdom of the dead and damned. The essence of damnation, it appears, lies in the cruelty of the damned; so that common-or-garden perverts like the Marquis de Sade, Nero, and Blackbeard, mix familiarly with types like John Calvin and Torquemada the Inquisitor, not to mention their latter-day equivalents, the new priesthood of Science, the behaviourists and vivisectors, who are forever watching ongoing events in vivisection laboratories throughout the world, via T.V. This book is, in fact, a massive attack on the twin gods of Science-with-a-capital-S and Religion-with-a-capital-R, Eugenics and Jehovah, all the abstract claims of 'Knowledge' and 'Salvation' that have militated against the still, small voice of individual human conscience.

But though there are lengthy passages of philosophising, this is no tract. Powys's imaginative invention is tremendous; and besides that, everything that happens depends not on some abstract 'message', but on the intense erotic relationship between the horny captain (who is the narrator) and the virginal Morwyn, as they pass through ever-more-surrealistic underground adventures, involving Taliesin the ancient Bard, Merlin, Saturn, Rhadamanthus (Judge of the Golden Age), and the shades of Socrates and Rabelais (who are not damned, but seem, like Taliesin, to have a free pass to Hell). It all reads, at times, like a wildly-surrealistic Journey to Centre of the Earth --- in fact they do, ultimately, reach the dead centre.

Throughout the book, something indescribable is happening --- the Creation of Man, the return of the Golden Age, the judgement of the damned (i.e., all those who have not assisted in, or have actively militated against, the Creation) --- oh, anything and everything is happening, and I enjoyed every bit of it. Powys keeps repeating himself, he mixed extraordinary insights with platitudes, he is long-winded and threatens to become incoherent (Part Three is a continuous narrative of nearly a hundred pages, and you just have to keep on reading); but I don't care, it's all worth it. There are precious moments when Powys seems to place the whole rise of Science-with-a-capital-S within the all-comprehending myth of Creation, and these moments are well worth waiting for.

THE ILLUSTRATED MAN by Ray Bradbury; Panther; St Albans; 1977; 60p; 204 pp; ISBN 586 04359 4

Reviewed by Brian Griffin

In his introduction to The Story of Art, E. H. Gombrich says: "To talk cleverly about art is not very difficult ---. But to look at a picture with fresh eyes and to venture on a voyage of discovery into it is a much more rewarding task. There is no telling what you might bring gome from such a journey."

For me, this applies especially to a writer like Bradbury; and it certainly applies to the sixteen animated pictures on the epidermis of his Illustrated Man. Yes --- sixteen: in this edition, at any rate. In the original edition (1951), and in my last Corgi edition (1963) there are eighteen. Panther have excised 'The Fire Balloons' (for crying out loud -- what do they think they're doing to these classic collections?), 'The Exiles' 'The Rocket Man' and 'The Concrete Mixer'--- so that's four of the best stories gone to start with. I suppose they'll pop up in some Panther edition of The Golden Apples, which would be better than nothing. But why??

Anyway, to fill in the aching void they've created, Panther have inserted two pretty good Bradbury Tales from elsewhere --- 'Usher Two', which is a free fantasia on Bradburian themes, rather like 'The Lost City of Mars', or a sequel to 'Exiles' (But where is 'The Exiles'?); and 'The Playground', which is Bradbury in his psychological, October-Country mood (ageing widower becomes obsessed with games of evil children in sinister playground). When I read this one recently I found it wondrously uncomfortable in its implications.

I can't say that Panther are actually cheating anyone with this revised edition: after all, the other stories are great. I only hope they know what they've done with those other four, great stories. After all, there may be a few people around who haven't read them yet.

*

Hurled". If you take a couple of chapters from a fictitious autobiography of Thomas Carlyle's wife, and mix them up with a parable of naivete somewhere in between Jerzy Kozinski's Being There and Christopher Morley's Thunder on the Left, linking them by means of a frame story in which God is a naughty schoolboy bollixing up his project with help from his little brother, and glue the lot together with a touch of Charles Fort... what do you get? A horrible mess, for sure - and yet it is not without its fascination. I can, at least, say in all honesty that I've never read anything quite like it.

All in all, this is an idiosyncratic collection - worth reading, but not likely to inspire wild praise and a series.

*

SCIENCE FICTION: THE GREAT YEARS edited by Frederik Pohl and Carol Pohl; Sphere; London; 1977; 287 pp; 75p; ISBN 0 7221 6294 8

SCIENCE FICTION DISCOVERIES edited by Carol and Frederik Pohl; details above

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

All right, I'll admit it: some of the sf from the 30s, 40s and 50s compares favourably with new stories; it exudes a breathless excitement which few authors achieve today. But because these good old stories are so few the same ones tend to be reprinted over and over again. Science Fiction: The Great Years contains seven stories which first appeared between 1934 and 1953. All are entertaining and only a couple are noticeably old-fashioned. "...And Then There Were None" by Eric Frank Russell (later part of his novel The Great Explosion) shows how a long-forgotten colony planet without laws, government or any kind of authority can "defeat" a large and well-armed spaceship from Earth which has come to make contact after a lapse of 300 years. C. M. Kornbluth's "The Little Black Bag", Fred Brown's "Placet is a Crazy Place" and William Tenn's "The Liberation of Earth" are surely so well known that any comment of mine is superfluous. "Wings of the Lightning World" by James MacCreigh (a pseudonym of Frederik Pohl) is an unusual fantasy within a hard-science framework, which succeeds due to its sense of wonder and a carefully calculated revelation, and despite an aimless plot. The two stories from the 1930s - "Old Faithful" by Raymond Z. Gallun (a Martian in communication with Earth) and "A Matter Of Form" by H. L. Gold (a reporter investigates illegal brain surgery) - are the poorest in the collection, though neither is really bad and the former seems to have achieved the status of a classic. If you haven't already read too many of these seven tales, this is an anthology worth buying.

When one novella occupies almost half of an original anthology, the anthology is going to stand or fall on the quality of that novella. "Error Hurled" by Babette Rosmond (who?) is original, erudite and amusing, but its point (about Earth being no more than the imperfect construction of a couple of superchildren) could have been made in half the space, and Science Fiction Discoveries is, by its inclusion, reduced from good to mediocre. The best here is "Starlady" by George R. R. Martin, a brilliant, rather Delanyesque tale set in a complex, decadent future. As the first line says, this story has no hero in it. Au contraire, the whole cast of characters is so nasty (sadists, murders, pimps, prostitutes, and never a heart of gold anywhere) as to leave a bitter taste in the mouth. Robert Sheckley's "The Never-Ending Western Movie" is derivative of the film Westworld, but here there aren't any robots and everything is for real, including the bullets. There's an astonishingly black comedy from Doris Piserchia (people die, but the tiny atomic motors inserted surgically keep their bodies functioning so that they can still walk around), and an unusually good story from Fred Saberhagen (about literally tangible time). Contributions by Scott Edelstein and Arthur Jean Cox are entertaining without being outstanding, and there's a Roger Zelazny piece which is, unfortunately, very slight and unoriginal. At 65 pence the anthology is still quite good value.

*

TETRASOMY TWO by Oscar Rossiter; Corgi; London; 1976; 174 pp; 60p; ISBN 0 552 10380 8

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Here we have - not for the first time - a schizoid superman-fantasy which finds its resolution in a transcendental metamorphosis. In its basics, it beats a strong resemblance to The Infinite Cage by Keith Laumer, which I reviewed here some time ago. The superstructure however, is different: Tetrasomy Two is glib, with a touch of irony. Its schizoid element is self-conscious, the action taking place in a mental hospital. Its author, like its hero, is a doctor, and can't quite take delusions with obsessive seriousness. The result is a flippancy which undermines the resolution. If you are going to juggle mind-shattering concepts then you have got to take them seriously. If you look as if you're just messing about, the whole exercise becomes ridiculous. Tetrasomy Two is a jolly little book, as apocalyptic novels go - most of the way it's competently written mystery stuff with an uneasy spicing of sex - but jolly books should have jolly endings, and you can't effectively latch a salvation myth on to a trivial thriller. Look out for Rossiter, though - his writing is lively, and he may well produce some eminently readable books in time to come.

*

DRAGONSONG by Anne McCaffrey; Sidgwick & Jackon; London; 1976; £3.95; 202 pp; ISBN 0 283 98329 9

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

So there we were at the end of Dragonquest, waiting anxiously to hear whether the new-fangled methods of F'lar and Benden Weyr would really be accepted by the old dragon-riders and more conservative holders, whether the gubs could possibly multiply to cover Pern's northern continent in time to save it from erratic fall of Thread, what plans F'lar had for the dragon-riders if Thread could be wiped out, and what would happen to the unique white dragon Impressed by Jaxom (the juvenile Lord Holder of Ruatha).

But Dragonsong (the third novel in the series) doesn't tell us any of these things, doesn't advance the grand saga of Pern one bit. Instead, it concentrates on the microcosm, telling the Cinderella tale of Menolly, a tall, gawky fifteen-year-old girl who lives in the Half Circle Sea Hold, a grim fishing village which has little contact with the rest of Pern. Menolly is a natural musician

but is persecuted for this by her family because "girls can't be harpers" and because it's a waste of good fish-gutting time.

There's a lot of sob stuff when she accidentally slices her hand. Will she/won't she ever be able to play the pipes again? Unable to bear the harshness of the hold any longer, she runs away. And then the fairy godmother bit begins. Menolly finds a clutch of fire lizard eggs which are hatching and she Impresses nine of them. (Which means they'll follow her anywhere.) From then on (despite a few misunderstanding) it's success all the way.

This is essentially a juvenile novel, a fairy tale. It occurs concurrently with Dragonquest, and we are shown again the hatchings at Benden Weyr when Brekke (having lost her queen dragon) fails to re-Impress, and when Jaxon Impresses the white dragon. It is successful enough as a juvenile, but disappointing by comparison with Dragonflight and Dragonquest. They had depth, subtle trickery, a range of strong emotions and a vast, awe-inspiring grandeur; Dragonsong is shallow, simple and small-scale. The sea hold is well described, characterisation (especially of Menolly) is convincing, and the fire lizards are delightully twee, but this isn't enough.

*

THE WORLD SET FREE by H. G. Wells; Corgi; London; 1976; 192 pp; 60p; ISBN 0 552 10258 X

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

This is the novel, first published in 1914, in which Wells deals with the invention and use of the atomic bomb. It belongs to the curious sub-genre of speculative fiction which flourished in Britain between 1870 and the eve of the first world war - the imminent war novel.

This brand of scare story fed gluttonously on an undercurrent of anxiety which haunted Britain in this period. The roots of the anxiety are easy enough to trace in the social disruption which followed the Industrial Revolution - a loss of confidence in tomorrow, a mind of proto-Future Shock.

Oddly enough, only two of the writers who contributed to the genre seem to have had any real appreciation of the fact that technology would so remake the art of war that there was genuine reason for great concern about the scale of the destruction wich might soon be possible. One was Wells, the other George Griffith (who wrote, in 1911, The Lord of Labour, another novel featuring the use of atomic weapons). Perhaps even more odd was the fact that neither Wells nor Griffith found in this possibility of doom any cause for despair - rather the reverse, in fact. Griffith always took a delight in recounting tales of tremendous destruction, and Wells felt that the destruction of man's present world was necessary in order that a socialist Utopia might emerge from the ruins. The World Set Free takes its title and its plot from this belief.

The way in which the New Order arises from the chaos of atomic war in this novel seems, today, so shallow and unconvincing as to be ludicrous. An elite corps of ex-kings and ex-premiers band together to establish a beneficient oligarchy. This is characteristic of Wells the Fabian, who could only believe that socialism would have to be forced upon the masses by a cultural elite. In common people and revolutions he had no faith at all. This is an interesting book, in that it offers valuable insights into Wells' thinking and to the speculative literature characteristic of its time. But it is a period piece. Corgi, in presenting it as a standard genre paperback, are guilty of a misrepresentation which seems, alas, to be characteristic of their present policies.

*

NEW WRITINGS IN SF 25 edited by Kenneth Bulmer; Corgi; London; 1976; 50p; 189 pp; ISBN 0 552 10085 4

NEW WRITINGS IN SF 28 edited by Kenneth Bulmer; Sidgwick & Jackson; London; 1976; £3.95; 189 pp; ISBN 0 283 98317 5

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

The longest-running original anthology series in sf is alive and well and living in deepest Kent. Under John Carnell's editorship (vols 1-21) the most outstanding feature of the series was its conservatism. The stories were mostly by British authors (though Canadians and Australians were occasionally allowed in) and were traditional science fiction: aliens, space ships, time machines and dystopian futures, with almost no fantasy or experimentation and certainly never a Dangerous Vision. And has the position changed under Kenneth Bulmer? I think it has. True, traditional sf is still to be found in NWSF (but this is what the bulk of sf readers seem to demand, is it not?) yet mixed in with it are originality of both theme and presentation, more fantasy and even references to love-making. Two examples are pertinent here. First Brian Aldiss's trios of enigmas have become a regular feature of most recent volumes. Second, the proportion of new authors - mainly young - has risen, and these newcomers are clearly not content to rip off the tired old ideas of 1950s sf, but instead try to achieve a synthesis of old style and new wave.

A good starting point for detailed consideration of these two volumes is with new author Michael Stall, who has produced marginally the best story in each. His very first published story, in NWSF 23, was the most original of that collection. "Rice Brandy" in NWSF 25 displays that same originality combined with excellent descriptions and a careful, double-plotted presentation. It is an alternate wordl story against a Cambodian background which is either well known to the author or painstakingly researched. "Manganon" in NWSF 28 is so different in theme and style that it might have been written by a different Michael Stall, but the quality is still present. In a way it, too, is an alternate worlds story. Travellers and ciphers seek gates which lead to other worlds. Their motives vary from escape to a desire for the immortality which gate travel confers. Their eagerness to seize a gate gives an air of heroic fantasy, but Manganon, the whole system of gates, is revealed as very much a mental exercise, and the story becomes heavily philosophical towards the end. Yes, Michael Stall is a talented writer, still improving.

Another powerful tale in NWSF 25 is "The Green Fuse" by Martin Ricketts. The unravelling of alien reproductive cycles has become such a standard theme of late that the success of a new version depends upon the author's scientific ingenuity in setting up the cycle and his descriptive powers in making both humans and aliens believable. Despite a technically unconvincing

underwater sequence, Martin Ricketts pulls it off, and this success is due largely to the intensely emotional climax in which nineteen babies are slaughtered. (If this sort of Dangerous Vision persists in NWSF I'm sure it won't be long before there are four-letter words in the foreword!)

Fans of the Unorthodox Engineers will be glad to see them back. Colin Kapp has edged into Larry Niven territory to produce a funny - though rather obvious - Black Hole story. The other goodies in NWSF 25 are an off-beat spoof by Keith Wells, a beautiful almost Ballard-like contribution from Charles Partington and a slight but pleasing time travel mood piece by Wolfgang Joschke. The remaining three stories in no 25 are all competently written by established authors (Sydney J. Bounds, Donald Malcolm and John Rackham) but their themes and styles are so much of the 1950s and early 60s that I could hardly get through them. I find it interesting that the blurb writer chose these three on which to concentrate.

NWSF 28 also has its share of hackneyed themes, but the authors concerned have generally taken the trouble to disguise them by originality of presentation. For example, the most exciting story in the book ("On the Inside" by Robert P. Holdstock) is revealed, in the harsh light of denoument, as having some very hoary old plot elements. But the writing pulls the reader along from page to page at a great pace. There is no time to stop and wonder as Andrew Quinn gets up, kisses his mummified wife, goes off to work, makes a lunch-time visit to the park and "Shock" becomes a different person. Similarly, Bryn Fortey sets up his fairly obvious ending in the first ten lines of "Wordsmith" but the story is a success because of its racy approach to the theme.

"The Banks Of The Nile" by Ritchie Smith and Thomas Penman shows us Europe after the fires of (presumably) nuclear war. It is a rebuilt Europe, perhaps to similar to the original at the time of the Renaissance to be totally credible, but beautifully described and decked out with literary and historical allusions. It is also a Europe torn by new wars, and viewed mainly from an airship. This has an air of quality about it and runs Michael Stall's "Manganon" close.

On the lighter side there are three more of Brian Aldiss's enigmas, this time in playlet form, and stories by Leroy Kettle and Grahame Leman. "The Call Of The Wild" by Dutch author Manuel van Loggem would have been amusing in its descriptions of pedestrian-hunting by Parisian motorists if Death Race 2000 had not come first. (The idea is not new though. Its earlies use which I can trace is in Fritz Leiber's "X Marks The Pedwalk" from Galaxy in 1953)

I'm glad to see the gradual improvement in New Writing's standards and also the increasing number of fans appearing in it. Long may the series continue.

=

NEW WRITINGS IN SF 26 edited by Kenneth Bulmer; Corgi; London; 1976; 60p; 191 pp; ISBN 0 552 10232 6

Reviewed by David Wingrove

The New Writings series sways delicately between the excellent and the abysmal. Within each volume you are almost guaranteed to find an assortment of gems and duds flavoured by the perennial performance of an "old hand". This collection is little different from that standard barring the fact that the "old hand" (in this case Mr Aldiss) performs more than adequately. I find this blend rather disconcerting at times - at others refreshing. It is nice to be reminded that sf is all things to all people.

John Keith opens the batting with a tale in the manner of Cordwainer Smith, "A Planet Called Cervantes". "On Rawn died the Thirty Thousand" he repeats tirelessly (and tiresomely) and impresses us with Kreld training, the Interregnum, Keridish battle squadrons and the Rengol Marines. Frankly, by the end of all the jargon I didn't care a damn. Cordwainer Smith presented his fare with a hint of enigma, a touch of myth and an undercurrent of factual scepticism. Mr Keith presents it undiluted and bores us silly.

Chris Priest's "Men Of Good Value" is an impressively honest tract despite Mr Bulmer's editorial disclaimer. Characters too often betray a natural "assumed" courage that real life would rob them of when circumstances prevailed. Chris Priest presents his alter-ego here for our inspection and it escapes unscathed if perjured. As a warning to us about the partiality of the media it is perhaps a half-hearted blow; as if only to remind us of that which we already know.

"Three Coins In Enigmatic Fountains" - another three enigmas from Mr Aldiss. This is one of two excellently written stories in this collection (the other is the last) and stands out as such. The language drips like molten honey as we romp through shards of the delightfully diseased mind of BWA. "Carefully observed women" reels through vistas of feminine dominance and trite truisms to where "The daffodil returns the smile" and Moolah travels up from the Rind to do battle with the Kimarsun. And somehow it is peaceful to find ourselves in "The year of the quiet computer" where transience will be banished and the daffodil returns the smile.

Need I say more?

"The Phobos Transcripts" by Cherry Wilder is singularly unimpressive. A-la-Malzberg the author provides us with the report of the incident on Phobos. Was an alien intelligence involved? Well, you, me and the-man-who-works-at-the-bottom-of-the-garden know, at least...

"The Man Who" by David S. Garnett - a familiar nightmare to those with regular, routine jobs. Garnett handles the theme with respect and produces a finely crafted if unspectacular result.

"You Get Lots Of Yesterday, Lots Of Tomorrow, And Only One Today" by Laurence James avoids once again a question that has always nagged at me with these "crowded world" stories. So people live in tiny boxes, fed through tubes three times a day. Fine. But who looks after them? How do they produce food? How do they reproduce? Are the workers in the system also the cause of the population explosion? If so, (a) when do they have the time? and (b) wouldn't they have the sense to leave off if it caused them so much work? That aside, Mr James writes a

fine story about that "special" day everyone is allocated once in their lives.

But once again: why should they bother?

"Murders" by Ramsey Campbell - holographic solids and a powerful telepath become a threat to society's fragile structure. But the power of mass reaction can be a two-edged weapon. This tory is competent enough to maintain interest throughout, but not as powerful as Barrington Bayley's "An Overload" (NWQ 6) which explores the same theme of mass manipulation by media personalities. A predictable outcome.

"To The Pump Room With Jane" by Ian Watson - Mr Watson confuses our senses. A fine essay on delusion and madness. The future proves a delirium of the past; but I spoil the tale....

"The Seafarer" by Ritchie Smith and Thomas Penman - I lost count of the literary/musical references that about in this moving tale. It certainly captures the zeitgeist, gazing back as it does with nostalgia for this "simple" age of ours. Densely written; this pair lead us gently into the history of a new world and the lost love of Karangetti, the seafarer. The romantic poets and out contemporary balladeers provide staunch support to the intellectual entabglements of a budding relationship. A care for language, construction and emotive subtlety is much in evidence. I shall watch these two with considerable interest.

Something for everyone? Certainly there was enough to keep my interest, and - in three cases - stimulate my thoughts. New Writings could be so much better with so little extra effort. I don't know Mr Bulmer's problems, economic or other-wise, and so would refrain from further comment, but tow of these stories were pure padding. Oh well, I keep reading the buggers so they can't be that bad!

*

THE BOOK OF PHILIP JOSE FARMER ; The Elmfield Press; Leeds; 1976; £4.95; 239 pp; ISBN 0 7057 0087 4

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

Phil Farmer has made a name for himself not by writing well but by the obsessional pursuit in his works of three controversial themes: fantasy sex, resurrection and the factual bases of fictional heroes. Potentially a very good writer (I regard the excellent novelette "Sketches Among the Ruins Of My Mind" as his finest achievement; at least two of his novels, The Lovers and Inside-Outside are good by any standards), he has too often sacrificed quality for sensationalism. Also, much of his output over the last ten or twleve years has been marred by lack of re-writing. Some of his novels are appallingly bad.

This latest volume (a nice hardcover reprint of the 1973 DAW books edition) is the author's personal selection and contains examples of many of the disparate strands of his work. Farmer has written a foreword and a brief introduction to each of the contents. Nowhere does he attempt to disguise or make light of his obsessions; nor does he disown any of his hackwork. The result is a book which does justice to the strengths and weakensses of Philip Jose Farmer while simultaneously being varied and entertaining.

Undeniably, Farmer's best work is of novelette length. Two of his best, "My Sister's Brother" and "The Alley Man", are reprinted here, together with a short extract from his notorious Hugo winner, "Riders of the Purple Wage". "My Sister's Brother" (like The Lovers) is an early story of alien sex. In this instance there is no sexual contact between the human male, Cardigan Lane, and the attractive female humanoid he discovers on Mars, though there are detailed anatomical descriptions. But the point of the story concerns conditioned attitudes towards sex rather than actions; it is as much allegory as straight sf. (Curiously, this humanoid, who carries a small snake in her throat as part of her sexual apparatus, recurs only slightly altered in Farmer's two porn fantasies, The Image Of The Beast and Blown. I wonder if Linda Lovelace ever read Phil Farmer during her formative years.)

Old Man Paley, "The Alley Man", is a scrap merchant and possibly the last surviving Neanderthal. He is, for me, one of Farmer's most unforgettable characters, starring in a story full of pride and sadness which should have won a Hugo.

Obviously the Riverworld novels are Farmer's best-known exporation of the resurrection theme, though Inside-Outside (reprinted last year in the Avon SF Rediscovery seeries) is a far superior treatment. The theme is represented here by "Toward The Beloved City", a relatively poor novelette which is nevertheless very typical of Farmer's non-heroic fiction, in having one weak male and two strong female characters, plus a bit of divine intervention by an angel. (Just in case you don't know, Farmer's angels are usually alien superbeings in more-or-less human shape.)

Then there are six of what Phil Farmer has christened polytropical paramyths. These are Marxian tales but, as the author says in his foreword, "the term refers to Groucho, Chico and Harpo, not Karl". They are very short zany fantasies with occasional bursts of satire, the best being "The Sumerian Oath", in which it is suggested (with tongue in cheek and scalpel in throat) that all doctors besides swearing the Hippocratic Oath swear the Sumerian oath never to reveal that disease is manufactured by doctors just to keep themselves in business.

The last section of The Book Of Philip Jose Farmer contains a "factual" meeting between Farmer and Tarzan, a biographical sketch of Kilgore Trout and an article about Farmer by US book critic Leslie A. Fiedler. The Tarzan interview is a stiff upper lip encounter, concentrating mainly on small discrepancies between Burroughs books and real life, while missing out on most of the opportunities for wry humour. But there is some humour there: (page 213):

"Farmer: Suffice it to say that I have shown you are closely related to the men who were living prototypes of Doc Savage, Nero Wolfe, Bulldog Drummond, Sherlock Holmes, Lord Peter Wimsey, Leopold Bloom, and Richard Wentworth (also known as G-8, The Spider and The Shadow), and a number of other notable characters in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction.

Tarzan: Indeed.

Farmer: I have also found the explanation for the remarkable, almost superhuman powers exhibited by yourself and many members of your family. As you know, a monument marks the spot today where a meteorite hit Wold Newton, Yorkshire, in 1795. It just so happens that three coaches were passing by when the meteorite struck, and in them were the third Duke of Greystoke and his wife, the rich gentleman Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley House and his wife Elizabeth Bennet - the heroine of Pride and Prejudice - Sherlock Holmes' great-grandparents, and a number of others. All the ladies were pregnant. Everybody was exposed to the radiation from the meteorite. Ionization accompanies the fall of these, you know. And the radiation must have caused favorable mutations in the party."

To those unfamiliar with the Kilgore Trout controversy let me just mention that he is a character (a fictional sf author) in three of Kurt Vonnegut's books whom various sf authors have (with or without Vonnegut's permission) made use of. Phil Farmer has even written a Kilgore Trout novel, Venus on the Half-shell. His Biographical article on Trout is a weird combination of fact and fiction. The article by Fiedler about Farmer is an honest appraisal not without brickbats.

This was meant to be a representative collection of Farmer's best work in different areas, omitting the most frequently anthologised material. As

such it succeeds well, though it is inevitable that few readers will enjoy the whole spectrum of writings included. Bibliographical purists will be upset that several of the pieces' first appearances were not credited, and I expect most people will join me in wishing that Farmer's introductory remarks had been longer, but this is a good volume - and interesting testimony to obsession.

Josh Kirby has done a very nice wraparound jacket illustration of an early scene from "My Sister's Brother".

*

THE BEST OF MURRAY LEINSTER edited by Brian Davis; Corgi; London; 1976; 171 pp; 60p; ISBN 0 552 10333 0

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Advertising in the UK is subject to various legal constraints regarding honesty, but one of the difficulties that the arbitrators face is the fact that through long and corrupt misuse certain words have become so devalued as to have lost all meaning. One of these words is "best". There has been a recent spate of "Best of..." anthologies which have made the term ridiculous. The present offering is even more pretentious, in that it also claims to be "a memorial anthology". This means that Murray Leinster died while the collection was being compiled and some bright spark at Corgi thought that his death might offer opportunities for even more cynical exploitation of the casual sf reader.

Murray Leinster's career in sf spanned nearly half a century - he began writing before Amazing Stories was born and was still around to help resuscitate it in the mid-sixties. He wrote a large number of dull potboilers but he did have ability and imagination, which he occasionally used to good effect. He wrote for a wide range of markets inside and outside the sf establishment. How is this career represented in this "memorial anthology"? We have ten short stories all of which initially appeared between 1945 and 1956. The book does not contain "The Mad Planet", "Sidewise in Time", "First Contact" or "Exploration Team" - yet these are the four stories with which his name is primarily associated. It does not contain any of the "Med Ship" stories. It does not contain any representative of his early work in or out of the genre magazines, not any representative of his work during the last decade that he was active. It does not contain "A Logic Named Joe" or "The Strange Case of John Kingman" or "The Lonely Planet" or "The Oldest Story in the World" or "The Amateur Alchemist" - it has, in fact, just two stories which number among Leinster's best or most popular: "The Ethical Equations" and "De Profundis". The book has an introduction, but it is only one page long and makes but a few facile comments. There is nothing here to put Leinster's work into any kind of perspective.

In my opinion the packaging of this collection is dishonest. To pretend that this book is a testament to Murray Leinster seems perilously close to an insult.

*

WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME by Marge Piercy; Random House; New York; 368 pp; $10.00
WOMEN OF WONDER edited by Pamela Sargent; Random House/Vintage Books; New York; 285 pp + lvii pp; $1.95
MORE WOMEN OF WONDER edited by Pamela Sargent; Random House /Vintage Books; New York; 310 + liii pp; $1.95
ORSINIAN TALES by Ursula Le Guin; Harper and Row; New York; 1976; 180 pp; $7.95

Reviewed by douglas barbour

What is perhaps most interesting about sf today is the fact that the boundaries are being blurred from every direction, as the two single-author books under review will reveal. But first, I want to discuss two fine new anthologies.

Pamela Sargent has rapidly gained a reputation as a formidable editor of and commentator on sf. Women of Wonder and More Women of Wonder are not only superior collections of science fiction, they are introductory explorations of the whole speculative interface between "Science Fiction and Women's Studies", as the back-cover rubric on Women of Wonder indicates.

both anthologies are historically organised to present an accurate view of woman's place in sf over the years. The stories are all by women, and they are all about women to a greater or lesser extent. The comparisons and contrasts that emerge from the juxtaposition of stories from the forties and fifties with those from the sixties and seventies are provocative and salutary. Though sf is still a male-dominated field, some real advances have been made; today writers are beginning to envision futures where advances in every field of technology will have their effect upon the social, psychological and sexual lives of women and

man,completely altering relationships long held to be "normal".

Offering stimulating and fresh explorations of possible futures in their best stories, WOW and MWOW provide, first and foremost, top notch entertainment throughout. Ms Sargent knows good sf when she sees it, no matter what its period, and her selection in these two books is nearly faultless. Judith Merril, Kate Wilhelm, Leigh Brackett, Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Joan D. Vinge and Vonda McIntyre are only the very best of a fine group of contributors. These books are not only interesting for their feminist slant, they are also among the very best introductions to sf available.

Ursula Le Guin's new collection, Orsinian Tales, represents her first work outside sf. Set in periods from 1150 to the near-present and in the imaginary-real countries of more realistic fiction, these stories reveal new facets of Ms Le Guin's protean and humane talent, her fine craft and her calm, accepting love of life.

Ms Le Guin has a remarkable talent for creating characters in whose emotional life the reader shares. Many of these stories are set in Easter Europe during various periods of this century of change. The men and women who lead their ordinary lives there suffer forms of material deprivation most of Ms Le Guin's readers will never have known. This only means that, like the people of her bleak Utopian planet in The Dispossessed, they live their lives a bit closer to the skin; there's less fancy clothing hiding the "poor bare, forked animal" that is every person. Deliberately lacking in adventure or romance, and often ending in material defeat for the protagonists, these stories are wonderfully, profoundly moving celebrations of human courage and love of life. Orsinian Tales is a yea-saying book.

As, in its different way, is Marge Piercy's Woman of the Edge of Time. Ms Piercy is known, not as an sf author, but as a feminist poet and novelist whose last book, Small Changes, was praised by Adrienne Rich and Pyllis Chester. Yet an earlier novel, Dance The Eagle To Sleep, was a projection into a revolutionary future from the youthful sense of possibility in the sixties, and Woman On The Edge Of Time is sf if it's anything: a fable of the future for our own time, and a story of extraordinary power and range.

Beginning in the contemporary slums of New York, it swings mostly between various mental hospitals in the area and at least two possible futures, one a beautifully humane Utopia, the other a mechanistic Dystopia, both obviously potential products of our present culture. Consuelo (Connie) Ramos, the woman on the edge of time, is trapped in a mental hospital so specifically rendered it scared the hell out of me. She somehow makes mental contact with Luciente of the playful, androgynous society of Mattapoisette over a century in the future. Treated as a sick animal by the people of her own time, Connie keeps going to Mattapoisette, where the inhabitants teach her their way of life, a life William Morris would have loved for its playful sense of work and learning and its life-enhancing use of technology.

Mattapoisette is a fully realised Utopia: a world of civility and ceremony, where children have three mothers of both sexes and make a stringent and dangerous rite-of-passage to free themselves of familial possessiveness; a world in which communities are large family groups, in which sexist distinctions have been eradicated (one of Piercy's best touches is the all-encompassing pronoun"per", which I was using by the time I'd finished the novel) in which creativity for and of all is a reality, and in which death is accepted as a natural part of life. Against this dream - a nightmare: a world of scientists, people mostly cyborg and controlled by technology, the worst imaginings of C.S. Lewis's The Abolition of Man. And, as Luciente tells Connie, "Yours is a crux-time. Alternative universes co-exist. Probabilities clash and possibilities wink out forever."

Indeed. Chosen to be a guinea-pig for a new method of "therapy", a neuro-electric experiment, in which computer-run electrodes implanted in the patient's brain will keep him or her "peaceful", Connie is only too aware that the war between the two futures is already being fought. It is this terrifying story of the present which keeps Woman On The Edge Of Time from becoming a boring Ralph Bellamy tour of a perfect future world. Connie is a human being, now, whose life as a free human being is in peril; she fully engages the reader's sympathies. In the doctors' eyes, she is mentally ill and anti-social, and society appears to agree with the doctors, if her family is any measure of its opinion. Yet she finally realises that she is at "war" with a form of thought and life which will prevent Mattapoisette from becoming, and this realization brings her to a violent moral choice.

It is impossible to do justice to the complexity of this novel, the stark realism of the hospital scenes juxtaposed to the glorious creation of the world of Mattapoisette, the rich characterisations not only of Connie, but of others in her ward and her many friends in the future. Woman On The Edge Of Time is a book full of pain and love, human courage and suffering, and, finally, hope. It is a book to be read and cherished for its provocative speculations, but also for its refusal to despair about the future of mankind.

*

EARTH ABIDES by George R. Stewart; Gollancz; London; 1977; $3.95; 334 pp; ISBN 0 575 02273 6

Reviewed by Cy Chauvin

In Billion Year Spree, Brian Aldiss said that the best novel in the disaster novel subgenre - which British writers of sf seemed to dominate - is, surprisingly, written by an American. He was referring to George R. Stewart's Earth Abides (1949). Not only did the novel win the International Fantasy Award for that year, but it comes with a recommendation from Carl Sandburg.

The novel chronicles the life of Isherwood (Ish) Williams, who is bit by a rattlesnake while alone in the wilderness just prior to the outbreak of the plague. Through some accidental immuisation process, Ish does not die. But he (and other survivors) still have the serious psychological problem of adjusting to a radically different world. Some do not survive: they drink themselves to oblivion, withdraw, or pretend as best they can that life is as it was before.

Ish is a "loner" before the plague, and when it first strikes he thinks of himself as an observer, rather than a participant, in the world to come. Methodically, he makes a list of his qualifications for survival:

"1) Have will to survive. Want to see what will happen in a world without man, and how. Geographer.
2) Always was solitary.
3) Have appendix out.
4) Moderately practical, though not mechanical. Camper.
5) Did not suffer devastating experience of living through it all, seeing family, other people, die. Thus escaped the worst of the shock." (Ish was in the wilderness during this period.)

In the classic explorer tradition, Ish decides to take a cross country trip, to see how the plague has affected different areas. While preparing for the trip, a beagle (in the classic situation) adopts Ish as his master. Without being overly cute or sentimental, Stewart uses the dog as a device to reaveal Ish's character. It is in the dog that Ish makes his first emotional attachment since the disaster. He has not realised how lonely he has been, and lives in fear (not all of it rational). He is extremely cautious. When the dog runs off to chase some reabbits in the desert, he becomes very depressed (he is afraid the dog will get lost and not return). When the dog returns after all, Ish makes an important realisation: "'What am I afraid of?' he thought. 'Nothing more than my own death can happen. That has come to most people already. Why should I be afraid of that?'...He felt infinite relief.'"

Ish's journey is an odyssey across a changed world, a world where man's influence is gradually waning, as certain bits of crucially placed omniscient narration help emphasise. Dogs die penned in kennels; pavement cracks and trees fall and cover roads; the wheat and the weeds grow together. These sections contrast with the personal narrative focused on Ish - they give a picture of the earth's evolution from nature's viewpoint, rather than man's.

Ish finds survivors along the way, but none he would wish to stay with. The people were often emotionally dead; the culture shock was too great. When Ish returns to the west coast, he meets Em, and he realises how much he has missed "real" human companions. They decide to live together, and gradually a small group of survivors grows up around them. They refer to themselves as "The Tribe", and a close-knit family/society evolves, with Ish as the leader. Ish says of himself: "I always struggle. I can never be merely happy."

He sees the fall of his civilisation and culture - not only the exteriors (buildings, technology) but in the children's lack of musical and reading ability. Ish puts all his hopes in one small boy, Joey, and when a virus spreads among the Tribe and kills the boy, Ish is crushed. "Perhaps the brilliant are not suited to survive," says one character to Ish, but he goes on to describe some members of the Tribe as "solid" but with "no imagination" (which is why they did not go crazy with shock). Ish comes to realise too that one boy and man cannot change the world - "How much did man strike outward to affect his surrounding, and how much did surroundings press in upon him?"

It is like a Robinsonade in much of its appeal - a small band of people fighting against nature, trying to salvage the scraps of civilisation. But there is no outside world they can escape to; and technological civilisation cannot survive. A part of Ish ('the last American') dies when he realises this.

There is some religious background to the novel. A hammer Ish discovers when he is first bitten by the rattlesnake becomes a symbol of his authority, and a link with the past. Some of the children come to believe it has magical powers, and Ish carries it everywhere with him. (Towards the end of his life, Ish is tending to be regarded as a god, or a prophet, and young men come to him for advice on important matters.) There is also a more conventional religious/fate orientation to the novel. Immediately after the infection swipes through the Tribe, and Joey dies, Ish thinks that the group may have committed some unknown sin, and confesses his weakness to Em. She replies:

"If there is a God who made is and we did wrong before his eyes...at least we did wrong only because we were as God made us, and I do not think he should set traps... Let us not bring all that back into the world again - the angry God, the mean God - the one who does not tell us the ruels of the game, and then strikes back when we break them."

Towards the very end of the novel, Ish begins to wonder how the plague has affected his life, and he thinks that at this point in his life it hardly matters: he would be an old man now, even if civilisation had continued. "What did it matter? What had he accomplished? Now certainly it made no difference." At many points in the novel, Ish puts off doing things (or does not do them at all) because he feels his actions alone will have no effect - nature will undo all he tries toaccomplish. Yet, Earth Abides is not a study of the futility of man's actions; it is more a story about human courage, in which the characters learn reasons for surviving depsite the disasters. Of Em, a friend srys: "We need Em, for she gave us courage, and without courage there is only a slow dying, not life." On my second reading of the novel, I found this last section too depressing, and strangely relevant to my own personal feelings. I suppose I felt the pain of empathy and tragedy.

"Men come and men go, but earth abides". (Ecclesiastes I, 4). The same might be said of most science fiction novels, but not of George R. Stewart's Earth Abides.

o

A Surfeit of Empires

THE IMPERIAL STARS by E. E. Doc Smith and Stephen Goldin; Panther; St Albans; 1976; 155 pp; 50p; ISBN 0 4334 9

FLANDRY OF TERRA by Poul Anderson; Coronet; London; 1976; 220 pp; 70p; ISBN 0 340 20753 1

WE CLAIM THESE STARS by Poul Anderson; Dobson; London; 1976; 125 pp; £3.35; ISBN 0 234 77946 2

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

Hack writers, unlike old soldiers, die but sometimes show a remarkable reluctance to fade away. Doc Smith has joined that select group of wordmills whose sails will be kept turning despite the demise of the original machinery. His brand of space opera can now be standardised and supplied by mass-production. For want of a better comment: Oh dear.

The Imperial Stars has been elaborated by Stephen Goldin from a fragment which appeared as a novelette in IF some ten years ago. Goldin's additions are like a toupee - you can't see the join but there's no getting over the fact that the intrinsic plot is very thin on top. It is a spy story and a Ruritanian romance. The fact that its Ruritania is another world and its Rasendil a pair of mealy-mouthed trapeze artists is hardly enough to warrant any claim of originality.

In the symposium The Science Fiction Novel published by Advent many years ago, Cyril Kornbluth pointed out that Smith's work consists of fantasies structurally similar to those employed by small children engaged in exciting games of make-believe, and that their universe is a metaphorical translation of the world-view of the child. The Imperial Stars is no exception, save that its poverty of ideas marks it off as the product of a jaded and ineffectual imagination compared to the Lensman series (which had all the verve and vigour of a genuine child's imagination.) The empire and the emperor here are paternal not in the political sense but in a straightforward metaphorical sense. To say that this is a childish novel is not to insult it but to describe it literally.

Poul Anderson's Flandry stories, three of which ("The Game of Glory", "A Message in Secret" and "A Plague of Masters") crop up in Flandry of Terra and one of which similarly stands slimly alone in We Claim These Stars, also feature the adventures of an imperial interstellar spy. They serve to point out some of the shortcomings of The Imperial Stars but - by an interesting irony - also reveal their own shortcomings by virtue of the comparison.

poul Anderson does not turn out standardised crud by the yard. Each of these four stories contains an idea, a more-or-less carefully designed hypothetical problem and a unique background. These factors allow the stories to become entities in their own right, not mere section cut from an endless roll of patterned cloth. They are not very good stories - the problem in "A Message in Secret" is very silly and the background in "The Game Of Glory" fails to convince - but they are individual stories. Their central character, in addition, has some semblance of personality - he does not simply go through the motions prescribed by the plot but has attitudes to what he is doing, motives and (occasionally) feelings. All this makes Flandry more interesting, and his adventures more readable, than the family d'Alembert, who exhibit a - literally - child-like acceptance of the parameters surrounding their actions and existence.

Curiously, however, it becomes easy - once we have recognised The Imperial Stars as a childish fantasy - to see the Flandry stories for what they really are, and to identify the factors involved in the characterisation of their hero. The Flandry series is unmistakably an adolescent fantasy. Here the Empire is still Daddy, but instead of the snug childhood acceptance of paternal rule we have a flamboyant and contemptuous adolescent resentment of it - it is seen as decadent and senile, while the youthful protagonist represents himself narcissistically as a cavalier and independent spirit.

The Imperial Stars is recommended to those with a mental age of 9, the Flandry series to those existentially becalmed at 15. Parsimonious readers may care to note that if Coronet contiune with the series We Claim These Stars (the best of the bunch) should appear in a subsequent collection under Anderson's preferred title "Hunters of the Sky Cave", along with a couple of other novelettes. This will be better value by far than a thin paperback photocopied from half of an old Ace Double.

Into The Horse's Head

Teeth glittering like myriad stars
On dark galactic nights
The helmsman pauses, smiles, hand poised
Console blink their code in lights
The captain gazes at the equine head
Captured by the ship's unseeing eyes
Ink black mass, coalescent gas
Chance configuration of familiar disguise
The captain turns, nods his head
The helmsman activates the ship's alert
Crewmen scurry, engines whine
They go, they go, they will be the first

--- Chris Evans

CONTRIBUTORS THIS ISSUE OF VRS:

douglas barbour
Cy Chauvin
James Corley
Chris Evans
Brian Griffin
Chris Morgan
Brian Stableford
David Wingrove

EDITORIAL

If all goes well, this first issue of VRS should be mailed out with Vector 79, on February 14th or thereabouts. As it is something of an experiment, the reactions of you, the readership, would be much appreciated.

As you will gather, the purpose of VRS is to keep up the rate of reviewing provided for Vector readers, without clogging up the journal completely with book reviews, to the exclusion of other material. We shall cont inue to put the best of the reviews, of the most important books, in Vector itself, but the rest will end up in VRS. This is no comment on the relative merits of those reviews/reviewers who appear in the two publications, merely a way of getting all the material into print. There are far more books being published in the UK today that are worthy of at least some length of review than can be fitted into the pages of Vector itself. Thus VRS.

--- Chris Fowler
14/2/1977