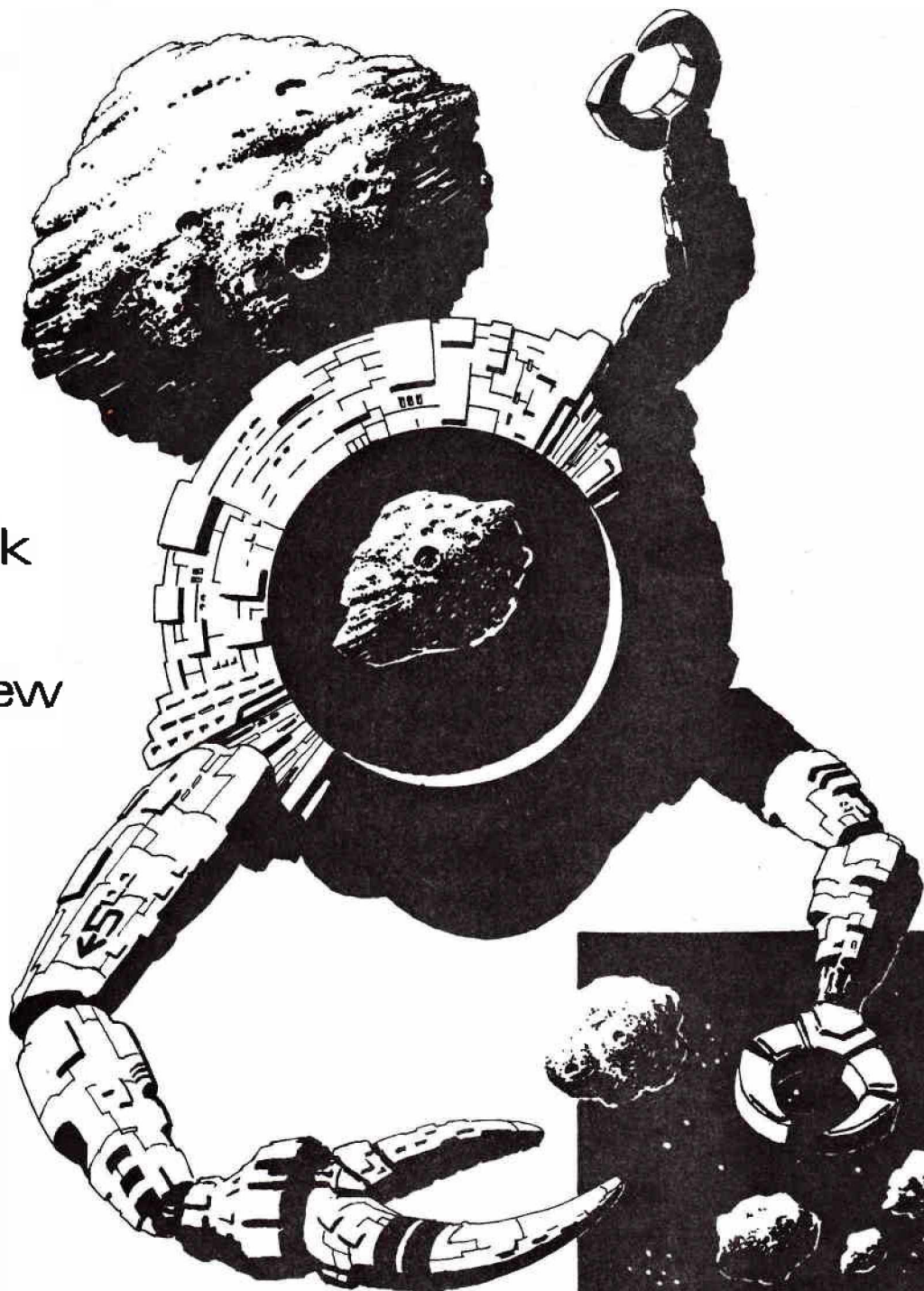


VECTOR 90
nov-dec 1978

frederik
pohl
interview

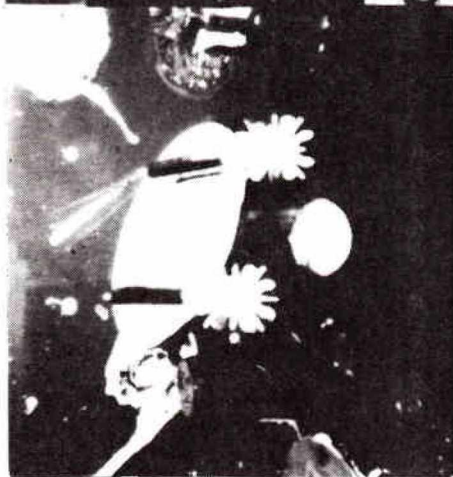


S. Bruce '77

the b.s.f.a. journal



LANCASHIRE.



VECTOR 90

nov-dec 78

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Illustrations: Richard Bancroft (pages 2, 12, 57)
Steve Bruce (Cover)
Peter Jones (pages 8, 14, 21, 39, 43)

Advertising Rates etc: all information regarding advertising in VECTOR may be obtained from Trev Briggs at:- 6, The Plains,
Crescent Road,
Chingford,
London, E4 6AU.

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Editorial Queries/Letters Of Comment: Should be addressed to the Editor, 4, Holmside Court, Nightingale Lane, Balham, London, SW12 8TA.
Telephone Number for urgent calls: 01-673-2069.

Special thanks this time must go to: Brand X; Peter (of course!) Hammill; New Worlds 214; the Muirs; Rob, Ritchie and Annie; Young's Brewery; The Windmill, Clapham Common; HMSO: Swallow Brand Stencil Correction Fluid; Madame Verdurin; Johnny Rotten & the Pogo King of Newcastle; Norman Sleet; Peter Kropotkin; Neil Young and (naturally) Sue. For keeping it sweet and helping make it through the nights crouched over the keys.

ISSN: 0505-0448.

THE ANDROID'S DREAMS

Putting VECTOR together is rather an organic process and is never the same twice. Certain things happen with perfect timing - an article arrives which coincides with the proposed contents of an issue; artwork arrives which fits perfectly - others with a curious disregard for my health and patience. From time to time the thing seems almost incestuous, the cross-references so many, at others it seems disjointed. And the greater part of the experience is pure chance. An editor can only hint at what he wants and choose from the material submitted to him: he in fact exerts very little influence at this level of things. It may seem a perverse thing to remind people, but VECTOR is very much the result of people giving their services gratis. If they don't want to write, or simply haven't the time to write, then they simply don't write anything for VECTOR. I have no economic power over my contributors and hopefully no letters from Peter Bessel in my files to make them write.

From next issue VECTOR will appear once again in a litho format. It will continue, hopefully, as an A4 magazine, though how large a one depends entirely on our financial situation. Fortunately that has improved vastly since this time last year. The improved format should allow me to take a few bolder steps with artwork, and I would thus appreciate the submission of artwork over the next few months to enable me to build up a file of illustrative material. I shall only be continuing in this role as VECTOR editor for another four issues after this one, and it would be nice to present my successor - whoever it may be - with a comprehensive file of written and illustrative material. The importance of VECTOR is in its continuity - that it continues to appear at regular bi-monthly intervals, commenting upon the genre from an educated viewpoint, stimulating and informing its readers. This can only be achieved through the constant efforts of voluntary helpers. I do not feel a magazine of VECTOR's nature can survive in an economic framework. It would be very nice if it could. Certainly a better product could result from that. But, presented with the reality of producing a magazine on a small budget, without payment to the contributors, regularly and - more to the point - with something of value between the covers, whoever takes this job on will need to pay heed to the uncertain nature of the beast, and take into account at all times what John Fowles likes to term 'hazard'.

At which point it would perhaps be appropriate to say that the present committee is seeking applicants for the job of VECTOR editor from the September-October issue 1979. Applicants should write to Tom Jones (see contents page) giving their name, age, experience and proposals for the magazine. We hope that we can settle the matter by early March so that I can assist whoever succeeds me in their first issue and maintain the continuity that has been all too often damaged in the past.

Up-coming in the new year are articles on Disch, Shaw, Cowper and Sf in the thirties, more author interviews and - if funds and contributions permit - a small overview of juvenile sf.

And, finally, I'd like to welcome John and Eve to the editorial chair of MATRIX. I look forward to seeing in what direction they lead the magazine. I'd emphasise once again that these magazines only exist because people are willing to contribute; so please assist by sending in any items of news, interest or scandal relating to sf... especially the last. In all seriousness, though, your response is sought - and appreciated by all.

an interview with frederik pohl

by
david wingrove



((The following interview took place on Wednesday 7th June when Fred Pohl was in London for the launching of MAN PLUS and GATEWAY. Held in the bar of a large London hotel, we were hampered by the crashing of glasses and - at one stage - a young lady playing an organ and singing on the other side of the room. Transcription of the tape was, therefore, quite difficult, and I apologise in advance if anything I've extracted from the resultant confusion is incorrect: I've endeavoured to capture it as clearly as possible. Finally, thanks to Ros Lewis and Richard Evans of Futura for their kind assistance in arranging matters at such short notice))

DW: Roaming and Reading. I was reading Ragged Claws again, and thinking that it was very much a summation of your life - roaming and reading...

FP: Yes. Actually, that inspired Judy Lynn Del Rey to get me to write my autobiography, which will be out in the States in about two months. I don't know whether it's going to be published here or not.

DW: If anything about that piece, there was a little bit too little of you, and too much of what was going on around you.

FP: There's a lot of me in the other book. It's called THE WAY THE FUTURE WAS, and it's a big book - about a hundred-and-odd thousand words. It covers my life up to about 1970. Since then it's much too close for me to know what I want to say about it. Isaac Asimov is bringing out his autobiography in February and we were comparing notes. His runs 640,000 words. There's not 640,000 words to say about anybody. I think I've padded my hundred and something...

DW: Also, from Ragged Claws I noted that you were reading about a million words of fiction a week?

FP: Oh no. No, it's...

DW: An exaggeration?

FP: Well. Let's see. I was reading about 4,000 manuscripts a year; which is about eighty a week and say 5000 words. So, it's not much short of it. In fact, 400,000 words a week.

DW: That's fairly voracious. Are you still reading a book a day?

FP: Just about. Yes.

DW: What sort of things are you reading now?

FP: Well, I've just finished reading Brian Aldiss' new novel, THE MALACIA TAPESTRY. And I enjoyed it a lot. I've read four or five novels, some non-fiction books, a couple of books on psychology, and a couple of books on the human body - because I was writing something that interested me in them. It's six or seven books a week, and I lose track of which I've read.

DW: Are you still reading a lot of science fiction as well?

FP: Not a great deal. I've left Bantam, though actually I'm still technically employed til the end of this month as their science fiction consultant. But I've stopped taking on new work, and I won't be actually back in my office until my contract has expired at the end of the month. So that I have not had to read very many manuscripts recently. I've read a few as a courtesy to the authors because they sent them in to me - that is, personally - and because they're people I know or people I've had dealings with.

DW: How intense is your contact with the writers, as an editor? Are you actually going through manuscripts and going back to them and saying 'this is the way I want it'?

FP: When I was an editor, I was.. Well, let me start from the beginning about how I think I work as an editor. The best way I work is to start reading the manuscript until I reach the point where it bores me silly, and then stop. If I have not reached that point before I come to the end of the manuscript, then I like it and buy it. If I don't finish it or if I'm quite clear in my mind that it's not something I want to publish, I usually don't work very close with the writer. I don't usually write very complicated letters to an author that I'm rejecting. And that's self-preservation.

DW: Pure volume?

FP: No. It's just that with writers you don't know, there's no way to say how they will respond to anything you say.

DW: You've covered this ground somewhere else before...

FP: Yes, I think I have. And therefore I'm careful about saying anything that may be construed as an invitation to re-write the story or to publish it, or even as an encouragement to submit more manuscripts. Unless I like people a lot. My favourite story, which I think may have been in Ragged Claws or somewhere, is about a writer who was sending me a story a week when I was a nineteen-year-old boy editor. After six months I asked him to stop and think for a while because none of them were anywhere near what I had any intention of publishing and he was wasting my time and his postage. I suggested that he take a couple of weeks off and instead of writing a new story every week, he decide whether he really wanted to do that or not. And he wrote back by return airmail saying 'Dear Mr Pohl, you're the only editor who has ever given me any personal response at all, and from now on I'll write two stories a week.' And I don't want to risk that happening.

DW: You said that you 'like to learn things'. Is that the most valuable part of the whole experience for you, of going through life?

FP: I think that the skills that I've aquired and the patterns that have formed as a result of learning things are possessions that I treasure most. There are some things I don't learn very well. My languages are very poor.

DW: Do you find that it's because you are not interested in them?

FP: No, I don't know why it is, but I think I have a block. I think American and English people don't bother learning languages because they assume everyone they're interested in will speak English. Which happens to be true - particularly if you're a science fiction writer. No country I've ever visited, most of the people I've wanted to see did not already speak English; or otherwise they wouldn't be interested in science fiction. English language science fiction is worldwide - you just don't know what's happening in the field if you can't read it.

DW: Do you find a lot of non-Anglo/American science fiction is coming through now?

FP: Quite a lot, and some of it's very good. The Japanese science fiction I am told is very good. The translation problems are so difficult that I can't vouch for much of it, but I do have, as one of the last things that I hope to complete for Bantam, a collection of Japanese short stories translated into English. Which should have been done long since, and I hope to wind that up as one of the loose ends. Some of the short stories I've read are very good. And there's some interesting Russian science fiction. Particularly two brothers named Boris and Arkadi Strugatski. I think they're great. Stanislaw Lem has a vocal and very enthusiastic following, of whom I don't happen to be one. But I'm not sure that it's Lem's fault. It may be the fault of the translators.

DW: Yes, they're re-translated.

FP: They're almost all re-translations from German and French. Nobody can survive two translations. I can't understand why people who read them in English like them. I don't.

DW: In The Cyberiad there's a great deal of wordplay, and I wonder how the translator could possibly have kept those elements, and translated them into English...

FP: I think that they probably re-invent them. I wrote a story once which involved a lot of coined words, and the only language I can read at all, other than English, is Italian. When it was translated into Italian the translator re-coined all the words. He didn't try to translate them, he just made up new things. I thought that was pretty good, and that must be what happens to Lem. Too much of it is not conceptual.

DW: One little point that I picked up. I was reading your 'The Man Who Ate The World' and I noticed you mentioned the 456 Bomb Group in there.

FP: I was in the 456th Bomb Group in Spurnaria. Did I mention it in that story?

DW: Yes. I just wondered how much of your real life you actually insert in the stories.

FP: Quite a lot. Not with malice aforethought. But when I'm writing something, it seems to relate to something I've done. Or when something that's happened seems to fit into a story I'm writing, I put it in. Unconsciously. Not that I feel obliged to.

DW: Devilish whimsy, almost?

FP: Yes. I don't feel obliged to separate reality from fiction.

DW: Yes, because you commented on THE SPACE MERCHANTS that it was almost disguised, extrapolated autobiography.

FP: Well, I spent three years in the advertising business and THE SPACE MERCHANTS was my way of getting back at them, I think.

DW: Not nice years?

FP: Actually, all the people I knew in advertising were good people. Advertising itself was pernicious. It makes people do things they shouldn't do.

DW: Yes, that's another thing I've noticed. In your work the theme of exploitation is very much to the fore; whether it's by people or by systems.

FP: The novel that I'm writing right now is about the complicity of the exploited in exploitation.

DW: Which is something that Brian Aldiss once said; that rape isn't entirely involuntary.

FP: I think that's so. Particularly in terms of social rape. Once indoctrination occurs, in advertising and propaganda, publicity and speeches by our political leaders, I think we actively play the game with them. It takes two players to make the game work.

DW: I noticed that very much about the Carter build-up for the Presidential election. He was using a computer to feed out the questions and writing speeches that he discovered people wanted to hear in each area.

FP: Well, if Carter wasn't doing it as a matter of policy it was only because he didn't think he needed to. Most of the people who are running for major office in the United States are pretty sophisticated.

DW: That's an idea that 20 years ago would have been science fiction, pure and simple.

FP: Well, I think the same thing was done 20 years ago, except without the computer. The computer doesn't really change the process, it just speeds it up, makes it more efficient.

DW: Another thing I noted. At twenty-three you re-evaluated your writing career. You obviously started off very young - nineteen...seventeen when you had your first poem published for two dollars. So at twenty-three you sat down and realised 'this is all crap', and 'let's try to write'. How did you manage to survive while you were re-evaluating?

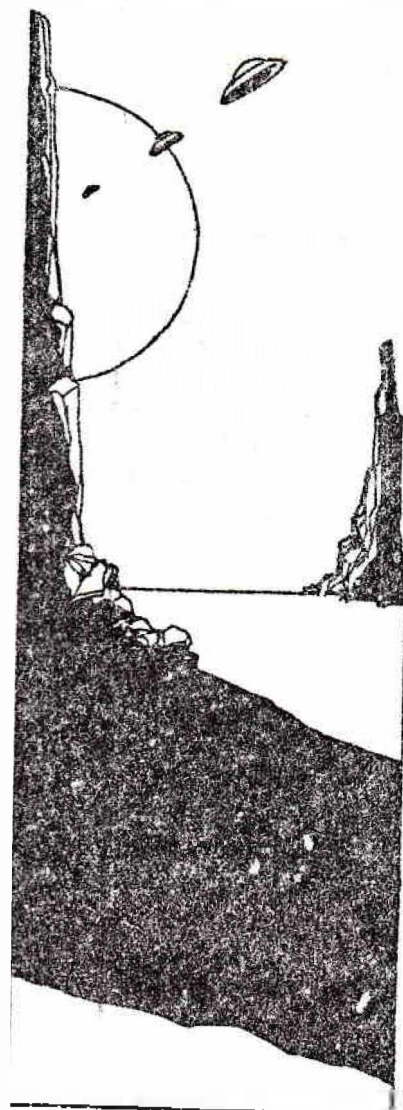
FP: Oh, I never tried to live on my writing. I never succeeded on the few occasions I tried until I was thirty or so. I always got some sort of job. The first thirty years of my life I spent just writing, growing up, working on something to support myself and writing in my spare time. Except for a brief period of six or seven months which was more or less involuntary, when I got fired from one job at Popular Publications and before I was re-hired for another.

DW: And that was spent purely writing, was it?

FP: Largely writing, and even more loafing. I mean, writing is a hard thing to force oneself to do, especially if you're dependent on the cheques coming in quickly. You find yourself doing all sorts of things to make that happen.

DW: When did you find you were writing at your most prolific?

FP: Probably right about now. You go through periods when you write quite a lot. 68, 69 and 70 is a good example, 71/72 I wrote quite a lot, 73 not so much. For the last year or two I've been writing...well, the programme I've imposed on myself is to write 4 pages every day of my life, and if I



miss a day or two it's hard to get back into. Sometimes the days drifted into months.

DW: It sounds somewhat like Bob Sheckley's system of getting 1500 words down, no matter what.

FP: Probably so. I don't even try 1500. I do four pages, which is about a thousand. But for the last two years I think I've done just about 4 pages a day. I've fallen off the wagon briefly, but I got back on it quickly.

DW: I've noticed particularly in the first few years of the fifties, every issue of Galaxy seemed to have something new, either a collaboration, or a short story, or a novella, by you.

FP: In fact, I averaged more than one piece an issue. In the first five years of Galaxy, of the sixty issues published, I think I had seventy to seventy-five stories. Some of them were three-part series, but a lot of them were under different names. I think one issue had three different things in it. But a lot of it was pretty short - and that's when I wasn't eating a lot of the time.

DW: They were not paying very good rates, then?

FP: They were paying pretty good rates for science fiction. I was getting four cents a word, which was as high as any science fiction magazine was paying, but I had to do a lot of words at four cents to eat, pay for a house, a wife and four kids. That's what I was doing.

DW: Of course, there weren't the perks in those days of having the things put in book form.

FP: Well, that happened pretty quickly in the fifties. I think it was in the fifties when it began to happen. Nearly everything I wrote that appeared in Galaxy came out in book form fairly soon thereafter.

DW: Did it make it a lot easier for you?

FP: It roughly doubled the income - so instead of getting four cents I was getting eight. If I wrote 5000 words I'd get four hundred dollars in a couple of weeks time. That must have been what it was, because I was averaging about ten thousand dollars a year, nearly. It was not starvation, but not luxury either.

DW: Is there anything you've ever written that you've really regretted?

FP: There's a lot of things I've regretted publishing without re-writing them two or three times. I can say that of about seventy-five per cent of what I've published. But there's nothing I've written which I think should have been stillborn.

DW: You usually kill them off before they get that far?

FP: Yes. Well, that's not really true. There are a number of things I've written on request for some editor, or a magazine, or a person, and I'm not often happy with them. I don't like to write when people ask me to write because I'm not very good at it. I like to think of something and shape it for myself before I show it to anybody or discuss it with them.

DW: Is there anything you've really got a bad feedback on?

FP: No. The worst feedback is none at all. I can't recall anything that's been published on which I've got a lot of bad feedback with people saying 'shame on you for writing this'. But there are a lot of stories and a few books which just drop into a well and are never heard of again. It's pretty painful.

DW: Particularly ones where you've liked the story and put a lot of effort into it.

FP: A story that I've liked a lot, "In The Problem Pit" - which there must have been something wrong with, for which I've had almost no response and which came out six or seven years ago. That was written on request, which may be part of the jinx, I don't know. Ed Ferman, the editor of the magazine, wanted to do a special issue and he asked me if I would write a novella for it. And I wrote that. I would have written it anyhow, if not at that time. I had the theme for the story, which was on my mind. But the worst thing I can do is when somebody says "write me a story about this issue of marijuana" - which I did in fact - and it was a pretty terrible story, and they haven't published it. I think I probably have nothing to say about the future of marijuana - and it shows.

DW: You find you have to be very interested in the subject you're writing on?

FP: Yes, it's better that way. I don't usually write things I'm not interested in - at least, in the beginning. I can get quite interested after working on something for a while. If they don't intrigue me at the beginning, though, it is hard to start.

DW: When you get to that point where you find a story is not working for you, do you then jettison it?

FP: No. I put it aside and let it sit for as long as I can. Until the problem has cleared out of my head, or I can get a point of view on it. I very seldom write anything straight through - which is another reason why writing on order doesn't work for me.

DW: You're better without such limitations?

FP: Well, without any at all, I'd never write. Procrastination is the evil that every writer has to fight all of the time. Writing is the easiest thing in the world to talk yourself out of. You can do it because you're hung-over, because your type-writer ribbon has gone pale... There is no such thing as having 'the time to write' or 'the occasion to write'. Nobody has either of those things - you have to make them for yourself.

DW: Have you had any scientific training?

FP: No, I've had no training of any kind.

DW: Not even in psychology? GATEWAY is a reasonably knowledgeable book in that respect.

FP: As I said before, learning things is part of your craft if you want to be a writer. And when I'm interested in a subject I try to find out all I can about it. Some subjects, after a while, I become saturated with them and I don't want to know anything more about them - which is where I stand with biochemistry. I don't want to hear any more about it.

DW: But psychology seems to be a constant interest...

FP: Yes. I've never reached my saturation point with that. One of the books I was reading last week was a penguin book on psychology. Psychology fascinates me, probably because it is not an exact science, and yet there is something at work there which can be defined and stated and used. And it's an interesting, topical subject. I don't know how much of what Freud and Jung and others wrote relates to reality and how much just keeps psycho-analysts from going on the dole...

DW: How much of it do you believe? There is an instance I picked up in GATEWAY. There's a teddy-talker in there at one stage - where Sigfrid puts on his teddy costume to talk to Robinette - and again, reading 'The Man Who Ate The World', there is a talking teddy.

FP: Actually, I was thinking of 'The Man Who Ate The World' when I wrote it. It seemed to me that when I wrote 'The Man Who Ate The World' - well,

I had small children at the time and they had these stuffed animals which had little acoustic phonograph things in them. You pull the cord and they say "Mama" or "Hungry" or "Byebyes" - and I thought it would be interesting to put a speaker in, with some sort of tape, which it would be quite easy to do. And I'm surprised that toy manufacturers haven't done it. I keep looking to see if it has happened.

DW: Perhaps they haven't found a way to make it marketable yet; to make it economical.

FP: It should be feasible.

DW: The point I was trying to make from that, anyway, is that a common theme of yours is that a character's psychosis is formed by something that happened in early childhood.

FP: I think that's so. I think there are two sources for really severe mental distress. One is physical. You get hit on the head or you get a chemical imbalance - something happens which poisons the brain. And the other, I think, is childhood stress, of one form or another. I don't believe that people are driven to insanity or psychosis or neurosis by things that happen to them when they are adult. And I don't think it's all physical either. I think the psychic stresses do come in childhood. People are very impressionable - young childhood is very plastic. You can imprint the things irrevocably at the age of two, whether they're good or bad. And this is orthodox Freud - part of the area where Freud was right - childhood experience becomes intelligence in the adult, especially when the experience is a frustrating one. The mother isn't there when he wants her, or he's not being fed when he wants to be. Frustration builds up in him.

DW: Yes, it's very evident in GATEWAY, where you have no father figure and the whole crux of it is that he has had this thing done to him as a young child with a thermometer...and it has started some deviation from the norm. Which is pure Freud.

FP: The history of Robinette Broadhead is a composite of about twelve people I know: bits and pieces from each one.

DW: And how much of yourself?

FP: Oh, I'm one of the twelve. And I showed a copy of the book to a friend of mine, who is an analyst, whose name is, in fact, Sigfrid - I named the character after him - and he thought it was pretty good. I'm satisfied with the reasonably balanced profile of a human being, with a tremendous amount of guilt, which is what Broadhead is. In my more literary, refined moments, I refer to GATEWAY as THE SMITHY OF GUILT.

DW: That brings me to the one marked similarity I noticed in the book, which was to Delany's TRITON; Robinette Broadhead is very much like Bron Helstrom.

FP: I hadn't read TRITON until about a year ago.

DW: You seem to have the same sort of interests mixed up in the one character. Was it possibly because you had that much interplay - I know that you were very much involved in Delany's writing.

FP: It's possible. I'm not really aware of the similarities. I suppose they exist - both main characters are unhappy with the way they are and try to change it. But you can say that about most main characters anyhow.

DW: What struck me was that both were only partially aware of what was happening to them, and they both deny the core of their problems until they are forced to face it.

FP: I haven't thought of that. I'll ask Chip if he's ever noticed that.

DW: How much are you concerned with the economic realities in what you're writing?

FP: What sort of economic realities?

DW: Well, in GATEWAY you have this marvellous system for the financing of things. And the idea that things happen as a result of economic pressures rather than anything else.

FP: A long time ago I wrote an essay for a fan magazine called "Money Is The Soul Of The World". And I think that at most human events and considerations can be quantified in terms of money. Nothing is beyond price, or without a price. There is a price placed on human life, and love and everything else. You can describe the value of anything that Humans perceive as worth having in terms of some monetary value. I believe this to be so and I believe that the economic mechanism is interesting in itself - is worth studying. I have not ever found a better system which exists. The market price - with a certain amount of government intervention to keep it from becoming inordinate - ly exploitive - seems to work better than anything else that's been tried.

DW: Have you ever tried exploring that in your stories at all?

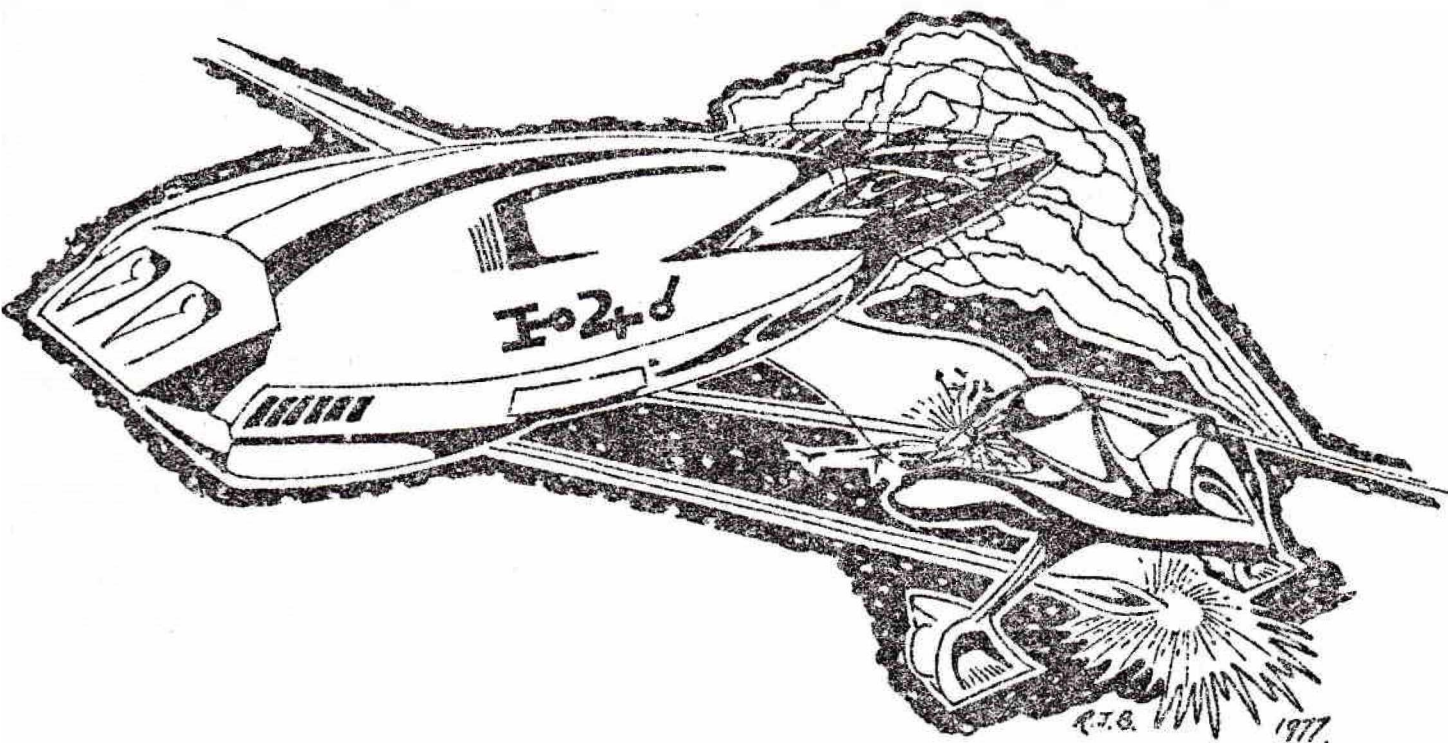
FP: Not as a central theme. But it does occur in a lot of my stories.

DW: In GATEWAY it is very much a 'lever' to get people to do things. A sort of barrier against apathy.

FP: Well, it is one of the major factors which induces people to do things - whether through advertising or through some kind of financial scheme, as in GATEWAY (or whatever). The individual human behaviour interests me a lot. Why people think what they think and do what they do. How it is possible for them to have irreconcilable views and not be aware that they're irreconcilable. I sometimes speak to audiences and feel they respond to something I say. And then another speaker comes up and says the opposite a few minutes later - and I feel they're responding quite positively to both of us. And I wonder what the hell they think they're doing there.

DW: Perhaps responding is a substitute for thinking about something.

FP: That sort of thing is part of the subject of the novel I'm writing now. It's called THE POOL WAR, and it should be finished by the end of the year. It should be published in America about this time next year. That's assuming I've finished it. I've got about half of it written and the rest partly written.



DW: Do you actually sit down and plot out a novel before you start it?

FP: Never. I start with a general concept and a few characters which intrigue me - and start writing about that. As long as I can find something interesting to say about it...when that point is reached where I can no longer think of anything to say, I put the book aside and do something else for a while. At the request of publishers I often have to write some sort of an outline, but I think they understand - all of them - that I don't mean it. It may be what I'm thinking of at the time, but I don't guarantee it'll work out like that. Judy Lynn del Rey is very easy to work with. She doesn't require many outlines...

((Here the lady organist is playing at full volume and singing "Singing In The Rain", obscuring our conversation...))

...he even gave me a contract some years ago with a ten thousand dollar advance because I needed some money. He didn't ask for a title or a subject or anything else - and that turned out to be GATEWAY.

DW: Would you like to do a sequel to that?

FP: Yes. One of the books I'd like to do for Judy Lynn is a sequel to GATEWAY.

DW: There are a lot of aspects of 'Gateway' not explored...

FP: There is also a story before GATEWAY, called "The Merchants of Venus" and I hope - if I live long enough - to see "Merchants of Venus" and GATEWAY and whatever follows, in one big volume.

DW: It has been a fasciation of recent sf - especially award-winning sf - with massive alien artifacts: GATEWAY, RINGWORLD, RAMA...can you explain why it should be so? Is there some sort of need for it?

FP: I don't know. In my case the notion of the asteroid-artifact - a big place where a lot of alien ships are discovered, ready to jump into and fly away in - is something I started to write ten or fifteen years ago. I thought of it as a juvenile novel and after writing about a chapter of it I realised I didn't really want to write a juvenile science fiction novel anyway. And I put it aside and didn't think of it again until two or three years ago when I began to write GATEWAY.

DW: It's a very realistic approach to the artifacts themselves, because they are treated as things there to be analysed, to be exploited and put to use - they are given their price.

FP: Yes, I like GATEWAY. It's my favourite of my own novels, though there are certain novels by other people that I like better.

DW: There's a small piece at the end of your 'Afterword' in the FINAL STAGE anthology where you were choosing your favourite novels, and you said WOLFBANE. Why that book particularly?

FP: Well, of the novels that Cyril and I wrote together, WOLFBANE was the last - and he died just a couple of weeks after finishing and revising it. It's one which had much more inventiveness in it than any of the others. It's not a trendy sort of novel and it's not socially relevant - at least, not in the way that THE SPACE MERCHANTS, for example, was. Maybe for that reason it has not ever received the same sort of attention that THE SPACE MERCHANTS has. I think that it's a neglected child and I like it a lot. There are things in it that I'm glad we wrote about, and that I think they should be explored further. Group consciousness, for example - which was one of the elements in it.

DW: Is that one of your most satisfying collaborations?

FP: They were always very satisfying. We worked together very well.

DW: Were there no strict demarcations between you?

FP: No, no. We did it all together. We flipped a coin to decide who started - the loser would write the first four pages and the other would write the next four and keep on doing that until the book was finished. We didn't plot in advance. We would talk about characters and study the general areas we were interested in - and sometimes make a change...

DW: It sounds a very different system to the one you used with Lester del Rey.

FP: With Lester del Rey the system broke down completely. Lester's a dear man, but I will never write another word with him. And he feels even more strongly about it than I do. Jack Williamson and I have written quite a bit together and have another novel in progress - done in a quite different way. Jack wrote the complete first draft.

DW: Yes, I notice you now have the Starchild Trilogy out in a single paperback volume. But what draws you to collaborate, and why?

FP: I think it's insecurity at first. When I first started writing I was not at all confident in all that I was doing. It is comfortable for young writers to have somebody share their feelings of inadequacy. Most of the younger writers I know, in circumstances where it was possible, did try to collaborate.

DW: It's quite an impressive list of names, your collaborations.

FP: I've forgotten who they all were. I collaborated on many books that were not science fiction, on the media for example, and under various names.

DW: Do you still find yourself studying the television media - particularly the advertising aspect?

FP: I'm still interested in it. It hasn't done anything very unusual in the last ten years, it just goes on doing the same thing.

DW: Have you seen any of the British advertising while you've been over here?

FP: Yes, and I think that it's very similar to American.

DW: I've had the view expressed to me before now that the accent is very much more on subtle humour here. Perhaps it's a more insidious way of advertising.

FP: There may be a quantitative difference. But some of the most successful television commercials have been comic. There is a series in America now of radio commercials for TIME magazine. I'm not sure that they sell TIME magazine, but they're very funny. I'm not sure that the comic commercial in America really did very much for the products they were advertising.

DW: Are they losing their edge?

FP: They become interesting in themselves and that's not really how you sell things. You need to make people somewhat irritable and tense and have the feeling they've got to have what you're selling.

DW: In THOSE WHO CAN - which I refer to quite often, almost as a text book - in your piece, 'Velocity Exercises' you wrote, "writing is a profession without a jargon, without a specific vocabulary".

FP: Without a mutually comprehensible one. People don't know what other people are talking about when they discuss writing. Betty teaches it ((Betty Hull, Executive Secretary of World SF)) - there's an academic vocabulary for writing - but most writers don't use it. Most writers are inarticulate on the subject of what it is they're doing.

DW: Do you feel that could be so because a writer's real job is to synthesise a lot of different, eclectic experiences and merge them into their own vision of what life is?

FP: I think that may well be, David.

DW: Some writers like Joe Haldeman do have academic training and in fact benefit from it.

FP: I'm not debating whether the training is any good, I'm only discussing whether writers talk in the same terms as academics do - and they don't. Joe is corruptive because he's a teacher too. He taught creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. But I think the reason why writers don't have a satisfactory vocabulary is that they don't talk to people about what they're doing. They do it. Writing is a solitary vice.

DW: So what good are writers' workshops then?

FP: Well, they're useful. They provide reinforcement. They provide the example of other people who are in as much trouble as you are. And they often lead to useful contacts with editors and agents and other writers who can do something for you.

DW: So they do very little for your writing, but a lot for your confidence.

FP: I don't think they do very much for your writing. I'm sure that..I know that in many cases they harm people's writing.

DW: You say 'harm'; is it by canalising their thoughts in certain directions - their methods in various directions.

FP: By making them self-conscious about what they're doing.

DW: Do you think it should be a very unself-conscious process, then?

FP: No, it can't be. But after a certain point the 'subconscious' becomes paralysing. Writing is a self-conscious thing anyway - you sit and try to think about something to put on paper and roam around inside your head, seeking information. And you're always observing yourself as you do it, because a writer himself is his best model - the only person he knows really well. To make it more self-conscious than that is getting close to the point where you can't do anything at all. It's hard for a writer to please himself. It's twice as hard to please both himself and an editor. If, at the same time, he's trying to please twenty-seven other people in the same writers' workshop as himself, it's impossible.

DW: So in that way they're damaging?

FP: In that way they're damaging. In other ways too. In some ways they're very good. Sharing pain minimises it. The pain of writing is real.

DW: It sounds almost like Group Therapy, the way you describe it.

FP: Milford is a lot like Group Therapy. Milford is a writers' conference where you sit around in a circle and all these terrible people destroy you: and you're not allowed to respond. And people come away crying or shattered.

DW: Is that still very much a live thing?

FP: I haven't been to a Milford conference for several years and I think they may be dwindling. I think the attendance may be going down and certainly they're not playing anything as important a part in the society of science fiction as they were. They were, for some years, the place where writers got together.

DW: I don't know whether you've heard about it, but there is a 'Milford' now in England.

FP: Oh yes, Jim Blish started it. I haven't ever been to that. It's extremely useful to get criticism of your work, but it's necessary to buffer it with some sort of insulation. It tends to hit you too hard - it can be very destructive. But a perceptive remark about your work can be a great insight and lead you to do things that you would otherwise not do. And also lead you to realise that you've been doing things wrong - even though you've

been published and doing them there - you suddenly perceive that nevertheless there's a basic flaw you haven't known about which could hurt you. Several writers I know stopped writing for longer or shorter periods after exposure to Milford. Maybe they became better writers in the long run, but I'm not sure that's so.

DW: Do you find that even if you've published fifteen novels and you're the top professional in your field you still find that sense of insecurity when you put the first few words down on the page?

FP: I find a great deal of insecurity - I'm never really sure that I'm doing the right thing. Any letter I type means that I've eliminated twenty-five others - because any of those twenty-five could be better, and there is no 'right' way to form a sentence, describe a character. You're only approximating an ideal vision to begin with. Something inside you knows what should come out but you can't ever do it quite that way.

DW: Do you ever find yourself, like Proust, sitting down and looking at a cup of tea and saying, 'this all springs from that'?

FP: More often a cup of coffee than a cup of tea. But I find myself bumming around, staring into space, sitting at my typewriter and wishing I were dead...now and then...

DW: You say you had a very bad period before you started writing again, round about when you were fifty. Was that (as you say it was) some kind of male menopause?

FP: Probably. Something like that. I was about fifty-one, I think.

DW: But do you think that was necessary so that you could become a different kind of writer?

FP: I don't know what's necessary. I know that it happened. It's hard to diagnose in retrospect whether I could have avoided it or not. But I'm not unhappy about it. I didn't. Very few things that happen to a writer are a total loss. Almost everything a writer does suggests something he can write, or provides insights into something he writes, gives him a reason to write.

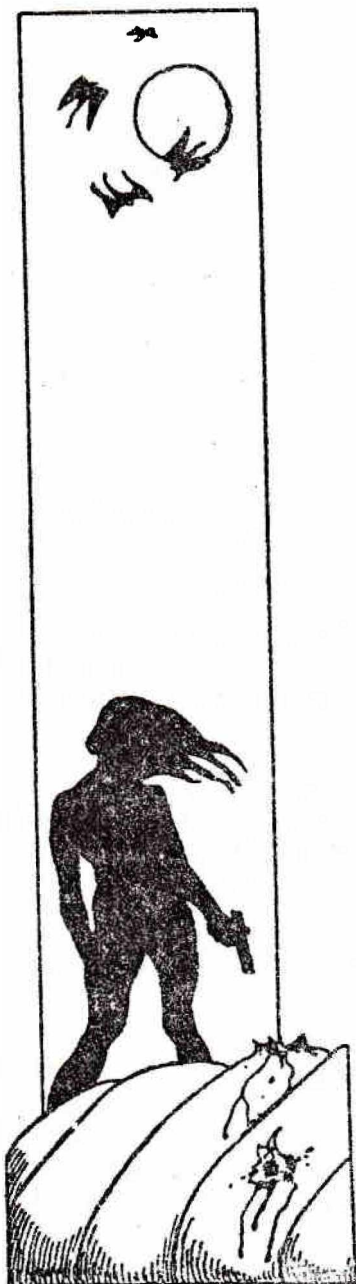
DW: Do you still find yourself plagued by startling revelations when you wake in the morning?

FP: Sometimes, yes. Sometimes the world seems a different shape when I haven't expected it. I guess that's disconcerting, but I guess I like it that way. I'd rather have the world change, even if it means going through bad periods.

DW: Your world hasn't changed that much - apart from your own personality...

FP: Well, you take whichever side you like, David, and I'll argue the other. In fundamental ways it has changed a great deal. Not in principle, but in application. Things happen more rapidly and on a larger scale; and those are significant changes.

DW: You said that in the thirties you could look out of a window and dislike what you saw, and therefore a lot of people were going into sf as an escapist thing. Is that still true?



FP: I think it's still true now. We're looking at a different sort of world that's not attractive for somewhat other reasons.

DW: Even if the alternatives offered are rather dystopic?

FP: Yes.

DW: The atmosphere I got from the part of "Ragged Claws" where you were describing the Futurians and fandom was of that era - between the Great Depression and the War - that to me has the same sort of atmosphere as is expressed in quite a lot of people's attitudes to the age we're in now. Between the Cold War and Armageddon, almost.

FP: If anyone looks seriously at the world around him, he's got to be depressed. And when something is obviously wrong with the world around him he's compelled to feel that. And in periods when something is going wrong - in the thirties it was the Great Depression, when the economic system had obviously broken down - and now when all sorts of things have gone wrong. The things that were once considered good have turned out to be evil. Public health has meant over-population. The increased ability to travel and generally do things has meant impoverishing the environment and so on... People must sit back and look at it and obviously give it their attention. And once you start this process of introspection you become unhappy with the world. You start looking for alternatives. Or so I think. Right now, things are going beautifully, as in the early 60's - nothing seemed to be going wrong at the moment very badly - there was not the need to sit back and examine the world. People were quite content to do their own thing and assume the world would manage for itself.

((End of the first side of the tape))

DW: In "On Velocity Exercises" you mention about the three-worder, the final, illuminating insight to the story. You've hit somebody with dense impressions throughout the story and there's the three-worder at the end which doesn't so much twist it as make sense of it. And I thought very much that the end of GATEWAY has one of these with the Robot Sigfrid's final words - he puts a whole new dimension on the book by saying "Yes. It is exactly what I call living. And...I envy it very much."

FP: That's exactly what I meant to do, thank you.

DW: Do you try to achieve that a lot, and deliberately?

FP: I don't try to set it out in a novel, but if I perceive, as I'm writing the novel, that there's an opportunity to do something like that, then, if I find I can, I do. I'm not very good at writing novels when I know the end before I begin them. The one novel that I ever wrote and published where I knew the last scene before I put the first word on paper was SLAVESHIP, which I've always considered the least successful novel.

DW: It's one of the most difficult to get hold of in England, as well.

FP: If I had the putzpan of Arthur Clarke I would withdraw the book and re-write it as he did with AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT.

DW: You didn't like the ending of SLAVESHIP?

FP: It made it difficult for me to write the book. The book doesn't succeed - the ending's alright. Actually, the ending's not much good either, now that I think of it. It just doesn't fit the book.

DW: Which new writers impress you?

FP: What do you call a new writer?

DW: Published in the seventies. If I throw a few names at you like John Varley, Michael Bishop, Lisa Tuttle...

FP: John Varley impresses me a lot. Lisa Tuttle I haven't read very much of.

DW: I've found her probably the most impressive.

FP: I've heard very good things about her but I haven't read many of her stories. Michael Bishop's good. George R. R. Martin, I think, is excellent. He's great, and getting better all the time. Varley I enjoy a lot. I've just - fairly recently - read his first novel, THE OPHIUCHI HOTLINE.

DW: Yes, a lot of people have said that it's more than a hundred pages too long.

FP: Oh, I don't think so. It has faults. I think the fault maybe goes the other way in that there's too much happening in it, and he hasn't started out quite clearly enough and he isn't really letting himself feel quite what would happen under the circumstances he describes. But there's a lot of brilliant invention in it. He writes quickly and well.

DW: He's also been criticised for his lack of 'poetry' and his - if not inept writing style - tendency to force images rather than letting them occur naturally. Is that just a standard fault of a new writer? Or is that a writer trying too hard?

FP: New writers in general are all different. Some writers seem to be born full form and write beautifully from their first word. Arthur Clarke's first story, 'Rescue Party', I still think of as one of his best. There's nothing wrong with the story - it's got all the parts put together properly and it does everything a story should do. I was not so fortunate: my first forty stories were, well, the best of them are 'fair', the worst of them I don't need to discuss...

DW: You found you had to work hard at it?

FP: Yes. I had some wrong attitudes towards writing. I didn't really know anything about 'writing' - I just wanted to be a writer. I thought there was some great secret one could learn.

DW: It's a very different attitude, isn't it? The difference between wanting to be 'a writer' and 'wanting to write'.

FP: Most people want to be writers.

DW: But you found you wanted to write, and so changed direction?

FP: That's it. I wanted to communicate. I just didn't want to get published - I wanted to say something that was worth saying, and feel proud of it afterwards.

DW: It's more satisfying?

FP: Well, it's a demeaning experience to realise that you've published a couple of dozen stories and none of them are anything you would personally care to read.

DW: But when you think of cases, and Bob Silverberg is obviously the classic example, where a writer has taken this decision after publishing a hell of a lot of stuff and said "I'm not doing it right". But to understand that after four years of writing..well, I should think it took a lot of work.

FP: Bob is about to write a novel again. He has an outline around, which was in the Bantam office this week. As I'm trying not to get involved in any future projects I resisted the temptation to read it. But many writers reach a point at which what they have written suddenly seems pretty bad to them, and they're not quite sure what to do about it. Partly I think it's because as writers grow the creative process and the critical faculty don't mature at the same rate. Sometimes their tastes improve more rapidly than their ability to produce something that satisfies them. And that's paralysing too. There are many ways a writer can be paralysed.

DW: You said that in the thirties it was very easy for the amateur to get published. Do you think that it's a good thing that it's now not so easy to

get published: that writers have to struggle for a few years before they get their first few stories published? They've got to hold down a steady job.

FP: I don't think it's that hard to get published now. It's certainly much more easy to get published with substantial works, with a novel, than it ever was before. There are very few halfway-decent science fiction novels around which are not in print. Of course, I think that has also produced a lot of good work because unless it's real easy to get published it's much too discouraging to try, and some people might have given up after several years who might have turned out to be good writers.

DW: How much of it is good, though? How much of the science fiction being produced is good?

FP: Sturgeon's Law. Ninety per-cent of everything is crap. Ninety per-cent of science fiction is crap. But the ten per-cent is very good. There are a lot of stories that I like. Don't ask me to name them, because I'll just make enemies if I do. I've read at least a dozen stories recently and only one, the James Hogan novel, THE GENESIS MACHINE, was pretty good stuff.

DW: I don't think very much of his work has been published over here.

FP: Well, there have only been two novels anywhere, as far as I know, THE GENESIS MACHINE and INHERIT THE STARS. But, speaking of new writers, he impresses me. He writes the kind of science fiction that is organically different from other kinds of writing - where you need not understand what the man is saying but be able to extrapolate beyond it for yourself what would happen. He's not just reporting technology, he's inventing a whole new field of science in THE GENESIS MACHINE - a theory that is attractive as Relativity. It probably isn't real and it probably doesn't describe the Universe, but it could. Science fiction. About physical science.

DW: Very little of science fiction these days is actually about science. In fact, science seems to have become so complex that it's been often said that the only true science fiction is to be found in the scientific journals where people are trying out their theories on other scientists. How can a science fiction writer keep up with that? You personally obviously read a fair number of such books, because you're interested, but can a science fiction writer be a true synthesist of the sciences?

FP: I think it's possible to understand the general thrust of what's happening in science. All of it. And I don't really think it's that difficult. But if one makes work of it, if one assumes that it is a job that has to be done in order to be able to extract something from it to put into a novel, then it's pretty dull drudgery, and I don't see why anybody would do it.

DW: Early on with Bantam Books you seem to have adopted a positive policy that you would publish of that was really very peripheral science fiction; things like Delany's DHALGREN.

FP: I don't think that was my 'policy'...

DW: Perhaps it was only because of the books that appeared in Britain - THE FEMALE MAN was another example.

FP: Well, I never really had an editorial policy in the sense that there were certain sorts of story that I would not publish or other sorts that I wanted to publish. I think that the kinds of editor I've most admired have tried to evaluate what they've published in other ways; not in terms of whether it fits a pattern, but whether it's good of whatever it is.

DW: Even if they don't like the actual drift of the book?

FP: Well, it's hard for me to publish anything successfully that I don't like, and I've never really tried. The only thing that I did get involved with at Bantam and did very poorly at was handling their Star Trek books,

because I don't really care much about Star Trek. It's passable television - sometimes good television. In printed form it does not compare with any average science fiction magazine, it's not as inventive nor as interesting, I think. And I got out of that early because I was doing it very badly: since I wasn't particularly interested I didn't seem to know how to be able to do it properly. So I almost never published anything that I didn't like pretty well. And I like all sorts of things - I like DHALGREN and I like Hogan and I like Varley.

DW: DHALGREN received a very hostile reception over here; I suppose it had the same in the States, as well.

FP: It got a very mixed reception in the States. There were two or three reviews that I thought were quite perceptive. The one that I thought most on target was a radio critic in Washington, whose name I don't recall, who said that when a writer like Delany writes something as difficult as DHALGREN, it isn't Delany's responsibility to make his piece clear, it's the reader's responsibility to suss it out and figure out what he's talking about.

DW: I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed DHALGREN and had finished it within seven days of buying it.

FP: You finished it? Read it all the way through? You and I are among the very few people who finished it. I've read it three times. It impresses me. Delany impresses me a great deal as a writer, and DHALGREN is his master work. I think he spent more time on it than any other thing he wrote.

DW: Yes. I believe he wrote it over five years. Did you see much of the development of DHALGREN, or did he deliver it as a package to you?

FP: Well, I had seen a very, very early stage of DHALGREN years before when I was still editing Galaxy and rejected the part. There was no way I could use it, especially as a fragment. I've forgotten which fragment it was, but it was by no stretch of the imagination science fiction. And so I did have that exposure to it. But apart from that, when he delivered it was essentially when it was published. He did make a few changes later on, and as a matter of fact he still is. Every time Chip wakes up in the morning and knocks a copy of DHALGREN off his bedside table it falls open to a page where he finds something wrong and he asks us to re-set it. I think we've re-set six times now.

DW: He tells a beautiful story about the arch and the architrave from the novel, THE JEWELS OF APTOR. I don't know which editor it was who changed that ... it wasn't you?

FP: It wasn't me.

DW: Anyway, he changed the word from architrave to arch, and Delany was screaming when he heard. He immediately told the editor that a bird can't sit on an arch because it would drop off. It may sound pedantic, but I agree with him. It is the only way to approach a book.

FP: Chip is extremely conscientious about his choice of words and punctuation, and should be respected because he knows what he wants to do. Many writers don't and are very arbitrary about how they punctuate or spell. Chip can't spell, but he finds someone who can spell for him.

DW: It's possibly the reason why he writes so conscientiously. Another thing I appreciated, actually, in the edition of TRITON, were the two essays at the end. It's very rarely that you see a writer finishing his novel and then having two discussional pieces about its nature.

FP: One of them is catastrophe theory and unfortunately catastrophe theory doesn't seem to be working. You don't hear very much about it any more.

((Which, through interruptions, ends the discussion...))



the best of
hamilton and brackett

brian stableford

Edmond Hamilton died on February 1st 1977 at the age of 72. His wife, Leigh Brackett, died little more than a year later, on March 18th 1978. She was 62. Both made their reputations writing science fiction for the pulp magazines. Hamilton began publishing in 1926 and was one of the most prolific contributors to the early sf pulps and to Weird Tales , his work typifying in many respects the kind of writing that emerged to supply the nascent genre. Brackett, in contrast, was most prolific in the period 1948-1955 - the period which saw the death of the pulps - and her work is redolent with a kind of nostalgia for the exotic that reflects the decline of a way of writing and a way of dreaming. Both writers, of course, adapted to the new regime of digest magazines and paperback books, but both remained irredeemably associated in the minds of the reading public with the pulps.

The sf pulps lasted barely thirty years - more than a generation but considerably less than a lifetime. In the post-war period a host of new sf writers emerged who had had little or nothing to do with the pulps, but the great majority of the pulp writers were still alive, and with a substantial amount of writing still in them. Most had been in their teens or twenties when Amazing Stories was founded (Hamilton was 21, Brackett 10) and it is only in the present decade that their three-score-years-and-ten is running out. As a generation, they are dying now. Campbell's generation, who were recruited to the cause of Astounding Stories in 1938-40, are still, for the most part, alive, but they were not only of a different time but of a different type. They were never pulp writers first and foremost in the sense that the older generation was, for their first loyalty was to the Campbellian manifesto for sf (which is not to say that Astounding never published pure pulp adventure fiction, and certainly not to say that the older generation could write nothing but.)

Though Leigh Brackett made her first appearance in Astounding ("Martian Quest" in 1940) she is principally associated with the school of pulp writing which survived alongside it in Startling Stories , Thrilling Wonder Stories and Planet Stories . Hamilton published only one story in Astounding after Campbell assumed control ("The Ephemeræ" in 1938) and he, too, was to give his principle allegiance to the sf adventure pulps, most prolifically to the sf hero-pulp Captain Future .

It is fashionable today to regret exactly the aspects of the history of sf as a publishing category that Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett exemplify: its founding as a pulp brand-name and its survival as such in harness with the more serious quest of Campbell's Astounding . It has become a cliché to speak of this developing pulp category as a "ghetto" whose memory will stigmatize modern science fiction even unto the fifth generation and perhaps forever. Modern writers, for the most part, feel that science fiction is so injured in its cultural reputation that it cannot support them in the manner to which they would dearly like to become accustomed - not so much in terms of money (there is a good number of nouveau riche sf writers) but in terms of prestige and social respectability. It is therefore commonplace - and

practically de rigueur - in today's sf community to speak of the writers who made their home in the pulps sometimes with embarrassment, always with condescension, and once in a while with dismissive vituperation. By the standards that most contemporary sf writers would like to apply to their work, pulp fiction was bad, and where its methods and conventions are still echoed there is a situation to be deplored. There are many young readers who can still enjoy it, and some old ones who can glean from renewal of acquaintance with it an echo of their adolescent imaginative virility, but otherwise it has few friends. For these reasons the welcome which has been given to Ballantine/del Rey's issuing of The Best of Edmond Hamilton and The Best of Leigh Brackett has been rather cautious, despite the sentiment aroused by the recent deaths of the writers.

It is, of course, heresy to suggest that our present criteria for judging whether fiction is good or bad are only one set out of very many. Like all commonly-held value-judgements they have the force of moral authority, which owes its power to the unthinkability which it attributes to alternatives. Commonly-held value-judgements always acquire a spurious gloss of "objectivity" and "rationality" in condemning their competitors to the realms of irrationality, stupidity, moral reprehensibility and childishness by habitual accusation. One consequence of this is that few people today would take the trouble to ask what there is in the work of Edmond Hamilton that made it special by the standards of assessment that its target audience used, or what there is in Leigh Brackett's exotic romances that make them exceptional among their own kind. Such questions seem to the majority to be pointless and redundant. In all probability, only someone well-known for the churlish espousal of heretical views would bother to pursue these questions, and to do so without apology.

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Reading through The Best of Edmond Hamilton, which contains stories published over a span of 42 years, the aspect of Hamilton's writing which seems most striking is its directness - a kind of calculated and unrepentant naivety. One exception to this is the first story in the book, "The Monster-God of Mamurth" (1926), which is both a pastiche and one which adopts a familiar wierd-story convention, the traveller's tale. It has a gloss of attempted sophistication - its prose is geared to effect, the effect being the evocation of a sense of mystery and fear of the unknown, associating the strange and distant places of the Earth with a lingering, supernatural hostility banished from more familiar milieux. This kind of mood-building is what H. P. Lovecraft claimed to be the only possible function - and hence the only commendable purpose - of a fantastic story, and "The Monster-God of Mamurth" shows the concern with technique and tactics that was common to all the writers archetypal of Wierd Tales. Lovecraft had little time for the sf pulps, though some of his stories appeared there, and he considered most of their fiction to be afflicted by a hopeless crudity and misdirection of imaginative effort.

The next story in The Best Of Edmond Hamilton, "The Man Who Evolved" (1931) exemplifies in many ways the tendencies to which he objected: it is unconcerned with techniques of presentation which intrude marvels gently into the perception of the reader, or with the tactics of mood-building.

Basically, "The Man Who Evolved" is a pseudo-journalistic account of the transformations undergone by a mad scientist bathing in the radiation of a machine which allows him to undergo ontogenically the entire course of future phylogenetic evolution (applying Haeckel's law in reverse, as it were). This too is a horror story, if we are to believe the narrator, who recounts his emotions in much the same tortured terms as are used by the unfortunate protagonist of "The Monster-God of Mamurth", but it is clearly

of a different species.

The Wierd Tales story takes place in a remote wilderness, mostly in darkness or twilight, its menace invisible, sensed but never clearly seen. It is essentially an appeal to the vague sense of unease that we all feel when our familiar environments are cloaked by darkness and we cannot fully trust our senses. "The Man Who Evolved", by contrast, belongs to Wonder Stories. It is here and now, witnessed by ordinary men making full use of their faculties with the aid of glaring electric light. Its miracle, too, is electric-powered. In no way does it attempt to woo the ill-formed fears already present in the mind in intimate connection with certain images or ideas, but it is by contrast determinedly innovative, offering a direct challenge to the imagination by attacking it not at its weakest and most vulnerable but in its normal state of invulnerable self-confidence. The method of attack is both blunt and exaggerated, aimed at an audience predominantly young and almost wholly unawakened to the kind of possibility with which it attempts to startle the minds of its readers. Here Hamilton is not attempting to deal with imaginative faculties that can be teased or gently provoked to use visionary responses already well-tutored, but with faculties which have not been accustomed to the notion involved, and which are therefore vulnerable to shock tactics.

We see this method repeated throughout the earlier stories in this collection. Even the later Wierd Tales stories attempt to capitalise on this deliberate bluntness rather than mimicking the strategies of traditional ghost stories or the gradually-building paranoia which is Lovecraft's hallmark. Hamilton believed in a direct approach to the biggest and most outrageous ideas, and this simple belief paid off. Even a story like "Thundering Worlds" (1934), which features the preposterous notion of the nine planets setting off in convoy to escape the death of the sun and to fight for possession of a new sun, has a confidence that is appealing. "The Accursed Galaxy" (1935) features the absurd premise that the reason the universe seems to us to be expanding is that all the other galaxies are fleeing from ours because it is infected with the 'disease' of life, but it demonstrates that absurdity is not necessarily a bad thing. Absurdity presents a challenge to reason by its very nature, and thus, if it can be entertained for even a moment, offers the potential of expanding the horizons of the imagination. This is the effect Hamilton always aimed at, and often succeeded in achieving.

Science Fiction, essentially, deals with the unreal, and all of its subject matter is to the truly mundane thinker absurd. It co-opts its disciples and its apologists by presenting its absurdities in such a way as to cloak their offensiveness, to excuse them and to conceal them behind a mask of jargon which - because of the power which jargon has in our scientifically re-mystified world - gives them spurious plausibility. It pretends that its adventures among ideas might be real, might be possible, and thus makes us hesitate long enough for the absurdities to have their effect and unsettle our certainty. It is, of course, the pretence that is important insofar as sf functions as an affective medium of communication, not any actual fidelity to the supposed bounds of possibility. The importance of this pretence results in a tension between two conflicting demands: on the one hand the demand for a good disguise, an expert masquerade by which the impossible dons the raiment of the conceivable; and on the other hand the demand for mind-opening extravagance, that ever-more-exciting impossibilities should be so excused and infiltrated. These two demands are in conflict precisely because the best and most wholly convincing disguises are those which need to make only the most subtle amendments to conceivability. The further one goes in pursuit of the second demand, the less possible it becomes to produce a mask which will stand up to close scrutiny. There are two possible answers to this dilemma: stay in those imaginative realms which

lend themselves readily to the masquerade; or exchange subtlety for deliberate and flamboyant overstatement, creating by boldness of suggestion a disguise adequate only to the moment, or perhaps only a token capitulation to the very demand for disguise, so that in a brief moment of deception in which the reader may voluntarily conspire, the task of surprising the imagination may be accomplished.

Hamilton, of course, has always preferred the latter alternative in his effective work. He parades his ideas starkly, cutting straight to the heart of his material without pause or apology. These are tactics which cannot always work, but they are tactics which often do work, and whose workability depends on their straightforwardness and their uncompromising frankness. They deceive only momentarily because of their obviousness - like lies which are quite transparent but which nevertheless make us hesitate because of the confidence and the sincerity with which they are offered. (We have, in today's world, become connoisseurs of the other kind of lie, which deceives by camouflage, making itself hardly distinguishable from truth, and it is hardly surprising that we prefer fiction of the same kind. We have come to feel that to hesitate momentarily in the face of a bold lie is somehow to be made a fool, and we are inclined to feel ashamed of it. We laugh at the earnest Churchmen who wanted to send missionaries to More's Utopia, and find, with Alice, little sympathy for a chessman who could believe two or three impossible things before breakfast every day.)

Pulp sf, by and large, traded almost exclusively on shock tactics like Hamilton's. It was this trade in mind-opening impossibilities which distinguished it from other brands of pulp fiction, and made it something more than a new and bizarre variety of costume melodrama. As a literary strategy it was very much a blunt instrument, but it worked, in its way. Hamilton became exceptional among pulp writers, and a favourite of sf fans, simply because he told bigger lies than most in a fashion more barefaced than any. Ideatively he was not as prolific as Jack Williamson or as brash as Edward E. Smith and John Campbell, but he was the most open, and hence the most accessible, of all.

Because of its open-ness and deliberate simplicity Hamilton's work is often close to fable. His treatment of archetypal sf themes in "The Island of Unreason" (1933), "Fessenden's Worlds" (1937) and "Day of Judgement" (1946) are possessed of the innocent panache of the fabulist, each with a moral presented a little too blandly for sophisticated literary taste. Hamilton wrote a whole series of such stories, extending from "A Conquest of Two Worlds" (1932) to "After a Judgement Day" (1963). (There are several notable examples not included in this collection, notably "Sacrifice Hit" (1954), "Sunfire!" (1962) and "The Stars My Brothers" (1962).)

The second aspect of Hamilton's writing revealed quite clearly here is in some ways a surprising one, for it calls into question one of the myths regarding pulp sf. Fans who look back to a Golden Age when Hamilton and kindred spirits were supreme among the writers of pulp sf complain of today's sf that it is too often downbeat - preoccupied with the intense conviction of the limits of human capability. But Hamilton, at his most impressive, is constantly and almost obsessively concerned with mortality and the vanity of human wishes. "The Man Who Evolved", "In The World's Dusk" (1936) and "The Accursed Galaxy" are all frontal attacks on human self-glorification. "The Man Who Returned" (1935) - a Wierd Tales story about a man returned from the grave to find himself very unwelcome in the land of the living - is conscientiously cynical. "He That Hath Wings" (1938), about a child born with wings whose attempt to adjust to humankind is not only unsuccessful but also puts paid to his chances of being successfully different, shows a marked pessimism about the human condition which accepts no compromise.

It is true that if we take Hamilton's total wordage into account this lack of confidence in the human spirit shows through only occasionally, perpetually stifled in his longer works in favour of grandiose plotting and fast-paced action, but much of that fiction was no sooner read than forgotten, and in the novels which survive as being memorable - The Star Of Life (1947), The Valley Of Creation (1948) and The City At World's End (1950) - there is at least an echo of the same feeling. The one major exception is The Star Kings (1947), which is the second of Hamilton's three attempts to co-opt the plot of The Prisoner Of Zenda into space opera, and which represents a romantic self-indulgence not altogether typical of his work. In his stories of the fifties and sixties the anti-romantic streak in Hamilton became more and more prominent. It may have appeared much earlier had the original version of "What's It Like Out There?" (1952) been published when written in 1933, but once liberated it found adequate expression. Perhaps the best of all the stories Hamilton ever wrote is "The Pro" (1964), whose authenticity seems guaranteed by its sincerity in the matter of a science fiction writer's realisation of the gulf between the romantic aspects of his work and the reality of the conquest of space. The tension between pessimism and romanticism is nowhere better represented than in the story "Requiem" (1962), about the man who ferries tourists and sensation-seekers to watch the death of Earth.

It would be easy enough to see in Hamilton a writer of two personas, one of which committed merry genocide against dozens of loathsome alien invaders of Earth while the other wrote "The Conquest of Two Worlds", one of which delighted in extravagant and lush interplanetary romances while the other wrote "What's It Like Out There?". It is easy, too, to say the same thing about his contemporaries, for Don A Stuart seemed a very different writer from John W. Campbell jr., and the Jack Williamson who wrote The Legion Of Space and The Legion Of Time is not quite the man who wrote "Star Bright" (1939) and "The Crucible of Power" (1939). This would, however, be something of a misrepresentation, for the deliberate indulgence in romanticism is usually correlated with a sobre cynicism, leaning towards pessimism, relative to the real world and its prospects. An enthusiasm for the vast and distant and for working on the fringes of imaginability is very often the corollary of a disappointment with and a more-or-less vague distaste for the immediate and the ordinary which can easily find expression in a more desolate vision of derelict futures. Pulp sf, unlike other pulp genres, has always had an uneasy affair with images of contemporary man and his world - and especially his cherished values and prejudices - coming to grief. This is evident even in Hamilton's work of the early pulp days, despite its ideative exuberance and its lust for unsubtle excitement, and it comes to dominate the work which he did for the pulps in their twilight. It is thus not surprising to find that in Leigh Brackett's work, which is virtually archetypal of the senescence of the pulp sf tradition, it has its equivalent, and that that equivalent is very much the heart of her work.

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The Best of Edmond Hamilton contains 21 stories, and follows the usual pattern of avoiding long novellettes in favour of short stories. The Best of Leigh Brackett, in contrast, contains only 10 stories (despite being 40pp. longer). Brackett's good work was virtually all done in the range from 10,000-45,000 words - her better novels are her shorter ones, The Sword Of Rhiannon (originally "Sea Kings Of Mars"), Shadow Over Mars (also known as The Nemesis From Terra), The Secret Of Sinharat (originally "Queen Of The Martian Catacombs") and People Of The Talisman (originally "Black Amazon Of Mars"). Those which were expanded for book publication (all save the second) gained little in the padding.

Brackett ~~once left~~ a story incomplete to be finished by Ray Bradbury, and though she and Bradbury now stand poles apart in the matter of their literary reputations, they have in common between them that they worked out the post-Burroughsian image of mythical Mars. Both used the tension which existed between Burroughs' fantasy Mars and the astronomical evidence which had eroded Lowell's speculations and brought the fantasy under sentence of death. Burroughs himself saw Mars as a decadent planet, already ancient, its life ebbing slowly away. Both Brackett and Bradbury accentuated that image, producing a Mars more ancient, more decadent, facing oblivion. In this they were right, for mythical Mars was, indeed, on the brink of death as the slender thread of hopeful possibility was severed forever by the march of twentieth century knowledge. The Martian Chronicles is already securely established as a period piece and Brackett, when she returned for the second time from scripting films to writing sf in the seventies was forced to forsake the milieux which had made her early reputation. (The folly of trying to trade on nostalgia alone is amply demonstrated by Lin Carter's sadly incongruous Brackett pastiches.)

Not all of Brackett's novellettes are set on Mars, but her fantasy Venus and her fantasy Mercury are simple linear extensions of Martian mythology. The names vary little in tone, and though the landscapes participate in different exotic features the same sense of eroded environment and planetary senescence is everpresent, because it is essential.

In his introduction to The Best Of Leigh Brackett her husband identifies a "favourite and recurring theme" in her work, which he describes as "the theme of a strong man's quest for a dream and of his final failure when it turns to smoke and ashes in his hand...her heroes seek for something they can never quite attain, yet their failure is not really defeat." This is accurate in its way, but misleading in its emphasis. It misses the point, which is that Brackett's stories carry a consistent moral: that the pursuit of dreams is ultimately and essentially a pointless pursuit, for even when they are caught they are illusions that can only deceive. Brackett is constantly fascinated by the allure of the exotic, and becomes fascinating in her own work through her dedicated attempt to represent that allure, but she is also constantly suspicious of its temptations and always certain that victory lies not in capturing dreams but in having the courage to turn back once having caught them.

In "The Jewel of Bas" (1944) the immortal Bas lives alone in his dream while his android creations work to destroy him. When awakened to counter the menace and to free the slaves which his androids have assembled he does what he must and then returns to his eternal dream, but the human characters of the story are convinced that they have the better deal in life and mortality.

In "The Veil of Astellar" (1944) a man made immortal by alien invaders lures spaceships to their doom so that he and his kind can prey upon the life-force of their passengers. But when he finds one of his own descendants aboard a captured ship he revolts against his endless and unnatural dream-life and destroys himself and his masters.

In "The Moon That Vanished" (1948) three humans sail into the moonfire, where any man can create his own reality and live in a substantial dream-world where he is effectively a god, but two choose to return because the very wholeness of the illusion renders it worthless. This is perhaps the best (and most fevered) story in the book, displaying the fight against temptation at its most desperate. The hero does not achieve his dream, but he wins his fight to forsake it, and that is the important thing. The same thing happens in countless other Brackett stories, though not quite so overtly. In other stories in this collection there is also a reversal of the

pattern, when men in mundane settings find their lives invaded by alien visions, and these show the other side of the coin, for while the heroes that live on fantasy Mars have the strength to overcome its attractions, men whose everyday lives are ordinary find the allure far less irresistible. The heroes of "The Woman From Altair" (1951), "The Tweener" (1954) and "The Queer Ones" (1956) do manage to resist successfully, but there is no real victory in their resistance, but rather a heavy sense of irony.

Brackett was perhaps the gaudiest of all the sf pulp writers, and at times her purple prose almost rivals that of Merritt in its sickly luxuriance:

"It was dawn now.

For a moment Heath lost all sense of time. The deck lifting lightly under his feet, the low mist and dawn over the Sea of Morning Opals, the dawn that gave the sea its name. It seemed that there had never been a Moonfire, never been a past or a future, but only David Heath and his ship and the light coming over the water.

It came slowly, sifting down like a rain of jewels through the miles of pearl-grey cloud. Cool and slow at first, then warming and spreading, turning the misty air to drops of rosy fire, opaline, glowing, low to the water, so that the little ship seemed to be drifting through the heart of a fire-opal as vast as the universe.

The sea turned color, from black to indigo streaked with milky bands. Flights of the small bright dragons rose flashing from the weed-beds that lay scattered on the surface in careless patterns of purple and ochre and cinnabar and the weed itself stirred with dim sentient life, lifting its tendrils to the light.

For one short moment David Heath was completely happy."

But one short moment it is - a brief dalliance, a submission to glamour that cannot and does not last. It is thus that Brackett differs from Merritt - in Merritt's work the glamorous illusion is the one and only goal - his characters are wholehearted in their longing to escape into dreams, and if they are turned back (they never turn back of their own accord) their return to reality is stark tragedy. When Merritt had the hero of The Dwellers In The Mirage expelled from his glorious hallucination it constituted a downbeat ending of such emotional ferocity that the editor of Argosy refused to tolerate it and rewrote it (the original version appeared only in the Fantastic Novels reprint). Merritt genuinely was an escapist, who despaired in real life precisely because his wonderful dreams were quite unattainable. Brackett's fascination with the exotic, however, was by no means such unreasoned infatuation. She was, in a genuine sense, an anti-romantic writer; not because she determinedly affected 'realism' (though she could maintain such an affectation, as in her thrillers) but because she persistently denied the real value of the insistent temptations of her dreams. Among her later work are several stories - especially "The Last Days of Shandakor" (1952) and the last of her Martian stories (not in this collection) "The Road To Sinharat" (1963) whose manifest subject matter is the death of dreams and the crushing of the ancient and the exotic by the irresistible pressure of time and common sense.

Brackett, like Bradbury, is an essentially nostalgic writer, and her nostalgia likewise finds as one of its main foci the Burroughsian Mars that seemed so bright and real in childhood. Her nostalgia, however, is constantly

accompanied by a ghostly awareness that the myths and fantasies of childhood cannot and should not be sustained save for transient moments of self-indulgence. This she finds sad, but she does not (as Hamilton implies) represent this impossibility as a kind of failure, but rather as a kind of success. Her work, which stands at the end of the sf pulp tradition, is orientated backwards in time, constituting in large measure a reflection upon that tradition insofar as it served the escapist needs of its readers. In her way she was as little committed to the wilder excesses of this escapist need as - on close inspection - Hamilton turns out to have been. That is what made both of them science fiction writers rather than fantasists. They both owed allegiance to the weltanschauung of modern rationalism, and were significantly divorced in the spirit of their writing from the fantastic imagination of writers like Burroughs, Merritt and Cummings, whose work resembles theirs in superficial symbology, but which is irredeemably committed to the flight from reason.

* * * * *

Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett do not belong to the science fiction of today. Their work forms part of a tradition now virtually extinct. This is largely because we live in a different period of history. In the twenties and thirties Hamilton's literary strategies were effective, because there was at that time a large audience whose scientific and sciencefictional naivety was undefiled. There is no such audience today, because even those people who are only beginning to read sf at the age of 12 have already been familiarised with most of the ideas that were new and mind-expanding to the similar generation of 1926. The mythology of sf has been established, slowly and almost unnoticeably, and has permeated the cultural atmosphere. Similarly, the kind of childhood fantasy from which Brackett's work is one important stage removed no longer has the dominance over present-day juvenile literary experience that it once had. Despite these facts, however, the best of Edmond Hamilton and the best of Leigh Brackett do have a certain timelessness. They will not appeal on the same wide scale even to today's emergent sf community, but there will always be something that they have to offer a particular type of reader: the reader who does find it possible to achieve that momentary hesitation which allows a wild idea to sting his imagination; the reader who has found himself quite entranced by the allure of ultra-exotic dreams. Because this is so it is not necessary to justify an interest in these two collections by considering them as period pieces. They can both be recommended as the work of good and special writers.

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The Best Of Edmond Hamilton, edited by Leigh Brackett; Ballantine/del Rey 1977; 381pp; 95p; ISBN 0-345-25900-9

and

The Best Of Leigh Brackett, edited by Edmond Hamilton; Ballantine/del Rey 1977; 423pp; 95p; ISBN 0-345-25954-8

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((Readers who are interested in pursuing some of the ideas raised in Brian's article could refer to the May 1977 issue of Science Fiction Review (number 21), edited by Richard Geiss. That issue contains a ten page interview with Hamilton and Brackett conducted in 1976.))

found in a bathtub letters

Philip Muldowney: PLYMOUTH.

You seem to have a very specialised and personal view of contemporary sf. A personal opinion which you seem to interpret as the complete whole. A view which I find rather overwhelmingly arrogant. In its own way, it is as bad as that of first fandom, stating that nothing happened in sf after 1930.

One is not asking you to ignore the 'metafiction' element in sf. Just to have a little balance. Sf is the sum of its parts, not the whole of one part. By following your own dictates and opinions as to what material to use, what books to review, you are using just as much censorship as you indicted Messrs Gilbert and Rogers for, a couple of issues ago. If VECTOR was your own personal fanzine, fine, use what you want, I would not subscribe. But it is not. It is presumably meant for the membership as a whole. A membership of diverse views, and one that wants to be informed on a wide basis, not a narrow one.

((This question of 'balance' is one I have been conscious of from the first issue I undertook - see the editorial to VECTOR 84 - but I feel you seriously misinterpret my editorial comments in VECTOR 89; my main intention has been to give VECTOR editorial direction, something it has lacked in the past. I would gladly like to know what alternatives you offer in terms of attaining this balance. Do I introduce pieces on Perry Rhodan, Star Trek, Dr Who, the Fantasy cults and various Star Wars/Close Encounters spin-offs? Each has its own specialised society catering for it. And as far as the Big Name sf authors are concerned, they are well-documented by the mass media (and I'm thinking of Asimov, Clarke and co..) who seem to believe that sf is encompassed by about six authors and nothing else exists. What does it leave us with? I see it that I ought to be covering the most recent developments (internationally, if possible) in sf, both in terms of written works and critical guides (the encyclopedias and art books that lay the 'basic foundations' I mentioned and which can be bought in most branches of W. H. Smiths). I should be trying to meet and get the views of the genre's writers and bringing them to the membership via this medium. And if in doing so I stamp some personality on the thing, then I do not see that necessarily as a bad thing. Thus in this issue you will find pieces on LeGuin and Hamilton and Brackett, an interview with Pohl and pieces on new writers like Varley, Butler and Corley. If that is lacking in balance then I can only ask you to spell out exactly what it is you want.))

Phil Rosenblum: ST JOHN'S WOOD, NW8

Having disappointed me with VECTOR 88 (which seemed desperate to avoid having anything to do with sf) you manage to pull out VECTOR 89 from your sleeves: certainly the most enjoyable issue of VECTOR I have read in my sojourn amongst the BSFA. Cy Chauvin's discourse was very convincing (even for a non-plussed-New-waver like me). The Sheckley interview was excellent and his G-O-H speech rewarding and very readable (like the man always is).

Your review of DIMENSION OF MIRACLES was very brief, but the use of long quotes was the ideal method to convey the concept of Sheckley (he's more than just a writer!) to the novice. Still, an examination, a critical appraisal would have been in order; ie. his lack of characterisation, episodic style of writing and inability to end the novel effectively, should all have been mentioned not just his inarguable wit, exuberance and inventiveness. The review of ALCHEMICAL MARRIAGE was much more satisfying. All the other reviews were of a very high standard, and I found great sympathy with Chris Morgan's look at some recent Vance. One point here: there are several loose ends at the end of Maske:Theory which leave scope for sequels.

Maxim Jakubowski: LONDON, NW4

A bit angry at your comments following Chris Evans' letter in the latest VECTOR. As an editor, you should have the courage of your convictions and it would have been better to reject the review of ANTICIPATIONS out of hand when I submitted it rather than comment on it in such a snide and, I feel, dishonest manner.

The publication of a piece does not mean that the editor endorses it (and you in fact did indicate your difference of opinion re. the anthology) but I was very disappointed by your meek leap onto the backlash bandwagon, a stance which could well discourage other people to review for VECTOR in future.

And I stick to my review. Every contentious line of it.

No, it is not ridiculous and fallacious to claim that an editor can influence (never did I talk of 'literary style' as Evans implies) other writers, however major they are. Viz. John Campbell and Roger Elwood as two examples most extreme. I strongly contend that when an editor commissions material from a writer, the writer will most definitely keep the personality traits and idiosyncracies of the editor in mind, if only subconsciously, while he is writing.

((You are right to question my actions, and I'll readily admit that I should have returned that review rather than print it. But it was no meek leap onto the backlash bandwagon: I was genuinely torn on that review, for it seemed that it was far too subjective. I feel, for example, that editors like Campbell and Elwood would not have been able to influence - in the least - the work of such independent-minded writers as Ballard, Disch and Aldiss. Such writers do not admit to the formulas of editors - they write exactly what they want to write. I feel that to judge an anthology from its editor's personality is not a justifiable reviewing technique. Saying that, I have always felt that a reviewer should judge a book from its intentions, and a deliberate editorial policy seemed (perhaps deliberately) lacking in the case of ANTICIPATIONS. And if an admission of fallability on my part will discourage other critics from reviewing for VECTOR, so be it.))

As far as bandying opinions as if they were facts, I would only refer you to most other reviewers in VECTOR, including Evans! "It is a sad fact that of the multitude of sf books published every year, very few contain any real speculative element." Who says this is a fact? Mr Evans! And so on (altho. I am happy to see books by Barry Bayley given the attention they deserve). Any reviewer does this sort of thing. And to take the particular example quoted from my own review, I daresay the majority of experts, readers and other critics would agree with me that Tom Disch's writing has never been characterised by all consuming warmth and affection for his characters. Which I hasten to say is no criticism in view of his splendid style, wit, intelligence and imagination, to name but a few...

Ah, I almost forgot, my stolen insights! A simple look at the calendar of this year's publications would show that FOUNDATION 13 had not been published when I wrote my review. Further, Ian Watson himself, who's after all the person concerned, can easily vouch that I raised the same point privately over two years ago!

No, I do not question my own motives and honesty in my attitude to reviewing, Mr. Evans, but maybe you should question your attitude to reviewing reviews.

Apart from that gripe, a nice issue.

Michael Coney: Sidney, BC, CANADA

VECTOR 88 was entertaining as usual. I didn't altogether agree with Herbert's analysis of Nixon; I think it was Kennedy who hit the nail on the head, years ago, when he said Nixon didn't have any class. He was no more a product of his culture than anybody else; his problem was that he was a loser, pure and simple, right from the start. He lived in a society where absolute truth or falsehood is of no consequence; what counts is how good an argument you put up. Given that genuine evil doesn't exist, what we have is a loser who people wouldn't buy a used car from, competing in a Darwinian environment. He tried to play the game the way the big-timers did, and he simply wasn't good enough, and it showed.

I enjoyed your review of A RUDE AWAKENING and, as you can imagine, am looking forward to seeing it over here. The rest of VECTOR was good, my only complaints being ones of personal preference -- although I did feel that Jakubowski spent far too long saying he didn't like ANTICIPATIONS. Overall, the Herbert interview was definitely the star of the issue.

((Time lapses as ever explain Mike's belated response to VECTOR 88; he is presently engaged in building a new house and has thus had little time for writing. But there is, apparently "a backlog of stuff at the publishers"))

Greg Hills: Wanganui, NEW ZEALAND.

((I'll print this next letter in abbreviated form: Greg was kind enough to expand his views to over two pages of dense type. Anyone wanting a copy of the complete letter can write to me and I'll be happy to provide...))

Okay. Your base is more reasonable than I might have guessed. So I guess I can abandon the extreme attitude I set up last time.

Now, 'A literature of self-discovery' is a pretty broad appellation. You need not feel you're prostituting yourself to cover US/UK stuff along the lines of MARTIANS GO HOME (Frederic Brown), THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS; THE TOMBS OF ATUAN; THE SPACE MERCHANTS; THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE; THE NAKED SUN; the DEATHWORLD stuff; TAU ZERO; JACK OF SHADOWS; THE DAY OF THEIR RETURN; SOS THE ROPE; THE GODS THEMSELVES; THE WEREWOLF PRINCIPLE (albeit this one is flawed, alas); THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF; ENCHANTED PILGRIMAGE; POOKAYNE OF MARS; MIDSUMMER CENTURY. All this is material that explores the nature and systems of self-discovery, and, more, does it in a story with solid plot, solid characters, easy-to-read style. That last is a point. A book that is hard to read is not necessarily a 'quality' production. A book that is easy to read, yet which does not simplify its structure or predigest the language, is far harder to write than any obscure one. DHALGREN may be well-written; I can appreciate that many passages are really quite exquisitely crafted (tho many more are sheer hackwork). Yet its style is over-concerned with itself. In developing itself it detracts from all other aspects of the novel. Now look at, say, THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS. The language/prose is simple in structure...yet builds up to a rich and enjoyable whole. It ADDS to the story.

One can turn effort from trying to comprehend the author's allusions and involutions to trying to understand what the author is saying. There are already signs that THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS will survive long after the far more pretentious DHALGREN is gone and buried. And you yourself have stated or implied that the true test of a real masterwork is whether it lasts. I disagree, natch, but by that viewpoint LHOD is a far greater work than Duldren.

((You pick two very good examples. THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS is my favourite science fiction novel. I think it has few rivals in the sf genre, but that's strictly personal. It is unfair to compare it on those terms to DHALGREN which attempts to do something entirely different; to explore the actions and reactions of a single character set in a nebulous framework. TLHOD is about systems of thought - ignorance, unlearning, the meaning of growth - and needs to be conveyed simply to maintain the clarity of its ideas. In DHALGREN the focus is upon Kidd, and to describe a character is, if you're honestly attempting the task, a far more involute and complex process. THE DISPOSSESSED comes somewhere between the two, with its focus shifting between Odonianism and Shevek. Thus it is vaguer in appearance than TLHOD. We are drifting dangerously into that area of argument that asks "should science fiction bother with characters?". I can only quote Ursula LeGuin "What good are all the objects in the universe, if there is no subject?" - her essay "Science Fiction And Mrs Brown" says this all far better than I could manage, see EXPLORATIONS OF THE MARVELLOUS))

You seem to have a black-and-white view: 'serious' and 'escapist'. You seem to look down on works that do not spend all their time jumping up and down on our mores and assumptions. You seem to look on 'escapist' (I'll open that can shortly) reading as slumming, or visiting country cousins. Yet in that escapist stuff, in that 'icing', is buried the germ plasm out of which comes the mind-expanding stuff. Often, such 'escapist' works are mind-expanding in their own right. It just isn't their main aim in life; hence is far more effective in hitting at people's attitudes. As for standards of excellence; first tie down what 'excellence' is, then maybe we can do business. You define it, I'll show you why the definition ain't workable...

((I'll try to define what I see as 'purely escapist'; a book that successfully manages to suspend my disbelief - by creation of a new planet, a new social system, etc - but which doesn't stimulate any new chain of thought within its pages. There are lots of them about. Books can be 'escapist' and - as you rightly say - provide the germination of new ways of seeing things. Sheckley's 'escapist' books do just that. Few fantasy books manage it; and I feel most technologically-biased sf fails on this score. We escape into a future where there are different gadgets but the same ways of viewing things. Which is why I disagree with you on your assessment of Asimov. Oh, he opens up some interesting avenues, but looks at them from an oh-so-familiar viewpoint.))

Now, escapist stuff. Where else can one really hit at today's society but from a point outside it? Termites can gnaw from within, but a lumberjack can do the job faster, better and more neatly. A lot of escapist stuff is just that; and as such it serves its purpose, taking one's mind away from the death and doom attitudes that surround one. I couldn't stand living in a world of death and doom all the time. I'd crack up. You hint that you would too. So why disparage escapist stuff as 'purely escapist'? It fulfils a vital need in humanity; it revitalises people who might otherwise just give up. Most religions are escapist. Religions fulfil a vital function in the lives of many people (tho I am agnostic). Science Fiction does that for me.

But much escapist stuff is simply working on us in a different way. That trite stuff using a 'formula' plot (what could be more formula than a murder-mystery, huh? Yet they sell by the thousand. Romances -- cliché but they SELL) means that a writer can really get down and WRITE without fear of turning out a plot-less, rambling bore. Often the work is uninspired and 'junk', but not always, or even mostly.

((You seem to have an overwhelming reverence for plot and little concern for character, though I may do you an injustice. Perhaps Bob Sheckley is right in saying that certain people can only be reached in that way - but I can't help seeing it as 'pandering' (and here I'm not mincing words) to that same instinct that Phil Farmer so delightfully portrayed in his Hugo winning novella, "Riders Of The Purple Wage". It is the 'consumer' side of writing you seem to be talking about; Market equals opportunity to sell Product, no matter what the product is. Switch-in to the undemanding novel and let everything float away, including the capacity for thought. That attitude to the genre - as providing a Product - frightens me.))

Now, then, as to 'ignoring the new wave element'; where do I do that? What I do do is to ask "Why should only New Wave carry this?" ... and, of course, the answer is that it does not. New Wave as such is dead (was from the start) and is disappearing from sf. There are still a few holdouts (Brian Aldiss and Robert Silverberg) who try to call what they are producing 'sf'; but this is just not acceptable to most readers (and not because they're semi illiterate. It's literate enough to know when what they're flicking through is not what it's labelled). So what used to be 'new wave' tried to become 'speculative fiction' and to drag sf with it. This did not wash either. So it has essentially died out of the US and all other countries except the UK, from where the New Wave started. Now it seems to have given up trying to get into sf, and is churning that-a-way as 'metafiction'; which is fine by me. If it does not try to call itself science fiction I can live with it and appreciate it. Even like it.

What the New Wave did was accentuate and illuminate areas of sf that were not yet being exploited as well as they could have been. Since this was a feeling in sf at large, too, the improvements were grabbed with alacrity. What emerged is better and stronger than either, yet owes its origins purely to sf; New Wave was but a catalyst. This 'new sf' has since become THE sf. New Wave has gone away. Space Opera lives as a sub-genre. The thought-variant likewise. Since New Wave seems deeply entrenched in Britain, I don't ask you to abandon it. What I do ask is that you open up and admit the Ocean.

((In fact we are not very far apart here in the view that the New Wave was a red herring - perhaps I should have made that clear last time. I see the process that was, inaccurately, labelled as the New Wave by those whose enthusiasm ran away with their better judgement, as a movement by individual writers to assert an individuality of style, rather than as a concerted shove by a group of writers in a certain direction. Moorcock's NEW WORLDS clouds this by appearing to cater only for a certain type of writing, whereas in fact it was very diverse, and it was the worst of its contributors that were at fault for forming a listless 'new wave' approach. If you can point out the marked similarities in the styles of Aldiss, Ballard, Disch, Moorcock, Brunner, Zelazny, Wolfe, Ellison and Spinrad, I'd be grateful for the pointer. They are all highly individual writers, and regularly appeared in NEW WORLDS during Moorcock's 'reign'. That sf shows any sign of individuality and freshness is thanks to them. And to call them catalysts is to denigrate their continuing affect upon the genre.))

Michael Moorcock: London W11.

I enjoyed the stuff on Shackle for whom I have considerable respect. The Barry Bayley story told at the end of Chris Evans review is substantially true but not quite the way he told it. I was instrumental in Barry changing his name to P.F. Woods (a real person, friend of Barry's) because Ted told me he would never be able to publish a story by Barry because he had a blind spot where Barry's work was concerned. When Barry heard this he used Pate Wood's name and address and immediately began to sell regularly to Ted. Later, when we revealed that Barry was P. F. Woods, Ted was amused but told Barry that he still had a prejudice against his work so he'd better keep on being P. F. Woods. The irony is that Pate Woods somehow couldn't resist the money or the fame and began spending the money while he put it about that he was the author of the stories (It was Barry and I who got Ted to take "The Terminal Beach" because we were so enthusiastic. It was Jimmy Ballard's enthusiasm that got Ted to take my "The Deep Fix" about the same time!)

A slip in my last letter. Should have said that a dandy should show the 'bottom' of a Regency buck.

New Worlds (re the comments in your interview) was not aiming to take sf into the mainstream or move towards 'personal' (subjective technique as opposed to objective) fiction. We were hoping to borrow sf's interest in the objective world and use that impulse in subtler ways. The U.S. 'new wave' was primarily a move towards subjective romanticism a la Pynchon, and I for one found this move depressing. Personal images are one thing. Writing about the self is another. VORTEX didn't fail through lack of money - it failed through lack of faith and lack of professionalism. I heartily agree with you that new names are worthless in themselves unless they are connected with fresh ideas and talent. Asimov's is building up a stable of hacks. It's disappointing.

Paul Kincaid: Manchester.

...it seems I have stirred up a small controversy. Certainly when I wrote my review of FLOATING WORLDS that was the last thing I had in mind. And I find the position a little awkward.

Writers have to take whatever critics throw at them, with no right of reply. In fairness, therefore, I think the same should be true of critics; they should stand or fall by their review. I, therefore, should bear Cherry Wilder's invective stoically.

I should; I'm afraid I'm not going to.

Firstly the matter of the clutch; it was a mistake on my part. John Owen pointed out this mistake sometime between me sending off the review to VECTOR and the appearance of that issue. Since it was not a very important point, I didn't think it worth phoning you, Dave, to change it at the 11th hour.

John Owen, incidentally, is someone else who disagrees with my view of FLOATING WORLDS; which seems to put me in the minority. A fact which changes my opinion of the novel not one iota. I still consider it mediocre and poorly written.

((See Andy Sawyer's comments on that...))

...which brings me round to your editorial. Any review consists primarily of the critics opinion, an opinion arrived at by comparing the book to other books. Therefore the standard of the novel under review varies according to the standard of the books it is judged against. There is, then, no objective standard by which we can say of one book or another: It is good.

I feel, however, that we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we did not judge books by the highest standard we know. If we judge sf only by the standard of other sf, then it may seem good or bad; but only by those narrow standards. If criticism has any value it is to point the way, to make an effort to raise standards. You are not going to do that if you say only: Good of its kind. From that stasis there can be no development, writers will simply be running round and round chasing their own tails.

Let me take as an example THE OPHIUCHI HOTLINE, that also aroused some controversy in your letter column. Judge that by Perry Rhodan and there is no way of avoiding the conclusion that it is brilliant. Judge it by the standards of sf in general and the thing that obviously springs to mind is the ideas-content. Sf has always set great store by ideas, by sense of wonder instilled not through great descriptive ability but through bombarding the reader with wonderful new ideas. On that level also Varley's novel scores highly. Taken individually the ideas may not be original (few are in sf anyway), but they are combined in a manner that is fresh and interesting, or at least I found it so. And since this is the comparison available to most sf fans, then THE OPHIUCHI HOTLINE must rate highly among them.

Let us broaden our horizons once more, and consider it by the standards of adventure stories in general. Again it scores highly, being well-paced, with a steady stream of incidents to keep the reader reading. Now this makes it a book of some worth; entertainment is an important part of the purpose of any novel, and to achieve this is to achieve a lot.

But let us extend our judgement just one more step. By now we are comparing it to Literature, to the works of people who care about writing and the language they use as much as they do about story-telling and ideas. Here Varley fails. Many sf writers, many writers in general, fail when they come to this hurdle. There is much that is good and readable and enjoyable that does not aspire to this standard.

But that cannot, must not, mean that we do not employ these standards in our judgements of the book. If we do not, then there is nobody prodding the writer to aspire for these heights, and if there is nobody prodding then why should the writer make the effort. After all, you can make a more comfortable living if you do not aspire towards these heights.

The statements are sweeping, but there are four critical levels - Perry Rhodan is the first; ideas fiction the second; story-telling the third; literature the fourth. I do not say that every aspiring author should chase after the fourth level. On the contrary, 'literature' without ideas or story-telling ability, or even simple entertainment, is just pretentious. Better to fall at the last fence than miss out the first three.

((I'd love to be quoted an example of 'literature' that isn't ideative, tells a story and entertains - if not on the 'gosh-wow' level. I'd be very loath to accept your simplification of the various strata of writing, if only because noone ever sets out to write a certain type of fiction - they usually end up writing what best suits their individual talents. Cause and effect are rarely synonymous in the writer/reader relationship.))

At the same time, whether or not an author has managed to clear a fence depends very much on the subjective opinion of the reader. At least Varley, to my mind, has reached the third level; which is more than so many of those revered names from the 40's and 50's ever managed to do.

((There seems a lot missed out from this whole argument. I also think it's a critics function to awaken a reader's curiosity, to stimulate with new ideas and perspectives, to 'educate' - that awful word - and also entertain))

Ian Watson: Oxford.

Amid your friendly words about FOUNDATION 14, on page 54 of the latest VECTOR there is one enormous gaffe which would have Basil Brush shouting 'Boom! Boom!' in delight, if he was given to loc VECTOR. To wit, 'This is the first issue under Malcolm Edwards sole control'.

Malcolm is the editor, yes. He has the final say, and the buck stops at his desk. But there happens to be an Editorial Board of three people running FOUNDATION: Malcolm, myself, and David Pringle. It says so in large enough letters on the title page, and it means it. The journal is edited by democratic committee decisions, and all three editors work to produce the journal. There is no autarchy operating at FOUNDATION. Dave, you wouldn't have been infected with the notion that the editor of an SF mag is necessarily and desirably an autarch, would you? You haven't been seduced by personality-cultism, have you? Beware, beware!

Yours,

Disgruntled of Dagenham (and Oxford)

((Okay, apologies for my inadvertently-bad wording. I should have said 'under the editorial guidance of'..or something similar. All I can say is that autarchy is hard work - especially on a schedule of six times a year. But then, no system is perfect...))

Margaret S. Chalmers: GLASGOW.

Although a longtime reader of science fiction I am a newcomer to the BSFA, and have therefore waited a few mailings before venturing any comment.

The verdict? On balance I liked more items than I disliked. Particular plusses for me are the editorials (whether I agree with them or not), the Infinity Box, Elmer T. Hack's saga, Paperback Parlour and the letters and gossip in Matrix.

A special favourite is the interviews with notable sf writers. You ask most of the questions I would like to put to them. However, in the otherwise excellent discussion with Frank Herbert I was itching to know if he intended to do more 'mainstream' novels, such as the enjoyable SOULCATCHER and apropos said book, what did he think of the publicity blurb on the dustjacket listing many of his sf works including DUNE but adding this was his 'first serious novel'. Would he agree with that description, I wonder?

I have just finished reading and chortling over the Robert Shackley interview. Now that should encourage anyone not fortunate enough to have already met his work to rush out and buy some. As a beginner in the writing field I found his article ON WORKING METHOD great fun and a real comfort: I thought I was unique in suffering from that strange affliction of WANTING to write but having to force myself to the typewriter...although his excuses were a lot more entertaining than mine.

Things I do not like? There is so much to read and digest in the mailings I prefer to reserve judgement for the moment.

However, not having been in any fan organisation before I was amused to discover some writers are fashionable and some are decidedly not... although this does not seem reflected in their sales. My, my, what once revered names are OUT. I am glad I am not a newcomer to actual sf reading or I might follow the fashion and miss out on a great many good stories...

... which brings me nicely to the debate on reviewing 'old' but re-issued work. As a new writer I naturally have a self-interest to declare,

but although I would like to see new names encouraged by reviews, let's not forget that many readers may have missed older books the first time around. Indeed, when I first began reading sf a great deal of the American output was unobtainable in my neck of the woods. Could you not consider adding a THESE WE HAVE LOVED section to the Infinity Box: perhaps shorter reviews of the oldies but goodies?

As a final compliment I can say truthfully I am looking forward to my next mailing from the BSFA. Many thanks for all the hard work you and your fellow editors and committee members do on behalf of we lazier folk who just sit back and criticise and enjoy your efforts.

((Yes, I hope there will always be a place for re-examining the classics of the genre - if only to check-out that they weren't the products of nostalgia and anachronistic in our own time, but more often to form a basis for what is happening now. I haven't put such reviews in a separate section because I felt VECTOR was compartmentalised enough already. But a reiteration or two per issue is a good idea. See this issue's Stableford article and review of Budrys as an example.))

Andy Sawyer: BIRKENHEAD.

Good grief! I've even got time for a letter to VECTOR!

Last couple of issues very good. V88 on Frank Herbert perhaps my favourite so far as THE DOSADI EXPERIMENT has convinced me that Frank Herbert can write a mean story at times. Maybe everyone else was right and I was wrong?

That's not to say the Sheckley issue was inadequate: a good interview (perhaps a shade too rambling?), an interesting and amusing speech and a couple of good books to think about. (I've just read ALISTAIR CROMPTON - very funny, very funny! Could it be that all those uncounted volumes of 'straight' sf only exist to be viewed through the tongue pressed firmly through the cheek of a Sheckley? And make of that image what you like!)

I'm a bit reluctant to jump in with boots flying about an author who has already been perfectly adequately disposed of by Paul Kincaid (I seem to be using a lot of violent language today: maybe it's the weather?) but I did choke on the first two letters, so...

In fact, I was convinced Cherry Wilder's letter was a joke: I mean it has to be in the solemnity "There are semi-colons on pages 4, 7, 18, 21, and colons on 12 and 21" and in the incongruity of "a rich, exciting, well characterised book" (This of a book I'd taken on holiday with me and continued reading solely because (a) when you're in a one-roomed Youth Hostel cottage trying not to wake the baby there's little to do in the evenings besides read and (b) I have this touching faith - or masochistic streak? - when I'm reading a bad book that it surely isn't this bad and anyway it'll start to make sense soon). Then I came to Chris Evans' letter and he said pretty much the same thing.

Well, I'm sorry to disagree but FLOATING WORLDS is second only to TIME OF THE HAWKLORDS in the "worst book I've read this year" stakes. The characters never "come to life" (whatever that is!), we are never really shown (not told about Chris, just "shown" as you suggest we are) the societies of Earth and Mars, and the extract Cherry Wilder quotes is a fair example of Ms Holland's style: Plod plod plod plod plod plod. Motivation on the part of any of the characters is virtually non-existent. Ideas (such as the 'healing power' cum "mind transference" of one of the characters) are sometimes interesting, but never developed sufficiently to really grip the imagination. But why should I go on? Cecilia Holland has a track record as a writer of historical (not 'Mainstream', Dave!) novels: I doubt if I shall read any of them, on the

evidence of her ~~sf~~. In my opinion the book should have been cut by half and sent back for a re-write before it reached the public. Maybe Cecilia Holland can use the semi-colon, but as an sf novelist she's got the life of a sleeping brick. I'm amazed that two intelligent people can rush to the defence of such a monotonous book.

Good to see THE VIOLET APPLE reviewed: I have read extracts which were published in a magazine several years ago, but never really hoped that it might see the light of day.

I liked the collage on the inside front cover. Cy Chauvin's piece was good, but I don't, to be honest, find terms like 'metafiction' particularly useful. For literature examining its own artificiality vis a vis "reality" try Shakespeare and the 'all the world's a stage' imagery of the Elizabethan dramatists, especially the prelude to "The Taming of the Shrew" (which probably goes to prove John Barth's point about realism being "a kind of aberration in the history of literature"). The relationship between sf writers and the fictioneers Cy discusses is similar to that between Elizabethan romance and Shakespeare's "The Winters Tale", for example. Every writer creates his precursors, as Borges says...

((I guess the only way I'll get a good idea of the value of FLOATING WORLDS is to read it myself, which, if it's a bad book, is not the best means. I guess this is where Libraries have their uses...))

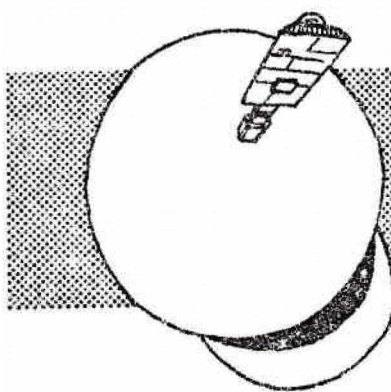
Nicholas Browne: Cardiff.

I enjoyed VECTOR 89 and I find myself in complete agreement with your editorial.

I was particularly pleased to find Martin Hatfield's review of 'The Last Wave' in THE INFINITY BOX. This is a move in the right direction. I have been in the BSFA only long enough to receive four mailings and this is the first time that a science fiction work in a non-literary incarnation has been featured in VECTOR's pages. Records and plays have been reviewed in MATRIX and as you yourself have contributed to these I conclude that this is part of a policy. As VECTOR is the serious organ of the BSFA it seems to me that the exclusion of nearly everything except books from its review section implies that sf work in areas other than its traditional medium is less valid or important. By consigning these reviews to the (deliberately) less consequential MATRIX you are bound to suggest that they lack significance. If I refer to your editorial: SF Records are "happening NOW". SF plays are happening NOW; SF films are happening NOW. To ignore SF work in any new area is to deny the role you plainly intend for the magazine you edit.

((It's true that there was a deliberate policy of placing media events in the pages of MATRIX rather than VECTOR, with the exception of films. But with John and Eve Harvey taking over MATRIX there may be a change in emphasis, with VECTOR carrying more of such items. And if you want to gauge my own feelings on this subject I'd refer you to VECTOR 80, in which I took a surface view of sf and rock music with the article 'A Song In The Depth Of The Galaxies'. Hopefully I'll be updating this some time next year. In the meantime I am open to contributions/essays on the non-literary media. I agree that these things are happening now, even if they reflect different emphases and are often anachronistic (by comparison to their literary counterparts) in their predilections.))

((And, finally, my thanks to everyone who, by word of mouth or in brief aside in personal correspondence, has helped by providing feedback on the direction and format of VECTOR. Especial (if perverse) thanks to Alan Dorey, Mike Dickenson, Don West and Dave Pringle for their continual and continuous interest in the contents and design of VECTOR. Long may you run...))



dispossession

steev

higgins

In THE CHARTERHOUSE OF PARMA, Stendhal stated that 'Politics in a work of literature are like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar'. Quite a few SF writers have disregarded this and have laden their novels with Politics. And whilst in THE DISPOSSESSED, Ursula LeGuin has written a political utopia, hers is a very different novels from those that are filled with ideas and ideologies and lacking in people and sensitivity. She concentrates upon the most basic form of politics - that which is about people.

The critic's habit of pigeon-holing works stems from an understandable desire to briefly describe the essence of a work. 'Political Utopia' was one attempt to describe THE DISPOSSESSED, but it tells us virtually nothing about the book, and what little can be gleaned from it is meaningless due to a lack of context. When I say it has a political theme that does not mean that it is a dry political tract, nor does it make reference to the many other levels of the work. In discussing the novel, I shall try to show how these other levels mesh in with this political bias.

THE DISPOSSESSED fits into the 'Hainish' concept that umbrellas much of Ursula LeGuin's fiction: in which the galaxy was seeded by a race called the Hain. Thus, human beings inhabit numerous planets including Annares, the moon of Urras, a planet of Tau Ceti. Annares is nearly as large as Urras and possesses an atmosphere of similar constitution. It is habitable - and inhabited - by humans. These inhabitants are Odonians, followers of Odo, whose revolutionary-anarchist movement had nearly brought down the existent capitalist system. They had been bought-off at the last moment with the provision of spaceships and the necessary equipment to settle barren Annares and build their ideal state from scratch.

The break between Annares and Urras is manifest in several ways; even to the extent of creating a totally new language. The two 'planets' are completely isolated from each other, an isolation symbolised by the wall around Annares' only spaceport, through which only traded goods may pass, either way.

The novel tells the story of the visit of Shevek, an Annaresti physicist, to Urras. He is the first visitor from one 'system' to the other since the break. In alternate chapters Ursula LeGuin tells the story of his visit and also the tale of his growing conviction - throughout his life - that, despite all, his society has gone wrong. And in so doing she compares the

two societies.

Urras is rich. It is physically still a paradise, unspoiled by industrialisation; rich because of it. But socially? That is far more subjective. It cannot and must not be forgotten that Urras is a 'satirical' version of contemporary Earth, a society dominated by two opposed nations, A-Io, which is capitalistic, and Thu, which in theory is Odonian; but proves in practice to be oppressive and totalitarian. Or so we are told, for we are never shown Thu.

Annarees meanwhile is a barren planet, almost desert and producing enough only because of the strenuous efforts of the Annaresti. Despite this its culture thrives. There is no economic system; everything is available to everyone, and all work is voluntary. There are various committees to organise, but they are without 'power'. Their greatest insult is to call each other "profiteer". And there is no law.

The real achievement of THE DISPOSSESSED is that it is a novel. It is reasonably long (349 pages) and throughout that length is exploring the character of Shevek and the people he encounters. It takes him on an odyssey which, in each case (for both strands of the plot eventually link) is a process of growth and discovery. It is an intense process too, and LeGuin gathers enough 'real' experience to create a deep and satisfying sense of reality. But were it not so then the novel would have failed in its own terms, for, as I see it, Odonianism is about people.

Ursula LeGuin perhaps best explains what Odonianism is in the introduction to "The Day Before The Revolution" (which tells of Odo herself) in THE WIND'S TWELVE QUARTERS:

"Odonianism is anarchism. Not the bomb-in-the-pocket stuff, which is terrorism, whatever name it tries to distinguish itself with; not the social-Darwinist economic "libertarianism" of the far right; but anarchism, as prefigured in early Taoist thought, and expounded by Shelley and Kropotkin, Goldman and Goodman. Anarchism's principal target is the authoritarian state (capitalist or socialist); its principal theme is co-operation (solitary, mutual aid). It is the most idealistic, and to me the most interesting of all political theories." (1)

In Annaresti society the ideals are held actively by many of the people. The philosophy of Odo is taught to children until they understand it, and everyone on the planet is aware of the philosophy. The basis of their social organisation is co-operation, actively pursued and practically a necessity. The society defies apathy - in its need for "constant vigilance" against centralisation and all the evils of the old system. The society derives its vitality from this: that their way provides for the non-materialistic needs of a human being - the spiritual needs.

"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (2)

The Annaresti prefer the words of Odo, but it still means that their society cares about the people themselves.

It is the materialism and near-decadence that Shevek finds on Urras which contrasts most vividly with the austerity of Annarees. The contrasts between the two are at times stark. One passage captures this best for me: when Shevek tries to make love to the wife of his Urrasti host, Vea:

"Vea was at his arm. 'Come along this way,' she said, laughing a little and breathless...he hoped she was taking him to the washroom, or to a window where he could breathe fresh air. But the room they came into was large, and dimly lit by reflection. A high,

white bed bulked against the wall...

"You are too much," Vea said, bringing herself directly before him and looking into his face, in the dimness, with that breathless laugh... 'Oh, the looks on their faces. I've got to kiss you for that!' And she lifted herself on tiptoe, presenting him her mouth, and her white throat, and her naked breasts.

"He took hold of her and kissed her mouth, forcing her head backward, and then her throat and breasts. She yielded at first, as if she had no bones, then she writhed a little, laughing and pushing weakly at him, and began to talk... 'Oh, no, no, now behave,' she said... He paid no attention. He pulled her with him towards the bed, and she came, though she kept talking... 'Now stop,' she said. 'No, now listen, Shevek, it won't do, not now. I haven't taken a contraceptive, if I got stuffed I'd be in a pretty mess.'" (3)

It contrasts very strongly with the description in the very next chapter of his partner, Takver's labour:

"He ran to the block clinic, arriving so out of breath and unsteady on his legs they thought he was having a heart attack. He explained. They sent a message to another midwife, and told him to go home, the partner would be wanting company...

"Takvery had no time for emotional scenes; she was busy. She had cleared the bed platform except for a clean sheet, and she was at work bearing a child. She did not howl or scream, as she was not in pain, but when each contraction came she managed it by muscle and breath control, and then let out a great houff of breath... Shevek had never seen any work that so used all the strength of the body.

"He could not look on such work without trying to help in it. He could serve as handhold and brace when she needed leverage. They found this arrangement quickly by trial and error, and kept to it after the midwife came in. Takver gave birth afoot, squatting, her face against Shevek's thigh, her hands gripping his braced arms...

'I want to wash,' said Takver feebly.

'Here, help her wash up. Those are sterile cloths - there.'

'Waw, waw, waw' said another voice.

The room seemed full of people. " (4)

It is real life, filled with joy and pain simultaneously; rather than the cosy, comfortable unreality of the shell in which the Urrasti keep him and themselves. It is at the point where art intersects with the harshness of life: there is created the raw essence of reality.

The beauty of THE DISPOSSESSED is that in describing an utopian society from the inside, LeGuin has shown both its function and its flaws. Annares is not a perfect society. It is imperfect; because it contains human beings.

In 'The Day Before The Revolution' we are told "There would always be misery, waste, cruelty. (Odo) had never pretended to be changing the human condition. So long as people were free to choose, if they chose to drink flybane and live in sewers, it was their business. So long as it was not

the business of Business." (5). And people on Annarets do. Despite the fact that Annaretsi society is the perfect environment for a person to grow into, people still fail to think for themselves. It is easy to be an individual and to avoid stereotyping from greater pressures, yet it still happens. And although "an anarchist is one who, choosing, accepts the responsibility of choosing", people are still human enough to forget that responsibility, to be wrapped up in their own petty fears, greeds and jealousies. And although cooperation is the only way to survive on their harsh world, they can still be short-sighted enough to raid food-trains destined elsewhere in time of famine.

It is this that makes LeGuin's utopia believable: that despite its flaws it still works, like a real society. Many authors have succumbed to the temptation of creating a fictional utopia and then letting their characters argue out the advantages of their system from an unassailable position (for right behind them is their proof). Ursula LeGuin never falls into this trap. Malcolm Edwards, in his SFMonthly review of THE DISPOSSESSED said "It is almost impossible to talk about this novel except in terms of the discussion on political and power systems which runs through its pages." (6). Which summarises much of what I've been saying. But there are none of Heinlein's didactics on the advantages of the system in question. Shevek feels his society is failing because of the flaws he sees, and it is only when it is compared to Urras (and thus, indirectly with Earth itself - or human culture as it is) that it is shown to be preferable.

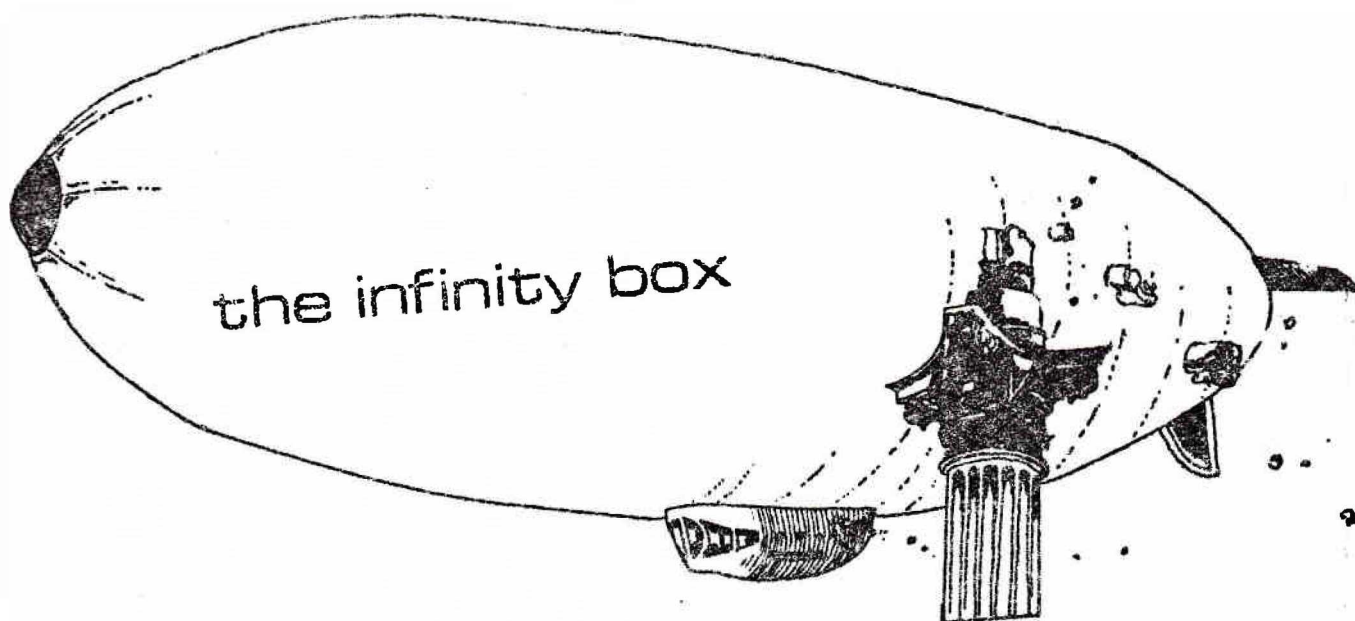
Ursula LeGuin's prose style is a thing of beauty, austerity and economy matching her subject matter. The theory of Simultaneity which Shevek is working on is described with an intelligence and apparent grasp of physics inventive enough to have made the novel fascinating even without the other attributes it possesses.

To close, I want to return to the New Testament. I hope Ursula LeGuin would not object to having her ideas compared to Christ's. "It is harder for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for the camel to pass through the eye of the needle." (7). The Annaretsi have been dispossessed, and are surely in the kingdom of heaven.

References:

- (1) THE WIND'S TWELVE QUARTERS; UK LeGuin; Gollancz; 1977 (p260)
- (2) MATTHEW : Chapter 4, Verse 4.
- (3) THE DISPOSSESSED; Gollancz; 1974; pp 190-1
- (4) THE DISPOSSESSED; pp 201-2
- (5) THE WIND'S TWELVE QUARTERS; p 274
- (6) 'The Dispossessed' Malcolm Edwards; Science Fiction Monthly; Vol 1, Number 2; December 1974.
- (7) MARK : Chapter 10, Verse 25.

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UP THE WALLS OF THE WORLD by James Tiptree Jr; Gollancz; 1978; 319pp;
£5.25 ISBN 0-575-02492-5

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

James Tiptree Jr. published her first sf stories in 1968 and quickly built up a considerable reputation. She won her first Nebula in 1973 for "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death" and her first Hugo in 1974 with "The Girl Who Was Plugged In". She has since added to these awards. Inevitably, her first novel has been eagerly awaited. Her writing is often shrill and she has an annoying habit of intruding the "science" into her stories by the use of idiotic biological analogies (as in "Your Haploid Heart" and "A Momentary Taste of Being"), but at her best she is an affectively powerful writer. Her forte is intense psychological melodrama, and UP THE WALLS OF THE WORLD is positively dripping with it. The human characters are as anguished and alienated a collection as has ever been assembled for an sf story (which is quite a feat when one remembers the standards set by Roque Moon, The Stars My Destination and innumerable Theodore Sturgeon stories) and the aliens are little better off. The principal alien characters are the atmosphere-dwellers of Tyree. Like most aliens in contemporary sf they are happy, non-violent culturally well-integrated and ecologically well-adapted characters (thus emphasising by contrast the tortured social and ecological relations of humankind) but they are thrown into terror, confusion and panic by the threat of imminent extinction. A destructive alien presence is busy annihilating whole races as it extinguishes their suns, and their telepathic senses reveal that they are next on the list. The destroyer is itself present as a character in the book, undergoing an identity crisis whose magnitude is revealed by the fact that it happens entirely in capital letters. Problems of moral responsibility abound on all sides.

Alternate chapters of the book are set on Earth, where a group of research subjects is conducting experiments in telepathic receptiveness, and on Tyree, where telepathic explorers set up a kind of psychic pipeline to Earth which might allow some of the natives to escape impending doom by usurping the bodies of the human telepaths. The whole narrative is set in the present tense, and this occasionally makes things even more confusing than they would otherwise be. It is not easy to follow the chronological correspondences between the passages set on Earth and those set on Tyree, and when the mind-switching begins it is not easy to recall exactly who is using whose body when, and where they are when they're not using anyone else's body at all. As might be expected from such a frenetic writer, though, the sheer pressure of the narrative and its rapid velocity carry

the reader through the confusion without its becoming too distressing. The plot also has the advantage of using familiar materials - we have met these goody-goody aliens and tortured souls so often before that we need little help to follow their transactions through to the end. The main surprise which the book has to offer is the nature of the destroyer, and it is a good one, though in retrospect one can't help feeling that all the capitalised identity-crisis which serves to keep that purpose hidden is more than a little artificial, and that the whole series of sections dealing with the mental state of the ultimate saviour might better have been left out altogether.

Tiptree, for all the excitement she has generated within the sf community, is not a particularly good writer. She is imaginatively vigorous, but the main reason for her popularity is probably her typicality: she is the ideal type of the contemporary sf writer in her methods, her mannerisms and her concerns. (For instance, her gruesomely unsubtle predilection for scoring feminist debating points, her impressionistic contrasts between human and alien social psychology, and her persistent thrust toward the imagery of transcendence are all at the very height of fashionability just now.) She may well prove to be something of a flash in the pan, but she does dazzle, and *UP THE WALLS OF THE WORLD* will delight a lot of readers for that reason. I fear that I find the rhythm of her prose rather discordant, and I have never been able to appreciate her work as much as I would like to, but there was enough in this novel to involve me and keep me reading despite the discordance. The book is, of course, a Publishing Event and not to be missed - but in twenty years time we won't be looking back on it as one of the landmarks of Sf history.

DREAMSNAKE by Vonda McIntyre; Gollancz; 1978; £4.95; 313 pages; ISBN 0-575-02480-1

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

"Fast, clean, exciting, beautiful," says Ursula LeGuin prominently on the cover. Unsubtle, she should have added, and hollow, unimaginative, predictable. Not for the first time, a brilliant novelette has been lengthened into a disappointing novel. "Of Mist and Grass and Sand" thoroughly deserved its Nebula award (for 1974); it was one of the most original and memorable stories of the 1970's (so far). Here it leads off, introducing the young female healer called Snake, together with her three real snakes, Mist the cobra, Sand the viper and Grass the alien dreamsnake. It forms the high point of the novel, detailing the ways in which the snakes are used to heal and comfort the sick, and outlining the background of an arid, mountainous landscape still pockmarked with radioactive craters centuries after a nuclear war. In the following 290 pages of new material very little is added of any consequence. What is added is a loose, uncomplicated plot of the 'quest' variety, agonisingly obvious at every turn. Instead of merely presenting a slightly primitive after-the-bomb future, Ms McIntyre seems intent on scoring moral points against the present day by showing the reader how much finer and fairer life could be -- for women in particular. A couple of examples will suffice. Although relatively few social changes have occurred, two major ones stick out: either sex may proposition the other, and contraception is achieved by both sexes through a process of biocontrol which is taught to all children. Even more incongruously, these practices seem to be universally accepted, even by isolated groups who rarely travel or see strangers. Such wishful thinking detracts from the book's credibility. But even so, this is not a bad novel, and should not be totally disregarded. It is saved by the power of the writing.

In the novelette (you may recall) Grass is killed by ignorant and frightened tribespeople who think it may be about to harm the boy, Stavin, whose life Snake is trying to save. But dreamsnakes cannot cause harm; their bite can only bring pleasurable dreams to ease pain. Of alien origin, they can exist on Earth but almost never breed here. Their rarity is great; the killing of one is a tragedy for the healers and particularly for Snake, who is engaged in a peripatetic probationary year following her training and feels she has failed. Her attempts to compensate take her to a city -- there remains at least one, preserving a high level of technology and maintaining contacts with an alien race, but she is not allowed inside -- and to a remote southern area, where finally and serendipitously she discovers the breeding requirements of the dreamsnakes. En route she encounters certain stock characters, including a young man of the strong, silent type who decides he is very much attracted to her; fortunately this is mutual, but unfortunately he waits until several days have passed before deciding to follow her, with the result that he catches up with her only at the end of the book. Then there is Melissa, a scarred, mal-treated waif whom Snake feels it necessary to adopt, and the irascible mayor of a small town who refuses to admit that he needs a healer's help, despite a gangrenous leg. These are all too good to be true. Even worse is North, the main villain of the book, a farcical figure suffering from pituitary gigantism who revels in his own iniquity.

DREAMSNAKE is a very moral book. Good inevitably vanquishes evil; all receive their just deserts. Snake herself goes around performing good works of various kinds as if she is in training for sainthood. The use of her medical knowledge in healing the sick is only a part of this; her session of extremely effective sex therapy with Gabriel, the mayor's son, and her adoption of Melissa are further examples. If such a high moral tone were being used allegorically, or if it had been lightened by humour, the result would have been more palatable. As it is, the world portrayed seems to be Disneylike -- part of an instructional story for children designed to show them how they should behave. In this context, the rest of Ursula LeGuin's comment on the cover ("A book like a mountain stream") becomes clear. DREAMSNAKE is slick and readable, but it never delivers what its first chapter promises, and is a poor follow-up to Ms McIntyre's first novel, THE EXILE WAITING.

THE NIGHT OF KADAR by Garry Kilworth; Faber & Faber; London, 1978; 193pp; £4.95; ISBN 0-571-11202-1.

Reviewed by David Wingrove.

In his debut novel, IN SOLITARY, Garry Kilworth displayed a clarity of vision and competence of delivery which made successful what might otherwise have been a quite immemorable story. THE NIGHT OF KADAR, his second book, is a considerable progression from the earlier work, and not solely in terms of technical accomplishment. It is a novel that embellishes a seemingly-stock science fiction theme -- that of alien landfall -- with the inner richness of the religion of Islam. And in ways this makes it a highly conservative book, a book that is honest to its subject matter; thoughtful in its approach to human relationships and motivations, if open to accusations of chauvinism and out-moded thinking. But it is difficult to portray Islam but in its own terms and aspects, and within its own referents this book works marvellously.

A starship is fired out from Earth and, reaching a suitable host planet, the human embryos it carries are fertilised, matured rapidly and the resultant people educated and given 'dream' childhoods before landfall. Given the framework of Islamic religion but not the trappings, they have choice but no direction. This is partly planned; allowing them to relate far easier to an alien planet, and to develop their own form of Islamic culture. But the equation is further complicated by the intrusion of a meddling alien force which manages to terminate their education mid-way through, leaving half of their complement morons - grown men and women born in total innocence, their minds blank, lacking all 'human' skills. The people's purpose on this new planet is another victim of this alien intrusion and is denied to them until much, much later; thus forming the central mystery of the novel. Othman, an engineer who assumes leadership of the group, senses that they must travel from the island upon which they landed to the mainland. The hostility of his people, his wife and even the planet itself, to this belief is not enough to shake his conviction. He is the subtly changing rock around which the events of the story unfold. About him the 'people' slowly change from unimaginative and naive townfolk to become hardened, communal bedu, a tribe of nomads.

The alien elements have a strong familiarity to them; Jessum, the planet, is an Earth-like place, with nicely exotic differences (giant snails, seas of quicksand, telepathic-but-harmless stickmen). Othman and his people see hardship, yet they adapt easily to the ways of this new world. And we are left with the final hint of a new breed of Man, a mixture of the human and the alien - able to communicate with the All, yet still possessing the gifts essential to humanity:

"Why were the town people empty? And their animals? Because they were not born of the planet? The ship's plants had patterns, but then they had been seeds and had sprung from the planet's soil. Fdar knew why he could send and receive the patterns through his own nerve ends - because he had only been a shell on arrival, whereas the creatures that were human already had the animal of themselves within their minds when they opened their eyes. They had a sad way of life. To see colours was not enough. One had to feel them to know their true worth.

To touch a reptile and experience the slow, lazy rivers flowing through the mind! Liquid malachite in the young. Sludge green from the mature amphibians. Or the short, sharp electric flash of an insect. A dull brown from a flying mammal, dozing in the thick of a tree's branches. Sudden lines of bright thread weaving a tapestry in one of the quick forest creatures, stationary only a nervous second before dancing with the trees again. These were valuable. These were denied the town people. " (p98)

Fdar, one of the morons who has inter-acted with the native stickmen, is one of the new humans, receptive to the powers of Jessum. And in a novel of lucid imagery and strong characters (Othman, his wife Silandi, and Jessum, the builder, all are well developed) he is the one I found most delightful, most colourful and intriguing. Othman is the central character, but Fdar steals the limelight (like the obligatory Hollywood dog) whenever we glance through his eyes momentarily.

Dissatisfactions? Only that this was not long enough, that Islam was too neatly incorporated and never didactically explained (a strength rather than a weakness, I'll admit). Few enough for a second novel: It only remains for me to recommend it strongly.

THE DEADLY MESSIAH by David Campbell Hill & Albert Fay Hill; Panther; St Albans; 1978; 315pp; 95p; ISBN 0-586-047387-7.

Reviewed by James Corley

Dennis Wheatley's sights seldom slipped below the level of *Dukes*, millionaire playboys and 7th Dan black magicians. It was a formula for certain success. Snobbish perhaps but the peasants loved it. We have to give the Hills credit for choosing to use only Ph Ds but above this meritocratic slip Wheatley's shade hovers like a supernatural portent of instant film-right sales.

The story: biblically virulent plagues are wiping out a sequence of American towns. Wise old rumpled Dr Gus, brilliantly unconventional epidemiologist, he of the twinkling bloodshot eyes, has a hunch something is knocking out the body's immune system. Young Jess Barrett, ex All-American football champ, six feet four in his golfing shoes, Rhodes scholar, brilliant electronics expert, has a theory it's an electrical field. Enter beautiful and elegant Vera Norman, Washington socialite, sophisticated Harvard psychology Ph D, the country's leading astrologer, the girl Jess has been saving his 230 pounds of well-toned muscle for. She demonstrates the obvious connection between this wholesale slaughter and the full moon exactly squaring Saturn and Mars in rising opposition to Uranus.

Despite orthodox medical protest they quickly convince the President's special assistant, brilliant soft-spoken Dr Maruyama, theologian, politician, troubleshooter, classmate of Jess and friend of Vera. Small world isn't it. The hunt is on for the insane maniac behind the catastrophes. He is identified as Jephthah Smith, a small, unprepossessing, evil genius who is a brilliant electronics expert and a brilliant astrologer both, but who sadly lacks a Ph D. With the help of her computer the enlightened Vera determines he owes his antisocial tendencies to being born a Leo with the Sun and Pluto in malefic opposition during an eclipse in Bethlehem. Can he be stopped before he obliterates the entire east coast of the USA? A serious question, you must admit.

Speaking as a Leo myself, I was rooting for him all the way.

SURVIVOR by Octavia E. Butler; Sidgwick & Jackson; 1978; 185pp; £4.50; ISBN 0-283-98465-1.

Reviewed by Brian Stableford.

Octavia Butler's third novel confirms the promise shown by *Patternmaster* and *Mind of my Mind*. It is an adventure story, intensely and tautly written, which carries the reader along to a well-orchestrated dramatic conclusion. It is the story of a colony established on an alien world by the members of a small Christian cult, which comes to play an unwitting but crucial role in the conflict between two "tribes" of alien indigenes. The central character is a girl named Alanna, adopted as an orphan by the leader of the religious community while still on Earth but never really converted to its beliefs and values. She is captured by the alien group which is opposed to the community's "friends" and held by them for two years until being released by a reprisal raid. This release sets in motion the train of events leading to the final confrontation between the two tribes, with the humans stuck in the middle and used as pawns. In order to secure their future Alanna must play a crucial role in the gathering conflict, fighting

not only ~~the aliens~~ believed by the colony to be their allies but also the ignorance and prejudices of the colonists themselves (not least those of her foster-father). The main narrative begins with her release from captivity and proceeds therefrom at relentless pace, but the background is filled in fully and comprehensively by a series of flashbacks. The background is linked to the common background of Mind Of My Mind and Patternmaster (chronologically, it is intermediate between the two) but the Patternists do not figure in the plot and the link is thus virtually superfluous.

There are one or two jarring notes in the plot. It was, I think, a mistake for the author to use an alien first-person viewpoint for some of the flashbacks, as the tone of the voice cannot sufficiently be distinguished either from the first-person voice of the other flashbacks or the auctorial voice of the main third-person narrative. It also upsets me to find (for the hundredth time) human and alien producing offspring without any more than the most cursory nod towards the implications of such an apparent possibility. Despite these minor points, though, the book commands the attention and involvement of the reader and develops its dramatic tension to a high pitch.

IN THE HALL OF THE MARTIAN KINGS by John Varley; Sidgwick & Jackson; 1978; £5.50; 316pp; ISBN 0-283-98504-6.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Many Sf writers present aliens and alien landscapes, but almost none achieve a convincing quality of alienness. Little green men from Mars, creatures from the other side of the galaxy and humans from the year 3000 all too often are shown thinking and behaving just like Americans of the 1960s, which is very sad for Sf (though probably it enables undereducated American teenagers to follow the stories without straining themselves). But once in a while an author comes along who is intelligent enough -- and brave enough -- to make his aliens properly alien. This is not just a matter of making one's little green men totally incomprehensible; it is the process (talent, gift if you like) of extrapolating trends to demonstrate, outrageously but believably, how alien mankind will have become in, say, a couple of hundred years or so.

That is what John Varley has achieved, a convincing quality of alienness. It is not the only outstanding facet of his work but it is the one which most impresses me and, as a continuing thread throughout the stories in this collection, it represents a convenient means of tying them together. The overt alienness is present in, for example, "Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance", where Barnum, who is basically human, has a pair of oversized hands growing from his ankles; they have been surgically attached, and his knee joints suitably modified, because he spends most of his time in deep space, beyond gravity fields. Barnum also has an alien plant as a symbiont. It pierces him from mouth to anus, but is astonishingly flexible in shape and relieves Barnum of the necessity of eating or breathing. Being intelligent, it also talks to Barnum (who calls it Bailey). Ember, in "In The Bowl" is an eleven-year-old girl who has replaced the hair on her head with a peacock fan of feathers, having transplanted the long blonde hair to her forearms and shins. She is an expert at "medicanice" as Varley calls it. She also has one eye (artificially made) which can see by infra-red light, but then so does everybody else on Venus. Yes, such things do sound outrageous and unbelievable, but a little outrageousness never did a story any harm, and Varley achieves conviction by avoiding the "gosh, wow!" approach (so beloved by Arthur C. Clarke) and presenting these alien elements as established fact, almost as throw-away lines. In a quieter vein is the alienness of a

community of deaf and blind people in "The Persistence of Vision" (only twenty years in the future, this one), where tactile communication has achieved undreamed-of subtlety.

Hand in hand with the alienness is a large measure of highly original technological extrapolation. Although Varley majored in Physics (and English) and takes care not to make scientific blunders, his extrapolations are so unrestrained that he is constantly walking the knife-edge between hard science prediction and fantasy. It is notable that none of his stories have appeared in Analog. There is the null-suit, a silvery personal force shield which automatically comes on if the pressure falls (essential for living on Mercury or Venus) and is controlled by a suit generator implanted in one's chest, replacing the left lung. This (and the cloning, sex-changes, memory storage banks and other items of science and technology which Varley uses) are not put in for their own sake but because his stories need them.

I had better make it clear that this is one of the best SF collections I have ever read. It has similarities of theme and treatment with Larry Niven's Neutron Star collection, but Varley's work is fresher, more original, more highly developed and (thank goodness) less determinedly American. I rate it more highly than any of the collections by Ellison, Tiptree, Martin, Dozois or Delany. They all contain the occasional weaker story; In The Hall Of The Martian Kings contains no weaker stories. (Which does not mean that Varley is necessarily a better writer than all of those others, just that he has picked the stories for his collection with greater care). If I compare this collection with Ursula LeGuin's The Wind's Twelve Quarters I find little to choose between them. Alright, Varley and LeGuin are poles apart in subject matter and treatment, but in common they have a brilliant end-product and a pervasive concern for humanity which is expressed in the treatment of their characters. If anything, I would place the LeGuin collection a little ahead on account of its greater range. But Varley is still young and still improving. He is, par excellence, one of the "second-generation" sf writers, synthesising the old and new approaches to the genre into something better than we have seen before. As Algis Budrys says, in his introduction to In The Hall Of The Martian Kings, "You will find traces of all of SF's history in Varley's work."

Are there no drawbacks at all to this collection, no points at which the perceptive reviewer can insert the knife and twist? Well, if you read both it and Varley's novel, The Ophiuchi Hotline, fairly close together, whichever you read second will seem a little disappointing because of the close similarity between the novel and several of the stories. Although the novel is separate, some incidents and most of its original technological gimmicks first appeared in stories like "The Black Hole Passes" and "Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance". In fact, six of these nine stories are set against the same background as the novel. Another shortcoming is that John Varley is not a great prose stylist. His writing is effective and entertaining (the term "slick" seems to have all sorts of unpleasant connotations which would be largely inappropriate here) but it can never be described as beautiful or poetic. Occasionally, Varley's desire to maintain pace and interest leads to an excess of technological gimmickry and a shortage of characterisation, but not often.

Ironically enough, the three stories here which do not share a background with The Ophiuchi Hotline are the most memorable --- the creme de la creme. "Air Raid" is one of those short stories which throws the reader in at the deep end and lets him work everything out for himself. It is the breath-takingly fast-moving and terribly gruesome tale of a justified skyjacking. To give any more details would spoil it for you. The story was placed second in this year's Hugo awards at Iguacon; considering that the winner was the

quest-of-honour, ~~Harlan~~ Ellison, with a well-publicised story from the special Harlan Ellison issue of Fantasy & Science Fiction, that seems a very creditable performance. "In The Hall Of The Martian Kings" also took second place in this year's Hugos, in the novella category. Reminiscent of Stanley G. Weinbaum's well-known story, "A Martian Odyssey", this charts the survival of five members of an expedition to Mars, after a dome blow-out kills their fifteen companions. The relationships of these five --- two men and three women --- are handled with great maturity. The Martian "Vegetation" they discover is another example of Varley's outrageous extrapolations. Plants never have wheels, but these do, and they are, of course, explained away quite logically in the end. "The Persistence Of Vision" is the third 'different' story in the book. It tells of a self-sufficient commune of congenitally deaf and blind people in the boom-slump USA of the 1990's. Not much of a subject, you might think, yet without any artificial drama John Varley makes it into the strongest story of the nine. In all probability you have never considered the communication problems of people like that, but Varley has; he has extrapolated the situation with impeccable logic and great imagination. This is a realistic story -- far less of a parable than its (presumed) model, H.G.Wells' "The Country of the Blind". In an eerie way these blind-deaf folk come alive; they are believable yet horribly alien. This occupies the rear spot in the book -- that recognised position of str strength -- and is the title story of the US edition. Only published in a magazine (F&SF) in March 1978, it should win a Hugo when its turn comes at Season 79.

There is a new John Varley novel soon to be published. I await it eagerly.

ORSINI GODBASE by James Corley; Robert Hale; 1978; 176pp; £3.95; ISBN 0-7091-6864-0.

Reviewed by David Wingrove.

James Corley's second novel has much in common with Sheckley's work. Like Sheckley, Corley is destroying the conventional patterns of plot development (in numerous ways) deliberately - to make us focus upon the ideas. And, much like Sheckley, his approach is tongue-in-cheek, via the medium of humour.

"Sammy, you must realise that this is a philosopher's stone. Philosophers, being men of ideas and not at all of a practical bent, would be most unlikely to produce any pharmacological wonder like an elixir of life. Most of them can get lost on the Underground never mind finding fountains of youth. No, Sammy, there's only one thing a philosopher's good for and that's for philosophising, producing ideas, words, verbiage, hot air, a million and one abstruse, incomprehensible, perfectly obvious and utterly impractical postulates." (p34/35)

And the theme of this book very much echoes that passage. As a story it functions on the same level as the tale of the snake who swallowed his own tale. The whole thing is, in essence, a comic nihilism. If comparisons can be drawn (apart from Sheckley) they must be to other of the genre's borderline black humourists, Sladek, Dick and Clute. It is a work of total irreverence, which even undermines its own foundations by the end, with the penetrating statement "There is no truth" and its acid postscript (which I'll leave you, the readers, to discover). But in the midst of this circular voyage there is the story of Orsini Maple, the richest and most powerful man in the World, together with his equally eccentric companions.

We first encounter Orsini sat inside his supertanker; a bed and a table in the vast room composed of the hold (and painted black) his total environment. A self-imposed exile from reality of six years is ending (the ultimate in introspective luxury), the reason for which we discover on Page 125. Here is the rationale (though a perverse one) for the whole tale:

"I've thought about the problem for a long time," said Orsini, 'and when you get down to it producing good reasons for doing anything is a fundamentally impossible task. We do it. We do it because we want to. But don't ask me why we want to. We just do.

'Maybe it's just a sort of socio-biological conditioning,' continued Orsini. 'People have always done things. That's the way it is. Like I said I thought about it for a long time. Even thinking about it was doing something. I almost decided to stop doing things.

'But there's no scope left for inertness. The pattern's wrong; time imposes its own order on events and it's a time for doing things, or so it seems. If you've got to do something you might as well do something big. What's bigger than taking over the Universe? Anyway what else is there left to do?'

'It's a big responsibility, Maple.'

'Everything is.'" (p125)

In fact, Orsini finds something that is slightly bigger than taking over the universe (hinted at in the title). All of which might seem to be rather too dry and too ethereal. But there is plenty to amuse, plenty to impress and stimulate in this book. I doubt whether the description 'novel' is really apt for what Corley is doing here (just as I would question it for Sheckley's Options). It is a difficult book that looks at life from a position of squint-eyed logical coldness yet manages to remain warm. The elements of sf hang like loose-fitting garments from its scanty plot, for this is a sinewy and energetic book that can only be approached with an open mind and a love of the philosophical absurdities. It is, by turns, poetic, funny, serious, ridiculous and touching. And it has only one message at core for its readers:

"Question the premises. Strip off the layers of assumption. The weapons of anarchy are not guns but the questions why and how. All arguments, statements, propositions are based upon absurdity. Existence is absurd. I broadcast the truth when I lie." (p142)

ROGUE MOON by Algis Budrys; Gollancz; 1978; 173pp; £3.95; ISBN 0-575-02476-3.

Reviewed by Brian Stableford.

All of Algis Budrys' early novels appeared in a period when relatively few sf novels were being published in hard covers, and he was perhaps a little too offbeat and mannered a writer to appeal strongly to most editors. Thus, neither the excellent Who? (1958) nor the now-classic Rogue Moon (1960) appeared in hard covers in the U.S.A.. Gollancz picked up the former in 1962 (after it had first been published in Britain by Badger Books) but we have had to wait a great deal longer for a proper edition of Rogue Moon.

Rogue Moon was a little unlucky not to win a Hugo in 1961, being beaten by a better book (A Canticle For Leibowitz) but one which should, technically speaking, have won its Hugo the previous year. Its reputation has, however, been maintained over the years and has kept it more or less constantly in

print as a paperback. It was one of the first sf novels to confront the alien (here represented only by an artifact) in a manner and a context which stressed the qualities of incomprehensibility and consequential hostility. The story was initially titled THE DEATH MACHINE, but this was altered before it ever reached print, presumably by the then-editor of Fantasy & Science Fiction, where an abridged version appeared. This more appropriate title refers to a "maze" discovered on the moon by visitors who use a matter duplicator as a means of travel. The story deals with the psychology of the man who tries to run the maze, his duplicate bodies being killed at each attempt, and with the psychology of the man who sends him out to die so frequently. James Blish once commented that all the characters in the book are certifiably insane, but this was not the author's intention, and is an appearance generated by the rather stylised and brittle prose. In point of fact, the novel's philosophical significance and quality of characterisation are often overestimated because of the deliberate but essentially empty ambiguous and enigmatic remarks, but even when this is taken away the book remains original in conception, neat in execution, and archetypal of a particular world-view which has since come to be much more prevalent in science fiction. There is much food for thought here, and no question that the book deserves to appear in permanent binding. It may remain the last testament to a writing talent which, if the author's senile and overblown posturings in his current column in Locus are to be taken at face value, has since been lost.

NECROMANCER by Robert Holdstock; Futura; 1978; 327pp; 95p; ISBN 0-7088-1406-9.

Reviewed by Garry Kilworth.

One of the recurring problems a writer faces, each time he-stroke-she sits down to produce a novel, is whether to continue in the established (and possibly expected) vein - in Robert Holdstock's case an alien-planet situation - or whether to take off in another direction. The decision cannot be taken lightly: a full length novel represents a great deal of a writer's time and the product will become an irremediable part of his career. Once a book has been written and published it cannot be made to 'go away' and the critics will never let a mistake die. One thing is sure, whichever way a writer goes, someone is bound to call it the wrong direction. For his third novel, Robert Holdstock has gone back to the fork and tried a new path. I believe he has been successful with NECROMANCER.

The Oxford Dictionary defines necromancy as: the act of predicting by means of communication with the dead; magic; enchantment. Therefore if one wished to categorise into which genre particular works fall, the horizons of Science Fiction would have to be broad to encompass NECROMANCER. The book is packaged as an 'occult' novel and it is true to say that the character and the reader, become involved in an esoteric and supernatural experience. I prefer to remain unencumbered by classifications and try to allow my senses to dictate my level of enjoyment and depth of satisfaction.

Apart from a short excursion to France the action takes place wholly within the fictitious small town of Higham, West of London. The centrepiece of the plot is a notorious stone font located in the ruins of a burnt-out church. A baby was dropped during its christening and its head struck the font, resulting in an arrest in the mental growth of the child.

The retarded boy's name is Adrian, and his mother, June Hunter, believes the stone to be somehow responsible for the loss of her son's persona. Edward Hunter, her husband, is unable to convince her that her blame is misdirected and she in turn believes him to be ineffectual and lacking in

imagination. Instead, she enlists the aid of two very strong characters (although even these two cannot satisfy June Hunter's intense obsession with retrieving her son's mind).

Lee Kline, an American historian with a penchant for cynicism and boredom, becomes accidentally involved with the hapless Hunter family. The involvement is partly psychological - Kline, in keeping with one or two other characters in the book, seems to have a half-conscious inclination towards self-destruction - and partly due to an overwhelming professional curiosity. His interest in an ancient piece of enscribed stone, the Higham fragment, leads him to a chance meeting with June Hunter and out of the dialogue that ensues they find that their joint (but diverse) interests are directed towards the font. The stone font has been (and will be, throughout the novel) responsible for the spilling of much blood.

While NECROMANCER is a diversification for Holdstock, blood and ancient stones are not. Both appear in EARTHWIND, his second novel, and the symbolism inherent with his use of the two is skillfully employed in directing the reader down paths overhung with mysticism and undergrown with strange evocations. Look for the blood. Listen to the stones.

June Hunter is convinced that the fate of her child is inextricably entwined with that of the font, but the eventual connection is possibly not the one she imagined or one in which she would have allowed herself to believe. In his search for the secret of the stone Kline involves Francoise, a very strange woman. In fact, privately, Kline calls her 'The Crazy Lady'.

In a letter she tells Kline:

'You ask me how I know . . . about the ancient cultures of my country. My gift is very special and very personal. You will think I am mad, but I shall tell it to you. I am psychic. You know what that is . . . Two hundred years ago I would have been called a witch . . . But there is a word that describes me better . . . Necromancer. I am a necromancer.'

Francoise Jeury is Kline's female counterpart and at times threatens to become the stronger character. To put it crudely, she's hung up on stones - the older, the better. Kline finds her amongst the monoliths of Le Menec. While Kline is the kind of person who meets people and situations head on, Francoise is more cautious. She carries an intrinsic sensitivity which is apart from her extrasensory perception. There's a deal of forked lightning that passes between these two people during their electric affair. 'He knew instinctively, that he would not have been able to fully trust and relate to a young woman An old Crazy Lady was far more acceptable; but a Crazy Lady in her thirties was a challenge.'

In the middle of all this is the unfortunate child - at least when he is himself. In the beginning, the effusion of malevolence from the placid boy are enough to set the reader's nerves tingling, ready for a story which caresses the heart with horny fingers, and when the squeeze finally comes, a holocaust (can I still use that word?) explodes within the brain. There is a reckoning (and every occult story should have one) that hits with the force of an unexpected hurricane. Its name is Cruachos.

Cruachos and Kline are the main combatants in this novel, and neither is a lightweight by any means. There are many other major-minor characters that occasionally snipe at each other, such as Adrian's sister and the June Hunter-hating vicar of the ruined church. (One thing I did dislike about June Hunter was her use of the nickname 'Kline-bottle'. I found it nonsensical and irritating. It pulled its character down to the nursery level and in my opinion retarded the like-loath relationship between the two, which otherwise was developed very well.)

NECROMANCER is ~~in the~~ big book league - some 140-thousand words - but its fast pace keeps the reader at a just-on-breathless run. I slowed to a walk once or twice, I have to admit, during the exposition on standing stones. This is a purely subjective thing, but I personally find myself skipping through chunks of stone-lore. At the risk of being accused of punning, I would rather these pieces were fragmented. However, some may consider this sort of background material is essential to a book of this kind. There could be no quibbling over the amount of research. The only character which does not emerge as wholly convincing is that of Edward Hunter, who appears a little too maive and immature. As a doctor he does not convince me, and not just because he still reads comics. It is his continual mental retreats from unpleasant situations that fails to ring true. However, this weakness perhaps serves to add contrast to the more clearly-defined, stronger characters.

As with Robert Holdstock's other novels, the writing is literate and the whole well-structured. NECROMANCER is a multiple-layered novel, the main theme being that of Obsession, with a side-issue of Possession. And despite my reservations concerning the lowdown on those standing stones, I have to admit to a newly-awakened respect within myself for their presence on the Earth. They've been here longer than I have and it doesn't take a lot of imagination to see something more than solid rock in their man-fashioned dimensions and patterns. I recall a line from a poem about standing stones by A.H.Snow: 'Surviving is what they are good at'.

MIRACLE VISITORS by Ian Watson; Gollancz; 1978; 239pp; £4.95; ISBN 0 575 02474 7

Reviewed by David Wingrove.

"Squatters in psychological space?" She laughed. "I don't feel as though I'm being squatted in. Do you, John?"

"I'm not sure," muttered Deacon, reviewing the events of December. "Maybe I do. What is mind, after all? Do we generate it in our brains - or do we simply transmit it? William James posed that puzzle decades ago, and there's still no answer. If the latter's the case, and we simply transmit, then we're all like receivers, or modulators, embedded in some sea of consciousness. The same sea." (p78)

I see Ian Watson's latest novel, MIRACLE VISITORS almost as a kind of summation of his previous four novels - examining once again that area of communication/contact between different states of consciousness and awareness. The above quotation, with its question "what is mind?" is central to Watson's work. This novel places this whole area of philosophical/scientific speculation within the framework of the UFO phenomenon in a rather bold attempt to examine the situation from as many angles as possible. I say bold, because any attempt to rationalise the irrational or to 'know' the 'unknowable' is, in Watson's own words, like constructing "the unreadable in pursuit of the inexpressible". And if the book is to be held to its own logic it is only presenting us with another illusion, manufactured, like one of the tulpas mentioned in the book, from the "UFO-conscious state". But, accepting this necessary flaw, it is a fascinating book, comparable to ALIEN EMBASSY in its achievement. Like ALIEN EMBASSY it places a succession of 'realities' before us, furnishes each with its own seemingly-cohesive set of arguments and, in so doing, 'proves' just how intangible each is. But, unlike ALIEN EMBASSY, it is neither concerned with the matter of choice with regard to these differing states of 'reality' nor with the morality of

aspiring to a 'higher-order patterning'. It re-states ideas that have been either implicit in the ideas or explicit in the text of all four previous novels, but it views them from an entirely different viewpoint. In *THE EMBEDDING* and *THE JONAH KIT* there is the constant endeavour to discover how the mind functions, to chart its limitations and speculate upon the different ways it could function. Indeed, the principle of 'unknowability' explored in these two books and examined far more thoroughly in *THE MARTIAN INCA*, is the essential element of this new work:

"You can never validate a system completely within the terms of that system...This same limit applies within each hierarchy of organization of the universe. Systems are only 'proved' - they're only fully determined - by higher systems. UFO's can't yield to our science because they're part of a higher psychic pattern. "

(p.205)

But UFO's are not treated simply as an abiogenetic product of the psyche; (the semi-autonomous tulpas created from the meditations of Tibetan adepts) they are presented here as manifestations of a higher-order reality which we interpret within the framework of our age:

"Intrusions of higher-order knowledge into a lower-order system, namely the human mind, to draw it upwards. The alien was the miracle from now on: this was the message of the UFOs. And how Man needed the image of the alien, to help himself evolve, now that he had filled his world and there were no more 'Here Be Dragons' zones upon the map!" (p.188)

In this novel we, the readers, can never be certain just how tangible each of the illusions presented to us actually are, until the very end. And then there is that element of choice that is essential to Watson's novels: that we can interpret it in one of three ways. We can choose, like Shriver, the UFO specialist and ex US Airforce pilot, to accept the UFO phenomenon at its face value - as a personally proven but 'unprovable' fact. We can, like John Deacon, an academic famous for his enquiries into altered states of consciousness, view it as an access-point into the 'sea of consciousness', as an ascension to a higher plane of reality where the 'ego' is discarded. Or, finally, we can reject the illusion altogether as 'madness' and grab hold firmly of the here-and-now, like Michael and Suzie, the young student and his girlfriend (and it is ironical, because Michael is the one who goes deepest into the illusion and is most deeply scarred by it).

Where these illusions differ from previous ones dished up for us by Watson is that there is no longer the 'carpet' of reality and the abyss acting separately: here they interact, in the religion of Sufi and in John Deacon's final act of acceptance:

"He saw through the trapdoor depths of the carpet at the same time as he stood upon it firmly." (p.125)

Here, Ian Watson is dealing with the only subject matter that can propound upon without being tied to its age and being reduced to anachronism (like the broomsticks, witches and ghosts that were earlier manifestations of the UFO phenomenon in one of these realities). To deal with technology evades the problem - and Watson has realised here, as elsewhere, that you must tackle the question of perception itself. There is a great deal of scepticism exhibited by all of the characters in this novel: it is an essential element without which the book would not be convincing. The sleight of hand and the Cosmic Joke are central to the book. The phenomenon, we see, uses confusion and hysteria as its tools. It can hint, but it cannot tell.

It may demonstrate, but never leave any evidence. Like Aldiss (in his short story "Appearance Of Life") Watson speculates upon whether mankind may be no more than "advanced thinking robots", whether he may be just a fluctuation, an amplitude peak "along a continuous line of being" (p.210). He plays with the idea of knowing and unknowing (a less romantic and far more logical examination than that employed by Ursula LeGuin in *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS* but with the same conclusion that ignorance, or 'not-knowing' is the factor that keeps everything in existence). But these are only peripheral to the core, which is that we have all the clues but not the plan with which to put it all together and attain a "higher patterning awareness" (p.233). The philosophical implications are broad (if colourful) for, remaining ignorant of the overall plan, we use "like so many components of a dismantled engine" pieces of this plan to carry out "lower-order" desires ("to kill or maim, or find buried treasure or compel success in love"). Watson, with a sweeping gesture, embraces the whole of pseudo-science at the same time as he rejects it. It matches Paul Hammond's dismissal of our universe as a 'shadow' of the real thing in *THE JONAH KIT* for audacity; though it acts not on the world but on a single being, John Deacon. It is, eventually, his story, though for a while it seems as if Michael is the focus for events. It is he who finds an access-point and chooses to step through into a new level of awareness. And of him, as is said of the leader of the Sufi sect we encounter earlier in the book, Sheikh Muradi, we could say: "He seemed to live his own life as though what most people saw as facts and absolutes he saw as metaphors for another sort of event, occurring in another way entirely." (p.125).

I have dwelt on the themes to the exclusion of all else so far; almost as if this were nothing more than an exercise in ideas. It is far, far more. I have commented before that *ALIEN EMBASSY* was, in terms of style, a vast improvement on Watson's previous works. This book maintains that fine level of writing (especially in the opening segment of Part 5 where Michael returns to reality with all its sensual delights), and succeeds as a fast-paced adventure for most of its length (with a small exception around page 210 where I felt I was being shown too little and told too much). There is a delightful interplay between image and idea throughout that enriches the book (small observations that emphasise the themes), scenes that re-iterate what has been said earlier, that embellish in a concrete manner the ideas (often absurd, judged from an inflexible attitude) presented to us. Outlining the plot would not assist in gauging whether this is a book to add to your reading list, for many of the events seem ludicrous out of context. I can only say, in that respect, that it is the only satisfying book I have ever read examining the UFO phenomenon. I keep waiting for Ian Watson to peak out, but he just keeps getting better.

THE VIEW FROM SERENDIP by Arthur C. Clarke; Gollancz; 1970; £5.50; 273pp; ISBN:

Reviewed by Bob Shaw

Science Fiction isn't Arthur C. Clarke's whole existence - his interests range further and wider - but it's true to say he has led a science fiction life. *THE VIEW FROM SERENDIP* is a new collection of his essays, but Clarke calls it "a first approximation to an autobiography" and that description is appropriate because his thoughts about technology, space and future are a vital part of the man's persona.

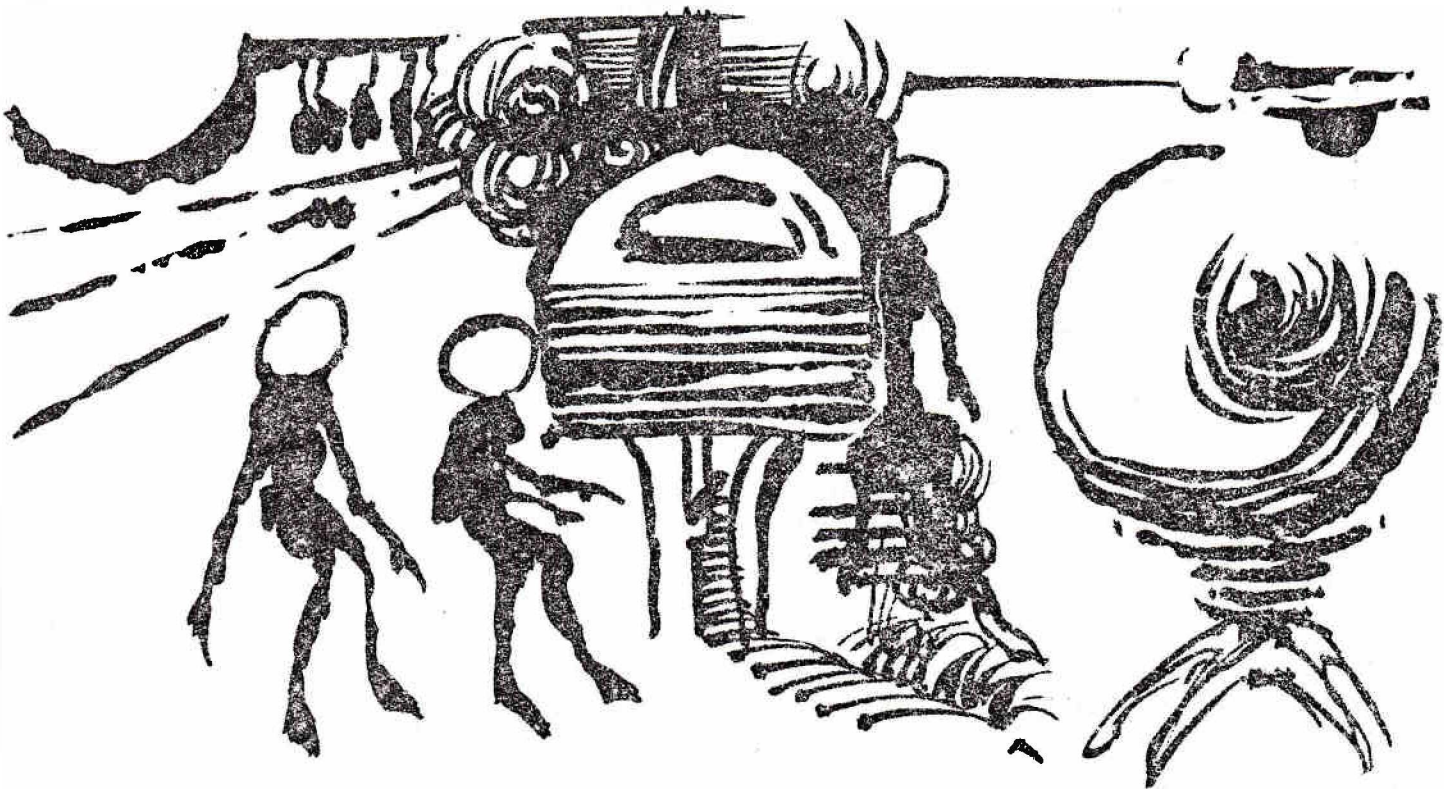
One can imagine that if, say, Malcolm Muggeridge had been born a century earlier he would simply have been an earlier version of Muggeridge, but

Arthur C. Clarke - true child of the space age - would have had to be somebody else altogether. (It would be interesting to speculate on what he would have done had he been born in 1817 instead of 1917, but that's a job for ACC himself....)

Who else, for instance, would have ventured into sub-aquatics, not for any of the usual reasons, but for the purpose of experiencing something close to the weightlessness of space travel? That insight comes on the first page of the book and it goes on in that way for 273 pages which I found enlightening, funny and fascinating. In structure the book consists of a fairly complete account of ACC's life since he was captivated by Ceylon in the mid-1950's, interspersed with smoothly-dovetailed articles on a wide variety of subjects.

One of the most evocative passages comes in a chapter about the early days of the British Interplanetary Society, at the time when Clarke was the organisation's treasurer and general propagandist. C S Lewis was then very antagonistic to rocket societies on the grounds that they would help spread mankind's crimes to other planets. Clarke, predictably annoyed by that viewpoint, met him in a pre-arranged open debate in an Oxford pub - undeterred by the fact that Lewis was seconded by no less a personage than Professor J R R Tolkien! Clarke's second was Val Cleaver, later to be head of Rolls-Royce's Rocket Division - so the occasion was a portentous one indeed, an alligning of forces.

The essays range from topics like the servant problem in Ceylon to the limits of knowledge, and are drawn from such a wide spectrum that it is unlikely that the ordinary reader is unlikely to find much that is already familiar to him. And as a bonus for Clarke fans there is a very short story - "When The Twerms Came" - which the author claims is the last he will ever write. ACC's predictions have a habit of coming true, but I hope this one about his future literary output is way off the beam.



BSFA AWARD 1978

Nominations as at 24 November 1978:-

(1) Best Novel

Aldiss (Brian)	THE MALACIA TAPESTRY
Amis (Kingsley)	THE ALTERATION
Bayley (Barrington)	THE GARMENTS OF CAEAN
Bishop (Michael)	A FUNERAL FOR THE EYES OF FIRE
Bishop (Michael)	STOLEN FACES
Bova (Ben)	MILLENIUM
Coney (Michael)	HELLO SUMMER, GOODBYE
Crowley (John)	BEASTS
Haldeman (Joe)	ALL MY SINS REMEMBERED
Margolis	CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRASS
Niven & Pournelle	LUCIFER'S HAMMER
Pohl (Frederik)	GATEWAY
Pohl (Frederik)	MAN PLUS
Priest (Christopher)	A DREAM OF WESSEX
Shaw (Bob)	WREATH OF STARS
Tennant (Emma)	HOTEL DE DREAM
Tennant (Emma)	THE CRACK

((The third entry - those of you who are eagle-eyed will no doubt recall - was on last year's list, apparently erroneously, as it's first paperback appearance in this country was this year. Thus it has been nominated again))

(2) Best Collection/Anthology

Cowper (Richard)	THE CUSTODIANS
LeGuin (Ursula)	ORSINIAN TALES
LeGuin (Ursula)	THE WIND'S TWELVE QUARTERS
Shaw (Bob)	COSMIC KALEIDOSCOPE

(3) Best Cover Illustration

NO AWARD as yet.

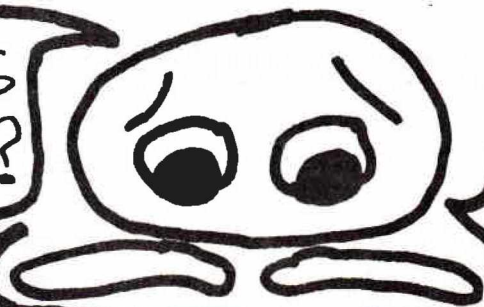
(4) Media Award

Doctor Who: "The Pirate Planet" (by Douglas Adams)
Hitch-hikers Guide To The Galaxy
The Last Wave

((I'm concerned that no nominations have been received for the Best Cover Illustration category, and perhaps a few of you will have a look at the paperbacks you've bought this year and see if any of them are worth the effort of a nomination))

And a last notice from Colin Lester: "I have mislaid the name and address of one of the people who sent me money for a discount-price copy of ISFY 1. If the person will contact him then he can check with his correspondence file and send the copy. Write c/o: Pierrot Publishing, 17 Oakley Rd, N1 3LL.

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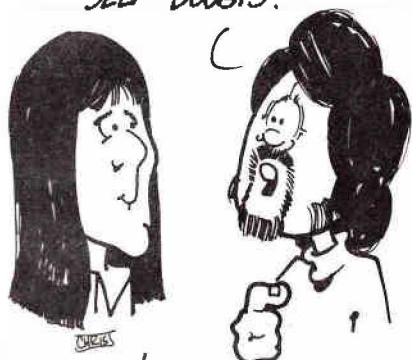
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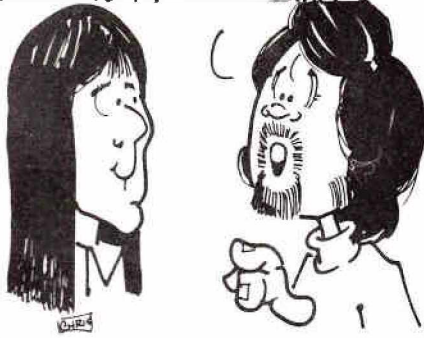
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