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VECTOR 97

A Little More Off The Top AN EDITORIAL Mike Dickinson.

This morning I listened to the vastly popular Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy. Later, I read in my Sunday Times the puffery for the forthcoming re-run of the Outer Limits, which was given space and respect through its selection as the 'Programme of the day'. It also mentioned the writer Harlan Ellison as if the average Sunday Times reader should know of him and his quality. Yesterday on Barry Norman's magazine programme 'Breakaway', the TV reviewer picked this as one of the programmes of the week eliciting some great enthusiasm for it and Sci-Fi in general from the TV guru himself. Recently, the Daily Mirror even removed the revelations of Hugh Hefner's former mistress from its centre pages in order to print an illustrated trailer for the second 'Star Wars' movie. At the

moment, in an almost unprecedented step, Radio Four's 'Morning Story' is given over to a ten-part adaptation - with the superb Peter Jones as narrator - of Roy Lewis's 'Once Upon an Ice Age', previously known as 'The Evolution Man'.

There are of course other SF programmes around, but what distinguishes these is sheer quality. For several years, as it has built up steam, it's been customary for SF readers to wince and mumble scatological descriptions at the whole SF phenomenon. I know because I used to be one of them. However much I groaned at the faults of 'Star Wars', I was forced to confess that I enjoyed it hugely. I had no reservations about 'The Hitch Hiker's Guide to The Galaxy', and I pity anyone who did not enjoy it. But the most interesting piece of news are those on the Roy Lewis book and 'Outer Limits'. Back in the early '60s, before TV spawned such atrocities as 'Blake's Seven', we expected pleasure from TV SF. The various 'Quatermass' and 'Andromeda' series, 1984, 'Out of This World' (dramatising stories by Asimov and others) and 'The Outer Limits' had offered good entertainment and often the authentic feeling of the real stuff. 'Dr. Who' has continued to show a high standard of wit and invention, even 'Star Trek' had its moments. It is only in the later seventies that we have been taught to be wary. There have been few worse things of any description, even including Show-Jumping and 'Miss World', than the first two series of 'Blake's Seven' (since somewhat revived), 'Spave 1999' and 'Fantasy Island'. Perhaps we can hope that they were a bad patch and that the future can only get better.

Now, if such media heavies are prepared to treat SF with respect and respond to its better efforts, it may get closer to SF and we may even yet force them to drop that horrible plastic term 'Sci-Fi'. Even now the benefits are showing clearly with such original works as 'Hitch Hiker's' and the disinterment of vanished classics like the Lewis book. My third copy of 'Evolution Man' was falling apart, the first two having been kept by borrowers, and it seemed that nobody was going to review it. You see, that book (whatever its title) is not only an SF classic, but also the funniest book I have ever read. Sci-Fi will always be a dirty word, but media SF need not always be a mess. As it

continues to become more popular, we are getting the good as well as the bad. There is also little chance of the ghettoisation from which literary SF is only just emerging.

In this issue, the results of such a ghettoisation are made only too apparent in Christopher Priest's SFWA resignation article. From discounting rumours of corruption, it is obvious that no organisation can hope to deal adequately with the amount of SF related material now available. Whilst SF was a small cell (hermit's or prisoner's) it was easier to study and assess, but after years of SF writers insisting that their was the literature of the Twentieth Century, the argument is catching on. Ironically, this is catching on at a time when the credibility of scientists is only a little above that of politicians and economists. Perhaps it is too late to return to the good old-fashioned relevance that John Brunner pleads for. Internal Space and forms of fantasy (Space Opera etc) seem more attractive to the Western World than the immediate future, or is it that people have tired of the old crudities of the 1950s engineer-worship and prefer the oblique approach of a Ballard or a Watson? As SF gradually begins to take over literature and the media, the reply may say something about the society which consumes SF.

Am I alone in believing that the aborting of the US space programme has very much to do with the new arms race and the posturing about Afghanistan? Could the 1980s lead to the reappearance of the Outward Urge? If SF really foretells the future trends of our actions, this seems unlikely, but this great new public awareness of SF could lead to a real demand for a Space Programme. Wishful Thinking? - for all of us I hope not.

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CHRISTOPHER PRIEST :

OUTSIDE THE WHALE

Seacon, the 1979 Worldcon in Brighton, was the first large convention to be held in Britain since the invention of something called a "SFWA Suite". This is an area of the con-hotel set aside for the exclusive use of writers, one to which they can retire and enjoy a quiet drink with their colleagues, one where they can be themselves, and one where they can find temporary sanctuary from the vexations of fame.

Also at Seacon there were a number of programme-items novel to British fans. There was a "meet the authors" party, and there were autograph parties, and throughout the con there was a series of readings by authors from their works.

It will sound like British snobbism to say it, but much of this was greeted with resentment by many rank-and-file British fans, especially as certain authors carried their "fame" with ill grace and bad manners. Such authors were in a minority, but their behaviour was so noticeably arrogant that many of their colleagues were embarrassed by the thought that they might be identified with them.

Although this obnoxiousness is still a minority phenomenon, anyone who follows trends in the sf world cannot help but have noticed that this kind of attitude is spreading. One hears of writers wanting to charge convention-committees for their services (on the principle that fans only go to conventions to see them). Authors use their "position" at conventions to publicize causes. Some authors start and administer fan-clubs for their own books. One author even had the temerity to expect the Seacon committee to set aside a special room for her exclusive use, so that she could hold audiences for her fans.

This attitude sees fandom as existing only to feed the egos of authors, and is thus essentially contemptuous of it.

As I am a writer with fannish roots, and am still to a degree active in fandom, I cannot help but find this attitude repellent. Quite apart from a sense of being indirectly slighted, it strikes me that it is inimical to the natural and beneficial harmony that has existed in the science fiction world for many years.

Having been a member of SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America) for nearly ten years, I have come to the conclusion that the breeding-ground for these attitudes lies there.

I originally joined SFWA for the same reasons as I write science fiction. I believe in sf as a valid and radical form of literature. I find the company of other sf writers stimulating and

enjoyable. On the whole, sf writers are alert to the vicissitudes of the publishing industry and freely exchange helpful information about markets, contracts, and so on. I presumed, when I joined SFWA, that what I would find would be a concentration of such pleasures and interests, that there would be a certain purity of intent, a sense of radicalism and progressiveness, and above all a propagation of the general good mood and high principles that so many sf writers manifest in person.

However, I am British and I live in Britain, and so of necessity my role as a SFWA member is from a distance. Becoming perforce an observer, I have had for the last decade the opportunity to watch as an interested party while SFWA has expanded at more or less the same rate as sf itself has expanded.

The expansion of the sf genre has been an acquisition of fatty tissue rather than a hardening of muscular flesh. Sf is now over-produced, with writers and markets galore, series and sequels and film tie-ins and comic-book versions and illustrated novellas, and all the other decadent symbols of a declining literary form. In my role of SFWA-watcher, in but not really of, I observe that SFWA has encouraged this decadence by putting "market" considerations before literature, by concentrating on, say, the sort of success attached to making a lot of money rather than the sort of success attached to writing well.

SFWA, like all writers' organizations, exists for three reasons. Firstly, to work for the common good by creating a lobby. Secondly, to provide a social context within which isolated writers can contact their peers. Thirdly, to promote an ambience, both commercial and artistic, within which creative freedom is encouraged.

It is in the last of these, for reasons both specific and general, that there has been the greatest dereliction of duty.

I have at last escaped from the floundering cetacean that is SFWA, by the simple expedient of failing to renew my membership this year. Now I am away and free, it seems to me that it concerns the sf community at large to know something of SFWA. I am a partisan, minority voice, admittedly, and I have not left SFWA without reason. (But a caveat: SFWA as a collective entity is greater or lesser than the sum of its parts. I have been in personal contact with many SFWA members over the years, and I almost invariably find that on this personal, individual level, few people are in agreement with the collective mind. Such is the momentum of the collective, though, that this seems to have absolutely no effect. It is a curious but real phenomenon. Therefore I must point out that my comments on SFWA are directed at the collective, not the individuals.)

Firstly, then, how does one join SFWA? Qualification for membership is obtained by publishing in the U.S.A. a piece of work that is recognizably science fiction. It does not have to be in an acknowledged sf outlet, such as one of the genre magazines, but in cases of doubt it does have to pass the subjective test of one or more officials of SFWA. In general, this is managed sensibly and well. The result is, in theory, that the membership is made up of active professional sf writers.

However, there's a thumping great presumption behind this philosophy. Briefly, it presumes that entry to the American market is the only test of professionalism. The sale of a 100,000-word novel to, say, Sanrio in Japan, or Calmann-Lévy in France, or Victor Gollancz in Britain, does not count. The sale of a 600-word vignette to Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine does.

The argument in defence of this philosophy goes that the "A" in SFWA stands for "America", that it is principally an American organization, and that if people elsewhere feel resentful of this they should start their own writers' organizations.

This is a sound defence so long as you believe that America is the only place in the world where science fiction is written. It is indeed the largest single market, and there are certainly more sf writers living there than anywhere else. The indications are, though, that this is merely a socio/geographical phenomenon, the product of a large, populous country enjoying a high standard of living. If you view the facts in a different light they take on different shapes.

For instance, if you express the number of writers actually working as a function of overall population, you discover that Britain has, per capita, more sf writers and more full-time sf writers than the States. In Australia, a nation with a population smaller than New York, there are proportionately more writers than in the States. In countries like France and Holland there are writers who enjoy the same sort of status and following as (just for example) Brian Aldiss or Chip Delany, yet whose names are all but unknown in the English-speaking sf world. The best-selling sf author in the world lives in Poland, the world's best-selling sf series came from Germany.

All these authors are permitted to join SFWA so long as their work makes it across to the States. But if it doesn't? If their work has the disadvantage of being written in a "foreign" language, if it is "too British", what then? I know of several instances where successful writers, many of whom lived by the pen, have been barred from entry to SFWA simply because American taste was not congruent with their work. Is a successful French author any less of an author because Analog or Ace Books don't like his stuff? Apparently so.

The first reason for clubbing together to form an authors' society is to gain some kind of collective muscle. Because there is a multitude of writers in the States, their numbers and influence should provide the cornerstone of a collective presence. Fifty British writers make a weak lobby on their own, as do thirty in Australia or fifteen in France. But those writers joining with the Americans would make a powerful worldwide lobby. American authors enjoy considerable success in the booming translation markets of Europe, yet these major markets are countries where SFWA is barely represented.

SFWA is at present a chauvinistic collective that accepts some and rejects others, and consequently it enfeebles itself.

Moreover, there is a persistent feeling within SFWA that what they call "overseas" members are more trouble than they're worth. Last

year, an author (who is extremely famous, and who writes long, boring books about old men) circulated a memo to a number of people in SFWA saying, in effect, that "overseas" members were an expensive nuisance, and should be charged a levy for the privilege of joining. In this particular author's worldview, "overseas" is a place for tax-exiles and loonies...and thus he ignored the fact that the majority of the world's population was born "overseas".

In its attitude to membership, SFWA is inward-looking, isolationist and self-serving.

This inherent conservatism extends also to political bias. To its eternal dishonour, SFWA has acted in the recent past to suppress freedom of speech and to silence those whose opinions did not conform to what was presumed to be the consensus of the collective mind.

SFWA publishes a fanzine called Forum. This is distributed to all writer-members (there are other kinds of members, incidentally, mostly publishers and agents), and contains the gossip of the society. The contributions to Forum are supposed to be confidential, and each issue prints a statement prohibiting any quotation from the text. Before you die of excitement at the thought of what this must contain, you can take it that most of Forum is intensely boring and trivial, and the prohibition serves not to protect confidence but embarrassment. The dialogues in Forum are at approximately the intellectual level of arguments in the public bar, and reveal the same order of prejudices.

In the early 1970s, the work of the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem began to appear in the West. It attracted a lot of attention. The United States was one of the last places in the world where his work was published, which was ironical because by then he was already selling more books than most American writers (and today is the top seller of all). Realizing that Lem was in a country lacking hard currency, the incumbent SFWA committee invited Lem to become an honorary member. Lem accepted. In due course he started receiving SFWA mailings.

One can only presume he read Forum with a surprised expression. Certainly he did read it, because after two or three years he wrote an article for a German newspaper, scathingly describing the attitudes of the collective SFWA consciousness. He made free and easy with many of the contributions to Forum, notably one in which Poul Anderson quoted Robert Heinlein's perceptive literary pensée: that writers are in competition for the readers' beer-money. For all the sarcasm of Lem's article, he wrote it from an impassioned point of view, and his own expressed attitude to writing was written in a civilized manner and was modest, moderate and balanced.

SFWA's reaction to this was one of revenge. It was felt: (1) Lem should not be quoting from Forum; (2) Lem was being discourteous to the society that had honoured him; (3) Lem was preaching dangerous heresy. (1) is arguable, (2) is agreed and (3) has never been admitted by the SFWA mind. With the hearty approval of the mob, by now howling for vengeance, the SFWA committee (composed by then of different people from the relatively liberal committee that had made the initial invitation) slung him out on his ear.

When the cries of protest were heard, and SFWA realized it had embarrassed itself, a searching of the by-laws went on and a face-saving rule was found. The official Newspeak version of Lem's banishment is, these days, that his honorary membership was revoked on a technicality.

It is not admitted that Lem was kicked out for political reasons: that he questioned and derided the complacent assumptions on which SFWA is based. Nor will SFWA accept that in acting in the way it did, it was lowering itself to the level of the State-controlled writers' unions that pre-censor and control writers in communist countries.

From the time of the Lem Affair the writing has been on the wall. There is an influential political faction within SFWA, conservative and regressive, one that feels threatened by ideas and minority opinions, one that sees the present boom in the sf market-place as vindication of their attitude.

It was with something approaching surprise that I discovered, at this time, that I had "radical" ideas. Until then, I had assumed I was moderate in my views. Yet I aligned with Lem (a writer of whom I know nothing). It came as a personal shock to realize that I was at odds with the collective mind, and from that time it was inevitable that I should eventually leave SFWA. I stayed on as long as I did on the principle that it might be better to work for improvement from within than from without. I no longer think this.

If this realization came late, another did not. Almost from the time I joined SFWA I have been an opponent of the Nebula award. It is a fraud, and the more people who know this the better.

Working within SFWA to abolish the Nebula is a waste of time and breath, although it has taken me ten years to realize this. The machinery of the Nebula wallows on and on, like a mindless, mechanical whale.

While in SFWA I did my bit to try to turn off this juggernaut. I have published two articles in criticism of it; I have consistently voted "No Award" in every category; I have in recent years followed a policy of withdrawing any work of mine that has looked as if it might come within a mile of competing for the prize. (I have found the last an unpleasant thing to do, because it runs the risk of seeming an inverse way of drawing attention to yourself. However, if the award exists, and you oppose it, your opposition must be comprehensive.)

Yet the Nebula is criticized at personal peril. Honourable men like Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison--whose integrity is beyond question--have put plausible, impassioned cases for its abolition, using words like "crooked" to describe it, and have either been ignored or their motives have been impugned. Because the collective assumption is that the Nebula is per se a good thing, it is further assumed that anyone who speaks out against it has some kind of underhand motive. To take two relatively recent examples:

In 1978, a well-known sf writer and former SFWA official said this: "(I suggest we) stop wasting time, energy and trees on debating changes in the Nebula rules. We

have 500 members and 4 annual winners, therefore 496 people will be dissatisfied with the results of any Nebula procedure."

In the last SFWA publication I received before leaving, someone with rather less clout, but again a former SFWA official, said this: "I find it most interesting that the most vocal opponents of the Nebula award are either people who have already won one or maybe even a handful, or others who have so far demonstrated a distinct lack of ability to ever produce something good enough to win one."

It is possible to detect a kind of primitive logic in both these remarks (and they are not exceptions, but representative of many others similar). What is interesting about them, though, are the inherent attitudes they reveal. Both of these writers are assuming that any Nebula is better than no Nebula, and that it is unquestionable that all authors recognize their value, both as tributes to their skill and as an important step towards reaching a wider audience. Therefore, the assumption seems to go, anyone who criticizes the system must have a base motive. And if there is no underhand motive, then the only other explanation must be the tasting of the sour grapes of failure.

I find this attitude deeply offensive, not only to myself but to the other men and women who have spoken out.

So the very existence of the Nebula is divisive, engendering suspicion, cynicism and hypocrisy. This could of course be argued about any important award, but the Nebula is one inflicted on writers by writers.

Moreover, it is a sham. It is wide open to corruption. Its manner of working is cumbersome and suspect. And although it was presumably conceived for idealistic motives, it represents an incontrovertible dishonesty about the nature of such awards.

That the Nebula has been corrupted is an "open secret", one freely acknowledged in private by many people. Nothing can be proved, but there is hearsay and circumstantial evidence from the past, and in the present there is abundant direct evidence, that vested interests seek to influence the way the Nebula is worked. Writers occasionally draw attention to their own work, offering to send Xerox copies to anyone who would "like to make up their own minds". Publishers circulate free copies of novels in which they have invested heavily, "suggesting" that they be "considered" for the prize. In the past, until it was stopped, editors of anthologies were known to nominate stories from their own books.

(This morning, while typing out this article, I received a package from a publisher who evidently has not heard yet of my defunct status. In the package was a Xerox of a story, and the following letter: "Dear SFWA Member, The enclosed novelette, RAY-GUN RANCH by Ignatius Hackenbacker, will most probably be on the Nebula Award final ballot. We think it's a brilliant and important story and we would like you to have a chance to

read it if you haven't already. RAY-GUN RANCH made its first appearance in Boggling SF in May 1979 and has just been reprinted in GRAB-BAG, Ignatius's new collection published by us." Can anyone doubt that a Nebula for this story--actually written by a generally unassuming author, so presumably this was sent out without his connivance--will not help the publisher?)

Incidentally, the free books sent out to SFWA members are now institutionalized. At the end of 1979 a letter was sent to every SFWA member, prompting renewal of membership for 1980. It included the following insight into the universe: "If you're like me, the free books alone mount up to much more than the dues (and if you're not getting many, try Nebula-nominating and see how popular you get)--and those lists, too, are taken from our membership files."

All this is harmless enough on the face of it, but the other well-known fact about the Nebula is that only a relatively few SFWA members bother to participate in either the nominations or the voting. To ensure a prize for any particular title, all that is needed is a small swing in its favour. Authors who have the nerve to draw attention to one of their stories do often later pick up the prize. Books heavily touted by publishers do indeed collect.

Any author wondering how to go about launching an effective campaign should consult Locust-229. This contains a detailed article by Norman Spinrad on this very subject. Award-grubbing has now become so commonplace that it is developing into a science.

The manner in which the Nebula is worked from day to day is also suspect, for different (but connected) reasons.

As the year proceeds, individual titles are "recommended" by apparently disinterested ordinary members. A "recommendation" is not intended to be a vote for the title, but is merely bringing it to the attention of other members, suggesting they read it for themselves. Those who "recommend" have their names attached to the story...so it appears democratic, open and above suspicion. However, as the months tick by it becomes obvious that some titles are more popular than others, as the "recommending" names accumulate. This de facto counting thus turns the simple "recommendations" into nominating votes, encouraging interested parties (as opposed to disinterested ones) to campaign.

(Mr Hackenbacker's publishers are doubtless acutely aware that at this very moment, RAY-GUN RANCH is leading its category.)

Under old rules, this concealed nomination system was acknowledged by the fact that the works with the most "recommendations" went on to the final ballot. Under newly introduced rules, the SFWA committee has bowed to pressure and changed this. Now all stories with more than one or two recommendations are listed as the basis for a preliminary vote to establish the composition of the final voting-form.

Procedures can be changed, and in fact the Nebula rules change with the wind. They are irrelevant, though, because no matter

how much the detailed rules are juggled, the central objection to the whole system cannot be denied.

That the Nebula was dreamed up from the highest motives is not questioned, but now that it exists we can see that it is conceptually impossible to work.

The idea is, of course, that the prize is awarded to a few writers by the majority verdict of their colleagues. It symbolizes, in other words, the recognition of one's peers. If other science fiction writers, the reasoning goes, think such-and-such story is the best of the year, then surely it must be? After all, they should know, etc etc.

The besetting sin of genre science fiction is its inbred nature. Since the creation of the sf pulp-magazines, the history of sf has been one of imitation piled on imitation, of accepted themes and idioms and tropes, of unwritten rules and shorthand and jargon.

The best science fiction is, and always has been, that which has broken with the idiom of the day, that which has taken a few chances, that which has stepped forward or outside, that which enlarges and advances. We admire and remember originality.

The worst science fiction is always that which is derivative or imaginatively borrowed. Bad sf is secondhand sf. In short, sf writers are at their least original when they have been reading too much sf.

Yet here is a prize, the Nebula, which by its lights demands that those sf writers who award it have read every science fiction novel in a year, every novella, every novelette and every short story.

It is, or should be, self-evident that if anyone did read all that science fiction in a year, he or she would be incapable of telling day from night, let alone be retaining a sense of literary perspective.

And if an award made by writers is not based on literary principles, what other reason could there be?

Anyone who casts a vote for a "best" work in a year is tacitly saying that everything has been read. Not just the titles listed on the voting-form...everything.

To give some idea of the scale of reading necessary in any one year, consider this:

For the 1979 Nebula, the following numbers of titles have been recommended. NOVELS: 65. NOVELLAS: 12. NOVELETTES: 52. SHORT STORIES: 101. (NB: These are just the titles that have been singled out; it is not by any means a count of everything published in 1979.)

A novel is defined as a work of fiction in excess of 40,000 words; a novella is between that and 17,500 words; a novelette is between 17,500 and 7,500 words; a short story is anything below 7,500 words.

If we assume that all these recommended titles have a word-length at the minimum of their categories (and the short stories are all, say, 5,000 words long) then we can work out just how many words a voting SFWA member will have to read.

In the Novel category: 2,600,000 words. Novella: 210,000 words. Novelette: 390,000 words. Short Story: 505,000 words. A grand total, in fact, of 3,705,000 words.

This is roughly equivalent to about 40 novels of the same length as Ursula Le Guin's *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS*.

Remember: These figures are the lowest possible estimates. They do not in any degree represent the total amount of fiction published.

Can anyone claim to be able to read even this small sample of the year's output?

Can anyone claim to have read everything? (Never mind whether they should.)

Can anyone who votes without reading everything not admit that they are deceiving themselves, deceiving the authors, deceiving the readers?

Most of what is in this article I have already said in SFWA circles, either in the form of letters or articles published in SFWA publications, or in direct correspondence with officials. So none of this should be new to SFWA ears, and consequently I feel free to bring it into the public forum. I was tempted to resign quietly, just to let SFWA drift away from my professional life as once I had drifted into it, but I believe the collective SFWA mind is representative of an important body of thought in the sf world. SFWA stands for the lazy consensus view, the received idea, the narrow mind. It is unadventurous, unquestioning and distinctly anti-radical.

Everything I have said here of course has opposing arguments, and in SFWA circles they are often voiced.

The defence of the membership-requirement, for instance, is the insular one of the "innate Americanness" of science fiction...an assumption that is wrong and dangerous, both in practice and as an idea. The Lem Affair is best left undiscussed and avoided...awkward and embarrassing business, that. The usual defence of the Nebula is that it makes a lot of money for those who win it.

So...does any of this matter? I believe it does, although by confining myself to three specific issues I have so far evaded what is for me the central failure of SFWA. This is the failure of the spirit, and because this is a nebulous concept, one for which neither arithmetic nor assertion will work, I have to approach it indirectly.

In spite of the conservative consensus, SFWA is not a monolithic entity, unchanging and unyielding. The committee changes personnel from year to year, and each new committee sets out with an

earnest attempt to improve matters. The writers who become SFWA officers usually put in a year's hard service of thankless labour. They are rarely unresponsive to criticism, although the response too often is sympathy rather than action. Even the Nebula has often gone to deserving works, without coercion.

In recent years, SFWA has scored two major victories, neither of which can be gainsaid, but the nature of these victories should be clearly understood. In the first case, SFWA, alone of all writers' organizations, stood in the face of a pernicious new contract dreamed up by one of the major publishers, and it won. It won too when it confronted another publisher who for some years had been getting its royalty calculations wrong.

These victories were tactical: the outcome of professional writers acting in concert for the common good. They required expertise and skill.

But in addition they required the nebulous sense of the spirit, of principle, and, to use an unfashionable word, of morality. At times like these, SFWA became a force for the good, extending an influence far beyond the matters I have been discussing here.

When SFWA fails in matters of the spirit, when it no longer keeps the faith, it becomes a lapse that is keenly felt. It betrays the very people it was set up to represent. By indecision and inaction, by obeisance to what it interprets as the safe consensus, by mistaking the short-term gain for the long-term strategy, it allows standards to slide and principles to become sullied. It condones the sham of the Nebula, it punishes the heretic, it applauds the quick buck.

In the moral climate it has by default helped create, the preening need for SFWA Suites becomes not only accepted but inevitable. This is the context in which authors squabble with convention-committees over their presumed status, in which grown men sulk because they haven't been given a paper hat to wear, in which big-heads become spokesmen.

If SFWA has not directly contributed to this decay of the spirit, then certainly it has not been felt as a force that resists it. This is its principal failure, and one to which it has never addressed itself.

... However, we feel that the setting in the Lunar cheese packing plant seriously detracts from the overall authenticity, and therefore we regret...



BLIND FOOLS

THEY'LL BE
SORRY WHEN
IT'S A
BESTSELLER

ASPECTS OF URSULA K. LE GUIN

CY CHAUVIN

Few writers hold my constant interest as much as Ursula K. Le Guin. It is more than the interest of a critic, certainly much more than a diversion for my "beer money"--it is almost a personal devotion. I don't know Le Guin personally, but her persona and her characters reach out and touch me almost like a friend. And, unlike most friends, she (they) never disappoint me. The cause of this perhaps unusual devotion is truth. Not absolute truth (because Le Guin is not foolish enough to believe in it) but a search for truth. The search for truth is important, and Le Guin in her writing is rarely distracted from it. From the search comes belief, feeling, faith. We must never give up the quest.

This truth comes through even in the PBS tv version of *THE LATHE OF HEAVEN*. It reminded me of the fairy tale about the princess who felt a pea underneath a stack of mattresses: the truth was still there, because we could feel it, even under the deluxe, super-foamy soft mattress of television. We still got slightly black and blue. But Le Guin's power is still more evident in prose, even in *THE BEGINNING PLACE*, her latest novel, which is a minor set piece. But what is wrong with the tv film?

The directors, enlightened although they were, still tended to emphasise special effects. The previews were all special effects, which made me fear greatly for the film. I feel they were often a distraction from the real story, and reflect an emphasis in handling the film which was mistaken. If unconvincing special effects are jarring, unconvincing acting is worse. I saw another film shortly afterwards, *SUMMER PARADISE* (1977), made in Sweden, by Junnel Lindbloom, and it seemed everything *THE LATHE OF HEAVEN* should have been. The director translated to film the sort of personal observations that make Le Guin's novels so truthful. It is hard to act naturally, to appear natural, in unnatural circumstances. And this is the sort of thing we miss, not the technological gimmickry, not the people changing from black and white to grey.

What we miss are the "special effects" of the novelist:

"Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone; it has to be made, like bread; re-made all the time, made new. When it was made, they lay asleep in each other's arms, holding love, asleep. In her sleep, Heather heard the roaring of a creek full of the voices of unborn children singing." (p. 159)

Many of the best parts of the novel rely on the direct exposition of the author, her voice of authority, and the style and character of the prose--and in the film, this reliance is transferred upon the actors. The authority and substance are not there in the film, and cannot be compensated for in visual effects. The strength is not there. George Orr is a wimp. In the novel,

his ineffectual manner does not matter. Haber takes advantage of him, overrides him, but he is not the voice of authority, the mouthpiece for Le Guin's philosophy and observations. In the film, he is--and can he tell us what love is? No. Even if he could we wouldn't believe him. When he attempts (in the film) to tell Haber why he must stop trying to alter the world through Orr's "effective dreams", because it destroys the balance in the world, he is cut off immediately by Haber. And Orr speaks in such a gentle voice and so quietly, that it carries little weight. Exposition in conversation has always been one of science fiction's stumbling blocks, whether it was the Mad Scientist explaining his rocket propulsion system to the Tough Hero or the thin, delicately-limbed alien explaining its philosophy to the young poet. It can be very awkward and ungainly; unless written by swans. No one says too much in the film, or lectures; but no one says enough--and the viewer does not see enough--for the film to have the same emotional impact the novel does.

Some scenes are effective, especially the dreams. I especially liked the ones of Orr's early childhood, and later the dream of the seaturtle (which prefigured the aliens) was effective. This is how dreams seem to work. But my favorite scene in the novel was Orr's visit to the Junk Shoppe, where he is given a copy of the Beatles' record "With A Little Help From My Friends" by a sympathetic alien. The scene is one of my favorites because it puts a familiar thing (a Beatles' song) in a very unfamiliar place; it is a song that many people have probably attached memories to, like George Orr. And the situation that unfolds is one we'd all like to happen: Orr dreams back his lover Heather. Haven't we all lost someone we'd like to dream back to love again? In the film, the scene is handled less well. The actual physical appearance of the alien is too stiff and artificial; they appear cast from concrete (this, I'm sure, was caused by the low budget). The aliens in the novel seemed faintly Chinese, and in the film they recite some of the quotations from famous Chinese that Le Guin used as chapter lead-ins. This works less well, because it makes the aliens seem less alien. The details about the rarity of the record, the talk with the friend downstairs that owns the record player Orr borrows--all that is eliminated. The actual music seems tinny, far away, like it would be on an old record player: but at the same time, this seems to downplay the music as the trigger for Orr's "effective" dream. (The dream sequence should have been more mythological; perhaps even a film cut from *YELLOW SUBMARINE* would have worked best.) And when Orr awakes, Heather is not cooking liver and onions in the kitchen (because that is all there is to eat), but is sharing his bed. Maybe it doesn't matter--whoever cooks on tv, anyway, besides Julia Child? The important thing is that all of the details have been bled out of the scene, all the individuality. I often anticipated scenes so much in the film that I didn't enjoy what I was seeing. Was this because I know the book so well (after only two readings), or does the film really suffer from the deletions of details? When I compare it with *SUMMER PARADISE*, I see the details missing: the children spilling food, baking dinner at the lake, picking wildflowers. I see the details in the novel that aren't in the film replaced perhaps by special effects. It is the small things that change us: how we think and feel.

Le Guin's own new novel, *THE BEGINNING PLACE*, is more interesting. Hugh (no last name) is rather like George Orr; he is ineffectual. He lets his mother push him around. He seems to be in a deadend situation, working as a checker at Sam's Thrift-E-Mart, living in a suburban apartment complex and eating Nixon's Turkey or Oriental tv dinners. He doesn't want to; he wants to go to library school and live downtown, so he can get around without a car (which he can't afford). But his mother is afraid of the city. In fact, she is afraid of coming home to an empty apartment at night, and insists that Hugh be there when she returns.

Something happens one night that begins to weaken the guilt that chains Hugh to his mother. A panic, a driving frustration, a supernatural force propels Hugh from his living room chair outside to a little creek that runs near the apartment complex. It is a special place, "the beginning place"--we all had one as children, a retreat where "we were king" (as in the Robert Louis Stevenson poem). Le Guin draws upon this shared experience, and adds to it: Time passes more slowly in this place than the outside world. Hugh spends an hour there, but when he walks home only a few moments have passed. He starts to come to the place nearly every day. He camps there, he drinks the water in a reverent sort of ritual; it is definitely a retreat for him. When he meets Irena, he is shattered (she is in his special place), but learns about a whole village, a country that lies beyond the beginning place that needs his help.

Irena is affected by the same problems as Hugh: she is "stuck" in a bad situation. Her mother is in a bad situation, and she feels she must be nearby, to help when needed. But she can't afford to live by herself in the suburbs, and can't live with the housemates she has. The villagers in the ain country are trapped in their village: they cannot go any further than the village limits. But, together, Irena and Hugh can. They can destroy what has entrapped them.

Irena and Hugh are unwilling partners at first, but they grow together. The novel becomes a symbolic journey; the monster the two find on the mountain the villagers tell them to climb is a mother-monster, with "white, wrinkled belly" and "a woman's arms, and...breasts, pointed like a sow's teats". (pp. 155, 156) It is archetypal, but Le Guin never calls into question the reality of this world; it is. It is not a dream.

Maybe the novel's form is a way of emphasising that all our problems are real to ourselves, even if others disregard them. Hugh and Irena have to struggle together through the forest in the ain country after killing the monster, and Hugh's hurt and weakened body is very real. The strength they give one another is real, too. In *THE LATHE OF HEAVEN*, George Orr and Heather keep returning to one another, though thrown apart by George's effective dreams. That is their strength, too: together. Le Guin is constantly pairing people, and bringing together opposites, circularity. Hugh and Irena reach the cave of the monster and: "In the cave it was dark. Not twilight: dark. From the beginning of time to the end."

Perhaps the worst that can be said for this novel is that you can predict the turn of events and almost what is said: these are

the things we know Le Guin believes. It is most refreshing when Le Guin handles mundane situations, since she writes with neither cynicism or superficiality. "His self-accusation was, as he knew, unjust, and it did not matter if it was just or unjust: it was judgment; he could not escape it." (p. 26). This is his guilt about his mother. And:

"She would cry and beg him to stay with her. When he did stay he did not know what to do with himself but read old comic books; he was afraid to go out and afraid to answer the telephone in case it was the school attendance officer calling; his mother never seemed glad to have him there.

. . . Once she started working she could cope with daytime all right. . . It was the night, darkness, that she still couldn't handle, being alone in the dark. So long as she knew he was there she was all right. Who else did she have to depend on?

And what else did he have but his dependability? Anything else he might have thought he was or was worth his father had pretty well devalued by leaving. People don't leave necessary things, or valuable things. But . . . in one respect he was valuable, useful, even necessary: he could be there when his mother needed somebody to be there." (p. 61)

This is the basis of Hugh's actions, before he discovers the beginning place and the ain country. He changes when he and Irena climb the mountain for the villagers. He changes his self-image.

This is Hugh's and Irena's search for the truth about themselves. It is not a tragedy. It is not as startling as THE LATHE OF HEAVEN, nor as important as the first filming of a major science fiction novel. But it is more satisfying.



BADGER HUNTING

R.L.FANTHORPE

Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit (Virgil)

(Aeneid 1203: 70-19 B.C.)

(Perhaps even these things will be pleasant to recall one day)

OR: The Plain Man's Guide to Badger-Hunting

A grizzled old cavalry colonel in a Western once turned to the heroine and said: "I never apologise, ma'am. It's a sign of weakness." What follows is neither apology nor explanation; just a few facts strung together.

In 1951, when I was sixteen, I wrote a parody of John Masefield's 'Sea Fever' -- a compulsory element in most English Literature syllabuses in those days -- which went something like this:

I must go back into space again,
To the lonely space and the stars,
And all I ask is a rocket ship
And a job to do on Mars.....

(I believe there was more, but I am comparatively humane when the moon is down.)

I sent this memorable opus to a number of publishers, and it returned with the regularity of a well-trained retriever. At last, I sent it to John Spencer and Company, and, although it returned yet again, it bore a metaphorical leaf in its beak. Prising down its lower mandible I discovered a note to the effect that, although Badger Books weren't exactly crazy about satirical sf poems just then, they'd like to buy stories at 10/- a thousand. (For our younger readers, there was once a useful invention called money which could be earned by working and then exchanged for desirable goods and services. This disappeared several years ago, but is still remembered nostalgically in the Temple of Decimania during the ritualistic orgies of Inflation.)

I'd left school at fifteen, and was working as an apprentice dental technician for £1 a week. Typing four pages of manuscript seemed an acceptable alternative to three days' lab work as a method of raising 10/-.

In those days I was an ardent Methodist local preacher, a left-wing member of the Labour Party, a pacifist, and a street orator with Donald Soper's Order of Christian Witness. I no longer hold any of these views, but I respect the integrity and sincerity of the boy who wrote -- however naively and clumsily -- about what he believed in. That first story, 'Worlds Without End', (even

the title was taken from the 'Lord's Prayer') dealt with an idealistic conflict between materialistic Karads ruling the universe and a space pilot who was one of the last theists. The plot hinged on whether or not the universe was bounded. The implausible and simplistic argument in the story was that a boundless universe was a cosmic accident; a universe with limits was the work of a Great Architect. If the hero hit the boundary and was destroyed, he proved that there was a creator; if he went to infinity and found no edge, he returned alive but destroyed his religion. I resolved his paradox with a 'deus ex machina' who brought the hero miraculously home, delivered a 'mene mene tekell upharsim' warning to the Karads, and ushered in the millenium. 'Worlds' was shot through with Utopian theology and scientific inaccuracies. It reads now like a script for 'Ripping Yarns', but I didn't see it that way at sixteen. An extract from pages 22 and 23 of 'Futuristic Science Stories 6' may convey an idea of the flavour:

"A few miles to the east of the Martian city of Zurl, a small group of humanoid Martians sat around a tiny shrine. White-bearded old Father Aloysius was leading his little band in song -- a song almost as old as time itself. Even though the electronic autoplayer rendered it in a way it had never been heard before it was nevertheless recognisable as 'Rock of Ages'. There was a happy light in the old man's eyes, as from some inner fire, while he conducted the music. His other arm lay paternally about the shoulders of a beautiful golden-haired girl; (sic) whose eyes were still moist with tears. As the autoplayer thundered out its final notes, the last of the Christian Priests turned to address his tiny congregation, and, in spite of the fierce ideals which led him onwards it was easy to see that the flock was soon to lose its last shepherd."

I believe with Blair, in '1984', that the past is vulnerable to the present. It is not a tyrant to be lived up to, down to, away from or in any other prepositional relationship. The personal past is a hazy conglomerate of interpreted experiences. For most of us it is forgettable and escapable. Yesterday is less secure than Colditz. But for the writer whose youth, naïvety and ignorance are sliced out of life's salami, vacuum-packed in print, and deep-frozen by collectors and bibliographers, the past can become whatever sort of Bridewell we allow it to become. I was pleased with 'Worlds' in 1951. I am not pleased with it in 1980, but it is less of a burden than the Ancient Mariner's albatross.

For the next few years Spencers bought stories here and there, but in 1957/8 things went into orbit. Patricia and I married in 1957, and I suspect that this had something to do with it!

From then until 1966, commissions came in faster than it was physically possible to type manuscripts and hold down a full-time job. Rather than turn work away we set up a production line. I bought four tape-recorders for my mother, Patricia, her sister Sylvia, and our friend Barbara Kirby. I dictated stories into the fifth. As a reel came off the machine it went straight into the typist under the least pressure. I started the second reel not knowing how many typed pages the first would run to, and not having the chance to look back through manuscripts for continuity. Early in the evening, while I was still reasonably fresh, a reel could hold as many as 10,000 words. In the early hours of the morning, when I was punchy

with tiredness, when the black coffee and cigarettes weren't working any more, I might manage as few as 2,000 words on a reel. Turning out a book a week, or a book a weekend, ran through ideas like the prodigal son spending Dad's money on booze and birds. When I had more pages to fill than ideas to put on them, I resorted to three types of padding: (a) tautology and synonym; (b) monosyllabic conversations; (c) irrelevant insertions or tangential padded wedges.

By and large, I did not take those 150 books very seriously, though here and there a few jewels gleamed among the mud. My old friend Harry Mansfield used to write some of the finest short supernatural stories I have ever read. Now and again, when he had difficulty in placing one with a good publisher, we'd tuck it into a Badger collection under one of my pen-names. The late Canon Noel Boston, whose death at an early age robbed literature of another M.R. James, wrote some superb stories which appeared in Badger under the Noel Bertram pen-name. Some of my Stearman and Deutero Spartacus stories are worth a second look as well.

I could not resist my own wickedly irreverent sense of humour. Writing under a heap of pen-names provided golden opportunities to refer to myself, or one of the pseudonyms, in the course of a story. Two characters in some improbable future argue over whether the aesthetic brilliance of Owen Irteth (the greatest Welsh supernatural writer of the Twentieth Century) was, at its best, the equal of the lyrical Irish poetry of Peter O'Flinn. The final supernatural collection contained an item called 'Curse of the Ring'. In this one RLF, plus six of his pen-names, takes on seven eldritch horrors to amuse a bored immortal who was once Ghengis Khan.

Our back covers also blew holes through the then nonexistent Trades Description Acts. Fifty thousand words which I'd dictated in a weekend were described as 'an outstanding collection of immaculate supernatural fiction from a wide section of today's leading international authors.....' These international authors were a more remarkable set of characters than the creations in their stories. Rene Rolant was an ex-resistance hero and notorious Parisian souteneur; Elton T. Neef, known as the Manhattan Magus, was a cross between John Wayne and Damon Runyon; Peter O'Flinn was an Irish shillelagh-fighter and poteen connoisseur.

Spencers originally claimed that they had bought full rights, although no such contract ever existed between us. In my view they had not. We have recently settled the matter amicably. Their letter of October 3, 1979 to my solicitor reverts all rights to me as from that date.

Prior to that reversion, however, they had sold dozens of my books in the USA and elsewhere without my knowledge, consent or financial benefit! (Uncle Lionel's unnecessary advice to young authors: don't sell anything to anyone without a fair contract.)

Another feature of the Spencers years which is sadly humorous in retrospect (Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit) was the way that commissions arrived. A pencil drawing of the intended cover would appear with the instruction to submit twenty or so proposed titles, blurbs and a back cover introduction. These would then be returned

with an indication of the ones Badgers liked. On several occasions the blurbs and titles didn't really go together, but they were paying..... It was also necessary to keep the back cover intros vague because I hadn't yet thought of the plot. Spencers often complained about the general nature of the cover wording, but, despite the complaints, they went on buying.

So much for the light-hearted romp over the Badger years, the horrors of hack, the wicked weekend wonders and the confessions of Kilgore Trout. And now for something entirely different.....

Over seven years ago, Patricia and I decided to start work on a heroic trilogy to be called the 'Chronicles of Derl'. It was to have a mythography that was to be mapped to the last detail, plenty of action, worthwhile characters, and an underlying meaning. The first volume of that trilogy was finished last year, and was to come out in November. 'The Black Lion' is published by Greystoke Mobray Ltd. (Patricia and I are two of the twelve shareholders and directors in Greystoke, and the company is currently planning a collection of sf shorts to be edited by Mike Ashley.)

Our underlying theme is that there are three basic components in the human personality: competition/aggression; hedonism/gratification; thoughtfulness/altruism and love. Countless millenia ago Zotala the priest/scientist nursed a dying spaceship through the warp to landfall on Derl. His companions, the Black Lion and the Golden Tiger, became reincarnate feudal kings, while Zotala set up the broken remains of his ship as the Holy Temple of Kalun. Derl was already inhabited when the trio arrived, and they find themselves pitting ruthless barbaric strength and residual starship technology against the League. Ramos, Kiphol and Argath (the League cities) are hated and feared for their vast mercenary armies, their dark wizardry, cruelty and depravity.

The Lion is the personification of aggression; the Tiger is the hedonist, and Zotala represents altruism. All three elements are present in each to varying degrees.

Zotala's ultimate goal is to rebuild the wrecked ship and lead his companions into the wider universe beyond Derl. In order to do this, he and his White Priests must try to educate and develop his people.

The Lion's aim is to be Warlord of Derl and any other planets he can reach, but his ambition though unbounded is not entirely ego-centric. He is a paternalist and an autocrat, but he regards his subjects as his family, not his slaves. He treats his servants as sons.

The Tiger lives for today and its pleasures, yet he is a loyal and honest friend. He is generous to the butler who fills his cup, the cook who warms his plate and the wenches who warm his bed. He regards life as a one-way journey to the grave, with no intermediate stations. He never asked for a ticket but, having begun the journey, he wants to make it as tolerable as possible for himself and those who travel with him.

All three regard loyalty and integrity as the highest virtue: "A man who dies for his friend, dies for God." (Zotola); "The greatest pleasure of all lies in giving pleasure to someone you love." (The Tiger); "A King's first obligation is the safety, happiness and welfare of his subjects." (The Lion). All three know that nothing worthwhile is achieved without prolonged and bitter struggles and sacrifices.

Kevin Kingston Walker designed the cover to fit the text; there is no padding; it was written over seven years, not seven days. There is a map of Derl, and there's a 'Ballad of the Black Lion' as an appendix. From your usual bookseller for 95p or direct from Grey-stoke Mobray Ltd., 30 Boverton Street, Roath Park, Cardiff, DF2 5ES, autographed for £1 post paid -- cash with order or quote your Access or Barclaycard number.



YESTERDATA:

THE FUTURE CONSIDERED
AS AN OBSOLETE ASSUMPTION

JOHN BRUNNER

(A speech delivered at the World Science Fiction Convention in Brighton
- 24th August 1979)

Good afternoon. I'd like to start by saying how pleased I am to have been invited to speak here today, even though I found it terribly hard to concentrate on preparing my talk because memory kept dragging me away to the last time I gave a speech at a world convention in Britain, at the Mount Royal, that hideous heap of bricks near Marble Arch where those of us who were booked in for the whole weekend talked wistfully of an issue of free bicycles to get from our rooms to the lifts, where the management was so suspicious of SF fans that people who wanted accommodation for just one or two nights rather than booking by post for the entire convention were required to cough up the full cost in advance - as insurance against damages, I suppose.

SF since then has become a growth industry, and our reputation has markedly improved. I recall at the Oxford convention in 1969, the last time I was actually fool enough to serve on a con committee, the manager extended us a blanket invitation to come back at any time. Considering the complaints we'd had from guests who were disturbed by our room-parties, I inquired why, and he said that most of the conventions or suchlike get-togethers held at his hotel were a great deal more trouble than ours. He instanced, in particular, groups of rugger fans who insisted on playing their chosen game along the corridors using full bottles of champagne instead of a ball...

And much the same thing happened again at the '79 con in Leeds, when the fans were partying away in the main lobby at 3 a.m. and I asked one of the people on duty how come he was still smiling. He said that two weeks before the hotel had entertained David Essex and his entourage, and they did £2000-worth of damage in an evening...

But the thing I most fondly remember about my speech at the last British Worldcon was this. During the question-and-answer period which followed, one of the audience voiced a strong complaint about people transferring from one spaceship to another without suits, a feat he claimed to be impossible. I don't know quite why he picked on me, because it was obvious what book he was talking about and it wasn't one of mine, so I said, "Why don't you ask the guy who wrote it? He's sitting next to you."

And that gave me my chance to introduce Arthur Clarke, who had walked in a few minutes after the start and taken the first vacant chair. Of course, everybody assumed I'd set the whole thing up...

Enough! Enough of these divagations! I'm not here to reminisce about the glories of the past. I'm here to talk about the future, which is what SF is all about, isn't it?

Or - is it?

Most people think so. But I have my doubts. I feel that far more often - far too often - it deals with a future which was already being overtaken by events when the author, or the film-director, or the producer of the TV series, worked out his or her plot and argument. I feel that in consequence an awful lot of inventiveness and ingenuity is being misapplied, trivialised, squandered on shallow and nugatory projects, when all that would be necessary to rectify matters would be to pay a little more attention to the way in which the assumptions we think of as "futuristic" - in other words, as science-fictional - are rooted in past attitudes that in our daily lives we recognise as obsolete. Admittedly, thinking is hard work, whereas dreaming is easy. So it's small wonder that science fiction dreams tend to let us down.

Even so...!

I propose to cite some examples of abortive trends in reality, both past and present, in the hope of providing concrete evidence for my iconoclastic point of view.

Recently I was reading about a propeller-driven eight-engined aircraft with a wing-span of 63 metres - about 207 feet, or to put it another way considerably greater than a Boeing Jumbo Jet's - equipped to carry a printing-plant, a photographic studio, a cinema and a radio broadcasting-station.

Hearing that description, your mind may well flash, as mine did, to the giant aircraft operated by "Wings Over the World" in Wells's Things to Come. I imagine most people here must have seen the film, if not read the book.

If you've done neither, and if you've been dragged up through what is laughably regarded as a formal education in this lop-sided, disorganised society of ours, you may nonetheless jump to the conclusion - I suspect the majority of people will do so - that I must have been reading a chunk of science fiction from the thirties, or just possibly the forties. Did not Jommy Cross, in Slan, flee from his pursuers in an aircraft capable of the amazing speed of 300 miles an hour?

But in fact the description I read out applies to the Tupolev ANT-20, first flown in 1934 - the year I was born - which carried a crew of 20 and as many as 76 passengers. It had its own electrical generators to light up illuminated advertising slogans on the underside of its wings, and it bore the proud name "Maxim Gorki" because it had been commissioned by the Union of Soviet Writers and Publishers to commemorate the centenary of Gorki's first published work.

By the way, given that this aircraft, which really flew and of which a later version was actually put into production, a total of sixteen being built, was far more "futuristic" in its day than half the gadgetry being described in magazine SF, I can't help thinking of that decision to commission it as one of the very few occasions when a genuinely science-fictional event has occurred in the real world as the result of action taken by writers as a group.

Writers being a solitary species, there are considerably more which are due to writers as individuals, albeit for the most part indirectly. For example, last time I was in Los Angeles, a friend of Florence Russell's very kindly took me to several places most tourists miss: above all, the Bradbury Building, which although I had never seen it before I recognised because it's been used in countless films. (I think it was the setting for Demon with a Glass Hand.) I imagine most people here might recognise it, too: galleried on five floors, ornamented in a late nineteenth-century style, under a skylight that maintains an even internal illumination during daylight hours, equipped with a marvellous mechanical lift in the middle where one can see all the pulleys and cables going about their business... It's in demand by all sorts of firms as a headquarters because compared to most office-blocks it's so downright habitable,

and I must say that if fate compelled me to work in LA I'd rather it were in the Bradbury Building than anywhere else I've run across in the area.

And allegedly this building was based on descriptions of future business premises given by Edward Bellamy in his much-admired and seldom-read novel, Looking Backward from the Year 2000, published in 1888.

I've never read it myself. I've read summaries of it, and many references to it in critical studies of the early days of SF. But none persuaded me that I ought actually to sit down and plough my way through the whole book.

As a result of visiting the Bradbury Building I now think I shall. Just to see how it was that Mr Bellamy got one thing right, without being an architect, which most architects of any standing thereafter got wrong... and which, like lambs to the slaughter, the majority of SF authors, artists and editors blindly followed. Has anyone here been to La Ville Radieuse, near Marseille, where Le Corbusier was given his head to carry his dreams into effect? It's precisely like the sort of future cities which were portrayed in Amazing and Astounding Stories before WWII. Anyone looking at the blueprints now would throw up his hands and cry, "Instant slum!" - and indeed that's the impression it left on me, what with the bicycles hung out to dry over the top-floor balconies along with the ragged washing. But this is in the post-tower-block era, of course, after the demolition of prize-winning edifices like Pruett-Igoe, which cost millions and proved so totally unsuited to human occupation that it had to be expensively blown up. Incidentally, on September 30th the same fate is due to overtake a 21-year-old block of flats in Birkenhead, and for the same reasons. Well, it's easy to be wise after the event.

What fascinates me about the Bradbury Building is that here someone was wise before the event. Conceivably the key to this mystery may lie in the fact that the man Bradbury hired to design it wasn't actually an architect, but an architectural draughtsman who spent his fee on being formally trained and acquiring a degree... and then never again produced a memorable building! His only subsequent claim to fame lay in becoming the grandfather of a certain Forrest J. Ackerman...

What Bellamy got right - if tradition is to be believed - was the scale of the building and its use of natural light and ventilation, which makes it tolerable in the worst of Southern Californian summers. It's built around an open court in a pattern which I imagine would have been novel to people who were moving to California around the turn of the century, but which would already have been familiar to those who had grown up there with the traditions imported from Spain, for the nearest to it I have ever seen is a hotel spang in the middle of the hot dry Iberian plateau, a welcome place to stop when driving from Madrid to, say, Malaga. The concept behind the building is therefore very probably Moorish, in other words African, and may well be far older than Islam.

And its mere rightness underlines one of the themes I'm trying to talk about in a way which, I confess, at this point in my draft took me entirely by surprise. Let me back-track, side-track, and approach from another direction.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, for instance, no SF writer currently rated high in the all-time popularity charts spotted that the 21st century is likely to be dominated by the thought-patterns of people to whom the notion of progress is now as novel, and as alarming, as it was for our great-great-great-grandparents; in other words, by Islamic rather than Christian attitudes... a prospect which, I may say, bodes ill for that Judeo-Christian heresy called Marxism. A few acute professional futurologists hinted at it as early as the 50's, but the idea didn't sink home, largely I suspect because of its unwelcome economic implications. I shall have more to say in a moment about economically-constrained linear projections, but for the moment what concerns me is the upheaval in our own world-view which is implicit in current shifts of economic power.

Marxism is not all that that prospect bodes ill for. Even though I have ambivalent feelings regarding the women's lib movement, because the ancient principle of divide and rule has lost none of its force and as far as I can make out the powers that be in our late 20th-century capitalist world are the first to think of that surpassingly brilliant stroke against the opposition: set the very sexes at each other's throats and we need not fear that a radical movement will combine efficiently enough to oust us in the foreseeable future! - even setting that aside, it's a regrettably tenable hypothesis that, simply because the new owners of the planet decline to deal with them on equal terms, women in Europe and America may be eased gently back to second-class citizenship within a couple of generations...

Don't scoff! There have been similar setbacks even in the context of modern European history. The Age of Enlightenment was in some ways rather similar to the 1960's, and gave rise to such phenomena as the Incroyables in France: men in skin-tight pants which showed off their genitals, or their braguettes if they were underdressed, women in thin muslin dresses worn over nothing which they sometimes soaked to make them more transparent, a fashion which even when adapted for young ladies of good family had to be supplemented by a bodice called a "spencer" to hide the bosom before they were allowed by their parents to walk down a public street... and that gave way to Victorian times and the crinoline and the multiple petticoats and the seven-fold layer of cloth regarded as the minimum permissible to cover his belly when a well-dressed gentleman set forth for his club. (You'll find a diagram of all those enveloping layers in Bernard Rudofsky's delightful book, The Unfashionable Human Body.)

But, contrariwise, one can find advertisements, mainly for cycling garb but quite often for other products which used up-to-the-moment and where possible - dare one say it, in the Victorian context? Of course one dare! - where possible sexy imagery to promote sales, showing that, for instance, trousers for women were not confined in those days to a handful of radical dress-reformers. They were worn, and hence they were manufactured, when circumstances dictated and prejudice did not forbid. Sarah Bernhardt, for instance, was photographed in a trouser-suit in 1876, and eventually it was the staid and conventional board of the Prussian State Railways which bowed to the facts of life in 1916 and became the first public authority to specify that its female employees should be issued with a uniform identical to the men's, including wide grey trousers. (See the Shell Book of Firsts for that one.)

By the same token: would anybody care to guess when the first American-style fast-food restaurant was opened in London, serving donuts, hamburgers, eggs over easy and the like?

The answer in fact is in 1903, in the Strand; I cite Punch as my authority for that one. Cocktails are inextricably associated with the Jazz Age and the Bright Young Things of the 20's; when was the first American cocktail-bar opened in London?

In 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition - and that I only recently learned off a BBC radio broadcast.

It may seem like a long way from where we started to this point in my argument. But hang on! In fact it isn't. It's more sort of adjacent. What I'm trying to do is set up a constellation of data - most of which I suspect are unfamiliar to most of you - to cast a fresh light on what we conventionally think of as the true form of the past, because our erroneous assumptions about the past lead us to wrong conclusions concerning the future. We think in huge generalities: the Victorian era was one of prudery and repressiveness, for instance, forgetting that it was three generations deep, long enough for a social revolution to turn full circle, and moreover greatly conditioned for us by the special fortune of Britain as an imperial power. Similarly we think of the Middle Ages under a single uniform rubric, forgetting that that was a time of colossal philosophical, technical and scientific innovation. And so forth.

I've been trying to apply the principle implicit in the foregoing to my own work for 101 these many years, but the abortion of what used to seem like dominant trends is particularly on my mind at present because recently I attended Westercon in San Francisco and was invited to appear on a panel to discuss "Future Living Standards" with among others Dean Ing, who turns out to be a top engineer from Lockheed's aerospace division - I'd known him only as a name on the page until then - and also with Larry Niven.

Now the context of this panel was very definitely the so-called energy crisis; the audience were individually and collectively smarting under the recent sudden increase in petrol and other power-supply prices in a way which we in a far smaller country like Britain would not feel so acutely. I tried to address myself to this problem above all. I tried to speak as the only person on the panel who had actually seen a life-style collapse. Those of you here who are my age or older and who were in Britain in 1939 will know exactly what I'm talking about; others I shall have to refer to things like - oh - pictures of a street in London in the summer of 1939 compared with those taken in 1940, or better yet in 1942, when rationing of petrol and the loss of our rubber-plantations to the Japanese had wiped the streets almost completely clean of traffic, when the Ministry of Information was teaching us how to make Woolton Pie and how to deck out that little pre-war dress to look new and fashionable for the return of your boy-friend from the battle-front... and all like that.

It was the collapse of a life-style, and even though for a fortunate few the end of it was postponed - see, for instance, the wartime diaries of Evelyn Waugh - that end was nonetheless complete. Imperial Britain, by ten years from the inception of the war, had ceased to exist except as a memory and a dream.

And yet here we are, and the 1960's in Britain, the period of 'Swinging London' and all that jazz, are generally regarded as something of a golden age. And our future is not as bleak on the inside as people on the outside imagine it to be.

I did my best to make this sort of thing clear to that audience in San Francisco, trying to emphasise that when considering the topic given us - future living standards - we must take into account everybody, not just one narrow corner of the world. Interestingly, Dean Ing - the guy from Lockheed - concentrated almost entirely on something which, as I learned a week or two later, is also currently the primary concern of Alvin Toffler, whose new book The Third Wave I am recommending without having read it simply on the basis of what he's told me about it; it sounds fascinating! That's to say, he discussed the enrichment of our lives which modern communication methods are making possible, for instance on the level of participatory government. A fuller debate than ever before on matters touching the basic interests of the community in which one lives can be facilitated by using just TV and telephones, even without adding more advanced technology to the equipment we're already accustomed to. This is not something, naturally, which the people in power welcome, but my feeling is that our future surely need not consist in taking and swallowing, like pre-digested infant-food, what those in power decree to be the best for us, so I felt that Ing was at least exploring a relevant subject.

I must admit that I was therefore extremely disappointed when Larry Niven dismissed the energy crisis as some kind of optical illusion, and devoted the rest of his slot to his current novel, a fantasy along the lines of Westworld, set on a resort island where magic - he specifically cited cargo-cult magic - can be made to work, if that's what the customers are paying for... without the least reference to exhaustible resources, or the majority of our species who cannot now, and short of a planetary revolution will not in the next century be able to, afford such mind-boggling luxuries. If there are people who can do so, then they will necessarily have made or inherited their fortunes in the nineteenth-century robber-baron style, and will be an elite embattled against the masses in a way which, during most of this century, we have imagined to belong to the dead past.

See what I mean about abortive trends?

But in fact I believe what's wrong with Larry's thinking here is a fault which far too many SF writers have been and still are guilty of. It's due to a fallacious assumption which in my innocence and naivete I thought had been exposed long ago in that magazine we all used to read: Analog. Harry Stine once published a set of linear extrapolations which climaxed in the colourable statement that, were transportation velocities to continue rising at the current rate, we would achieve faster-than-light travel by the mid-1980's.

What he neglected to include in his list of data was any mention of where an infinite energy-source was going to come from. Without one, we'd need a quantum-jump in technology. And such quantum-jumps are of their nature unforeseeable - right?

Now by the stage when he published that article - back in the 60's, certainly more than ten years ago - it had become plain what was wrong with simplistic extrapolations of that type. The wild factor boiled down simply and solely to the existence of far more people - people increasingly in a position to make influential discoveries and influential decisions - who did not fit and never could fit into the pre-existing set of assumptions about "what the future will be like".

Let me amplify that with an example. The kind of predictions which used to be made concerning increases in velocity of transportation were due to people whose thinking had been conditioned by the age of speed-records, when the Schneider Trophy and the Bluebird and the Thunderbolt and their kind vied for the headlines. They had little or no contact with the unfortunate masses who - heaven preserve us! - had to do actual work for a living, but who have turned out to be the major clientele for airlines in this age of the package holiday. Much the same might be said of the automatic assumption that we were all going to have videophones, a prediction which was nearly fulfilled but in an unexpected way. The amount of information now being transmitted over telephone lines is at least as great as what would have been necessary given home TV-phones (though why bother with those, when almost everyone with a phone also has an existing TV set capable of adaption?) In the upshot, the information-traffic is between not human beings but machines.

The people who set that process in motion must have had their minds far better attuned to the developing reality than those who decreed the creation of that p-technological p-terodactyl the Concorde, which is never going to return a decent percentage on the investment made in it because it was designed to serve an Imperial-style elite... like the Bristol Brabazon, or post-war luxury liners like the United States, and in a different but analogous way, that nuclear-powered merchant ship whose name I had to look up because I'd clean forgotten it, the Savannah, and all too probably, the traditional science-fictional spaceship, including the Apollos and the Soyuz.

Why is this so, and what do they all have in common with far too much science fiction?

I submit that each is, or was, headed for a future predicted on obsolete assumptions.

On my most recent trip to the USA many people told me that they felt what I too feel about contemporary SF: that it's going through something worse than just a fallow period - that it's in the doldrums. I'm not just talking about the fact that if you take SF magazines at random from the 40's and compare them with their counterparts from the 70's you are certain to find the stories have themes in common more often than not - themes most of which have already been tackled by H.G. Wells, anyhow, from space-travel via time-travel to the effect

of drugs and poisons. I am I suppose talking rather more about the fact that if you open a current magazine and look at the names they are liable to fall, even now, into the same pattern as a 30's pulp, so that it comes as a relief when a character is called Ling Sangjen rather than Derek Carson or Anne Henderson.. all 1979 examples, by the way.

I am very definitely talking about the space-shuttles operated by Pan Am in 2001, and the fact that with Star Wars and The Empire Strikes Back mass media has lately arrived where Planet Stories was when I first began reading it in the late 40's, and even more about the acute mental derangement which led the makers of Close Encounters to imagine that a star-faring culture given to kidnapping children and to messing about with human beings on the same basis as a kid sticking a twig into an anthill to see what would happen (witness the long scene at the level-crossing in that picture) - that such a culture must be regarded as "superior" simply because it possesses bigger and prettier machines. If there are people like that out there, then I confess I have no particular urge to make their acquaintance; it would be rather like bumping into an alcoholic prankster in a dark street just after closing-time.

Am I to be accused here of concentrating too much on mass-media SF? I'm afraid that charge wouldn't hold up; I haven't even mentioned Space 1999, for example... but, like it or not, I am talking about what the vast majority of people, in those countries where SF is so much as vaguely known, believe it to be. Moreover, in SF novel after SF novel I keep running across the same kind of thing: that insufferable woman in The Mote in God's Eye, for example, explaining to her alien opposite number (a far more credible character, by the way, than any of the humans in that book!) that "nice girls don't"... as though mores were not inextricably bound up with such matters as longevity, world-view, technical competence, awareness of past history, available information and communication-channels... and all like that.

Can this not be subsumed under the head I was talking of earlier: the abortion of trends? I'd claim that it can't, because it isn't integrated or reasoned out; it's arbitrary.

And this, at long last, brings me to what I regard as the prime reason why SF is currently in the doldrums, why the influx of outstanding new writers which we were enjoying twenty years, even twelve years ago, has declined to a thin trickle of people with the shallow auctorial competence to rehash traditional themes and impose a veneer of novelty. I am not, I would emphasise, here relying solely on my own judgement; I'm quoting what appeared to be a near-total consensus among the people I talked with during three weeks in the USA this summer.

Moreover, in Foundation 17 which arrived after I had drafted this talk, I find an otherwise promising first novel dismissed by one reviewer because he found the story "lacking in understanding (of politics, economics, scientific activity) and depth" - precisely the kind of fault which grievously disappoints me in the majority of recent SF.

What accounts for this? Here's how I view the matter.

We long ago wore out our patience with writers who casually endowed Jupiter with a breathable atmosphere - for example - without taking the precaution of transferring the action to a parallel universe, or otherwise copping their bets. It has come to be regarded as a sine qua non for an SF writer to be at least superficially acquainted with the nature of the real universe as revealed by scientific investigation, and there are a great many of my colleagues who take that part of their job very seriously indeed: Niven and Pournelle, whom I took to task over a different aspect of the subject just now, are cases very much in point, and I scarcely need to list further examples, there being so many.

But...

But it is long past time for us to stop tolerating among SF authors - or come to that among movie-directors, or producers of TV series - to stop tolerating a degree of splendid ignorance where history is concerned, where even history of technology is concerned, let alone sociology, social psychology, economic history, the evolution of ethics and mores, and all such related questions... a degree of ignorance which, were it matched in the case of the physical sciences, would make their work a laughing-stock.

It is not enough to impose, arbitrarily, Victorian clothing and manners on a culture which has achieved starflight; I read a story in which that happened just the other day, and I was annoyed, because it failed to take into account that there was only one Victorian era in the past, that it did not resemble its closest precedent counterpart in more than a few details - I'm thinking of the strict Protestant culture of the Reformation period, of course - and in any case wasn't homogeneous either in space or in time, as I remarked earlier. If you must attack that sort of problem, then at least furnish a rationalisation, as Alfred Bester did in Tiger! Tiger! by re-establishing the notion of women - or at least a wife and daughters - as part of a wealthy man's property.

It is not enough to lift the attitudes of the American frontier into space and dump them among the asteroids, for the people who mine those asteroids - if they ever do, which given the proclivity of our species to wreck our best endeavours by fighting wars I'm inclined to doubt at present - the people who might be conceived of as doing so, then, will stem from backgrounds wholly different from a Westerner's, and their reasons for moving on into unclaimed (save the mark) territory will be at best askew from what held good in the 19th century on a planetary surface.

It is not enough to envisage a gigantic luxury resort consuming power on a greater-than-city level and equipped with as yet undreamed-of technology a hundred years ahead, without explaining how the population of the Third World have been reconciled to its existence, particularly since, if present patterns have held, the same technology will have put nuclear destruction into the hands of small dissident groups, and the grievances which create such groups cannot possibly have been eliminated, because if they had been the ultra-luxury resort would be as much a thing of the past as the Colosseum or the palace of mad King Ludwig at Neuschwanstein.

And we've had plenty of time to teach ourselves not to fall into this kind of trap, you know. According to I.F. Clarke, it was as far back as 1763 that King George VI of England was made to win a battle before the gates of Vienna in 1918 by taking personal command of six regiments of dragoons.

Since then, we've had a little event called the Industrial Revolution, along with a few other object lessons I could cite. Tom Swift ought no longer to be battling the marauding Indians, under whatever guise - especially since those Indians weren't anybody special, even though nowadays people tend to take their side. It's more that they simply don't deserve, any more than the Tasmanians, to be wiped out by a greedier branch of humanity. In the 19th century this was excused in the first heady flush of misunderstanding of the Darwinian principle of "survival of the fittest". Painfully, during the Boer Wars and later the World Wars, we began to digest the uncomfortable truth that fittest doesn't equate to "better-armed". It could well be a tubercular weakling, or a syphilitic, who sat behind the Gatling gun mowing down scores of splendidly fit Zulu warriors... who of course on closer examination turned out to be suffering from bilharzia and malnutrition and parasitic worms and all like that. The myth of the Noble Savage is a classic instance of the way in which trends can fluctuate; so is the myth of the divinely-appointed leader, or Master Race. It wouldn't in the least surprise me to discover that, owing to its unique and cancerous talent for sowing destruction unintentionally, the branch of humanity into which I was born is the most stationary unfit.

I've talked quite long enough. It's time for me to sum up, which I can do most cogently by re-emphasising the point I've just made about ignorance of real-world social processes.

If science fiction is not to be so completely dominated from now on by the mass-media sort of garbage - so completely dominated that that kind of thing becomes synonymous in the public mind with science fiction (as very nearly happened in the 50's when they were making pictures like The Monolith Monsters)... if this is not to happen, then that ignorance must be cancelled out, just as ignorance of what hard sciences have taught us was cancelled out a quarter-century or more ago. It is absolutely no use to talk about the pioneering spirit sending people out to colonise a satellite at L-5 because it wasn't the pioneering spirit that sent people to Utah, for instance (it was religious persecution), or Oklahoma (that was plain ordinary greed). And quite a lot of the settlers had had to leave home because otherwise they'd have been hanged or jailed. The pioneering spirit, except in the case of a few explorers, is a romantic myth. Myths have their place, but aboard a spaceship where 99.99% reliability can result in 15,000 things going wrong is probably not it.

If science fiction is not to become hopelessly sterile, it must return to the fountain of reality and rejuvenate itself. Or, putting it another way, next time I read a science fiction novel set in the 22nd century, I want to be able to believe that the characters in it would look back on me, their author, as old-fashioned.



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EDITED BY
JOSEPH NICHOLAS

The Encyclopedia Of Science Fiction - Granada £15 - 1979

One index of the new seriousness with which sf is now approached is the growing amount of critical attention it is receiving. As the somewhat sneering fannish term 'sercon' (serious and constructive) indicates, much of this threatens the same sort of interest that missionaries gave the Tasmanian natives -- they studied them to death. Nevertheless these three publications show that it is possible to identify a genuine need, and to satisfy it.

Most striking in all ways is The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, edited by Peter Nicholls. The first thing that impresses is the quality of the production. The binding and paper are excellent, the layout clear and pleasant. The size (10½" by 7¼") is ideal for portability and the weight sits satisfyingly in the hand. It is not a book to be hidden away among the usual garish reminders of sf's gutter origin; it positively invites use. Its contents exhibit a similar taste. It is hardly the first sf encyclopedia but (with the exception of Tuck's) it is the first really useful one, the usual pattern being more on the level of 'A for Asimov, B for Bug-Eyed monster.' The Nicholls volume sets itself the task of covering published sf as widely as possible and, although it admits, rather disarmingly, the impossibility of total comprehension, it succeeds, as far as one may gather, admirably, also finding space for theme entries from Absurdist sf to Women, sf films, sf on tv, scientists and other related topics. The introduction claims over 2800 separate entries and I certainly am not disposed to argue with that. All entries, even authors of a single volume, receive a biographical note, discussion of the most prominent of their works and a checklist with publication dates. Since most of this has been researched from primary sources, the result is reliable information.

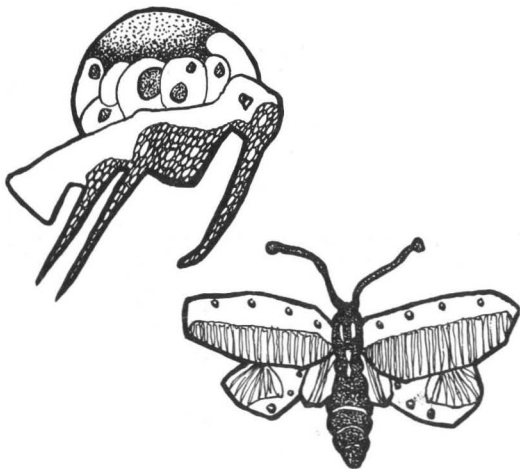
One of the strengths of the Encyclopedia is that, having chosen a really good group of critics, primarily the admirable John Clute, Brian Stableford and Peter Nicholls himself (although including such writers as Brian Aldiss, Tom Disch and John Sladek, and respected critics like John Foyster, Tom Shippey and Susan Wood). Peter Nicholls then allows them to make some critical statement; thus, instead of the usual blandness we have such incisive writing as John Clute's summary of Disch's writing career (p. 174). Inevitably this may sometimes rankle, especially in thematic entries -- the entry on Women, for example, seems too concerned with listing women authors and takes little account of the evolution of women characters from the days where they were always in need of a good rescue. Perhaps a future edition might consider a specifically Feminist sf entry, as well as dividing the present theme. Another theme which raises the same questions is that of 'History in sf' which covers Toynbee's and other influences, yet fails to mention Marx, who is regarded as quite respectable, even essential, by the most conservative of historians nowadays, and has probably influenced several writers, especially Eastern Europeans. One also has a few doubts about comparative word lengths on authors -- for example, Nicholl's own entry on Le Guin seems inordinately long when compared to others.

The only author entry I find dubious is that on Robert Silverberg, where not only is Tuck's mistake about his birthdate (it should be 1935, not 1936) perpetuated, but the impression given is that 'Tower of Glass' and 'Dying Inside' were published with butchered texts whereas, I think, Silverberg's original complaint concerned their over-hasty withdrawal. Perhaps there might be other errors, but I have checked pretty thoroughly and am very sure that they would be few and the volume is certainly more reliable than any of its predecessors. Not only do I recommend the Encyclopedia, but I would suggest that it is essential for anyone who claims a serious interest in sf. £15 may seem a lot of money, but even at that price it represents a bargain which should yield an excellent dividend in years to come.

One of the contributors to the SF Encyclopedia was David Pringle. Now, having already co-edited one book - J.G. Ballard: The First Twenty Years (1976) - he returns to the same thorny subject. This handsome Borgo Press edition shows just how well he understands his subject. Too often criticism can be an excuse for trotting out academic jargon and over-introspection, leaving the reader with the feeling that not only he but the critic himself cannot see the wood for the trees. This is not Pringle's attitude; in a very lucid way he summarises Ballard's history and predecessors, making plain many of those concerns that recur in his work. During the detailed examination of Ballard's books there is a sense of logical construction both on Pringle's part and as perceived by him in the author. One of the strengths of the book is Pringle's own research into Ballard's incidental works such as a Guardian review of Mailer's FIRE ON THE MOON which shows Ballard's own admiration of NASA and the astronauts themselves. Indeed one of Pringle's most convincing points is the reinforcement of the fact that not only is Ballard very much an SF writer but also by his very concern with contemporary life and relevance satisfies such doubts as those expressed by John Brunner earlier in this issue. It seems ironic that because of his style and depth Ballard is ignored by precisely those people who feel most deprived of an SF vision.

In the third section of the book on Ballard's characters Pringle does the thing that is perhaps the most difficult - identifying the areas of most disquiet in readers of Ballard. "Ballard's treatment of lower-class characters and 'natives' is no more objective or realistic than his treatment of women," (p46) certainly seems to involve the dismissal of most of the world's population, and shows that Pringle is no idolator. The only trouble comes in accepting Ballard's right to reduce these to 'symbols'. Ballard's youth in China is very important not only in explaining his alienation but also suggesting the air of mourning for a pseudo-colonial world in which attitudes like those above were acceptable. Pringle defends Ballard partially against the charge of pessimism - not a particularly relevant charge since there is no reason why he should not be pessimistic - but still cannot dispell the air of nihilism that suffuses his work. Ballard does believe in "individuality in the face of encroaching technological and social change" (p60) but such is his identification with the male WASP bourgeois society of his youth, a class that in many ways no longer exists, that it would seem only those are allowed to be or know how to be individuals.

This objection notwithstanding there is no doubt of Ballard's vast importance not merely to SF but to literature and while he sometimes is too dismissive of other writers - one doubts whether Philip K. Dick's concerns are really "a little too private" (p7) or even more private than Ballard's own - Pringle has staked an almost unassailable claim to the responsibility of guide to his work.



Robert Silverberg (ed.) -- THE CRYSTAL SHIP (Millington, 198pp, £4.50)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

There seems to be a campaign, promoted most noticeably by Samuel R. Delany and Theodore Sturgeon, to the effect that all the very best science fiction is now being written by women. Robert Silverberg, in his introduction to this volume, adds his voice to the campaign by stating that: "Most of the women who have entered science fiction have been extraordinarily gifted". This is at the very least an overstatement of the case, for while there has been a great influx of women writers into the field of SF and fantasy over the past fifteen years only a few have produced fiction of a really high quality, and only two -- Ursula LeGuin and Angela Carter -- have done so consistently. There are good female writers and poor female writers in much the same proportion as there are good and poor male ones. So while I applaud the influx I reject the sexual snobbery which it has engendered, and which is probably just an overreaction to the anti-feminism which existed in SF for so long in the past.

All of which is a roundabout way of saying that this anthology of three original novellas is no better or worse for the fact that the three authors are women. It is the stories alone which must be judged, and all three are worth reading.

Joan D. Vinge is one of the most promising newcomers to SF. She has produced work of great brilliance both before and since the title story to this book, and her forthcoming novel The Snow Queen is one to watch for. By comparison, "The Crystal Ship" is a disappointment. Its images are beautifully painted and its range of emotions well conveyed, yet it seems aimless, developing of its own accord rather than being preplanned. The awkwardly-named Terawassie rouses herself from a drug-induced stupor aboard an artificial satellite orbiting an alien planet. All around her are the remnants of her compatriots, debauching themselves in dreamy decadence, but she prefers to go down to the planet's surface (transport is automatic) and search for a meaning. Eventually she finds a humanoid alien with a peculiar pouch and the answers to a lot of questions she had never even thought of asking. The ending is suitably ambiguous.

Marta Randall's contribution, "Megan's World", might have been titled "Hard To Be A God" if a couple of Russians (the Strugatski brothers) hadn't got there first. The story is ostensibly about a mining expedition determined to exploit the wealth of an alien planet, but in fact becomes a fascinating exercise in describing factions and power politics as different groups of humanoid aliens bargain with different groups of Earthmen, some of whom are posing as gods. Though non-technological, the aliens are highly intelligent; the story is very tightly written with a magnificent (though contrived) climax.

Vonda N. McIntyre is not my favourite writer by a very large margin, though she has produced a couple of very good stories. "Screwtop", in this anthology, is one of them. It is overemotional, but a bare fifty pages of her emotional wallowing is quite bearable, and even adds to its impact (whereas Dreamsnake's three hundred-odd pages of overemotionalism was just tiresome). It is an attack on regimes which throw people into prison for political offences and on the warders who actively contribute to making those people's lives hell. "Never bow down to an authority you don't approve of" is the message, which can hardly fail to arouse feelings of sympathy in the breasts of all readers. Yet it didn't need to be an SF story at all; the alien conditions and advanced technology are just cosmetic grafts. Despite this, McIntyre's story of three prisoners -- Kylis and her two beautiful men (one golden, the other piebald) -- in a frightful work camp is immensely powerful and skilfully worked-out.

All in all, I think that The Crystal Ship could well turn out to be the best anthology published in Britain in 1980.

Chelses Quinn Yarbro -- TIME OF THE FOURTH HORSEMAN (Sidgwick & Jackson, 183pp, £5.95)

Reviewed by Roz Kaveney

When a writer is still looking for her subject-matter, her tone of voice, there are worse things to do than sit around waiting for a bandwagon. Post-Watergate, post Robin Cook's Coma, there was a clear market for paranoia in general and paranoia about doctors in particular -- back in 1976, when this was first published. Now, in 1980, it's just a slick, slightly dated little thriller with plenty of thrills and spills, a nicely ironic ending and characters that prefigure in a rather pastebord way Ma Yarbro's stock company as it has emerged in her later work. It is SF only by virtue of a few bits of hardware which make it easier for the villains to carry out their plans; it's basic feel remains that of the thriller and it is none the worse for that. Still, with all the genocidal eugenicist crap that's being preached in some quarters of the SF genre it is salutary to see mass extermination discussed in appropriately outraged terms.

I worked for a while as part of the DHSS negotiating team that was being gouged for a new contract by the BMA, and thought for a time that I was being overly cynical about government and medicine -- but Time Of The Fourth Horseman takes some beating for sheer over-the-top hysteria. Its heroine, Dr Lebbreau, becomes worried when her child patients begin to develop supposedly extinct diseases, and even more concerned when they begin to disappear. Her husband, a laboratory clinician, who is cold and hard in the best sub-Gothic tradition, tells her not to worry herself about individuals. Before long, he is revealed as an adulterer, and also as a junior member of a conspiracy by the US government to reduce the population by feeding fake vaccines to a section of the child population. Lebbreau and a male colleague attempt to expose the conspiracy; and, needless to say, are promptly locked up. The plague gets predictably out of hand; less predictably and less plausibly, the death-toll is increased by a new, mutant plague and by teenage gangs who have it in for all doctors. The heroine escapes and goes nobly off to care for the teenage terrorists who have been thoughtful enough to incinerate her husband, while her sidekick goes off to infect the Cabinet with the mutant plague -- an old trick but one that might just work.

All this is competent enough tosh but it really is a bit unfair to judge it as though it were representative of the work Yarbro is publishing now, some five years later. The characterisation is all stereotypes: noble plain good guys versus saturninely handsome bad guys. The repentance of one of the villains is so clearly calculated to answer this charge of stereotyping as to be tantamount to a plea of guilty. The style is solid, communicative and totally unfancy, with almost none of the slightly pretentious trimmings that I like in Yarbro's later work. What can one say about a good read like this except that there are other, better reads around?

D. G. Compton -- ASCENDANCIES (Gollancz, 208pp, £5.95)

Reviewed by Roz Kaveney

My first reaction to this novel was that I would have to praise Compton for his competent craftsmanship. He evokes with considerable skill the correct proportions of pity, terror, wonder and suspense, and almost makes you believe in the relationship between the central characters; he makes an unlikely premise a plausible background for the real human problems contingent upon it. But there is something stale about its atmosphere -- it's a bit like dozing fitfully in a nonsmoking railway compartment full of men in Austin Reed suits complaining about strikers over their copies of The Times. Critics may sometimes be a little ungenerous to authors, but we have nothing on the sheer vindictiveness with which authors like Compton outline their characters' deficiencies.

To the accompaniment of unearthly music and the scent of artificial roses, people have started disappearing from the face of the earth. Presumably from sheer bloody-mindedness, governments and insurance companies have decided not to treat these disappearances as deaths in spite of the fact that none of them ever return. An insurance agent, Wallingford, realises that the corpse on which Mrs Trenchard is claiming

insurance is not in fact that of her husband, because when he disappeared someone rang her up and offered to sell her a reasonable facsimile with a broken neck and thus enable her to claim. Wallingford blackmails her into a fifty-fifty split of her ill-gotten gains and thus finds himself well and truly on the spot when the gang who sold her the body later demand their fairly hefty cut. Despite their incompatibility of temperament and class -- and the fact that he's already living with a girl -- Wallingford and Mrs Trenchard become lovers; later, he also becomes involved with Irene, a psychotic who collects for the gang and claims (implausibly) to be a Disappearer who's returned through a TV set. But we never find out what's causing the disappearances, nor much about the inner workings of the gang; all we see is the lust-ridden power-struggle between the protagonists (punningly referred to -- along with the disappearances -- in the title of the book), which eventually turns, convincingly, into a grudging friendship and respect.

Ascendancies earns the audience it will clearly get, but I feel that its virtues -- pace, solidity of feel, slickness of execution, hardheadedly perceptive view of character -- are more suited to Gollancz's thriller list; a list from which it is of course excluded due to its fantastic rationale. Indeed, it might have been a better novel without this rationale, but it has to be said that this is partly because I did not enjoy reading it and would gladly have escaped its closed and cynical view of human relationships.

Barrington J. Bayley -- THE SEED OF EVIL, EMPIRE OF TWO WORLDS, and ANNIHILATION FACTOR (Allison & Busby, 175pp, 144pp and 144pp respectively, £5.95 each (Hb), £2.50 each (Pb))

Reviewed by Alan Dorey

Occasionally, but only occasionally, I have a perverse desire to read books that are unashamedly SF in content -- not those written by pen-pushing hacks desperate to earn a crust or two before returning to their latest Mills & Boon masterpieces, but those by writers of quality and imagination. The major constraint placed upon me by this desire is the lack of authors who fit the bill sufficiently well to fire the imagination without deadening the senses by their dull-witted and derivative narratives. Fortunately, we do have a writer of such a calibre: a writer who can take an innocuous piece of space-opera and transform it into a highly-polished product, but a writer who has until recently been sadly neglected by the reading public. Despite his many appearances in the pages of Michael Moorcock's New Worlds, Barrington J. Bayley never quite received the recognition that his work deserved, but now Allison & Busby -- and, to a lesser extent, Fontana -- have resolved this anomalous situation.

The Seed Of Evil is a collection of thirteen short stories, most of them culled from the pages of New Worlds but five of which have remained previously unpublished. The subject-matter of each story is as diverse as it is innovative. "Sporting With The Child" is a prime example, displaying those qualities which differentiate the short story from the novel and being a first-class horror story to boot. The idea of an alien culture demanding a wager in return for their medical services may not be new, but the idea of two bodies striding towards a cliff-top with their brains crawling behind them, striving to re-enter their respective skulls before the bodies plunge to certain death, is certainly novel. "The Radius Riders" is similarly brimming with ideas, and concerns a subterranean ship capable of travel through solid rock; attempting to return to the surface, its crew discover that the laws of physics are no longer the same, and are effectively trapped below the ground. I first read it in New Worlds, and it has lost none of its impact in the intervening years.

There are some weak stories in the collection; some are simply too plagiaristic, whilst others embrace a fine idea but diminish its effect with pedestrian writing. The lapses are, however, few; in the main, Bayley's narratives are fast-paced but never careless. For a typical piece of writing, read "The God Gun", a story which deals with a philosophical question that has puzzled many: 'Does God exist?' He might as far as Bayley's characters are concerned, but his continued omnipotence is severely endangered by the invention of the God Gun.

Overall, The Seed Of Evil is a worthy purchase, showing Bayley at the height of his very individual and idiosyncratic skills -- skills which do not always seem to be completely carried over to his novels. Whilst Collision With Chronos and The Garments Of Caeon were well-written and deserved their success, the two under review here never quite achieve the level of those works. This is not to say that they are completely inferior, because in many ways they are refreshingly original treatments of old SF clichés -- but, as with so many SF books, their characterisation is minimal, most of the author's creative ability having been poured into the advancement of the plot. Empire Of Two Worlds is perhaps the more successful of the two: the characters are more than just sketchy outlines, and the pace of the plotting is relentless, imaginative, but never overpowering. Set on the planet Killibol, it revolves around Becmeth, a kind of futuristic Al Capone figure who deals in nutrient tanks rather than prohibited liquor. A would-be empire-builder, he is ruthless, ambitious, and skillfully exploitive of those around him in order to achieve his ends -- but like most of those who rise to power in such a fashion, he eventually has to live through the consequences of having his pedestal kicked out from under him. The novel's major drawback is that -- almost as though to emphasise Becmeth's swift rise to power and equally swift fall from it -- it is in places rather rushed in execution, and suffers accordingly.

Annihilation Factor appears to be more original and is on an altogether grander scale. The duplicity of the royal house which rules a solar system being threatened by an energy-consuming being "a light-year across" is well drawn, as are the interactions and clashes of personality between the members of the house. Split loyalties and civil war are the inevitable results of their attempts to harness the power of the being, and the stage is thereby set for some exciting thriller-like intrigue and mystery -- which unfortunately fails to materialise. Instead, the novel tails off into an insipid first draft for something far superior. Empire Of Two Worlds has an altogether better framework, and is certainly free of such mind-bogglingly inane passages as the following:

"It's a lifeform....why didn't our agents warn us it was coming this way?"
"Peredan ignored the question. He followed the scientist to a huge bank of instruments where his colleagues were busy adjusting instrument settings for standard experiments and connecting up other equipment they had dragged from another part of the laboratory."
"What are you doing?" he demanded.
"Trying to find out something about it...."

Despite these niggling criticisms, Empire Of Two Worlds and Annihilation Factor are too good to be idly dismissed. I urge you to acquire them and re-evaluate the supposed merits of the previous so-called "masters" of the space-opera format. Bayley will surprise you.

R. A. Lafferty -- DOES ANYONE ELSE HAVE SOMETHING FURTHER TO ADD? STORIES ABOUT SECRET PLACES AND MEAN MEN (Dobson, 273pp, £5.25)

Reviewed by Kevin Smith

This is a very odd book.

Any review of a collection of short stories by R. A. Lafferty that started any other way would have something very wrong with it indeed. He is an odd sort of writer, and his stories are odd sorts of stories; in fact, he is sort of odd himself, as those who saw him wandering around Seacon 79 last August will readily testify. There are a number of reasons why the stories are odd, apart from the fact that the odd Lafferty writes them that way.

The most obvious reason, perhaps, is that the basic ideas in the stories are odd; there is nothing straightforward in anything Lafferty thinks of. The second reason is that Lafferty's characters are odd; no ordinary men are allowed anywhere near a Lafferty story, unless he needs a fall-guy. A third reason is that Lafferty

himself doesn't think any of these basic ideas or characters are at all odd: he treats them as if everyone is, or ought to be, totally familiar with them. A final reason derives from the fact that Lafferty throws into his taken-for-granted oddness things that he says are odd. These are not things that we would consider normal -- oh no, for that is the way of the hack writer, which Lafferty is not. These odd things are still odd, and Lafferty refuses to explain any of them in any way at all.

This is something more than taking it all for granted. "This is odd," says Lafferty. "This thing should not happen, but it does. This thing cannot be done, but is." And never another word, as though he is as mystified by it as anyone else. He doesn't explain why, and it certainly isn't easy for the reader to see why, within the general context of oddness. Nor does he show us why; it's not in Lafferty's style to show anything much. He has discarded four hundred years of literary development, placing himself with Homer and Chaucer and the tellers of Sagas. He is a story-teller, and he tells us what's happening; the Lafferty auctorial presence is strong in all his work.

If it were up to him to explain why his stories are odd, he'd tell you it's because he writes them that way, and that's all you'd get.

Does Anyone Else Have Something Further To Add? uses some of his more common themes, as shown by the subtitle Stories Of Secret Places And Mean Men. The sixteen stories split neatly in half, with eight in each category, alternately, and the contents page shows this dichotomy by using different typefaces and putting Secret Places on the left and Mean Men on the right. The idea of the Secret Place, as meaning a land or town or nation that exists on Earth but is hidden from ordinary view or knowledge is one that Lafferty has used several times previously. "Land Of The Great Horses", "Sodom And Gomorrah, Texas" and "Where Have You Been, Sordaliois?" all use variants of this basic idea. (How are these lands hidden in the midst of the world? They just are.) The Mean Men stories have odder characters than ideas, but even those are pretty odd.

Of the sixteen stories, half a dozen stand out; they are "typical Lafferty". "About A Secret Crocodile" employs a Lafferty preoccupation with conspiracies -- secret societies that really do run everything -- and pits against one of them three apparently ordinary people who turn out to be giants in their own way. The society -- the Secret Crocodile of the title -- invents the slogans and catchphrases that influence and twist our lives. The three giants have the ability, by gesture, grimace and intonation respectively, to pour the scorn of scorns on anything and everything, and constantly defuse and ruin, albeit inadvertently, the remarkable slogans the Crocodile has invented. The Crocodile wins, of course, in the way that big conspiracies do: by violently crushing the opposition.

"In The Garden" is a new twist on the Garden of Eden story (and you thought there couldn't possibly be a new one!). Explorers find a new planet with, apparently, another Eden on it. The Adam and Eve there have not fallen. The sceptics are converted, and wax lyrical about the purity of the place. As the leader says:

"It would be a crime calling to the wide heavens for vengeance for anyone to smirch in any way that perfection.

"So much for that. Now to business. Gilbert, take a gram: Ninety Million Square Miles of Pristine Paradise for sale or lease."

Stab! Has anyone ever portrayed hypocrisy so briefly and so accurately, or so blatantly and still got away with it? For get away with it Lafferty does time and again. The twist: this Eden is a hoax run by crooks and murderers who know people will flock to see Paradise, and despoil it. One of the explorers, however, is a Jesuit priest who realises that this Eden is a tawdry fake, mainly because "Adam" wouldn't play him at checkers. He says: "It is only the unbelieving who believe so easily in obvious frauds." Stab again. And if this isn't enough, Lafferty throws in a final pinprick just for the hell of it. "It was Paradise in one way," says a guy. "All the time we were there the woman did not speak." The points in a Lafferty story may not be very deeply hidden, but they are always sharp.

"Maybe Jones And The City" is about the search for the Perfect Place. In Lafferty's terms, this is the place where you can have a high old time -- girls, drinks, tall stories -- and where they take the sky off at night just to give it more height. The idea that this is the only life worth living crops up again and again in Lafferty's stories.

"Adam Had Three Brothers" is about a group of people descended from one of Adam's brothers, who are thus not under Adam's curse of having to work for a living, which they don't. They are instead con artists, the best in the world, purveyors of grand lies to suckers for money. There is little that Lafferty seems to like better than a grand lie, or a grand liar. The story is full of the names of con tricks that sound both highly outlandish and extremely plausible. If the tricks don't exist, they ought to.

These four are all stories about Secret Places, which are on average better than those about Mean Men. Two of the Mean Men stories, however, are very good indeed. "Groaning Hinges Of The World" has as its central idea that a portion of the world can turn over on its hinges and become entirely different. It looks the same, it has the same names, as do its people; but it and its people are different. The story tells us what happens when the world turns over in the South Pacific. A peaceful island tribe goes on a violent and bloody rampage; its men become very mean indeed, and would kill people as soon as look at them. They are stopped only when the world is turned forcibly back, with great effort. The legends have it that there are also hinges in Armenia, the Pyrenees and Germany. But this cannot be, says Lafferty. If the hinges had turned in Germany they would have made a groaning heard all over the world -- and who has heard any such thing? Ouch!

The last of the six is the one that most appeals to me, "How They Gave It Back", a post-disaster story as only Lafferty could do it. The "it" in question is given back in exchange for fifty hatchets, twenty guns, twenty-five kilogrammes of gunpowder, ten shirts, thirty pairs of socks, a hundred bullets, forty kettles and one brass frying pan -- approximate value (once upon a time) twenty-four dollars. Work it out for yourself; the idea is beautiful.

Does Anyone Else Have Something Further To Add? is undiluted and unmistakable Lafferty; concentrated oddness and brilliant lunacy, with many sharp bits. If you've liked previous Lafferty you'll not be disappointed with this. If you didn't like him, this collection will do nothing to change your mind. If you've never read him, come to this book with an open mind; come to be told tall stories, come prepared for anything -- but come.

E. C. Tubb -- THE LUCK MACHINE (Dobson, 188pp, £4.95)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

E. C. Tubb's latest novel is far removed from the space ops of his Earl Dumarest and Cap Kennedy series. It's a farce, set in the present day during the vacation at a private school somewhere in England. Two of the masters and a scientist friend build a machine -- a small electronic gadget like a slightly oversized wristwatch -- to bring them good luck but, scared of its potential, have to persuade another master to try it out for them. It works remarkably well, bringing him vast amounts of good luck, and he unsurprisingly refuses to give it back. The three inventors then spend the rest of the book trying in vain to recover their luck machine. Why don't they just build another one? Ah, well, they were (yawn) drunk at the time, you see, and (yawn) aren't quite sure of the details, and....

As farces go this is nothing special -- less polished than Thorne Smith's and less inventive than Keith Laumer's.

Isaac Asimov -- LIFE AND TIME (Avon/Discus, 273pp, \$2.50)
John G. Taylor -- BLACK HOLES (Avon, 208pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

In LIFE AND TIME Asimov, a qualified chemist, writes mainly on biology; the book is well-informed, clearly written, admittedly stodgy and repetitive at times, but in its modest way a success. In BLACK HOLES Taylor, a professor of mathematics, writes ostensibly on physics but with large dollops of mysticism; the book is ill-informed, fuzzily written, admittedly showy and evocative at times, but with its frightful pandering to every class of popular mysticism deserves to be a failure.

Asimov's collection is the usual stuff, hall-marked as always with careful research and a sense of plot rare in non-fiction; there is a bonus for non-mathematical types in that (biology being the chief subject) the ever-tempting numbers are infrequent, and another bonus for dislikers of Asimov facetious in that these essays were written for markets other than F&SF, and thus omit the traditional introductory gags. The 26 essays range from 1960 to 1977; with the exception of a fairly recent plea for solar-power satellites (something which the darkening economic climate has made almost risible), they haven't dated. Each essay, even if written down for the US equivalent of TV Times, contains some hoarded fact or insight; worth a look.

BLACK HOLES should not be here for review. It was first published in 1973, before many major advances in black hole theory; it has not been revised in six Avon printings (nor even, it seems, corrected: scientists cited include Carl Savgan, Schwarzschild, Scharschild and Einsten). Even for its time it was an unworthy book, opening with three chapters of content-free mysticism before ever getting down to the black holes (a bad structural flaw) and descending again and again to statements of utmost wildness to hold the attention of a presumably gullible public. "It may be that under extreme conditions (the force of gravity) becomes repulsive and allows us to build the much-conjectured anti-gravity machine." "Without doubt there is someone out there, possibly even searching at this very moment for life like ours." (For life like theirs, surely?) "Perhaps in the past travellers from far-off stars have conquered the black hole and harnessed its power to drive through the heavens to visit us here on Earth. Have records of the past described these visitors and their strange craft?" "One interesting explanation is that Satan and his followers were aliens disobedient to their leader and were punished by him by being cast into the black hole power source . . ."

The physics - especially in the discussion of entropy and black hole power sources - tends to be dangerously misleading; Taylor may be good at maths, but his popularising descriptions are sloppy. There is some nonsense about rockets scooping bits from a black hole during its initial collapse, without mention of the half-second or so this collapse takes. The fundamental inseparability of space curvature and mass/energy is happily ignored: "If the Earth were suddenly annihilated yet no disturbance made in the space around it . . .". We even get "The frozen image of the star (which collapsed to form the black hole) would be very dim." Very dim is presumably Taylor-speak for black.

Much of the book is simply outdated. Black holes are known not to be eternal; tiny "mini-holes" or quantum black holes supposedly created in the Big Bang have been shown to be unstable, undergoing spectacular dissolution in a

fraction of a second. You don't hear much talk about "white holes" any more, either. The pious warning against the creation of tiny, lethal black holes in the laboratory also seems silly both because of their instability and because the pressures involved are many orders of magnitude greater than foreseeably possible. (In fact this must have seemed as silly in 1973 for the same reason.)

BLACK HOLES is, in short, a very bad book. It was never a good one; what small worth it had in 1973 has decayed with the swiftness of a quantum black hole; its continual re-issue is inexcusable.

F. Paul Wilson -- WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS (Sidgwick & Jackson, 177pp, £5.95)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

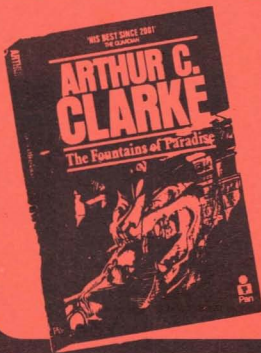
This second novel displays several characteristic vices of the Lesser (or Spotty) American SF Writer. It is part of a future history, "a novel of the LaNague Federation", set in the universe of Wilson's first book HEALER (the plot of which is summarized within for your convenience). It is expanded from a considerably shorter piece - a 1971 Analog story of the same title. There are aliens of the cheapest bargain-basement variety: the Mark II Enigmatic. The ostensible lead character is a woman who we are told is smart, aggressive, dynamic etc., having risen to the top the hard way in the face of brutal sexism: a facade swiftly undermined by an author who is (a) a little too amazed that this mere woman does so well; (b) apparently convinced that rising to the top the hard way means inheriting the firm from Daddy and then sacking the directors; and (c) careful to ensure that the real action lies with deceased Daddy (in flashback) and various male henchmen. The lady's major piece of action comes when she sensibly tries to shoot a villain in the back; unfortunately he notices and gets her within his fearful psychic powers.

The plot lacks the convolutions promised by the title. It's partly a detective story unfairly turning on hitherto unmentioned psychic powers (see above) and made a mystery only by the enigmatic and reticent aliens, who Know All but are much aware that being enigmatic is their sole justification for being here at all: they thus play the part to the hilt. The other plot component is political, dealing with a fiendish plan to abrogate the "LaNague Charter", whose principles are rooted in long study of Heinleinian economics: the all-important thing is to have a free market which governments are not allowed to muck up with taxes, tariffs, or indeed anything else besides (presumably) a few laws making bad debts a flogging offence. If we only had a LaNague Charter, back would come the Victorian days of prosperity when one could make a fortune and nobody who was anybody suffered from it. (In Wilson's universe there are no poor except the enigmatically rustic aliens, who like it that way.) Back in the plot . . . the book's political/economic manoeuvrings are quite devoid of subtlety, requiring that all the good folk be incredibly moronic in order to miss the obvious until the last chapter.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS is a fast-paced Analog-type book, affording a modicum of enjoyment if read at the prescribed fast pace while the higher cerebral functions are looking the other way.

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