

# VECTOR

75p

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

# 98

CHRIS PRIEST

CHRIS EVANS

and others



June 1980

# VECTOR 98

June 1980

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# **Editorial**

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As you will have noticed from the Contents page, there have been some changes in Vector. Primarily, the editor, Mike Dickinson, resigned for personal reasons immediately after Vector 97. Obviously, this gave us no time at all to appoint a new editor for this issue, with the result that it has been a committee effort, and is a little shorter than we would ordinarily like Vector to be. With the appointment of a new editor we hope it will grow fatter, though not flabby. Our thanks to Mike for his efforts over the last three issues.

Applications are now invited for the position of Vector editor. As for all BSFA publications, the editor will be responsible for both editing and producing the magazine. Applications should be sent to the Chairman of the BSFA, Alan Dorey, by 1st August 1980. The new editor will begin with number 99, for the October 1980 BSFA mailing.

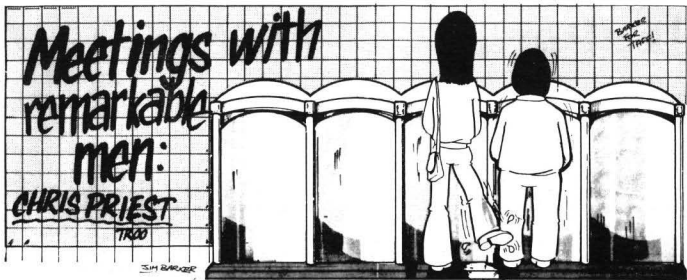
In this issue we have articles from Christopher Priest, Chris Evans and Simon Ounsley (names which should be familiar to you) and the usual book review column. Christopher Priest was Guest of Honour at Novacon 9 in November 1979 (an accolade he well deserved) and 'Meetings with Remarkable Men' is the transcript of the speech he gave then. Chris Evans is co-editor of the BSFA's Focus, and has recently had his first novel published. 'A Long Time Coming' is in part about how he wrote that novel. Simon Ounsley is a BSFA Council member, responsible for liaison with SF groups around the country. His article, 'The Deadly Tiger', is sub-titled 'A dissident's view of Alfred Bester', so that we have little doubt that many of you will disagree with his views on this author. Write and let us know.

This leads rather nicely into another change in Vector -- the return of the letter column. It is very short, and the letters were actually addressed to Matrix, but we hope that it will, in time, build up. Any letters on subjects arising in Vector should be sent to Vector from now on. They will all be read, and some of them will indeed be published, though we reserve the right to edit all letters received. (If you are writing to Matrix also, and don't want to use an extra stamp, then by all means send only one envelope, with two separate letters in it. Letters will reach the right editor eventually, but not if they are on one piece of paper.) To save additional strain on most of our already overburdened editorial committee, letters on this issue of Vector should be sent to Kevin Smith.

Filling in the space at the end of articles you will find some strange little quotations. They are all taken from Asteroid Man by R.L. Fanthorpe, published by Badger Books, and are reprinted here without comment. It may well be that other books will find themselves similarly quoted in future issues of Vector. Here's the first.

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"He had to keep moving, it was like groping your way through a thick fog. The beams of your headlights throwing the fog back at you. It was like that, and yet it wasn't."



(A talk first delivered at Novacon 9, November 1979, and reprinted from Drilkjis 5, March 1980.)

I have borrowed the title of my talk today from the Armenian mystic Gurdjieff, who wrote a semi-autobiographical account of his quest for knowledge and understanding. He sought out a number of philosophers and mystics, became their disciple, and absorbed their wisdom. I'm telling you this in the hope that it will set a high intellectual tone to this convention. In fact, it sets the intellectual tone of this talk exactly... because I'm bluffing. Not only have I not read Gurdjieff, but I haven't even seen the film. However it's a good title, and it's somewhere to begin.

When I first started to go to science fiction conventions I did so for very simple motives. I was a fan of science fiction. Or, to put it more accurately, I was a fan of certain writers who had published science fiction. When I went to Peterborough in 1964 I did so in the hope of meeting John Wyndham, Ray Bradbury, J G Ballard, Robert Sheckley, Brian Aldiss. . . even, if I was very lucky, H G Wells. I wanted to be a science fiction writer, and I hoped that by rubbing shoulders with people like this that some of their talent might rub off on me. I soon discovered that if you rub shoulders with science fiction writers the only thing that's likely to rub off on you is dandruff.

When I first thought about what I should say to you today I felt a slight sense of panic. It might come as something of a surprise to some of you, but this is the first time I have ever given a talk at a convention. I've often taken part in panels - usually the sort where we set out to talk about literature and end up arguing about money - but never before have I been given a whole hour of the convention's time.

I started to go to sf conventions because I was a fan, and to a large extent I continue to come to cons for fannish reasons. They are above all fannish events, and any writer who comes along has to do so more or less on fannish terms. I'm proud of the fact that I have maintained fannish links for more than fifteen years, and it was this that gave me a clue as to what I might be able to talk about today. I saw myself as a sort of latter-day Gurdjieff, passing through the sf world for fifteen years, in contact with the great minds. Perhaps, I thought, I could give you a series of anecdotes about the remarkable men I have met over the years, passing on to you what grains of wisdom, or dandruff, I have picked up. So, with this in mind, I started making a list. Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clarke, Brian Aldiss, John Wyndham, John W Campbell, Frederick Pohl, Rob Holdstock. . . all these I have met. And, because in these liberated times remarkable men should



really be called remarkable people, Ursula Le Guin, Vonda McIntyre, Leigh Brackett, Anne McCaffrey, Judith Merrill. The list extended indefinitely, easily filling an hour of your time.

But then I thought back to the very first science fiction writer I ever met, and my plans started to come adrift.

For many years I have sat in convention halls like this one, listening to Bob Shaw's serious and scientific talks. This weekend, as you know, he is my co-guest of honour at Novacon West. So while he's away I thought I'd take my revenge. I want to tell you the true story of how we met. Garbled versions of this historical meeting have appeared in fanzines over the years - Brian Aldiss even wrote about it in the New Statesman - but now I'm going to set the record straight.

In 1964, Bob Shaw was better known as a fan than he was as an author. Then, as now, Bob was in fact a BNF, or Big Name Fan. Any Big Name Fan was an awesome figure, but Bob was a legend, even in those days. Bob's mere presence in the same room was enough to strike me dumb. In fact, Bob then was probably very much like Bob now, always talking seriously about science, but I had no way of finding this out. Then, on the last evening of the convention, Bob introduced himself to me. It happened like this:

Somewhere around midnight I was taken with a bodily need, and retired to the nearest Gents. Nature started to take its course, and all was well. At that precise moment, Bob Shaw walked into the Gents and came and stood beside me. Now, as most of you will know, one of the more remarkable things about Bob is that he can be in a bar all evening, and *stay* in a bar all evening. When I came into fandom, there was much serious scientific speculation that Bob actually kept a collapsible bucket under his coat. So you can imagine my feelings when I saw Bob walk into this Gents. Not only was I alone with him, but I was there at a moment of fannish history! Perhaps I'd even see the bucket! But before I could say or do anything about any of this, something quite extraordinary happened. I felt something splashing against my shoe. I looked down, and sure enough a small puddle had appeared. I looked up, slowly... and for a moment our eyes met. It was, as they say in Bob Shaw novels, a moment fraught with tension. Then Bob gave one of his peculiar, chortling snuffles. "Sorry," he said. "Would you like a return shot?" Unfortunately, nature had run its course, and as often happens during a stimulating conversation, I dried up. In the words of the Sunday newspapers, I made my excuses and left... with a slight hopping motion.

There's a postscript to this historical meeting. Three or four years ago I drove up from London to spend the weekend at Bob's mansion in the Lake District. About twenty-five seconds after I arrived, having given me time to rest and recuperate after my long drive on the motorway, Bob suggested that we go down to his local. Actually, he claimed he didn't go there very often, and pretended to lose his way, but I noticed as we went in that the landlord was sending a telegram order to the brewery. So we had a drink or seven, and eventually I asked Bob if he remembered how we had met, all those years before. Bob claimed he didn't, so I reminded him. He sat in silence as I told the story, but was obviously puzzled why I should be telling him. He suddenly gave one of his peculiar, chortling snuffles, and said, "Do you want to borrow a Kleenex?"

So I decided against telling you this anecdote, because it didn't really seem relevant to my quest for knowledge. And the more I thought about it, none of my other meetings with remarkable men were all that remarkable. I could have told you about how my father-figure, Harry Harrison, cuffed me about the ear and said, "Get out of the way, you fucking fan." Or how the very first words ever spoken to me by Arthur C Clarke were, "What about the variable albedo?" ...something which to this day is worrying me. I could tell you how I stood next to Harlan Ellison, and loomed over him. Come to that, I could tell you how Douglas Adams stood next to me, and loomed over us both.

But none of these memories are really helpful. All I've really learnt is that if

you give a science fiction writer a chance he will piss on your shoe.

A reader's experience of science fiction is, in a sense, a meeting with remarkable minds. It was this that first surprised me when I encountered sf. Through their work, I met, for the first time, writers who could show me a different way of seeing things, who were way above the mundane things in life and were getting on with a kind of fiction that made me think for myself. Years later, I came across a passage in an essay by George Orwell, which describes this feeling exactly. Orwell was describing the effect on him of reading H G Wells as a boy:

"It was a wonderful experience for a boy to discover H G Wells. There you were, in a world of pedants, clergymen and golfers, with your future employers exhorting you to "get on or get out", your parents systematically warping your sexual life, and your dull-witted schoolmasters sniggering over their Latin tags; and here was this wonderful man who could tell you about the inhabitants of the planets and the bottom of the sea, and who *knew* that the future was not going to be what respectable people imagined."

Orwell always has the ability to pinpoint a feeling exactly, and this describes the effect science fiction as a whole can have on people who come to it with open minds. I myself came to it with the open mind of adolescence, as many of us do. The ideas of science fiction work on two levels. Firstly, there is the element of surprise or novelty, and secondly there is the less specific quality of making us think for ourselves, of applying a freshness of approach to our own lives.

I don't want to emphasize the importance of the ideas too much, because there is much more to science fiction than just novelty. I think ideas are misunderstood in some quarters, and given the wrong sort of importance. Science fiction is undoubtedly the literature of ideas, or speculative notions, but an idea in a story cannot exist outside the words that contain it. It therefore seems obvious to me that we should be at least as interested in the words as we are in the ideas.

This amounts to taking a more literary approach to sf, but I have found to my cost over the years that the very mention of the word "literary" seems to indicate some kind of mischief on my behalf. There is an anti-literature mood in science fiction, one that is shared by many readers, critics and even some of the writers. Literature is a dirty word: it is taken to mean "arty" or "boring" or "pretentious". Science fiction is fresh and exciting; literature would only muck it up. Literature is posh, literature is for the academics and poseurs. Science fiction is fun, and literature isn't.

This perverse attitude is especially ironic, because it seems to me that the best science fiction has the twin merits of being popular and widely read, and yet also deeply serious. Some of the most popular sf books in recent years have been serious novels, capable of being judged by the highest literary standards. You have only to look as far as the novels of, say, Ursula Le Guin to see this.

So in recent years I've become a bit of a literature bore, or so it seems. I have said, until even I am bored with hearing me say it, that a science fiction novel should be a novel first and science fiction second. That it should be recognized as an art and not a craft. That it should make demands on a reader and not pander to laziness. That it should not seek to compete with television or comics or films, but that it should be first and foremost a literary experience. That it should be peopled with characters who not only live for the plot but are living. That there should be a celebration of language and metaphor and style. In short, that a novel, whether it is science fiction or anything else, is literature above all else.

Yet in the science fiction world this kind of sentiment is seen as heresy. You have probably heard Heinlein's remark, that writers are competing for the readers' beer-money. When this was quoted in an SFWA publication by Poul Anderson, under-

lining the entertainment-value of science fiction, Stanislaw Lem was moved to reply. Writing in Frankfurter Allgemeine, he said:

"If in the past all authors had accepted the suggestions of the two Americans (Heinlein and Anderson) we would have no literature worth mentioning. We would have none of the literary heritage of which we are so proud if every author worried about publishers, critics, censors, readers, public opinion, sales potential, and the like. My rebuttal to Anderson's thesis, then, is that marketing prospects or official approval or similar concerns have no business intruding in that narrow gap between the author's eye and the blank piece of paper. That the muse cannot be pursued over a bottle of beer goes without saying. In short, honest literature can never conform to external pressures or exigencies. To do so would be its death."

You would think that this was a civilized and reasonable reply, yet for these very words Stanislaw Lem was booted through the door. SFWA, the organization that represents the world's leading science fiction writers, chucked him out. You would think that a writer in the Eastern bloc would have troubles enough with the writers' union, and yet here was a writers' organisation in a free and democratic country acting in exactly the same way. Of course, it's not fair to tar every member of SFWA with the same brush, but out of a membership of nearly four hundred, less than ten registered a protest.

Nor is this attitude just a collective phenomenon. It crops up all over the place, in articles in fanzines, in interviews with writers, in criticism, in those infamous rejection slips from Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine. Boiled down to its essence, it says: "We are but entertainers, and entertainment is a humble trade. Therefore our sights are set low." I believe that entertainment is a high art, and should be treated as such. Everyone at the convention today is here because we believe that science fiction is a stimulating, radical *and* entertaining form of literature, yet by their very words the Poul Andersons and Robert A Heinleins are asking you to settle for less.

If you have the misfortune to read Analog you will have been exposed to the so-called wisdom of certain reviewers, whom I am tempted to call Loser del Ray-Gun and Creepy-Crawly Crusoe. These men, both of whom are said to have written science fiction, are leading spokesmen for the anti-literature school. Month after month they have stated their theory of sf. That it is first and foremost entertainment, that it should be well crafted, that it should have a comprehensible plot, that it should not make undue demands on the reader... and, as an afterthought, that it should have what they call 'characterisation' and 'good writing', as if these can be added later. In short, that sf should be lowbrow entertainment, pitched at the same sort of level as television films.

Perhaps it doesn't sound so very different from my own statement just now, with the elements coming in a different order. Well, that *is* the difference. It's a question of priorities. Ray-Gun and Crusoe appeal to the lowest common denominator of readership. I happen to believe that the readership of science fiction is intelligent and diverse.

As I move about the sf world, both as a sort of fan who comes to these conventions, and as a writer working in the field, I see more and more evidence that these insulting attitudes are taking over. I believe, for instance, that my views on the literary nature of science fiction are actually rather moderate, well-meaning and conventional. It doesn't seem to me that to say a form of literature should be treated as literature is at all revolutionary or extreme. You would think that it speaks for itself. Yet such is the consensus these days that the very act of stating the obvious is one that is treated as dangerous extremism. Because the *consensus* is an extremist viewpoint, anyone who opposes it looks like a different sort of extremist.

Nor is it just a theoretical debate. Such attitudes are filtering down and taking different forms. The present commercial success of science fiction is bringing with it a set of attitudes which are close cousins to the entertainment-or-literature argument. Some of you might have been present at Skycon last year, when Rob Holdstock and I got involved in a public argument with James Baen of Ace Books. A lady in the audience asked the panel how she should go about getting her work published. Rob and I said something soggy and organic, such as "write for yourself", whereas Baen said didactically that the only way was to "write for market". In conversation with him afterwards it became clear that the very fact that a writer is being paid means he *must* put market considerations first... and later we were told that there was no market for what he called 'British misery'. This presumably would include miserable British books like *Frankenstein*, *The War of the Worlds* and *The Day of the Triffids*. This points up the commercial silliness of such an attitude, because any publisher could probably retire on the sales of those three books alone.

Then there are the critics, who divide into camps of such extremism that neither side knows where the other lot are.

Doctor Johnson once said: "Criticism is a study by which men grow important and formidable at very small expense." So it is... but whether we like it or not, sf needs responsible criticism.

Writing is an art, and criticism is the natural companion to art. It defines and shapes it, it interprets it, it sets standards, it provides an overview of what individual writers are doing, it provides a context of intelligent debate. Original work *can* survive without it, and can of course be appreciated without it, but responsible criticism enhances art.

Science fiction critics are usually one of two sorts. There are those who have discovered that sf is literature, and have promptly gone barmy. These are the academics, who come to science fiction from the comfortable security of a chair at a university. There are a few good academic critics, but most of the criticism I have seen from academics has been pompous and narcissistic, apparently written with no love of literature, just a desire to impress.

The other lot are the crowd-pleasers, the likes of Loser del Ray-Gun and Creepy-Crawly Crusoe, who shy away from criticism and call themselves 'reviewers'. They claim to know what the common reader enjoys, and from this position of arrogance and ignorance parade their subjective opinions with all the certainty of the closed mind.

Neither kind of critic is worth a damn. They say nothing to the writer or the reader, and neither is able to join a larger debate.

Of course, there are a few exceptions. There are some perceptive critics in fandom, who are not showing off, who are not trying to agree with anybody and who write with honesty and insight. And the British magazine *Foundation* has a well-earned reputation for clear, unpretentious criticism. But this simply isn't enough to form a body of critical work. There should be a sufficient amount of sf criticism that there is disagreement amongst informed critics, that there is a continuity of debate.

At this point I was intending to turn away from the critics and have something to say about the responsibility of the writers. However, on the principle that ~~dog~~ shouldn't eat dog (except in private, when you can have fun) I won't say too much.

It is the writers whom one would think remain blameless, whatever venality there might be elsewhere in the science fiction industry. The trouble is, and I'll say more on this in a moment, with the increasing success of sf in the marketplace the temptations laid before writers are the greater. At one time the hidden strength of sf as a genre was that although it was sold in the same way as the other categories, like Westerns, etc., it actually consisted of a large

number of autonomous novels... just like general literature. An autonomous novel is one that stands alone. It explains itself, it does not require the reader to know something about it in advance, it contains its own self-explanatory universe.

Today, it seems that more and more so-called sf novels are going the way of the down-market bestseller, and are parts of a larger whole. We see an increasing dependence on sf jargon. We get film-scripts turned into a bastard form called a novelization. (I once saw an Ace book which was a 'novelization' of The Island of Doctor Moreau, as if H G Wells's novel had died of old age or something.) We get sequels and series and trilogies and future histories. We're getting novel-ettes published in book form and padded out with cartoon illustrations. We're getting comic-book versions of stories and novels. We even got a comic-book version of Battlestar Galactica, as if something you can't watch has to be turned into something you can't read. The trend is towards pre-digested pabulum, baby-food for the mind. The Dark Ages are almost upon us.

All the ills of science fiction are caused by two distinct things, of which by far the more disagreeable is the pulp-tradition, an article of faith held high and holy by virtually every science fiction writer or commentator you come across.

The fallacies of the pulp-tradition are so obvious that I'm genuinely surprised that they survive. The tradition goes like this: Science fiction was invented in 1926 with the inception of Amazing Stories, and after a few ropery years it started getting better, and then we had the Golden Age, and since then everything's been just mind-bogglingly good. Thus we progress from Bob Shaw's favourite writer, Captain S P Meek, to my favourite writer, Larry Niven.

Important figures in the pulp-tradition are Hugo Gernsback, who started it all, and John W Campbell, who improved sf standards no end. In my view, Hugo Gernsback was a menace, and John W Campbell is utterly irrelevant.

The advocates of the pulp-tradition simply cannot see beyond the ends of their noses. Science fiction has existed in British and European literature for about a hundred years. It existed as a natural part of all literature. Writers outside the science fiction category, both major and minor, have turned to the speculative themes of sf as a means of saying something. They did this before Gernsback came along, they did it all through Campbell's so-called Golden Age, and they continue to do it now. After fifty years, pulp science fiction has improved itself to the point where the half-dozen or so best sf writers can compete with writers outside. This is my principal indictment of the pulp-tradition: it put the clock back and created something worse. Gernsback and his imitators siphoned off speculative literature into crass, commercial magazines, and made it into trash. After fifty years, we're just recovering. The ignorance of pundits like Loser del Ray-Gun is the ignorance of the pulp-tradition itself. Ray-Gun would say that Larry Niven is a better writer than Captain S P Meek, but I would counter that by saying: "Is Captain S P Meek therefore better than H G Wells?"... or indeed, "Is Larry Niven better than H G Wells?"

You could argue that all of us here today, including myself, are indirect products of the pulp-tradition. This I do not and cannot deny. All this is made possible by Hugo Gernsback, etc. But think of it this way. The science fiction world today is like a colony. It is as if a number of people from, say, Britain were transported fifty years ago to a penal colony on Corsica. After half a century, the population has increased immeasurably, they have a few traditions and folk-heroes, and they think of themselves as Corsicans. The regime that put them there has long gone. What I'm saying is: "Hey, we're British really. Let's go home to Birmingham."

Obviously, a few people will choose to remain in Corsica, but perhaps the rest will leave. You can take it, therefore, that I'm all in favour of so-called science fiction rejoining the so-called mainstream. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner it happens the better.

The other besetting ill of science fiction is, paradoxically its present success. If you doubt this success, all you have to do is walk around the book-room here and see the truly staggering amount of stuff that is being published. Or you could go to the movies and see one of the two or three biggest box-office successes in the history of the cinema. You could read Locus, and see the sort of money that some sf writers make these days (but not all). Science fiction imagery is being used to sell everything from hi-fi equipment to instant mashed potato. To quote at least two hundred of the pulp-tradition believers: "We must be doing something right."

I often wonder if we are. As far as I can see, the present boom in science fiction is an artificial one. It is principally a publishing boom. Although there are undoubtedly more people reading sf these days, and there are certainly more people writing it, the bulge is in the middle, where the publishers are. Too much stuff is coming out, and it's coming out faster than it could conceivably be written, or even read. Just take Britain, for example, where the activity is considerably lower than it is in the States, or even in France or Japan. Here we have twelve paperback publishers with science fiction lists. If each publisher brings out only one book per month (and in fact they bring out rather more), then in any one year we would have 144 new titles on the shelves. How many people can or want to read nearly three novels a week? And can you remember any year when there were more than about half a dozen new sf titles worth reading?

In practice, of course, most of the new books that come out aren't new at all. A very large proportion of all apparently new books are reprints or reissues. Much of the remainder is taken up with the stuff I talked about earlier: the film tie-ins, the series, the sequels. Only a very small proportion, about ten per cent, is new work, autonomously conceived, available for the first time. So the excess fat in the publishing boom does not necessarily reflect an equivalent boom in creative work.

You could say that a large market makes room for everyone, for a variety of tastes. Readers can select from a wide range of material. A lot of stuff is coming back into print, and some of it deservedly. And even if a hundred bad novels are published in a year, surely all of them are vindicated by the hundred-and-first, which might be the new 'Left Hand of Darkness', 'Lord of the Rings' or 'Dune'?

I don't argue against this. What I see is the danger of over-extension, of science fiction growing so fat that it collapses in a heap of blubber. We can take a lesson, in miniature, from the recent past.

A few years ago I read a letter published in the SFWA Bulletin that contained the following sentence: "I am now the largest market in the world for sf short stories." The writer of the letter was Roger Elwood, announcing the fact that he was signing up more than thirty new anthologies with publishers, and that he was looking for short stories to fill them. It was not long before this first batch of anthologies had grown to a number that some estimates put at more than eighty. What Mr Elwood did was to boldly go where no sf had gone before... in other words, to many publishers who had never done any sf. A majority of sf writers proclaimed that this was nothing but for the good, because it meant a larger market. Then many writers, possibly the same ones, rushed in to fill these new markets. The consequences of all this are well known. It was an artificially expanded market. Any publisher who brought out an Elwood anthology was competing with 79 or more similar books, and each Elwood anthology had the distinct disadvantage of being distinctively mediocre. Many of them sold as well as bacon sandwiches in Tel Aviv. Not only did the Elwood anthologies put themselves out of the market, but in the process practically annihilated what existing market there was for anyone else's anthology. Nowadays, it is a publishing truism that science fiction anthologies do not sell. The market for short stories is now somewhat smaller than it was a few years ago, because people were greedy.

I got a tell-tale warning pain in my elbow when I heard about Mr Elwood's anthologies,

and I feel it throbbing again whenever I hear complacent noises about the present boom. The lesson from Roger Elwood is that an expansion of the commercial market will be short-lived, and that it doesn't create a parallel boom in creativity. Indeed, the signs are that the market is full of padding these days. On the other hand, good writing and honest, ambitious work *will* create its own market, *will* bring about a natural expansion of the market.

Anyway, having had my grumbles, I should like to finish on a positive note. It is a great pleasure to be made the guest of honour at a convention, if only because it gives me the unique opportunity to speak candidly and subjectively about my own outlook. This is what you have been hearing, and I'm not speaking for anyone except myself. You should always remember that criticism is a form of autobiography... I'm not trying to separate myself from the things I have been describing. I am in, and of, the science fiction world.

I'd like to close, therefore, with what I suppose will be seen as a personal statement. Much of what I have said will sound as if I am intending to turn my back on sf in the future, and I'd like to correct this view. I see absolutely nothing wrong with science fiction as literature. The novel I'm writing at the moment is what we would all recognize as sf... the two or three ideas I have for the novels that will follow are all sf. I'd go so far as to say that the science fiction type of novel, the speculative novel, has more life in it, more potential, than most of the other forms of novel I have read in the last few years.

The only thing wrong with science fiction is the 'science fiction' label, and all the misbegotten attitudes that have arisen around it. We are all aware of the close-minded attitudes from people outside the sf world who have not read the stuff... we know that their dislike of science fiction is based on ignorance and prejudice. My point is that there are similar attitudes *within* the field, just as ignorant, just as prejudiced, yet they are mostly invisible to us because they appear to be on our side. These internal ignorant attitudes will eventually destroy the freedoms of creative writers, unless they are exposed for what they are.

Science fiction writers are blessed with many valuable things. They have an active, intelligent and open-minded readership. They have a successful commercial framework within which to work. The 'science fiction' label conceals a multitude of sins, but it also provides a liberal framework within which to write. New writers are still being actively encouraged. There is room for the experimental story, for the avant-garde, for the work you can't easily pin a label on. All this is valuable, and, as far as I know, unique in modern publishing. I say to the remarkable men and women who are my colleagues: write up to the level of your audience. Make life difficult for them. Give them autonomous, demanding novels. Stimulate them and entertain them. Don't listen to the Loserdel Ray-Guns of the world, don't settle for the imaginatively second-hand, for the easy sequel to your first success. You're not writing for beer-money, you're writing for minds. Put your language first; language is the test of reality, the medium of ideas.

Thank you.

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"If you could translate a problem into computer terms, then there was no problem you couldn't answer. It all depended on a man's ability to translate. To get the feel of a problem. To sense it. To view the whole of the cosmos as a huge mathematical equation. An enormous complex, and yet perfectly solvable, quadratic.

"He kept on feeding information and corrections. Looking at tapes and then re-feeding his answers. He worked in a series of concentric rectangles..."

# THE DEADLY TIGER

A Dissident's View of Alfred Bester

**Simon Ounsley**

Last year, Penguin Books reprinted Alfred Bester's Tiger! Tiger! and The Demolished Man, two widely acknowledged classics of science fiction from the 1950s, and several months ago I was asked to review them for Vector.

Now I'd better come clean right from the start. I haven't actually read these books - not all the way through that is, though I have been conscientiously trying for the last four months. In the case of Tiger! Tiger! it's been even longer; I bought that one after reading Joe Nicholas's short commercial in Paperback Parlour at SEACON, the essence of which fitted in with the opinions I'd heard from various other sources over the years. In short: this book is gonna knock you sideways - Ka-pow!

I mis-spent my youth, you see. I did read Asimov's robot yarns at the age of 14, but they put me off science fiction for about five years. I only came back to it out of Tolkien by Michael Moorcock, if you'll forgive the unlikely metaphor. The upshot of all this is that I got in via wizards and sword-fights rather than spaceships and lazer-guns, so that - unlike the hordes of loyal devotees who crawl out of the woodwork every time I mention that I hate his work - I didn't read Bester at an early age.

Maybe that was my mistake. I'm willing to admit that in my early teens I might have been impressed and excited by these free-wheeling galaxy-stomping romps. If I'd been that age in the 1950s, and had the expression been in use at the time, I'd probably even have been blown out of my mind. But it's not the 1950s and I'm not 16 (sigh!) and Joe didn't say "this is a marvellously entertaining juvenile period-piece", he said "it's one of the best sf novels ever written".

Now maybe I'm taking things far too seriously, but isn't the BSFA supposed to be offering some kind of intelligent criticism of the genre, and if I pick up a book it describes as "one of the best sf novels ever written" and find that it's utterly unreadable, isn't there something wrong somewhere, either with the genre, the BSFA, or (OK, I admit the possibility) with me?

So what's the matter? Why can't I read these books? Is it just that I'm too damned lazy?

Well, I don't think so; I recently reviewed another book for Vector, a dire

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piece of work written in a style which was technically inferior to Bester's, yet I managed to read to the end of the thing. You see with that book I did feel that something interesting just might happen towards the end, that one of the two-dimensional characters just might be changed in some interesting way, perhaps even become three-dimensional.

With Bester it's different. Perhaps he just strikes a blank spot in my brain and I'm willing to admit to that possibility, but it doesn't stop me attempting to explain my antipathy towards his work.

There are no doubt extraordinary things in the parts of these books that I haven't read. I did get as far as the spaceship graveyard asteroid in Tiger! Tiger! and even the massive prison that Gully Foyle gets thrown into, and, trying to take an objective view, those are already pretty amazing. But I didn't enjoy reading about them and I know that whatever other marvellous vistas and environments Bester has dreamt up, I'll be totally unimpressed with those as well.

When I really think about it, I'm afraid it comes down to this: it's the old moan about science fiction - these books don't have real people in them. And I'm fussy, I need real people to relate to. I can't get interested in a bunch of cardboard cut-outs riding through space. I want to be there with someone real, so it's like I'm there myself; I want to know what they feel so I can feel it myself; and I want to know how it changes them, so that the book can, in some small way, change me. OK, so this has all been said before, and the counter-arguments have been put before as well: science fiction is a literature of ideas, so that the characters don't really matter that much. And yes, maybe there are ideas in Bester that really would blow my tiny little mind if I could stop it screaming in pain and bring it to bear on the content for a short while. Maybe those patterns on the pages of The Demolished Man really do mean something. I don't know, I can't talk about that. I can't even talk about the use of an amoral superman as hero, a device which I'm told worries even some of Bester's fans. To discuss such matters without finishing the books would be utterly ludicrous.

But this much I can say: Bester's style seems to me so arrogant and overbearing that it overshadows everything else in the book. The people... the places... the ideas... all these are drowned in the intolerable deluge of Bester's prose. He seems to write not with a pen but with a sledgehammer: propelling his characters from one extraordinary setting to the next, with great blows which rock the cosmos and shatter credibility, hacking away at the worlds he's created until they fit exactly the shape he requires.

Bester may be a technically competent craftsman, but the impression received is that he's worked out every blow of his hammer before he starts to work. There's no hint of flexibility, no concessions to the 'inner life' of his characters.

I'd better explain what I mean by this. To quote from Randal Flynn's article 'This Way to Heaven' in Focus 2 (and changing the tense for convenience) "there are two fundamental types of plot in the universe. There is the plot boldly and artificially imposed from above, the way Poul Anderson does it. He invents a few names, John, Tom and Jane, and then makes them do things, like chase after star treasures etc. Or there is the plot that grows out of itself, starting from the imaginative creation or arrival of a life-given character and the results of his subsequent interactions with the physical and social environment, and with his own emotional nature. This is organic plot".

I agree with Randal that the second category is preferable. Now I think that in some of his novels, like Three Hearts and Three Lions, Poul Anderson transcends the other category, the one which Randal has assigned to him, but Alfred Bester seems to fit into it perfectly.

Another quote: this time from a recent BBC-tv interview with novelist Doris

Lessing, a mainstream writer who has recently turned to science fiction. She described each new novel she starts to write as "an adventure", because she knows that she's going to be changed in the process of writing it. Which seems a laudable attitude to me, because if the author is changed in the process of writing a novel, then it seems likely that I am going to be changed by reading it.

I'm not trying to suggest that someone necessarily picks up an Alfred Bester novel for the same reasons they might pick up a Doris Lessing, but we are talking about so-called classics of science fiction here don't forget, and sf is supposed to be a literature of ideas isn't it?, so when I pick up a Bester book I can surely expect something in the way of ideas, something that's going to bear on the way I look at things; or, more realistically, to get an impression that the book might contain such a thing, so that I have the incentive to keep reading it and perhaps at the end think "Well, not this time, but maybe the next..."

So what do we get from Alfred Bester?: this overbearing, dynamic, know-it-all style which suggests a man whose mind is already made up. There's no chance of him being changed by writing the book, or even of him altering the plot to fit in with the motivations of the characters as they emerge in detail. Nothing like that: he's going to force them to do exactly what he wants them to, whether it's realistic or not. The impression is that of a god in a world without free will, or a puppeteer who uses ropes instead of cotton for his strings, so that the marionettes dance around on the stage well enough, but you can see at a glance that their motivations come from outside of themselves.

The characters are like pocket calculators, which Bester carries around in his pocket to use at his convenience. He switches them on at the start of the novel and off again at the end, making them perform the precise functions he requires. He can input their memory at any time and wipe it clean at any time. Take the start of TIGER! TIGER!:

Switch on calculator. Memory blank

"He had reached a dead end. He had been content to drift from moment to moment of existence for thirty years like some heavily armoured creature, sluggish and indifferent... Gully Foyle, the stereotype common man."

Input memory. Stereotype common man

Then six pages later -

"After thirty years of existence and six months of torture, Gully Foyle, the stereotype Common Man was no more. The key turned in the lock of his soul ((i.e. the finger pushed the memory button)) and the door was opened. What emerged expunged the Common Man for ever."

Wipe memory. Prepare for new input

"'You pass me by,' he said with slow mounting fury. 'You leave me rot like a dog. You leave me die, VORGA...VORGA-T:l339. No. I get out of here, me. I follow you, VORGA. I find you, VORGA. I pay you back, me. I rot you. I kill you VORGA. I kill you deadly.'"

Input memory. Overwhelming hatred and tunnel vision

This is now Gully Foyle's motivation for the rest of the book (OK, so far as I've read in it).

This kind of heavy-handed treatment of the characters, as well as the irritating style are my main objections to the books. As I've said, the fact that I can't finish reading them doesn't qualify me to talk about much else. But one other point does occur.

I've just been reading Philip Dick's excellent novel Martian Time-Slip, which contains characters who have special powers (they can see into the future) and this reminded me of the mind-reading 'peepers' in The Demolished Man. Or rather it didn't.

In Dick's book, the 'gifted' people are presented as humans with problems. Their powers are shown as terrifying and disorientating, the kind of things which just might possibly happen to a human being. In The Demolished Man, I didn't find such sympathy; the peepers are presented as something mysterious: strange people who converse in patterns of words; they might as well be aliens for all the empathy they have with the human being as we know it.

This approach I find less interesting, less enlightening, less entertaining than Dick's. Of course, a comparison of The Demolished Man with just one other book, written a decade later, is not entirely fair, but I think it illustrates a general point about Bester's writing: his novels are far away in more than one sense of the word. They're removed in time and space and from existence as we know it. They're dazzling patterns painted on the backcloth of space: patterns of weird and wonderful things: things which are alien not just in themselves but in the way they are presented. Bester purposefully tries to make his worlds seem strange to us; he seems to be saying "look, isn't this something totally outside your knowledge, isn't it so much more exciting, so much faster than the humdrum life that you lead. Look at the peepers: people so different you wouldn't even be able to talk to them, you wouldn't be able to understand the way they perceive things at all."

"That's right!" you might cry, with the scent of my blood in your nostrils, "they're totally different. It's total escapism!". But for me, there's no way to escape. There's no point of contact between me and this astounding light-show in the sky, no Arthur C Clarke space ladder, no escape hatch I can climb through to get up there. I prefer Dick's approach, presenting something which is undoubtedly strange but from the inside rather than the outside, and with real characters to act as a point of reference. With Bester, I'm left outside the dream; I can't relate to it. Which is my misfortune, I suppose. After all, Bester's entertained an awful lot of people over the years, which is quite an achievement and I hate to be missing out. But that's the way it seems to be. I'm stuck down here in one reality or another, and I'll just have to make do with the space that affords me, won't I? Unless someone can persuade me to delve into these books again, of course. After all, as I keep repeating cynically, these are supposed to be classics of science fiction. Someone out there must be able to tell me why.



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# A LONG TIME COMING

## Chris Evans

In my experience, most sf fans are would-be writers of science fiction. Talking to people at conventions or in pubs, you quickly discover that a lot of them have written/are writing/intend to write sf stories or novels. Only a very small proportion of these people will eventually go on to write regularly and find a market for their work. What separates the few success stories from the rest? It's not simply a question of innate ability. Most people who fall by the wayside do so because they are insufficiently dedicated to the sheer hard graft of writing. They imagine that they can dash off instantly saleable stories whenever the inspiration strikes them, and they quickly become disillusioned when they fail to sell (if, indeed, they ever get round to writing something in the first place). Some, either by luck or talent, do manage to find a market for their work relatively easily, but then stop writing because other things take precedence in their lives: writing is simply not important enough to them for them to want to do it on a regular basis. (And there's no reason, of course, why it should be; there are lots of other things in life which are just as interesting and certainly more worthwhile.) Those who do succeed do so because, apart from anything else, they are obsessive about it and are prepared if necessary to suffer endless frustrations in the tortuous business of perfecting their craft.

I originally started writing sf stories because I enjoyed reading them so much (and one or two affected me very profoundly indeed) that I thought I might be able to work out why I enjoyed them by writing my own. I also had the idea that being "a writer" would be glamorous, that I would quickly gain the admiration and respect of others and that beautiful women would fall at my feet. These are, I suspect, not uncommon motives for beginning writers, particularly in sf. Science fiction seems to attract a disproportionate number of people who are maladjusted or at least unhappy in society at large. Reading sf provides an escape from one's problems in this respect; writing it, as far as I was concerned, would help me overcome them by making me a figure of importance - a "creative artist" whom mere mortals would look upon in awe. I can't even claim that I was a spotty adolescent when I concocted this vision of imminent fame; I was a spotty undergraduate, suffering from acute intellectual and imaginative boredom.

It took me about eight years to make my first sale - a bit longer than I had anticipated. Living in South Wales as I was, without any contact with other people who were writing or even interested in science fiction, I felt like a man with an unwholesome obsession which he could only satisfy in the privacy of his bedroom. I submitted stories to a variety of outlets from New Worlds through SF Monthly to New Writings in SF. I couldn't sell any of them, and the dull thud of returned manuscripts hitting the doormat became depressingly regular. Sometimes the rejections slips were encouraging; more often they were standard replies which said that the story was "unsuitable" or "does not meet our present requirements". I was dumbfounded and crestfallen (and sometimes dumbfallen and crestfounded). Reluctantly deciding that the editors were not all nincompoops who couldn't recognize a brilliant story if it slapped them across the face, I wondered why they wouldn't explain to me why my story had failed and how it might be improved.

(Having now worked in a similar editorial capacity myself, I fully appreciate why: the sheer volume of stories which an editor has to read makes it impracticable to respond at length to each one. If the story is a near-miss, the better editors will usually write an encouraging note to the author, perhaps asking to see more of his or her work. But the majority of stories come from beginners whom the editor knows will not write a publishable story for some years - if ever. How do you tell a writer this? You don't. It's a risky business replying at length to any story. Some writers will respond to criticism in the spirit in which it was given - they go quietly away and brood over its possible value to the development of their work. But others will react with indignation, writing angry letters back to the editor refuting every criticism point-by-point and ultimately informing him that he is an imbecile. Form rejection slips are thus not only practical, but also safer.)

I was at first very disillusioned that my grand entry into the ranks of the great literary figures of the day had been thwarted. (I was also keenly aware that Samuel Delany had published his first novel at the age of twenty - already I was lagging behind!) However, I swallowed my disappointment and continued to write. I did so more out of desperation than anything else, for I had come to the conclusion that (aside from the fact that I enjoyed concocting stories) writing was the only career I could think of that I was remotely interested in pursuing. If my confidence in my talent was now less than wholesale, my determination to sell something had grown by leaps and bounds.

(Incidentally, the only reason I'm equating success in writing with selling fiction is that I wanted to make my living as a full-time writer, and it was therefore important to me that I should get paid for my labours. There are those who argue that satisfying oneself in one's writing is the only important thing and that market considerations are irrelevant. I wouldn't argue with this view, though I have my reservations about it - it's easy to be a closet genius. Selling your work can also give you added confidence in what you write because it means that someone else is prepared to back your estimation of your story's worth with hard cash.)

In 1975 I moved to London and discovered the sf community there. No longer was I isolated, working in a vacuum; suddenly there were people who shared my interests and ambitions, with whom I could talk and talk about science fiction and the writing of it. A few friends read my stories and gave me some helpful criticisms. Some of them were even writers, whom I had hitherto considered a species apart from all other people. I discovered that aside from the fact that they were more involved in their work than most people are, they weren't the glamorous, god-like figures I had imagined them to be, but practically minded people lucky enough to be pursuing a profession which absorbed them utterly. I also became aware that they regarded writing as a task in which inspiration was only the starting point for a lot of hard work. This was an important realization.

Unpublished writers frequently assume that there is some kind of secret to writing saleable fiction which, once acquired, will bring about an immediate quantum leap to full professionalism. In fact, the process is usually much more gradual, a simple question of the writer gaining in maturity of thought and mastery of the basic crafts of story-telling. Some will never manage it, of course, but the only truly useful advice one can give to the ambitious beginner is to keep writing: time will tell.

Judging by the comments I was now receiving on my most recent stories, some of them at least seemed to be of a professional standard. But the short story market had dwindled to virtual extinction in this country, and I was still unable to sell anything. There was a fragment of a story I had been working on which was gradually getting longer and longer, and I finally realised that it would have to be novel-length if I was to do any justice to the themes and characters in it. A few years earlier I had written a 60,000 word opus for the Sunday Times/Gollancz SF Competition - a novel which I put away in my deepest box-file as soon as I had completed it, having realized that it deserved nothing less than utter obscurity. But it had

been a useful exercise, proving to me that I had at least the stamina to write something of book-length. Early in 1976 I decided that it was time I tried to write another novel.

During the day I was working in a laboratory, so I settled down to write in the evenings and on weekends. My progress was slow and halting. I knew that I could not write even reasonably fluid prose or create credible characters without considerable care and effort, so I kept revising my text as I went along, sometimes writing pages over and over until I was happy with them. Gradually I felt that some satisfactory shape was emerging, and I grew confident that I could at least finish the book. I did not, however, work to a regular schedule, and sometimes weeks would pass on which I did not work on the novel at all. (To some extent, this was a mistake: a modest, flexible schedule has a lot to commend it, particularly when you are embarked on a full-length work; novels have to be "lived with" over a period of at least months, and the more the writer can maintain a continuity of thought and feeling towards the book he's working on, the better it's likely to be.)

Still, even when I wasn't actually writing it, the novel occupied most of my thoughts, to the obvious detriment of the work I was supposed to be conducting from nine to five each day. I didn't care; what did promotions matter, a step up the ladder in the mundane real world when I was wrestling with a much more vivid fictional construct of my own creation? How could I worry about the decomposition of laxative tablets when the fate of a world hung in the balance in my head? This phenomenon - the way in which the real world often becomes a distraction to the person engrossed in the inner world of his imagination - is something which interests me greatly. To write about the world (which, indirectly, every author does) one has to withdraw from it, and there is in most writers a strong voyeuristic tendency - a retreat from experience into observation and reflection. As Ken Bulmer has remarked elsewhere, the act of writing is anti-social; I'd go even further and say that the whole business of being a writer is anti-social, since for the writer everything that happens to him is potentially grist to his fictional mill. Writers are parasites on experience.

By the summer of 1978 the book was almost - and at long last - complete. About this time, too, the department for which I worked was due to move from West London to Leatherhead in Surrey. Commuting was impractical since I don't drive, and besides I was by now intolerably bored with the job. I decided to take a voluntary redundancy and devote myself to completing the book. Having taken the plunge, I resisted the temptation to while away my days sunbathing and getting drunk every evening; I actually sat down each day and wrote something. By the end of August the manuscript was complete. With some trepidation, I gave it to a writer friend to read. He suggested some improvements, but he was essentially enthusiastic about it and recommended a literary agency that I might approach.

I hurried away and did a final draft before submitting the manuscript to the agency. Two nail-biting weeks followed, then I heard that they had accepted it. This was in November 1978. The novel was then submitted to Faber & Faber, and there was a further period of anxious waiting. At the beginning of February I received the news that Faber were willing to publish it.

To say that I was overjoyed would be an understatement. I spent a small fortune telephoning friends and relatives with the news. I subsidized my local several nights in succession. I was so cheerful for days afterwards that I got on everyone's nerves. Then more good news: the paperback rights had been offered to Panther, and they had bought them.

The publishers seemed very enthusiastic about the book. Had I been younger, this would have confirmed my original belief that I was an undiscovered literary genius; but I was no longer so sanguine about my work. (This was just as well, for although the novel found a hardback and paperback home in this country relatively quickly, it has been bounced from successive US publishers.) I had served a long, chastening apprenticeship which I now regard as valuable because I feel

that it enables you to develop a healthy self-critical attitude towards your work without which even the most talented writer runs the risk of eventually over-estimating his own importance and ability. Nevertheless, I felt extremely pleased and, above all, vindicated. All those solitary hours at the typewriter had finally borne fruit.

The contract arrived, stipulating publication within fifteen months. This was a little short of my secret hope that copies of the novel would be appearing on the nation's book-shelves within a matter of weeks, but having waited eight years to make my first sale I was content to shrug philosophically and pray that the world wouldn't end in the intervening period.

Fifteen months is, however, a long time. Since then I have managed to support myself - just - as a freelance writer, this first sale having opened doors elsewhere so that I've been able to obtain other writing work on commission (which means that you get half the money even if you botch the job completely). This has paid the rent and kept body-and-soul together.

Faber were kind enough to ask me if I had any ideas for a cover jacket design. I duly submitted a rough sketch. Imagine my horror when I received a jacket proof a few months ago and found that the artist had only interpreted my suggestion extremely literally but had contrived to use the most pulsating orange colour I've seen outside of a belisha beacon. The publicity girl described it as "striking", which is a very tactful way of putting it.

A few weeks ago I received the first bound copy of my novel, which is due to be published on June 9th. It was a weird feeling. My initial exuberance had long since waned into a much more ambiguous feeling, and when I dipped into the book I quickly spotted a passage which cried out for revision. To paraphrase what someone once said of poems, novels are never really finished, merely abandoned. Reading through the prose which seemed quite satisfactory fifteen months ago, I can see lots of minor details which I would dearly love to correct before publication, and several less-than-minor flaws which give me cause for great concern.

The idea of becoming a writer is usually conceived romantically. It certainly was in my case. However, I've slowly come to realize that the reality is that it entails a great deal of hard, solitary work, with few immediate rewards and very little glamour. (It has its good points, of course: the writer can work his own hours and mostly write for himself; the corresponding disadvantages are that it can often be a lonely task with no guarantee that he will ultimately get paid for it.) Since most writers aim for publication, it might seem that the eventual appearance of your first work of fiction will be an exciting event. For me, it's more unnerving. The long wait, and the chance to look back on the book I wrote eighteen months ago has made me aware of some of its shortcomings just at the time when it's about to be exposed to the critical public gaze. My feeling, as I wait for the first reviews to appear (and I have a sneaking suspicion that this very issue of Vector may carry one), is something close to trepidation.

Since selling my first novel I have had more problems with my writing than ever before. When I was unpublished there was no pressure to produce, so I was able to write freely. But now that a publisher has invested money in me, I feel that I have to start living up to something (I'm not sure what). It's taken me a long time to get moving on my second novel, even though second novels are traditionally much easier to sell. The thing is, you see, I have to make it better, much better, than the first one. In my most optimistic moments I think I'm succeeding and am writing a beautifully rounded, almost flawless work of art. But if you ask me what I think of it in eighteen months' time, I know I'm going to groan.

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"What the devil could it be? he asked himself over and over again. Only the length of the torch beam separated him from his objective now. He drew closer, and closer still. Then he recognised the peculiar gleaming object for what it was -- a door handle!"

# BOOK REVIEWS

## BOOK REVIEWS

Reviews Editor: Joseph Nicholas

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Joseph D. Olander & Martin Harry Greenberg (eds.) -- WRITERS OF THE  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: URSULA K. LEGUIN (Paul Harris  
Publishing, 258pp, £6.00)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Science fiction has now achieved academic and critical respectability. Cause for celebration and self-congratulation? So I would have thought, until I encountered this book, which purports to be a critical examination of LeGuin's work by a number of writers with impeccable academic qualifications, but which is actually a turgid hagiography that does no favours to either her or SF as a whole.

The common approach is to take one aspect of LeGuin's work, usually a very small aspect, that the essayist considers good, and subject this fragment to painstaking analysis. The result, inevitably, is a narrow view. By concentrating so exhaustively and exhaustingly upon such minutiae it is made to appear as if the excellence of her work rested solely there, thus belittling the whole. It is as if a surgeon had, with great delicacy and care, cut the heart out of a patient for closer examination, then thrown away as unimportant the rest of the body.

Let me explain what I mean by taking just one of these essays, "The Master Pattern: The Psychological Journey In The Earthsea Trilogy" (a typically pretentious title), by one Margaret P. Esmonde. Her thesis is that in her trilogy LeGuin deliberately set out to recreate the Jungian archetypes of the traditional fairy story. This assumes that the whole book was plotted down to the slightest detail, that everything was designed to fill some particular archetypal role, or to act as a symbol illustrating some point about the archetype. This is not the way in which novelists work. Plotting provides no more than a rough sketch map that the writer may not even follow all the way. He does not say, "I have an archetypal role to fill, I must create a new character here" or "I have this to say here, what symbol can I use?" Archetypes and symbols are an accidental outgrowth of the fiction, not an internal imposition upon it. It seems more reasonable to change the emphasis around and say that LeGuin recreated a typical fairy story in which the archetypes, if there, were a side-effect rather than the centre of it all.

But each and every one of the contributors suffers from this same selective blindness. For them a novel consists of no more than a concatenation of symbols, with character development, plot, the skillful handling of words -- the very things that make us read and admire a book -- being totally ignored. In the arcane little world of these posturing "critics" such things are important only in so far as they create or point up symbols. This is of course a false picture. Analyses like this do not open up a book, do not reveal any of the things that make it come alive; there is much more than symbols and archetypes to any good book, and this analysis misses them all.

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The Athenians banished the virtuous Aristides because they were tired of hearing him called "The Just"; the critic who finds herself confronted with a new work by LeGuin always has that story and the sentiment it embodies somewhere in the back of her mind. Malafrena is not SF or fantasy, nor is it the novel-length equivalent of "psychomyths" like "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas"; it is instead an historical novel about Romanticism and bourgeois revolution set in an imaginary country in order that its study of these historical elements can be purified of artistically inconvenient factual associations. In its preoccupations and in this aspect of its method it has so much in common with the body of LeGuin's work that it would be ridiculous not to review it in Vector. For the author, the setting of a story in the past of an imaginary country is much the same as the setting of it in another world of the future; a fictional construct which enables her to make her ideas new to the reader. Galaxy used to run on its back page a thing called "You'll never see it in Galaxy!" in which westerns were transmogrified into space operas and thereby ridiculed, thus "proving" that space operas were necessarily a form inferior to punchy melodramas about the conquest of the galaxy by used-car salesmen - but in the real world of art it is perfectly possible to make a story completely new by shifting its setting just as in order to translate Thomas Hardy's Tess Of The D'Urbervilles so that it was comprehensible to the Japanese of 1910 or so vast quantities of the story had to be changed.

Malafrena is set in Orsinia (as in Orsinian Tales - and remember that Shakespeare's Orsino was duke of Illyria in much the same region), a country somewhere around where the Balkans turn into Italy, a country which in the 1820s is ruled by the Austrians with the usual Metternichian apparatus of censorship and spies. Itale Sorde, the main protagonist, has already become notorious for pinning an anti-Austrian lampoon to the door of the University chapel; now he decides that his duty lies not in helping his father to run the family estate of the title but in radical and nationalist journalism in the capital, Krasnoy. There he both takes up his Bohemian contacts and, as a result of a chance meeting and a love affair with the nouveau riche Countess Luisa Paludsekar, moves on the more raffish fringes of the local aristocracy. He becomes friendly with Orsinia's doomed Romantic poet Amadey, the events leading up to whose suicide form a section of the novel; Itale is also the original of the protagonist of the great Orsinian "Young Werther" ripoff. He travels to the industrial belt to organise the working class and is promptly imprisoned for several years in conditions of considerable squalor. Meanwhile his sister, Laura, and Piera, the girl he was expected to marry, drift aimlessly in and out of engagements and gradually get involved in running their fathers' estates faute de mieux. With the Paris uprising of 1830 comes a hope of overthrowing the claustrophobic yoke of Austria - a hope which predictably comes to nothing but futile bloodshed. Itale is exiled from Krasnoy and returns home with his Italian friend Sanguisto to resume the idyllic life of the country. Itale's grandfather had spent several years in Revolutionary France before realising that the time was not yet; it is implied that Itale will at least settle down for the time being. His relationship with Piera becomes satisfactory and friendly - all options are left open.

Malafrena has clear links with themes and subjects that we have met elsewhere in LeGuin's work. Itale's martyrdom is described in terms similar to that of Genly Ai in The Left Hand Of Darkness; the atmosphere of the days leading up to the streetfighting in Krasnoy has the same excitement as "The Day Before The Revolution"; the descriptions of pastoral life in Malafrena itself have their links with the idyll of Omelas as something that has to be rejected because of what it involves ignoring. Throughout there is the sense that fills all of LeGuin's work: the sense that politics is important less for what it can do for other people than as a way of achieving personal moral self-realisation. Altruism is seen as good for its own sake and not because it may be useful to the underprivileged, although the altruist is supposed to be too busy to ever think in

precisely those terms. Rumour states that for the most part this novel precedes the majority of LeGuin's work in the SF and fantasy genres, and if it is at least true that it has existed in draft form for many years and has recently been reworked then it only shows that these matters are deeply important to the author and are ones which she chose to embody in different fictional forms.

*Malafrena* also deals rather effectively with sexual politics, and in a way distinctly more successful than the equivalent discussions in, say, "The Eye of the Heron". Just as the time for Orsinian liberty and the democratic freedom is not yet, so the time of autonomy for Luisa, Piera and Laura is not yet - but all of them manage to sort out their lives within the limits imposed upon them. Luisa's efforts to procure Itale's release from prison lead to her becoming an effective force in the less reactionary of Orsinia's aristocratic salons, and even without the influence of his love for her she will not cease to be a source of political good. Piera refuses the easy option of marrying either her elderly widower or, when he returns from Krasnoy, Itale, nor is prepared to act the part of a wronged neurotic spinster; instead she takes care of her father's estates, agreeing to retain and perhaps read Itale's gift to her of *La Vita Nuova*. Laura is perhaps the least realised of the three, although she can take charge of her own destiny by marrying the raffish Sanguisto, thus providing him with a certain ballast and herself with a needed spice. It is difficult for them to achieve self-development without reference to men just as it is difficult for the men in the book to achieve self-realisation without reference to society as a whole: this is a function of the date at which the novel is set and part of the justification for making it a historical one.

In some ways, this is the easiest of LeGuin's books for many years, simply because its philosophical concepts are of necessity totally Western: there is little of the obsession with the Eastern modes of dualism which have so delighted the academics and made some other critics think meaningfully of Pseud's Corner. All the dualities in *Malafrena* are simple and total, except that the human manifestation of evil is always implied and never shown directly. And, in terms of its tolerant and loving attitude to the human individuals who move through its foreground, this is probably also LeGuin's sunniest book.

The trouble is that LeGuin is so damned good and clever. You know that when you start thinking about whether Lukacs's model of the historical novel as an affirmation by the bourgeoisie of the historically progressive portion of its role is relevant to discussion of this novel that LeGuin knows a lot more about it than you. When you write "Tolstoy? Thoreau" in the margin of a discussion about political existence as opposed to self-realisation in pastoral solitude you know that she was annotating the Levin chapters of *Anna Karenina* and reciting bits of *Walden Pond* by heart when both were but distant shadows on your reading list. The extent to which the adventures of Itale are recapitulations of those of a number of great nineteenth century novels, and in particular of *Le Chartreuse De Parme*, is already taken care of in the novel's own acknowledgement that Itale Sorde exists in the literature as well as the history of Orsinia. *Malafrena* does the whole thing so well that one is riddled with both jealousy and pleasure - it is warm and human and theoretically sophisticated, managing to combine human individuals with political discussion in a way that *The Dispossessed* never quite managed. It's another excellent book from an incredibly talented author.

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Richard Cowper - THE WEB OF THE MAGI (Gollancz, 160pp, £5.50)  
Reviewed by Kevin Smith

*The Web Of The Magi* is a collection of four short stories which are old-fashioned in style, very different from the slick, fast-paced shorts that tend to be produced by American writers. This is far from saying that they are poorly-written; the difference lies entirely in the style chosen. Cowper has reverted to the nineteenth century, discarding on his way the currently accepted conventions of

story-telling - or, rather, he has reaffirmed the conventions instead of merely accepting them.

What does this mean?

To start with, in all four stories Cowper has tackled the problem of how they came to be written. This may not seem much of a problem; a story is, after all, a story. Well, no, it isn't. Dependent on the narrative technique chosen by the author is the amount of information that can be given - single viewpoint, for example, restricts the information to that known by the single character. And the narrative technique arises from the author's conception of how the events came to be put into words on paper. An early method was to use the letters or a journal written by one of the characters, and from this developed the convention of a single viewpoint. Other conventions developed similarly - but it must be recognised that they are merely conventions. These days they are taken for granted, in novels and short stories, by virtually everyone in SF, readers and writers alike. I suspect that the majority of both do not realise that this is what they are doing. Cowper does.

The first story in the book is "Drink Me, Francesca". It starts in a classroom of the future, but the bulk of it consists of a text the students are given to read, this text being a journal dictated by an interstellar explorer who has discovered an alien consciousness comprised of beings who have transcended individual fear and aggression. The alien describes men as "those who know but do not understand". The way to understanding is apparently through a oneness with the universe, and the alien offers humanity the chance to achieve it, to throw off the shackles of fear. At the time the story is set the meaning of the word "xenophobia" arouses disbelief and amusement, so obviously humanity is well on the way.

This theme is repeated in the third story, "Out There Where The Big Ships Go". The first interstellar explorer has returned with a game - The Game - taught to him by an alien race. The Game sweeps Earth, and eventually the best players realise that the way to win is not to play to win but to play to preserve the pattern of The Game. Again, what matters is not individualism but pattern and balance; and again aliens are used as the means of revealing this. The story takes place at a tournament of The Game, except for a four page chunk in the middle, in which it is explained how The Game was brought to Earth. Four pages is too big for such a chunk; it is a sizeable flaw in the story. And at the end we find that the story is a fragment of autobiography found among some papers.

These two stories are similar in theme, and merely utilise a nineteenth century technique. The other two are also similar to each other; both are set in late Victorian times, and their entire feel is Victorian, in both narrative style and content. "The Attleborough Poltergeist" is a report of some research into psychic phenomena occurring in Norfolk in 1892, although the report itself is written about fifty years afterwards. It is much more a story than "Drink Me...." and "Out There....", which tend to be more philosophical expositions, but the lack of a main theme means that the plot or the characters have to be much better, and this they are not. Not even the twist in its ending stops this from being a slight story.

The final story in the book gives it its title and is the longest: at seventy pages it is more akin to a novel than a short story. (Novellas and novelettes are mere publishers' categories, not distinct literary forms, being either long short stories or short novels.) It is very Rider-Haggardish; the hero is a British army officer who discovers a lost valley in India inhabited by a community whose members weave the loom of human destiny (the cover blurb is quite accurate about this), and who has a predestined and significant role to play in the community. In this case the characters are better realised and the story has greater depth although, possibly because of its old-fashioned style, I found it less accessible than "Out There....", my personal favourite of the collection.

Overall, The Web Of The Magi is a fair collection. There is nothing of startling originality; I suspect that Cowper is more comfortable with novels than with short stories. And, in what seems to be an attempt to be distinctively, almost defiantly English, Cowper has chosen to use the style and techniques of a time when the English were best. The irony, of course, is that the philosophies he presents would be totally alien to those English.

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Walter Wangerin Jnr - THE BOOK OF THE DUN COW (Allen Lane, 241pp, £4.95)  
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

What a rare pleasure it is to be able to greet a new book with unreserved praise. And not just a new book, but a first novel.

The Book Of The Dun Cow is one of those delightful works that come along every so often, break every rule in the book, defy categorisation, and spin a web that captivates the reader from the first page to the last.

I must admit that I approached it with some trepidation, since it arrived loaded down with heavyweight hype from American critics - not a very encouraging sign. The title, the cover illustration, the blurb: all raised the dread spectre of something midway between the worst of heroic fantasy and the worst of Richard Adams. But within a page all my fears had been discarded; here was a novel that was fresh, witty, original, and totally absorbing. Describing it, however, remains a problem since, as I've said, it defies categorisation, and any brief description would make it sound like a collection of contradictions - contradictions which nevertheless work.

The characters are all animals who display human attributes, yet Wangerin never loses sight of the fact that they are animals. It is a tightrope he is walking, for animal characters must have human characteristics if they are to engage our sympathies, but if they are to retain their believability they must not behave in any way that rings false. He walks the tightrope with remarkable assurance, and doesn't once slip. The animals do engage our sympathies, and more besides. They are very believable individuals: Chauntecleer the Rooster who rules the Coop and whose personality develops convincingly as he experiences love, despair and the heavy responsibility of leadership in war; Mundo Cani Dog whose obsession with his nose sinks him into a mammoth depression; John Wesley Weasel whose idiosyncratic mode of speech Wangerin is able to sustain throughout the novel without it becoming a dreary affectation.

These are the good characters. The evil ones - or one, since only Cockatrice plays any real part in the book - are less successfully portrayed, falling into the familiar pattern of blacker than black villains, but even so they help point up the traditional, fabulaic aspects of the novel. (Even the name of the hero, Chauntecleer, is taken from the old story of Reynard the Fox.) The plot concerns a straight battle between Good and Evil - Evil being the beast Wyrn, imprisoned deep in the earth by God but now beginning to effect his escape through the good offices of his servant Cockatrice. Though ignorant of their role, Chauntecleer and the animals he rules are Wyrn's gaolers, used to a life of peace and plenty but who find themselves suddenly forced to make a desperate defence against Cockatrice and his evil brood.

This is of course an old, old plot, one that has become hackneyed into cliché in the hands of countless second-rate storytellers, yet here it is rescued and brought back to resplendent life by Wangerin's concern to make the characters more than cardboard pieces in his game. The book's refreshing, sharp-edged humour frees it from any possible accusations of either tweekiness (so easy in books about animals) or ponderousness (so easy in books about the grand matter of Good and Evil), and ensures instead that it is consistently entertaining. Its crisp, clear prose style partakes at times of the nature of high medieval romance, yet never descends to the thees and thous and unconsidered verbiage

with which so many modern imitations of medieval literature are so disastrously marked.

I did say that my praise was unreserved. Well, there is perhaps one reservation: the ending leaves the way clear for that terrible modern disease, the sequel. But perhaps Wangerin could sustain his inventiveness through a follow-up; and if so, then I'm looking forward to the result.

In case I haven't made myself clear, The Book Of The Dun Cow is bloody good. Go out and buy it!

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Colin Wilson (consultant ed.) & John Grant (ed.) -- THE BOOK OF TIME  
(Westbridge, 320pp, £10.50)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

In this large and accurately researched book, seven writers offer guided tours of different aspects of time. The pace is frequently too fast and the landscape too crowded for the fullest edification and enjoyment: thus the opening piece, Roy Porter's "The History of Time", starts by whizzing past Donne (on the left) and Neanderthal man (on the right), plunging into forests of historical and literary erudition which do little more than establish that a lot of people have thought a lot of different things about time. The conclusion is that "Time has ceased to be cyclical, and become development" (i.e., the turning wheel of the seasons is less important in modern thought than the arrow of entropy); to this Porter darkly adds: "We are all children of Time. We must not forget that Time devours her own children." (Note the pronoun: obviously old man Chronos has at last slipped with his scythe.)

As early as this I was worrying about the illustrations -- all black-and-white drawings or halftones, enhanced by the heavy 'quality' paper used throughout. These are numerous, perhaps too much so: on p.41 is a picture of Virginia Woolf, cited because her books "explore subjective time"; below, a painting shows two women in a field. Caption: "This same theme is epitomised by the Monet painting Les Coquelicots." You learn something every day; mainly that there was a shortage of relevant illustrations.

Chapter II, by Richard Knox, is solid and worthy stuff about astronomy, days, years, eclipses and suchlike -- but not sunspots, despite which some pictures of sunspots are provided. For me its chief defect was familiarity; Vector readers, too, will probably have been taken several times over this well-worn ground. On the other hand, this book is aimed at the general public, and Knox's piece is an excellent introduction for those vague about solar and sidereal time. In Chapter III Chris Morgan is onto an easy winner with descriptions of timekeeping and its fascinating gadgetry -- but again the random illustration policy strikes. Descriptions of the verge escapement, foliot balance, fusee, stackfreed, etc. demand explanatory line drawings, but instead we get pictures of clocks, and generally not the ones mentioned in the text. This piece suffers from overcompression: as in the previous chapter, its subject could fill whole books and indeed has.

Biological clocks are covered by E.W.J. Phipps in a short but absorbing Chapter IV. 'Absorbing' is a subjective opinion; Phipps has an occasionally mannered style with a fondness for rhetorical questions, contrasting with the simple clarity of the two preceding and the two following chapters, but his material is perhaps the book's most interesting -- especially to fans of a genre where biology still receives

much less attention than physics. Art Dept: the internal clock of the alga Acetabularia is illustrated with photographs of the otherwise unmentioned algae Tabellaria and Asterionella. If Phipps had mentioned a biorhythmic potato the illustrations would doubtless have been of a swede and an onion.

Iain Nicolson, in "Mutable Time", trots out a clear but hardly novel account of relativity and black holes, stuff which one of his ability can write in his sleep (and which fans overfamiliar with hard SF may read in much the same state). Nicolson plays this very straight, dismissing time travel and its paradoxes as Not Sensible, and refraining from speculation beyond a little discreet dallying with tachyons. There is a photo of a Seyfert galaxy (not mentioned in the text) whose caption explains that such galaxies emit X-rays, which could well be caused by black holes, in the region of which there would surely be time dilation effects: the picture's relevance is thus inarguable.

Brian John's "Measuring Time Past" deals competently with geological time -- the age of the Earth and its crustal layers, with a catalogue of dating methods. I was glad to find out what a 'varve' was. Finally comes Chapter VII, the one SF fans have been waiting for: "Time In Disarray", by Colin Wilson. Something on SF views of time and their relation to modern physics would have been an excellent contribution to this book, but Wilson has thought otherwise. H.G. Wells's Time Machine is dismissed as nonsense because it leads to "an absurd view of a multiple-multiple Universe in which everyone is fragmented into an infinite number of selves...", but as a matter of fact this is known as the "Many-Worlds" view of quantum effects and is a highly respectable theory. Wilson naturally prefers his own notions of Faculty X, the untapped power of the human mind, dowsing, J.W. Dunne, psychometry and the rest, supported by numerous references to his own books and by case histories which are astonishing proof of either the paranormal or the human mind's capacity for self-delusion. Were I to term this a load of cobblers I would, of course, be merely demonstrating my closed mind; but such personal speculation is out of place in an otherwise factual book, and the chapter in question adds virtually nothing to Wilson's other copious writings on his theories.

For a whopping £10.50, therefore, you get a historical ramble (Porter), a chunk of manically idiosyncratic speculation (Wilson), five solidly factual presentations and many sometimes relevant pictures. It's a nice book to hold, and a compact reference source (though short on the philosophical aspects of time); but the impoverished or miserly may prefer to buy full-length paperbacks on those included topics of interest to them -- and still be left with change from £10.50.

Meanwhile, originator "John Grant" is doubtless planning his new Book Of Space, containing Porter on historical concepts of distance, Morgan on the evolution of rulers, Nicolson on the Lorentz contraction again, Wilson on how space is all in the mind and may be readily mastered by washing with Faculty X...

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Ron Goulart - COWBOY HEAVEN (Robert Hale, 185pp, £5.25)  
Reviewed by Chris Morgan

Ron Goulart is the finest of all SF humourists and, fortunately, the most prolific. Over some forty or so SF novels he has maintained a remarkably consistent style, one that is deceptively simple yet which runs the entire range of humour from farce to satire. Anyone who has ever read one of Goulart's books will

know the distinctive features: brief but telling descriptions, a convoluted plot involving a host of peculiar minor characters, and a predilection for robots of all kinds.

Cowboy Heaven conforms to this pattern, of course. It mainly concerns one Andy Stoker, who works for a talent agency in a near-future USA, and whose current task is to make sure that Jake Troop, an old and sickly cowboy film star, stays healthy enough to complete his latest film, Saddle Tramp. Any hint that Troop is a sick man with a bad heart condition (exacerbated by excesses of alcohol and women) could lead to the cancelling of contracts and great financial loss - so when it becomes clear that Troop is unable to continue, a robot duplicate of him has to be brought in to take over.

Some of the humour derives from the main plot - Andy Stoker's troubles to control first an obstinate old actor and then an obstinate robot which leaks oil from a knee and undergoes personality changes in hot sunshine. A great deal more of the humour is provided by the wonderful minor characters and the exaggerated showbiz settings - for example, the Sweetwater Kid, another old cowboy actor, who can't get out of the habit of entering a room by leaping through the window and landing amidst a hail of broken glass.

Cowboy Heaven has nothing particularly deep or serious to offer, but is marvellous fun to read and frequently made me laugh out loud.

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Michael Bishop - TRANSFIGURATIONS (Gollancz, 362pp, £6.95)  
Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Reviewing Spider and Jeanne Robinson's Stardance in Vector 95, Roz Kaveney had several pertinent things to say about SF's "quaint superstition" that a popular and/or good story could be improved by "bloating it, padding it, extending it, or supplementing it", and thendumped on the selfsame Stardance as just such a piece of "witless hypertrophy". And there are, of course, many other examples of the superstition at work: Vonda McIntyre's Dreamsnake, Larry Niven's A World Out Of Time, Damon Knight's A For Anything, to mention only a few. And now we have Michael Bishop's Transfigurations to add to their number....

One of Bishop's earlier-published stories was a novella entitled "Death And Designation Among The Asadi", which appeared in a 1973 Galaxy and told, via a collection of transcribed in-the-field notes, of the determined but ultimately vain attempt by a nonconformist cultural xenologist, Egon Chaney, to unravel the mysterious behaviour of a race of ape-like aliens, the Asadi, on the Glaktik Komm frontier planet of BoskVeld. Described so baldly, it sounds like nothing so much as yet another tired retreading of one of SF's most cliched plots; but Bishop gave it a whole new lease of life by adopting throughout it a strictly subjective first-person viewpoint that made impossible any and all intrusions by he, the omniscient author, and thus ruled out the possibility of there being a solution to the mystery: not only was Chaney saddled with the responsibility of working things out for himself, but the reader as well. It was thus, paradoxically, both an immensely frustrating and an immensely satisfying story, throwing up fresh problems and fresh insights with each re-reading.

A lesser writer would probably have taken this story and expanded it to twice its original length by the simple expedient of fleshing out its background and characters - in which case the padding would have shown - or by sending Egon Chaney back into the Calyptran Wilderness to reinvestigate the mystery - in which case the joins between the two halves would have shown (as, indeed, the joins between the various parts of the novels mentioned in the first paragraph do show). Transfigurations, however, is neither padded nor disjointed because Bishop, realising that both approaches would be completely unsatisfactory, has chosen instead to deploy the story as the prologue to the novel and, by so doing, has given the alien Asadi the dominant role in everything that follows. Transfigurations is

thus not so much a story of humans investigating strange alien practices as of strange alien practices being investigated by humans - a slight difference, but a crucial one in that it completely inverts the standard format of all the "adventure on alien planets" stories that have gone before.

The plot is simple and straightforward enough, concentrating on the efforts to extend and deepen man's knowledge of the Asadi by Chaney's less adventurous colleague, Thomas Benedict (who organised his notes into a posthumous monograph) and Chaney's partially-estranged daughter, Elegy Cather, who arrives on BoskVeld with a baboon-chimpanzee crossbreed, Kretzoi, who has been surgically modified to superficially resemble an Asadi male so that he can be infiltrated into their number without arousing too much suspicion (because a variant of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle is at work here too: the act of observation alters the behaviour of that being observed). But this ploy fails to work, in the main because the Asadi communicate via their eyes, large rainbow-hued discs which flash like pinwheels as they range rapidly up and down the spectrum, Kretzoi can only communicate via Ameslan (American sign language), taught to him by Elegy. The three therefore kidnap a young Asadi male, later nicknamed Bojangles, from the jungle clearing in which the Asadi gather during the day and return with him to the unused spaceport hangar at Chaney Field, on the outskirts of Frasierville, BoskVeld's "capital", where he and Kretzoi can begin to learn from each other in their own way and at their own pace. However, some bored Komm-service guards, sitting around in their barracks with nothing to do, decide to generate some fun for themselves by killing Bojangles...the culmination of which incident is the silliest, most mishandled part of the entire novel.

Thomas Benedict has up until this point shown himself as an intelligent, aware and rational individual: someone with whom the reader can readily sympathise - yet all this is wiped away by behaviour so moronic as to defy belief. Despite having been told of the plot to murder Bojangles the night before by his personal helicopter pilot, Jafaar, and despite his unease at the demeanour of the two guards who deliver Bojangles's daily ration of vegetation to the hangar the next morning, he still fails to realise - as the reader has of course already guessed - that these are the two who will carry out the deed, and does not so realise until he has been clubbed over the head with the butt of a gun and the murder is in progress. That he has been up half the night is no excuse; and the reader is left feeling vaguely resentful at the author's attempted conning of him and vaguely angry at Benedict's incredible stupidity - emotions which may conspire to alienate him altogether from the thrust of what the author is trying to do and in any case remain present in his mind throughout the remainder of the novel.

Back into the jungle, then, go Benedict, Elegy and Kretzoi, this time with the intention of deliberately upsetting the Asadi by Kretzoi's acting out of the ritual of death and designation first observed by Egon Chaney in the hope that they will be able to rediscover the ancient stone pagoda around which the ritual culminated but which none but Chaney had ever been able to find. Duly rediscovering it, they find themselves no closer to understanding the Asadi than they were before - but have, between them, worked out a theory of where the Asadi came from and how and why they've degenerated to the state they have: a theory which partakes about equally of H Rider Haggard's tales of lost tribes and some hoary old Von Danikenist nonsense about alien visits to Earth in its dim and distant past. This is of course to supply a solution - however partial or speculative - to the mystery, and it leaves the reader in a rather uncertain position: on the one hand, he's been expecting it, and would rather like to have the mystery solved anyway; and on the other, the author's provision of it does tend to rob the story of some of its power and depth - after all, the original novella left the question unresolved, and was all the more satisfying because of that. Nor is the answer presented very effectively; if Elegy Cather isn't lecturing Thomas Benedict face-to-face, then Thomas Benedict is lecturing the reader as part of his narrative.

The saving grace of the answer (glib and superficial as it inevitably sounds), however, is that it is only partial and speculative, and is not presented as an objective truth. As per the original novella, the viewpoint adopted throughout



Transfigurations is first-person subjective (in this case, Thomas Benedict's), with the result that not even he can be sure of its validity. Like evolutionary and cultural anthropologists in the real world, he and Elegg Cather can only ever observe, investigate and deduce, testing each new hypothesis against the evidence available to them and discarding it when it ceases to fit the known facts. Indeed, a hint that it may be wrong is given by an earlier, internal reference by Elegg to Colin Turnbull's *The Mountain People*, an ethnography of the Ik, an East African tribe the government of whose country has forbidden them to hunt and who, living in a basically infertile region, had failed as agriculturists and whose culture had as a result collapsed. Turnbull saw their cruelty to one another as a mirror of the savagery that emerged when the veneer of civilisation was removed, but ignored the fact that, because he was working from a different cultural background, his conclusions about them and mankind as a whole arose from an inappropriate context - just as Benedict's and Cather's conclusions about the Asadi may arise from a different cultural background, a different evolutionary philosophy, a different context. (As an aside: there's a fair amount of incidental anthropological, ethnographical and primatological data embedded in the text of the story, none of which is ever explained directly and which some readers may thus find offputting. For no very good reason; the material does not have to be explained in such a fashion because the context in which it appears does the job for it - a triumphant demonstration of the synthesis of fact and fiction that many other writers addicted to the dishing out of such facts in large, undigested lumps would do well to study.)

All this, however - and despite the comments in my third paragraph - is to virtually ignore the Asadi themselves, who may (on the evidence of their resemblance to Kretzoi alone) seem too similar to terrestrial primates but whose portrayal is nevertheless one of the most fascinating and absorbing aspects of the novel. Never mind their ruined temples, their human-like biochemistry and their flashing eyes: pace Paul Kincaid's article in Vector 95 about SF's aliens being at root but a mirror of the human psyche, these are just incidental to their strange, baffling but ultimately thought-provoking rituals through the study of which we may hope to learn something about ourselves. Could it be, for example, that the Asadi's apparently meaningless morning rush to the jungle clearing and evening rush away from it again is an analogue of our own commuter journeys into and out of our city centres every morning and evening? Surely not; such a supposition is too ludicrous for words, and in any case Bishop does supply a possible answer to the enigma - but one suspects that it's not the real answer and, like such real-life anthropologists as Goodall and Fossey, we must watch, consider, and decide for ourselves. (How much, after all, do we understand of our own behaviour anyway?) Herein lies the real strength of the novel; not what it actually says, but just how much it leaves unsaid, virtually demanding that, on reaching its end, we immediately return to the first page and begin reading it all over again, the better to fuel and inspire our speculative impulses....

Despite, therefore, Roz Kaveney's criticisms of "extended" or "supplemented" novels - because generalisations must always admit of exceptions, after all - and despite my earlier carping about certain minor flaws in this novel - because they are only minor and may not seem as obvious to others as they do to me - I unhesitatingly commend Transfigurations to your attention. It is a rich, complex and, although perhaps not wholly satisfying, at least rewarding novel; one that can only enhance and further Bishop's rapidly growing reputation as one of the best SF writers to have come out of America in years.

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Jayge Carr - LEVIATHAN'S DEEP (Sidgwick & Jackson, 213pp, £5.95)  
 Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The alien is probably one of SF's most fruitful and yet persistently worst-handled elements. Few have attempted to properly examine the clash of cultures that occurs when human and alien meet - although on the rare occasions when this has been done successfully it has produced some of the best examples of the genre - and fewer still have attempted to do so from the alien's point of

view. Yet this is precisely what Jayge Carr has tried in her very first novel, and it is therefore a pity that her success is, to say the least, fitful. There are moments when she highlights, very acutely, the mutual incomprehensibility of human and alien cultures; but these rare achievements are less substantial than they might have been due to her inability to fully flesh out even the human culture, let alone the alien, so that we don't see the contradictions so much as we see the writer's artifice. Furthermore, these few nuggets of genuine success are hidden away amidst such inconsistencies of character that as the narrator, Kimassu, slowly learns about the humans she will appreciate one aspect of our nature on one page only to be totally mystified by it on the next.

The novel's greatest failing, however, can be traced to its one-sided feminist propaganda. I don't know how much of this is due to the author's intentions - towards the end there are signs that she is trying to give a fairer picture - but she has dug her own grave right from the start, and is never really able to get out of it.

The alien culture to which Kimassu belongs is never clearly described, although it appears to be feudal in nature - or, rather, that idealisation of feudalism so beloved by most fantasy writers. But it is different in that the rulers are women, and it in fact seems as though Ms Carr has simply taken the feminists' most extreme, most paranoid vision of a male-dominated world, and reversed it. Men are unintelligent, unimportant, fill no socially useful role and seem little better than slaves. Life, in this matriarchy, is presented as being all peace and light: gracious, comfortable, without wars or even intrigue. It is the golden age that will be achieved as soon as women take over.

Yet the picture is deceptive. We are allowed to glimpse only the aristocracy. There is a working, a peasant, class - dismissively referred to as the "lumpen" (presumably from "lumpenproletariat", although how that term gained currency among the aliens I couldn't guess) - but we are not permitted to see anything of this part of the society perhaps because it might tarnish the golden image Ms Carr is trying to present.

Everything in the garden is lovely, therefore, until the humans arrive, and here we encounter yet another distortion. Every one of the aliens is good, bar one exception who turns out all right in the end. Every one of the humans is bad, with one renegade exception. And all the humans are men. At one point the renegade, Neill, says that sporadic attempts at equality had been made, but without success. At another point we learn that women had been used as ambassadors once it was discovered that the planet was dominated by females (a curious claim, since Kimassu's inability to conceive of the role of women in human society suggest that she has had virtually no contact with human women). But in truth the absence of women is just one more example of the way in which Ms Carr has loaded her dice.

All this rather crude propaganda is dressed up in an adventure story which, if your taste runs to a constant stream of murder, kidnapping, torture, rape and the like without much time given to the building up of character or the filling in of background, really isn't all that bad. But what purpose is there to this when the potential inherent in the alien-human clash of cultures has again been thrown away virtually unused?

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Vonda McIntyre - FIREFLOOD AND OTHER STORIES (Gollancz, 281pp, £5.95)  
Reviewed by Roz Kaveney

Authors are at the mercy of their publishers, particularly with regard to their short story collections. The author is directly committed to the individual worth of the stories and is not necessarily the best person to judge whether when bound together in a single volume, they set each other off to the best advantage. The publisher's editor has a number of jobs to do, most of them concerned (reasonably enough) with making money for his employer, and matters of fine judgement about

the contents of a short story collection and their ordering are almost beside the point when the success of earlier work guarantees its sale. The questions that, alas, was never going to be asked about Fireflood And Other Stories is: just what is this collection for? Is it a set of elegant variations, planned over several years, on some central theme of the author's? Is it a gaudy display case intended to show the breadth of her talents and interests? Or is it - as I rather fear it is - a number of stories by Vonda N McIntyre crammed without thought or discrimination into the same small box?

McIntyre produced a rather good apres-LeGuin novel of character and movement (not plot, just movement), The Exile Waiting, and made her reputation with a fine and emotionally precise short story, "Of Mist, And Grass, And Sand" - which not only won a Nebula in itself but then proceeded to agglomerate unto itself enough mimsy sequelae to win another Nebula, and a Hugo, as the "novel" Dreamsnake. Both of these fictions dealt with talented young women coping with problems which stand in the way of the development of their talent, and managing in passing to come to some equitable arrangement with a young man prepared to be their sidekick. This volume includes the unadorned "Of Mist, And Grass, And Sand", along with other pieces of varying length and variable quality. In the title story, "Fireflood", a young woman mutated into a multi-sensed burrower for an abandoned exploration project tries to persuade flying men to make common cause against their human oppressors and finds consolation for her defeat in the friendship of one young flier and in her solitary and unsharable perception of the heart of a volcano. In "Mountains of Sunset, Mountains of Dawn", an old flying woman leaves a generation ship and her young lover to die soaring in the atmosphere. In "Aztecs", a young woman surgically altered to become a starpilot loves and loses a young unaltered crewmember but is basically happy with her altered perceptions. In "Spectra", an adolescent is surgically altered by an oppressive regime and mourns her lost senses. And so on and so forth; this is not what I meant by variations....

Patently, each of these stories is a not particularly disguised or digested meditation on the personal and artistic problems of a bright young woman SF writer with a talent worthy of some consideration and very little to actually say. Standard Romantic cliches of the artist as doomed flier or misunderstood seer predominate, and after no very long time get on the nerves. It is difficult for a critic to be rude about stories so personal without feeling that one is being offensive, but the perpetual harping on the same topics is doing Ms McIntyre no good as a writer. All of her heroines are so reasonable, so badly treated by life and above all so decorous. I know she sells to Analog (whose readers once screamed with rage at the mere mention of sex in a Joe Haldeman story), but the occasional bouts of lovemaking in this volume suffer from one of the worst attacks of the Afterwards that I have seen these many years. In "Aztecs", screwing is absolutely essential to the direction, feel and emotional weight of the story, yet McIntyre blows it the first time out with a dreadful sex-manual clinical coyness:

"He responded to her, hardening, drawing circles on her breast with his fingertips."(!)

Later in the same story she blows it with an attack of Poetry:

"Knowing what to expect, and what to fear, they made love a third, final, desperate time, exhausting themselves against each other beside the cold blue sea."

Pretty enough in its way, but fatally diffusing the story's portrayal of lost lust.

In "Fireflood", she tries to show us Dark's vision of the volcano's heart:

"The currents swirled, hotter and hotter, and in the earth's wound a flood of fire burned."

A real battery of literary devices - pathetic fallacy, tautology, oxymoron - and we still don't see anything except a writer thinking that she can get away with minimal effort. Here we have Dark seeing the volcano; she has senses which we do not possess but a brain much the same as ours; this is the culminating experience

of her life, compensating for her imminent defeat and frustration; this is the heart of what is meant to be a deeply emotional story; and we feel nothing. If that is all that Dark's new senses and lifetime of oppression can bring her - a blend of bad Symbolisms and first-form geology - then why the blazes should we care. I don't know what she should have seen, or how it could have been best conveyed to us, but then I'm only a poor stiff of a critic while Vonda McIntyre is, heaven help her, a "talented artist". She should start thinking a little harder about the artist's sense of duty to clear vision and crisp expression and a little less about all this bleeding angst.

With the exception of "Of Mist, And Grass, And Sand", large parts of "Aztecs", and possibly "Screwtop", these limply repetitious stories are not even terribly good confessional prose, mainly because they are so fatally unspecific and cloud-egged. What is good in this collection is available elsewhere; what is third-rate is at best preparation for the good work that is (hopefully) to come and should be dispensed with. McIntyre is a writer at the crossroads, and with a certain amount of constructive abuse may be persuaded to abjure the easy, profitable and stylistically self-indulgent path that would lead her to endless books about some handy substitute for dragons. At her occasional best she can produce a stripped dialogue and a prose that modulates from the minimalist to the tastefully ornate and communicates adequately (if little more) frustration and loss and tentative love. She needs to describe a wider range of human experience and take some steps towards a more complexly-plotted narrative. This collection, with all its sensitivity and occasional facilities of expression, is a trading-in on her reputation of a kind which ought to be discouraged. It is also, and this may be of more concern to the Vector audience, a rather tedious read.

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Frederik Pohl -- THE EARLY POHL (Dobson, 183pp, £5.25)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

I suppose that most of the people who discover SF in their youth spend their late teens dreaming of selling stories to the magazines. I know I did. Fred Pohl did too, but he found a way of making his dream come true: at the age of nineteen he got a job editing two SF magazines and began buying stories from himself. The stories he wrote at that time (eight of which are reprinted here, plus a poem) are not bad for a young man in his late teens and early twenties; and are not bad even for the period (the early 1940s). By today's standards, of course, they are eminently forgettable, although how much of this was due to Pohl's lack of experience as a writer and how much to the simple, all-action demands of the magazines' readers is uncertain. However, the book's chronological arrangement of the stories allows one to note how their quality improves towards the end.

In between the stories are some marvellous pieces of autobiography -- honest pictures of what it was like to be a struggling young SF author in the early 1940s. These are the real meat in the sandwich, the real reason for reading this book. Pohl describes the Young Communist League (of which he was a member for a while, until disillusionment set in), the Futurians, his long struggle to get into the US Army during the war. The style is dry, but the content totally absorbing.

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"The reds could discover what was happening in a distant part of the planet by going into a trance and transporting their astral body to any place they desired. The greens duplicated this trick by inventing television and taking a camera to any part of the world they needed. The reds could bury themselves alive by a stupendous effort of will over mind, of mind over matter..."

# Letters

## Originality in SF

From Alex P. Torres

"I'd like to challenge Chris Priest on a point arising from his article in Vector 97. During his lashing of the SFWA and the Nebula award he stated: 'SF writers are at their least original when they have been reading too much SF.'

"I feel this is a dangerous statement to make, and this is most easily explained by quoting from my own experience. Like most members of the BSFA I have in my time made some feeble attempt at writing a story. One of them was on the time-honoured theme of the nature/existence of a God. Now, when I wrote that particular story I thought it was original (not having read very much SF at the time) but in subsequent years I have discovered at least four cases of other writers' stories very similar to my own. So my point is this: I'd written a story having read very little SF and (contrary to Mr Priest's contention) it turned out to be anything but original. Nowadays, having read more widely, my attempts at writing at least try to steer away from obvious similarities to stories I have seen, bringing more originality to the work.

"I remember a reference in Profiles of the Future to a story that Arthur C. Clarke had written about Adam and Eve, but couldn't publish until he was certain the idea hadn't been used before. The fear of writing a story and finding that an identical one has been published in the past is one that should haunt most SF writers; its only cure is to read more widely."

Alex P. Torres, 2 Thorley Close, Cyncoed, Cardiff, CF2 6HS.

\*\* Certainly it is remarkably easy to come up with ideas that have been used before by other authors, but I think it is fair to say that these will be the ideas it is easy to come up with in any case. The hoary old example is a 'twist' on the Adam and Eve theme. Hopeful young writers produce them by the thousand, and tired old editors reject them just as fast. The accepted wisdom of SF, quickly learned, is that Adam and Eve stories are right out. And yet, you know, R.A. Lafferty managed a superbly original Adam and Eve story only recently -- 'In The Garden' from the collection Does Anyone Else Have Something Further To Add (reviewed in Vector 97).

Lack of originality is easily illustrated. How many SF stories have you read in which spaceships have 'hyper-space drives', and in which the term 'hyper-space drive' is never once explained? Lots, I bet. To be sure, you and I both know roughly what it means, because we've read it lots of times in other stories. But how much originality has an author used in writing merely 'hyper-space drive', in the confident expectation that he will be understood? None. And this principle applies across the board; SF stories draw on other SF stories, and are themselves drawn on.

This, I think, is what Chris Priest meant. By reading too much SF you are in danger of absorbing the conventions of SF, of accepting the 'wisdom', and in doing so you are limiting what you can write about, and the ways you can write about it. There is no danger in using an idea that has been used before; no editor is going to line you up against a wall and shoot you for it. Your treatment of a well-used idea might turn out to be the best ever, because you have never been

influenced by the previous, inferior attempts. No Adam and Eve stories? Try telling it to Lafferty.

### SFWA Suite

From Pete Wright

"Having read Chris Priest's article 'Outside the Whale' in Vector 97, I found several points extremely depressing. Firstly, all this business about the SFWA suite: any move to separate writers from us mortal fans with a metaphorical Berlin Wall may well be seen by fans as a Bad Move. Surely writers who feel that they deserve a special elitist Authors' Club at a convention are doing themselves a disfavoured by cutting themselves off. Is a writer beyond going to his own hotel room with his friends if he wants peace and seclusion? I don't think so. If any writer who reads this would care to comment upon the idea of the SFWA suite, and the attendant implications of a Mount Olympus where the people who give them their bread may not tread, I would be very interested to hear what they have to say."

Pete Wright, 12 Elm Road, Faringdon, Oxon, SN7 7EJ.

\*\* So would I, Pete. All the fans I've spoken to about this were pretty horrified by the idea of the SFWA suite, being used to instantly accessible writers, such as Bob Shaw, Jim White and Chris Priest, at conventions. SFWA and the SFWA suite are American things, and so, because I want very much to avoid getting into nationalistic arguments, I would especially like to hear the views of American fans and writers on this. I'm sure we have a few in the BSFA.

Also, both Pete and Alex were somewhat distressed about the Nebula procedures, and inclined to be fatalistic about them.

### Women and Islam

From Jill Lyon

"I was very interested to read in Vector 97 John Brunner's comments on the possible position of women because of the rise of the Islamic movement. In ancient Europe the society was matrilineal. Women were considered mystical goddesses (viz Mother Earth) and men formed the 'weaker sex'. The reason for this state of affairs was that the concept of fatherhood was unknown; children apparently being produced 'at will' by the female. When the relationship between coition and pregnancy had been established, the credit for the mysteries of reproduction passed to the male line and has remained the underlying basis for male supremacy in religious/social circles ever since.

"It is interesting to note that the current Women's Liberation Movement emerged at roughly the same time as the contraceptive pill. From this can it be assumed that, having once again gained control of the 'baby market', women will regain their 'superior' status?"

Jill Lyon, 77 Milton Road, Salisbury, SP2 8AX.

\*\* It's a dangerous assumption to make. Only a minority of women worldwide have regained control of the 'baby market'. John Brunner's point was that worldwide influences would affect the status of Western women. I can demonstrate this with an example. A friend of mine was recently turned down for a job with a multinational company because she was a woman -- and the job required a certain amount of time to be spent in the Middle East. John's point is a valid and concerning one.

(Letters edited and commented upon by Kevin Smith.)

# THE HITCH-HIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

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