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The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association



● **Iain Banks Interviewed** ●

● Charles Stross: Myths, Computers & Cyberpunk ●

● The Summer's SF films reviewed ● Josephine Saxton interviewed ●

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Editorial

By Kev McVeigh

I have just read a remarkable novel based on a major historical change in the middle of the 19th century. It isn't the best novel I've read this year (though very well-written it has its minor flaws), but it has an approach to its subject which is worthy of attention.

Before I do that, however, I'd like to explain the background to my reading of this novel. There are two factors of note: the first is that I generally enjoy alternate history novels (despite getting bogged down two-thirds of the way through *The Difference Engine*). The "what if" method of commenting on the present using the past is a common device not always convincingly used (eg Hitler winning the war without any explanation of what change has brought this about). I also enjoy certain periods of history, including that in which half of this novel is set, which was why I bought it. Secondly, I have recently been reading a few books chosen after watching BBC2's "Eyes on the Prize" series. That series and some of those books, dealt with the American Black Civil Rights Movement from the mid-50's up to the early 80's. Until I read this novel I had been toying with the idea of writing something based upon this subject. Of course I hadn't taken it back far enough, and now I can't, because Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* does it so well.

It is 50 years since Black novelists began to achieve success, notably James Baldwin, Frank Yerby and Richard Wright; but there were others before them, leading to Ishmael Reed and George Lamming today. It is 30 years since Samuel R Delany began his career as probably the first black sf writer of any note; and 30 years since Robert A Heinlein casually slid a sucker punch past us by telling the reader who'd got half-way through *Starship Troopers* that his hero, John Rico, was black. And it is 20 years since Norman Spinrad put Lucas Greene into the White House as the first black President... Now name me a major black character in sf since then. I'll make it easier: name a major black public figure outside of sport and entertainments (and also excepting certain South Africans). To the latter question we probably got Jesse Jackson (I wonder if he's read Spinrad?), Trevor McDonald and... that's probably it. To the sf question? Those guys with the cod accents in *Neuromancer*, a few Lucius Shepard, RA Lafferty and Delany characters, Molly Rachel in Mary Gentile's *Ancient Light*... and that's it again. Or is it? There are certainly dozens more; sf may be reactionary as a whole but there are always radicals and those with supporting gestures,

but where are they? Why aren't they memorable?

I mentioned Molly Rachel, but although I remember her now as a black woman, when I first read *Ancient Light* each time I came across a reference to her colour it was like the first time. Cultural conditioning is such, particularly in a northern village or in the sf community where black faces are rare, that I tend to read characters as white, even now when I'm aware of this. It is even tricky when the character is a slave descendant as in Howard Waldrop's *A Dozen Tough Jobs*. Most writers, I suppose, are in a position where doing anything but making the occasional skin reference is very difficult. Mentioning it every time is racist, because it isn't necessary for white characters; ignoring it negates the whole point. Phonetic accents are difficult too, either to be convincing or readable (and I don't just mean black accents, but Scottish, Northern English, Spanish, French, and any non-conventional accentuation). Nevertheless, I had been thinking that it was strange that nobody had managed to shake me up and out of my white middle class complacency in sf the way that a few non-sf writers including Imanu Amir Baraka, Alex Haley and Ntozake Shange had done widely.

So this was the direction from which I approached *Fire on the Mountain*, having been delighted by Bisson's previous novel *Talking Man*, and being intrigued by his premise: that John Brown and Harriet Tubman succeeded at Harper's Ferry in 1859, and afterwards, leading to a black secessionist and socialist Deep South. (My own idea had been for Malcolm X to survive Dr Martin Luther King, leading to a powerful and radical black Moslem movement whilst the US was confused by Viet Nam.) What I found was something special: *Fire on the Mountain* gently and unobtrusively coerced this reader into reading it with the natural assumption that, until told otherwise, all characters could be considered to be black. This reversal is remarkable, and quite as radical as anything that the SFU is offering; but it is also somewhat disturbing that, in 1990, a novel like this is so unusual. Yes, there are writers such as CJ Cherryh who regularly and very successfully use aliens in this manner: a friend says he tends to assume characters are Hani unless told otherwise; but in human-orientated sf and particularly in fantasy the race of the major characters seems to reflect that of the author. There may be a few tokens, spear-carriers, killed off as necessary; there may be a spaceship named after Marcus Garvey; but generally this forms part of the

background, trivia and detritus, nothing more. I think Terry Bisson recognised this, not only because he wrote something very different, but in the manner of his difference. He recognises that Abraham Lincoln is a national hero for abolishing slavery, whilst Brown and Tubman are neglected, as is the real situation in 1859: Slavery was on the brink of collapse; there were almost as many poor whites as poor blacks; and abolition had begun long before Lincoln, who was caught up in it and was shrewd enough to react ahead of his rivals, rather than being a man with a mission as, for example, William Wilberforce was in this country. (Indeed, how many people are aware that Rhode Island, the thirteenth state of the union, abolished slavery in 1774?) Bisson contributes to the history lesson with a foreword sketching what really happened at Harper's Ferry (Brown and others were hanged) and writes into his novel an alternative history novel, *John Brown's Body*, where this was how it happened and Lincoln did become the President we know. A clever conceit which emphasises the potential reality of this black USSA.

I didn't intend this editorial to become an extended review of one book (though Bisson is an author to cherish), but I hope it has served its purpose through that review. That is, I hope that I have made people think on the (mostly unconscious, minor and understandable) racism in sf and fantasy, and, perhaps, realise that there is a lot happening in today's world that a greater awareness of what really happened in our collective and individual pasts will help us produce a more tolerable future. There is a long way to go, I noted only a half-dozen black faces amongst about 350 white faces at Novacon in Birmingham last week. Nevertheless, sf assimilated women both as characters and as writers and is immeasurably richer for it - though still flawed, as *Interzone*'s well-intentioned sexual apartheid in issue 42 and most of the preceding year shows - and it can do the same with multi-racial sf, in which case Terry Bisson may well be remembered as one of the early standard bearers, and a brave and inspiring writer.

If sf ignores this lead then it has failed to be either the "literature of the imagination" or the growing, living form it must be to survive.

Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* is published by Avon (Arbor House/William Morrow, 1988).

Letters

Reviews

Ken Lake's (first) letter in V157 was annoying on two counts.

The first I should term the professionalism of reviewers or, indeed, of any critical approach to literature. Ken rightly points out that we all have differing tastes in sf, but this has not a thing to do with reviewing as an art in itself. He says that where he finds a book's philosophy offensive, he would prefer not to review since the review would be coloured by his distaste. This, I submit, is an abdication of the responsibilities of the reviewer. Surely, the only function that the reviewer should fulfill is that of bringing his knowledge, experience and critical skills to bear on the two questions of what the author is trying to achieve and of how well the author does it. In other words, we should be able to look to the reviewer for a non-subjective report (insofar as such a thing is possible) arising from the specialist skills that are the only reason I can see to justify the existence of reviewers at all. The reviewer's *personal* opinions are valid, of course, but should be very firmly held in check when the "professional" *persona* is at work.

On the second count, I am personally affronted. Why should it of necessity be "stupid" to ask a neo to review, for example, the *Eden* trilogy? I am a neo, in that I have only recently become involved in fandom. However, I have been reading sf and bringing my own critical faculties to bear on the genre for some 40 years. Over that period sf has represented and continues to represent by far the greatest proportion of my considerable outlay on books. Who knows, I might just have read and thought about sf almost as much as Ken has. And there could be a lot more experienced sf readers out there — I know a few myself.

John D Rickett
London

from Cecil Nurse

I would like to register a complaint about Kev McVeigh's review of Walter Jon Williams's *Angel Station* (V156), which I feel was improperly and objectionably abusive. Maybe I don't "know better", but I found it highly readable, a carefully plotted space-opera-cum-first-contact story written with zest. The c-punk dressing should not distract a reviewer so much that he loses sight of the basic premise of the book — that the next

question after "what the hell are you?" when meeting aliens would be "what can we sell each other?" — and that the economic situation features as an important plot element. Further, if Williams's previous book *Voices of the Whirlwind* is as full of violence as Ken Lake suggests (V152), there is no excuse for not mentioning that this one is a first contact story without war as an "inevitable" consequence. I suggest Williams is a new writer serving out his apprenticeship with familiar materials, as many do, and not the hack that this review implies. If McVeigh is so concerned about giving new writing a fair shake, perhaps he would do better to leave out the mindlessly hostile reviews and use the space more constructively.

Cecil Nurse
Focus Editor, York

Kev replies:

What is a new writer? *Angel Station* is Williams's tenth novel, and I suggest that if he hasn't mastered a few basic tools of his trade in that time, then he probably never will.

Angel Station takes its commercial background from Heinlein via CJ Cherryh, hides it behind a few c-punk tokens, and, once we've waded a hundred-plus pages into this, shows us some very silly plasticine aliens. *Vector* would use the space more constructively if writers like Williams would do the same.

KM

The following review was considered unacceptable as part of our Reviews section because... well, for reasons that will become quite clear on reading it.

Digital Dreams

Edited by David V Barrett

Immoral. Offensive. And probably illegal under the trades description legislation. That's just the front cover of this book, which represents the most crass example of publishing greed and insensitivity that I have ever come across. What makes it worse is that David Barrett, who ought to know better, has allowed his name to be associated with this blatant attempted ripoff.

Let me explain. On the front cover of *Digi-*

tal *Dreams* we have, reading from the top:

1. The book's title. No problem there.
2. In small print, "exciting stories from". Debatable choice of adjective, but acceptable hype.
3. In large print "TERRY PRATCHETT". Wow. I bet that caught your attention!
4. In small print, "and the best of British science-fiction". Strange place for a hyphen, but you know publishers.
5. At the bottom of the page, "edited by David V Barrett".

I want to make it absolutely clear that *Digital Dreams* contains 20 stories by 21 authors. The words of TERRY PRATCHETT occupy just over 14 pages out of 347, less than 5% of the book.

Now, given the proclivities of the average publisher, and the current best-selling status of TERRY PRATCHETT, it is just about understandable that some junior employee in the publicity department of NEL might have thought up this wizard wheeze to sell more copies of *Digital Dreams*. I am amazed, however, that a publisher with such a good track record of sympathy to the genre should have let the idea get off the drawing board; and I am stunned that David Barrett should have let them get away with it.

There is only one appropriate way in which the BSFA should respond to this. I propose that David Barrett should be thrown out of the Association, and if no such mechanism exists, then I hereby propose to the next AGM that we invent one. As for the book, nobody who loves sf should even think of buying it, on a matter of principle. And since the only thing the publisher and editors seem to want you to know is that TERRY PRATCHETT was associated with it, the only thing I am prepared to tell you in this review is that they are deceitful cheats.

(Quality control note: just over 5% of this review is *not* about TERRY PRATCHETT's name being on the cover of *Digital Dreams*.)

John Gribbin

As always, readers comments are always welcome (particularly on the above piece) so please feel free to write to us, at the usual address:

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Iain Banks

Interviewed By Andy Sawyer

Anyone present at Waterstone's Bookshop, Liverpool, for the signing session where this interview took place might be forgiven for being a bit baffled by Iain Banks's writing. On one side of the table were piles of *The Wasp Factory*, *Walking on Glass*, *Canal Dreams*, etc. by plain Iain Banks in their spare, black-and-white packaging. On the other, piles of *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games*, and the latest novel *Use of Weapons* by Iain M Banks: bright oranges and blues, shrieking out the visual equivalent of EEEYOW - FOO! DAKKA DAKKA DAKKA!

But this difference may be more apparent than real. The "Culture" novels are deeper, more horrific, *funnier* than most space opera and - particularly *Use of Weapons* - are more carefully structured than the usual part-one-of-the-trilogy-by-Friday epic, while behind the austerity of the "M"-less Banks covers is a seriously strange set of narratives which has caused confusion among critics and delight among readers - many of whom are sf readers anyway - ever since *The Wasp Factory* appeared in 1984. Banks denies that these books are sf or horror, although it's hard to imagine anyone appreciating the jokes in *Walking on Glass* or *The Bridge* who hasn't themselves spent far too long reading crap sf or worse fantasy. The point is that Banks is perhaps the most powerful and versatile of the generation of writers who have grown up with sf as a natural form of expression to the extent that sf and related areas are part of their lives. Once you've absorbed sf from those bright yellow Gollancz hardbacks to *New Worlds* and onwards to that extent you don't need to become "an sf writer." Nowadays to write sf may in itself say or do nothing radical, but it's always there, part of the culture which has formed you.

Iain Banks writes sf because he likes sf, and refers to it because sf and similar fringe genres are part of the experience of his times and his characters. But because he is an innovative and energetic writer, he sidesteps genre whether it be the genre of space opera or the genre of the "literary novel." Whatever the subject of his books, he is always immensely readable, often ferociously funny and murderously ironic.

Use of Weapons is the third book involving the "Culture" - or third-and-a-half counting the small press edition of *The State of the Art* published by Mark Ziesing. *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games*, and *Use of Weapons* do not form a trilogy, and to prove it *The State of the Art* will be published as an Orbit hardback, with added short stories, in March 1991.

Following a reading and a question-and-answer session, I spoke to Iain for *Vector*.

Andy Sawyer: When I said to Kev McVeigh that I wanted to do this interview with you, he said "Don't ask him about climbing down walls, car crashes, or sherry adverts," and I can't for the life of me think what he meant... (laughter). He said "Concentrate on his books."

Iain Banks: Yeah, concentrate on his books... much more interesting. Well, actually a lot less interesting, but Kev's a stickler for the truth.

So what do Iain Banks's readers think of books written by Iain M Banks? Do they have an opinion?

I don't know. It's hard to say; it's very difficult to tell the number of people who do actually cross over. I have talked to some people who say "I don't normally read science fiction but I've read yours because I've liked your non-sf books and I thought I'd try the science fiction", so there are a few of them around, but I think a lot of people do just have a complete prejudice against science fiction and some people just don't like it - can't deal with it, I suppose.

Some are bemused, some just dismiss it, some try to read science fiction and just don't like it and some actually find they do like sf - or at least like mine. I've actually found people who've said "I've started reading science fiction through your books," which gives you a real nice glow. You think "Oh, my life has not been in vain!"

Do you think then that you're writing for different audiences?

A bit, yeah, I think so. In the end, I'm writing for someone just like me; I'm writing for myself. In a way, it's the only way you can write: the truest way to write is to write for yourself and I happen to like some non-sf books and I like some sf books. I like trying to write different types of books anyway, just as I like reading different types of books. You were saying about *The Wasp Factory* not being sf, which okay it's not, but...

I said it wasn't *horror* as well but that's probably more dubious.

Certainly the first sentence could come out of an sf novel.

"... the Factory told me..." Yes... mmm...

It reminds me of the Minds of the ships of the Culture novels. Okay it's not sf, but it has that resonance to it.

I was amazed that people picked up on the fact that I was into sf or read sf or also wrote sf just from having read *The Wasp Factory*. Apparently Rog Peyton of Andromeda did just that. He came up to me as I was coming out of the Futura roadshow - they were taking

a few writers around and introducing them to booksellers and so on - and Rog Peyton came up. He said "You're into science fiction, aren't you?" I said "How the hell did you know that?" I think he'd read *The Wasp Factory*. It makes a sort of sense; I think I can see why, but I still find it slightly... odd that people can spot that.

Do people think you're slumming in sf?

I'm sure some of the more ossified literary types do, but I don't think that those sort of people had a very high opinion of my stuff anyway. I mean, having started off with *The Wasp Factory* you can't really slum anywhere, that was their attitude! There might be a little of that feeling of prejudice but they don't tend to say it to my face, though I don't tend to mix with the literary crowd much.

It seems anyway that space opera is becoming more and more respectable now. Partly it's due to Iain M Banks and the Culture...

You really think so? That's very flattering. I don't know if it's true.

Suddenly people are writing space opera who wouldn't usually be seen as writing the stuff.

Colin Greenland's done one [*Take Back Plenty*]... I haven't read it yet.

I dunno. I think it's the usual thing of people starting doing the same thing more or less independently. I'd be very surprised if people actually thought "Well, if Banksie can do it, I can do it" - understandable though the reaction would certainly be! Anyway it's no bad thing if it's going to be good space opera. I want to ask a few things about the Culture. You've obviously lived with the Culture for some time. Am I right that you were writing *Consider Phlebas* before *The Wasp Factory*?

No, it was written immediately after *The Wasp Factory* in 1981. *The Wasp Factory* was written in the summer of 1980. The first draft of *Consider Phlebas* was written in '81. *The Wasp Factory* wasn't accepted until '83, that was when I wrote *Walking on Glass*, and *The Wasp Factory* wasn't actually published until 1984. Yeah, the book just after was *Consider Phlebas*. In fact the book just before *The Wasp Factory* was called *The Player of Games* in its earliest incarnation. Actually *The Player of Games* came quite close to getting published - but it wasn't, obviously in the end, it wasn't as good a book; it was just about publishable, I think.

The Culture actually dates from the very first draft of *Use of Weapons*, in fact, which was 1977 I think, again completely rewritten.

It's an infinitely better book than it was then. The actual idea - if you reduce the storyline to a sentence, it is still the same book, but otherwise it's utterly changed; what I would claim to be the difference between a 2CV and a Ferrari. They're both cars - but they're slightly different!

As a utopia, the Culture's a utopia that needs this ruthless edge: Special Circumstances, manipulation of other societies and so forth.

unfulfilled; so there's lots of things, all the sort of human things you can write about in a utopia. But in what I've been wanting to write about for the last few years, you have to go to the outside edge of the Culture where there's the interface between Culture and non-Culture, as it were, where interesting things are happening. It's the old Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times." They're good to read about but hell to live through and that's - the very fact that they're

book. You don't find out what it is until the end of the book, but it's there in its grisly manifestation -

... which We Must Not Reveal!

Absolutely not! But the claim that the Culture itself comes across... maybe it does in the end, I'm the last person to say yay or nay to that. The thing is, both *Consider Phlebas* and *Use of Weapons* are not very much about the Culture. The one book that actually is - about a third of it set in the Culture - is *The Player of Games*. You actually see the Culture in fact in *one* place in *Use of Weapons*, that's where the man is on the first of the big ships, the GSV, when he wanders around it, and that's the only time the Culture appears centre stage in the whole book. Certainly what it's doing - yes, is fairly "darker side" of it, I suppose. It sounds a bit *Star Wars*, doesn't it: "The Dark Side!" You said before that you'd really like to be in the Culture.

Definitely, yes. Ideal place, yeah. I just can't think of anywhere better to start life. I'd say it's an ethical hedonism - not to mention living for four hundred years and having all these wonderful drug glands implanted in your body and enhanced sexuality. It's *great*, you know, plus you can do whatever the hell you want basically. The thing is there's the proviso that you don't actually harm other people, but unlimited resources... God, it seems great fun to me. Indulge you every whim.

There's a beautiful bit where Zakalwe has just succeeded in creating his first - ah - Culture orgasm and he doesn't know what she's doing.

(Laughter) Ah yes, it does go on rather longer than he's used to. I wish I could say that it was based on personal experience but unfortunately it's not.

More wish-fulfilment?

Well yes, it is a bit. Utopias I suppose *are* an exercise in wish-fulfilment. It's just that it might in the end be practical, you never know...

It struck me that Zakalwe was - you've just said a "dark hero" - a bit of a romantic hero: dark secret in his past, joining Special Circumstances to forget, almost.

Well, I would say no. No, that's taking it too far into the Foreign Legion Stuff. No, not to forget but for redemption, and also because they can keep track of the woman that he wants redemption from, to be forgiven by, so that he's actually got a practical reason. Also in that sequence that I mentioned earlier, in the GSV, he's saying to Sma, "I just want to know that I'm doing right", and this is actually important to him. I mean, some bastard will always *tell* you that you're doing the right thing even when you're slaughtering women and children, shoving them into ovens, you're doing the right thing. It's "for the good of the Arany Race" or whatever, you know; somebody's always going to lie to you and tell you it's good.

He wants some at least half-acceptable proof that he is doing the right thing, he's doing good. He knows that it's got to be



Yes, that's me bending over backwards to be fair and not make the Culture look so goody-goody. The idea is that this is something of the Culture that occurs very very rarely indeed, the fact that it's the most interesting thing that I can write about is probably more an indication of my failings as a writer than any possible failings of this totally theoretical civilisation.

Is it possible that there's nothing interesting that can happen in a utopia?

Well actually there is. Even in a utopia you still have heartbreak, you still have unrequited love, you still have ambition that's

good to read about - what I want to write. And the Culture has always got a good reason for what it wants to do. It claims that it actually is doing it not for its own - not for imperialistic reasons or anything, but things which have to be done. Basically it's a utilitarian argument.

It seems much darker and more confused in *Use of Weapons*, though.

Yeah, that's - it's not the Culture that seems darker, that's Zakalwe's reaction to it. The central character is a fairly dark sort of character himself; what his great traumatic secret is, I think, really informs the whole of the

through martial means, he just accepts that's what he's good for, and the bit that I was reading out where he tries to become a poet with not very hilarious results - he knows that that's what he's made for, to be a general and he wants to do it for someone who's trying to do good. So that he can then be doing good.

It sounds a bit pathetic, but I was trying to make him a nice rounded character. I felt - I always imagined that he was but I was trying to bring it out, even in little bits like where he gets hit in front of these attractive young students and all the rest of it but he just accepts it. These sort of things do happen to him, so he's not like the superhero, the sort of person who never jams their pubic hair in their zip and that sort of stuff. Also his reaction is not what you'd expect from the standard gung-ho Rambo type which would be to strangle all the students and bury them under a ton of snow or something. He thinks that perhaps in his youth he would have at least chased after them to give them a fight but now he thinks well, what the hell?

In the question-and-answer session you mentioned *Catch 22* as one of the books you've most enjoyed...

Oh yes, it had a big effect on me. I read it six times in four years starting from about 14.

... The section in *The Player of Games* when the drone is taking Gurgeh around and showing him the real nature of the Azad society reminded me of that scene with Yossarian towards the end of *Catch 22*.

Yes, that is inspired by that chapter in *Catch 22* which I thought was *incredibly* powerful. It was done very well in the film - an immensely underrated film, absolutely one of my top five - and brilliant in the book. It was something that lived with me, this sort of seeing the underside of something that you'd sort of seen from a more elevated prospect before or whatever. Oh yeah, I'm not making any bones about that, it was inspired by that, very much so. In fact, the original draft, the '79 draft, that section was a lot more horrific and I thought I'd tone it down and let you see the effect on him more than describing what he's actually seeing, especially in the last bit where he's watching stuff on the screen. Yeah, that was one place where *Catch 22* had a definite effect. Well spotted!

The other thing I had in mind from *Catch 22* was in *The Wasp Factory* where I just liked it where Heller kept on bringing in the the thing where whenever things were going too well they just added another mission increase and it suddenly had to be 55 missions rather than 50 before you got rotated. That was a sort of template for Eric's phone calls. Whenever I thought *The Wasp Factory* was flagging or showing slight signs of it I thought "Right, time for another mad phone call from Eric." So yeah, I think I learned quite a lot from *Catch 22*.

It's also one of the classic examples of military fuck-ups.

Yes, absolutely. In fact I'm slightly disappointed to find that Joseph Heller's in great demand on the lecture circuit nowadays

mostly talking to Air Force reunion parties and stuff. Very odd... but a great novel.

In Use of Weapons there's the scene where Zakalwe's got this incredibly beautiful plasma-rifle and he can't get this thing to fucking work!

Again, it's like that. You've got this scene earlier on where he's trying to test it; he's annoyed the Ship, so the Ship hasn't told him that it's actually snapping the plasma bolt out of his dimension to another one to get rid of it. He's using this thing and the rest of it, you get some idea of the power of it. Also it's archaic, the drone says "This thing belongs in a museum. It's a thousand years old, they make pistols with more power"; that's sort of setting it up. You think, "Sounds like a great weapon, oh Banksie's going to make great use of this," and then you find it's been fused, it's got effectorised and he ends up in a fit of pique throwing it away.

He uses it once, doesn't he?

The bit where Beychae says "Are you mad, Zakalwe?" and he turns round and casually shoots this plane out of the sky and says "What was the question again?"

Do you think that the Culture's a sort of End of History? I mean, in the three novels that you've written about the Culture a long time separates them but you don't get much of a sense of historical development.

The short answer's yes. That is more or less said in *The State of the Art*, the novella, when Sma, who's also of course in *Use of Weapons* is talking to the chap that wants to stay on Earth and he's saying, you don't understand the way that they live; it's so involved with change, you know they have disposable underwear and the cars are changed every year and you and I are used to society staying the same for hundreds of years, for lifetimes, and there I was trying to make that point that the Culture is actually very stable and to find the same stability in our background you'd probably have to go back pre-Industrial Revolution.

Even then you'd probably always find something - we're told by our particular masters that it was wonderful back then but it wasn't and there was still change and there certainly was conflict, but that's the sort of time you'd have to go back to to get even a semblance of the sort of ordered calm or disordered calm that exists in something like the Culture - assuming that the Culture or something like it could ever exist.

While I was actually drawing up and developing the idea of the Culture - as I said, this was about 1977, I'd written reams and reams about it, notes about the Culture and all sorts of stuff - some of it's now been abandoned in terms of the way in which I think it would work - I got really involved in it. I must have written the equivalent of about a quarter or half a novel and I eventually thought what am I talking about? So I went right back to the start and wrote this sort of thing about THE CULTURE DOES NOT EXIST, YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS, YOU IDIOT! I have to watch myself some-

times. It's not actually real.

A lot of the games you mentioned - now I'm not going to ask too many questions about games because most of the late Banks interviews I've read have been full of questions about games - still, for fun: do you think out the games? Things like *Damage* and all the endless examples in *The Player of Games* which look absolutely wonderful and you think gosh this must be great, I'll learn how to play that...

I'm afraid the answer's no. What you see is all there is, for the very good reason of being absolutely difficult. What I'm talking about in the end are real genuine classic games and it's beyond the wit of me to invent one of those - would that it weren't!

Have you read Mary Gentle's *Golden Witchbreed with the game "ochmir"*?

Yes I have, fascinating, it's one of those that actually worked as well.

People kept saying, "market it, market it"; I don't know if she ever tried.

That did sound interesting. I liked the novel too. I remember you get more or less a full set of instructions. I always wanted to try that.

Are you going to get back into the Culture and bring us back any more?

Not for a few years. The next sf book isn't going to be a Culture book, the one that comes out in 1992, and the one after that, I don't know. I haven't decided that; it might be. That's all for now, I think, for the Culture.

Are you alternating sf and non-sf?

Oh yeah, definitely. That's the plan for the next few novels. For the foreseeable future it's sf one year and non-sf the next.

So what's the next non-sf?

Well, I haven't got a title or a plot for it yet, but I think it's going to be set in the west coast of Scotland. There's this family that either used to own or don't have it any more or actually are still the owners... anyway they make glass, they've got this beach full of pure sand they make glass from. It's going to be sort of a bit weird, I think, lots of strange things happening. It's sort of difficult to explain. Anyway it's got horrible signs of becoming a sort of family saga which could be absolute death, I don't want to do one those, but on the other hand if I tried to do a family saga it'd probably turn out totally weird anyway. *The Wasp Factory* was my attempt at writing an ordinary conventional novel and you can all see how that turned out, so... yeah, the west coast of Scotland, not the one that exists, a different one.

An Alternative West Coast? Is this Science Fiction?

No no no - only geographically. Anyone who knows the west coast of Scotland's going to get certainly messed up with this. An additional gen there? That loch's not a sea loch? But other than that I think it'll be sort of realistic. I haven't actually got a plot for it yet which is a bit unfortunate as I'm supposed to start work on it in about a month or six weeks.

Myths, Computers and Cyberpunk

By Charles Stross

Science fiction as a genre is multifaceted. On one level it purports to naively predict possible futures, both in terms of futurist extrapolations and in terms of the human reaction to such events; on another level, it is simply a subset of the broader literary field, with the question "but what if...?" appended to its exploratory remit. It is interesting to note that these views lie at opposite poles of an axis running through the genre, between "hard sf" at one end and the literary experimentalism identified by Bruce Sterling as "Slipstream" (see *SF Eye* #5) at the other. Other axes exist within the literature, but for the purposes of this article I intend to concentrate on a serious flaw in the gemstone: why it is that a supposedly visionary literature has completely ignored or trivialised the implications of what is currently the fastest-evolving technology on the planet.

This is quite a serious accusation to make. Writers at each end of the predictive/experimental axis may feel themselves to be quite justified in protesting loudly. The predictive tendency can rightly point to bigger and better mainframes, smaller and faster microprocessors, and even to the holy grail of Artificial Intelligence, the ghost in the machine. On the other hand, the experimentalists may well protest that they have explored the preoccupations of humanity from a human perspective, and that they have dealt adequately with information technology whenever it has trespassed within the arena of human interaction. Both groups are right; and, equally, both are wrong. I would like to use as my working example the sub-genre known as "cyberpunk" which emerged during the early 80's and which positions itself about halfway along this hypothetical axis, combining human concerns with a future more rigorously extrapolated than those of its antecedents.

It's a shame that the computer-as-icon has been taken up as central to cyberpunk, because it isn't. Science fiction has always tended to reflect contemporary attitudes and concerns, and cyberpunk is no exception. This is a sub-genre obsessed with style and insecurity. Style and design were two buzzwords for the 1980's which may well be remembered long after all other memories of

the decade have faded; insecurity was another. Cyberpunk reflected these neuroses by snapping up the trendy accoutrements of the design magazines and splashing them across a broad canvas of contemporary human concerns. We read about television advertising as a form of art; brand-name implants; Japanese multinationals buying up everything in sight; and the omnipresent awareness of corruption and pollution in the background, like a *dance macabre* with dioxin. These are magnifications of today, projected onto the screen of the future. Computers, the burgeoning new technology of the 80's, were obviously part and parcel of this projection: and so it's no surprise that they feature prominently in books like *Neuromancer* and *Ambient*.

Being projections of the present day, the heroes and heroines of cyberpunk fiction aren't the classic Campbellian/Heinleinian "competent man", gung-ho in a space suit. These people are products of the anomie of the 80's, suffering the insecurity and alienation in the face of rapid change that is so typical of the period (for a vivid and non-Gibsonian example of this, I would cite *The Glass Hammer* by KW Jeter or *Metrophage* by Richard Kadrey). The protagonists are generally either losers or company (wo)men - and hence, not directly responsible for their own circumstances - for in such an angst-extrapolation all our insecurity rises up to assault us and the only way to survive our fears is to evade them, typically by placing responsibility in the hands of a larger corporate identity.

Because cyberpunk seems so contemporary, it offers a mirror which the 80's sf community has used in order to scrutinise its own preoccupations to an incestuous degree. Unfortunately, this has led to certain problems of definition. Pinning down cyberpunk is like nailing jelly to a tree; it tends to slip and slide, and gets into places where it shouldn't. For example, some reviewers tried to lump Storm Constantine and Connie Willis in with the likes of Tom Maddox and John Shirley, perhaps because they weren't depicting 50's, 60's or even 70's people in their fiction. Both Willis and Constantine have aimed for striking levels of contemporaneity in their characterisation, but neither of them are writing in that curiously stunted vision of

the future wherein *everyone* is a hustler. These two deal with human beings who are neither straitjacketed with the simplistic formulae of escapist wish-fulfilment nor manacled to the ball-and-chain of suburban angst; their protagonists are complex, contradictory, and thoroughly *modern*. But cyberpunk, whatever else it may be, is not a blanket label for modernity: hence the element of confusion.

At the same time as the initial cyberpunk explosion, other writers were discovering the 80's. Some of these - Kim Stanley Robinson primarily, but also James Patrick Kelly, John Kessel, James P Blaylock, Tim Powers - didn't particularly like where the Movement was going, or where it said it was going, or even where it appeared to be coming from. Whatever the cause, the effect has been obvious; acrimonious dispute. Cyberpunk was frequently misunderstood, disliked intensely by those who just wanted another dose of their favourite literary tranquilliser, and in the end the authors who originally promoted it moved on to newer pastures. The field has since been cannibalised by younger, less original writers (whom I once referred to as "Technogoths," in recognition of the fact that they adopted the gaudy clothing of their predecessor 'punks without paying enough attention to the controversial contents).

One question remains unasked (and thus unanswered) - the subject of this article: given that sf uses the future to reflect today's preoccupations, why did the appearance of a major new technology evoke such a trivial response? Because the use of computers in cyberpunk is trivial. This technology is, today, evolving so rapidly that it is possible to look at a machine built only ten years ago and describe it in terms of archaeology. Current research in virtual environments and nanotechnology is threatening to render reality itself obsolescent within a time scale of two to five decades. The possibility of creating a true artificial intelligence remains questionable, but the question is still fundamentally an open one. Surely the cyberpunks, with their position somewhere between the poles of rigorous techno-extrapolation and humanist self-scrutiny, should have been able to identify and address these questions. But why didn't they? In order to examine this prob-

lem, it's necessary to identify the nature of the beast - the intersection of computer science and sf - and the misuse to which it has been put.

Let's ignore the question of whether AI is possible for the moment. Many people have strongly-held, dogmatic views on the issue, and it's not strictly relevant to the issue in hand, which is the treatment of computers in sf. What is interesting is the fictional treatment that the hypothesis of AI has received. Possible or not, AIs are central to the portrayal of computers in sf, and cyberpunk in particular. They provide a kind of operating system for the imagination, a motivating force without which the fictional machines are nothing more than buzzing lumps of characterless background plastic: this is true to the extent that it's difficult to think of an sf novel in which computers are prominent but not gifted with sentience of some kind.

There is a popular image of the computer that became prevalent in the 50's and still persists; the vast white monolith surrounded by engineers and scientists, mysterious acolytes of the vast, brooding artificial intelligence. The personal computer has banalised this image, but it hasn't dispelled it completely; by analogy, where formerly Dr Frankenstein once lurked in his laboratory in his castle attic and the townspeople bolted their doors at night, now the spotty adolescent who lives next door to you is brewing trouble by night with the chemistry kit his parents bought him for his 14th birthday.

Several examples of the application of this image spring to mind. First, and most obvious, is the HAL-9000 syndrome - an example of the disobedient golem, the logical come-uppance for those who would play God. Next, and perhaps related to these fears of disobedience, is the God-in-a-box syndrome. If it's so damned powerful, why not make it responsible for the whole shooting match and have done with it? (Jack L Chalker in particular has taken this tendency to an almost megalomaniacal extreme in some of his fiction.) Finally, somewhere within the spectrum between these two extremes of villainous villain and benevolent master, lies the third option: the machine as convenient alien for exploration. True Aliens, after all, are a lot less biddable than the big white box next door; Deep Thought is always on hand to provide a command performance of inscrutability, whereas aliens, by definition, are alien and Not To Be Trusted. Ever. That's what the myth of the alien is about... and computers have, now, been thoroughly mythologised.

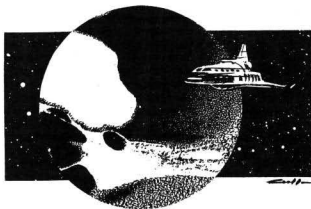
Some human preoccupations are constant; that is, they do not change over a time scale short enough for us to conveniently observe. The continuing power of ancient mythic traditions is an example of this. Myths are essential to human culture insofar as they provide templates for behaviour; they outline the testing-to-destruction of the human social organism along narrowly defined axes. They continue to speak to us because the history of our species is a continuous process in which information is added to our collected mem-

ory, and once included becomes very hard to destroy. Myths address the very core of our response patterns: jealousy, anger, revenge, love, territoriality... the litany of emotions that have been with us since before we became human. This baggage is so deeply rooted in the human psyche that it cannot be destroyed: consider the difficulty of concisely defining any of those words as a measure of the degree to which they are integral to our experience.

Let's select Gibson as the key example of a cyberpunk writer. Gibson used computers (and AI) as a metaphor. Style is not the same as content, and Gibson appears to have been somewhat at a loss for an original plot in

programmer, alive or dead.

Consider cyberspace itself, the mysterious domain in which information lurks in the raw, accessible only to those who already possess a little dangerous knowledge. It has hidden dangers; there is always a Mephistopheles to demand to demand some frightful payment in return for access to it, or a Monster to come lurking down fearful dark alleys in search of retribution. AIs substitute for angels or devils - literally, in the case of *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* - and cyberspace for the forbidden wisdom, in which they can be found. Sometimes the demon or the monster are actually parts of the hero(ine), summoned up by their own exposure to knowledge with-



Neuromancer. Nevertheless, he seems to have eventually decided to use the trappings of contemporary society, projected onto the mirror of the future, as a tool with which to examine those myths that most interested him. These myths seem generally to have been preoccupations with helplessness; the 80's were very conducive to such feelings, with their cold-war ambience and neurotic techno-sleaze. The fictions Gibson developed used extremely powerful, even omniscient, beings (the AIs), and mortals who were condemned to search for the knowledge that would free them. The trappings were contemporary, the hermetic texts replaced with cool blue video screens, the high priest of Athens with the improbable figure of The Finn... but the patterns were the same.

Just as the B-feature primarily used socio-cultural images and conventions to convey its message, so did cyberpunk. Frankenstein corresponds to the fearful Pentagon officials in *War Games*, and even the teen-aged nerd next door has his own cyberspace deck to play with. The hackers and cyberspace cowboys of *Neuromancer* have far more in common with Dr Faustus or Victor Frankenstein than they have with any real computer

out wisdom, and sometimes they are cunningly disguised - but it always comes back to the tired old arcana, the pithy observation that *A Little Knowledge Is A Dangerous Thing*.

The characters in Gibson's work appear to be the inheritors of Faust or Frankenstein, who in turn were descended from Prometheus. And this is the level they function on, the level of myth. Gibson's novels, at plot level, don't constitute escapist fiction so much as reworked mythologies; in places this becomes overt. The end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, which lurches to an escapist conclusion, jars precisely because it *isn't* an escapist-structured novel.

Computers therefore feature in Gibson's work on two levels: as elements of style - the present projected on the future - and, with added AI, as mythic components, the *deus ex machina*. Gibson can probably be excused responsibility for the subsequent abuse of these two distinct aspects of his work, but the net result has that any sensible exploration of the impact of information technology on the present has been completely obscured by the presentation of computers as either the latest gosh-wow God-substitute or as matt-black

fashion accessories. A couple of contrary examples shine out - notably *Islands In the Net* by Bruce Sterling, and the pre-cyberpunk *The Shockwave Rider* by John Brunner - but in general, the treatment of informational technologies by sf has been execrable, tending to concentrate exclusively on the stylistic or the mythic levels of the stereotype.

Confusing style with content has been the downfall of the cyberpunk imitators. Cyberpunk muddled the waters by presenting itself as contemporary, whilst for the most part emulating a trend-setter whose influences were, at root, obsolescent. This has made it a sub-genre particularly easy to parody unintentionally (as witness *Dreams of Flesh and Sand* by WT Quick, or *The Second Program* by Tom Maddox), simply because of the authors' failure to avoid the gaffes of previous works in the field. Among the elements that stick out like a sore thumb in any of the follow-on cyber-epics is the gratuitous abuse of large quantities of silicon. Indeed, the endless proliferation of 21st century dystopias dominated by 1950's mega-corporations and 1950's mega-mainframes has almost become a genre stereotype. Considering that within the next 20 years it is probable that the mainframe will become extinct, this is rather short-sighted. What we see portrayed as the reflection of today upon tomorrow is actually the reflection of yesterday upon tomorrow; the 50's myth of the Big White Box is being

recycled *ad infinitum* while far more revolutionary developments are being ignored.

It is worth noting that sf as a predictive medium has consistently demonstrated a blind spot towards the potential of informational technologies, preferring the somewhat more gaudy moon-rockets and robots that, at the time, reflected the scientific aspirations of the day; relatively crude power technologies descended from the era of agriculture (the robot - "worker") and the early industrial revolution (the steam-powered engine). Truly visionary sf treatments of computing are few and far between, because the distortion that a mature information technology will lace between our senses and the real world around us is totally alien to our experience. *Escape Plans* by Gwyneth Jones is an example that works - but even this is a conservative vision when the time span described is taken into account. Fundamentally, the computing industry is truly exhibiting exponential growth, and this - as Heinlein observed in the 1940's - is so frighteningly rapid that even a temporally conservative projection may seem like a mad fantasy to the uninformed.

As a predictive medium, sf has failed the computer. The Technogoths, those cyberpunk assimilationists whose works currently dominate the pages of *Interzone*, have digested the lesson uncritically; and consequently, despite a proliferation of implants and cyberspace decks, we have little of any real

significance here. Technogoth seems to present a reassuringly dull vision of a future that is not so far removed from those supposedly buried futures of the 1950's, with a little added sex as a concession to changing public appetites. If this isn't a telling example of the narrow-minded conservatism of the sf genre, I'm not sure what is.

Science fiction has failed even to reflect the present state of the art; the only level upon which it has succeeded in depicting the contemporary information revolution is that of recrudescence style-mania, confined within the ghettoised enclave of cyberpunk. We who write in the sf field have betrayed our historic claim to reflect the future, in return for a treacherous stylistic enterprise based upon obsolete traditions; and unless we can dig our imaginations free of the post-cyberpunk quagmire, we may never regain the ability to see even the present day with clear eyes.

Here I rest my case, and my keyboard. There's got to be a solution, a genre where at least *these* limits of precedent do not apply to the imagination. A genre in which the fictions accurately reflect at least *some* of what we may well experience as virtual realities in the next century. A genre which has the scope to reflect mythic structures, but which also has the breadth to avoid them if necessary. I'm talking, of course, about fantasy...

One Fine Summer

A Review of the Summer's SF Films

by Ian Nathan

The oppressive heat starting to get to you? The grainy sweat inching its way down the small of your back? You really need to cool off don't you? What better way than to whisk yourself off to some far flung planet or through shadow haunted streets or even along the threads of time; you got it, what could be finer than to take your numbered seat within the dream factory, within that blackened auditorium, and amidst the hushed whispers and gentle rustle of popcorn, escape into the worlds of celluloid fantasy?

What then have the masters of Tinseltown had to offer us this summer? As with the written word, the boundaries of category are becoming blurred; it is less easy now to simply define a film as science fiction, horror, comedy or thriller. It is therefore highly likely that in the following evaluation I will tread on some toes by the inclusion of works some

of you would prescribe irrelevant.

This summer has had much to interest and even excite the avid fan and advocate of that most enhanced of film genres - "science fiction".

Let me commence with a movie that is without any doubt fodder for the fan of the fantastic. Based on the short story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" by that visionary, quirky and iconoclastic writer Philip K Dick, *Total Recall* is the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle, proudly revealing a budget somewhere in the \$60-70 million region, and at the directorial helm the bloodthirsty whim of "Robocopman" Paul Verhoeven. It was difficult to know what to expect, a cinematic breakthrough or an elaborate (and expensive) excuse for big Arnie to kick ass in a decorative near future. What we got was neither - yes true, the violence was there in all its exaggerated excess, yet set

against the corkscrew twists of so extraneous a plot, it was an absolute pleasure to behold the nightmarish confusion and vulnerability spreading across the big man's face (a remarkably adept performance from an actor who has matured a long way from *Conan*). The effects varied from a depiction of the surface of Mars more reminiscent of the heady days of *Blake's 7*, to a gobsmacker of visuals when Arnie sheds his drag get up, though in consideration of what was done with a far smaller budget for *Robocop* the hi-tech environs here were a tad wooden. What succeeds with *Total Recall* is the devious sway of the tale; it tickles and entices, leading you hungrily to the overblown (literally) finale. It lifts what is otherwise low-brow, regular splat-happy sci-fi pulp to an imaginative and memorable movie.

Heh, remember Warren Beatty? You know, Hollywood's most eligible bachelor? Well he

has arisen from the post-Ishtar darkness; with carefully manipulated hype he has, together with Uncle Walt Ltd., brought Yankee comic-book stalwart Dick Tracy into the silver screen gloss. Behind the camera he showed a mastery of touch, and noble creativity, literal in his translation from cartoon page, the portrayal was awash with bold primary colour, all the villainish foils bedecked in goonish, grotesque make-ups of their epynymity: Pruneface, Shoulders, Flattop and Little Face. Narratively the depiction was shamefully bland, the only spark a flamboyantly lunatic Al Pacino as the head hoodlum Big Boy Caprice. The key flaw was Beatty's own performance as the campaigner of justice — a lifeless hero sheltered beneath matching fedora and trenchcoat. I never quite managed to figure the dynamics to Dick Tracy the character, it seemed most success was more down to his young sidekick The Kid.

We were reassuringly informed prior to the release of *Back to the Future Part III* that it was definitely the final time-spinning jaunt of Marty McFly, and not without a hidden sigh of relief, we all pined our regrets. After the cataclysm of complexity and product placement that was *Part II*, this lively dash through the old time West came as a lightly amusing but slightly tame end to the trilogy. Christopher Lloyd took centre stage with rapid love interest Mary Steenburgen, while little Mikie Fox dashed around at high speed avoiding the fiendish Mad Dog Tanner, in an attempt to return Doc and himself back to the future — well what did you expect, something new? It was all done with the slickness and style we have come to expect from Robert Zemeckis and co. and was tidily rounded off with a little moral. It all shied away from the potential experimentation within the theme, just running the requisite gags to keep the faithful fans happy, who can now spend many an idle hour explaining, with the aid of diagrams, how it is all entirely feasible; who cares?

Joe Dante took his heavy weight satirical swipe a stage further with the sequel *Grem-lins 2*. Here the battleground was transferred to a Trumpesque corporate highrise, the Clamp Tower, a building choking with mechanised efficiency. "Have you washed your hands?" a synthetic voice demands upon exiting the Gents. A man-made stack of hi-tech fodder ripe for the Green nightmare. Lacking the more rounded open satire of its predecessor, here the game is more simply a blatant and bitty romp of parody and derision. Dante carelessly sets up his targets, his Hollywood hierarchy prime on the list, and blows them away in a whirlwind of sadistic laughter and mercurial editing. The film was wickedly delightful and at times positively inspired, but the plot often became blurred, and at times greatly breached even its own stretched credibility.

It was a vast improvement on the insipid rehash that was *Spaced Invaders*. This clumsy parody of *War of the Worlds* had five inept pint-sized aliens running amok in back-

water America, giving unintentional restitution to the formulaic lonely little girl and downtrodden farmer alike. Even with a vaguely likeable quasi-Jack Nicholson invader, the whole remained flat and entirely unfunny.

To win the *Palm d'Or* at Cannes a film needs to express a novelty, verve and daring that the Academy Awards would shy away from. David Lynch is an underrated director, he deems it unfit (and justly so) to curtail a risqué and creative spirit for the sake of precedents of conformity and commerciality. *Wild at Heart* is certainly a contemporary fantasy, is the passage of innocence through a metaphorical darkness of the Southern States of the US, a road movie bearing a banner of the need for self-expression. Youth, in the form of fleeing lovers Nicholas Cage and Laura Dern, the hunted; the hunters, killers hired by a vengeful mother (of Dern); a passage beset with promise and entrapment alike. A most memorable Dafee cameo the most visceral pitfall of sadistic evil. It is individual, and entirely off-centre. It is almost a masterpiece. See it.

The Guardian was a flabby, wasted attempt at possessional terror, an effort to instill new colour into the anemic themes of horror. Here there was a twist from the regular requisites in that it is the babysitter who is evil incarnate rather than the hapless victim. A glossy yet vacuous film, a return to the brimming store of written horror would give the much needed scope so lacking from current efforts.

The future looks a rosy shade (as far as film releases go anyway), to the end of the year there is a steady stream of genre pics, and suitably variegated they are to boot. Of course the sequels keep on coming — that mechanised cop Murphy returns with directives intact in *Robocop 2*, written by comic book king Frank Miller. Now that the brat packers are getting older they are experimenting with more mature themes, namely death, literally, by stopping each others hearts momentarily then restarting them again with electric shocks. All to gain an insight into the after death experience. *Flatliners* stars Keifer Sutherland, Julia Roberts and Kevin Bacon amongst others. Clive Barker will have his latest progeny on show in the autumn; *Nightbreed* based on his novella *Cabal*, also includes a cameo by auspicious horror director David Cronenberg. Hopefully it will do slightly better here than it fared State-side. And of course for Christmas the one you've all been waiting for, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, what more can I say?

The above piece was written during the summer (note the clues: "oppressive heat" and "grainy sweat", amongst others) and should have been in last issue, but unfortunately was squeezed out at the last moment. Any further installments from Mr Nathan will be run on a more timely basis.

Production Editor

Vector urgently requires a Production Editor to handle all aspects of producing the magazine every two months.

The ideal candidate should have the following:

- a good working knowledge of DTP/typesetting/design
- ready access to some form of DTP equipment (IBM/Mac/Atari) and printer (preferably post-script)
- lots of enthusiasm (perhaps the most important quality)
- a very good sense of humour (you don't get paid!)

If you think you possess the above qualities and would like to help out, please write to the editors (addresses on page 3).



Book Reviews

Edited by Paul Kincaid

Lyonnesse III: Madouc

Jack Vance

Grafton, 1990, 358pp, £12.95

In the character of Princess Madouc, born of uncertain parentage and substituted for a prince at birth, is clearly visible the jester and rogue, Cugel, perverse, sly and witty, and instantly likeable for having all her priorities in the right order. Glimpses of Alice can be seen behind the facade, but hers is a character that runs through almost every Vance story and gives the novel its main strength and weakness. Cugel's, and sometimes Alice's visage keep superimposing themselves on her, and *The Dying Earth* and the *Looking Glass* world on the magician's *Lyonnesse*. In the chapters away from her the book suffers enormously from its lack of comparable character and as a result seems both overlong and unfocused. Vance, rather than being released by his use of myth, has been constrained by it, the descriptive verve which so characterised works like *Emphyrio* and *Planet Of Adventure* drained and colourless by comparison.

It may be an inferior Vance work, but as far as fantasy sagas go, and they tend to go on and on, *Madouc* suffers few of their faults. Vance avoids most of the weaknesses and clichés of the genre, which are often taken, undigested, from the kind of fairy tales we all develop a disgust for as we grow older. Where he fails the story jars horrendously, but in those odd moments when his creative genius shines again, one can only hope that the future will reveal for Vance and for us once more the joys of *The Dying Earth*.

Until then, one is left with a curate's egg of a volume. Madouc learns that she is not, after all, the daughter of Princess Suldran (from *Lyonnesse I*) but that of Twisk, the careless fairy, and sets out to discover her true heritage. Along the way she defeats a monster, finds the Grail and uncovers a plot against a prince, with whom she falls in love. Improbable coincidences and fortune, as was the style with the gothic romance, play their part

in a story which delights in its artificiality, but respects its readers, too. Its main strength is its humour, an element missing from so many fantasies, and it is this, along with Vance's idiosyncratic style, which raises it above them. Still, I prefer Vance's earlier work and trust that this is just another temporary slip in his inconstant career.

Terry Broome

Take Back Plenty

Colin Greenland

Unwin, 1990, 359pp, £6.99

The intensity and style of Colin Greenland's writing saves this from being just another all-action, chase-sequence *Space Opera*. It is worth persevering with the book since the plot promises little at first, but opens out into a grandly realised broad-brush painting that sweeps the reader along with its sheer panache.

Set on a Mars with names and folk borrowed from every cliché under the sun (the town of Schiapparelli, for example), the action revolves around Tabitha Jute, owner of the space-barge, *Alice Liddell* (a nod in the direction of Lewis Carroll). Short of money and anxious to get herself "sorted out", she becomes involved with some very shady characters indeed. With the law and time against her she gives Marco Metz a ride to Plenty, the promise of a quick journey in return for oodles of cash being the chief (and only) attraction. Needless to say, her ailing ship and the enigmatic Marco conspire against her best intentions and a simple voyage becomes a cat-and-mouse chase.

Plenty is not an honest sort of place; it appears to be the repository of all known strange creatures and customs, and in order to escape the forces of the law, Tabitha has to take her craft into Hyperspace. The ship, gradually evading the pursuing police then falls into the hands of evil pirates, and so the story goes, bouncing along, testing and correcting itself from time to time. The wit of the

writing is exemplified by the useful device of regular "conversations" between Tabitha and the On-Board computer -- this helps clarify the narrative thrust and counterpoints the regular bouts of action.

The vast range of folk that inhabit the unfolding tale are a further bonus. Imaginatively drawn and, in some cases gruesomely realistic, they provide the novel with that rarity in sf, genuine character development. Not only does the reader become interested in these individuals, but you really do care about their ultimate fate.

All in all, this is a book to be enjoyed, a rich collection of inventive situations which forms another milestone in the promising career of Colin Greenland.

Alan Dorey

Rune

Christopher Fowler

Century, 1990, 368pp, £13.99, £7.50 pb

There can be few people who are not at least vaguely familiar with the plot of MR James's short story "Casting the Runes", even if only through the film version, *Night of the Demon* (1958). The evil Karswell brings down a demon on his enemies by surreptitiously passing them a slip of paper bearing a runic curse. Unfortunately for Karswell, one of his intended victims is able to return the paper to him and the curse rebounds on the sender. In *Rune*, Christopher Fowler has taken this basic idea and turned it into a huge contemporary urban thriller.

People are dying in London, in varied, strange and highly violent ways; but most of them have in common the fact that they are found with a piece of card inscribed with runes in their possession. Among those killed are the father and secretary (a particularly nasty death) of ad-man Harry Buckingham. He is one of several characters who set out, independently at first, then coming together, to solve the mystery. Others include two elderly policemen called Bryant & May, and

the woman who accidentally killed Harry's father. Perhaps more interesting than any of these is Dorothy Huxley, a middle-aged librarian whose superficial ordinariness belies her great knowledge of and expertise in matters occult and esoteric.

What they discover is that a multinational communications company has updated Karwell's methods with the use of subliminal messages on video, and the head of the company, Daniel Carmody, is using them to achieve his ends; ends which are megalomaniac to say the least. I won't reveal whether he suffers the same fate as Karwell, but certainly the conclusion of the book isn't as clear-cut as the short story.

Rune is a good supernatural thriller (even if most of the supernatural effects can be accounted for by Carmody's manipulations of people's minds), which holds the attention throughout whilst not being particularly frightening. The frequent violence is not over-graphic, and what the book lacks in sense-of-place it makes up for in the excellently drawn characters and an attractive line in humour.

Rosemary Pardoe

The Difference Engine

William Gibson & Bruce Sterling
Gollancz, 1990, 383pp, £12.95

The Difference Engine is the hero, or, rather, the *idea* of the difference engine is hero. For it is the difference engine, developed by Charles Babbage in the early 19th century, which has brought Victorian England into the computer age, overthrown the conservatives, given it a Radical government under Lord Byron, promoted savants and industrialists like Lord Darwin and Lord Engels to positions of political influence (and forced Benjamin Disraeli to seek a career as hack writer). The plot is far too complex to summarise: it involves the daughter of an executed luddite, a Texan president in exile, a distinguished palaeontologist, a secret policeman and Lady Ada Byron (mathematician and computer-scientist) -- "real" people intermingled with the (probably) imaginary -- in conspiracy and counter-conspiracy during an alternative 1855. The objectives of all this are clarified only towards the end. Along the way there's the aftermath of The Stink, a cataclysmic breakdown of London's overstrained transport and sewage systems, and an attempted uprising by followers of Karl Marx (leader of the Manhattan Commune).

That the Apostles of Cyberpunk have given themselves over to such an ultimately, traditional exercise in alternative history has been disguised somewhat by attempts to call it "steampunk". It's a label even more meaningless than the original "cyberpunk". If the "punk" implies anything, it ought to symbolise an element of anarchy, of revolt against convention (as one finds in Tim Power's historicals more than here). The Difference Engine is traditional stylistically.

There are no *Neuromancer* tricks here, and no slavish attempts to make the dialogue seem Victorian; there is certainly no attempt to give the novel itself a Victorian feel -- it is far too hectically paced for that, and the sex-scenes have a steaminess you would not even find in Victorian pornography, let alone the Victorian novel. Stylistically it reads like the political thriller it is. Conceptually it is directly in the tradition of sf alternative history novels: much less radical in its differences than *The Empire of Fear*; worked out in more detail than *A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!*, but in precisely the same genre. It's an exercise in good old sf extrapolation. The political facts logically derive from the initial premise of the Babbage engine; the social and technological facts are worked out with almost obsessive glee. The technological tour-de-force is the Central Statistics Bureau, its pyramidal shape recalling Orwell's ministries, a vast Victorian-Egyptian edifice housing miles and miles of steam driven gearing in Britain's greatest Babbage engine: a huge computer which helps run the growing British Empire. But great delight has obviously been expended too on those extrapolations of the Victorian machines one sees in museums: miniature miracles of brass workmanship encased in shining mahogany boxes, like the Babbaged version of cinema, the kinotrope (with John Keats as one of its great artists). The authors clearly had immense fun with this book; it would be a fairly churlish reader who couldn't have almost as much fun herself.

Edward James

The Frighteners

Stephen Laws
Souvenir Press, 1990, 375pp, £14.95

Hallowes' Hell

Neville Steed
Headline, 1990, 276pp, £12.95

Stephen Laws is one of the up-and-coming crop of young Horror writers who get compared to Clive Barker a lot. The Frighteners is written in the spare, punchy style of a confident craftsman, comfortable with his material and familiar with the genre. Where he loses control is in the plotting, which starts out quite promisingly with a demon-possessed petty crook embarking on a supernatural vendetta against the gangsters who murdered his family, but which ends up careering wildly out of control as demons and angels created by renegade Home Office parapsychologists battle it out over the smoking remains of what used to be London.

Neville Steed, on the other hand, has come late to Horror novels from the more mannered pastures of the traditional Whodunnit. The plotting of *Hallowes' Hell* ticks along as smoothly as a Swiss watch, with its enclosed community of cardboard cutouts menaced by a Dark Secret which could have been defused by chapter three if one of the supporting cast hadn't obligingly kept quiet about it to let the

body count rack up a bit first. None of the victims are much of a loss, though, being completely interchangeable, and given to explaining things they already know to one another in a flat, pedantic monotone devoid of the inflections of real speech. This book also gets my award for the most crassly insensitive *deus ex machina* of the year, in having a passing airliner blown out of the sky by a carbon copy of the Lockerbie bomb just in time to flatten the focus of the nastiness when things are looking bleakest for our hero.

As a compare and contrast exercise, reading these supernatural potboilers in fairly quick succession has confirmed my long-standing belief that an energetic stylist can kick some life into the woolliest of plots, but the tightest plotting in the world can't save a blandly written novel, however neat the initial idea.

Alex Stewart

The Last World

Christoph Ransmayr
Chatto, 1990, 202pp, £12.95

In the year 8AD, during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, the poet Ovid was suddenly and inexplicably exiled to the remote village of Tomi on the Black Sea, where he died some 10 years later. This historical fact is the basis for one of the most extraordinary and, literally, fantastic novels to emerge in recent years. For in Ransmayr's book, elegantly translated by John Woods, Ovid's friend, Cotta, tracks him down in exile to discover the whereabouts of his last book, *Metamorphoses*. But in this timeless world the bureaucrats of Rome communicate by telephone, the first thing Cotta consults on arrival in Tomi is a bus timetable, and every year the dwarf Cyparis transports his projector over the mountains to entertain the inhabitants of Tomi with the latest movies.

This is a land outside the normal constraints of history, which is only appropriate for the book is all about escape from mundane reality. Ovid's last great work, as the title suggests, was concerned with the transformations which afflicted the gods, heroes and animals of classical mythology. And though Cotta never finds the poet, he does discover the poem played out all unwittingly by the inhabitants of the village. Thus Cotta's landlord, Lycan, who is glimpsed running barefoot through the mountains wearing a moth-eaten wolf's pelt, is also Lycan the Arcadian tyrant who, in Ovid's poem, is transformed into a wolf by Jupiter. And elsewhere the metamorphosing characters take on a disturbing reality, though Cotta doesn't realise that the mad world he experiences is actually life taking on the characteristics of the art he has come to seek.

The book is a fascinating intellectual game. Ransmayr handles the blurring between myth and reality with complete assurance, and the creation of the novel's own unique world outside of any one time is

coherent, surprising, and often very funny. There are some severe criticisms: the artifice is a little too obvious and there is no emotional heart in the midst of all this stylish cleverness. It is being described as this year's *The Name of the Rose*, but though it does share that book's academic quality, and similarly ignores all literary boundaries, it doesn't muster the same life. But none of this should belittle the achievement of the book, a challenging, though-provoking flourish of the imagination.

Paul Kincaid

Hyperion

Dan Simmons

Headline, 1990, 346pp, £12.95

Phases of Gravity

Dan Simmons

Headline, 1990, 282pp, £14.95

I finished reading *Hyperion* the day before it received the Hugo. This review took so long because I had to find and read *The Fall of Hyperion* too. Now it's done, I can confidently report that if you like any of the following—science fiction, horror, mystery, thrillers, Alistair Maclean, Chaucer, John Keats, WB Yeats, poetry generally, aeroplanes, puzzle stories, cyberpunk, Vonnegut, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Seventh Seal* (and these from memory only)—then chances are you will enjoy Simmons's books. If you like more than one of these then you will be delighted by the way he weaves their influences together—and the more of them you like the more you will enjoy.

Hyperion is that rarest of animals, a "volume one" which stands alone as a good novel. Several pilgrims each tell how they came to be on their pilgrimage. These tales build, mosaic-like, a picture of a human-dominated universe which is astonishing in its complexity, its sure use of the interplay of politics, religion, pragmatic executive decisions and the pure cussedness of human beings, and in that extra touch of strange without which no SF novel can be complete. Although in some ways a necessary preamble to *The Fall of Hyperion*, the novel nevertheless is complete. As with its model, *The Canterbury Tales*, this completeness is generated not within the stories themselves, but rather by their juxtaposition.

The Fall of Hyperion, more within the traditional structure of space opera, also cleverly interweaves the tropes of cyberspace with all the wonders of the previous book. Yes, sensawunda, that's what it's all about.

Phases of Gravity is not science fiction, but is just as wonderful—sort of *The Right Stuff*, but with real people. It tells the story of a man who was once an astronaut, but not a famous one, and thus examines on one level the discontinuity between celebrity and reality. Like the *Hyperion* novels, it also explores the real political power structures that underlie religions—but here the religions are recognisably of modern America. Deeper

still, it examines self-exploration and coming to terms with being a man—and it manages this, despite many apparently macho exploits (including one which, without violence, literally took my breath away), without ever promoting the empty posturing which is the nature of true macho. It shows men being strong and sensitive, and the same people being weak and callous. It shows us a man discovering, through the medium of his friends and their lives, what he has lost in his hollow life, and how to regain some of it. And so much more! Aagh! Read this book, if only to experience Simmons's effortless mastery of telling an incoherent multiple-strand and multiple-time-and-place story not only without a safety net, but without once losing his grip on your attention. I expected to be lost, and never was.

Paul Brazier

Use of Weapons

Iain M Banks

Orbit, 1990, 379pp, £12.95

Iain Banks's third novel about the Culture is. In many ways, the best yet. He displays, for example, an imagination every bit as vast, comic and fertile as *Consider Phlebas*, yet with a far greater mastery of his material. And there is a daring to the structure of the book which we haven't seen since *The Bridge*. Yet....

I enjoy this book immensely. It is rich and vivid and great fun. There is a cascade of incident paralleled by a peeling away of character which is fascinating. One strand of the book tells the story of the final mission of Cheradenine Zakalwe, a mercenary working for Special Circumstances, a morally ambiguous outfit which promotes the aims of the Culture throughout the galaxy by means of war, espionage and assassination. Their acts are questionable, to say the least, interfering with the internal politics of various societies to ends which can only be justifiable within the very broad view of the Culture itself. And Zakalwe is their star player, kept alive for centuries by the miracles of Culture medicine he has swept from system to system leading armies, fomenting wars, killing politicians of every hue for a greater good which he can only take on trust. Now war is brewing in a system in which Zakalwe has interfered before, and he must embark on an adventure as wild, as dangerous, and as brutal as any in his career.

But Zakalwe himself is not all that the Culture might suppose. As this final mission is told straightforwardly from chapters One to Fourteen, so in alternating chapters the story of his life is told in reverse, from chapters XIII to I. Here we discover a man driven by something he can never quite confront within himself, yet weary of what he is driven to do. It is a masterful character analysis, stripping away the layers of his life like the skins of an onion, until it arrives at a long buried moment as horrific as anything this brilliant creator of the horrible and perverse has ever achieved.

All of which makes for a wonderful book. The multitude of strange societies is as colourful, as varied, as original and as believable as any you will find in science fiction. There are moments of horror which will send a chill racing through your veins, and moments of comedy which are uproarious. And to produce a work of such an epic scale which can still take you deep into the heart of one human being is an awesome achievement. This is a book which you cannot help admiring, just as you cannot help enjoying it.

So why the "Yet...." which left my first paragraph teetering on the brink of disappointment? Perhaps it is something to do with the way that so many of the scenes are set in the quiet after action, this is a book about drama which so often is told in terms of reflection. Once or twice you get the feeling that what could so easily have been shown has only been told. This leads to certain suspicions about Zakalwe, that we are being permitted to glimpse only a part of the man, and those parts which make him likeable, a man of doubts but a good man nonetheless. Perhaps it is the way the moral ambiguity of the Culture is shown but never questioned. The way that Zakalwe's own moral ambiguity as it develops is brought to centre stage and thoroughly explored, while those he works for have the same doubtfulness from the word go and it is never developed further. Perhaps it is just that there is so much to enjoy in this book that I wanted more.

Paul Kincaid

Bill, the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Bottled Brains

Harry Harrison & Robert Shekley

Gollancz, 1990, 236pp, £12.95

The Colloghi Conspiracy

Douglas Hill

Gollancz, 1990, 238pp, £12.95

Humour is arguably the most difficult form of fiction to write, and in genre fictions it seems particularly difficult: how many funny detective, cowboy or SF stories can you name? These two books are supposed to be funny, unfortunately they didn't make me really laugh—and that's another problem with humour, it's very subjective. No doubt other people will find them hilarious.

Douglas Hill's hero, Del Curb, is a courier who acquires a 21st century astronaut in suspended animation. He is paid to take this "cargo" to Colloghi, a planet which specialises in providing suspended animation for the rich. Needless to say all is not as it seems; what are the Colloghi really up to, what about the original natives of the planet and why do people keep getting headaches. Del Curb is self centred, materialistic and doesn't listen to people. Other characters include Del's ships computer (the most sensible person in the book) the 21st astronaut (an archetypal space hero) and a hard nosed, get the story at all costs, incredibly beautiful reporter.

Naturally Del wins but only with the help

of enough *deus ex machina* to create a small pantheon of gods. Amusing moments, but the hero was so stupid that I ceased to care what happened to him.

One way of tackling humour within a genre is to lampoon it. That's what the original Bill, *The Galactic Hero* did with great success. In this follow up *Star Trek, Han Solo (Ham Duo)* and the time travel war theme get the treatment.

This sort of lampoon doesn't really need a plot except to string the funny scenes together. Except the scenes weren't that funny. I may be particularly hard on this book because I enjoyed the original and because Harrison and Sheekley certainly can write good humour. But this one just doesn't make it.

It's going to depend on your taste whether these books make you laugh but give me Eric Frank Russell any time.

Tom A Jones

Bury My Heart At WH Smith's

Brian Aldiss

Hodder, 1990, 221pp, £13.95

The Motion of Light in Water

Samuel R Delany

Paladin, 1990, 581pp, £6.99

The notion of a writer of fiction turning his hand to autobiography ought to be less than straightforward. More than any other, the sf author will be continually aware of how memory, interpretation or the streamlining necessary to turn raw experience into the end product—story—will hinder any attempt at accurate recollection.

But in fiction, so in *Bury My Heart at WH Smith's*. Aldiss' autobiography is subtitled *A Writing Life*, and leads us through his early adulthood up to the present day, with frequent admonitions to the effect that *all this* has to do with the creative process. It is all germane. All this experience is duly stored and turned into that which informs his writing. Malacia is based on Medan, Indonesia; but the Medan of the 1950s when Aldiss knew it, pre-cars and Coca-Cola, and filtered through the engravings of GB Tiepolo. Aldiss' interests are worldwide and beyond, as befits the co-founder of World SF: sf can hardly afford to breed insularity, even though it often does, and Aldiss has done more than most to break down the barriers it continues to erect around and within itself. What emerges from this autobiography is the good news that he is still pushing back borders, still exploring, and reporting back to us from the frontiers of the real.

Samuel R Delany is similarly concerned with the reality or irreality of memory. In *The Motion of Light in Water* he makes no attempt at a linear autobiography; he concentrates on the period 1960-5, when he was living in New York, producing his first published works (at an alarming rate), and examining his identity as black, gay and most

importantly (as the only element that will touch at random those unknown to him) as a writer. His writing appears to spring even less directly from his experiences. This edition also contains a section "The Column at the Market's Edge" in which Delany explores the nature of sex as commodity and as mainstream of society, and gives us more insight into the nature of "that rare generic oxymoron, credible sword & sorcery" (Michael Bishop, *F&SF*, June 1980). Of course reality intrudes; how can it not? The question remains, whose reality and whose experience? "The best writing does not reproduce -- or represent -- the writer's experience at all... it creates a re-presentation, in a different form, of the reader's world."

Christopher Amies

Rusalka

CJ Cherryh

Methuen, 1990, 374pp, £14.99
Mandarin, 1990, 374pp, £6.99 pb

Prince Ivan

Peter Morwood

Legend, 1990, 280pp, £12.99, £6.99 pb

Both stories take place in old Russia, but neither pretends to be the real Old Mother Russia of history, for each involves magicians and strange creatures from the magical realms. Cherryh's work was published shortly before Morwood's, but of the two I preferred the latter. Cherryh's rather long novel concerns Pyetr Kochevnikov, a fugitive with a price on his head who befriends a seemingly dim-witted youngster Sasha to make good his escape from pursuit. They flee to a vast forest where the atmosphere is thoroughly morbid, the place dripping with lifelessness... Sasha is a superstitious soul, who believes that he only has to wish something and it will befall him; he's not very optimistic either. The interplay between the two characters is of interest, but drawn out, and while there are subtleties of character-change in the youth and even in unbelieving Pyetr, they never held my attention.

Prince Ivan, the only son of the local Tsar, sets out on a bridal quest that will lead him to the fairest princess in all the Russias. Here, people throughout the land acknowledge the presence and power of magic and superstition. We are introduced to a number of amusing characters, none of them taking themselves too seriously, unlike those of Cherryh. Morwood's tale seems light, pleasant and raises many a smile as courtiers call on Ivan's three sisters: their ultimate betrothal to three special wizards bodes well for the future, and threads begin to intertwine, smoothly... Interestingly, both books latch onto the superstition that to name the thought is to bring forth the deed: name the fear and it is real.

Within the dead forest Sasha and Pyetr encounter the miserable wizard Uulamets, and his beautiful and wraithlike daughter, a rusalka, a tormented ghost of a murdered girl,

doomed to prey upon living souls... Fittingly perhaps, the daughter lacks depth or reader sympathy, while Mar'ya Morevna, a beautiful sorceress who marries Prince Ivan is rounded in more than one sense. But Mar'ya holds a secret within her castle walls, a secret which Ivan unwittingly unleashes.

Uulamets the wizard had the potential, as had his ghostly daughter, to be memorable, but the interplay between the characters, the monotony of the setting—mostly within the forest—could not hold me; yet the ever-threatened fate of Mar'ya and Ivan kept me turning the pages: it seemed inevitable that Ivan would succeed against the wizard—a hideous chilling creation!—but then again Ivan forgot the wizard was not called Koschey the Undying for nothing... he could not be so easily killed; preconceived notions are therefore shattered, and the neat twists that do occur, while being logical, are often gruesome. Horses that talk and rivers that burn, the promise of more to come, make Prince Ivan a pleasure to read.

Morwood provides a select bibliography, but his research while evident is never overpowering. He conveys a far better grasp of the lives, minds and history of Russia than Cherryh; indeed, were it not for the fact that a rusalka harks from Russian folklore the story could have taken place anywhere, for there is no feeling of foreignness about the land or its people. Cherryh's characters resort to Americanisms and anachronisms too readily, spoiling what little effect she strives towards. If you're a fan of Cherryh, you may find her departure from space opera and straight fantasy a revelation; alas, you may also find it disappointing.

Nik Morton

Redshift Rendezvous

John E Stith

Ace, 1990, 214pp, \$3.50

Redshift Rendezvous is a rather dull title for a rather appealing story. The Redshift is a space-travelling craft that exists on hyperspace level 10, where the speed of light is 10m/sec. Which means daily human affairs are subject to relativistic effects, such as the blue- and red-shifting of optical phenomena. The ship has a little gravitational warp at its centre which has the effect of discernably bending light-paths in the lower levels. More, existing on level 10 means the ship "maps onto" ordinary space (level 0) in a highly rarefied state (a 2m person spreads over 37,200 miles), and movement onto and off the ship involves a "translation" rather than a transportation procedure. What would it be like on such a ship? Stith makes a straightforward attempt in true sf style. I'm sure he didn't take proper account of time dilation effects and I'm sure the visual environment would be a lot weirder than he was able to portray, but what exactly they would be I can hardly imagine. Good stuff.

Plot? Characters? Don't be a prude! Read

the previous paragraph *again*. Still, there is a plot, there are characters, a life and death situation, love, baddies to thwart with intelligent and decisive action. Stith's earlier work has been a combination of *sf/mystery/adventure*, and this is no exception. The plot begins with small clues and anomalies and the gradual revelation of what is going on takes up the first half of the book, while the second half pursues the intrigue to its conclusion. The *sf* ideas are not really intrinsic to the plot, constituting, rather, the environment in which things happen. On the other hand, the tone of the book is analytic rather than technophilic, and avoids the glorification of sheer power and technological wizardry. The hero is competent, slightly low on self-esteem, reticent about his past, motivated primarily by his personal sense of justice and loyalty, and thoroughly deserves the girl. A bit too much, in fact; the perceptive appreciation of (male) assets isn't really what deliciously happy-romantic endings are made of. Satisfying, nevertheless; goes down without a hitch.

Cecil Nourse

Black Cocktail

Jonathan Carroll

Legend, 1990, 76pp, £8.99, £4.50 pb

A Short, Sharp Shock

Kim Stanley Robinson

Ziesing, 1990, 147pp, \$18.00

Kalimantan

Lucius Shepard

Legend, 1990, 160pp, £9.99, £4.99 pb

These days, if you want to get anywhere in science fiction you have to write novels, preferably trilogies. They are easily packaged by publishers and booksellers, but there is strong evidence to suggest that this is not the best length for science fiction. *SF* began, as a clearly defined genre, in the magazines, and outlets for short stories proliferate more in science fiction than in any other genre. To the extent that much of the best science fiction presents a vivid new idea enclosed within a dramatic moment, then the short story form is a natural. Occupying an awkward middle-ground between the short story and the novel is the novella, which allows the precise *idea* of science fiction to be dressed in literary flair without being stretched beyond its natural scope. It is a magical length for the genre, yet it is the most difficult for publishers to handle. All praise, then, to *Legend*, for their daring in providing this wonderful service to our genre.

The *Legend* novellas follow in the footsteps of the mainstream Hutchinson novellas, an experiment which didn't achieve great commercial success. Let us hope that *Legend*, in a genre in which there is a greater tradition of the novella, does better. On the evidence of these books they deserve to.

Jonathan Carroll's *Black Cocktail* is an elegant little chiller which wraps the reader in a delicate filigree of lies and half-truths. Are

Michael Billa's tales about his childhood friend and protector, Clinton Deix, accurate, and if so why is Michael afraid of Clinton's reappearance? Why is DJ Ingram York suddenly finding his life invaded? And what is the strange revelation which is to bind these people together? Carroll's story is very brief, but it achieves a tremendous atmosphere, and packs one hell of a punch.

You could not say the same for Lucius Shepard, he doesn't go for the brief, broad strokes which fling you straight into the heart of the matter, rather he favours a slow piling on of detail until you are gradually immersed in the physical and moral decay which is the landscape of his extraordinary imagination. Here again he takes us into a jungle, the fevered world which so effectively isolates and illuminates his sweating characters. This excursion into the territory of Somerset Maugham or Graham Greene takes us to Borneo, and an old English exile who knows all about the decay of his chosen home, but who only now discovers the depths behind it. When a fleeing criminal discovers a drug which takes him into the spirit land of the Dayak Indians it is up to the Englishman Barrett to follow him there and defeat him. But there are more horrors in this dream world than Barrett could possibly have imagined, and more of these horrors are inside him than could make any of us feel comfortable. In this novella Shepard has once again found a way of making foetid heat chill our bones.

And in this company, Kim Stanley Robinson's peculiar fancy is not out of place. The world is a narrow spine of bare rock which marches across an endless ocean. A man with no memory is swept up here, and must immediately follow after a woman who may possibly hold the key to who he is. And where? And why? The questions are not resolved, but in the cold of loneliness, and in the peculiar creatures and magics that this latter-day Pincher Martin meets within this variety of a white-walled cell a sort of understanding evolves. It is a sly, allusive work, disturbing in its implications, and it lives up to its title wondrously for it is short, it is sharp, and it is most certainly a shock.

Nothing links these books beyond their length, indeed it is hard to imagine a more vivid example of how varied science fiction can be at its best. Yet all are suited to the novella length, and our genre would be impoverished without them.

Paul Kincald

Rats and Gargoyles

Mary Gentle

Bantam, 1990, 414pp, £12.99

Rats and Gargoyles is an intelligent, sensuous, well-researched and atmospheric book. Nevertheless I found it difficult to enjoy.

Mary Gentle's complex novel is set in a city called "the heart of the world" which makes a town plan of Gormenghast seem almost as straightforward as Central Swindon.

It's a labyrinthine board game of backstreets, canals, marketplaces, halls, sewers, prisons and temples. The Time (like the Place) is "quasi-alchemical"—a mid-Renaissance century alloyed with druidism, witch-craft, gnosticism, mysticism, gothicism, baroque. Trace elements include electricity, heavy engineering, the Planet of the Apes (with Rats), the court of Elizabeth I, Roke, Alexandria, and Minas Tirith. It's a beautifully painted stage, though I sometimes found it distracting and occasionally grinding. If, as a fantasist, Ms Gentle sought to make the extraordinary appear ordinary, she succeeded. The main characters also have a theatrical presence: Lucas (whom I related to most), a young brave handsome prince; White Crow (whom I didn't), a sorceress with a voracious sexual appetite that knows no age-range; Zari-betuzekgal (even harder) a young lesbian with a rat's tail and an eidetic memory; and Baltazar Casaubon a fat wizard belcher than Falstaff. Actually these characters were good fun, but there is a Lloyd-Webber sized cast of others that I found confusingly indistinguishable. The apocalyptic plot relates to the power struggle between the Thirty-Six Decans who rule the universe of the novel, the humanoid Rats who rule the humans, and the humans who rule the various human splinter groups. Like a Renaissance mega-play, the plot acrobatically leaps from scene to scene to character to character, though I feel it doesn't always land on its feet.

For me, the most striking parts of *Rats and Gargoyles* were the images, which are now occasional guests in my dreams: moths and butterflies fluttering from the mouths of the dead, an iron spike topped by a speaking head, the transmutation of a woman into a crow as felt by the transmuted, and a black sun that casts golden shadows. Also remarkable are the illustrations taken from 16th and 17th century hermetic books which complement the novel and its cosmology excellently. Thirdly, I appreciated the author's sense of humour which is sometimes slapstick but always human.

In her Acknowledgements Ms Gentle refers to her use of Renaissance hermetic magic as "an adventure playground". This is quite true, and underlies my difficulty with the novel. I was not moved, stirred, excited, gripped or saddened by *Rats and Gargoyles*—I felt that it was a game I had participated in, and once over didn't matter any more than last weekend's Monopoly session. Certainly it was a beautifully designed game, and there is evidence that Mary Gentle is capable of seriously special work. But this isn't it.

David Mitchell

Heathern

Jack Womack

Unwin, 1990, 255pp, £12.95

A ruined America is firmly under the thumb of Dryco, an immense industrial conglomerate led by megalomaniac tycoon

Thatcher Dryden, whose bodyguards routinely shoot passers-by on suspicion, and his deranged wife Susie. Even the army, fighting a constant guerrilla war against urban insurgents, is controlled by Dryco. The narrator, Joanna, New Products Manager for the corporation, is sent to investigate a rumour from the streets. Is a messiah really out there in the battered city, raising people from the dead? If so, can Dryco come to a favourable business arrangement with God?

Finding out requires the reader to hack through some of the most clotted and random-sounding prose this side of James Joyce, with baroque outgrowths of irrelevant simile and metaphor blossoming from every sentence. Nor is the difficult style made up for by elegance of setting (like Gene Wolfe) or complexity of plot (like Jack Vance). The background is sketchy to the last degree. Thatcher, his wife Susie, and Joanna appear to be the only members of the Dryco board. Apart from the presence of a Japanese executive and the odd mention of Russia, the rest of the world appears not to exist. The catastrophic collapse of American society is glossed over in a few sentences; nor is it explained how Dryco can be doing so well in what appears to be a post-capitalist world.

The effect is rather like the Edinburgh Festival performance of 2001 done by a cast of two in the back of a car. The characters are an ill-defined and unlovable lot, who appear to act without much consistency or motive, while the resolution resolves nothing. Enigmatic? Uninteresting. Mr Womack is not devoid of literary talent, some of the scenes in the book, taken in isolation, are quite impressive, while the send-up of corporatespeak ("Fact me", "That's essentialised") is sometimes amusing. All the same, he needs to exercise more control over his material.

Not only is it difficult to fight through to the end of *Heathern*, not only is it difficult to comprehend the point of the relentlessly linear plot or to fathom the reason for the title, it's hard to care very much. Some sort of religious fable is clearly struggling to escape from this formless book, but only the truly dedicated will want to make so much effort for so little reward.

Gareth Davies

Queen of Angels

Greg Bear

Gollancz, 1990, 385pp, £14.95

Heads

Greg Bear

Legend, 1990, 125pp, £8.99, £4.50 pb

Heads runs to a mere 111 pages and six Fred Gambino illios; it's described as a "novella" and need not, surely, detain us long. The trouble is, it's so badly written: in 19 lines I counted "I" ten times and "my" nine times, but that pales into insignificance when you read the jacket blurb and the first two paragraphs of the book.

Consider, if you will, "the Moon is emerg-

ing from an age of innocence" (he means its inhabitants are); "William Pierce is searching for absolute zero" (it was never lost); "Rho has brought 410 heads, cryogenically frozen centuries before in the hope of resurrection" (yet we are only 200 years in the future). Join with "the devotedly religious Logologists" and experience "the force disorder pumps with their constant sucking soundlessness."

I'm sorry, but that little injection left me giggling uncontrollably; the man surely cannot be serious? However, this is all local colour: what really matters, we find, is "the sophistication and corruption of political intrigue," and we all know just how deadly boring that is. Let's look instead at *Queen of Angels*, from whose blurb we learn that the year 2047 is binary 1111111111, and hence 2048 becomes 100000000000 (that's eleven ones, then eleven zeros, in case your eyes are as bogged as mine).

This is, apparently, deeply significant and the last page is made up mostly of sans-serif 'I's—hundreds of them, arranged as a dense serifed 'I' while the preceding text is liberally spattered with odd 'I's as well. I have to confess that the significance of this escaped me, but then, this is a singularly opaque book all round.

"Transform" Mary Choy takes vinegar baths to cure the grey crease in the buttocks of her otherwise "night coloured," "dolphin-slick," deep black skin. Personalities are "cybernetically enhanced" and live in "enormously complex city arcologies." News arrives of the first robot exploration of a dead civilisation on another world, eight young citizens are dead, and Mary is in charge of the police's murder investigation. Early pages are so spattered with invented slang and unexplained future-tech terminology that you need a notepad and pencil just to keep track; until you have completed the intuitive cross-word-clue glossary you just cannot comprehend what is going on at all.

Typefaces change from an elegantly readable serifed face to a bleak sans, then back to serifs with a patch of italic between; from the latter we learn that Satan is to expel Martin Bormann and others of the damned. "Let the living find the best ways to punish their miscreants. Open the gates of Hell, and push the damned through, one by one!" Voodoo appears, in the author's own screwed-up "vodoun" version; anti-matter propulsion is but one of many theoretical technologies nudged or squeezed into this mishmash. I tried hard to make sense of it all, but frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. Why can't Bear give us a story we can read and enjoy, page by page, with a beginning we can understand and an ending that means something?

Ken Lake

Princes of Sandastre

Antony Swihin

Fontana, 1990, 220pp, £5.99

Dragon Wing

Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman

Bantam, 1990, 434pp, £11.95

These books begin with maps and conclude with glossaries. Don't try to figure them out before starting, get straight into the text and refer to the maps and appendices as you read; all will become clear. Do study the covers though, excellent portrayals of Rockall and Arianus.

Princes of Sandastre starts in the real world and moves into the imaginary. Following his family's support of the rebel Hotspur (killed at the battle of Shrewsbury in 1403) Simon Branthwaite flees Holdworth Manor in Yorkshire. A third of the book follows his adventures before he leaves Bristol searching for sanctuary in Lyonesse. His ship is bound for Rockall—not the solitary crag of today, but a civilisation far out in the Atlantic. Is it really lost Lyonesse, or an alternative North America where a "Green" way of life has been practised for centuries? It definitely has skyscraper castles—and feuds; inevitably Simon gets involved.

Conversely, *Dragon Wing* is set entirely within an imaginary universe—or is it? Could Arianus be our Earth shattered into a collection of asteroids floating within a bubble of air? Is it a realisation of the Medieval tiers of Heaven, Earth, and Hell? Through it move Hugh the Hand (a macho bounty-hunter), the boy-prince Bane (likeable and malevolent), Alfred and Limbeck (differently-shaped Laurel and Hardy), Haplo and his Dog, elves with political problems, mysteryarcs with Olympian jealousies, plus wars, revolutions, machines, murders, magic, lots of laughs and a lot of thought-provoking passages. *Dragon Wing* is a real good read; the first of *The Death Gate Cycle*, I'm looking forward to the rest of the series.

Mind you, I also want to follow up *The Perilous Quest* for Lyonesse, especially Rockall's participation in World Wars I & II.

Martin Brice

The Magefire

Alexander Bialoi

Headline, 1990, 436pp, £14.95

Chase the Morning

Michael Scott Rohan

Orbit, 1990, 334pp, £4.99

To be able to write a fantasy on the grand scale of *The Lord of the Rings* is a wonderful thing. Both these writers have done it: Rohan in his *Winter of the World* trilogy, Bialoi in *The Dark Amulet Cycle* of which *The Magefire* is the first volume. Both writers are in their thirties, both live in Yorkshire. Apart from that, they seem to have little in common.

The blurb describes Steve, the hero of *Chase the Morning*, as "a hollow man, both in his job and his personal life, until one night, near the docks of his home city. A night that changes his life." What happens is that he drifts out of the contemporary world into "a fantastic otherworld, tangential to our own, where pirates, magic and hideous

beings exist". It is lightweight stuff: the sort of fantasy that does not have to make much sense or be consistent. It is unfortunately written in the first person, ostensibly by Steve, the "hollow man", and the style is highly verbose, almost stream of consciousness. The tone is frivolous. I confess to not having read Rohan's *Winter of the World* trilogy. I hope it is good—because this isn't.

The *Magefire* could hardly be more different. It is a first novel, and concerns Leighor, a healer with fake credentials, who is falsely accused of the murder of an Archbishop and forced to flee from his accusers. Accumulating a band of companions, he sets off on a long journey to avert the election of a new High King by an enemy who have rediscovered the deadly magefire of the title. The journey is fraught with dangers and there is much scenery to be described. At one point, Leighor travels alone through dull scenery to arrive closer to his starting point. At a few others, the narrator uses modern idioms and words (such as "extrovert") which do not seem to fit. There are implausibilities. There is no purple prose at the writing style is one of great dignity and simplicity. A cynical character called Insyns has some of the best lines, eg. "However much they strive, the poor can never get quite poor enough to suit the rich". The front cover blurb, for once, seems accurate in referring to "a brilliantly realised world" and "a magical world no reader will want to leave". It is impossible to say how the whole *Dark Amulet* Cycle will turn out, but *The Magefire* is a magnificent achievement and, judging from this first volume, it will approach *The Lord of the Rings* more closely in spirit and execution than anything else I have read.

Jim England

Total Recall

Piers Anthony

Legend, 1990, 224pp, £12.99

It is hard to imagine just what Philip K Dick, by all accounts a gentle and mild-mannered man, would have made of the film *Total Recall*, the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle and supposedly based on Dick's short story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale".

God knows, Hollywood has enough trouble coming to grips with the kind of SF Dick wrote, but at least *Blade Runner* had a mild stab at the philosophical complexities of his work. *Total Recall*, the novelisation by Piers Anthony, doesn't bother. Why should it? It's only cheap hackwork, after all.

By about the fifth paragraph you begin to get the drift. "He seemed to exude raw power. His chiseled features within the helmet were set, reflecting his indomitable will." He also talks in a funny accent, but you can't have everything. He may even end up as president, they say.

There is a disturbing trend among the blockbusters of today, a kind of jokey designer violence. A comedy thriller is a hard

enough genre to work in, but when you add to that the kind of body count that pulls the crowds into a Schwarzenegger film, you have a problem. People are chopped up, gored, bludgeoned, crushed, depressurised, just plain shot, to the accompaniment of wise-cracks from old Arn. "Consider this divorce," he says as he kills his treacherous wife. "Am I boring you?" he says, drilling a hole through somebody. All of this works fine on the screen but is a waste of time on paper. The sex scenes are embarrassing, the love scenes triply so, but then no one said Anthony could actually write.

This is boring, shoddily-written, meretricious trash. See the film instead. Better still, re-read Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.

Martin Waller

The Ghost Now Standing on Platform One

Richard Peyton (Ed)

Souvenir Press, 1990, 322pp, £14.95

Notwithstanding the predictable and overblown title, this collection is a triumph of the packager's rather than the editor's art. The stories themselves are excellent and well-

chosen, ranging impressively from the well-known, such as Charles Dickens's "The Signal-Man", Rolt's "The Garside Fell Disaster", and inevitably, Robert Bloch's "That Hell-bound Train", through contributions from the likes of Aickman, Derleth, Wyndham, Blackwood and F Scott Fitzgerald to such unfamiliar gems as AM Burrage's "The Wrong Station" and a brief, strange tale from Richard Hughes.

However, the so-called factual accounts are disappointing in the extreme. Despite Peyton's claims to be an enthusiastic collector of true ghost stories, he seems to have put little if any effort into researching the anecdotes offered here, and their presence in the text seems to be primarily to provide not always obvious or appropriate links between stories. Peyton's prose comes to the reader apparently without benefit of editor, surely the only explanation for the large number of grammatical infelicities. The standard of proof reading throughout the collection is also appalling. And yet, in spite of these glaring deficiencies, I must commend the anthology simply because it is a delight to see so many fine ghost stories gathered together in one place.

Maureen Porter

Castles in the Air

Diana Wynne Jones

Methuen, 1990, 208pp, £8.95

Wild Robert

Diana Wynne Jones

Methuen, 1990, 88pp, £7.95

The popularity of Diana Wynne Jones's work among adult readers is immense.

Both the Chrestomanci series and *Howl's Moving Castle* in particular have earned her a well-deserved following. It's not surprising; she tells her stories with wit and energy, and a degree of subversion which delights anyone with a slightly twisted view of the world. *Castle in the Air* is no exception. Perhaps best described as a sort of sequel to *Howl's Moving Castle*, it's initially set not in Ingary but in Zanzib, a land far to the South where Abdullah, a young man prone to daydreaming, suddenly finds himself caught in a reality far more bizarre than anything he could have imagined, when a Djinn kidnaps the daughter of the Sultan, and he is left to save the day with nothing more than a bad-tempered mauve genie and a threadbare flying carpet with just a hint of vanity.

Anyone familiar with the stories of the Arabian Nights will recognise the initial plot conventions of the Djinn who must wed a princess, of the genie who can grant one wish a day, and the poor but honest merchant who must save the day, but Wynne Jones turns the tables in most unexpected ways. It is the cunning of the captured princesses which aids Abdullah in his quest for the Djinn's life, and this honest young man is not so honest that he can't learn a little cunning once he is placed in a milieu so different from his own. There is also a marked but not obtrusive moral flavour. *Howl*, the royal magician, is criticised for his inappropriate use of magic, and a sharp lesson is taught about the misery caused by war. However, it is impossible to keep down the irrepressible *Howl* and all is resolved satisfactorily if a little breathlessly towards the end.

I fear that many adult readers will pass over *Wild Robert* because it is ostensibly intended for a younger audience. This would be a mistake as it is a charming story, with sinister underones of MR James. Heather's parents are curators of a stately home, so school holidays consist of dodging the crowds. In despair of ever finding privacy, she goes to the mysterious mound in the grounds, and there inadvertently calls up *Wild Robert*, shut away for 350 years by relations, frightened of his magical powers. Until sunset, *Wild Robert* lives up to his name, righting wrongs but causing much confusion as he does. It's very funny, but underlying it is Robert's bewilderment as he tries to deal with the changes wrought to his estate by the twentieth century and the appalling revelation of the nature of his death. A slim volume but quite as absorbing as *Castle in the Air*.

Maureen Porter

Cyteen

CJ Cherryh

NEL, 1989, 680pp, £4.99

Rimrunners

CJ Cherryh

NEL, 1990, 288pp, £12.95, £7.95 pb

Cyteen won the Hugo for best novel in 1988; *Rimrunners* was runner-up for

best novel in the *Locus* award for 1989. Both novels fill in gaps in the Cherryh Future History: *Cyteen* looks, in part, at the political background and repercussions of the discovery of the Gehenna experiment (see *Forty Thousand in Gehenna*), while *Rimrunners* focusses on the struggle for survival by a participant on the losing side of the war which ends *Downbelow Station* (Hugo-winner in 1981). Neither book is recommended for the claustrophobic.

The claustrophobia in *Cyteen* is partly the result of the action taking place in the rooms and corridors of a world only terraformed over small areas; but largely the result of the narration and the "action" taking place mainly in the characters' own heads in a world only faintly described. I have seldom read a novel which is so startlingly unusual. The sense of the future or the alien is thus present only fleetingly, in the (to us) rather alien mindsets of the (human) protagonists, and in the biological-cum-psychological work, conducted by the powerful Reseune company. There are plenty of the traditional italicised chapters filling in the background from spurious archives or computer databases; but the rest of it is complex, almost unrelieved, political discussion and debate. Ariane Emory, scientific genius and head of Reseune, is murdered, and the plot revolves around Reseune's recreation of Ariane from her genetic material and by the manipulation of her environment and her education. Somewhat predictably, Ariane II emerges as a different (and nicer) personality than her predecessor, and by the end of the novel has taken over the reins of power. Intertwoven with this are other sub-plots to do with Justin Warrick, the son of the supposed murderer, and with the nature of the azi—the laboratory-bred and programmed "slaves" who are Reseune's main product (and who had, earlier, been sent, 40,000-strong, to colonise Gehenna). Ariane has sexual and emotional relations with both her azi bodyguards, male and female; Justin remains the faithful sexual partner of his male azi.

There is much good stuff in *Cyteen*. The childhood of Ariane II is well-handled, and there is discussion, much more mature than in most SF, of the nature of power, politics, slavery, and a society in which genetics can be controlled. The amount of detail is staggering, thought-provoking, but ultimately, in its sheer quantity, indigestible. It is as if Cherryh wanted to unload on the reader vast amounts of the Future History with which she has been filling her notebooks over the years, without thinking too much about whether it was going to work as a novel.

A comparison with *Rimrunners* is a little like comparing two approaches to history. There are those historians who (still) believe that one can learn about the past by looking at the individuals who claim to be important (Napoleon, Hitler, Ariane Emory); there are others who think that the past is best understood not by looking at events and "great (wo)men", but at how societies and communities actually work, and at their "deep

structures". The society of *Rimrunners* is a society in microcosm, living in a claustrophobic environment, under extreme tensions caused by tight regulations and dangerous conditions. The society is the crew of a spaceship, making a precarious living in the uncertain chaos following the ending of the war between Union, Alliance and the Earth. The protagonist is Bet Yeager—surely one of the great females in SF ("heroine" wouldn't be appropriate): as human and as fallible as Colin Greenland's Tabitha Jute, and alive in a way that no-one on *Cyteen* was. An ex-Marine, on the losing side of the war, she survives by murder (when rape is attempted), by lying, by patience, and by sheer force of personality. Yeager, together with an absence of lecturing and an overload of tension, helps lift *Rimrunners*, in my view, into that mythical state of being unputdownable. Cherryh is one of the very best SF writers of the present day (and, as Gwyneth Jones reminds us in an extensive review of *Cyteen* in *Foundation* 48, she is a feminist writer. If you haven't read her before, try *Rimrunners* rather than *Cyteen* (and not *Downbelow Station*, which shares many of *Cyteen*'s faults. Both won Hugos, of course, so feel free to ignore me.) If only she could give us rather more Bet Yeagers and rather fewer Ariane Emorys.

Edward James

The Quiet Woman

Christopher Priest

Bloomsbury, 1990, 216pp, £13.99

Christopher Priest

Nicholas Ruddick

Starport, 1989, 104pp, \$19.95, \$9.95 pb

If you look for them there are plenty of sf devices in this novel. The setting is the near future, after the fall-out from a nuclear accident in Northern France has contaminated most of Southern England. In one powerful scene we watch mysterious black cylinders arrive in the night to leave behind crop circles. Even the curious mixture of political and commercial power wielded by Gordon Sinclair is unlike anything so far in existence even though Thatcherite policies might seem to be heading in that direction.

But unlike anything else Priest has ever written, the sf trappings are not integral to the story. They are a device which allows him to make his point, but they are not a part of that point. *The Quiet Woman* is Priest's first wholly mainstream novel. It is also as good as anything else he has written with the exception of *The Affirmation*, and fits neatly into the development of his work.

It is a book about aberrant psychology and political responsibility. Just as, in *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour*, Priest explored the minds of complex psychotic characters while making firm political points about the necessity of playing a role in the real world. Here the central character is Alice, a biographer who has already come into

incomprehensible conflict with the government over her latest book. When a friend, the children's writer Eleanor, dies in mysterious circumstances (reminiscent of the peace campaigner Hilda Murrell) Alice decides to write a book about her. But this brings her into contact with Eleanor's son, Gordon, whose political power, curious fantasies and distorted view of the world form the true subject of this book.

Gordon is the linear descendant of Paul Mason in *A Dream of Wessex*, Peter Sinclair in *The Affirmation* and Niall in *The Glamour*. It is the way these characters echo aspects of each other, the way Priest uses such violent, psychotic and marginalised characters, which should provide a feast for any future critic of Priest's work. It's a pity, really, that Ruddick's slim book doesn't come this far up to date, or make such a connection. This is an admirable little volume providing the kind of concise introduction to each book which makes you want to go out and re-read them. In fact he made me see several of the novels, especially the earlier ones, afresh. It is only a pity, therefore, that this first serious critical study of Priest's work, a book that is long overdue, should be so structured that it only deals with the books one at a time in isolation. Although unifying features and themes are apparent, Ruddick is not able to draw them together to provide a systematic overview which shows how Priest's books all lie upon a single, identifiable axis. Otherwise we might be able to appreciate that though *The Quiet Woman* takes the step outside the genre that Priest has been threatening for a decade or more, it still belongs to exactly the same universe as *Fugue for a Darkening Island* and *The Affirmation*.

Paul Kincaid

Drabble II — Double Century

Rob Meades & David B Wake (Eds)

Beacon, 1990, 121pp, £5.00

A Drabble:

A one-hundred word story, plus titles.

Drabble II:

A collection of one-hundred such drabbles, the proceeds going to charity.

The review:

In the beginning are a number of post-New Wave foam flecks which break under the crashing of time and tide, followed by the "condensed" novel, the plot synopsis, the blurb purple, the awful punchline and the excerpt. There are the neat stories (Liz Honeywill, Winifred Wake), the abysmal stories (Steve Jones, Steve Davis), poems (including an amusing Andy Sawyer) and finally many Big Name Author contributions.

The moral?

Good things come in small packages.

Terry Broome

JOSEPHINE SAXTON

Interview by Kev P McVeigh 19-11-89

British SF has a reputation for being very introspective and pessimistic, dating back at least to the New Worlds/early-Ballard era. Of course this isn't the whole story, one writer whose work is very personal and introspective, without seeming pessimistic is Josephine Saxton, though as she explains, she isn't necessarily an optimist either. Last November I visited her at her home in a terraced house in a small midlands town. Over tea in delicate china, we managed the following conversation:

You began to get published quite a long time ago... with stories dating back to the mid-sixties...

Yes, just twenty-five years.

Yet there doesn't seem to be a great deal of your work in print.

Oh, but there is actually. There are three novels in print at the moment, one came out on the 24th September this year [1989], and the previous one in that series, *The Travails of Jane Saint*, is still in print, as is *Queen Of The States*.

But it's still not a lot for twenty-five years, when compared to many authors.

This is true...

At the end of the 60s and into the early 70s you sold three books to America and then there seemed to be a long gap, until the Women's Press came along, mainly.

Well, *The Travails of Jane Saint* did come out from Virgin originally, in about 79 or 80. The trouble is, my books don't sell. Once they're published they don't

sell. I always have the greatest difficulty persuading publishers that they're worth doing. I've written continuously since I was about 25. I never really dropped it for long, and I've an immense amount of stuff written that isn't published.

Yes, I understand that most of your published work is quite old, and has taken a very long time to get into print. Do you think that there may be a problem with this, in that by the time it goes on sale both you and the world have moved on quite a long way from where you were when you wrote it?

I think this might be true for most writers apart from those who just churn out very quickly for a known audience. They're a different kind of writer. I think though, that even when you read it, it hasn't actually gone stale, it hasn't got a shelf life, it's not yoghurt, so that doesn't matter.

I was thinking less of style, but perhaps of some of the opinions you have written into it. Do you ever feel that you were wrong?

No, not wrong, but often misguided, like we all are. They're just different aspects of the same questions. Different ways of trying to find answers, as I recently found out when I did a paper for an academic work brought out by Lucy Arnott. It's coming out next year, and I think it's called *Where No Man Has Gone Before - Women in Science Fiction*. When I started to write about my work, what I'd done, and why I was published as a Science Fiction writer, I realised that I've been hammering away at the same thing all my life, in different ways.

A lot of it is Science Fiction by default, because it isn't anything else...

Yes. I started to write Science Fiction because I got interested in it. I don't know why else.

They're predominantly, as it says in the Introduction to the new Jane Saint book, concerned with the realms of Psychology.

Yes, I suppose they could probably have been written before there was such a term as Science Fiction.

Obviously Jung is dominant in your interest in Psychology, and Merleau-Ponty?

Yes, I have been heavily influenced by Jung, but Merleau-Ponty was just something I'd read. Well, perhaps I have been influenced, one is influenced by everything, but it just seemed a very nice name for the character. The little dog who philosophises a lot. It just came out.

I don't really know anything about psychology, just enough to recognise that that is what you were dealing with...

Oh yes you do, you conned me into this interview... but go on.

In terms of theory, I know that Jung and The Collective Unconsciousness go together, but that's about my limit, yet I enjoyed your books. Could you perhaps say a little bit to elaborate for those readers like myself who don't know the details of psychology, to give a key to the deeper levels?

As some people might know, and as I think I've said in the

introduction to *Jane Saint and The Backlash*, when I was writing the first book of those early three, my then husband was reading Jung, working his way through volume after volume, whilst I was stuck into Gurtjeff, Ouspensky and various mystical works, but he had a habit of reading things out. "Hey, this is interesting..." and it was an L-shaped room in which I was typing away round the corner, and suddenly he started speaking about the Hieros Gamos. "Oh!" I said, "That's the title for the book I'm writing." He went on to explain what it all meant, and it was exactly right for the story, and this in itself was a Jungian significance, an example of a significant coincidence, and that was intriguing. So I started to read Jung and haven't looked back.

So you've looked into all of this very seriously?

Not in recent years so much, no, because one passes on, but I would never say that I had made a mistake in reading Jung. He's given me a great deal. I reckon he's got a whole lot to offer anyone. The concept of the Collective unconsciousness, the archetypes, the animus, the shadow, the wonderful child, the terrible mother, and so on. I took all of this rather literally, perhaps you're meant to, but anyone can act out one of these roles, or change from one to another, it's just a way of saying we're role-playing. I began to see them as characters, and began to see the collective unconscious as a parallel dimension, a place where you can actually be, which you visit in dreams. This is a thing we certainly have done, you know when you wake up in a dream and you know where you are and can go and discuss things with these characters. This is fairly commonplace actually. It sounds a little bizarre, but if you study dreams it appears a lot, and this is the basis of Jane Saint's stories. Upfront you can get into the Collective Unconsciousness by falling out of a tree, or through a mirror, or down a well, by any

means that you can find to change your state of consciousness.

So this is how it works for people who don't know anything about psychology?

Yes, you don't need to know it. A lot of writers, both mainstream and Science Fiction, use these devices.

So who else, apart from Jung, would you cite as an influence?

The *Beano* comic, and especially Minnie the Minx and Dennis the Menace. Just about everything, it's all an influence. My mind is a ragbag of everything I've ever read, but perhaps John Bunyan more than most. I read *Pilgrim's Progress* when I was about 7 and thought it was absolutely stunning. I read that and it was perhaps the same way that a young person now might read Science Fiction. It was just this chap having an adventure, meeting all sorts of strange people and beasts spouting flame and so on. It's an amazing story, a spiritual trip, and a classic one.

And the journey is reflected in Jane Saint.

Yes, it just seemed the natural way to approach the story, and so I told it that way. I read Science Fiction stories, and I've written quite a few later, but having first said I would never touch Science Fiction (urgh!) I couldn't say now which of mine are Science Fiction or Horror stories or what.

One which clearly seems to be Science Fiction, on the surface, is the one In the Women's Press anthology, "Big Operation On Altair Three"...

That was quite a long time ago now. That was how I first came into contact with The Women's Press, they said they were doing an anthology of Science Fiction short stories to launch their new Science Fiction line, and so I said "Yes, I'll do it." The absolute truth about that was that I was

desperately short of money. I wasn't writing at all, I was studying acupuncture and I had no ideas whatsoever, but I do have a filing cabinet full of half-written stories and idea notes, which I ruffled through until I found something which is nothing like the finished product, but which eventually turned into a Science Fiction story.

To go back to the archetypes that you use in Jane Saint... do I see traces of your own family creeping in around the edges?

Yes, that's an amusing conceit, and also, the dialogue between Jane Saint and the world, Jane Saint and Men, is nothing more than the dialogue between anima and animus. Now, if you want a dialogue between anima and animus of a Jungian kind, just listen to any domestic argument between husband and wife, they always take on the role-playing. They always say the same things, and nobody gets any further with it, and in the next row, the same words come trotting out. Jane Saint is trying to get beyond that, so there are hints of domestic lives because a lot of the story is coming out of domestic argument and what happens to us all. If you've read Jane Saint and the Backlash you'll realise that at the end I've tried to get male and female to some kind of an understanding because that is what it's all supposed to be about. Mind you, Jung is more complicated and subtle than that. What he wanted was for people to realise the male and female selves were incorporated into each other so that women were not oppressed and men were not oppressive. That causes 90% of the world's troubles...

So if the male part of women or the female part of men is brought into an understanding, then that individual will, according to Jung, be peaceful?

They'll be more of a whole person, and develop an understanding with themselves

and with other individuals, yes. That's what it's all about.

So how much of you does Jane Saint represent?

Oh, I'm not sure. Having written it, I don't feel quite so fierce, but I think that at the time of writing it, I certainly did hold all those views. I still do to some extent, but I don't think it's right to go on and on about it. The solution at the end is what I felt.

So were you writing something out for your own benefit as well as for the story?

(pause) I hadn't meant to, but yes, I suppose it might be true. I never write for therapy though, because I don't find writing therapeutic. Writing is hell. I find it hard, and I almost always would rather do something else. I could have been writing now before you came, but I chose to do some sewing. Generally I do push myself, though it is the hardest thing I know of to do.

One of your other preconceptions, sorry preoccupations I mean...

Was that a Freudian slip? (laughs)

One thing that is quite noticeable, particularly within Queen Of The States, is food.

Yes, this is true.

Aside from the marvellous food scenes in that book, there are stories such as "Food and Love" and a lot of the Little Tours Of Hell collection.

Yes, somebody asked me about this recently and I was trying to think why. It's not just rich food, it used to be good, aesthetic, delightful food that fed the soul as well as the body. And healthy food. I've always been a believer in "You are what you eat." Therefore if you eat pork pies which are full of nitrates and horrible hormones, and all the suffering of the pig, you can't

really be a complete person. But how did I come to this though? There are several reasons. I was brought up during the war; as a child there wasn't any food to speak of. A treat for us was a slice of potato and onion done in the oven in Oxo gravy. Any meat that came into the house went to the father, I remember one slice of bacon on a Sunday morning if we were good, as an absolute treat, and so on. Windfalls, of plums and pears in Autumn, were a much looked-forward to treat, and so when food started to come back into the shops and then lots of foreign influences came into play. I also had dreams, I don't know where these came from, of being a great hostess of fantastic banqueting entertainment, and I just got very very interested. I was just astounded to realise that there was actually such a thing as Spaghetti outside of a Heinz tin, and it's just been a long voyage of discovery. And then I found out that I was in fact a very excellent cook, so when I got a family, and also started doing dinner parties, it was just a very creative thing. I just enjoyed it. I've also been very interested in vitamins and biochemistry. I was in school when I realised that health could possibly be got by the right diet, so between all these influences, and also liking describing them in detail, it was inevitable that all my work should include food. My greatest discovery about food, paradoxically, is that the cleanest zen macrobiotic diet is the one which makes you feel absolutely wonderful if you stick to it. I was on it for eighteen months, and basically that was brown rice, local vegetables, and seaweed and those foods are very very clean, very little salt. In the end you come to appreciate this food as much as you might have appreciated the finest French restaurant food. It does tend to have the social disadvantage that when you go out you have to eat something somebody else has specially prepared for you. So that's not very practical. I don't know whether it's relevant, or even desirable to have so much

food in novels. I don't care about that if people have enjoyed reading it. After all you do need to pace yourself. I don't write action novels anyway.

Aside from the novels, you've written a lot of short fiction. Since you say that you find writing hard work, do you find that shorts are harder or easier or...

No, I think I put a lot more work into short fiction than novels. I mean, you write and rewrite them, but not always. You can't generalize. People always want to generalize, but each story's different. Some come reeling out without any great conscious activity, and others require a great deal of hard work. They've got to say everything in a short period of time, and you can't afford to put in anything that isn't relevant or essential.

One of your best short stories is basically a retelling of "Snow-white and the Seven Dwarfs". A lot of authors have tried this modernising, and perhaps, feminizing of fairy tales.

Yes. I wrote "Woe, Blight & In Heaven, Laughs" for an anthology George Hay did [Pulsar 1], in which stories were followed by an article about the story, and anyway George chose Angela Carter to write about my story. I was planning to do a whole series of these stories but for various reasons I didn't, and now Angela and other people have done it themselves. Not in the same way I might have done it, of course. At that time though, I was just about the only one to do that.

So you deliberately set out to rewrite the older story?

Oh yes, because Jung uses the myths quite a lot. The myths and fairy tales are the embodiment of our times, and as you know I was quite interested in that.

So are we likely to see any more updatings of older pieces,

as you did with "The Consciousness Machine"?

No, I don't think so. I'll be leaving the past alone as far as I can tell.

So what does come next?

What I'm writing now is a psychological thriller, not at all Science Fiction. It's set firmly in the real world, in Lancashire. I'm on Chapter 7, but there are constant distractions.

Is there anything in the publishing pipeline?

Yes, a few short stories. There is going to be a story called "The Ancestress" in an anthology put together by Lisa Tuttle. One in an anthology called *Digital Dreams*. I can't remember who's editing that. [David V Barrett] There's another one somewhere. You see, you write them and either sell or don't sell them, and then months and months can go by before they come out and you've forgotten them. I'm suddenly quite surprised to get a book through the mail that I'd forgotten all about. But there are no major works, no, just those stories at the moment.

Are there any plans for anyone to reprint the older books?

No, it appears to be almost out of the question. I would have liked to have seen *Vector For Seven* out under its original title. I have mentioned it once or twice to agents, but I just get embarrassed mumbblings about the public and publishers not being ready for it yet. To go back to what I have in the pipeline, there is a book that Kerosina have of mine, but it appears to have got lost at the moment. That's the story of my life, it seems. They chased me for that, I said no at first, then they've had it for a couple of years now. I was thinking of asking for it back but I just don't get the time to write letters at the moment.

I understand you work full-time, so when do you manage to fit the writing in?

Yes, I do. It comes down to an hour or so in the evenings two or three nights per week, in which I actually build up quite a head of steam after years of doing it that way. When I wasn't working I did quite a lot of other things... I sew, I make furniture and do interior decor and cook, and I'm never short of things to do in the garden. I've no intention of giving it up though.

So are you a slow writer?

No, I'm quite a fast writer but I can't do it for very long at a time. I can only do about two hours and then that's it, I've got to go and do something else. I could never do it full time. I have done, but I had to force myself to do it. I haven't got the stamina and the skill to do it professionally full-time. It takes guts to do that, it really does. I think another thing is that with few exceptions I've never written for an audience. This dawned on me recently, and I think it's why my work doesn't sell, or if it does, it doesn't sell very well. I don't write it for myself either, I write things which I actually feel need to be written, which must be written, for an imaginary audience out there which actually doesn't exist consisting of thousands of people exactly like me. Not me as such, but people who know what I'm talking about and live in my world. They're not actually there. I've not really given a damn about readers, I'm sorry to say, so it's not really surprising that they've not given a damn about me.

If you feel you're writing things which have to be said, are you writing, in the broadest sense of the word, political things?

No, not at all political. I've never joined anything, and I've never thought about it like that, though it may have turned out like that I certainly never intended it to.

What about the feminist things?

Well, they reached out and grabbed me, I never submitted anything to the Women's Press. I

couldn't even read most Women's Press novels, so they had to grab me. They happened to like what I was writing anyway, I never thought of myself as a feminist writer until a feminist publisher noticed me.

So what do you feel needs saying?

Well, the things I've said. What I do think needs to be done, especially by me, is to lighten up a bit. I can be quite funny at times, but I'd like a lot more of that. What doesn't need to be said is too much dwelling on horror and misery. There's just too much of that about and I think it makes everybody even worse. Naomi Mitchison put me onto myself, for one thing. She said "What you need is to do something hilarious..." and after letting this sink in for a while I realised she was right. You could analyse my work and see that I've been saying the same things in different ways each time. What concerned me then is what concerns me now. This is going to sound pompous so I better come straight out with it, I think what really interests me are spiritual matters... it's all a spiritual quest, which is why it's not political. It's for a higher state of being, conscious evolution is what I'm interested in. Any way you can do it; meditation, diet, exercising or whatever. A lot of this, obviously, has to do with sexual energy which has to do with relationships, and it also has to do with food, and all the things which have come into my novels -- all the different aspects of what a human being is. It's all a bit heavy really, but there's no reason why this shouldn't be done with lots more humour. As I said, we should lighten up, it doesn't have to be a miserable world.

Well, Queen of The States does have some very funny scenes though I'm not sure if it's a happy ending.

Well she escapes, she escapes both from the aliens and from her husband.

Yes, but it is a neutral ending in that it comes down to "Right, I'm free... Now what?"

True, but that is quite a good place to end a novel about the struggle to straighten your head out, get your strength together, and not be dominated by society or whatever.

to go back to your being picked up by The Women's Press, they've labelled your first two books for them as Science Fiction, but you say you aren't a Science Fiction writer.

Well, I'm not, if you look at Robert Heinlein and say that is Science Fiction. I'm not that well up on it, but to me it is the same scenes and the same things all churned out every time by hundreds of authors all writing the same thing. I do read all the time, I've just read Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, yet another history of the Brontës and an Australian writer whose name eludes me. A few years ago I was doing some reviewing for *The New Statesman*, and I had to read a lot of Science Fiction for them, and that was the hardest piece of work. You have to read them all, you can't discard the things you don't like.

Josephine Saxton, Thank you very much.

You're very welcome.



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