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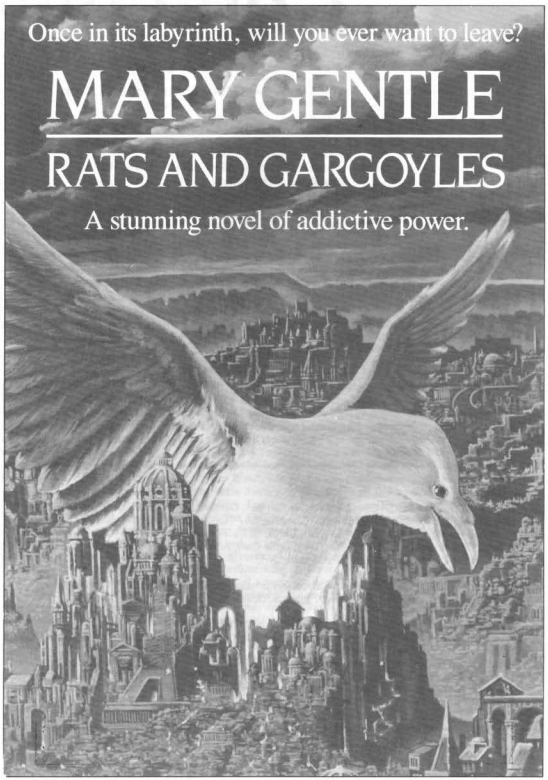
Mary Gentle Interview

Chinese SF

Plus: Book Reviews Readers' Letters



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Editorial

by Kev McVeigh

Nobody's perfect. On page 43 of Steve Erickson's **Leap Year**, the author makes a ghastly mistake. **Leap Year** is a fascinating, passionate and informative modern historical ghost story coupled with documentary non-fiction recounting the 1988 American Presidential election campaigns, and is notable for, amongst other things, the perceptive and insightful illustration of the events described. The mistake is all the more obvious for this perception, and I instantly disagreed with it in content and principle.

Erickson states, in a detailed examination of the "nuclear imagination", that:

> The great American authors of the nuclear imagination are those who wedded themselves to something more primitive than technology could touch, that invaded a land beyond technology, which is to say that the great American novels of the last 35 years have had titles like Chuck Berry's **Great Twenty-Eight** and **Blonde on Blonde** by Bob Dylan, **Where Are You** by Frank Sinatra and **What's Going On** by Marvin Gaye, Bruce Springsteen's **The River** and **Little Richard's Grooviest 17 Original Hits!**

Ouch! What began as a fresh look at the mythic impact of certain fictions, regardless of surface dressing, and with seeming relevance to contemporary hard sf, suddenly became a comment on popular cultural icons, and lost much of its validity in a single idea. It seemed so clear to me, even as I shrugged off personal taste (**Highway 61 Revisited** is Dylan's finest moment, with **Blonde on Blonde** relegated to fourth place, but that doesn't matter). These are not novels.

The old fogies out there, the so-called purists amongst you, can stop nodding in agreement, however, for the most glaring fact about the titles listed is that they are all short story collections! It's so simple really. Whether it is Chuck Berry's archetypal country boy turned guitar player ("Johnny B Goode" — if you needed to ask you won't understand) or Bob Dylan's retelling of TS Eliot's **The Waste Land** ("Desolation Row", and see also Ian McDonald's debut novel with its echoes of both Dylan and Eliot) these are some of the most vital stories of post-war America. These are the reflections of a lost American Dream, the voices of the disenfranchised and the disillusioned.

But why has the otherwise so astute Mr Erickson made this simple error, even after noticing the status of rock music and ascribing its invention to Thomas Jefferson? Part of the answer comes from Garry Kilworth's **Vector** article "Short Stories Are People Too" in which he laments the decline in many areas of the short story. Since the decline of markets such as **The Saturday Evening Post** the market for short fiction has been very limited. Within sf there were far too many anthologies in the 70s and the market collapsed. Now there are very few. I'm left with a chicken and egg puzzle, did the fall from grace of the short story cause the loss of the markets, or the collapse of the markets cause the fall in esteem? Either way, it may be Erickson recognised that some critics might consider his examples trivial or naive and attempted to give them extra status as novels.

For myself, I like short stories, and I am pleased to see a minor resurgence in the publishing of shorter fiction. In the US, several authors have recently had successful short story collections published: Karen Joy Fowler, Connie Willis, and Ian McDonald even debuting in that format (as Eric Brown has over here); and Pat Murphy, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Michael Blumlein, Howard Waldrop, Lucius Shepard and Pat Cadigan have added to the list; whilst the Pulphouse "Author's Choice" series has been a welcome development from an adventurous collective. In Britain, Legend continue with their Novella series, the first four of which received considerable praise, and Paul J McAuley, Iain Banks, Garry Kilworth and Mary Gentle have had short story sets released. In the magazines battle, David Pringle seems surprised that anyone might want to publish an alternative to **Interzone**, but the success of **BBR** over the past year, and the continued good health of other NSFA titles, is not merely encouraging in itself, but **IZ** has at last lifted itself towards its heights of a few years ago.

The thing about short stories is their immediacy. There are less distractions from the real thrust of the story. M John Harrison has said that structurally a short story is identical to a novel; Garry Kilworth asserts that "a short story is the essence of a much larger, looser work." I wonder, is that the key? Is it the looseness of many novels which makes them easier to read but at the same time somehow dissatisfying? As Kilworth said, fat novels fill time (on the train, on the beach) whilst a good short story has an emotional intensity which makes it impossible to turn immediately to the next one. Of course, some novels have this intensity and tautness — how long would **Gravity's Rainbow** have been if written as loosely, with as much spurious material, as some fantasy trilogies seem to be?

Novels of course, receive criticism — reviews in **Vector** and **Paperback Inferno**, and numerous other magazines often go into detail about plot, style or theme; and articles in **Vector** take this further still. Short stories rarely achieve this attention. Anthology reviews generally have insufficient space to do much more than list titles with a brief remark on some of the stories. The American magazine **Short Form** aimed to restore the balance somewhat, but appears to have drifted from this policy of late. **BBR** recently carried a review of Eric Brown's **The Time-Lapsed Man and Other Stories** which took the space to consider the problems of collecting stories set in the same universe, but these are exceptions. **Vector** hopes to begin regular reviews of magazines in the near future, and we hope to be able to give the appropriate space to short story collections. In addition, for the first time, our annual best of the year feature will have a look at some of the best short stories of last year. We would like, occasionally, to do a little bit more, however. We would welcome critical articles about short fiction, about writers who have made their reputations with short stories. Remember the adage: Size isn't everything, and the next time you groan at the thought of another 200,000 word epic collapsing under its own weight, try something smaller. Believe me, the diet should do you the world of good.

Letters

Digital Dreams

From John Gribbin

I was intrigued by the response generated by my objections to the cover of **Digital Dreams**, and surprised that sf readers and writers should be such shrinking violets. I'd like to offer you for publication the correspondence between myself and David Barrett, which covers just about all the points raised in your columns, but unfortunately David refuses to agree to this. But I would like to make one thing clear. I have more than 20 years experience of how publishing houses work (both as gamekeeper and poacher), which is why I know how David should have handled this fiasco; it is precisely because both he and many of his contributors were so inexperienced that they had the wool pulled over their eyes so successfully. It is *never* too late to withdraw a book, and it *is* one of the editor's jobs to protect his contributors.

John Gribbin
Piddinghoe, East Sussex

This really does sound like sour grapes, John. I think everyone agrees that NEL have cheated people, but the book *is* selling, which means that people are reading it. The end doesn't justify the means, but there are worse things going on.

— KM

Flabby Engineering

From Simon Ings

Easter 1990: I wrote the first draft of a review of **Interzone**'s young writers for the new magazine **Psycho Kandy** (or was it **Physko Candy**? I don't think even the editor knew). Anyway, it died the death, as these things tend to do, and so, come late summer 1990, I sent that first draft to Kev McVeigh, editor of **Vector**, and I said to him, VERY CLEARLY, LEAVING NO MARGIN FOR ERROR: Look, this isn't finished, it's out of date, it needs work, but take a look, and if you want something up-to-date on the same lines, let me know.

A month later I phoned Mr McVeigh, and he said that he had read the article, but that he didn't have any plans for it as yet. I did not hear any more. I assumed it had been trashed.

February 1991. That same draft, now eight (or is it nine?) months out of date, appears in **Vector**. The first I know of this is when David Pringle, editor of **Interzone**, writes and asks me why I am being rude about him. (You see, I'm not a member of the BSFA, and did not receive a copy of **Vector**).

So I load up my article on the wordpro, and I find that, taken out of its context, this article in many ways reads counter to my intentions when writing it. Back in 1990 I was attempting to get all those who found it fashionable to moan about **IZ** without actually doing anything about it, to support this other venture, this ill-fated **Psycho Candy**.

Now, in February 1991, the context which pointed up my ironic *defence* of **IZ** as a good *commercial* magazine is lost entirely.

What saddens me most is not that it reads like an attack on **IZ**, but that it reads like a *bad* attack. I am more than happy to set down in print my reservations about that magazine, and indeed my central thesis, that **IZ**'s overbearing and egotistical editorial persona has gone quite out of control, is only bolstered by Mr Pringle's more recent editorials.

I quite understand why Mr Pringle may find parts of this article personally offensive, and I am sorry for that and I apologise, but it is nevertheless long overdue that someone somewhere should wig him over his magazine's aura of sheer bloody solipsism.

My article does not do this at all well: it is an early draft, and it is chock full of posturing and unsubstantiated rants.

Because I am not a member of the BSFA I will not be around to reply to criticism arising from the article; nor do I particularly *want* to have to try and remember what I meant by all that short-hand.

I recant. It was never my intention that this article see print in this form, and, in as much as it is bound to stir up ill-feeling, I apologise for any offense caused.

I will not ask Mr McVeigh for an apology. Editors' apologies have a tendency to backhand the plaintiff and the sight of Mr McVeigh scrabbling desperately for the moral high ground is never a pleasant one.

You may be assured, however, that I hereby divorce myself, utterly and in perpetuity, from the BSFA. I cannot risk being the target of such shoddy treatment again.

Simon Ings
London

Editorial — 159

From Ian Rosenthal

In response to Kev's Editorial in **V159**: may I ask (not too bluntly) since when is the Editorial a soapbox for personal opinion on (amongst other things) the Gulf War? We all have opinions, but they seemed a little too thick on the ground when the purpose of your piece appeared to be an examination of sf's response to modern events. I agree that using sf to challenge war is a justifiable topic to preach; after all, who wants to fight in a war? But since opinions were raised, and "facts" stated, I have a couple of points to make:

- Opinion — Since when is it wrong to fight for oil? (Once you've overcome the hurdle that war is bad full-stop; and assuming that's what the Gulf War's about — which clearly many people do not.) After all, without oil we'd all be in the dark ages (don't tell me it's going to happen anyway, I know that, but we assume that governments/scientists have a planned timetable to cope with that [?]). Maybe someone will write about this matter in an sf context. Without oil, the printing presses would soon grind to a halt.
- Citing Israel to highlight supposed American/UN hypocrisy is beginning to irritate me. I can't speak for your Turkey and Indonesia excamples, but th 1967 UN resolution was aimed at Israel returning to pre-Six Day War borders in "return for secure borders." Since then, only Egypt has been brave enough to sign a peace treaty with Israel. I'm sorry, but you should only compare like with like — and in this case you are not.

If we must point to a novel in sf circles to challenge the idiocy of war, then look no further than Joe Haldeman's **The Forever War**. Surely the ultimate soldier's nightmare — never to see their families again, win or lose?

At the end of the day, mankind is driven by too many divergent forces, not least are Greed and Envy. I fear man is still a thousand years away from proper maturity to secure world-wide peace. I hope I'm mistaken.

Ian Rosenthal
Barkingside, Essex

Perhaps I should have related my editorial to sf with a couple of quotes, like these:

"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent." — Isaac Asimov, **Foundation**.

"If civilisation has an opposite, it is war." — Ursula K Leguin, **The Left Hand of Darkness**.

Meanwhile, while people are being killed, *everywhere* is a valid platform for opposition to this senseless inhumanity.

— KM

The Cyberpunk Bust

From James D Grey

In the Sterling/Gibson interview, the topic of the US Secret Service raid on Steve Jackson Games comes up, and Bruce Sterling states that this "essentially bankrupted the company". Gibson adds, "and now they're dead." For a dead company, it is pretty active. There is an account of the raid, and some reasons why the author might have come to the attention of the authorities (he did a lot of real-world research), in the **Cyberpunk** rulebook (technically, it is a universe guide for a games system called **GURPS** rather than a game). Reading between the lines, they came close to collapse, but were able to get some replacement hardware and get the legal advice they needed to get copies of their business data and keep the company running. The **Cyberpunk** text was reported to have been re-written from memory.

One of their latest products is a similar guide for David Brin's **Uplift** series, and there are a couple of others. I have heard one or two other stories about the American response to illegal access to computer systems, and I can believe the description of how the author was treated. Apparently, if you hack into a military system they are liable to trace the call and send in the Marines.

The hacker is something of a binary bogeyman, and, most of the time, he is a scapegoat for the faults of the people who use the system legitimately. Almost all computer crime is an inside job. Most lost data is the result of a user error, or simple mechanical wear and tear. Most of the people in charge of computer systems in large organisations were trained on mainframe computers — it's less than a decade since IBM launched their PC — and there is a tempting analogy with the reaction of the Catholic Church to the idea of letting people read the Bible in their native language, rather than Latin.

The interesting thing about the **Cyberpunk** game is that it describes some ways of illicitly getting access to computer systems which will work, because the users are so careless about security. I onced logged onto a system as a new user, and found a mass of files which had been left by a previous user, who had been allocated the same User ID the year before. The system controller had done nothing more than reset the passwords to the defaults. There are a lot of multi-user systems o/s software with no provision for security.

Is it any wonder that the hacker is such a useful person to have on the grey fringes of the computer world?

James D Grey
Lincoln

As I understand it, Steve Jackson Games survived on the generosity of friends who helped replace material stolen by the Secret Service. It's a very small light in a dark world, however.

— KM

From John Clute

A couple of recent **Vector** reviews have been confusing me, so I thought I might ask for guidance.

The first is a notice by Ken Lake of Greg Bear's **Queen of Angels** (in **V158**). I do not share his "reading" of this novel, nor his lack of sympathy with it; but that is neither here nor there, I've had my own opportunity to express a view which differs radically from his, and that's fine, that's all part of the conversation of critics. What confused me was a "reading" of **Queen of Angels** which not only disparaged its ending (which it is Lake's right as a reviewer to do) but which represents it as incomprehensible (which takes Lake into a grey area indeed). **Queen of Angels** is partly about the coming to self-consciousness of an AI, and ends at the moment in which the AI has begun to understand something of the meaning of the first person singular. In view of this, it does not strike me as "singularly opaque" of Bear to have ended his book in an assemblage of binary-code "1"s constructed in the shape of a large capital I. This may not be a brilliant physical pun, but it's surely anything but obscure. You readers might ask — if this obvious pun escapes the **Vector** ken — just how well served they were by the rest of the review?

I was also a bit troubled by Chris Amies's review of Joe Haldeman's **The Hemingway Hoax** (in **V159**). We certainly agree — I've also published elsewhere a notice of this book — that the story descends into a maze of indeterminacy as it nears its close, but my sense of its initial premises differs pretty sharply from Amies's. For one thing, I had always understood that Hemingway *really did* lose his manuscripts in 1921, and more or less in the way Haldeman describes the event: and the fact that the book is based on a genuine historical event (like Macdonald Harris's **Hemingway's Suitcase**, 1990) must radically shape one's sense of Haldeman's novel. For another, I read the plot much more blackly than Amies. The transdimensional Time Guard who bears Hemingway's face has been sent into our universe to keep John Baird from forging imitations of the lost stories not because their existence might inflame 21st century machismo and cause the world to end, but because any softening by John Baird of the macho image Hemingway promulgated later in his career might cause the world *not* to end. The Time Guard's job is to make sure our world terminates utterly, because if it doesn't a vast nexus of parallel universes will be destabilized. From that point, our readings descend similarly into the vertigo of the ending; but we seem to have reached that point from subtly differing universes. (By the way, I thought Henry Miller didn't reach Paris till 1930 or so.)

John Clute
London

We enjoy receiving letters from our readers. Please send all letters of comment to:

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Mary Gentle Interview

The following interview was conducted by Kev McVeigh before an audience at Chronoclasm in Derby, June 1990. Kev McVeigh speaks first.

Mary, you started off as a professional writer at quite an early age, yes?
My first book came out when I was 21, but it was written when I was 18. It was about the fifth novel I'd actually written.
But then it was quite a long time before you finished, then published *Golden Witchbreed*.
That's right, I spent several years writing that and failed to sell it to anybody and I thought "Oh Dear, I'd better go off and get educated, 'cause this is not going to pay my rent", and as soon as I went off to college I sold the book to Arrow. Life got a little confusing then.
Do you think it caused any problems being published so relatively young, in that there was this big gap that you didn't know what to do with?
I didn't have any problems with it. Writers inevitably end up doing other things on the way to writing, whenever they are published, and I already knew that I was not going to bring out books in rapid succession anyway because I'm not that sort of writer. It tends to be long books at slightly longer intervals. Whether it did anything from the sales point of view, I don't know.
But if that was your fifth finished novel at age 18, you must have started very early.
The first thing I actually have that's typewritten is from when I was about 9, and then from when I was about 12, I started writing... I call them novels but basically they're **Doctor Who** ripoffs and they're **Star Trek** ripoffs and in fact almost anything that came through the television, came in the ear and on to the page. They're burned and buried and no-one will ever see them.
Did you get involved in fandom at this time, or not?
I often wish I'd known fandom existed, because I don't think it was until my early twenties that I suddenly woke up to the fact that there were actually other people who read science fiction. Well, actually up to the age of about sixteen, I wasn't too sure that there were other people who read books, 'cause I was damn sure I was the only one doing it where I was.
Yes I think a lot of us know about that one.
It would have been nice to know that there were other like-minded people who thought this wasn't a particularly crazy thing to do, or at least if it was crazy — it was excusable.
That first book. *A Hawk in Silver*, is very Alan Garner-ish, was that the sort of thing that you had been writing generally, and thought you were going to be writing?
I knew I was going to be writing the fantastic. I actually think this is the Duckling Principal; when you read at a very young age you imprint on books, and you look at the books and you think "Mummy!". For me it was Alan Garner, it was CS Lewis and it was **The Hobbit**. Primarily it was CS Lewis, but Garner was the person who was doing the intersection between the fantasy world and the real world.
People have said to me that the best bits of *A Hawk in Silver* are the non-fantastic bits: the bits about the schoolgirls going to school, having their petty arguments.
Yes, all the mindless teenage violence is pure journalism. I have to admit that this is not fiction; this happened. The names have been changed to indict the guilty.
So you didn't enjoy school?
Of course I enjoyed school! — for every day that I had to be forced there at gunpoint, and every day that I couldn't go off sick. I loathed it.
Is this why you became a writer, because it is a solitary profession in many ways?
No, I wasn't particularly solitary. I liked being around people. The bit about school that I couldn't take was the discipline. I liked going out with my particular gang of friends, raising hell and playing truant and falling off walls and things. Writing is just something you do — like breathing. I think it's in you from the start. People have ways of processing experience: for me it's words on paper. For other people it's other things.
Really it was *Golden Witchbreed* and then *Ancient Light* which established you as a rising star of British science fiction ?
Or something like that, yes. This is difficult because it's a long time ago and every so often I get breaks in my writing and I go out and then come in again as somebody else. **Golden Witchbreed** and **Ancient Light** belong to some time ago. I had the first conception of the end of **Ancient Light** when I was 17 and it took me something like 7 years writing to get to that final scene. It comes from a lot of sources. It comes from Jacobean tragedy, it comes from Ursula Le Guin; it comes from liking to build worlds.
In a way it's almost a form of hard sf, it's about technology's impact on people.
You can't grow up in the Sixties and Seventies and not be aware that you have to process something in your own mind about the impact of technology. There is a thing I think, at the moment, where time is moving faster. Our parents' generation is actually several hundreds of years behind ours and our grandparents' is even further back. Time in the twentieth century shifts fairly rapidly. I had a childhood which partly took place in the 1890s and partly in the 1930s, as well as the 1950s. So I am now living in my science fiction future and I have to deal with that. My way of dealing with that is running a thought experiment, is saying "How would this play on another

world?".

Lynne De Lisle Christie is you?

Lynne De Lisle Christie is not me. Except in the sense that every character in every book is part of you, but also part of other people, part of observed behaviour and part themselves. There comes to be this thing where you add all the attributes of a character together and it becomes greater than that sum and it starts acting of it's own volition; then you know a book is going to run.

I have here an article from *Focus*...

aughs This is where the evidence comes out. I don't remember it, it wasn't me guv.

... actually talking about *Ancient Light* and the character Molly Rachel. It says that you came back from lunch and a very tall and angular young black woman walked onto the page. "And who the hell are you? I wondered".

Yes that's exactly the way it was. Some characters create their own scenes and some characters just waltz off with the book in other directions. It was difficult with her, because I knew at some point somebody was going to have to be killed and I rather thought it might be her — but she didn't want to be. You have a trade off between the necessities of plot and the necessities of characters.

You get very involved with your characters?

I get very involved with everything about a book. I can't do it otherwise. It's somewhere between Method acting and research and simple visualisation. There is always an in-house movie running in the skull. When it's a book, it goes on all the time and it's up to you to transcribe what's going on.

That is one of the features of those two books, the travelogue aspect, particularly of the first book. It's very cinematic; it's a journey.

We think in images, we are passing out of an age where we think with words, and we're thinking in images again. Because they're more immediate. Because they can get through to people, but then on the other hand, in narrative you can also do the stuff you can't do in film. You can do the interior dialogue; the interior monologue.

Through that journey, Lynne is developing a sense of her own moralities, her own ethics. It's a sort of *Pilgrims Progress*.

Those are dismally moral books if I actually sit down and think about it.

But did you go into them knowing you wanted to say something?

You don't go in knowing that you want to say something; you go in knowing that something will be said. Quite often it's not quite what you expected. There's one character in **Ancient Light**. She is the military commander. She is the one that gives the reasons for taking the police actions that lead to the tragedy. I still cannot fault her reasoning. I cannot fault her arguments. I wanted to all the way through, because I knew that what she was doing was disastrous. But I can't argue with her reasons for doing it.

I feel the same as a reader actually. I kept thinking, there's a sense that she's in the wrong here, but you can't figure out why. The only reason that you feel in the end that she's in the wrong is because the reader empathises so well with Lynne Christie, who's battling with her most of the way.

The trouble is, nobody's wrong on their own terms, everybody's right in their own head — then that clashes with outside realities. Lynne is not guiltless at any point in either of the books.

There's one problem that I have with those two books. In the first book Lynne De Lisle Christie is a British envoy, now this is quite far future...

This is about 2036. It's not that far future.

Hmmm. Do you really think it's reasonable to expect Britain to have that significant a role?

Now we come to the fudge. I thought we'd get fudge on the menu sooner or later. Okay. What is never stated in **Golden Witchbreed** is that the history of Earth in that one is a slightly alternate history. We have one where the British Empire didn't quite peter out and is still just about around, and there's a united Europe and stuff!

Now she tells me.

Now I tell everybody. I looked at this when I came to writing the second one, and I thought No, No Way, Not a chance. So I sat down and I decided to work out the post industrial society and the most likely scenario of which is Japan and the Far East and I thought okay I will play that one through this time with the commercial version. It plays better in **Witchbreed**, because **Witchbreed** is an After-the-Empire novel in most respects, which British writers keep being accused of doing, and you can't help doing it, because it's in the air, you pick it up.

Where from?

We had an Empire and we lost it. Might not have been a good idea but it's in the consciousness.

This is very strong in all British writers, you think?

I think it is. It's the sense of living in the ruins. Nobody's quite got used to the idea yet. It hasn't been long enough. You begin to notice it creeping in among American writers as they realise that their Empire is on very shaky foundations.

You mean the post-Vietnam novels?

Roughly, yes.

At the same time — making her British, were you reacting against Americanness at all?

No, I think I was consciously playing off it. When one reads sf, (and I don't know if it's true for everybody), starting around the traditional age of twelve, sf is almost exclusively American or at least so I found it, but then I also found that most of the culture around me was becoming Americanised, it was (if I'd known the words then) the MacDonalds Syndrome that creeps up on us. So I wanted to play off against that. I think that sf is an essentially American genre.

Perhaps. On a panel yesterday, we were trying to define the differences between British and American sf. One view I've come to think of as a useful but not exclusive generalisation, is that American sf saves the world, whereas British sf just saves the character's little corner of the world.

Yes, there's a certain parochial element which I feel may be true in that.

Is this a bad thing?

It's not a bad thing, but it's not my particular temperament. I mean wide-screen baroque is my temperament.

Yes, Anne McCaffrey said that there'd been a time when sf in general was scared of getting off Earth, and you'd done it in great style.

It wasn't so much getting off Earth as getting into peoples' heads. This is still the everlasting problem of sf until you get out to the boundaries of the genre, is that people will not write human nature. People will write thinned-down, simplified versions of human nature and it's cheating the reader. It's false expectations.

Which is why your books take so long to write, because they're inevitably so complex.

No, **Ancient Light** is about 700 pages and it took me four years. **Rats and Gargoyles** is about 410 pages and it took me seven months. I don't understand it either.

Is it not perhaps just part of the writers maturity?

No, I think as Marx says, you have to look at the material substratum, which translated out of Jargonese means you look at the circumstances going on in your own life. I moved to London. I bought a word processor. What can I tell you?

Fair enough. There's a lot of development in the *Witchbreed* books, designing the planet, the language. The language is very significant. Nearly every sentence has a word in italics which is an Orthean word, but it has a true ring to it. How did you go about creating those? Sometimes you get the sense that writers have thought "I need an alien word — where's the keyboard" *bang, bang, bang* — with their eyes closed.

Yes, these were made up by ear. Essentially this goes back to another influence which was Lord Dunsany, who I think was the first fantasy writer to really rummage

through Hebrew and various other languages of that nature for his invented cities, that plus Celtic equals Orthean.

That's interesting. You didn't actually plan it out in any way. You just made up the words you needed.

Yes, though there was a grammatical structure in there. There were more words than are on the page. At certain points I could write small chunks of Orthean that I thought were not really worth putting in the book, because if you're educating your audience to read a language as they go through the book, this is hard work and it's really all you can ask of them.

Then again, there are places in the second book where Lynne is speaking the long-dead language that is just represented by dashes.

This is the old problem of how do you represent the indescribable, and the answer is you give ten percent of the clue and you leave the reader to fill in the remaining ninety percent because it's always better than what you can do. It's the same principle as "Never show the monster".

Of course, part of it is that Lynne doesn't actually understand what she's saying herself consciously. She's understanding it subconsciously.

She can understand in terms of images, but she's having to repeat in terms of words. It's the split again.

Also, about the game of Ochmir. Is it actually playable?

It's playable if you tweak about with the rules, and I keep tweaking about with the rules. Ochmir is a metaphor, Ochmir is basically Machiavelli's **The Prince** put down on a board, which is what I wanted to use it for, but yes, you ought to be able to play it as a game and I really didn't see why you couldn't link something like a board game with a metaphor that could run through the entire book.

Which I suppose is what Iain Banks has done with *Player of Games*.

And others have done before, yes.

Would you like somebody to polish up the rules and produce the board game then?

Well, various people keep threatening to ...

And is anything likely to come of it, do you know?

I don't know. No, we shall see.

It would be interesting...

It would be interesting because it's one of the few games where one of the ground rules is that you have to cheat.

Yes. I thought that knowing you, that would appear. aughter

(gestures mock-swipe at interviewer) That won't transcribe on the tape.

Yes it will.. Now let's move on a little bit. We've noted already that the *Witchbreed* books are political; green from one point of view. They're feminist. Feminism means a lot to you?

Yes, I think I was a cradle feminist on account of being one of those girls who want to do what girls are told that they can't do. So you do it, and you take the stick for it and you grow up and you develop into a feminist. It's like a fish in water, you don't know how other people don't do it. So later on you go on to work out the more complex analyses of it.

Does this ever clash with your writing?

Not necessarily, no. If I admit that there are many, many versions of feminism then something can be worked out.

So you don't have a case where you think, well a character from plot dictation ought to be doing this, but I'd really rather they didn't do it?

No, it doesn't work like that. If you'd rather they wouldn't do it then they do it and you just explain the reasons for it.

I was just thinking, I have here the "Feminism in sf" issue of *Vector*. You wrote a very hard-hitting article on John Norman's "Gor" books.

Not hard-hitting enough — he's still around.

If I can quote the opening line... "Which of you bastards out there likes reading rape fantasies?"

This is a reasonable hook line to get people to read the article, I always thought. Actually my quarrel with John Norman is not particularly his fantasies: It's the biological determinism that he will shovel over in repetitive loads. It's the propaganda aspect. It wouldn't actually matter if it was accurate propganda, but it isn't. It's more insidious. Because it's argued by an academic. Because it's argued by somebody with supposed authority. Because it's argued to people who will not necessarily have the tools to dissect this analysis.

But do you not think that the people who read these things, just read them and think they're simple adventure. Or is that the problem, that they do think they're simple adventure?

I think this is probably the problem. You can read them and be consciously aware of what's going on and you can read them and be unconscious about it and I think unconscious probably affects you more. It's always worth foregrounding what's going on.

So, if you're consciously aware of it, you query what's going on and even if you come to the conclusion, in the end that you agree with what's said, you have at least thought about it.

At least you have thought it. At least you have argued it. At least you have looked at the evidence. You have not taken someone elses word for it. I mean basically it's there in **John Carter of Mars**, which is John Norman's model. You know — all the fetishism, all the slavery — it's all there. And I suspect this went straight into peoples' unconsciousness without a word being said. It was just taken on board. But you know, this is fifty years after that, we have a duty to look at things.

In your *Witchbreed* novels, there's a wide range of characters. It's not always obvious what gender a character is. The minor characters, one sometimes has to look back and think "I thought they were..." You know.

Witchbreed is in some sense a gender experiment. I wanted to run this through. I wanted to see how it would work.

There are certain characters who are very obviously male or female, Lynne, Ruric, Haltern, but the lesser characters are ...

It depends, I mean what I would have liked to have been able to do is to foreground in your minds the fact that Ruric would have been a little boy before she grew up. You can't do everything.

You went to University after writing *Witchbreed*.

Yes

But before writing *Ancient Light* although you had it planned.

I had the end of it. I didn't know how I would get to the end of it. It took me a long time to find out.

How did University affect your writing?

It gave me names for things. It gave me the names for areas I'd already studied. They paid me to sit down and look at books in detail. It was wonderful.

Yes. So wonderful you went back for more.

Yes. Shome mistake shurely. No, by that time I'd been bitten by the seventeenth century and occasionally a period of history will grab you by the scruff of the neck and say "That Period. Then. Now." and it was to be the seventeenth century. Firstly because it's the major discontinuity in Western Civilisation. Secondly because it's directly responsible for making the twentieth century what it is. If you're going to study what we are you have to look at that point. You cannot do otherwise.

What's this discontinuity?

OK. Descartes basically. It's where we split the mind off from the rest of the universe. It's where we become separate discrete people and everything that is happening out there is happening at a distance, as opposed to everything being connected with everything else. We come back to this gradually, we come back to the holistic, the chaos Physics view that everything is interconnected and affects everything else but we went through about three hundred and fifty years of believing we were separate. This is not so. It enabled us to have the Industrial Revolution and wreck the planet. It was useful.

That's where we came from. And that's where you as a scholar came from.

Ye-e-es

And then that's where *Rats and Gar-*

***goyles* comes from...**

Rats and Gargoyles comes from being grossly annoyed with Ben Jonson actually.

Why? You can't just say things like that. You have to explain them.

Yes I can. I've got a mic. I can say anything I like.

OK. The first degree, I did Jacobean Revenge Tragedy because I love it to pieces. It's people being nasty. It's people sticking each other with swords. It's Treachery. It's deceit. It's dark. It's glittery. It's corrupt. And I thought I'd like somebody to pay me to read all of these and watch all of these on stage and come the second degree I thought, OK, I've done tragedy — comedy I'll do. Not something I know much about. I'll do comedy, and so the great writer of that period, the great satiric grotesque comedy writer was Ben Jonson. Fair enough I thought, I'll do him and you get this large rather filthy drunken, scruffy looking object who writes gross satirical comedies with an awful lot of lavatorial humour, meanwhile, standing there being moral and didactic and pushing neo-classical virtues of order and proportion and cleanliness. And about half way through this you think "Where is this guy coming from?" "How can he talk like this?" and that's how I got Balthasar Casaubon for **Rats and Gargoyles** who is Ben Jonson as he should have been.

And also, based slightly on Isaac Casaubon?

There's a basic sideswipe in there at Isaac Casaubon, yes, but only a little tiny joke.

Right. Casaubon first came up in publishing terms in the two long stories in *Scholars and Soldiers*. Which came first.

The short stories (I say short stories) — the two novellas came first. Because we were about half way through middle term and we were deeply into this, and I was thinking "I've got exams in three months time so I ought to revise", so I sat down and wrote these stories. Well I got off a train at West Croydon station, and all of a sudden there was Valentine getting off a train in front of this city. And I thought — who's Valentine?, and I looked at her and there was this red-headed woman with a satchel of scrolls on her back and a sword in her hand, and I thought "What?", and she was getting off this steam train in front of this sort of Renaissance City, and I thought — give me a word processor, I thought. So I wrote this down and I didn't have another scene — and then I had another scene — and there was Casaubon sitting there fishing pork chops out of his pocket and drawing architectural plans and I didn't have a scene and I sat down again — and eventually I had this novella and it was like building a bridge out into a void one stone at a time and you're looking down and it's an awful long way down and you don't know what's going to be at the end but you're getting the images; you're getting the picture through; so you do the story.

It turns out to be a strange mixture of elements. It's got the heroic element, the swash-buckling, the swordplay ...

There's not a swash buckled in it; I promise you.

There's the swordplay, the wit, the repartee and there's Cthulhuesque demons.

Yes some of us got bitten by Cthulhu at a very early age and I don't think it ever wears off. And there was this point where I realised that H.P.Lovecraft meshed very well with Hermetic Science and the various monsters that there are in Renaissance magic and I thought. Yeah OK, we'll play it and see how it runs.

OK. Could you explain about hermetic science?

How long have you got?

I've had the book a couple of months, there's a bibliography in the back. I tried to find books relevant. I think someone was saying in a panel yesterday about people not being aware of our own history, to the extent that school children know there was a second world war, but don't know much. My generation, slightly older than school children don't know much about these hermetic philosophies.

Nobody does. There was a point about half way through the degree where I thought "I'm not reading fiction. I'm reading non-fiction. What's the difference? You can steal non-fiction and nobody's going to object to it" — so I did. The bibliography is for the people who really want to know what alchemy is about and how it really works, what astrology is like, what star demons are, why Neo Platonist philosophy is important. The book takes those various things and it tweaks and it twiddles and it says this would be better this way, that would be better the other way. Why don't we throw this in, totally from left field. There's a point where one of the Gods is sitting down watching television and I still don't know how that happened. Trust nothing, it's a quicksand. That's why it's got a bibliography at the back, if you're really interested. Can I explain Hermetic Science? No. It depends on everything in the universe from electrons upwards being alive and animate, and it depends on the naming of names. It depends on language being the most powerful thing. So if you create the right construct of words, therefore reality will change in accordance with it, which I've just realised is why it appeals to a writer.

Yes. This came directly out of your studies, or your studies gave you a clue to this and you went looking seperately.

This comes, as indeed quite a number of things do, from George Hay, who at some point sat down and said read Frances Yates' **The Art of Memory**, which is about the Renaissance art of memorising things by memorising a building and placing images at various points in it. You then go back in your mind and walk around this building and the images will remind you of what it is you want to know. George, being a great ideas man, said read this book. So I read this book, and thought, well its a book... Then about two years later I read the rest of Frances Yates and it suddenly went click. Kapow! This was at the point about half way through the Masters degree when we were doing the history of the philosophy of science. God help us.

Then this art of memory is presumably where the character Zari comes from?

No. Zari comes from the Hernandez Brothers and a film I never did quite catch the name of because I never saw the beginning of it on television. She's this cute little dyke with a tail, she's not a rat and she's not a human being, and she's completely irrepressible, though you'd really like to with half a brick at some point. She goes around annoying the crap out of everybody. I really liked her.

But the concept of the King's memory?

She's a human tape recorder. There's another story in the Second Forbidden Planet anthology which actually is the city in **Rats and Gargoyles**, which is semi-Renaissance, when it gets round to Victorian times, so it's really weird. It's thereby explained that you can't put records down in writing, because writing's too magical. Therefore you have to have people with photographic memories who go around with you and remember these things and tell them back to you and that's what Zari does. It's also a handy plot device, because she can repeat everything when you need reminding of it.

And tell other people of things. A useful spy. The thing about *Rats and Gargoyles* is, in many ways it doesn't have a single protagonist; although Valentine and Casaubon are the stars, they don't dominate.

There's about a dozen people. It's a very democratic book. It wasn't ever going to be that way, but then I started writing it and I found that nobody wanted to be a spear carrier. Nobody was having any of that. Everybody wanted their own flashy dialogue. Everybody wanted to look good, or at least spectacularly bad and that ended up the way it was going to be.

Everybody ends up working towards or against the same thing, thus resulting in chaos.

Except the ones who just don't know what's going on. Except the ones who're just hanging round to enjoy themselves. Yes.

Including yourself.

Who me?

You say in the acknowledgments that you've just treated it as a giant adven-

ture playground.
I don't expect everybody to get worked up about research. I mean I love research. I go away and I sort of chomp my way through books and I think it's wonderful but I don't expect anyone else to appreciate that aspect of it. But the fact that it was immense fun to write might have carried over, it might have given it a feel.
It certainly was great fun to read and to the point that I wanted to know a little bit more about the universe. Not necessarily go into scholarly research but certainly find out a little bit more about the background you'd taken.
You don't get to do that, because there's another story, another novel follows on from that one, but the background has changed, so have some of the characters' histories and Valentine's actually got an eight year old child and a baby at that point and I don't know how that happened.
And you don't know who the father is?
I know who the father of one of them is. It's very worrying.
Is it not who you expected it to be?
Well one of them is Casaubon's of course. I mean, you can imagine what Casaubon's child is like. He's sort of this small eight-year old Margaret Thatcher clone who thinks Casaubon is thoroughly disreputable and really doesn't want anything to do with him.
I'm not sure that anyone would want anything to do with Casaubon except maybe Valentine.
She's strange.
Yes
It's a strange and perverted book. The next one is a really strange and perverted book. And the one I'm about to write, I think I'll leave town after. Everytime I go back and look at the notes and sort of check it out in my head, that one's got really weird. That one's about a man who's in love with a boy. Except it isn't — it's a girl and she's his sister. Yes.
Right. When you're writing these incredibly complex books. Obviously you've got a lot of notes on characters, places and suchlike. Do you have to almost keep a flowchart of who's going where and when?
Only when it gets to the end and it's got out of hand and I need to be reminded. Mostly I do notes between the first and second drafts. The first draft won't have any notes, because it's a process of finding out what will actually happen.
Now, let's look at Valentine. Paul Kincaid says that you're Valentine.
Yes. he would say that wouldn't he?
I think he's gone now, so you're safe.
I think it actually might be true to say that Valentine's me. aughs No. She had the sword first. She had the red hair first.
You mean it's not your own?
It's perfectly natural. It's naturally out of a bottle. It was just one of those things where art created the life that was to come. It's a little bit worrying if you think of the rest of what's in that book. And especially the one that follows it.
We wait.
Actually Valentine is not me. I'm Casaubon.
I see. I see your friends nodding.
Thank you. Ignore the rabble down there.
You're writing these three linked books, but not a trilogy as such?
No, the second one is linked to **Rats and Gargoyles**, the second one is called **The Architecture of Desire** and it's slightly thematically linked because mystical architecture is a theme in both of them, and it has two of the same characters. The background's changed, the characters' past histories have changed.

The third one, may be a historical novel. At least I think it may be an early 17th Century novel, but there are links between that and the present day. And I think it's fair enough to say that reality gazumped me on that one, because it was going to be a theatre book and most of last summer I found myself sitting outside the Rose Theatre trying to stop them dumping concrete on it. Which has either short-circuited some of the book or will feed into it in a different way.
Is this why *Rats and Gargoyles* isn't being marketed as fantasy?
I'm told it's being marketed as cross-genre. I mean this is the trouble. The trouble is labels. There's enough in that book to keep everybody happy. There's a Fantasy audience. There's an sf audience. There's a mainstream audience. I think there's a detective novel going on in there somewhere as well. But you get this thing where people will say "I do not read X" and if it has this label saying "X" on it they won't read it. So it's just an attempt to get it under as many peoples' guard as is humanly possible.
So that you earn your money...?
Money? What's that?
Somebody told me about it a long time ago.
I saw some once — I wonder what happened to it.
Short Stories?
Yes. What are they?
Your short stories are approaching the length of some peoples' novels.
I used to write short stories. There is stuff in **Scholars and Soldiers** from about five years ago that is short, you know it's about 4,000 words long. I think after that I started realising how complex every thing is, and that everything is connected to everything else and it became a problem of screening stuff out. I sat down over the last bank holiday weekend and I wrote this incredibly simple story, that just has an opening scene — flashback to what led up to it — and a finishing scene, And it's 10,000 words long. I don't know. Things happen.
I'm just looking at the length of the stories here.
The thing about that is, I can also do a reasonably condensed style. Not condensed in the sense that it's clotted or difficult to read, but in the terms of the amount of information I can get over. If **Rats** was written in the style of **Witchbreed**, it would be about five times as long, which nobody could have stood, least of all me.
We've seen that there's the three stories with the one in the "Forbidden Planet" anthology. There's also a story set in Kasabaarde on Orthe.
That's right. That particular story is sideways again to the two novels, because I wrote it in between them and that was a story about working through grief and the solution it comes to is elegant and I think possibly true, but not for me any longer.
So grief played a part in writing it?
Yes, and in **Ancient Light** as well. You don't work through your own emotions. That's not what it's about. It's not therapy. The terrible thing is that writers are users. Something happens to you, and it happens to you and it distresses you and it becomes raw material and you use it and then it isn't yours anymore. I don't necessarily think this is healthy. I think it's just what we do.
The problem I have with that story is that it feels very different to the Kasabaarde of the novel.
Yes, I think that at the time I wrote it I'd actually given up on the idea of writing the second novel, so it's a little animal off on it's own that one.
It might have been better set elsewhere?
No, you couldn't have set it anywhere because Kasabaarde is the city of the Philosopher King turned nasty. It's Zen with a sharp edge to it. I couldn't really put that story anywhere else.
[Audience]: I've been thinking for the last five minutes how to ask this question. You've told us a lot about the research you did into our world and put it into the city of *Rats and Gargoyles*. And If I ask this wrong you'll say "Why the hell haven't you been listening to what I've been saying for the past few hours?".
Why should you? I haven't been.
[Audience]: Is there a way from here to the city of *Rats and Gargoyles*? Do we know anything about them? Do they know anything about us? Is it on Earth at all? Is it within recorded history?
I've always thought that you could get there if you could just manage to walk round the right corner.

The thing that you should know about the city is that it has five points to the compass and that they're at ninety degree

angles to each other on a flat plane, which is why the book doesn't have a map in it. On account of we haven't quite invented the geometry to take care of that one yet.

[Audience]: You'll have to do a pop-up book!

Oh, it has to be a flat plane. Yes, you can get there from here, but I'm not sure how. It's a fever dream of our particular past.

Isn't it a bit like the little magic shop that's a hole in the wall one day, and if you go into the shop and go out the same door you might end up somewhere else?

It's more the thing that you could see it but you'll never quite happen to be looking in that direction. It exists in our blind spot.

[Audience]: One of the things that made me sit up slightly was when you said about fiction being able to give you the interior monologue as well. Whereas culture's becoming more visual and I heard this ripple go through the audience: "Comics". The great thing about comics is that they are both visual but they can give you an internal monologue very convincingly and this is something that movies cannot do. This is something that novels cannot do and obviously one of the things you want to move into is graphic novels. What other motivation or things about comics excite you?

It tends to be what specific writers have done with it and I come back to the Hernandez Brothers, who in terms of the way they structure a story, simply the way they structure panels on the page, I have stolen and tried to do an analogue of that in narrative. Having said that about interior monologue, there is almost, or I think there is actually no interior monologue whatever in **Rats and Gargoyles**. You see these people. You hear what they say. It's then up to you to work out why they're doing what they're doing from those clues. In a way it's written theatre, though on the other hand you can still use the authoreal voice where you can't get away without it.

[Audience]: You've got that freedom, to use it if you want.

Yes.

[Audience]: It's like Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* has interior monologues that are brilliant and *Watchmen* does not. But he has the freedom.

Yes. It's so flexible. It's marvellous what you can do with it. We're really only just starting to do what can be done with that.

Do you think that you'll actually move away from novels to comics and graphic novels? or just move into doing both?

I don't know. Whatever it is, if it's words — it's me, whether it's comics, novels ... I wouldn't actually mind doing theatre, you know? It's the creation of worlds by words.

A question Geoff Ryman asked Colin Greenland earlier, in view of your role-playing activities. Do you act out your characters in any way? In developing them ?

Giggles No. Not the characters. I mean, I started doing roleplay and I discovered there was a character (who I am not) who does the roleplay and she's called Roxanne, but she's not like me and she's not anyone I'll ever put in a book. She's just somebody who goes out and does that stuff. I mean what I pick up from it is simple things like the heft of a sword in a hand, which there is no way of knowing except by doing that. There's no way of knowing how 17th Century clothing feels except by wearing it. Having said that, when I went and did it I found I knew an awful lot of how it felt. This goes back to my grandparents who lived in a little place with no mains water, no light, no gas, no whatever, and in a style of life that hadn't substantially changed I don't think for three or four hundred years out in the country. But this I think doesn't exist anymore. This is part of the americanisation of England. It's a resource we've lost, we are using up our history. I'm at least trying to put some of it down before we lose it totally.

That's your abiding passion then, History?

No my abiding passion is the present; History is the only way I can understand it. The future is heading at us and it's going to hit us and you have to work out some way to handle it, to dodge, to deal with it or you end up doing what other people will tell you to do , and the only mirror we've got to reflect this accurately is the past. What else can you do?

Anybody else anything to add? [sotto voce] — They obviously haven't read the book yet.

No, I think they're asleep actually.

Yes, Oh well, shall we go to the bar?

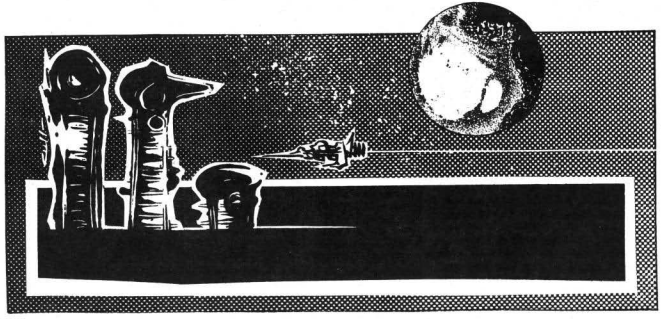
Yeah; you distract 'em. I'll make a break for it.

Thank you all for sitting very patiently and for listening very attentively. Thank you Mary for being so interesting. In a few minutes there'll be a signing session.

[Deafening Applause]

Can I go home now?

No.



Kevin A Cullen

Grand Canal Dreams

by Tommy McClellan

The following piece arose from the Science Fiction in China panel at ConFiction, the 1990 Worldcon in The Hague, Netherlands, and from reading **Science Fiction from China** (1989) — the first work of its kind in English.

For most the highlight of this panel probably came even before it had started, when a "People Mover" who shall remain nameless sheepishly announced to the vast open spaces of the Van Gogh Auditorium and its half dozen or so scattered occupants that he and his colleagues had been unable to locate the panellists, only to step off the podium and watch the latter step straight up onto it in his place — from right under his very nose! In spite of learning only a few hours previously that they were expected, so they later told me, they had in fact arrived on time and had listened politely to this declaration of their non-existence, having no doubt hoped that it would turn out to be an introduction. The surreal quality of this overture was matched only during the final movement when, during the lengthy question-time, the massive multi-screen video display behind the panel began to run steadily through its repertoire of increasingly bizarre fantasy images, quite at odds with the sedate discussion going on below.

The talk itself was not without interest. Perhaps it would have been more lively in more intimate surroundings than the Nederlands Congresgebouw's second largest auditorium. (Compare around 15 turning up for this to the 70 or 80 who packed into one of the Commission Rooms to hear Geoff Ryman.) I say "talk" because it turned out there was really only one "panellist", plus an interpreter. As Editor-in-chief of China's one and only sf journal however, Yang Xiao was clearly well qualified to pronounce on her topic. I should probably confess here, as I was forced to do at the time, that I on the other hand "know something about Chinese, but nothing whatsoever about sf". It's true that one of my first-year set texts was a children's novel entitled **Little Lingtong Goes Walkabout in the Future**, written perhaps by China's most prominent sf writer, Ye Yonglie, and that the lecturer who taught us that book, whom I now have the good fortune to have as a colleague, confessed the other day that he had once had a novel refused by the publishers for being too imitative of Douglas Adams, but I'm afraid my sf credentials don't extend much beyond this. I was only in the Hague as a camp follower and under the tragic delusion that the place would be awash with Grolsch. (Sigh!) So I expect I was the only one who attended the talk who knew as little about sf *outside* China as inside. Sadly, the most revealing piece of information about Chinese sf was already implicit in the speaker's self-introduction. For to learn that there is only one single journal devoted to a given genre — and a bi-monthly with a circulation of not much more than 10,000 at that — in a country which probably now boasts more periodical publications per head of its vast population than any other on Earth, is to know that that genre must be dying on its feet there.

Ms Yang understandably talked mainly of the boom in sf writing that occured in the years 1979-82 and, passing over the years in between, stressed the pre-eminent position of her journal, **Science Literature** (Chengdu, Sichuan) today. When questioned, she readily and frankly replied that during those boom years there had been at least a dozen sf journals and that despite their subsequent demise, even the one journal left has seen its circulation drop from a high of 230,000 down almost to four figures. Yang Xiao was less frank when I asked her the *reason* for the failure of sf in China to build on the surge of interest which occured around the start of the 80s, confining herself to the stock Chinese officialese "that is a question my colleagues and I are looking into". This phrase is generally open to two interpretations, (a) "We haven't the foggiest" and (b) "Do you really expect me to tell you that, O Naive One". In this context I would choose translation (b), because Wu Dingbo, whom Yang Xiao claimed during question-time as a good friend of hers and who joined World SF together with her, certainly does have an answer, and one which seems plausible to me. In his introduction to **Science Fiction From China** (Praeger: NY, 1989), which he edited with Patrick D Murphy, Wu explains how Chinese sf was made a scapegoat during the "anti-spiritual pollution" campaign of 1983, which represented a chilling reminder of if not altogether return to a harsher intellectual climate after the thaw of the early years of Deng Xiaoping's political supremacy. The campaign was a reaction by left-wing forces against what they saw as the evils resulting from increased contact with the capitalist world as a result of Deng's "open-door" policies. Chinese sf's heavy reliance on Western sources of influence left it open to attack as a "comprador literature". Among the examples of charges which Wu Dingbo lists as having been levelled at Chinese sf writers by the all-powerful leftist critics and Party hacks are its depiction of "low-taste sex with sensual robots" (!) and what they saw as its increasing tendency towards the fantastic at the expense of scientific fact (Chinese sf seems on the whole to have been officially accepted only as a branch of popular science, something very strongly promoted by the Chinese Government as a means of mobilising the population in the efforts towards the "Four Mechanisations").

The Chronological Bibliography of Chinese Science Fiction appended to **Science Fiction From China** is an eloquent testimont to the effect these attacks had on output. Forty works are cited for 1981, only two for 1984 as also, sadly, for 1988, the last year included in the bibliography. Fearful of a return to a Cultural Revolution style literary inquisition, writers and editors quite simply went to ground.

Towards the end of his article Wu Dingbo does express cautious optimism for the future of sf in China, citing evidence of a healthy

trend towards freeing the genre from the stifling patronage of popular science. Yet considering that by 1988, when he was writing, the literary and political climate in China was far more liberal than before the 1983 clampdown, it may be that there are other fundamental reasons for the continuing stagnation of sf in China. Yang Xiao's tentative suggestion that Chinese people are too down-to-earth to go in heavily for sf surely cannot be the whole answer, given the prominence of the supernatural in traditional Chinese literature, which is still very popular. The huge success in 1986, in spite of very mixed reviews, of Zhang Xianliang's **Half of Man is Woman**, a magical realist novel, would also seem to show that the Chinese reading public has not allowed at least three decades of varying degrees of enforcement of socialist realism to blunt its appetite for the fantastic.

Considering its failure to recover in the years between 1983 and 1988, one fears especially for the future of sf in China at the present time of retrenchment in the People's Republic. Yang Xiao's very presence at ConFiction is a source of encouragement in this regard. She was in the Hague as one of the representatives of the Chinese branch of World SF attending the annual conference of this, the International Association of Science Fiction Professionals (*not* to be confused with the World Science Fiction (WorldCon) Society, as the latter was frequently at pains to point out during ConFiction). Yang Xiao was able to announce during her talk that World SF had decided that morning to hold its 1991 conference in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 20-25 May 1991. Desperate as it is to repair the international bridges its tanks tore down even as they made mincemeat of peaceful protestors in Beijing in 1989, the Chinese government will be forced to welcome international sf people to Chengdu this year. It is hoped that many will go, and that Asian and Australasian fans will respond positively to Yang Xiao's open invitation. Even when literary dictatorship is not being exercised over them by the self-appointed representatives of the proletariat, it will always be difficult for Chinese sf to develop healthily in isolation.

So go to Chengdu. Sichuan will be getting hot by late May, but Chengdu sits at a high enough altitude to be more bearable than most of China even at the height of summer. After the Con, you can always escape to the neighbouring province of Yunnan, a temperate plateau of year-long spring which is actually Eden in disguise, or southeast to Hainan Island, which is more like Bali than Scheveningen [*where ConFiction took place — Ed*].

Go to Chengdu. Avoid feeding the CCP propaganda machine more than your mere presence will aready do, but take badly-needed encouragement to China's beleaguered sf people. Encourage the writers to write more and better (it has to be said that the stories included in Wu's anthology show a need for constructive criticism); encourage editors and publishers to continue to promote the genre; and take encouragement to the as yet embryonic development of Fandom in the PRC. Oh, and have a good time.

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WHERE SCIENCE FICTION MEETS REALITY

Book Reviews

Edited by Chris Amies

War Fever

JG Ballard

Collins, 1990, 176pp, £12.95

Ballard's first story was published in **New Worlds** in 1956, states the blurb. It is the only hint, and an obscure one to most readers outside the genre, that the author was science fiction author; apart from that one reference the publishers have hidden the fact very carefully. The intention, obviously, is to attract as many readers as possible, which is fine. The effect, probably, will be that most will say "This is good; it can't be sf"; which is sad, as those readers will be denying themselves much pleasure. And in fact this short story collection is alomst nothing but sf, is rather more traditional sf than Ballard was writing 20 years ago, and it reveals some, at least, of Ballard's own sf roots. The title story is a classic piece of Dickian closed-universe paranoia, when a participant in a generation-long civil war in Beirut finally realises what the rest of the world is up to. "The Secret History of World War 3" is a glorious Pohlian extrapolation from the current media obsessions with the health of public figures into the possible future of Reagan's third presidency. Several stories are indeed straight "what-if" stories, such as an extrapolation of the future possibilities of a united Europe (with the rise of fascist movements among the sun-loving youth of the Mediterranean coast) in "The Largest Theme Park in the World", or an amusing (believe it or not) tale of the future development of sexual relations in an AIDS-ridden world, in "Love in a Cloder Climate".

Humour is, in fact, the element whi is rather too easy to forget is often present in Ballard's work, lurking shyly at the bottom of dried-up swimming pools. And in this collection the humour is particularly to be found in the three more "experimental" stories: "Answers to a Questionnaire", "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown" and "The Index". The first is precisely that: answers to a questionnaire, or an interview, in which we have to surmise the questions: it is masterly way of very slowly revealing the actual story (which is again very reminiscent of Dick), and of maintaining the reader's interest. "Notes" takes a one-sentence statement, and provides detailed footnotes to every word, in which, again, the story gradually takes shape. And "The Index" is the index to an autobiography of an important (and fictitious) world-figure, from Acapulco down to Zielinski: a "story" which is original, witty, and teasing. My favourite story, though, is even more ambiguous: "The Enormous Space", a marvellous enigmatic unravelling of suburban life from that most unrelieble of narrators — a madman. It is the closest thing in the collection to a non-sf story, and yet it is too suffused with sfnal images and ideas. Despite what the publishers think, Ballard is still one of the best sf writers Britain has. And this collection is an excellent introduction to his work.

Edward James

Man from Mundania

Piers Anthony

NEL, 1990, 343pp, £12.95, £7.95pb

Bad Dreams

Kim Newman

Simon & Schuster, 1990, 280pp, £13.95

Tehanu

Ursula LeGuin

Gollancz, 1990, 219pp, £9.95

Man from Mundania is the 12th book in the Xanth series, and unlikely to be the last. It picks up the plot from **Heaven Cent** and continues with more of the same whimsical fantasy.

This time we follow the meeting and subsequent adventures of Grey Murphy — at first sight an ordinary college student of Mundania — and Princess Ivy of Xanth. The dastardly Com-pewter is up to its tricks again, and the two young lovers must overcome many obstacles on their path to wedded bliss. These include run-ins with goblins, maenads, and the interminable Anthony puns. The goblins and their hate-spring nearly steal the show as the only real baddies in the book.

There are some good set pieces, such as the dream world inside the Gourd. Some of the dreams are quite horrific, though Anthony ameliorates this by indicating that they will have a morally beneficial effect on the dreamer. The difficulty in distinguishing illusion from reality, and magic from special effects, is a recurring theme. It is especially nicely handled in the discovery of the Good Magician's whereabouts.

Anthony's style, as usual, is easily readable but self-consciously coy. This seems to be aimed at juveniles with an obssession with sex — or rather kissing and panties. There is also a tendency to keep repeating things, as though the reader will not grasp it at first go — I lost count of the number of times we were told that Prince Dolph was betrothed to two girls and the consequences of his final choice of bride.

Xanth fans will love **Man from Mundania**, the rest of us can have a light-hearted and undemanding read.

Kim Newman is a writer, film-critic and broadcaster. His most recent novel is **The Night Mayor**, his short stories have appeared in **Interzone** and other magazines, and he also writes under the name "Jack Yeovil".

Bad Dreams is a horror story of which the blurb says "the modernist horrors of Clive Barker and Freddy Krueger fuse together with fairy tale fears...". This reference to a film character is apt when one considers the background of the author, and the allusions to films that occur throughout his work.

A near-immortal vampire, one of "the Kind", is in Hollywood in one of his many guises when he is snubbed by an elder of his race. He decides to take his revenge through her human protege, a Nobel Prize-winning playwright, and his descendents. One of these

descendents, Anne Nielson, an American journalist now living in Britain, tries to find out what caused the death of her sister Judi. She traces Judi's involvement in the sado-masochistic London night-life scene, and finally meets the vampire himself. From this point on she is involved in a fight for her life in both the real world and the world of her dreams.

Newman's style is lucid, gripping and pacy. It is also voyeuristic with its scenes of sadism, masochism and decadence among the yuppy classes. But perhaps this charge could be laid against most horror writers these days. Familiar themes — London, racism, Thatcherism and its effects — turn up along the way.

The author drops a lot of names of products and people, from ephemeral pop stars to classic Hollywood actors. Indeed some of the latter are given walk-on parts in the plot. The story could become dated in a few years because of this. Who will remember Neneh Cherry and her ilk in 10 years hence? It also assumes a lot on the part of the reader, and often provides the author with an easy way out. Why strive to create character and atmosphere when you can refer to a famous person or film which will do the job instead? That said, Newman creates both character and atmosphere in abundance when he needs to.

Bad Dreams is an absorbing read though it contains some gruesome scenes.

In the "Women and SF" issue of **Vector** (139), Sue Thomason asked how a woman could have written **The Earthsea Trilogy**. She argued that women were essentially excluded from the books.

Tehanu is Le Guin's answer to this criticism. She admits her fault and redresses the balance. Feminism has come to Earthsea.

This fourth and final book means that the "trilogy" has had to be retitled "saga". It picks up the familiar characters of Tenar and Ged, and introduces Therru, a little girl who has been raped and hideously scarred by men she lived with.

The story begins with the death of Ogion, the mage who taught both Tenar and Ged. There are momentous events and journeys, but it is essentially the tale of the relationship between a mother and her adopted child, of the growth of that child into something rich and strange, and of the reunion of Ged and Tenar and their resulting changed relationship.

Tehanu continues plot strands from the earlier books, occasionally referring to past events, but can be read as a complete work in itself.

The surface themes are as before — wizards and witches, spells and dragons, friendship and hatred. But there are also deeper themes — the contrast between men's attitudes and those of women; the incompleteness of the male without the female; the effect of deformity, and the fase assumption that it is deserved, on its victim. It is also about men's abuse of power.

> ... power belongs to men. If women had power, what would men be but women who can't bear children? And what would women be but men who can?

As with the former trilogy, Le Guin's style is marvellous — such crystal clear and seemingly effortless prose.

The characters of the women, from the smelly witch, Moss, to former priestess, Tenar, are deep and convincing. The child, Therru, is especially compelling in her vulnerability. The men are less convincing; the wicked wizard, Aspen, is hardly more than a plot device.

Tehanu is powerful and moving in its vision of feminism. Le Guin seems to see little sign of the "new man". Ged and King Lebannen, certainly not perfect new men, are far outweighed by the uncomprehending, conservative man, who wants his dinner and wants it now, as illustrated by Spark, Tenar's own son.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Read it. You'll not be disappointed.

Barbara Davies

Visions of Space

David Hardy
Paper Tiger, 1989, 176pp, £16.95

Visions of Space is one of the most visually beautiful books I have ever seen. Hardy, who has illustrated books for Patrick Moore, done designs for the Planetarium, produced and **Atlas of the Solar System**, and done numerous covers for **Worlds of If** and **F&SF**, has put together a large format collection of space paintings over the decades — nearly all in colour; a truly amazing art gallery.

He's also written an extremely informative histoorical study of space art — which, in passing, is also a fascinating text on astronomy. Amongst many other things, I learnt that an asteroid has been named after artist Chesley Bonestell, and a crater on Mars after Lucien Rudaux — who, I also discover, wrote the **Larousse Encyclopaedia of Astronomy** which I devoured in my teens.

Although the book is space art rather than specifically sf art, there's obviously a lot of overlap, and I'm quite surprised at some of the omissions; I don't mind at all Chris Foss's work not being included, but I'd liked to have seen Jim Burns, Tim White and Bruce Pennington. I'm delighted, though, to see such an international mix of artists, from Russian and Japanese, as well as European continental, and the expected British and American. There are old favourites and new discoveries, and constant surprises: "So *that's* who painted..."

From "photographs of the unphotographable" to the fantastical, from the mechanical to the surreal, from Lucien Rudaux's atmospheric monochrome work of the 1930s to the haunting colour work of many present day artists, this is a book which any aspiring space artist must own. I hope they bring out a slightly more affordable paperback edition, but if not, save up and buy the hardcover; it's worth every penny. I've spent hours losing myself in the paintings, and felt most ruminously uplifted. Thank you, David Hardy.

David V Barrett

TekWar

William Shatner
Bantam, 1990, 216pp, £12.95

The Rowan

Anne McCaffrey
Bantam, 1990, 335pp, £12.99

The Renegades of Pern

Anne McCaffrey
Bantam, 1990, 384pp, £7.99

Starchild and Witchfire

David Henshall
Macmillan, 1990, 231pp, £4.99

TekWar echoes Shatner's performances with the appaling **TJ Hooker** and his more competent abilities as co-writer, director and star of **Star Trek V**. An ex-LA cop, once married to an adulteress and framed by her crooked boss/lover and a drug lord for dealing Tek (an addictive microchip hallucinogenic) is hired to track down a scientist (who has developed an anti-Tek device) and his daughter, Beth.

Hollywood cliches abound. There are, among others, drug-running South Americans, smug Hispanics, the hero's teenage son (off-stage) and a non-deviating course through a number of convenient "contacts" and assassination attempts leading directly to the desired goal. Not a red herring, wrong foot, or stumbling block in sight. Add to this simplistic detective story the usual love interest, in this case with the simulacrum of the scientist's daughter (who is blown up before the end to rid the novel of any interesting, albeit awkward, plot complications) and you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd just stepped into *Miami Vice*land.

The superficiality and delight in comforting illusion, if not deceit, of this future society is only an extension of the American film industry today, which can be seen as both the novel's main weakness and strength, depending on your viewpoint.

The author knows his sf, is enthusiastic about it, and — rare in the genre — cares greatly for his characters. This is good, because **TekWar** is VERY clumsy, with the most basic sentence structure along the lines: "Jake did this and then Jake did that". It's not a bad work of pulp sf for a first-time writer. It is, like the latest Enterprise, badly in need of an overhaul, but races along like Spock in anti-gravity boots, too.

Anne McCaffrey's been very busy. Between the beginning of 1989 and March 1991 a total of nine new novels, four written in collaboration, many parts in series, will

have been published. They include, according to **Locus**, the first in another series, **The Rowan** (based on "The Lady In The Tower", from **Get Off the Unicorn**) and **The Renegades of Pern**. Her prolificacy, taken together with the fact that many of the books *are* sequels, suggest McCaffrey's gone for quantity rather than quality in the last three or four years, and indeed both these books seem rushed.

Renegades (the lazier of the two) and the previous Pern novel, **Dragonsdawn** both contain familiarly and flimsily motivated characters, psychotic women and the author's special brand of instant hot romance and ontap tragedy. The same weaknesses mar **The Rowan** (except that the psychotic woman has become an alien hive-mind of female creepycrawlies), which shares with **Renegades** a middle that loses its way before a highly contrived ending.

Renegades, for example, loosely revolves around megalomaniacal outlaw, Thela, whose grand ambitions turn with inadequately explained haste into petty vengeance schemes. The plot is highly elliptical, swinging so wide in its orbit that for much of the story it is totally eclipsed by events first told better and in greater depth in pre-1980 Pern novels, only re-emerging as an adjunct to them. The sideshow is more interesting than the initial plot, and that they should reverse roles is an indication of where the author's true interests lie.

The Rowan's story, in the other book, is gradually subverted by her love interest, Jeff Raven, and a tacky attempt to shift the action from the personal to the galactic by having a token alien invasion threaten the human colonies between which the Primes teleport matter. The initial story becomes a thread in a much less interesting old rope. Bradley did the telepaths-in-towers theme better in **Darkover** and Herbert the transport company monopoly better in **Dune**, but despite that **The Rowan** *is* entertaining, the first half being particularly strong, although Jeff's apparent (and apt) mimicking of a 20th Century TV advertisement ("I'm good, but I'm not that good") still rankles.

If you like firmly paternal, "infinitely tender" sexual fantasies, then McCaffrey's for you, but if you're expecting a return to the form of **The White Dragon** and **Dragonquest** you'll be disappointed.

Come on then, murglings," he cried, waving his fists like a miniature boxer. "Come on! I'll smadge you to dobs. Stay behind me, Jamie Mercer. These murglings look mean and gangly."

The back-cover blurb proclaims **Starchild and Witchfire** is "an enthralling fantasy for readers of nine and up" and, indeed, it is. Little Fern and her slightly older brother Jamie wake up one morning to the sight of snow in their Stubbs Terrace backyard and a childrake, a flying lizard related to dragons. Since the rest of Stubbs Terrace is enjoying a glorious Summer, they are both puzzled, Jamie's dark suspicions offset by Fern's more innocent delight. Flung into Mithics, a parallel world full of strange neo-mythical creatures, they enter a frightening battle against a witch for possession of the Heart, the source of all power there.

It is amusing, well-written, rivetting stuff, and I'm sure children will enjoy it, but as an adult I was continually distracted by Henshall's approach and the Christian cliches, which owe far too much to **The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe**, **The Lord of The Rings** and — oddly enough — to **Yellow Submarine**. We have an evil, power-hungry witch who marches through the land and can change size alarmingly, enslave the minds of a whole race and magic snakes out of nothing, themes of temptation, redemption and blind faith, prophecies which come true, saviours reborn, and so on.

The children are charming, not like real children at all, but idealised versions who will appeal particularly to the adult, parent-buying market. It's an excellently-timed product for a Christian Christmas, if too calculated and artificial an adventure for an unreserved recommendation, although it does promise better things from Henshall's pen in the future.

Terry Broome

Midnight's Sun
Garry Kilworth
Unwin, 1990, 317pp, £12.95

Dark Hills, Hollow Clocks
Garry Kilworth
Methuen, 1990, 112pp, £8.95

Mary Reilly
Valerie Martin
Doubleday, 1990, 263pp, £12.95

The Werewolves of London
Brian Stableford
Simon & Schuster, 1990, 390pp, £14.95

Garry Kilworth shifts from fox to wolf, maintaining the talking animal conventions of **Hunter's Moon** — canids speak English, corvids German. Though the move is from solitary to pack animal, his "hero" and "heroine" are outcasts, sharing, however, some pack/rebel ambivalences. This genre is hard to control. It can easily veer from sentimentalised nature study to outrageous anthropomorphism. Kilworth forestalls accusation of anthropomorphism by prefatory speculation on comparable mind-sets in wolf and primitive man; and he explores the concept interestingly in an episode of lupine-human quasi-partnership. This punctuates the dominant theme of man's unrelenting hostility to wolves, and paves the way for a dialectical resolution, ecologically "green" and conservationist.

Nevertheless, there is some difficulty in accepting the pack's ostracism of wolf-"hero" Athaba on account of his tendency to mysticism; or one wolf saying to another "in your pack wolves are pushed into responsibilities not suited to their personalities". But talk between the wolf Magitar and a border collie on the ways of humans becomes at once more acceptable for its similarity to Aesopian fable-dialogue. Kilworth keeps switching modes so intriguingly, and the odyssey of his storyline (basically "wolf gets bitch; wolf loses bitch; wolf finds bitch") is so attention-holding, that everything can be taken painlessly in the reader's stride. Elements of animal behaviour are well researched; tundra and forest settings are convincingly and poetically described; and the wolf's sensing of these, if less convincing, is poetically satisfying — "a storm was pulling its pack together, in order to attack the land below". An embracing geo-mythic frame, introduced through passages of age-long wolf-lore, is, with its "Firstdark" and giant "Groff", magnificently "northern", incorporating at times such engaging evolutionary *Just So*-ish fables as the bard-wolf's account of why whales and dolphins returned to the ocean.

Dark Holes, Hollow Clocks presents ten of what the subtitle calls "Stories from the Otherworld" for the pleasure of both children and fantasists. Kilworth draws on veins of folklore and legend for very original tales in which a Grimmish earthiness shows through the decorative surfaces, and quirky humour may be tempered by sudden shock. Their settings range from Orkney to the Chiltern beech woods, the Essex marshes and modern Kowloon. In the title story fairies cannibalise a choice collection of clocks for their industrial spare-parts. "The Sleeping Giants" is a wonderful kind of cyclic history of civilisation in 71 pages. A small, beautifully produced volume: treasurable.

Mary Reilly is the tragedy (tragedy here rather than *grand guignol*) of Stevenson's Dr Jekyll experience through the eyes and emotional involvement of a young housemaid, whose journal, lucid and largely literate, constitutes the text. How one of her time and "station" might have been able to write this is discussed in a fictive Afterword. In her, Ms Martin has invented a sympathetic and rather lovely character who combines a Jane Eyre intuitive sensitivity with an Elizabeth Bennet perceptivity and directness — traits inevitably somewhat damped down by the constraints of her "station". Jekyll/Hyde is a Jungianly conceived "ego-and-shadow" figure of anguish. The supporting cast of servants (some from the original) moves convincingly through an "upstairs-downstairs" scenario, and the outdoor London episodes are so well-drawn that their street-people might have stepped straight out of Mayhew or Charles Booth. No pastiche this, but an authentic creation.

Brian Stableford's Victorian London is a theatrically ficticious metropolis: gaslamps luminous through fog, Soho and Society, hansom-cab assignations, shapeshifting werewolves, a gnostic monastery near its centre and foundling-home, manor-hall and madhouse at its fringe. Theatrical or not, it is

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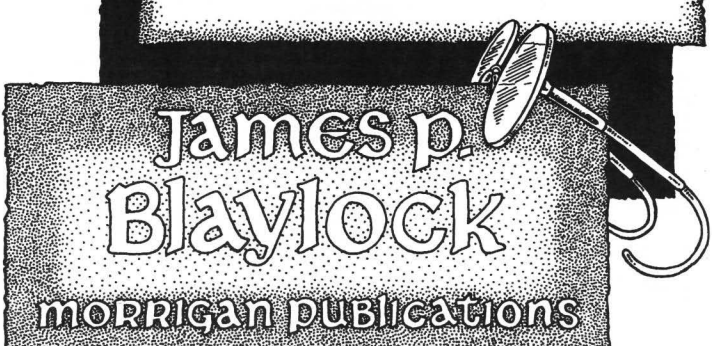


the one real-seeming locale cementing a fantasia of nightmares and visions which starts with daemonic possession amidst the tombs of Egypt and, before finishing, stretches to the bounds of a universe perceived as the Great or Cosmic Man and recognised as "the inverted image of the mould which was God".

The foci of angelic/satanic possession and observation are David, the ward of an upper-class humanist, and Gabriel, the bastard creation of a lower-class magician. Many human and supernatural entities, werewolves included, contend to manipulate the powers lodged in the two. The varying degrees of the possessseds' compliance or defiance advance the action, much of it challenged through illusion, dream, clairvoyant insight, and mystical experience. As melodrama, and occasionally horror, the book fascinates, though it courts the risk, as one searing climax piles on another, of over-the-top saturation. But such extremes of Gothicry are mostly theatre. Stableford, buttressing his purpose metafiction-wise with interluded real and fictitious academic glosses, is concerned to probe the nature of history and of myth, both of which exist and persist only as mental phenomena — history perhaps being fantasy as much as is myth. His scholarship and his ability to give myth — Luciferian, Promethean, Orphean — a local habitation are impressive, and the result is imaginatively and intellectually invigorating. The destiny of mankind is left problematic when the book ends in the eighteen-seventies, with two sequels to come.

KV Bailey

The City, Not Long After

Pat Murphy

Pan, 1990, 320pp, £12.95

Fires' Astonishment

Geraldine McCaughrean

Secker & Warburg, 1990, 275pp, £12.95

The City, Not Long After could be called a post-holocaust novel. It could be called a fantasy novel. It could also be called an allegory if you felt so inclined. It is all these things in part, and more than all of them combined. It mostly takes place in San Francisco, certainly San Francisco is one of the main characters of the story (I couldn't help feeling that I'd have got even more from it if I knew the city well) after a Plague has wiped out the majority of the population of America. Unlike many post-holocaust societies which have descended into barbarism and savagery, this part of America has established small independant groupings based around cities and rural communities which have developed characteristics and ways of their own. San Francisco is home for a number of artists — poets, sculptors, painters and others — who are all eccentric in a major or minor way.

Without giving away too much of the plot it is difficult to go much further and, as a large part of the charm and depth of the book lies in the gradual unfolding of the characters and the story in which they find themselves, I do not wish to spoil that. It must suffice to say that reality and magic are interlinked and mixed together so that the dividing lines blur and the magic of San Francisco becomes possible, even likely.

The characters are not fully fleshed, solid and real, if they were so they would be out of place in this novel, but they are believable in their own context where their ill-assorted backgrounds have opened their acceptance of and joy in their differences, their aims and their achievements. One can question the likelihood of their existence, but if one wishes to do so it would be better not to read the book at all.

The writing is at all times fluid and fluent and the progress of the novel well under the author's control. The pace is leisurely, apparent sidetracks having relevance and adding depth at a later stage, so that, like the artists in San Francisco, the reader has time to pause, to appreciate and reflect while at no time losing the tension of the narrative.

It is a novel which involves the reader's imagination, the acceptance of the elements of fantasy (which have nothing at all to do with S&S). Not a book for cyberpunks or space opera fans, but a genuinely original and well crafted book, with morals and messages to be culled along the way should the reader wish to do so. A gentle, intelligent and enjoyable novel.

Fires' Astonishment begins in a real historical context with Leo comparing his own happiness to that of King Henry, whose son and heir was lost at sea and whose necessary wedding Leo has just attended. Then he gets home to be told his daughter has gone to France to be married and that his son, Elshender, has gone off after receiving a vision to devote his life to God. Or has he? At the end of Chapter 1 we are with Elshender reciting the names of his family ending with that of his stepmother, Gwynne, who "belongs to the devil".

Chapter 2 introduces Anselm, Leo's brother, and the tale that a dragon has been seen locally. From then on the story grows, revealing the love of Anselm for Elfleda, who had been engaged to Elshender, the existence of the dragon, the mystery of what became of Elshender and his sister. It introduces Alban, an excommunicated monk, and a host of minor characters, all of whom have a part to play in the unfolding story.

There are passages of description, particularly of people, which are very effective. Indeed, this is an extremely well written book, the author has an individuality of style and expression which creates a world both credible and fantastic with seeming ease and great fluency. Reading through there are phrases so apposite and descriptive that one pauses to savour them, take delight in their small perfection.

Where the book is flawed is, for me, in the plotting. I guessed the twists far too early and thus was deprived of the surprise and astonishment I ought to have felt. The plotting, although neatly done, seemed too transparent, as though the author who has chiefly written children's books, has yet to develop the complexity necessary to sustain the mystery in an adult novel (this is not to say that all children's books are simple). Notwithstanding this I enjoyed the book, but wished I could have been surprised, and that the suspense had been as well maintained as the quality of the language and characters.

Helen McNabb

Night Chills

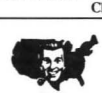
Dean R Koontz

Headline, 1991, 334pp, £14.95

I think I've identified the trouble with Horror novels. They start out good and go downhill all the way. In sf anything can happen. The villains can win; unexpected variables can kick into action; the stable pattern can unpredictably go unstable. Chaotic behaviour is possible. The Horror text, though, is generically stable.

Night Chills — which is somewhere midway between the two genres — takes as its premise the idea of subliminal control: that people can be unwittingly conditioned to obey every command of a person who gives them a certain signal. Despite this promising start, however, the novel rapidly turns into a standard small-town-under-siege tale, with the usual standard characters pitting themselves against a villain who controls every mind in the town except theirs. The corpses pile up, and there is the usual chase sequence and our villain, through mistakes and a weakening of his powers, gets penned in by the good guys who finally win the shoot-out in the last reel. And we know darn well that Good — meaning the status quo — is going to triumph. Why not a novel in which altered states of control are used to the constructive end of removing the current, and inimical, social structure? Though where **Night Chills** is concerned, I do wonder about the story starting in the week 12-19 April 1975, which is when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge; and the ultimate aim of the villainous mind-controlling cartel is to stage a coup to take over Kuwait. Curious.

Chris Amies



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Midnight Sun
Ramsey Campbell
MacDonald, 1990, 312pp, £12.95

Needing Ghosts
Ramsey Campbell
Legend, 1990, 80pp, £4.50

Cold Fire
Dean R Koontz
Headline, 1991, 374pp, £13.95

The simultaneous publication of two very different books, under separate imprints, underlines Ramsey Campbell's astonishing versatility. **Needing Ghosts** is a haunting, hallucinatory novella, in which the deconstruction of the narrative reflects the crumbling psyche of the protagonist in a manner strikingly reminiscent of of Paul Auster's **City of Glass**. Campbell, however, eschews post-modernist word games for their own sake in favour of a suffocating cocoon of impressionistic imagery, which follows the paralogic of nightmare. Early on, the reader begins to suspect that this is, indeed, a dream; then to share the protagonist's dread that it's actually something far worse.

One of the key theme of **Needing Ghosts**, the extent to which an author's sense of self is inseperable from their work, is also strongly present in **Midnight Sun**. Ben Sterling, a best-selling children's author, takes a lot longer than the reader to realise that his stories are inspired by something beyond the Arctic Circle by his great-grandfather, a Victorian explorer, which is now linked in some way to the family house on the Yorkshire moors and to the destiny of Ben himself. Campbell began his career dabbling in the Cthulu mythos, and returns to a similar theme here, pitting the frail human world against something older and more terrible than it can even begin to contemplate. This time, however, he brings the skills of an experienced author to bear, setting his tale against vividly real settings peopled with characters flushed with the bloom of life. As Ben and his family come under threat, their prosaic bickering and casual affection underpin the fantastic elements of the story with all the convincing minutiae of day to day living. The true nature of what's lurking in the woods behind the house is revealed slowly and carefully, leading by imperceptable stages from the bright certainties of the everyday world to a familiar setting made unearthly and threatening by a power beyond control, and utterly indifferent to all that is human.

To have written either the most profoundly disturbing piece of short fiction I've come across in a very long time, or one of the best novels of the year, would have been a major achievement for any author. Only Ramsey Campbell could have published both on the same day.

Cold Fire is the latest mid-list potboiler from the Koontz assembly line, and for most people that should be all the comment necessary. If you like what he does you'll like

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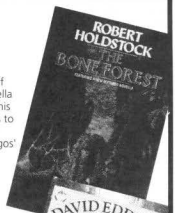

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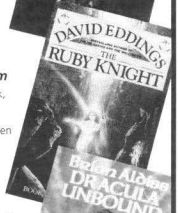

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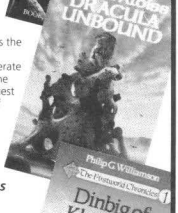

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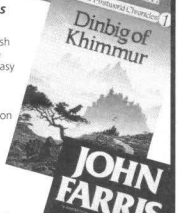

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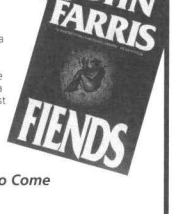

The Shape of Reading to Come

GraftonBooks
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this one, and if you don't you'll be picking something else off the shelf anyway. If you haven't tried him yet, this book would be a good place to start.

The plotting is tight, and the pacing rapid, as reporter Holly Thorne discovers amiable stranger Jim Ironheart apparently makes a career out of performing heroic last-minute rescues at the behest of a "Higher Power". When the power warns him that The Enemy is approaching, intent on killing the pair of them, Jim and Holly are faced with unravelling the mystery of what The Power and The Enemy are, and their connection to Jim. A satisfying number of surprises later, the answer turns out to be even more complex and menacing than it first appeared.

Though his plot construction is meticulous, Koontz's prose style can best be described as functional. Nevertheless, he's a sufficiently skilled storyteller to keep me turning the pages, and judging by his sales figures I'm far from being alone. **Cold Fire** won't win any literary awards, or launch any doctoral theses, but it will entertain an awful lot of people; and for my money, that's what counts.

Alex Stewart

A Fit of Shivers

Joan Aiken

Gollancz, 1990, 140pp, £8.95

Frontiersville High

Stephen Bowkett

Gollancz, 1990, 139pp, £8.95

The Afterdark Princess

Annie Dalton

Methuen, 1990, 115pp, £7.95

Joan Aiken's new collection is something of a mixed bag, lacking the surrealistic inventiveness of her stories for younger readers and the detailed exuberance of her "alternative-historical" novels such as **The Wolves of Willoughby Chase**. These macabre tales sometimes lead up to more than they actually deliver: the cosmic horror of "Something" never quite crystallises, while the archly verbose style of some of the stories, such as "Number Four, Bowstring Lane", gets in the way of the reader in search of story. On the plus side, there's a most unusual ghost in "Wtkyn, Comma", the writing is pared down in "The Rose-garden Dream" which shows how even the dreams of the underclass are prey for the powerful, and "The Legacy" is superbly Jamesian. What starts as stereotype of character in "Cousin Alice" becomes refreshingly deeper, and this is a feature of several stories: because of their brevity, however, what should be ironic reversal appears as dislocation.

There's an awful cartoon series called **Galaxy High**, and Stephen Bowkett uses a similar idea in **Forntiersville High**, set in an orbiting spacecolony. It's lighter than Bowkett's normal fare, although the second of the four stories ends sombrely with the narrator's mother hating life in space. Each story focusses upon a different character, and the plots — involving such things as a dishy new kid who turns out to be a robot, and an advertising campaign for an addictive drink — are hardly original. Although Bowkett writes well and is frequently amusing and accurate in his characterisation, the first story in particular reaches its conclusion and moral point before the reader is quite ready and the whole book is nearer to conventional "light teenage fiction" than I've seen from him. It's a tribute to Bowkett's skills that he makes a readable creation out of unpromising material.

The Afterdark Princess is written for younger readers than the previous books, but for several reasons it's the best. Joe, mollycoddled and unpopular, is left with Alice, the town's best babysitter, when his mother goes on a rare evening out. But Alice is really the Princess of Afterdark, in danger from an invader, and it becomes up to Joe to sort things out. If you can imagine a mixture of **Mary Poppins** and the "Eustace" scenes in the **Narnia** books, this comes somewhere near. Annie Dalton uses fantasy for young children as a model for their real lives — especially with the ending and identification of the wicked Emperor of Nightfall — in a way which captures authenticity of feeling without dropping into twee allegory.

Andy Sawyer

The Skybreaker

Ann Halam

Orchard, 1990, 208pp, £8.95

With the publication of **Skybreaker**, Ann Halam, better known to sf readers as Gwyneth Jones, has brought to a close a challenging series of novels which have raised issues far beyond what might be expected of so-called children's fiction.

Zanne, the main character throughout the series, has a remarkable magical affinity with the dead machines which represent the technological past of Inland, prior to its rejection of mechanisation in favour of a more pastoral existence and a gentle, communal magic. In a time when even the majority of the coveners fear the machines, Zanne is required to lay to rest those still active, before they destroy "the web of new reality" brought about by the magic of the Covenant.

The final volume takes Zanne away from Inland, to Magia and its sophisticated yet decadent society, where magic has become the privelage of the few, rather than a common responisibility, and where it has become possible for one person to control the power of many, ostensibly in the name of the majority, but in reality in order to bend it to her own will, which is, inevitably, to reactivate one of the dead "makers".

Throughout this series, Halam has raised difficult and pertinent questions. She has explored the tensions inherent in the conscious rejection of one way of life, the technological, in favour for another, the pastoral, and the consequences for those unable or unwilling to relinquish old ways, or who exhibit an affinity for the inappropriate or unacceptable. This can prove most uncomfortable for the 20th century sf reader, brought up in a mechanist tradition and inclined to sympathise with apparent efforts to reclaim lost knowledge for society's benefit, a traditional subject for modern genre writers.

The Skybreaker goes further, questioning the rightness of one magical methodology above others, and considering the character of insularity, forcing the reader to question even that which seems to be presented as the best, the most effective way of ordering a community.

In the communistic society of Inland, one can discern the outlines of a Utopian way of life, while Magia might represent quite the opposite, a dystopian society in decline. But equally, one must confront the restraining nature of the Covenant as practiced by the Inlanders, and their insularity, at once a protection from and a barrier to the influx of new ideas. At the same time, for all its apparent sophistication and receptiveness to external influences, Magia is as much in thrall, more dangerously so, for the power resides in one rather than in many. Zanne represents the benchmark against which both societies must be measured. She recognises that she does not entirely belong to one or the other, any more than does Lady Monkshood, Mage of Magia. However, unlike Zanne, who can work towards achieving a balance in the world, and peace in herself, Monkshood can attain peace only through the isolation of exile.

This series has not been easy reading. At the end of it, I'm left with a sense of disquiet which stems not from the construction of the novel, but from the questions raised, the acceptance of the inability to provide clear answers and the rightness of this inability. Too much fiction seems intended to offer an unequivocal but frequently impractical answer to problems which are, in reality, as multi-headed as a hydra. It is rare indeed for a novel to come to terms so thoroughly with the uncertainties of life. Ann Halam has done a fine job in achieving this not once but three times. My only regret is that, as a result of them being published in a children's fiction imprint, too many people will have missed the opportunity to tackle this demanding and intellectually satisfying work.

Maureen Porter

Plague Daemon

Brian Craig

GW Books, 1990, 235pp, £4.99

Red Thirst

David Pringle (Ed)

GW Books, 1990, 256pp, £4.99

Marvellous. I really enjoyed these books. The narrative hurries along, with the occasional description or explanation for the reader to draw breath before the heroes and heroines are whirled into their next adventure. The characters are skilfully portrayed, and your imagination is confirmed by the full-colour covers, frontispieces and lines drawings.

Red Thirst is a collection of novellas featuring Sam Warble (the halfling private-eye), the religious Sisterhood of Shallya, a sorcerer's female apprentice, two troll-slayers, and a young girl tracking down the poison-traffickers who caused her sister's death. They are all "ordinary" people; not kings, princesses or presidents, who live happily and powerfully ever after, but members of the lower estates who return to their common task when the adventure is over.

In **Plague Daemon** the storyteller Orfeo relates the experiences of Harmis, a Border Guard. During the long retreat from the frontier to the capital-city, he and his magick-wielding companions keep one jump ahead of the invaders, wanring everybody that the enemy includes both human barbarians and a shapeshifting demon carrying physical disease and moral corruption within its apparently healthy body.

Besides action, these two books include much to make the reader stop and think. For example: "We too often forget that the shadows of evil cast by dark magic often linger long after the destruction of the magicians themselves."

Martin Brice

The Mammoth Book of Vintage Science Fiction Short Novels of the 1950s

Isaac Asimov, Charles G Waugh & Martin H Greenberg (Eds)

Robinson, 1990, 503pp, £4.99

Zenith 2

David S Garnett (Ed)

Orbit, 1990, 320pp, £3.99

Two collections of short(ish) fiction, one from the 1950s and the other from the late 1980s, make for some very interesting reading. What is so refreshing about the "vintage" stories, is that ideas that merited short novel length treatment, could be explored in the appropriate form without having to be converted into tedious trilogies in order to be published. Fortunately this is still true of short story length ideas, as the **Zenith 2** collection shows.

Some of the "vintage" stories, such as Eric Frank Russell's "And Then There Were None" and Theodore Sturgeon's "Baby Is Three", were old friends which had lost none of their freshness on being read again. Others were delightful discoveries. Many of the ideas have since been over-used and may seem hackneyed, yet, as with "Dark Benediction" by Walter J Miller which deals with the collapse of modern civilisation as a result of a space-born plague, they were still compulsive reading. Allowances also have to be made for social attitudes of the era, particularly in the subsidiary role assigned to women characters, who tend to be glorified housekeepers, brood-mares and sex-interest. An exception is "The Alley Man" by Philip Jose Farmer, which has a female research scientist as one of its main protagonists.

Because the simpler themes have been much milked over time, the ideas explored in the second **Zenith** collection are more subtle. "Insight" by John Gribbin and "The Time She Became" by Storm Constantine are set in almost fantasy worlds, while "A Journey to the King Planet" by SM Baxter is a pastiche of nineteenth century sf. But there is still room for the what-if story which takes as its starting point a development observed in contemporary society and extrapolates into an extreme near future, as exemplified by "Winning" by Ian MacDonald, which deals with methods of artificially enhancing an athlete's performance.

Compiling an anthology is a very subjective exercise, and many will dispute **Zenith**'s claim to be "The best in new British Science Fiction". We will disagree on which stories we would have left out. We could also speculate which of the stories might be included, 30 years hence, in a **Mammoth Book of SF of the 1980s**. My feeling is that few would stand the test of time the way the "vintage" stories have.

Valerie Housden

The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook 3

David S Garnett (Ed)

Orbit, 1990, 361pp, £4.99

Discovering *no* British sf worth reprinting here, British editor Garnett lines up Brian Aldiss, John Clute and Iain Banks to give a British feel to the cover. Banks provides an outdated econo-political outburst in his Introduction; Aldiss' Afterword, Clute's Reviews and Garnett's closing notes all fall into the same trap, with Aldiss actually citing the Caeusescu fiasco and setting out to argue against "arguments," and argument demolished by the Iraq explosion.

"Sf stories," says Aldiss, "are *anagrams of truth*" — not so, they are merely anagrams of the author's perception of truth at a given time and in a given place, and the overwhelmingly American source of these 1989 stories is itself a distortion of the truth.

Yet this is by no means a shortcoming, for among this selection are some absolute stunners, beautifully opened by Connie Willis's hilarious piece on quantum physics — would that much more sf were written in this way! JR Dunn reveals the way space travel died — not with a bang, but it just kinda slipped my mind one day: sad. Bruce Sterling's contribution is Weirdsville, in spades, though it was nice to see a mention of can-you-believe it Julie Burchill in there!

Lucius Shepard gives us sub-PJ O'Rourke guts'n'gore in an anti-US Latin America; my reaction to Charles Sheffield was, as usual, "wordy, great idea, pity he didn't make more of it," while from James Morrow comes a nasty little bit of Nietzchean propaganda on "the morality of masters and the morality of slaves" where Abe Lincoln's tardy conversion to freedom is totally unconvincing.

Jayge Carr's story is one where you are expected to pick up the lingo as you go — if you can stand the strain. The resulting *post*-post feminist tract was very sad, but of course it took Orson Scott Card to carry deliberate obfuscation to the ultimate — after reading the story, I *still* don't understand a lot of his neologisms: can do better.

Richard Paul Russo's taster, snippet, pointless title vignette of a spoiled society lacks wit, perception or empathy with his own characters. A rehash of that silly Asimov spat over Pu-186 brings Robert Silverberg to these pages with one of those Thiotimoline developments that is regrettably totally lacking in the rigorous academic presentation and wit of the originals.

I *like* David Brin — he tells a damn good tale which is just enough over the line to tickle your sense of the absurd. Try this: the Last War, against the Gnomes of Zurich, the banker's mercenaries, the fall of Bern — and that's just the framework; you also get real-life problems, worries and fears, a finely wrought piece. What a pity the book closes with John Crowley's eerie, meandering tale of alienation in a post-Revolutionary communal society: lacking any real denouement, it peters out into Aldiss' Afterword, Clute's Reviews and the closing Garnett thoughts.

John Clute attempts to cover such a vast canvas that mostly he gives us a checklist rather than a guide, but the stimulus to track down each title is hard to resist; David Garnett gives us some lightly annotated lists, some publishing gossip, much too much knocking copy attacking other compilations, his reasons for rejecting British writers (pp 339-40), and an Appendix with lots, lots more lists.

All in all a useful volume, reasonably priced and containing some absolute gems. Perhaps you will place them in a different sequence from mine, but there can be no denying the patchiness of the quality here I'm afraid.

Ken Lake

The Best of the Nebulas

Ben Bova

Hale, 1990, 573pp, £15.95

These are the Nebula Award winners which the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) have judged to be the best between 1965 and 1985 in the short fiction category. I do wonder if this is the complete book; there's no story later than 1980 (surely one from the following five years was worth including?) and the copyright page lists "The Mystery of Dune" by Brian Herbert which does not appear in the book.

So, how many stand the test of time? Well, "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth" by Roger Zelazny and "'Repent, Harlequin!' said the Ticktockman" by Harlan Ellison were disappointing. I thought they were marvellous when I first read them but I think that was a triumph of style over content, and the style isn't novel any more.

Zelazny also has "He Who Shapes" which does stand up and Ellison has two other stories. "A Boy and His Dog" lacks the punch you get on first reading but is still a hell of a good read and "Jeffty is Five" is my favourite story in the book. Ellison says it's about remembrance rather than nostalgia, I say it's about both and also about how we get tied up in every day trivia and forget what's really important. It's a very emotional story and that's difficult to do this well.

Nothing else seemed outdated and I was pleasantly surprised to find I still enjoyed Anne McCaffrey's "Dragonrider" even though the plot strands are a little too neatly drawn together.

Of the one's I'd not read before I particularly liked "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death" by James Tiptree, Jr which really seems to get inside the alien mind. On the other hand I thought her "Houston, Houston, do you read?" along with Joanna Russ' "When It Changed" sacrificied story for feminism.

I could also nitpick with the excessive wish-fulfilment of John Varley's "The Persistence of Vision" and I suspect that Clifford D Simak's "The Grotto of the Dancing Deer" got the award not simply on its own merits but because of Simak's collected works. This, though, would be churlish; none of these stories are bad.

This is a good book — there are 21 stories, some will make you think, some will make you cry and some you'll just enjoy — what more can you want?

Tom A Jones

England 1940: Invasion

Derek Slade

Oriflamme, 1990, 502pp, £4.50

Keepers of the Peace

Keith Brooke

Gollancz, 1990, 216pp, £13.95

Alternate histories have long been a subgenre of sf, but most are set many years after the "pivotal point" when "our" history diverted from the alternative. Almost all of them tell a story from the point of view of a character through whom is revealed the differences in the alternate world. As a purely intellectual exercise a pseudo-history book could be written — but it's doubtful it would make a popular book.

Invasion covers the pivotal point, the invasion of England in 1940 and the immediate aftermath. It does so in three strands. One enumerates troop movements, political and military policy decisions and results of battles much as you would expect in a populist history. The other two, seemingly added to "humanise" the book, are the experiences of a young English lad and his almost exact German counterpart.

In **Invasion** the Luftwaffe were given a clearer directive (the complete destruction of the RAF) and were not sidetracked as they were in reality. Instead of a narrow RAF victory, the Luftwaffe are triumphant... Operation Sealion then follows.

Although there can be little argument about the attainment of air superiority it is surprising that the Royal Navy is not allowed to play any "do-or-die" part. The Navy is, in several places, "saved for later" instead of being thrown into the "Battle of the Channel". Historically it was proved that a navy fighting against an enemy who had air superiority had very little chance of winning — cf, the fall of Singapore. In the circumstances of this book the British leaders would have known that *every* barge sunk was of paramount importance and would, I believe, have been willing to sacrifice the Navy in that endeavour. The book could have included this *and* shown it to be futile (because of the Luftwaffe's supremacy) with no loss of plot or story.

A little cursory investigation has thrown up a few facts that are at odds with the author's version. He states there were two armoured regiments in Britain whereas I believe there was only one and the numbers of the regiments available seem higher than was the case. As well as this I was left feeling that the amount of luck required by the Germans was inordinate and not "earned" as in their French campaign.

I've concentrated on the "factual history", rather than the story as unfolded by Don and Adolf's experiences, because the books 497 pages have a preponderance of "factual" information on the course of the war, which should have been revealed to the reader via the main characters. The "war experiences" are quite enjoyably written but neither in quantity nor quality do they rescue the book. Sadly a good idea which falls down in its execution.

Nearly a hundred years in the future Earth (well the USA — Europe, Asia, Africa and Australasia are hardly mentioned) has degenerated both politically and technically. There *is* high technology but it is becoming increasingly scarce in everyday use on Earth. Another factor introduced is the near-space colonists — the Moon, the Lagrange eco-systems and, again barely mentioned, the asteroid miner/colonists. These space colonists have, previous to the period covered in **Keepers of the Peace**, won a war of independence with Earth/USA.

One of the largest of the many nation states that has replaced the USA has spreading civil unrest and an as-yet undeclared war with a neighbouring state to contend with. The government invite a peace keeping force from the space colonists to help them. The parallels with Vietnam are made obvious and, indeed, almost intrusive.

The main plot concerns the abduction of an influential politician from a scheduled flight by a small, elite, group of the peace keeping force. Naturally things go wrong (there would hardly be a story otherwise) and the politician and his abductors have to struggle across the desert for survival. Much is made, at this point. of the necessity of the main character to not only survive but to survive as a human being.

Unfortunately the author has chosen to tell this story in a quasi flashback style rather than linearly. He hasn't yet got the skill to bring this off successfully and it makes what is, essentially, a simple story overly complicated. The other premise he seems to be labouring under is that a *good* soldier has had the ability to think for himself "trained" out of him by the army. This is a popular misconception — a little thought shows that the *best* soldiers are both willing to submit to discipline *and* capable of acting on their own initiative. But maybe this is the fault of the Lagrange AI generals that the author is trying to show?

Shorn of the obfuscation of the non-linear telling this book has a simple plot, simple characters and little going for it. It *is* a first novel, however, and we may expect better things in the future...

Keith Freeman

The Time-Lapsed Man

Eric Brown

Pan, 1990, 216pp, £3.99

Out on Blue Six

Ian McDonald

Bantam, 1990, 335pp, £4.99

Two examples of the new British sf that helped make the 80s so much more interesting than the 70s. Eric Brown offers us a collection of shorts — five of them from **Interzone**, one from **Opus**, two which don't

seem to have been published before (one of which shouldn't have been published ever). His theme is usually the same — love and death. Indeed, putting the stories together between one set of covers makes it painfully clear that all too often the *plots* are essentially the same. Which may be why my favourite is "Pithecanthropus Blues", one of the unpublished pair, about a spacefarer bounced telepathically back into the body of a distant ancestor. Being Brown, it isn't *quite* that simple, and love and death creep into the plot of this one, as well.

If you read **IZ**, you've probably come across at least one of the others, and if you like Brown's punk style the collection will appeal, though it's best not to try reading six of the punk-type stories in a row. Titles that may ring a bell include "Krash-Bangg Joe and the Pineal-Zen Equation" (not one of my favourites) and "The Karma Kid Transcends" (which is). The big minus about the collection, though, is the inclusion of a 66-page (out of 216 pages) sub-Wellsian piece of garbage that is probably the story referred to in the blurb, which tells us that Brown started writing at 15. He's improved since then.

Ian McDonald also writes punk, with a little bit of cyber thrown in for good measure. But no sub-Wellsian he. In fact, **Out on Blue Six** has a storyline strikingly reminiscent of Arthur C Clarke's **The City and the Stars**. There's a city, closed off from the rest of the world and in a state of unhealthy stasis; there's a hero who doesn't have any memories and seeks to find the truth; and there's an ending involving a journey into space. Oh yes, there's a supercomputer running the whole show, too. On the other hand, Clarke never had Love Police to make sure every individual member of the city fitted into their assigned niche without disturbing the equilibrium of others, or genetically engineered raccoons living in the sewers and worshipping their creator.

There's just a little too much in **Blue Six**, in fact, with too many characters chasing off at too many tangents, and an ending that is more *Deus* than *deus ex machina*. There are also loose threads that I kept waiting to see picked up, but which were left dangling — why is one character carefully set up as a cartoonist persuasive enough to jolt the masses out of their apathy by page 41, but never uses this talent again throughout the entire book?

But these are the kind of picky points that you note when (self)consciously reading a book to review it. It is also a rattling good read that kept me happily entertained all day. I doubt if you will find anything better published this year, and I'm looking forward to McDonald's next.

John Gribbin

Castleview

Gene Wolfe

NEL, 1991, 279pp, £13.95

Children of the Wind

Kate Wilhelm

Hale, 1990, 263pp, £13.95

Graham Greene used to divide his work into "novels" and "entertainments", a division not of quality but of perceived seriousness. I think Gene Wolfe is now, subconsciously at least, doing much the same thing. The complex and challenging "novels" of **The Book of the New Sun** and the sequence begun with **Soldier of the Mist** are being interspersed with "entertainments", **Free Live Free**, **There Are Doors** and now **Castleview**, which are considerably lighter in touch and less overtly challenging to the reader. Though it might be going too far to describe them as comedies — they are frequently humorous but are hardly likely to raise a belly-laugh — they have none of the high seriousness which embeds the "novels" in intricacy within intricacy until it takes a critical scalpel honed to monomolecular sharpness to penetrate some of the layers of meaning they carry. Which is not to say that these "entertainments" are superficial or simple, just that Wolfe is relaxing with a more straightforward storytelling technique.

In this new book the Castleview of the title is a small town not too far from Chicago which received its name because a ghostly can sometimes be glimpsed on the outskirts of the town. In the course of one night and the next morning an odd selection of characters from the town find themselves caught up in a series of dramas which force them to penetrate the strange world of faerie which is congruent with their own. The structure is almost that of a farce, people disappear and reappear constantly, every chapter ends in a cliffhanger, yet despite the plethora of characters there is a narrative drive missing from his more convoluted stories.

In the castle and its ambiguous inhabitants Wolfe has woven elements of the legend of King Arthur and the story of Hern the Hunter and the Wild Hunt, and there are traditional elements of fantasy, horror and ghost stories woven into the various narrative strands. There is, deep within the heart of it all, a skirmish within the on-going battle between good and evil. But since the struggle is eternal it cannot end here, so we never know who comes out on top. Nor do we know, for sure, which is good and which is evil. It goes beyond simple distinctions, and all the ghosts, inhabitants of faerie and other strange beings caught up in the struggle believe themselves to be on the side of right.

The result is a book as fascinating and as entertaining as any Wolfe has written, which raises the sort of unresolved questions which seem an inevitable part of his work.

Children of the Wind is a collection of five novellas which illustrates two important points. The first is that the novella is a length which is perfectly suited to science fiction. The second is that Kate Wilhelm, when writing at this length, is one of the best things that science fiction has so far come up with.

Of the stories collected here, three are from the mid-1980s, one is from as long ago as 1974, and one is published here for the first time. All are united by a mastery of language, mood and tone which is a sheer pleasure to read. And the control never slips, there are no false notes or dying falls which undo the magic woven here.

Trying to discern any unifying feature in Wilhelm's work one is forced back on a word which, in the circumstances, seems bathetic: ordinary. She is deft at weaving a spell from the ordinary minutiae of daily life: the portrayal of a marriage and a psyche under strain in the title story is utterly convincing. The cause of the strain is two hyperactive children, twins with their own private language and an intelligence shorn of adult compunction which is absolutely terrifying. Slowly, and probably as much as anything because this is a science fiction collection, one begins to discern something extraordinary in the twins, but as the story continues to haunt the memory later it becomes possible to see that there need have been nothing outlandish at all. Such is Wilhelm's skill, to make the extraordinary seem acceptable within a vividly realised ordinary world, and to elevate the ordinary into something precise and unique.

Therefore there are none of science fiction's more elaborate flights of fancy in these pages, they would not suit the quiet, domestic world she paints. But there are disturbances enough to make us question and look afresh and feel that the world of the everyday contains more than we had ever realised. A community of old people living on a sterile, post-apocalyptic world is threatened by the sudden appearance of feral children. A local girl poses for a dying artist and finds herself transformed into something possibly approaching the angelic. And in her Nebula Award winner, "The Girl Who Fell Into The Sky", a mismatched couple who come together in an isolated prairie homestead find themselves retracing the pathways of an old evil. All work their spell by making you believe implicitly in the ordinariness and the reality of the people and their situation until somewhere in among everything you had accepted you realise there must have been something which gave it all an odd, skewed, and so effective angle.

Paul Kincaid

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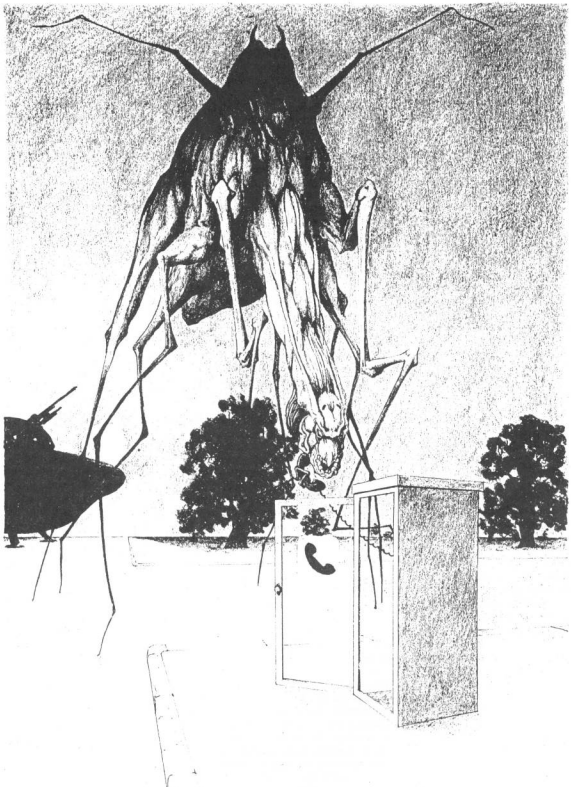

Vaclav Cochura