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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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Just Lousy With Information

Neal Stephenson Interviewed

Stephen Baxter on H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*

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Editorial

On a New Year's Day visit to Camden, I discovered that the Penguin bookshop had closed down. I remember this particular shop because it seemed to me to sum up the elements of Camden I disliked: it had a cult book section, and I always felt that if you needed a marketing category to tell you something was a cult, then you were coming to it for the wrong reasons. If it has to be explained, you won't understand it.

But cult books have re-emerged, in a joint Waterstones / Observer promotion of sixteen cult books read in 1966 and 1996. Leaving aside the arbitrariness of the thirty year gap, the two lists provide interesting reading as to what is considered cult material, and what is left out. In 1966, Beat writing is represented by Kerouac's *On the Road* and Burroughs's seminal (in all senses of the word) *The Naked Lunch*. Three other books on the list may be loosely considered fantasy: Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Peake's *Gormenghast*. No Lord of the Rings, and no science fiction: no *Dune*, no *Stranger in a Strange Land*, no *Sirens of Titan*.

The 1996 list includes William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, as well as and Jeff Noon's *Vurt* and a volume of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* on the posters, if not on the bookmarks. It also includes an Iain Banks title, *The Wasp Factory*, which was read by many sf fans before Iain M. Banks made his first appearance. Despite the boom in fantasy since the 1960s, there is still no Tolkien, nor Donaldson, nor Eddings nor Pratchett. Perhaps fantasy has now become absorbed into the nebulous genre of the bestseller, as at least the last two named authors regularly hit the top ten lists. But then so did Banks and Gibson.

The old idea of a cult book whose existence was spread by word of mouth (beyond Jeff Noon's *Vurt*) and whose audience was small but vocal seems no longer to apply. As with the (so-called) independent movie (and indie music), the cult book can have megabucks behind it in marketing campaigns. Perhaps the designation is one of literary merit: that these books are worshipped beyond their worth. But Gibson, Noon, Banks and the others on the list are all stylists. The only link in the 1996 list I see is that they are concerned with characters on the margins of society, which is perhaps where we'd like to see ourselves.

I experienced another manifestation of the cult this month: one of the branches of Waterstones in Leeds has a section of cult science fiction. Is this the place to look for, Banks, Gibson, Stephenson and Noon, and the other cult heroes of sf such as Leyner, Millar, Robbins or even Dick? No, it appears to consist entirely of *Star Trek* material: the product of a major television network and Hollywood studio. Cult has been absorbed into cultural imperialism. It seems that we have to look for another term for the books read and discussed by small but vocal audiences.

Hull, February 1996.

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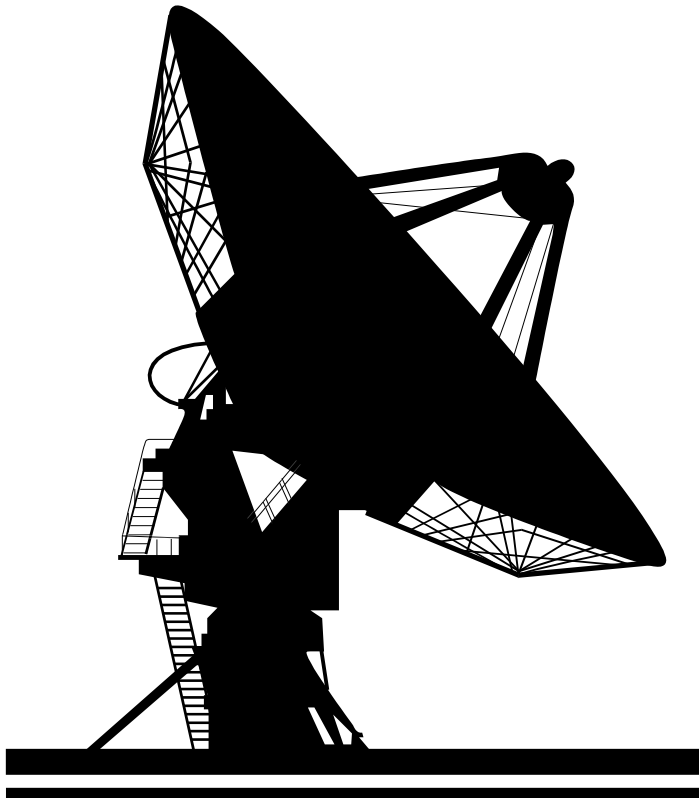
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Front Line



Despatches

Letters edited by Gary Dalkin

From John Molyneux, Runcorn

Dear Editor

Thank you for the article entitled 'Can SF be PC?'... 'redundant behaviour patterns inculcated by the old paternalist society.' ...I haven't laughed so much in ages. There is an answer of course:

'Can SF be PC?'... ..'Why on earth would it want to be?'

For those of you who explode at the 'covers which sport penis shaped rocket ships' [I haven't seen one in a good long while; but maybe anatomy has changed recently] might I recommend 'The Kodak Book of Neutral Grey Tones'.

From Jim England, Kinver

Dear Editor

The worst thing about 'Vector 184' is the two-page 'Can SF be PC?' and I don't know why it features on the front cover, nor why it appears under transparently false names. It is distasteful from the first sentence with its references to "the majority of literature" and "Dead White" males. Firstly, "the majority" is normally used to mean "the greatest number" and "most" is more appropriate [and shorter] in the context. Secondly, do the authors not realize that "Dead White" has connotations of corpses washed up on a beach, and that there is no disgrace in being either dead or white.

As for "the lessons of PC thought" do they realize that this is almost a contradiction in terms? Any person capable of independent thought uses the term "PC" ironically to denote what is currently fashionable. There can be no "correctness" in politics. It is all a matter of opinion. To think otherwise requires a sheeplike mentality

In concluding that SF is "without a future" because technology is a "masculine endeavour" and spaceships look like penises, etc., this is just shit-stirring. Maybe the authors should next try writing to a philatelic magazine informing the readers that it is silly [or non-PC] to collect stamps!

The [new] editors reply:

When we first read "Can SF be PC" we dismissed it as badly argued nonsense, and left it at that. No one is obliged to hold coherent opinions. Not even BSFA members. However, a second, more attentive reading reveals the whole thing to be a spoof, for no one would seriously construct an argument so inconsistent, so contradictory, so ridiculous. It certainly is not PC to attack people for their skin colour [white], gender [male] or degree of living-impairedness [being dead]. Anyway, we don't believe that dead people write any SF, let alone most of it. All the writers we have ever met have been very much alive - even if some do give the impression of premature brain death.

We would take Jim England to task on one point: if everything in politics is a matter of opinion, would you suggest that even concentration camps are just another manifestation of one particular opinion? The opinion that certain people have no right to exist? Or are some opinions completely unacceptable, and if so does that lead us back to some versions of political correctness?

Cognitive Mapping 2:

Language

by Paul Kincaid

The sides of the gate rose high above us, pierced at wide intervals by windows of some material thicker, yet clearer, than glass. Behind these windows we could see the moving figures of men and women, and of creatures that were neither men nor women. Cacogens, I think, were there, beings to whom the avern was but what a marigold or a marguerite is to us. Others seemed beasts with too much of men about them, so that horned heads watched us with eyes too wise, and mouths that appeared to speak showed teeth like nails or hooks. I asked Dr. Talos what these creatures were.

'Soldiers,' he said. 'The pandours of the Autarch.'

Jolenta, whose fear made her press the side of one full breast against the thigh of the man on the merychip, whispered, 'Whose perspiration is the gold of his subjects.'

The Shadow of the Torturer (1980) - Gene Wolfe

Their house stood apart from the others in a tree-fringed hollow. It opened a sleepy eye as she approached, then its doormouth parted, enveloping her in warm living air. As soon as she was inside, her cloak slid from her shoulders and scuttled over to the heart to bask in its warmth.

Mortal Remains (1995) - Christopher Evans

One of the least controversial things that the American critic Harold Bloom proclaimed in his monumental survey of *The Western Canon* (1994) was that William Shakespeare is the central figure in the entire history of Western literature. Shakespeare was the most important writer in English that the world has yet seen. But no modern edition of Shakespeare is complete without its copious notes on the language. He was writing a bare 500 years ago in a language that is still essentially the everyday language of those of us in Britain, America, Australia or anywhere in the English-speaking world, and he wrote an ordinary, demotic version of the language meant to be understood by the least educated groundlings. Yet what he wrote is frequently incomprehensible without explanatory notes, and even where it appears straightforward a shift in the meaning of a word can give it an entirely different connotation from what we might assume.

The language has changed, and continues to change. Within the lifetime of most of us, the meaning of the word 'gay' has changed fundamentally; so much so, indeed, that the work of writers of the 1920s may well require an explanatory gloss by the 2020s. At the same time, new words are entering the language at an exponential rate. A dictionary of new words published, say, in 1990, would be hopelessly out of date by now; such is the rate at which new coinages are entering the language that we could probably support one such dictionary a year, if not more.

All of which affects science fiction in a vital way. It is not just that science fiction is itself a source of neologisms (two of the most widely taken up coinages of recent years have been William Gibson's "cyberspace" and Gardner Dozois's "cyberpunk", which have themselves inspired a host of other words built upon the prefix "cyber-" or the suffix "-punk", just as, post-Watergate, the suffix "-gate" has been attached to any political scandal). It is more that neologisms are, or have become, increasingly essential in the construction of science fiction.

Consider a novel set in a future 500 years from now. Assuming that English is still, if you will pardon the expression, the *lingua franca* (and that term alone suggests it won't be), we must assume that the language will have changed at least as much as our language has changed since Shakespeare's day. More than that, however, the very stuff of science fiction is invention: new devices, new ideas, new approaches, each of which will generate words to name, describe, encompass them. Sometimes these will be new words, sometimes old words will be appropriated and given a new, subtly (or not so subtly) different meaning. Of course, words do more than simply name things, just as a new invention has a more wide-ranging effect than simply doing one set task more efficiently. Language and socio-cultural structure are intimately connected (a fact recognised by writers as varied as George Orwell in 1984 [1949] and Samuel R. Delany in *Babel-17* [1966]), so the invention of neologisms does not just name the new objects which are the signals identifying a science fiction world, they also help to introduce us to that other world.

In an article called "The Words that could Happen: Science Fiction Neologisms and the Creation of Future Worlds" (*Extrapolation*, Winter 1993), Gary Westfahl suggests a quantitative reckoning of the number of neologisms in a work of science fiction will reflect the number of new ideas. Apart from the dubious notion that new ideas is the defining feature of science fiction, this article seems to concentrate on the words alone rather than the language they represent. Samuel R. Delany is perhaps closer to the mark in his article, "About 5,750 Words" (*The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*,

1977), which proposes that science fiction is itself a language. We learn the words, and the worlds these words represent, over the period of our acquaintance with science fiction: Wells informs Clarke, Bester informs Gibson. But each new science fiction novel is a new world, which suggests that we must learn a new language with every book we pick up. The world depicted in the arcane language of Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* is very different from the Mars seen in Christopher Evans's *Mortal Remains*, learning the vocabulary of one would not help to understand the other.

What science fiction writers, and particularly those who set their stories in a far future, are actually doing is painting a world in all its complexities that we can never see. To do so, they use essentially the language we use today. Far and away the majority of words in any science fiction story will be words we know and use every day. Even in such a radical work as *Riddley Walker* (1980) by Russell Hoban, in which the whole story is cast into the debased and untravelling language of this future dark age, the shock is in the spelling. The words themselves, if we read the book phonetically, are largely familiar. Without this familiarity there is no gateway into the world, we would be locked out by incomprehension. But some hint of the alien is given by the selective quoting of words from the contemporary language, the magician's flourish that is indispensable to the illusion.

The words that are quoted, the way they are constructed, the echoes they sound of our own world, or their sheer alienness, are important for the type of illusion they are creating. The extract from Wolfe, for instance, has been chosen almost at random from a work that seems to the average reader to be clogged with strange language. The profusion of such words helps in the depiction of a world far removed from our own, so much time has passed, so many things have happened, that the language cannot even be fully translated into modern English. Yet the words are not so alien as they appear, many are drawn from or built around words that have fallen out of use, Wolfe uses the language of the past and so hints at a society that has reverted to an old pattern. Despite the alien influences that have shaped this world, it echoes a still older past, elements of the archaic appearing everywhere in the setting, the social structure, the narrative shape as well as the language.

Evans, on the other hand, has a more familiar and more traditional purpose in mind behind the neologisms he has constructed. It doesn't take much to see in the doormouth, the scuttling cloak, the heart that at first seems an apposite misprint for hearth, an anthropomorphism at work, and then, through that, a world that is biologically engineered. Our houses do not have eyes, our clothing does not have a will of its own, but it is easy for us to enter this world because the language creates it. In fact, although the opening chapter of Evans's novel (from which this short extract is taken) seems to be filled with strange and wonderful new ideas, the number of actual neologisms is very small. In the quoted paragraph there is only one, "doormouth", in itself a simple and obvious conflation of two very familiar words; it would probably score surprisingly low on Westfahl's quantitative test, but it seems you don't necessarily need new words to suggest a new language, and with it the new ideas that make up science fiction.

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Just Lousy with Information

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 GATGGTTATGGACATACTGCCTGATATTCAATAGCTAATAGGTTTCAGGACCACGAGTCAG
 ACTATGTTTAGAAGCTTACATGGACGCCTTCTTGTGCGAGCCCGACGACCTCAAGCCTGTT
 GTTCGGCCGCGACGACTACGATCTGTGGATAATGCGACTATAGATGGCATATCGATGCTCAGACGCATACTTCGGAGCGTGGAGGCCATCCACCAGGTGCTGTCTATATC
 AGTGTGTCTCCGCTCCATCATACGCTGGCACCGCCGACTTGGGGCTGACTCATCCACTGAAGCCACAAGCTCATTGCCGACCCGATCCGATCAAAATATTCACCTCTCTAT

Neal Stephenson Interviewed by
 Tanya Brown

Tanya Brown: *Snow Crash* wasn't your first novel - you'd published an eco-thriller, a campus novel and a collaboration before that - but, despite (or because of) being more of an intellectual, "literature of ideas" novel, it made a huge impact.

Neal Stephenson: It's not supposed to work that way, is it? It's supposed to be the other way round, I believe; you write the brainless sludge and that makes a great success. If you try to get fancy, nobody buys it.

TB: Why do you think *Snow Crash* was so successful?

NS: It has a hell of a lot to do with the fact that the timing, through no particular virtue of my own, was perfect. It came out just as interactive media was becoming a huge news story, and it just started to get mentioned quite a bit as being some kind of a sign post in that field. I think a lot of it was luck.

TB: Didn't it start out as a computer-generated graphic novel?

NS: At the time we were doing it, things like CD-ROM's and Internet hook-ups were not very common, to say the least. The idea was that I'd use a computer to generate the imagery for a paper graphic novel that would then be published like any other paper graphic novel. I never got far in the writing of the ... libretto, I guess ... because there was no point getting ahead of myself and there was a lot of work to do on the technology we needed. All I did was come up with a few characters and a few little vignettes involving them. Later on, when it became evident that that notion was not going to work, I just started from scratch and took some of those characters. It was certainly easier to sit down and write it from scratch than to try to take something that had been conceived for another medium and rework it. That's a recipe for some sort of disaster. All I knew was that, for example, because YT and her skateboard had been conceived for comic books, that it would be visual and if I could describe her in the right way, that might come across.

TB: It's a visually-paced novel ... with a hundred-page info-dump in the middle, where the Librarian gives Hiro a crash-course in ancient history.

NS: It used to be much worse. The entire contents of the conversations with the Librarian were in one solid slab, because it seemed to me that it had to go in one way or the other, so let's just get it over with. Then I was persuaded by cooler heads to break it up a bit. All of the historical, factual information that the Librarian presents to Hiro you can take as seriously as you want, because it's all straight from actual research. The two gods really did exist; they really did have

these things called *me*, which in some way we don't really understand were the instructions and the rules that people followed to create a civil society, and the possession of the *me* was of great importance, and they were fought over by different gods; the whole battle thing is a myth that appears in various cultures. All of that is for real; you can take it as seriously or as lightly as you would any other ancient mythology. The only thing that's really fictional is the way in which it's projected into the modern world.

TB: The *me* were effectively a social program. There's echoes of that in the Neo-Victorianism of *The Diamond Age*: the whole emphasis on the moral code.

NS: Clearly, how to run a society is a big question and we haven't quite worked it out. An approach that might have been used speculatively, thousands of years ago, was to have the people as automatons. That has its drawbacks; so, in the modern era, people are thinking for themselves - in fact, they insist on doing so. How do you run a society then? There's different paradigms for doing that, and one of them includes some kind of instruction for passing that set of rules onto the next generation - by definition, because if you have a culture that doesn't include that then it will only last for one generation. I think there are some cultures like that around right now, but not for long. In *The Diamond Age*, the government thing is gone, and it's just all these different cultures - different systems - that are propagating their sets of beliefs and behaviours through time. They all co-exist, and if you don't like the one that you happen to be in there are others available to you.

TB: In *Snow Crash*, language is portrayed as a kind of virus; you draw parallels with the *Snow Crash* virus itself. In some ways it's a rather negative way of looking at language, because we do have this negative reaction to the word "virus".

NS: The virus idea's pretty powerful, and it may be so powerful that it's possible to overuse it sometimes. It may be better to speak of systems of information that have the ability to propagate and adapt through time. Virus is a quick, simple way of saying that. Another one that's popular is "meme". In a way, when you say "this is a virus" or "that is a virus", you're making a good point; but one's also guilty of being a little bit reductionist and glib, so it's probably better to say that in many different contexts we can see systems of information that propagate and perpetuate themselves through time. Having made that observation, we should try to be a little cautious about slapping the label of virus onto all those systems and somehow treating them as though they were all diseases.

TB: On the *SF Encyclopedia* CD-ROM you spoke of music as a virus, presumably with the same limitations.

NS: When you're trying to explain this whole virus thing, you need examples. One example I've been known to use is tunes that get caught in your head. "Georgie Girl" is my *bête noire* - in fact I shouldn't even have mentioned it - once it gets into your brain it keeps going and going and you can't get it out. If you're in an elevator and you start humming it then someone else might pick it up and they might spread it. Melodies are another thing that exhibit this property that we've been talking about. I hope I never actually said, in so many words, that music is a virus.

TB: I was fascinated by the concept of the Wet Net in *The Diamond Age* - running in parallel to, but unconnected to, the old-fashioned hardware side- the concept of nanosites infecting various other humans by the "exchange of bodily fluids".

NS: I think we've all been fascinated and horrified by the notion that there are these unintelligent but highly effective information-carriers that spread through sex particularly, and that during intercourse not only can there be transmission of the information needed to create a new human being, but at the same time there can be transmission of deadly information that can destroy whole swathes of humanity. That's just a staggering concept. It brings home the notion that we are all repositories for genetically-encoded information that we're all spreading back and forth amongst each other, all the time. We're just lousy with information. In our DNA we've got enormous amounts of junk DNA in each of our cells that's left-over vestiges from when we were frogs and amoebas. It's still there and it still tags along in all of our cells, and it will probably always be there. In these times of rampant Internet excitement, it seemed natural to try to make the jump from that to the notion of a wet Internet that would spread information as we have described. I think it's an SF writer's duty to freak people out, so you've got to throw in the occasional bit of stuff like that.

TB: And the idea about spontaneous human combustion?

NS: That's a tie-in with a lot of Joseph Campbell's work on mythology. Campbell divides all mythological systems into two very broad categories -the one of the hunter-gatherers, and after that, the Way of The Seed, the agricultural societies. The transition that seems to happen between the two is that agricultural societies have a lot of sacrifice, particularly human sacrifice. The big advance of Christianity is that we do it symbolically. We don't actually have to kill people, or indeed animals. There are a lot of other ancient cultures in which there was a whole lot of sacrificing going on. The statistics on how many people the Aztecs killed are just unbelievable; they would kill 20,000 people in a weekend. I thought there was a nice tie-in to that neo-primitive thing, there; there's some technical justification for it in that it's been established that one of the major problems - design challenges - with nanotech computers is that they would generate a tremendous amount of waste heat. A great deal of engineering would have to go into building systems to carry away the waste heat so that they wouldn't just explode. If you started up one of these computers in a building, it would just incinerate the whole block. That's the

underlying technological justification, if there is one, for the thing that you're referring to.

Once I started learning about nanotech, basically just by reading Drexler's book *Nanosystems*, I decided on the one hand that one couldn't responsibly write SF without talking about this any more. On the other hand, I felt that a lot of the speculation that I was seeing about nanotech and how it might be used was not very well thought out, because - at least according to Drexler's explanation of the subject - it would be tremendously effective in some areas. There would be clear limits on what it could accomplish; for example, if these machines were exposed to light or to air they would be instantly destroyed. It would be like opening up the back of a fine Swiss watch and dumping sand into it. It seemed like the time was ripe to try to write a book that, on the one hand, didn't ignore nanotech, but on the other hand didn't just make it equivalent to magic - capable of being a *deus ex machina* for any purpose that the author wanted to achieve.

TB: Reading *The Diamond Age*, I was reminded of the way you explored the relation between information and ethics in *Snow Crash*. Information doesn't have a moral tag attached to it; what's done with it and who is allowed to access it is where the ethical decisions come - the ethical aspect of the story.

NS: We're in a bit of a pinch - we've got this basic belief in freedom of speech, but it's difficult to say "You can say whatever you want as long as it's not encrypted". If we're going to be consistent and advocate freedom of speech we have to advocate freedom of encrypted speech too. But what if what's encrypted turns out to be child porn or a murder plot? That's the bind we're in right now. The easiest and least thoughtful approach is to say, "Well, we won't allow encrypted speech; we'll place limits on what kind of encryption can be used". That's what the US government's trying to do right now. It's a really bad idea because the genie is out of the bottle, cryptologically. Even if that were the morally correct position, it's no longer a wise position, because it's too late; it's not going to work. Instead we have to face up to the fact that in the future anyone who wants it will be able to hide their speech from the most powerful governments and corporations on earth. That's the situation today. I have a program on my laptop that can do it. That being the case, what should we do? How should we respond to possible unethical uses of this? I think that society will find ways to adapt to that, but it's not going to be a straightforward or a simple process; it's going to cause some changes in how society's organised, and it's also going to involve some subtle technical tricks that may take awhile to implement.

TB: *The Diamond Age* struck me as in part a novel about making ethical decisions. Hackworth's decision to steal the original primer is a crime; he feels that he's doing it for the greater good. Then he decides to make it available to thousands of unwanted female children. You go into the way in which he weighs up those two decisions, and the morass of ethical decisions which entailed from those.

NS: That's one of the charms of the Victorian novel - you've got these people who have a strong concept of right and wrong, who sincerely believe in it. They're not weasels; they're people trying to do what is right, and they - through

no fault of their own - find themselves in complicated situations and they have to muddle through. The decisions that they make with their imperfect information can have elaborate and unforeseen consequences. It's that kind of thing that makes the Victorian era such an ideal setting for a novelist. That's why people keep reading - and writing - those novels.

TB: You've created an expanded and reworked Victorian code that exists as a framework for ethical decisions; the neo-Victorians in contrast to the neo-primitive Drummers, and to the trivial and short-lived societies which made up other phyles. It's a more positive view of the Victorian ethos than is usual in modern writing.

NS: It's cheap and easy to bash away at the Victorians. It's partly because a lot of people seem to have a pretty cartoonish view of what that era was like - that everybody was a pompous buffoon. Some smart person said that the past is not just the present dressed up in funny clothes. There's more complexity and intelligence in the behaviour of those people than we sometimes give them credit for. If you go back and read biographies of that period you find that although the image is one of repression and conformity, in some ways they seem to tolerate eccentric behaviour and original behaviour better than modern-day society does. It just did it in a different way. We hear about how Oscar Wilde was treated, and that was a shabby and terrible thing; but at the same time there were a lot of other gay men and women in Victorian society who had ways of working things out. They were tolerated in a different way from what we now think of as tolerance. There were all of these really odd characters like Sir Richard Francis Burton running around, leading completely bizarre lives; there's a lot more complexity to Victorian culture than it's generally credited with. In a lot of ways it does compare favourably to our own today, and I keep wanting to ask people, "If modern culture is so wonderful, then why's everything so screwed up?"

TB: *Zodiac*, your environmental novel of 1988, also concerned itself with ethics - in that instance, the ethics of environmentalism and the green movement. What are your views on the organisations that carry out that sort of environmental action - Greenpeace, for example?.

NS: The thing that impressed me about Greenpeace - at least the last time I was current on the subject, back in the '80s - was not so much their daring and skill at doing these operations, as their amazing facility for manipulating the media. The media are so soft-headed that they cry out to be manipulated; they deserve whatever they get. It's a point that I try to make in *Zodiac*, that this guy has a lot of technical skill, and he is good at these operations, but he's got this essentially contemptuous view of the media as this instrument that he can manipulate at will. He doesn't even derive any satisfaction from manipulating them, because it's so easy. I don't think that's changed. Looking at the Shell thing - the media ate it up, then Greenpeace came out recently and said "We were wrong". Which was good of them, it enhances their credibility to my eyes that they admitted that; but it doesn't do much for my view of the

media, that they lapped it up. I don't get any more outraged at Greenpeace than I might otherwise because I don't agree in every particular with what they're espousing, but for the most part it's pretty harmless stuff, like "Let's control toxic waste. Let's not nuke things. Let's try to keep major species from becoming extinct." That's all perfectly reasonable, and as I may have indicated, my opinion of the media is so low that when they are manipulated I don't care, because everything that appears in the media is one way or another a result of direct, conscious manipulation by someone. It's not as though the media depiction of Greenpeace is any more focused than anything else that appears in the media. The only thing that I take issue with is that sometimes they get things wrong - as with Shell - and sometimes they just are a little flaky. They make a tremendous exercise about issues that have a lot of media appeal but that are not intrinsically that important. The example of that in *Zodiac* is where they refer to the baby seals as their "furry fund-raisers".

TB: After *Zodiac*, you wrote *Interface*, as a pseudonymous collaboration. I don't think it's ever been available in the UK. What's the story?

NS: My uncle is a history professor, and he and I have now written two novels together; *Interface*, and *The Cobweb*, which will be published in the States next summer. We've got ideas for a few of these things.

In *Interface*, they've chosen 100 Americans who represent a cross-section of the electorate, and they've paid each one of these Americans to wear a little wrist-watch with a little TV which shows coverage of election-related events.

It's also got sensors that react to their emotional reaction, and radios that data into headquarters. The data's run through a computer to figure out what the ramifications are in terms of electoral votes, and then it's piped to the chip in the politician's head. The guy becomes the ultimate politician in that he can do a flip-flop in mid-sentence, if he senses that the electorate doesn't like what he's just said. That's the basic premise; the politician in this case is a decent and likeable guy who's got this thing in his head through no particular fault of his own, and is having to fight against it at the same time as it's controlling him.

TB: Do you see that level of control, of reaction, to be where the US political system is going?

NS: It's pretty close. During Reagan's last campaign they almost had it set up that way; he was doing a debate, and they had a real-time poll going in Portland, Oregon. The debate was in Ohio, but they were monitoring peoples' reactions in Oregon, and telephoning the data to someone who was standing off-stage, about six feet away from Reagan. He wasn't quite able to close the loop and give direct feedback to Reagan, but it would have been trivial to set that up. It's a simple thought experiment; take the situation as we have it now and exaggerate it.

TB: Any chance of *Interface* appearing here?

NS: Penguin bought it at the same time as *The Diamond Age*, so I would imagine that they're going to publish it pretty soon.

They refer to baby seals as their "furry fund-raisers".

TB: What's *The Cobweb* about?

NS: It's about a lowly homely deputy county sheriff in a county in Iowa. This county has two towns; one's a university town, the other's a depressed industrial town. The sheriff starts to figure out that the Iraqi graduate students at the university are up to no good. It's set in 1990, before and leading up to the Gulf War; he's in the awkward position of strongly suspecting that something really naughty is going on with these Iraqis, but having limited credibility and limited resources to work on. It's a page-turner. The Stephen Bury stuff is our little stab at writing enjoyable, fun, mass-market fiction; you won't find anything about Sumerian deities in there.

TB: Do you think cyberpunk, as a genre, is still active?

NS: There's some distance to go yet. It seems to bring in new people; I like Simon Ings' work; I haven't read Jeff Noon yet, due to the unfortunate bankruptcy of his publishers, but I hear nothing but good about him. My reaction when I saw Gibson's work, was to say "Oh, that's really cool, I have to try that". That's how I got into it; I get the sense that there are other writers who are still doing that, and there's certainly no shortage of subject matter to be delved into. Naturally, when a book becomes successful, there's often a rush to capitalise on it, so one sees a certain number of knock-offs coming onto the market. I don't begrudge them that. If you see a bunch of those it's easy to become discouraged about the genre, and think it's dead. But new stuff keeps coming along. If one book in ten, or one in twenty, is really interesting that's a pretty good ratio.

TB: One comment about *Snow Crash* was that it was "William Gibson with laughs". How do you feel about that?

NS: Any comparison with Gibson is one that I'll gladly and gratefully accept. If people think it has laughs then that's also nice. I tried to put some funny stuff in there and so it's good that some people are laughing. One reaction I get in a small number of cases, which always pisses me off, is that there are people who are always dismissive about any book that has humorous content; anything that has the occasional laugh in it can't possibly be taken seriously. That always gets my dander up, but I don't see it that often. I saw it more when *Snow Crash* was pretty new. Now it seems to have some established credibility and people who are inclined to think that way may be a bit more cautious about saying so.

TB: Cyberpunk - the genre - has been accused of portraying women in a somewhat stereotyped, cardboard manner. You, on the other hand, seem to have produced a series of strong female characters - YT, Nell.

NS: The situations that women find themselves in are, in a lot of ways, intrinsically more interesting than men's situations. The classic male protagonist is a lone wolf, like Hiro Protagonist - which can make for a great yarn, but it's not very real. You could write a character, a guy who has family and attachments; I guess that's what Hackworth is. But Hackworth goes off on his own for a long time. It's intrinsically more complicated, and therefore more interesting, to write about women. I think it's because, to make a generalisation, they're just more patched into a whole web of people, and they can handle those connections without in some way compromising who they are. This lone-wolf thing seems like a pretty silly, simple-minded view by comparison.

TB: One last question: does YT appear in *The Diamond Age*?

NS: I have established a strict policy against taking any stance on that.

The Novels of Neal Stephenson

The Big U, (1984), [New York, Vintage, no UK edition]

Zodiac: The Eco-Novel (1988), Bloomsbury: 1988.

Snow Crash, (1992), Roc: 1993.

The Diamond Age, or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer (1995), Viking: 1995.

A short story,

"The Great Simolean Caper" which appeared in *Time* magazine [Spring 1995 Volume 145, No. 12] is available on the World Wide Web at <http://kuoi.asui.uidaho.edu/~kamikaze/documents/simoleon.html>

Novels Written with George F. Jewsbury, as Stephen Bury

Interface, (1994), [New York: Bantam; UK rights owned by Penguin].

The Cobweb (forthcoming, New York: Bantam, August 1996.)

(With special thanks to Eric A. Johnson, Library of Congress, for additional details)

The Invisible Man

With the centenary of H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance* approaching, **Stephen Baxter** takes a look at the new Everyman edition of a classic scientific romance

The Invisible Man was first published in 1897, in the middle of Wells's most fertile period as an author of scientific romances. It was written after *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), but before *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901).

Now Everyman have brought us a new scholarly edition of the novel. The publishing history of Wells's early novels was complex, with many editions and serialisations being involved; this version is based on the first American edition. It comes complete with notes on the author, a chronology, a good introduction by MacDonald Daly of the University of Nottingham, line-by-line notes on the text, and a comprehensive round-up of critical reactions and analyses.

The Invisible Man is the story of Griffin, an overreaching, amoral scientist typical of much of Wells's early work. As a young science student Griffin begins a series of experiments into physical invisibility. His motivation is an unstructured dream of power. Eight years later he finally succeeds in his goal - and immediately confronts a series of unforeseen obstacles which render his ambitions absurd: he is invisible but any clothes aren't, so he is forced to go naked; he is still subject to weather, collisions and assaults, the attention of dogs, hunger ...

Griffin's career as the Invisible Man begins with violence - he torches his lodging house - and he later descends to robbery, brutality and murder. Finally he is hunted down and killed; in an eerie final scene, his corpse becomes visible as life recedes: "First came the little white nerves, a hazy grey sketch of a limb, then the glassy bones and intricate arteries, then the flesh and skin ..." (p135.)

Wells uses a battery of techniques to convince us of the reality of this fantasy. He never uses the viewpoint of Griffin himself; we always 'see' him through the eyes, actions and thoughts of others. Indeed, to aid suspension of disbelief, Wells hints that the events of the novel have somehow been reported to him by the surviving characters: "Mr Henfrey ... was confronted by this bandaged person. He was, he says, 'taken aback'." (p9.) And in later passages, when Griffin is alone, Wells shows himself as reconstructing Griffin's actions with intelligent guesswork. (Here, Wells is aiming for plausibility but also a deliberate distancing from Griffin, with whom, as we shall see, we are not meant to sympathise.)

In structure the novel is a book of two halves. In the first the Invisible Man - unnamed but already fully transparent - blunders farcically about Iping, a peaceful Sussex village. This scenario enables Wells to reveal the invisibility detail by detail, in pleasing detective-fiction style: the gaping bandages over the transparent face, the

empty sleeve ... In the second half Griffin tries to form an alliance with Kemp, an old college friend, and Griffin tells, in retrospect, the story of how his researches led him to his invisibility formula. Here we can enjoy some classic sfnal sleight-of-hand as Wells justifies invisibility. Wells draws analogies like clear sea creatures, the transparency of paper doped with oil, and the invisibility of glass in water, and throws in a few scientific terms like 'refractive index' and 'Roentgen vibrations'. But as to the details: "I will tell you ... all the complicated processes. We need not go into that now ..." But of course he never does; the 'explanation' is misdirection, a thing of smoke and mirrors.

With this two-part structure Wells is aiming to get the best of both worlds - the air of mystery surrounding the revelation of his central conceit, and the later pseudo-science justification. But the structure isn't entirely successful; the disjoint between the sections is a little obvious.

The early Iping adventures read as slapstick comedy - we aren't sure whether to pity or mock Griffin here, and we laugh at the gap between Griffin's ambitions and the reality: naked, hungry and cold, he bullies a tramp to do his bidding, saying "'An invisible man is a man of great power.' He stopped for a moment to sneeze violently" (p43). But in the book's second half we must believe that Griffin, driven by his ambition to rule the world through a 'Reign of Terror', is a vicious killer, if not actually insane. Wells, apparently keen to force us to lose sympathy with Griffin, throws in several gratuitous touches to convince us of Griffin's viciousness, such as robbing his own father - who then shoots himself - and knocking aside a small child and breaking her ankle. Wells here wishes to depict Griffin as an overreaching scientist in the Moreau mould. But this portrayal sits uneasily with the exuberant comedy of much of the book and is thereby far less convincing.

By comparison, there isn't much slapstick in *The Island of Dr Moreau*.

The Invisible Man - as the editor of this edition shows - has been largely neglected by subsequent generations of critics. Perhaps this is partly because, unlike some of Wells's other classic notions, invisibility is not a resonant sfnal trope.

For one thing, as Griffin's story shows, invisibility isn't actually much use. Subsequent exploitations of the theme have often descended into absurdity - witness *Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man* (1951), and the US tv series of the 1970s starring David McCallum and his skin-coloured face mask ...

Also we have to confront an essential implausibility. While we can still believe in time and space travel and extraterrestrial life, invisibility today seems

rather absurd. Wells himself was aware of some logical problems: he pointed out - in a letter to Arnold Bennett a month after publication - that an invisible man, with transparent retinae, must be blind. (And besides, as Jorge Luis Borges pointed out in an essay in 1946, with transparent eyelids [p. 91] how could Griffin ever sleep? Wells does not follow up this hellish notion.) It isn't hard to find other nitpicks in the book itself. Substances become visible when they are detached from Griffin's body, or before they are fully absorbed - spilled blood, half-digested food in his stomach. But if so, how come his 'dead' hair, beard and nails aren't visible? (On p. 87 we are told that an invisible cat's claws remain visible.)

There are more fundamental flaws in the notion which have limited the longer-term power of invisibility as an sf trope. In *Profiles of the Future* (1962), Arthur Clarke pointed out that there are billions of complex chemicals in Griffin's body, all of which would have to be reworked to become invisible; and besides, many of life's biochemical reactions would be thrown out of kilter if the molecules taking part in them were made transparent. In later sf, the Wellsian idea of (what Clarke calls) objective invisibility has tended to go out of style; rather we find subjective invisibility - caused by camouflage, drugs and hypnotism, social pressures, psychological distortions. In Robert Silverberg's "To See the Invisible Man" (1963) criminals are isolated by other people who simply refuse to see them. Chris Priest's *The Glamour* (1984) is a typically multilayered take on subjective invisibility, with the idea being connected to memory loss, and a final ambiguity as to whether the invisibility is 'real' or not.

In the end we must regard *The Invisible Man* as not one of Wells's finest scientific romances. But it remains, nevertheless, an important step in Wells's development. Although like earlier works it features a singular figure - the driven scientist, as in *Time Machine* and *Moreau* - it also anticipates later portrayals of realistic, fleshed-out societies. As such it is a transitional work, leading both to the 'faction' of *War of the Worlds* and to the techniques of the later social comedies such as *Kipps* (1905) and *Mr Polly* (1910).

And the novel, for all its flaws, also has a great deal of power. Daly shows how one source of inspiration for Wells must have been the tale of the Ring of Gyges, told in Plato's *The Republic* - a key work for Wells in many other ways - in which Gyges, a shepherd, stumbles on a magic invisibility ring and is immediately corrupted by power. Wells updates this fable. It becomes necessary for Griffin to construct his invisibility device over eight years; his power-compulsion is the more disturbing for this sustained, deliberate effort. It is possible Wells was

paralleling Griffin's gradual withdrawal into invisibility with the moral bankrupt's withdrawal into social isolation. He is also showing the absurdity of technical 'power' without a comparable connection to social power, and how limited is the thinking behind some wish-fulfilment fantasies, when confronted with the mundane reality of such places as Iping: "Ambition - what is the good of pride of place when you cannot appear there?" (p. 111).

The novel is besides a vigorous work, full of incident and - characteristically for young Wells - much violence. There are many startling sf details, such as the description of Griffin smoking. Wells's use of his central notion is typically memorable, spawning a good Hollywood treatment in 1933: Arthur Clarke has acknowledged the power of the scene in which Claude Rains unwraps his invisible head. Some of the deeper aspects of Wells's myth may also have found expression in such works as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a novel about the social invisibility of blacks in America.

And Wells, as so often, succeeds in synthesising a new sf trope - and seeing immediately the grisly power of that trope. In *War of the Worlds*, Wells, writing fifty years before Cold War paranoia, perceptively picked out the fear of the unknown which lies at the heart of so much of our thinking about extraterrestrials. And in *The Invisible Man* we are left, in the end, with the horror of the unseen hunter which fuels the most striking invisibility tales, such as *Predator* (1987): "Fear came striding by, rushed ahead of him, and in a moment had seized the town. 'The Invisible Man is coming! The Invisible Man!' ..." (p. 64).

The Everyman series of affordable Wells paperbacks is a worthy effort, but not without its critics.

The editions vary in style and quality: the recent 'Centennial' edition of *The Time Machine*, for example, was a notable improvement on the earlier version, but its style is disconcertingly different from that employed on *The Invisible Man*. Besides, there must be many potential new readers of Wells's classic novels who are more interested in the tales themselves than academic wrappings, and who may be reluctant to shell out the 4.99 cover price for a 99-year-old, 55,000-word novel, accompanying notes or not.

In the US, where Wells is out of copyright, Penguin have produced a 95¢ edition of *The Time Machine*, equivalent to our Penguin 60s. Such an edition of the novels over here would surely multiply Wells's modern audience manyfold. But we're unlikely to see it as long as the books remain in copyright in Europe. So, for many modern readers, *The Invisible Man* will itself remain invisible.

Steven Baxter wrote *The Time Ships*, an authorized sequel to Wells's *The Time Machine* and the next issue of *Vector* will feature an article by him on *The Time Machine*. Penguin have published a cheap edition of extracts from *The Time Machine* in the UK. The Everyman edition of *The Invisible Man* is priced £4.99.

First Impressions

Reviews of Hardback and Paperback Originals

Edited by Paul Kincaid

David Alexander

Star Trek Creator: The Authorized Biography of Gene Roddenberry
Boxtree, 1995, 599pp, £8.99

Leonard Nimoy

I Am Spock
Century, 1995, 342pp, £16.99

It is interesting to compare the approaches used in these two books which, on the face of it, cover similar material. But they are very different in style, presentation and, occasionally, viewpoint.

Nimoy's book charts the curious relationship he has had with Spock, in chronological order with backfilling where necessary. Although not exactly a biography, it is easy to follow and picks up from his 1975 book, *I Am Not Spock*. In fact, Nimoy is very careful to set the record straight about that book, freely admitting that he made a mistake in choosing that particular title. In this new book he uses the same tactic of creating dialogues between himself and Spock to illustrate particular points, a quirky way of showing rather than telling that generally works well. Yet the book reflects not only the conflict and resolution between Spock's human and Vulcan halves, but also that between Spock and Nimoy, allowing it to be read on more than one level.

The reader is treated to Nimoy's view of events, travelling through time with Nimoy, Spock and the rest of the cast of *Star Trek*. There is much commentary on various episodes, changes in background personnel and how they affected the series and films. His graciousness and tact deserve credit: he loyally praises the talents and supports the decisions of those he agrees with, yet lets the reader in on disagreements with colleagues in such a charming and disarming way that

there is no doubt that the disagreement is genuine (and usually for sound reasons) yet there is still the feeling that he is being very complimentary. (Cynics might argue that a man who wishes to continue working steadily should be.) Overall, this is a gentle read, the humour quirky rather than a belly-laugh, but it is entertaining nevertheless.

The Roddenberry biography starts with an Introduction by Majel Barrett Roddenberry, followed by a Foreword by Ray Bradbury and the author's preface and acknowledgements. The book is a choppy and disorganised read in which the same events are returned to on several occasions. After a Prologue in which Roddenberry's death is described in over-sentimental detail and which reads more like a novel than a biography, chapter one then leaps back to his birth. I suppose this is intended as dramatic contrast, but it didn't make me want to read on.

The first seven chapters mainly concern Roddenberry's background and development as a writer, it is with chapter eight that *Star Trek* springs into prominence. So many memos and letters are included that it had my reaction oscillating back and forth between irritation and interest; Nimoy does this far less, and only where necessary to supply the background to a particular incident, Alexander seems to have included them just for the sake of it. Perhaps this is aimed at the ardent Trekkie, while there is such a lot of information about the TV and film making hierarchy that the book will also appeal to dedicated TV and movie buffs and people who like reading about the famous. As a biography, however, the book failed for me. At the end I didn't feel I knew much about Roddenberry the man, and what I did know didn't endear him to me. But I knew a lot about the politics behind the making of *Star Trek* and something of the difficulties Roddenberry faced as writer-producer.

Despite the common subject matter, these two books are very different in outlook and approach. Where there is overlap the two viewpoints are often quite contrasting, especially when it comes to the in-studio politics which both books explore as a necessary background to the making of *Star*

Trek. For me, that was the most interesting aspect of reading these books together: at times alternate realities were presented, each, perhaps, equally valid.

Helen Gould

Greg Bear (Ed)

New Legends Legend, 1995, 419pp, £15.99

It took me a long time to work out why this anthology left me feeling so dissatisfied, despite the fact that it contains good stories (some of them excellent) by a variety of good writers (some of them, not necessarily the same, excellent). This anthology is the wrong way round.

The anthology has been given the title *New Legends*, presumably and simply because it was commissioned and published by Legend. But Greg Bear has chosen to take the title as if it is a theme. He spends a large part of his ham-fisted introduction trying to set the theme up without coming close to explaining what he means by legend, or putting the stories that follow into any kind of context. The introduction is followed by 'Elegy' by Mary Rosenblum, a beautifully-written story, worthy rather than good, a sensitive psychological study tied up with medical advances in the treatment of Alzheimer's Disease and coincidentally with communication with creatures of the sea: this is neither the story one would normally choose to open an anthology, nor is it anything to do with any of the vague themes Bear has just been waffling around. It doesn't help that the next story in the anthology is 'A Desperate Calculus' by Sterling Blake (which seems to be a pseudonym for Gregory Benford, a writer who also has another story and an article under his own name in this anthology). 'A Desperate Calculus' is a routine tale of eco-terrorism which hinges on a series of sexually intimate letters between the two protagonists which actually serve as a code – after such a dismal offering one begins to despair of the anthology ever taking off.

It begins to do so a couple of stories later with 'Coming of Age in Karhide' by Ursula K. Le Guin, one of her finely judged sociological tales about how human aliens are. This tale takes us back to Gethen, the world of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin seems to be assiduously revisiting old haunts in her recent fiction), and tells of a young person coming to adulthood, a process which allows Le Guin to make a number of telling points about human sexual attitudes. But it is another couple of stories later, and a stunning piece by Paul J. McAuley, 'Recording Angel', which finally convinces you that this is an anthology worth reading. The stories so far have been decent science fiction, but this story suddenly takes us into the realms of science fiction as legend. It is a story which conveys all the haunting, half-grasped mystery of an incomprehensibly distant future with the sort of poetic inference that marked works such as 'Day Million' by Frederik Pohl or 'The Dance of the Changer and the Three' by Terry Carr. We are on a world we can barely comprehend, peopled by a race whose actions and attitudes are driven by something millions of years beyond our understanding, and into this dusty entropic place a figure out of the past arrives, a figure that the world's professional rememberer tries and fails to bring within his scheme of things.

Other excellent stories follow, notably 'Rorvik's War' by Geoffrey A. Landis about the many deaths of an ordinary soldier in a cruel near-future war, and 'One' by George Alec Effinger which follows a quest for other life forms out into the cold vastness of a universe which turns out to be not only impersonal but utterly devoid of life. These are chilly, haunting stories, but of all the other stories in the book only one matches McAuley's mythic resonance, and only one is actually a better story. The better story is, in fact, not science fiction at all; 'Radiance' by Carter Scholz, returning to fiction after an absence of too many years, is an insightful account of morality and personal conscience among physicists whose work is being bent by the demands of the Cold War. There are no new wonders, no epic discoveries, in fact the focus of research in the story probably won't work at all except by distorting the figures, and because of the subject matter it actually belongs to the time before the break-up of the Soviet Empire, yet it is a superb example of something that is surprisingly all too rare in science fiction – a story about working scientists.

The story which matches McAuley's in tone, though I think it is by a whisker the weaker work, is actually the last story in the book. 'Wang's Carpets' by Greg Egan is also set in an unimaginably distant future, in this instance on a starship peopled by beings so far descended from us that we probably would be unable to recognise them. These are people with absolute control over their bodily appearance, and the story

of their encounter with something alien is so packed with science fictional concepts that it would probably be meaningless to anyone not already familiar with the language of science fiction. It is a story, in short, which exploits the legend that is science fiction: as Bear says in his introduction to the story, it ‘anchored for me the theme of this anthology’. Which it does, it sets up the way science fiction builds on its own legend in a way that, looking back, can be seen to resonate in many (though not all) of the other stories in this volume. In other words, this should have been the keynote, the story that opened the anthology to set the tone for everything that followed. It is in exactly the wrong place within the book – but as I said, this volume is back to front.

Finally, Greg Bear rounds the whole thing off with a brief, telling and effective ‘Epilog’ which, if it had stood in place of the Introduction, would have made a lot more sense of what he was trying to do with the volume. It is as if he only knew what his anthology was about when he had finished the whole thing.

As a random collation of some first class examples of contemporary science fiction, this volume is superb. As an anthology, it does not hold together. When you read it, you might be best advised to start at the back and work forwards.

Paul Kincaid

Orson Scott Card *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus*
Tor, 1996, 351pp, \$23.95

Orson Scott Card can now reasonably claim a place among the top flight of American sf writers, his clear sense of mission becoming more and more evident novel by novel. His latest is a time-travel story prepared with typical diligence (there’s a three-page reading list at the end) and packed with the results of a lot of hard thinking – and it makes the reader think as well.

In a future world congratulating itself (unwisely) that it is solving all major environmental and economic problems, a new scientific breakthrough enables researchers to view, but not participate in, the events of the past. Looking through screens, the highly trained members of Pastwatch can search the complicated fine detail of past events, enabling some fortunate ones to pinpoint those key moments after which subsequent trends become inevitable.

Naturally, a few Pastwatchers have a social conscience, longing to intervene, critical of the events they view and the consequences they detect. At the same time, other scientists are becoming uneasily aware of growing environmental crises, with disasters lining up in the immediate (sadly unviewable) future. If only they could intervene, alter the time-lines, change the past for the benefit of the future and the redemption of humanity! Yes, we’ve come across that before, in Asimov’s *The End of Eternity* for instance, but never quite in this way. Here the ethics of intervention, should it prove possible, are well explored *before* any further experimentation takes place. Then the surprise: evidence is found that just such an intervention has already happened – irrevocably changing Christopher Columbus’s mind so that he set his sights on travelling westward instead of going east to help quell Islam, his original plan.

Which brings us to the Big Idea, towards which we can now see several of Card’s novels have recently been delicately nudging us: what is really wrong with our times, and a threat to our future, stems from nothing less than the conquest of the Americas by Europeans. Had not Columbus, already promising gold, returned from his Caribbean adventure at the time he did – and had the Mexican, Caribbean and Amerindian peoples been more developed, united and ready for invasion – the

conquest and subsequent pillage of the Americas, and all that flowed from it, might never have happened. A more honourable relationship might have developed between European and indigenous American people, and the present USA with all it represents might not have come into being. Card wisely does not stress the last bit, but black African Tagiri:

had already made up her mind. The Europeans had had their future, had fulfilled their most potent dreams, and it was their future that now was the dark past of her world, the consequences of their choices that now were being scoured from the Earth.

So the Pastwatch experimenters get to work, and of course a method of possible intervention is discovered. A plan is painstakingly prepared for simultaneously sending three people back into different places and times, with detailed instructions that will change (again!) the course of history. The three are Kemal, a Moslem, Diko, a black woman, and Hunahpu, a Mexican – a nicely balanced racial mix.

We see a lot of Cristoforo Colon (Columbus) during this novel, and learn a great deal (which Card has zealously researched) about the Caribbean peoples towards whom his caravels unwittingly sailed. We are pushed through a lot of argument – about the merits and demerits of slavery, the ethics of intervention, and the worries of Pastwatch members who, if their scheme is successful, will wink into non-existence together with their families and friends – but the book reads easily, the narrative logic is convincing and the characterisation well differentiated. As a result, we never question how the Pastwatch technology might work nor whether the interveners will reach their precise time and place.

And we are given good cause to re-examine the standard historical accounts we have previously taken for granted. Card’s Alvin Maker books look back at the early USA and quietly offer new alternative heroes with very different sets of values. Now, in *Pastwatch*, we re-assess Columbus, whose day is still annually celebrated throughout the USA. My only worry, on finishing this book, is that its time engineers are seen as goodies, operating just once (although for the second ‘time’). If intervention to alter the direction of history becomes really practical, where will it stop, and what happens if some gang of malevolent idiots discover the technology?

Norman Beswick

I.F. Clarke (Ed) The Tale of the Next Great War, 1871-1914
Liverpool University Press, 1995, 382pp, £32.00, £12.95 pb

When war comes no-one seems prepared for it, no matter how much the people find they can bear when it happens. In World War One no-one had been prepared for men to live for four years in trenches; in World War Two no-one had foreseen that, despite the inconveniences of air raids, war production on all sides would increase and extend the war. The Gulf War seems to have been no different. All this despite the continuous warnings and predictions of military experts, journalists, scientists and sf authors – for predicting the military future goes back a long way.

Voices Propheying War by I.F. Clarke is the standard study of that sub-genre of sf. Now he has edited this big anthology of stories, beginning with Chesney's 'The Battle of Dorking' from 1871 and ending with 'Frankreichs Ende in Jahre 19??' which was published, like Conan Doyle's 'Danger', in 1914. Before this, the only collection of such stories has been Michael Moorcock's 1975 anthology, *Before Armageddon*, but there were so many stories in the period that only two from Moorcock's six are re-printed among Clarke's sixteen. (Moorcock included Saki's *When William Came* in a second volume, which was rather a waste, seeing that it is easily available in the one volume *Collected Works*. Clarke does not use it.)

The usual question raised about these stories is how much they contributed to the spirit of war: did 1914 have to happen? In his introduction Clarke says 'The guiding principle in these stories was: tomorrow's wars begin today', but the odd sensation in some of them is their realism in describing the horrors of war. Chesney writes:

I found Travers, sitting with his back against the bank. A ball had gone through his lungs, and blood was coming from his mouth. I was lifting him up, but the cry of agony he gave stopped me. I then saw that this was not his only wound ...

and he goes on to describe the wounds and the pain. There had been future war writers before Chesney, but he had the advantage of joining the new growth of magazine publishing – *Blackwood's* magazine in his case, others come from *Pearson's* and *The Strand*. It was *Blackwood's*, too, that published Ernest Swinton's 'The Green Curve' in 1907, which

George Orwell called 'an old favourite of my boyhood'. This was not only an English style, though, and Clarke has examples of German, French and American authors. Gustaf Janson, who was Swedish, describes an air battle between Italian and Turkish forces fought in Libya, which includes the bombing of a field hospital.

Michael Moorcock labelled his anthology 'A Collection of Fantasy Fiction', which suggests no close relationship between these stories and the spirit of war; and in his study, *The Scaremongers: The Advocacy of War and Rearmament 1896-1914* A.J.A. Morris gives the rôle of future war stories almost no credence. William LeQueux gets a one-page mention and there's nothing else – Morris puts the blame firmly on the military correspondents of the main newspapers, who were in close touch with both political and military leaders. On the other hand, some of these stories had huge sales and surely must have had some influence, or at least they reveal an audience who could tolerate such ideas. For a hundred years from 1815 to 1914 there was no major European war, but for the last forty years of the period there was clearly a demand for something else. Perhaps our simplistic understanding does not help us, after all there were wars in the period, even if we don't know about them all (like the Italo-Turkish war of 1911) and as we move away in time we forget. Hugh Grattan Donnelly's 'The Stricken Nation' from 1890 describes Britain devastating the USA in a war allegedly fought to preserve Canadian fishing stocks (something still in the news). The only reference I can find to such an enormous rivalry is in Orwell, where he describes a character in 'Boy's Weeklies': 'Fisher T. Fish is the old-style stage Yankee ... dating from a period of Anglo-American jealousy'. Orwell uses the adjective 'old', on the other hand a story such as 'The Green Curve' struck me as modern – it describes a general under siege looking at a graph on which different coloured lines show how long the military and civilian forces can hold out; that is, it describes what would later be called mathematical modelling or Operational Research.

Clarke also includes illustrations from the period, brief notes and biographies. I would have liked those to be more detailed, but this big book is a fascinating introduction to a little known area of sf.

L.J. Hurst

John Clute Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia
Dorling Kindersley, 1995, 312pp, £25.00

Science fiction has always been a visual genre. Long before the name was coined, the fantastic tales that appeared in late Victorian magazines were accompanied by often stunning illustrations. As science fiction took on its distinctive form during the pulp era, the illustrations became a little more hot under the collar and a little more strait-jacketed in their range – bug-eyed monsters, clanking robots, phallic spaceships and usually a cowering woman. More recently *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, *Alien* and *Bladerunner* and a dozen other popular films

and television programmes have had their own impact on the look of the genre. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the development of science fiction as a literary form, a form that has given us the work variously of Ballard and Priest, Shepard and Swanwick, Le Guin and Lafferty and Lem, has happened independently of the development of science fiction as a visual form. The two may be related, but it is a distant relationship: book covers and television and film have their own aesthetic, their own notion of what it is that science fiction creates, that we the consumers acquire from our exposure to the genre.

In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* John Clute paid lip service to visual science fiction. Illustrators, films and television programmes were included among the entries but it

was a very literary-oriented approach to the genre; there was not a single illustration to break out from the nearly 1,400 pages of solid text. In this new venture, the focus is very much on the visual, and the form of science fiction presented is therefore and inevitably different. The emphasis has to be on strange and quaint visions of the future (learning machines in which text books are fed into a giant hopper, pristine city streets where everyone flitters about in their private flying machine), and the broad stokes of pulp magazine covers. Some of these are charming, some (particularly the very early illustrations) are fascinating, but still there is the sense that entries are chosen as much for the fact that there is an appropriate book cover to feature as for their strict relevance to the history of science fiction.

Of course, this book is not strictly an encyclopedia, not in the way that the Clute and Nicholls work is an encyclopedic compendium of virtually every atom that forms a part of the monster that is science fiction. This is more in the line of a snapshot, a rapid glance, a quick grasping of the surface essentials. When, in considering science fiction's prehistory, Clute identifies Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the genre's starting point because in looking back it is easier to see preceding works as Proto SF, something in the way of argument seems to be missing. However, such an overview can be valuable in its own right if we don't expect any deep analysis of what science fiction is but rather a partial listing of what goes into the genre.

Thus, the timelines in which events in the sf world are placed alongside events in the real world, and in which major books are listed by their year of publication, are useful. It is only in such a format, for instance, that one learns the curiously interesting fact that Farmer's *The Lovers*, Harrison's *The Stainless Steel Rat*, Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Leiber's *The Big Time* and Lem's *Solaris* were all first published in the same year, 1961, though they feel as if they belong to very different eras. The brief essays on notable writers will add little to scholarship but they do provide useful introductions and a taste of their work.

In a work which claims to be encyclopedic, however, there are more errors and misleading statements than one might expect. Neal Barrett Jr's first novel was *Kelwin*, not *Kelvin*;

Bob Guccione is illustrated with a photograph of David Langford and (even less forgivably) Bob Shaw with a photograph of Eddie Jones. *Giles Goat-Boy* was not John Barth's debut, he had written several novels before this though none of them science fiction; and *Big as Life* was E.L. Doctorow's second novel, not his debut – in fact it is strange that Clute should choose to mention this work at all since it has been out of print almost since it was published in 1966 and Doctorow has built his considerable literary reputation on work that has hardly touched sf or fantasy again. The selection of short articles on major authors seems to be satisfyingly catholic, though there are always going to be odd omissions (why no M. John Harrison or Keith Roberts – come to that, why doesn't *Pavane* even make it into the list of classic titles?). While the inclusion of Primo Levi (primarily a mainstream and autobiographical writer haunted by his experiences during the holocaust whose work has resonances for the sf reader) and Italo Calvino (a fantasist and postmodernist rather than an sf writer) seems to owe more to the fact that they are Italian and Clute has been rigorously internationalist in his approach, than to any significant part either has played in the development of the genre. Within these short articles the approach is partial to say the least – would one really include *The Flies of Memory* among Ian Watson's key works in preference to, say, *The Martian Inca*, *The Book of the River* or "The Very Slow Time Machine"; and an article on Christopher Priest that omits any mention of *The Affirmation* seems to be way off target (and, incidentally, the Dream Archipelago has nothing to do with *A Dream of Wessex*). It is, moreover, curious that in a book with such a visual take on science fiction there is no comparable potted biography of an artist or film maker.

Any book which attempts to encapsulate so broad a subject as science fiction in so few pages, especially when most of its story is told in captions rather than extended text, is bound to make mistakes. But these are flaws not quibbles, and it is sad that they should marr what is otherwise a lively and attractive survey of the subject.

Paul Kincaid

Richard Dreyfuss & Harry Turtledove

The Two Georges

Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, 422pp, £16.99

Success in one field of endeavour can give an individual the freedom to experiment with other areas, irrespective of their competence to do so: sportspeople indulge themselves by playing in mediocre rock bands; rock musicians who can't act get supporting, or even starring, roles in movies; actors get to write books, or maybe have books written for them. Richard Dreyfuss has produced his first novel, an alternative history, in collaboration with one of the sub-genre's leading practitioners, Harry Turtledove. Apparently, it is a genuine collaboration – it's not just a matter of Turtledove acting as a ghost writer or an editor for the latest superstar who fancies having a novel he can call his own – and the result is not at all bad. Interestingly, the book receives its UK publication a month or so after another joint celebrity/sf writer alternative history: William R.

Forstchen and Newt Gingrich's *1945*. Is this the beginning of a trend?

A major British work of art is about to go on tour in America. At a society function to launch the tour, a prominent businessman is murdered and the painting stolen, much to the surprise of ... well, certainly not anybody reading this book. However, this is no mere art heist; it very quickly becomes apparent that the theft is politically motivated. A detective is charged with the responsibility of retrieving the painting, and doing so quickly. He sets out on his mission, employing the fairly unconventional technique of conducting the investigation by eating in what seems like every restaurant, hotel and cafe in the North American continent and picking up clues along the way, almost as a sideline.

In essence this is a crime story, or perhaps more accurately a thriller because of the political dimension of the crime, yet it is an alternative history. The America of this novel is the North American Union, which remains part of the British Empire currently ruled by the Emperor Charles III. George

Washington never lead the colonies in a War of Independence in the late eighteenth century, and it is the Gainsborough canvas of his meeting with King George III, The Two Georges of the title, that has been stolen. The North American Union of the late twentieth century (the exact date is never given, but seems to be roughly contemporary) is a reasonably contented place, whose inhabitants are for the most part happy with their colonial status. There is however an independence movement: a political faction, The Independence Party, and a somewhat more unsavoury terrorist/freedom fighter (according to taste) wing, the Sons of Liberty, and it is this latter body that seem to be responsible for the theft.

The actual investigation is relatively conventional: virtually every major character becomes a suspect at some point, as the detective works his way around America and through a couple of romantic sub-plots, always one step behind the suspects (presumably because of the amount of time spent eating lovingly described breakfasts, lunches or dinners). The Sons of Liberty are for the most part portrayed unsympathetically, and are presumably modelled on the American militias, but to a British reader they resemble nothing so much as BNP-type neo-nazi thugs. The American Loyalists and the British are most definitely the good guys. One wonders what effect this casting, unexpected from American authors, will have on US sales.

What is more surprising is that the authors choose not to make much of their setting. It may be uncharitable but there is the assumption that Dreyfuss, as a first-time novelist, might fall into the trap of providing extensive info-dumps about the

timeline he's created. Granted, Turtledove knows his way around this kind of story, but he has tended to cram as much of his research as possible into recent alternative history forays, specifically the pulpy but nevertheless enjoyable World War books. However, here the historical context is, if anything, underplayed. The major parameter, the point of departure from our history, is set out on the second page, and the overall impression – that of a society in most respects advanced to late nineteenth/early twentieth century levels – is also fairly quickly established. There are passing references to what's been happening in the last couple of centuries – we are told of a young Napoleon Bonaparte defending the Bastille in 1789 – but by and large the (to us) alternative past is largely taken for granted. This might almost be a disappointment for some science fiction readers who would want to know more about a world where the American colonies did not become independent, and why this fact seems to have retarded technological developments by between fifty and a hundred years.

Ultimately, this book invites comparisons with Robert Harris's *Fatherland*: the alternative history frame is competent enough, but this is, in essence, an enjoyable crime/thriller novel. This fact, and Dreyfuss's name on the cover, might, again like *Fatherland*, bring this book, and the alternative history sub-genre, to a wider audience which surely can't be a bad thing.

Mark Plummer

Greg Egan

Distress

Millennium, 1995, 343pp, £15.99, £8.99 pb

In the South Pacific is Stateless, a bioengineered coral island – a renegade territory, having being seeded by anarchist-biotech scientists who 'stole' their intellectual property from the biotech company, EnGeneUity. Stateless, the closest the world has come to a practical utopia, suffers from a near global boycott, is painted by the 'murdochs' as corrupt and doomed.

In April 2055 the world's top physicists hold a conference on Stateless, marking the centenary of Einstein's death with three rival papers, each of which aspires to be a 'Theory of Everything (TOE)'. Andrew Worth is making a documentary for SeeNet on Violet Mosala, the Nobel Prize winning South African front-runner. His eyes are his cameras: he has internalised his professional tools of perception, but remains distanced emotionally. He first appreciates his failure to empathise when, shortly after interviewing a Voluntary Autist, his lover leaves him; he had not known anything was wrong. Before Worth arrives on Stateless we meet him finishing his previous documentary. Through him we see the resurrection of a murder victim; follow a debate upon the right to define 'health' in an age of potentially unlimited genetic manipulation; meet a man who is having the base pairs of his DNA changed to become entirely immune to viral infection; and gain an introduction to 'Distress', a disease as symptomatically appalling as enigmatically encoded.

Revolving around the conference are 'Ignorance Cults'; a broad spectrum of 'New Age' groups opposing any TOE, on the basis that a full scientific understanding of the underpinnings of the universe would negate individual metaphysics. Tangential are various anthrocosmologists, who alternately revere the physicists, or fear that a summation of the universe will lead to its end; as in George Zebrowski's 'Godel's Doom', or Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Nine Billion Names of God'.

When rumours circulate that Violet Mosala is preparing to move permanently to Stateless there are fears for her life. The radical Pan-African Cultural Defence Front, which rejects values of 'white imperialist science', already considers her a traitor. While such is Mosala's status that if she does defect it may be

enough to precipitate the collapse of the boycott, so shattering the biotech companies' monopolisation of technology which could transform Africa and the Third World....

Egan has created the illusion of a future as detailed, and as believable, as the present. Not content to extrapolate the science of the next sixty years, he has dissected the cultural, moral and psychological issues which will accompany that science, and in doing so has rendered a sophisticated articulation of the philosophies people and societies adopt in their response to daunting complexities. *Distress* confronts these complexities through the archetype of a journalist forced to question his detachment and take a personal stand:

Once people ceased to understand how the machines around them actually functioned, the world they inhabited began to dissolve into an incomprehensible dreamscape. Technology moved beyond control, beyond discussion, evoking only worship or loathing, dependence or alienation.

Worth goes on to quote Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum on advanced technology and magic, before concluding '...but if a science journalist had one responsibility above all else, it was to keep Clarke's Law from applying to human technology in human eyes.'

Egan aligns the reader with a protagonist struggling to comprehend, eventually, everything, placing both at the centre of the modern world; the screen of the evermore interconnected and pervasive visual media. Andrew Worth is the biotechnological interface between the cutting-edge of science and what the commercial interests behind SeeNet consider viable. Worth is the fulcrum of the axis of compromise, the loaded camera where science is anything but value free, but rather, and ironically in the context of a novel which is also a commercial product, an embarrassment to be sugarcoated with entertainment.

As *Distress* progresses, Egan pulls his strings together, revealing an ingenious time asymmetrical structure capable of withstanding exhaustive literary experiment. He does so while delivering a respectable quota of genre excitement – seven different 'sexes', one of which is asex, mercenaries, invisible robots, gunplay, kidnapping, and the true nature of *Distress* itself – the final third holds several twists worthy of a first rate thriller. Within this frame Egan has integrated his argument at every level, forcing his protagonist into successive confrontations with each aspect of his relationship with the world and reality.

Borges writes, in 'About William Beckford's *Vathek*' that Carlyle joked about 'a biography of Michelangelo that would omit any mention of Michelangelo's works'. Borges argues that any attempt at understanding inevitably leads to simplification; that many different biographies could be written about the same person – concentrating on separate aspects of a complete life, as any review must concentrate on certain aspects of a novel – before the reader realised they all pertained to the same subject. Likewise, any novel must simplify its world, and though *Distress* is astonishingly comprehensive in its Borgean 'lucid perplexity', much is necessarily excluded from this journey to the heart of the state-of-the-art. Nevertheless, *Distress*, which uses science to explain people, a much more difficult endeavor than using people to explain science, begs its own, inevitably incomplete, theory to 'explain' its fundamental force. Hence this reviewer's own Theory Of Distress (TOD):

Distress is concerned with the reconciliation of the weak force (the individual human as the only one with both the ability and the right to define 'verself' – Egan's catch-all for a sliding scale of sexual identities), in opposition to the strong force (the power of the group, media, nation, to simplify, distort and otherwise manipulate the representation of the individual, group, nation, to other individuals, groups, and nations), and the magnetic force (the physical limitations of the human body and the dictates of instinct on human decision-making and behavior).

Ultimately *Distress* is a melioristic novel centred around some of the least woolly metaphysical cosmology in recent sf: it is up to each reader (neither author nor reviewer can decide for you), to conclude if, overhead, without any fuss, Egan's star is shining more brightly than ever.

Gary Dalkin

Christopher Evans

Mortal Remains

Gollancz, 1995, 319pp, £15.99, £8.99 pb

After three fine novels in the first half of the 1980's Christopher Evans' career appeared to be in limbo. Then came his spectacular re-emergence with the BSFA Award winning *Aztec Century*. *Mortal Remains*, a space opera, is his first novel

since then, and like everything else Evans has published under his own name, it is a fascinating read.

Set when the solar system has been extensively colonised and terraformed, *Mortal Remains* begins with the crash of a bio-engineered spaceship on Mars. From it is recovered a uniquely self-sustaining womb. Since all children are grown externally in artificial wombs, which normally must be linked to a parent (of either sex) by an 'umbilical', this

particular womb becomes the focus of a complex and bloody power-struggle. Through this, Evans continues to explore his familiar themes of the corruption of power, personal duplicity, and perceptions of memory and identity.

The Noosphere is an artificial afterlife into which the essence of each citizen is transferred upon death, at, or before, the age of 100. Advances in biotechnology have permitted greatly extended lifespans, and so, in a device reminiscent of *Logan's Run* (there are even Arbiters who fulfill the 'Sandman' role), a compulsory upper age limit is enforced. Until the century is reached all citizens enjoy perfect health and a body as 'youthful' as they desire. This, however, is the acceptable limit of interference with the human form, and those Augmentists who would engineer humanity for other environments, or to enhance bodily function, do so outside the law. Evans adds many other elements to the world he has created: a mysterious plague called (for self-explanatory reasons) The Dementia, a possible survivor from the dawn of the colonisation of the system, bio-engineering on a massive scale, powerful computer systems and a wide range of habitats, from space stations and ships to a necropolis on Charon.

It would be unfair to describe the plot Evans weaves around these elements, as a very large part of the enjoyment I derived from reading the book came from wondering just what it was all about and where it was bound for. I will just say that *Mortal Remains* is divided into three, fast moving, parts. The first sets the scene with a La Rondesque structure, each chapter following one main character, who then is replaced in the next chapter by a previously supporting character. In part two the novel really begins to intrigue, as what has previously been a minor thread – a seemingly un-connected narrative by a nameless amnesiac – moves into the foreground.

All this future is richly imagined, and Evans does not parade his invention unless the detail is necessary to the plot. Thus a complex texture hints at much more existing beyond the page, and in this there is something of Bester's *The Demolished Man*. Unfortunately the characters often seem little more than plot devices, as we follow each individual only when they play a vital role in the unfolding of the grand design. Even so, in a review you might reasonably expect to learn something of the central protagonists, however, *Mortal Remains* is a novel with perhaps a dozen main characters, all important in different ways, and to single out those around whom the novel finally depends would mean giving rather too much of the story.

As the plot untangles itself, Evans literally alienates the reader from his text by telling much of the second and third parts of the book from the perspective of a floating mind which can be relocated the moment danger threatens. Such a device facilitates a detached, God-like perspective, enabling Evans to play various meta-fictional games with his narrative, yet it dilutes the suspense to a significant degree. It is a device which functions magnificently in Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker*, but it is less effective in an adventure story; as if the entire novel were a collision between Evans' earlier, more interior style, and the epic approach he adopted for *Aztec Century*. Thus the book intrigues more than it involves, the very cleverness of the structure serving to detract from the excitement of the purely space-opera elements.

As I read I endeavoured to anticipate the moment when Evans, an extremely gifted writer, suddenly pulls the rug away. He does this skillfully; except that when the revelations come they are a little anticlimatic. Everything more or less makes sense, but the resolution is not only less than epic (in comparison with the scale of much of the best modern space opera), but as the complex skein of plot-threads knot together to reveal the overall picture, the detachment involved in maintaining several different levels of reality leads to a surprisingly low key and hurried resolution. The final space battle is under-written, and the closing scenes feel rushed – as if Evans wanted to dispose of these 'juvenile' elements as quickly as possible.

Some questions remain: why are the majority so opposed to Augmentation, considering the extent to which they have adapted biology already, accepting the wholesale manipulation of the earth's genepool to create an entire bestiary of fantastical biocreations? And where were the rights activists opposed to the exploitation of the living spaceships – which we are told live most of their lives in begrudging drudgery?

Despite my reservations, *Mortal Remains* is a thoughtful, entertaining novel. If it less successfully fuses the interior and exterior than did *Aztec Century*, then it is not for want of ambition. Evans could have taken the easy route, and no doubt made his publishers happier, by re-cycling his award winner into an endless series. In this era of sequels, sharecrops and spinoffery he is to be congratulated for attempting something very different. *Mortal Remains* is not first class Evans, but it is still an intelligent, enigmatic novel more worthy of attention than 95% of what currently passes for sf.

Gary Dalkin

David Gemmell

The Hawk Eternal

Legend, 1995, 313pp, £15.99

The Hawk Eternal, the second in the series *The Hawk Queen*, is a sequel to *Ironhand's Daughter*. It uses a different version of the same background, and the same character, Sigarni, the Queen of the title.

When I reviewed the first volume (in *Vector* 183) I was disappointed because I never really felt that Sigarni had the charisma that was claimed for her, and that her attitudes and behaviour didn't come over as those of a woman. In this present volume Sigarni is less prominent. She is 'on stage' for a relatively short time, although the points when she appears are crucial. Rather, it is her symbolic value, the idea of her that

exists in the minds of others, that is important: paradoxically, she is much more effective when she is portrayed in this way.

The central character of this book is Caswallon, who was briefly mentioned in the first. He is a member of the Highland clans, a maverick who has always flouted convention and evaded responsibility, although many people love and respect him. At the time of the story the clans are threatened by the warlike Aenir, again briefly mentioned in the first book. Because Caswallon refuses to believe that the Aenir will ever leave the clans in peace, he is gradually forced to accept a position of leadership. At the same time, the book traces the story of Gaelen, Caswallon's adopted son, and a group of his friends who grow to manhood during the period of the war against the Aenir.

The idea of the Gateways from the first book is elaborated so that timelines fold back on themselves in the way that Gemmell has used successfully in other books. We find out a lot more about the way the Gateways operate, though it would be unfair to give away too much in a review.

I was much more impressed by this book than by the first ones; it's more what I expect of Gemmell. There's plenty of action and excitement, but it's also very thoughtful, with a believable society and interesting characters. However, I still get distracted by Gemmell's naming systems. The Aenir are Norse, with names like Tostig and Ongist, and their god Vatan; when they die they go to Valhalla – yet they evidently aren't, historically, Norse. The clans often use Arthurian names, and when characters called Gwalchmai and Cei pop up I expect them to start behaving like their more famous counterparts.

The world is vivid and well-imagined, but I can't help feeling that it hasn't quite cut itself free from its legendary or historical basis.

It is obvious from what I've said that *The Hawk Eternal* builds on hints that were laid down in the first volume of the series. There are other hints in this book, suggesting that there are still many different timelines to be explored. I'd guess that the series won't be linear, with each successive volume picking up the story where the one before left off, but more like a jigsaw puzzle in which each piece contributes to the whole picture. If so, I think by the end it will be very satisfying: I'm looking forward to finding out if I'm right.

Cherith Baldry

Terry Goodkind

Stone of Tears

Millenium, 1995, 703pp, £17.99, £12.99 pb

'Escapist' is a term that has come to have derogatory overtones when used in conjunction with the word 'fiction'. It is something of a puzzle why this should be. Surely one reason for reading fiction, particularly fantasy fiction, is to 'escape' the realities of the mundane world and enter the world of an author's imagination. Here, then, in *Stone of Tears*, is a work of unashamed escapism. Terry Goodkind's unbridled imagination has created a stirring epic fantasy which will appeal to fans of the sub-genre.

This is the second book in a series. In the preceding volume, *Wizard's First Rule*, the evil wizard Darken Rahl was killed by Richard Cypher, the Seeker, the wielder of the Sword of Truth, the one who, according to prophecy, will prevent the destruction of the world of the living by the Keeper of the world of the dead. Richard also has the potential to become a great wizard, but having discovered that he is the son of Darken Rahl he equates the use of magic with evil and so denies his heritage. In this second volume Richard is sought out by three women who proclaim themselves the Sisters of the Light, who serve the Creator by training wizards. If Richard does not learn to use his magic it will kill him, yet to learn he must submit to wearing the Rada'Han, a collar which will

enable the Sisters to control him. Kahlan, Richard's beloved, knows that collars are anathema to him because one was once used to torture him, but she persuades him to wear the Rada'Han as the only way to save his life. Richard goes to be trained believing that Kahlan has betrayed him, and he will never see her again.

Kahlan herself has magical powers, for she is the Mother Confessor, head of the council which keeps the peace between the different peoples of the Midlands. She discovers that the veil between the world of the living and the dead has been torn and only Richard can close it. The servants of the Keeper are already active bringing war to the Midlands, and the power of Darken Rahl reaches out from beyond the grave. While Richard is discovering the hidden secrets of the People's Palace where wizards are trained, Kahlan is drawn into a fight against the forces of evil which have subverted the council itself.

Stone of Tears plunges the reader into a world with all the ingredients of epic fantasy – wizards, dragons, battles and so forth – yet which reveals the author to be both inventive and fully capable of handling the various strands of the fast-paced plot. Great literature it ain't, but it is a real page turner and fans of epic fantasy will escape the world in this book.

Lynne Bispham

Stephen King

Rose Madder

Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, 466pp, £16.99

Rose Daniels is a housewife who is physically and mentally abused by her husband, Norman. One day she decides, more or less on the spur of the moment, that she has had enough and runs away to a new life – with nothing but her husband's cashpoint card and the clothes on her back. And boy! is she scared; so scared that she flees to another city on the far side of America where, lost and alone, she seeks sanctuary in a woman's refuge.

Meanwhile, her husband resolves to track her down. Well, 'resolves' is probably not the most accurate description of his (unstable) mental condition. He is driven to track her down – and he's quite good at it because he's a professional; he's a policeman, a detective.

So far, so good. The story, following Norman as he traces his wife's footsteps and Rose as she rebuilds her

shattered life, reads like any number of crime/horror concoctions that pack the booksellers' shelves. Then King throws in the Kingism, the spanner in the works. Rose buys a painting from a pawn shop, a painting entitled 'Rose Madder'. It depicts a woman with her back to the viewer, standing at the top of a hill looking down upon the ruins of (what appears to be) some sort of classically designed building, a Greek temple perhaps. Clearly there is something in this – and there is. Like a latterday Alice, Rose finds herself stepping into the painting. But this is no fantasy or dream, at least, King does not choose to portray it in quite that way. For every action that Rose takes in the world of Rose Madder, there is a reaction in the real world of Rose Daniels; for every favour that Rose earns from the inhabitants of Rose Madder's world, there is a responsibility she must meet in her own life.

I initially felt uncomfortable at the course of this novel. Abused women (and all who are exploited, bullied and beaten) are not going to find salvation in the arms of a picture

or anything else 'magical'. Real life ain't like that, and it does a great disservice to the people who find themselves in these situations to suggest that it is. But King treads lightly, he does not lay blame at the doorstep of the victim; he's much too clever for the bric-a-brac of cliché and hackery. This novel goes beyond the simplistic approach of good vs. evil and it is the character of Rose, the strength of both her character and

her friends (most of whom are female), that finally subjugates her husband and brings the book to its climax.

I was genuinely surprised by the quality of this novel. It occurs to me that King is a much better writer than he is often given credit for.

Stephen Payne

Ian McDonald

Chaga

Gollancz, 1995, 413pp, £16.99

Without any doubt, Ian McDonald is one of the most important writers working in the genre today. His inventiveness and considerable literary ability have combined to produce such outstanding novels as *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day* and *Hearts, Hands and Voices*. Any new book is something of an event, something to look forward to with confident expectation. What has gone wrong then? Is it just me?

Necroville, his last novel, was written around a wonderful idea (nanotechnology abolishing death) that seemed to promise manifold delights. Yet at the end of the day it left me unaffected in a way that was not the case with any of his earlier books. Much the same is true of *Chaga*.

Again there is a marvellous idea, this time involving first contact. The alien environment that is engulfing Africa is superbly realised, McDonald's writing is consistently good and sometimes outstanding, but ... In neither *Necroville* nor *Chaga* have I felt at all engaged with any of the characters, there has been no-one that I have felt any real liking for or identification with. Consequently, their adventures, no matter how exotic, have left me relatively unmoved.

This might just be me – white middle-aged professional male can no longer hack it with exciting young people's literature – but I hope not, and I don't think so. Indeed, I think McDonald himself is at least partly aware of the problem. Some way into *Chaga* he seems to realise that in his protagonist, Gaby McAslan, an incredibly self-centred, spoiled and shallow airhead, he has in fact created a monster. She just cannot carry the novel, whatever its other strengths.

The Kilimanjaro Event, the arrival of an alien biological package, has begun remorselessly transforming Kenya into another planet, into an exotic alien jungle landscape that swallows up both nature and civilisation. Gaby McAslan arrives in Nairobi as a junior broadcast journalist with Sky Net, determined to make a career out of covering what is going on in the African heart of darkness. She sets about this with a quite remarkable lack of scruple and responsibility that actually involves her in a symbolic selling of her soul: in return for help with her career, she enters into a contract with Haran, a powerful Nairobi gangster.

'Anything you want,' Faraway whispered confidentially to Gaby, 'Haran can get it for you. And he does not deal in cash. He is a gentleman, my friend Haran. He does you a favour, you do him a favour, someday, when he needs it. Maybe never.'

Haran is absolutely crucial to her success as a journalist exposing UN activities and revealing the truth about the Chaga. In the fullness of time he demands his price.

This Faustian dimension of the plot could have been one of the great strengths of the book, but it is never developed strongly enough. McDonald is too closely involved with his unlikeable protagonist to successfully portray her as one of the damned and her final redemption comes remarkably cheaply. Towards the end of the novel, Haran demands that she betray her friends. He resorts to torture as a means of forcing her to honour her side of the bargain – not torture of Gaby herself but of a young black woman he holds prisoner. In a particularly unpleasant scene the young woman's naked body is studded with industrial staples. Her agony is Gaby's road to redemption: the woman suffers that Gaby might be saved. This really is a monumental cop-out that is only compounded by the ease with which Gaby turns the tables on Haran. There is a decided lack of seriousness here, a trivialising of the issues, a moral shallowness in the book's resolution that reflects the protagonist McDonald has created. The final redemption of this career woman comes with her embrace of pregnancy, while her lover goes off into space to meet the creatures behind the Chaga.

Despite this criticism, there is still much of interest in the novel. McDonald's exploration of the alien world that is unfolding in Africa is predictably outstanding. Gaby broadcasts to the world the news that the Chaga is not inimical to human life but is both adapting humanity and changing humanity. One can almost

see the Chaga as a metaphor for postmodernism, a new nation of countless diversities is being born. This is nicely done. Similarly, Gaby's various adventures are well-written, carefully crafted affairs. What undermines the whole construction, however, is Gaby McAslan. Having said all this, I still look forward with anticipation to McDonald's next novel in the confident expectation that he will soon recover his balance.

John Newsinger

Rand & Robyn Miller with David Wingrove **Myst: The Book of Atrus**

Bantam Press, 1995, 287pp, £16.99

This is the 'book of' the popular adventure game, *Myst*. Usually, tie-in books leave me cold so I approached the novel with some trepidation, but was pleasantly surprised.

Myst, subtitled 'The Book of Atrus', is the story of a young boy, Atrus, whose mother died in childbirth, leaving him to be raised by his grandmother. His father returns for him as a teenager, to the annoyance of the grandmother, and shows the boy the magic of his race, the D'Ni, who are world-builders. They create realms and worlds by writing about them in specially prepared books. Their realm fell, and we find out how and why, and why the boy's family alone survived. Atrus and his father, Gehn, have quite different philosophies concerning the worlds they create and this eventually leads them into the central conflict of the book.

The characterisation of Atrus and his father is quite

well-done, as is the description of the underground city of the D'Ni and the realms the pair create. Initially the plot moves quite well, but the ending is an abrupt *deus ex machina* – the pace increasing too slowly then accelerating to crisis point too quickly for my taste.

One final thing that should be mentioned is the physical presentation of the book. It is obviously meant to look like one of the special books described within, with embossing on the cover to simulate a metal cornered, leather-bound volume with aged pages. There are numerous sketches inside – purportedly Atrus's sketches of what he sees – which detract quite seriously from the rest of the book. They are badly drawn, possibly deliberately, and not always in the correct place for an illustration.

The book is probably worth it if you're a fan of the game, and it wouldn't be bad for a long train journey, but it's no masterpiece.

Andrew Adams

Michael Moorcock **Fabulous Harbours**

Millenium, 1995, 192pp, £15.99

Fabulous Harbours is billed as a sequel to *Blood*, and is, again, a fix-up, a collection of eleven stories which have appeared elsewhere. While *Blood* attempted an uneasy marriage of Moorcock's stories from the New Worlds anthologies, both under his own name and the rather cartoonish space opera tales of the Second Ether as Warwick Colvin Jnr., *Fabulous Harbours* uses a different framing device: travellers tales, reminiscences and tales of adventure, exchanged one evening between a group including Jack Karaquazian, Colinda Devero, Countess von Bek, and various members and friends of the Begg family at Sir Sexton Begg's flat in Sporting House Square. Tales, as Moorcock points out in his Introduction, of some imperfect world that is still somewhat better, and richer, than our own, and recounted to him at second hand, and thus to us at third hand.

That rich, imperfect world is, as we have come to expect from Moorcock, the Multiverse: that realm in which characters (or maybe only one character, repeated in an infinite variety of incarnations) are called to maintain the fine balance in the struggle between Law and Chaos, Entropy and Singularity; between the disorientation of infinite variety and the dead hand of stasis.

This sequence, starting with *Blood* and to conclude in *The War Amongst the Angels*, seems set to link the stories and characters which play their part in this struggle: Elric, the White Wolf, von Bek and Erekoze, through the sequence of the Eternal Champion, to those of the jugaderos, the more knowing players in the Game of Time and Balance, who include Jack Karaquazian and the immortal Rose, Colinda Devero, and,

perhaps more selfishly and hedonistically, Jerry Cornelius. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, the rhetoric and actions of opposing polarities become indistinguishable from each other. Freedom of choice, and indeed individuality, rest on a dynamic balance of forces, neither of which must be allowed to fully overcome the other. Although Moorcock does not use the terms, it is likely that he is quite aware of the new studies in complexity in maths and physics, where richness and creativity exist at the thin fractal boundary between chaos and order. Neither is it probably too far fetched to suggest that Moorcock's metaphor extends from the realms of thermodynamics and physics to both morality and politics. It is in 'Lunching With The Antichrist', where the slow deterioration of community proceeds apace with the despoliation of property developers that the latter comes most strongly to the fore.

Maybe it is a mellowing, or a disenchantment with radical politics at both ends of the spectrum, but the tone of many of these stories, and their linking passages, appear to hark back to an older world of lost elegance and manners, a kind of frayed nobility.

Against this background, it is the studied amorality of Jerry Cornelius rather than the often bewildered Elric that stands in strongest contrast. This wider canvas of the Multiverse allows Moorcock to place familiar characters in unfamiliar contexts, as the Game of Time unfolds on different frames of time and place. Characters, on both sides of the Game, are fluid, mutable. Elric, in 'The Black Blade's Summoning', is allied to his Chaos Lord, Arioch, but his actions, and his heart, tend more to serve the cause of Law. Elsewhere he reoccurs as the desert wanderer Al Rik'h, Le Loup Blanc, or as Crimson Eyes. The irascible pirate, Captain

Quelch, is a shapeshifter of a more devious sort, from a kindly old man, a lecherous privateer, to the monstrous Original Insect, champion of the crystalline stasis of the Singularity.

Linking several of these stories, particularly 'The White Pirate', 'The Black Blade's Summoning' and 'Lunching With The Antichrist', comes the enigmatic vision of the Rose, who may prove to be one of the more important characters in the Moorcock pantheon as the sequence develops. I was deeply unconvinced by *Blood* and didn't have much patience for, or really understand, the interspersed exploits of the Corsairs of the Second Ether. While several characters and settings from

there recur in *Fabulous Harbours*, they seem much more embedded in the narrative and more coherent. I'm still not fully sure quite what Moorcock is working towards with this linking up of characters and stories into the web of worlds and possibilities that forms the Multiverse, but I am far more tempted to pursue it after this volume. Even if you have only a passing familiarity with Moorcock's prestigious output, this stands alone as a rather fine collection of stories.

Steve Jeffrey

Steve Perry

Aliens: Earth Hive & Nightmare Asylum

Millenium, 1995, 556pp, £14.99, £8.99 pb

In the late 80's, Dark Horse Comics began a series of comics based on Twentieth Century Fox's successful *Alien* franchise. The comics were beautifully drawn, the first six-issue story being an atmospheric edition in monochrome pen and ink, while the second four-part colour issues featured superbly painted renderings that did justice to the horror of H.R. Giger's biomechanical beasties. The stories borrowed heavily from the Fox movies, with the obligatory face-hugging, chest-bursting, gun-toting moments that made the films successful. The comic books, especially the first series, have rocketed in price and are now highly collectable.

The two pieces in this omnibus edition are adaptations of the first two Dark horse adventures, but deprived of the art that made the comics so highly praised, the novelisations are left wanting, to put it mildly. Perry's writing style is just too economical, and there is a certain blandness of imagination that makes you realise how difficult – and perhaps pointless – it is to recreate the comic series in words.

The extraordinary, lethal Aliens – a defining moment

in cinematic sf – are here crudely described: 'It looked like a reptile, no, a giant bug', 'The alien sprang. It seemed all teeth and claws...' Surely, everyone likely to buy this volume will at least have seen the films, in which case 'It looked like a reptile, no, a giant bug' is somewhat lacking in verve.

While the writing style is lacking, the actual stories are not bad. The strongest is *Nightmare Asylum*, in which an insane general attempts to train aliens as troops. (You'd have thought the lesson from the original film, that the aliens cannot be moulded by humans, would have been learnt by now. Apparently not.)

It always seemed to me that even the film sequels to *Alien* were something of a waste of time (quite apart from being crap films), given the brilliance of the original and Ridley Scott's genius in not really showing us the alien except for a brief shot at the end. Why people can't let a good idea stay as it is I don't know. Actually I do: money.

If you want to read a good *Alien* novel try the movie adaptations by Alan Dean Foster, or seek out the graphic novel reprints of the Dark Horse Comics on which these two stories are based. They are far more interesting and better value for money.

Steve Palmer

Terry Pratchett

Maskerade

Gollancz, 1995, 285pp, £15.99

'When shall we three meet again?' the witches used to chorus. There are only two of them now, as Magrat Garlick has gone off to marry king Verence, and it wouldn't surprise me if she turns into a bulimic avatar of Princess Di in a later volume of the witches' adventures. But there must be three; they are, after all, avatars of the three ages of woman: maiden, mother and... the other one. Besides, it looks suspiciously like Granny Weatherwax, with no real outlet for her talents, may be turning from a good witch into a really unpleasant one, like Black Allis who lived in a house made of frogs and turned people into gingerbread (well, that's what it says here...). The world of the Disc is, after all, a medieval one, and one where magic works, even if most of the time Granny and Nanny deny its existence and put everything down to 'headology'. A witch gone to the bad, especially one whom no-one dares disagree with anyway, would be no laughing matter.

With his finely-tuned sense of the preposterous it must have been inevitable that, one fine day, Terry Pratchett would turn his attention to that most preposterous and cod-medieval of artforms (apart from Fantasy itself, that is) opera. Ankh-Morpork, which has often had something of turn-of-the-

century Vienna about it, charm and corruption mingled uneasily, now has itself an Opera House, run by a man who used to be a cheese magnate. Strange things are starting to happen backstage and a mysterious masked figure is spotted high in the roof. He even sends manic laughter in finely-written notes to the manager.

To this strange place comes one Agnes Nitt, a big girl with a huge voice: the kind of range that would have made Callas hide in a corner. Agnes is into wearing pale makeup and black lace gloves, being mysterious and interesting and calling herself Perdita X Dream, where the X stands for 'someone with a really cool middle initial'. Unfortunately it doesn't quite work, and she has to stand backstage while the pretty but bag-of-rocks dim Christine actually goes on stage and mimes to Agnes's singing. Meanwhile Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg are in town because Nanny wants to be paid her royalties for her bestselling 'The Joye of Snacks'. Also arriving by the same coach is one Henry Slugg, who has spent years building up a career as tenor Enrico Basilica, having to eat spaghetti while yearning for meat pies and dumplings.

There are plenty of jokes, thankfully. Opera is described in a way that makes me think Pratchett must have been bitten by one as a child, but he does have a point: Wagnerian opera is 'twenty minutes of good tunes and three

days of gods shouting at one another', for example. The ludicrous conventions of opera are thoroughly lampooned: the idea that a woman could make herself unrecognisable by wearing a tiny mask; death scenes that take an hour and several arias to complete ('Isn't she dead *yet?*'). When Agnes/Perdita finally does get to sing at the end, Granny Weatherwax declares the opera finally over, which isn't going to be hard for the reader to complete. More obliquely, when Granny and Nanny Ogg arrive in Ankh-Morpork they alight from the stagecoach in Sator Square: complete the word square if you will (the fourth word is 'Opera'). Then there are the references to 'the Phantom' and to Andrew Lloyd Webber's composition methods. It doesn't even matter that it's a borrowed story; this is, after all, operatic territory.

The ending is, as it were, satisfactory. The Witches sequence of Discworld novels do seem to need proper endings; it is part of the role of the witches to see that the demands of story are adhered to, while the City Guards or Wizards novels don't seem to need so much tenacity to the demands of closure. It might not seem to be the most desirable conclusion, but it has the sense of being right.

There was just enough rebellion left in Agnes to put a sarcastic edge on her voice. 'Oh? Are you offering to teach me something?' 'Teach? No,' said Granny. 'Ain't got the patience for teaching. But I might let you learn.'

Chris Amies

Anne Rice

Memnoch the Devil

Chatto & Windus, 1995, 354pp, £15.99

Anne Rice has said that *Memnoch the Devil* will be her last book about Lestat, the charismatic vampire/rock star/Agent of Destiny who has been the protagonist of her vampire novels to date. She has discussed the reasons for this in terms that are emotional, to say the least; and she has told the world that she's in love with Lestat. This amour is very evident in her latest novel, where Lestat's actions have, quite literally, religious overtones.

The book opens with Lestat pursuing his most fascinating prey to date. Roger is a criminal who is almost as charismatic as Lestat. He uses the proceeds of his drug deals to purchase treasures of religious art. Lestat is equally fascinated by Roger's daughter, the televangelist Dora. He will kill Roger and drain him dry; but when? It's only a matter of time ...

Meanwhile Lestat is being stalked in turn – by an entity he does not recognise or understand, and which terrifies him. It will not surprise anyone who has noted the title of the book to learn that this pursuer is Memnoch, the Devil Himself. But what does he want with Lestat? Is it simply to drag him down to a blazing Christian Hell, or is there something more?

Memnoch the Devil is written in the same expansive style as the previous three books (the first, *Interview with the Vampire*, which was narrated by the pleasantly-reserved Louis, has a more formal manner), and this occasionally grates. So much emotion! So many exclamation marks! Can one withstand Rice's passion for her creation? Actually, it's remarkably easy. Rice's lush prose style lends itself to evocative and emotive description; but there are turns of phrase which catapult one abruptly into the realisation that her writing is not, perhaps, what it was: "he said politely in British," for example, or, "awesome statistics such as 1704, or even 1692," or ... But it's easy to quote out of context and there are more profound aspects of *Memnoch, the Devil* to criticise than mere turns of phrase. Rice's prose is more evidently verbose than before. Considering that one of the novel's major motifs is Lestat's confusion and self-doubt – is he going mad or not? – it is possible to accept that his stream of consciousness might be more haphazard than in previous novels.

In some ways this is the most claustrophobic of her books; none of the rest of the vampire pantheon appear until the very end, and the action focusses more on Lestat's inner turmoil than on the awful glamour of his existence as a vampire. Oh yes, he still gets to kill people; he still gets to

drink blood. (Incidentally, this may be one of the first mainstream vampire novels to deal with menstruation. Tastefully, moreover. Pun intended). But Lestat, who has always shown a tendency to whinge like an angst-ridden adolescent about his place in God's Creation, is reaching a crisis point in his existence. His love for Dora, the daughter of the man he refers to as 'my Victim' (the capitalisation sanctifies the noun: think of 'my Saviour') forces him to confront his own faith, which up to now he has made a point of rejecting in as loud and dramatic a fashion as possible. The process of soul-searching – in one who has said before that he has no soul – is exacerbated by the appearance on the stage of Memnoch.

One can't help but feel that the theological debate which ensues is, at least in part, founded on the author's own religious doubts. Rice raises the standard theological puzzles: how can a good God allow suffering? What is the role of evolution in religious thought? What is the nature of angels? The discussion is, on the whole, rigorously argued, and there are occasional flashes of wit and profundity. Lestat's rôle is often no more than that of the ignorant apostle, who asks all the obvious questions in order to establish the tenets of his faith; the difference between this and the standard catechism is that his questions are answered by one who is in a position to know the truth.

The novel's main flaw is its structural imbalance. Memnoch's story, and the theological arguments proceeding from it, constitute well over a third of the book, and Lestat's present-day secular adventures sometime seem no more than a framing device for what is, in effect, a massive and melodramatic info-dump. Memnoch is the hero of this part of the novel, and bears more than a passing resemblance to the self-assured Lestat of previous Chronicles. Memnoch is as enthralled by, as in love with humanity as Lestat has been with Roger and Dora. The parallels between the two are difficult to mistake.

Rice, like Milton, is of the Devil's party; unlike Milton, she knows it. Lestat's experiences echo those of Christ tempted by Satan, but Memnoch is not the archetypal villain that one would traditionally expect. Does Rice's theology equate to hereticism? And should a novel be judged by its philosophical arguments when other criteria of quality, such as structure and characterisation, aren't met?

The climax makes the ending of *Queen of the Damned* – reminiscent of a de Mille epic in sheer scale – seem an exercise in moderation. If Rice had intended to write

another novel about Lestat, this would be a hard act to follow. Flawed and decadent, but still capable of fascinating; let that

stand as a monument to Lestat, as well as to *Memnoch, the Devil*.

Tanya Brown

Roger Taylor

Ibryen

Headline, 1995, 407pp, £16.99

Count Ibryen and his loyal band of followers are fighting a war of attrition against the Gevethen, the evil usurpers of his ancestral home. From his base in the mountains, he knows it is only a matter of time before the Gevethen gather their power and their army for one final assault.

Lured alone into the mountains above his camp by a mysterious desperate 'inner' call, Ibryen encounters a stranger: an enigmatic little man who becomes known to all only as the Traveller. It is with the Traveller, and his cousin Rachyl, that Ibryen sets off on a journey to discover the source of the call in the hope that it will provide a new way to fight the Gevethen.

Meanwhile back in the Ennerhald, the broken ruins from which the city of Dirynhald grew, Jeyan Dyalith survives purely on her hatred for the Gevethen. Constantly seeking an opportunity to avenge the death of her parents and the forced exile of her Lord, Ibryen, she slays the Lord Counsellor Hagan, the right arm of the Gevethen. Expecting certain capture and a long, lingering death for this act, nothing could have prepared Jeyan for the Gevethen's eventual reaction.

Following a huge battle with the Great Corrupter himself, Isgyrn the dryenwr is flung from Culmadryen, the legendary Cloud Lands, into the Middle Depths. Sustained and healed over several years by his magical Culmaryn cloak, Isgyrn finds that the Dryenvolk's battle against the Great Corrupter is not over. Stranded in the Dryenvolk's equivalent

of hell he soon realises that the Great Corrupter is also at work in the Middle Depths. Unable to return to the Culmaryn, he strives to aid his people from within their own worst nightmares.

In the space between worlds, whilst seeking power and guidance from their dark lord, the Gevethen learn the truth of the power that Ibryen holds, a power that Ibryen himself neither understands nor appreciates. On returning to their seat of power, the citadel in Dirynhald, they mobilise the full strength of the army from all over Nesdiryn with orders to capture Ibryen alive at any cost. The army converges relentlessly on Ibryen's secret outpost in the mountains whilst Ibryen is still away seeking aid.

Once again, Taylor spins a dark and magical tale of the battle of good against evil. In Ibryen, Rachyl, Isgyrn and the Traveller, he draws characters that the reader really cares about and can empathise with. In the Gevethen, he draws a thorough and convincing psychological evil that makes the reader's skin crawl. Taking the familiar fantasy theme of parallel worlds and gateways between them, Taylor expertly weaves a strange and yet familiar tale, whilst demonstrating a tight control of the plot that never gets away from him, or becomes too convoluted to follow.

Roger Taylor is a grossly underrated writer but I would, without doubt, place him in the top ten of fantasy writers today and I eagerly await his next novel.

Vikki Lee

Freda Warrington

The Dark Blood of Poppies *Macmillan, 1995, 519pp, £16.99*

The Dark Blood of Poppies is the third volume in a series, begun with *A Taste of Blood Wine* (1992) and followed by *A Dance in Blood Velvet* (1994), which follows the exploits of a group of vampires in the 1920s. The series is among the best of those spawned by the wave of fashionability which has caught up 'revisionist' vampire fiction in the last twenty years. All three volumes have been written with an emotional fervour and vividly Decadent style which are perfectly suited to the subject-matter and all three have maintained a sense of philosophical enquiry which patiently, perceptively and politely raises questions about the reasons for our fascination with the vampire and related mythological figures. The author has developed her own idiosyncratic account of vampire powers and vampire nature, but that does not diminish the worth of this enquiry; it provides a useful vocabulary of symbols which operate as imaginative instruments to display and solidify the issues at stake.

By the time any series of this kind reaches its third volume its innovations are bound to have lost their novelty value, so *The Dark Blood of Poppies* cannot reproduce the power with which *A Taste of Blood Wine* startled the reader. That first volume served an exploratory purpose for author and reader alike, and Freda Warrington has now settled into her imaginary world – her ease there is evident in the way that Karl and Charlotte, the vampire lovers of the first volume, have now acquired the kind of position of trust that can only be afforded to old friends. That same easefulness is reflected in the plot of *The Dark Blood of Poppies*, which cannot contrive a repetition of the remarkable crescendo which *A Dance in Blood Velvet* built as it rushed headlong towards its climax. In consequence, readers in search

of elementary excitement might well find the new volume a little less rewarding than its predecessors – there are, however, compensations for this marginal loss of narrative vigour.

The Dark Blood of Poppies has a more complicated plot than its predecessors, mainly because it has inherited so many key characters from the earlier volumes. Karl and Charlotte remain at the heart of the enterprise, if only because they constitute a kind of moral anchorage checking the wilder excesses of two of the characters inherited from *A Dance in Blood Velvet*: the dancer Violette Lenoir, who seems to be possessed by the dark spirit of Lilith, reputed ancestress of vampirekind; and Simon, the vampire ‘angel’ who considers it his mission to destroy Lilith. As this struggle progresses it draws in other vampires who move to centre-stage for the first time: the proudly enigmatic Sebastian Pierse, who might in some sense be Lilith’s demonic counterpart Samael; and the manically religious Cesare, who becomes Simon’s dupe. Because this is the kind of book it is, there also has to be a human female at its heart, whose destiny it is to become the prey of a vampiric bloodlust inextricably bound up with sexual passion and – potentially, at least –love. In this case the role is filled by the professional heartbreaker Robyn – a far more adamant figure than Charlotte and Violette were when they played the equivalent roles in the earlier volumes.

Given this profusion of characters, it is not entirely surprising that the schemes in which they are involved never quite come together – not sufficiently, at least, to allow an intricate entanglement of plot and counterplot winding towards some all-important climactic confrontation. There is a climactic confrontation, but it can only consummate half the plot, if that, and much of the rest remains dangling. What the profusion of characters and individual projects does enhance, however, is the subtext of the series – which relentlessly probes away at the questions implicit in the metaphysics of the still-unfolding story.

One such set of questions asks what it might conceivably mean to say that Violette is in some sense also Lilith, or that Lilith is in some sense the ancestress of all vampires. Another set, cleverly interwoven with the first, asks how many kinds of relationships might conceivably exist between vampires, and between vampires and their victims, and which are preferable on moral, aesthetic and pragmatic grounds. Readers who find this increasingly-complicated subtext the most engaging and most interesting part of the exercise, as I do, will have no cause to be disappointed in *The Dark Blood of Poppies*; they are highly likely to end the book, as I did, hoping that this will not be the end of it.

The Dark Blood of Poppies does not feel like the end. The author gives the impression that she has the ability to take the series further, and its subtexts too. Nor does she give the slightest sign that she might suffer the same sad fate as Anne Rice, whose ignominious relapse into inane religiosity has undone all the good work she did in the earlier parts of her ‘vampire chronicles’; Freda Warrington remains perfectly level-headed even at her most extravagant, and she is always in control, even at her most perfervid. The series so far adds up to one of the most striking and most intriguing exercises in modern fantasy fiction; it may yet be further augmented.

Brian Stableford

Paperback Graffiti

Paperback Reviews edited by Tanya Brown

Kevin J. Anderson (ed) **Star Wars: Tales From Jabba's Palace**
Bantam, 1996, £4.99, 427pp

Superficially, this appears to be just another Shared World Anthology, with the shared world that of *Star Wars*. Actually this is a little bit cleverer than that.

I'll remind you of those parts of *Return of the Jedi* that take place in Jabba the Hutt's palace on Tatooine. Han Solo has been encased in Carbonite and sold to Jabba to decorate his palace. Princess Leia disguises herself as a bounty hunter who has captured Chewbacca the Wookiee, but is found out just after she frees Han, then enslaved and made to dance for Jabba. Luke Skywalker comes to rescue them all and kills the Rancor (the monster that lives under Jabba's throne room). However he too is captured. They are then all taken on Jabba's Sail Barge to be fed to a monster in the desert, escape, kill almost everybody, including Jabba, who's strangled by Princess Leia using the chain that was used to enslave her.

Now that's the background to this anthology, and if you're not familiar with it, go rent the video. In the film, Jabba's palace is a busy place, with lots of slaves, droids, and hangers-on - dancers, musicians, guards, technicians - most of whom only appear in the background. This anthology is a collection of stories about these "bit-players", told from their point of view. All the stories are set in the two or three days around Jabba's death at the hands of Princess Leia. There's the story of the Gamorrean guard, the snot vampire, the Rancor keeper, the dancer. The stories are cleverly interlinked with each other and with *Return of the Jedi*, so that the anthology is more a single tale told by many hands rather than a collection of tales.

The stories that form this braided anthology are all pretty much the same standard - enjoyable but not brilliant, apart from William F Wu's 'And Then There Were Some: The Gamorrean Guard's Tale' which is very funny and Kenneth C Flint's 'Old Friends: Ephant Mon's Tale' which is execrable.

Star Wars: Tales from Jabba's Palace has very much the same relationship to *Return of the Jedi* as *Rosencratz and Guildenstern are Dead* has to *Hamlet*. This is not an intellectually challenging collection of tales, but for those of us of a certain age (old enough to have seen *Star Wars* in the cinema, young enough to have been seriously impressed) it's great fun.

Pat McMurray

Wilhelmina Baird

Crashcourse

Roc p/back, 1995, 277pp, £4.99

There are SF books which have a creative buzz about them that you read because you must; there are others that you read because they happen to be SF, they are available, and because they are fun. Wilhelmina Baird's *Crashcourse* falls into the second category. Ground-breaking SF it ain't, since Baird borrows freely from the cyberpunk of Gibson, Sterling et al. She wraps the cybertech up in a plotline that could have been shaped in the sixties by Poul Anderson or Harry Harrison. Then Baird lacquers it with dialogue sharpened on Raymond Chandler. The result is sugar-free, non-fattening fastfood for the SF fan, no great sensawunder involved, just good, solid entertainment for the few hours it takes to devour the book.

The story is based around a trio of lovers, Cass (a pro burglar), Moke (a promising sculptor) and Dosh (a male prostitute and would-be actor), who are struggling to get the cash together to get off the world they are on to another with more prospects. When early in the book Dosh is badly hurt by one of his clients, the three realise they are running out of time. Then along comes an offer too good to resist: a film company wants the three of them for one of their 'real life dramas', with enough money on offer to buy their tickets off planet. The trouble is, the moviemakers aren't unhappy to see them killed off in the course of the film, and the star of the movie has at least two of them down as expendable. But Cass has friends of her own to bring into play, and they are as deadly as anything the moviemakers can come up with. How Baird works all of this out to a satisfactory conclusion makes for exciting amusement for any SF fan.

John D. Owen

Nancy Baker **Blood and Chrysanthemums**
Creed, 1995, 282pp, £4.99

This is the sequel to *The Night Inside* and perhaps it's premature. *The Night Inside* was a sympathetic, and occasionally novel, exposition of the vampire theme; while *Blood and Chrysanthemums* continues to explore new aspects of the mythos, it does so less engagingly. Ardeth Alexander, a new and neurotic vampire, is learning to adjust to her status as a penniless and unimportant member of the legions of the undead. Rozokov, her mentor and lover, has been coping with his state for half a millenium, and could be said to be something of an expert in it. Admittedly, he's seldom had to associate with other vampires, and his morality clashes with Ardeth's ethical views, which are still lamentably human. Fidelity is all very well, but is having sex with someone for the purposes of blood-drinking

really the same as breaking a marriage vow? "I wouldn't think," says Ardeth's sensible, still-human sister, "that vampires had the same definition of fidelity that humans do."

Ardeth behaves rather adolescently, running off mid-plot when she decides that Rozokov has betrayed her. He, by contrast, calmly continues his hunt for Fujiwara, the mysterious Japanese vampire whose diary he has been given, and who seems equally keen to meet Rozokov.

The portrayal of Fujiwara and his entourage - a vampire and his 'family' who originated in a feudal culture with no vampire myth - is perhaps the most intriguing part of *Blood and Chrysanthemums*. The climax of the book explores notions of morality and honour with regard to immortal life and the burdens that Fujiwara has taken upon himself; even Ardeth is forced to learn from Fujiwara's behaviour, and by the end of the book is marginally less irritating than before.

Blood and Chrysanthemums is, on one level, about the rejection of the myth, and the attempt to form meaningful relationships when one is no longer human. "I blamed him because this life turned out to be nothing like the mythology said it would be," whines Ardeth at one point. It's difficult to sympathise with her all-too-human adolescent traumas, though, and Fujiwara's remark on 'the sort of people with whom you would want to spend eternity' leads one to wonder how distraught Rozokov really feels about the departure of his creation. Eternity with Ardeth? Ask me again in a century.

Tanya Brown

Stephen Baxter

The Time Ships

Harper Collins, 1995, 629pp, £4.99

The one hundredth anniversary of the first publication of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* has attracted a fair bit of attention in areas as diverse as installation art and postage stamps, yet Stephen Baxter's *The Time Ships*, which carries the tag "The Authorized Sequel to...", is no cheap cash-in.

Following on directly from Wells's book, *The Time Traveller* sets off to return to the far future, to AD 802,701 and the world of the Eloi and the Morlocks and, as one might expect with 600 pages ahead of us, he actually ends up somewhere else entirely. This is a long novel, many times the length of the original, yet this space is used to enable the Traveller to range from the far future to (unlike in Wells) the remote past, encountering a series of para-doxes and problems as Baxter draws on Wells's original novel, indeed his whole science fictional canon, and a century of explorations of time travel. The elements of traditional scientific romance combine with evolved humans in incredible societies, in fact all the features that so typify Baxter's other novels. There is plenty here to engage the reader throughout.

It remains to be seen whether the late twenty-first century equivalent of the Post Office will issue the late twenty-first century equivalent of a set of postage stamps to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the first publication of Stephen Baxter's *The Time Ships*. For the time being, we'll have to settle for the fact that this is Baxter's best book to date and probably one of the best sf novels of the year.

Terry Bisson

Johnny Mnemonic

HarperCollins, 1996, £4.99

From an original idea / short story / screenplay by the more famous Mr. Gibson, Terry Bisson has produced a film novelisation of considerable accomplishment. It's still distinctly a novelisation; the visual jokes meticulously recounted, the snappy editing translated to abrupt prose, and the descriptive passages which are sometimes just encoded instructions to the set designer. But Bisson's humour and style make this more than just another novelisation; *Johnny Mnemonic* is a remarkably readable novel.

If you've read Gibson's original tale and think you know the plot, think again. Remember, this is Hollywood, and Hollywood likes its futures nice and neat. Nasty violent Molly, Female with Attitude, has been bribed to leave the scene of the crime. She's replaced by the 'almost pretty' Jane - a victim of the ghastly new disease, Neural Attenuation Syndrome, which is sweeping the world. Feisty Jane still manages to fight her way out of most situations (while continuing to look almost pretty) but she doesn't have mirror-shades or four-inch talons, just a set of smart one-liners and an artificially-enhanced nervous system. Johnny isn't the cool, selfish operator we know and love, either; somewhere along the line he's had a conscience surgically implanted, and he's more of a victim too.

Most of the changes are, presumably, Gibson's; he's tied in threads from *Virtual Light* and *Neuromancer*, and updated the whole cyberpunk methodology to reflect the caring, sharing Nineties. Bisson's input is probably fairly minimal, although there's passages of almost-lyrical prose that are strongly reminiscent of Bisson's original work - in particular, his short stories. To be fair, there's also places where he doesn't quite pull off the translation from script to story; but, after all, it's only a novelisation...

For anyone who wondered how Hollywood could produce a movie of one of Gibson's shortest, slightest stories, here's the answer. The film should be released in this country real soon now; if the book's anything to judge by, it's worth seeing.

Tanya Brown

C. J. Cherryh

Fortress in the Eye of Time

HarperCollins, 1995, 773pp, £5.99

At the opening of this novel, the mage Mauryl Gestaurian creates a Shaping, a boy whom he names Tristen. At first Tristen is a complete innocent, his mind a blank, and in the first section of the book he has to learn very simple and basic things about everyday life, as well as trying to fit himself for the unknown purpose for which Mauryl created him.

The two live alone in an ancient fortress, but there are unexplained threats from outside, and when Mauryl's enemy defeats him, Tristen is left with nothing to do but obey Mauryl's last command to him, to follow the Road.

At this point the novel opens out into a wide sweep of different lands, religions and political move-

ments. Tristen is brought to the notice of Cefwyn, Regent of this part of the country, and heir to the throne. Cefwyn feels drawn to him, but is not sure whether he can trust a pupil of Mauryl. Meanwhile Tristen, as his experience expands, comes to realise that he is not just a sorcerer's creation, but a recreation of someone out of history. His discovery of his own identity, and how that will affect his world, is the major theme of the novel.

I was impressed by this book, the deliberate narrowness of the early parts contrasting with the complexity of the later sections. It's not every fantasy novel that creates a world with such solid history, politics and religion. One problem I found was that sometimes the complexity tended to overwhelm the story; it can be difficult to work out who's who. But the central characters are believable and compelling and their difficulties are real. This isn't my favourite of the Cherryh novels I've read, but I enjoyed it, and I recommend it.

Cherith Baldrey

Claremont / Aliens v. Predator - The Deadliest of the Species Book 2
Barreto

Boxtree, 1995. No pagination. £9.99

If you liked *Alien...* if you liked *Predator...* you might not like *Aliens v. Predator*. (Writer: Christopher Claremont. Artist Eduardo Barreto - Edward Barrett?). The filmic originals have been overpowered and left for dead: only the TM-ed titles remain. But so what? We're not talking about Platonic ideals, here – just two goddam sci-fi movies.

Book 1 of *Aliens v. Predator – The Deadliest of the Species* remains available from the same publisher at the same subject-to-change-without-notice price (ISBN 0 7522 0878 0).

"Predators and aliens, they're like the mongoose to the cobra. Instinctive enemies, from time's beginning to its end" (I didn't put it better myself). The writing is fine. Ditto the artwork. What else can I usefully say? Oh, yes... I liked the Sharon ('Quick and the Dead') Stone lookalike. She later turns up looking lusciously like the Black Canary. (Real comic-book fans will know what I'm on about: fake comic-book fans can */&µ =§!). Adolescents of all ages have a visual/tactile treat in store for them. There is, however, a preponderance of nippleless breasts – and that's just the men.

Where comic books/"graphic novels" are, I still hold the "Silver Age" *Green Lantern* in high esteem; (Writer: John Broome. Penciller: Gil Kane. Inker: Joe Giela.). But that's my problem, not yours.

Graham Andrews

D.G. Compton

Justice City

Gollancz, 1995, 288pp, £5.99

This is not science fiction. It is, we are told, a crime novel. Never mind that we know whodunnit, and even why, before the book is half done. Never mind that its setting - in a Britain so near in time that a Conservative government is still in power, with a "play to the galleries, hang 'em and flog 'em" Home Secretary and a Prime Minister who would appear to be John Major - is a fortress prison that does not exist where a clinical and

ultra-high-tech punishment is inflicted that does not exist. This is not science fiction.

In fact what is science fictional about the book is kept so far in the background that we never even discover what this terrifying punishment is, other than that it employs sound. Compton is not writing about the nature of futuristic punishment, but about our notions of justice and our morality of punishment, and to do so he has employed a near-future setting to abstract it from any argument about what actually happens, and he uses a crime novel scenario to tie it in with our most conventional and convenient notions of justice. The result is not wholly satisfactory: the crime only exposes the soft surface not the hard underbelly of the criminal justice system; while the claustrophobic setting serves to narrow rather than broaden the repercussions of the crime. We are left with personal flaws and a petty cover up rather than flaws in the system and a fundamental conspiracy. If this is satire we should be left reeling from the attack and questioning our beliefs rather than wondering mildly if a Tory Party Conference wouldn't actually applaud the regime described here and feel entirely comfortable with its flaws.

The fortress that is Justice City has reduced punishment to a conveyor belt, justice to a factory timetable. Prisoners are wheeled in, a few at a time, drugged, processed, then wheeled out to the next stage in the process. Then a minor flaw upsets this well-oiled machine: one criminal, a Crime Baron of staggering threat, is murdered during the processing. The suspects are conveniently few: the chillingly efficient chief nurse, her two assistants (a large and friendly black woman and a gay man so camp he hovers just over the edge of caricature), and the old lag who serves as general factotum. But Justice City is so impersonal that such a human crime as murder cannot be allowed to intrude; so it is kept quiet while Inspector Duncan, a black cop who has bucked the system so he is a handy sacrificial goat, is brought in to solve the crime to a set time-table.

There are no surprises, but the writing, like so much of Compton's work, is fresh and vivid and keeps you reading for the sheer pleasure of the experience. He even slips a little literary experimentation into a normally conservative genre: every other chapter follows Duncan in conventional third-person, past-tense style, but the alternating chapters which focus on the prison staff are told in a present tense that addresses the reader directly, almost as if narrating a film. The result gives a wonderful freshness and vigor to what would otherwise be a fairly predictable tale; it's a pity he couldn't be as daring in his approach to the subject.

Paul Kincaid

Phil Farrand

The Nitpicker's Guide for Next Generation Trekkers Volume 2

(Boxtree, 1996, £7.99)

This guide covers each episode of the seven seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the film *Star Trek: Generations*. In each case it includes a plot summary, a couple of trivia questions, and 'nit picks'. The 'nit picks' include plot oversights, changed premises, equipment oddities and continuity errors.

The plot summaries are rather too scanty to be

any use as a reference to the series. There seems to be enough detail to jog the readers memory as to the outline of the story, but little more than that. The trivia questions may be of use to quiz setters, but are mostly too obscure to be of any interest to most fans. The most interesting section is the 'nit picks', which after all are the main point of the guide. Some of these are quite fun, but even here I couldn't read more than a few at a time without my eyes glazing over.

I'm not sure what the intended audience for this guide is. If you set a lot of *Star Trek* quizzes, or perhaps are a real *Star Trek* trivia buff it might be worth a look. I suspect however that most fans of the series are going to find it rather pointless.

Kathy Taylor

Simon R. Green

Hellworld

Gollancz, 1995, £4.99, 256pp

A small exploration team land on a planet to examine it and see if it's fit for colonisation. They find the planet was colonised by an alien intelligence in the distant past, which has vanished almost without trace, except for one large city. They find that the aliens have not in fact gone away, but have instead mutated into creatures of evil who lust after the crew's death. Against incredible odds, etc, etc.

Despite the somewhat hackneyed plot, this book has got several things going for it. Firstly, it's short. No, don't laugh - it's only 70,000 words, I'm sure we can all think of authors who'd spin this out to 700,000. Secondly, despite being the third book in a series it stands perfectly well on it's own, something else others might do well to learn from.

Finally, and most importantly, it's workmanlike - the words are all there, they're in the right order, the plot moves along, the characters are fairly substantial cardboard.

This is not great (or even good) literature. If you enjoy reading 1960's Analogs, you'll like this book, or if you've got a train journey and you want some easy-reading, this is for you.

Pat McMurray

Nicola Griffith

Slow River

Voyager 1995, £4.99, 343 pages

Lore van de Oerst, youngest daughter of van de Oerst family, is dumped naked and injured in a city alley after fatally injuring one of her kidnappers. Her family, worth billions from their gene-tech monopoly, have shown no intention of paying her ransom. Someone wants her out of the way. She is rescued by Spanner, hacker, con artist, pimp and pusher, and gets drawn into Spanner's increasingly grandiose plans, walking a dangerous, unstable edge between the lure of easy money and the threat of summary violent retribution. When the partnership degenerates under Spanner's addiction to a new and dangerous pheromone drug, and Lore's dark, haunted dreams of her family and her kidnap ordeal, Lore has to try and break free and find life on her own terms.

As Sal Bird, she takes a menial job at a local wastewater treatment plant, while still tied to Spanner for

one last deal, a charity broadcast scam that will rake in thousands to a diverted account. But the wastewater job proves almost as perilous as Spanner's desperate plans, with costs and safety procedures cut back to dangerous levels. Lore's concerns, and her evident knowledge of the inherent dangers in how the plant is being run, raise the suspicions of her supervisor Magyar. When the storm finally breaks, it proves all too carefully planned, not an accident, but sabotage, and the trail leads back to a horrible secret buried in Lore's past.

This is a disturbing book, one that looks deeply into the terrifying effects of betrayal and abuse, of trust, power and responsibility that, combined with greed and wilful ignorance of consequences, leave Lore scarred, mentally and physically, in fear of her family, friends and those around her.

It is also, as Griffith feels she has to point out in her Author's Note, a fiction, but no less powerful or disturbing for that.

Steve Jeffery

Barbara Hambly

Travelling with The Dead

Voyager, 1995, £4.99

This is the long-awaited sequel to the highly entertaining *Immortal Blood* (a.k.a. *Those Who Hunt the Night*); fans of the earlier book will need no recommendation to hunt it out, but I'd strongly advise anyone else to read *Immortal Blood* first. *Travelling with the Dead* can be read as a standalone - just - but it's immeasurably enriched by standing on the shoulders of its forerunner.

The Dead we're invited to travel with are vampires, and the journey is across early twentieth-century Europe to that Oriental heart of darkness, Constantinople. (And before you groan at the thought of yet more vampires, bear in mind that Hambly is just about the most level-headed fantasy writer in the business. Pain hurts. People die. Her vampires are, you should pardon the expression, the real thing). Dr. James Asher, the surprisingly versatile Oxford don who was the protagonist of *Immortal Blood*, is missing: his wife - clever, bespec-tacled, red-headed Lydia - will take whatever help she can get to find him. Thus the involvement of Don Simon Ysidro, the enigmatic Elizabethan vampire introduced in the earlier book. Intercut with the adventures of their quarry, the two of them follow a trail, via lovingly-evoked turn-of-the-century steam train, which leads to a terrible conclusion in a city reeking of decay.

Along with the incidental excitements of the story (and these are frequent and well-executed, Hambly being the skilled craftswoman that she is) we're given an examination of power and its abuses, morality both theoretical and in practice, and - not unconnected with both - the nature of vampirism itself. Hambly remorselessly shows us the consequences of an existence, however glamorous its illusions, whose continuance depends on the killing of human beings. Being an artist as well as a moralist, she makes us feel the charm of her Undead; at times we're actually impatient with Lydia - the ethical touchstone of the book - for struggling against the sympathy which enforced companionship arouses in her. Hambly even - and this is something a cracker-barrel moralist such as Heinlein would never do - allows Don

Simon some excellent debating-points in his conversations with Lydia about the demands of his nature. (After all, how is vampirism different from what humans have always done to the world around them? Other than, in this case, it being humans themselves who are a step down the food chain.) Yet we're always pulled back to the inexorable fact that 'vampire' is synonymous with 'serial killer'. The idea of a 'good; vampire, however seductive - and it is seductive, as witness the number of authors who make excuses for their harming but murderous creations - is shown to be so much self-delusion. Even when vampires are capable of great and unselfish love, as at least three of them are here. Hambly is one of the very few authors I've read who doesn't use Love as the justification for any amount of bad behaviour; one entire plot-strand demonstrates the fact that the only admirable course, when existence is morally abhorrent, is to terminate that existence no matter how much one loves and is beloved.

As with the previous book, the period atmosphere is spot-on, even to the extent of getting the political gossip right, or at least convincing; my knowledge of the Great Game as it was played before the First World War is less extensive than hers. And she has an excellent grasp of that ambitious, expansionist outlook in the minds of governments which was so prevalent in the early years of this century. But this is all, as it should be, mere background to a rivetting, page-turning story (though it does give an extra fillip to the amateur historian). Daring fights, hair's-breadth escapes, complex puzzles; it's got the full set. And all this with depth of feeling; her major characters' emotions are real, and difficult. Both the climax and the coda of the book are moving to the point of tears. You know, with Hambly, that you're going to get a good read - but this is a bit more than that. Vampire stories for grown-ups, perhaps.

Alice Williams

Nancy Holder

Dead in the Water

Raven. 1995. 413 pp. £4.99

"This is how it will be when you drown" is a running - or should that be sinking? - motif throughout Nancy ('Winner of the Bram Stoker Award') Holder's *Dead in the Water*. When - not if: "And it *will* happen. Sooner. Or later . . . So nice you can join us" (p. 8).

In the beginning (7 April 1797) was Captain Thomas Reade of the ill-named *Royal Grace*, cast adrift by his scurvy crew "...six hundred miles from the Owhyhee Islands,* on the rough Pacific sea" (p. 35). Reade vows vengeance -- up to the utmost barbarity. Not just upon those erstwhile shipmates (who weren't such bad lads, really): "For them that sails the sea, I'll come. And they'll wish they'd never even thought of living, because I'll drag them down to the bottom of the sea . . ." (ibid.)

I am flippantly reminded of that malevolent 'Simpsons' mariner who hates the sea and everything in it. Just when Reade - who has been enshrouded, by the way - seems about to lose his bottle, a bottle comes to him: "A wave lifted it up, up, up; it gleamed like a crown atop the crest! and tossed it into the vessel --" (p.82). A bird grabs the bottle, but *something* rips off one of its legs... Then Cap'n Thomas Reade takes on a new lease

of un-life.

Jump cut to the present day. Long Beach, California. Decrepit, Vietnam-war-guilty freighter *Robert .X. Morris* embarks a new batch of passengers. Among the Hawaii-bound vacationers are: Phil and Elise van Buren-Hadley (money-can't-buy-happiness yuppies); Dr. John Fiedler and his cancer-ridden son Matt/Matty; Ruth Hamilton (love-lorn for long-lost hubby); Donna Almond/"DonnyOsmond / Donny-O" (female cop with omigod! memories of the boy she couldn't save from drowning). In the immortal words of Private ('Dad's Army' Fraser: "You're doomed. All o' ye, doomed!")

Forget - if you can even remember - *Voyage of the Damned* (1976 movie). ~~*Ten Little Niggers Vertically-Challenged Afro-Americans*~~ is more like it. Fans of John Carpenter will enjoy "The Fog" (Chapter Four). Other cultural allusions/illusions abound, from Poe's "Ms. Found in a Bottle" to Police's "Message in a Bottle" -- not excepting the Ancient Mariner. But all that *hommage* stuff doesn't detract one jot from Holder's own prepare-to-defend-yourself style. The prologue alone would scare the number twos out of Lloyd (*Sea Hunt*) Bridges.

Graham Andrews

* I've never heard of them, either.

Mike Jefferies

The Knights of Cawdor

Harper Collins, 1995, 381pp, £4.99

This fantasy novel is set in the kingdom of Elundium, now at peace after war, and enjoying the beneficent and enlightened rule of King Thane. He has released from prison the dwarven Tunnellers to garden the wilderness, and he encourages the education of peasant children by the Loremasters, who had previously restricted their knowledge to a secretive elite. Unfortunately such policies don't find favour with certain elements in society. Those whose privileges are threatened join forces with the resentful and jealous, and with external enemies. But do the terrifying Night-Beasts really exist, or are their attacks actually the result of corporeal terrorists; and, if the latter, who are they? And can ordinary characters survive - and turn back - the tide of hate sweeping away reason, decency and toleration? Over it all flit the owl-spirits, trying to streng-then the honest and valiant, and guide them through the tangle of events.

Two passages stand out in my mind.

One of the warrior Marchers is realistically human enough to have an irrational phobia - he admits he would rather face a Night-Beast than an ordinary dog; while the most disturbing portions of the book are not phantastical, but the portrayals of Snatchpurse, self-appointed per-secutor of the alien, the stranger and the outsider. He harangues his followers with such words as "Everybody's sick of them; people don't want their kind barging in here any more. Remember, fear is the greatest power of all."

Martin Brice

**Doris Lessing and
Charlie Adlard**

Playing the Game

Harper Collins, 1995, £6.99

This is the long-awaited 'first ever graphic novel to be

written by a major contemporary novelist' - a statement which might raise a few quibbles somewhere, but I have had enormous fun showing it to people as 'the new Doris Lessing comic' and watching their reactions.

But, apart from confusing folk with a too-strait-laced conception of literary form, does it have any *value*? I have to say that the delay in publishing 'Playing the Game' (it was announced a good couple of years ago) has caused it to miss the waves of hype that the HarperCollins graphic novels were originally launched upon, and people are now either used to this form or have rejected it as, well, comics by any other name. What we have here is a poetic fable illustrated by a rising comics artist, who uses many of the more effective techniques of the genre to bring out the symbolism of the original text. "Spacer Joe" is a young man of the urban underclass who risks all in a visionary game. There's a blonde woman (Bella-Rose) who is Joe's first sexual muse, and a black woman (Francesca Bird) who soars high above the city, rescuing Joe as he tumbles from a tower and leading him to play the literal snakes-and-ladders game in which they finally confront their fates. When there are no ladders to bring you out of your environment, appears to be one meaning of the text, you "use the enemy/friend for foe". Whether the ending is triumphant, though, is to me a moot point.

This is exactly the sort of book which will be discarded by people who "can't read comics". It is, frankly, difficult, depending on a very sophisticated interplay of word and picture. The fact that the "word" is poetry and Francesca Bird's "part" is sung adds an extra layer. Should this "book" actually have appeared *with* music, as a CD-ROM package? But it is as definitive a Doris Lessing text as anything, when you consider the *Canopus in Argus* series and other Lessing stories which were equally visionary; and Adlard's command of visual narrative, motion and colour hit the imagination in just the right spots. There's such a thing as being given too much, and Adlard allows you to take a scene slowly and ponder the implications, which are various.

Andy Sawyer

Jane Lindskold

The Pipes of Orpheus

Avon Books, 1995, £4.99

This piece of juvenile fiction has a certain charm and the use of ancient Greek heroes and deities provides a novel angle. Its main protagonists are five of the children who followed the Pied Piper from Hamelin.

The first section of the book deals with their journey through Hades in an attempt to free themselves, and the other children both living and dead. At its best this section deals well with the effect of living through horror and deprivation. Unfortunately it suffers from one of the commoner problems of juvenile fantasy; the unrealistic level of skill, knowledge and vocabulary demonstrated by its younger protagonists.

The plot of the second section, which is set ten years later, follows logically on from the first. Although overall the plot seems dragged out it contains some original ideas. The characterisation in this section of the book is weaker. Most of the protagonists appear unchanged by the events of the intervening decade, and the minor characters are portrayed as stereotypes.

Overall the book is a pleasant if undemanding read. A quest book, but one which is a little bit different.

Kathy Taylor

Simon Maginn

A Sickness of the Soul

Corgi, 1995, 331pp, £4.99

Robert, narrator of this quiet but effective horror novel, is an investigative journalist. When he goes undercover to investigate a strange healer cult operating in the West Midlands, he finds something far weirder than he could have imagined, or invented. Led by a man who calls himself Teacher, the Sons of the New Bethlehem are a leather-clad biker gang bringing a brutal salvation to the disaffected and alienated. Kept in a half-deserted hotel, Robert is told that he will be kept there until he is ready to accept Teacher's ministry. Echoes of *Heart of Darkness*, certainly; though whether Teacher or Robert himself is the hollow sham is another matter entirely. Right from the start the journalist, already a man only tangentially acquainted with the truth, a would-be rebel who has all the trappings of a left-whinge pseudo-yuppie, admits that his recollections are 'slightly fuzzy': he is an unreliable narrator who admits it. The sense of misinformation permeates the book from introduction onward. His escape attempts fail with the chill inevitability which is a feature of the contemporary British horror novel; and even when he does return to his Ealing flat and his pregnant girlfriend, he finds he cannot actually stay away. He needs to go back, to confront the heart of darkness and, with that same chill inevitability, to give himself up to it.

Chris Amies

Graham Masterton

Spirit

Mandarin, 1995, 424pp, £5.99

A tautly-told tale from one of horror's leading writers, *Spirit* is a welcome new novel from Graham Masterton.

The pace is slower than in his previous novels, many of which were unashamedly pot-boilers. Masterton has used it to his advantage, adding more detail, working hard to create a creeping sense of denouement.

As in all his books there is a supernatural explanation for what happens, which many readers may have trouble swallowing. It is a sign of how good a writer Masterton can be, that however absurd the premises of the plot, the fictional world he creates in *Spirit* is always entirely believable.

The fates of three sisters are woven together by the tragic death of one of them as a little girl. The emotional shock is replaced by a growing awareness that something of their dead sister has survived. Clues as to what their dead sister might have become are given in the story of the Snow Queen, as retold in *Spirit*. Masterton skillfully blends fact with fiction, the real world of the sisters set in 1940's America with a mythical world inside a dark children's book.

Sex, the favourite staple of any good horror story, rears its ugly head and is punished. The Snow Queen is a grotesque virginal figure with a fiery beauty, yet who remains icy. The dead sister returns to punish the men who want to spoil the childhood of her living

sisters. The two sisters eventually grow up, but have to exorcise their childhood, and the fears embodied by the monster haunting them.

Spirit is a clever book that uses many of the most interesting themes in horror, although it is aimed at a mass-market audience and has to make many compromises along the way. It should widen Masterton's readership without losing the more traditional buyers of his fiction.

Max Sexton

Jay Russell

Celestial Dogs

Raven Books, 1996, 264pp, £5.99

Marty Burns is a former child TV star who now operates as a down-at-heel Los Angeles private eye prone to excessive intakes of alcohol. He's employed by a pimp to find a young cheerleader-type girl the pimp has fallen for. But Jenny has been killed, Marty thinks by a snuff movie outfit called Celestial Dogs. In reality this is a front for a Japanese secret sect; Jenny has been sacrificed in order to bring the demon lord Shuten Doji back into the world of men. Marty is suddenly plunged into a deadly and horrific war between good and evil, complicated by his falling in love with Rosa, who runs a hostel for girls working the streets.

Russell's use of Japanese mythology is the one original aspect of a novel which looks as though it was written with both eyes on the movie rights. It's a fun, fast-moving read to be sure, but in any examination it does rather fall apart. The L.A. cop scenes are almost parodies, and Rosa is introduced in a sort of Huggy Bear fashion as a source of information for Marty. Of course, she's more than that - as the love interest it also helps that she's stunningly attractive and has a PhD to boot! The good and evil sides are supposed to be balanced, yet whilst the mythical hero's spirit is easily brought to life the bad guys have to go through a complicated, long-drawn out procedure to allow Shuten Doji to visit L.A.. As to how, at the end, the whole affair is explained away to our L.A.P.D. friends, the least said the better ...

Andy Mills

Brian Sibley (text) &
John Howe (images)

**There and Back Again;
The Map of 'The Hobbit'**

HarperCollins, 1995, £4.99

There is now a conventional format of the "map-book", and this is it; a short booklet on the writing of *The Hobbit*, and a large colour map showing the map of Middle-Earth featured in Tolkien's celebrated children's book, together with a scene which is obviously the gathering of the dwarves in Bilbo's home.

It's a conventional and convenient gift for Tolkien fans who have so far avoided buying it for themselves, although considering the meticulous task Tolkien himself made of mapping Middle Earth, you do wonder if someone else's interpretation is really necessary. It's undeniably attractive, although the artist does fall into the trap of depicting Bilbo (an adult hobbit) with the features of a pre-adolescent boy, and the dragon circling the map is too close to the fantasy-book convention to be Smaug. For collectors who aren't avid enough to go into the

serious Tolkien Academic Industry.

Andy Sawyer

**Deep Space Nine, Star Trek The Next
Generation: The Landmark Crossover.**

(Titan, 1995, £7.99)

The Adventures of Cyclops and Phoenix.

(Titan, 1995, £8.99)

(Titan, 1995, £6.99)

Babylon 5

The graphic novel is one of the more interesting new media. At its best, the story and art work enhance each other, producing memorable, striking images and ideas, such as the Maus series. None of the three graphic novels reviewed here are of this calibre.

The worst of the three is the *Deep Space Nine / Star Trek The Next Generation* crossover. This 'graphic novel' contains every dreadful cliché from the series. It squeezes in all the major characters from both series, in the process reducing them to their stereotypes. There are no decent lines, and the only humorous touches, for instance where Quark is cheating in the bar, are predictably recycled from the series. Unsurprisingly there is no character development; at the end of the story no one has learnt anything or changed in any way. The level of plot is derisory, and the only credible thing I can find to say about it is that most of the characters are recognisably drawn. The press release claims "You thought it could never happen;" I rather wish it never had. Even fans of these series should give this one a miss.

The Adventures of Cyclops and Phoenix is a better representation of the graphic novel. The story is set in a bleak future where 'flat liners', normal humans, are subjugated and controlled by mutants. A couple brought forward from the past, Jean and Scott Summers (a.k.a. Cyclops and Phoenix) raise their son who plays a vital role in the resistance against this regime. The story is well paced, with decent characterisation and some interesting artwork. Although it could almost stand alone as a novel the reader would benefit from knowing more about the background of the characters.

The *Babylon 5* graphic novel follows directly on from episode one of the second series of the television series. This novel, being co-written by J Michael Straczynski, is canonical to the series, and like it answers some questions and poses others.

The plot is centred around the threat of an assassination plot against the new Minbari leader. The story starts with the recall of Jeffrey Sinclair to Earth, and follows his arrival to Minbar as the first Earth Ambassador. The standard of writing is high, and the novel provides some interesting insights into the relationships between characters. The novel is set partly on Babylon 5 and partly on Minbar, and the Minbar sections provide some fascinating insights into Minbari politics.

A graphic novel however relies not just on plot and script but on graphics, and unfortunately overall these are of a poor standard. This is due in part to the colouring; for example at one point Delenn is shown with a purple face. One or two of the characters are well drawn, such as G'Kar, but others are recognisable only by their uniforms.

Despite the graphics, for established fans this

provides a welcome addition to the *Babylon 5* narrative.

Kathy Taylor

Classic Star Wars: Books 2 and 3

Boxtree, 1995, £10.99 each

Graphic novels are a step beyond comic books. They take subject matter that is considered too avant-garde or use art styles that are new and dynamic, extend the usual 4-colour comic palette to a rainbow range of colours and use them in new and exciting ways to bring the story to life, to broaden the comic book's horizons...

Having said all that, these books are comics. Oh, the artwork makes reasonably good use of light and shade to convey its images and the colour palettes are muted and realistic rather than garish, but there is nothing really special about the framing or the layouts, not enough innovation to count.

But of course, that's not really why you'd want to buy these. You'd want to buy these because they're *Star Wars*!!! Wouldn't you? Well, probably. These books cover the time between the end of the first film and the beginning of the next. It details the travails of Han and Leia, Luke and Chewie, C3PO and R2D2 and the Rebel alliance in their search for allies, weapons and a new base as the Empire's forces close in.

The snag with in-between books like this is that because we know the characters from both films, and have a fair idea how they are going to react in any situation, they are not allowed to develop. By the end of these volumes, Princess Leia still thinks that Han is just a free-booting privateer, out for all he can get. More to the point I suppose, is that Han still does too. The pace is hectic, our heroes jump from crisis to crisis, Han saves Luke, Luke saves Han, Chewbacca saves everybody, but they still have the uneasy partnership that we see at the start of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Ah well, you can't win them all.

If you want to know how the Rebels located Hoth, why they had to abandon Yavin and where Admiral Ackbar and his Mon Calamari came from, then read these, for they hold the answers you seek. And may the Force be with you.

Jon Wallace

Cathal Tohill & Pete Tombs **Immoral Tales: Sex and Horror Cinema in Europe 1956 - 1984**

Titan, 16/11/95, 272pp, £14.99

There's a grey area between art house cinema, commercial movies and video nasties inhabited by a bunch of directors who, for one reason or another, attempt to use exploitation cinema as a means of expression. This book briefly outlines the course of Italian, German, French and Spanish exploitation cinema (Europe, in the context of this book, does not include the UK - UK censorship laws are far too harsh for this kind of film making to flourish), then follows up with the bulk of the text given over to critical histories of 6 directors who live and work there.

Given the title of this volume, my initial thought was that authors would be examining directors like Mario Bava, Lucio Fulci and Dario Argento, however the

emphasis is more on sex than horror and, of the directors that the authors choose to spotlight, I would say none of them are particularly well known. Probably the most famous name covered here is Alain Robbe-Grillet, who wrote *Last Year at Marienbad* as well as directing a number of surreal sex films. Robbe-Grillet is portrayed as an intellectual, but an intellectual who wants to make pornography. That sexual content allows Robbe-Grillet some freedom; perhaps more than he would be allowed in commercial cinema.

This is the case with many of the directors who are examined. In an interview with the Jose Bnazraf, Bnazraf remarks that out of the 60 or so films that he has directed (many of which are hardcore pornography), only 3 or 4 were any good. It's not that he understands his own limitations; more that he is happy to accept a lack of resources (and esteem) that come with working in the sex industry ghetto, as it leaves him free to create what he likes. He has been typecast, as all of these directors have been; typecast as a sex film maker or a horror film maker. When Jean Rollin made *La viol du vampire* in 1966, it typecast him as a 'vampire' film director, even though the subject matter was chosen almost as an afterthought. Rollin had pretensions, and by all accounts *La viol du vampire* is a pretentious film (the Paris critics hated it - something which contributed to its success), and he continues to make bizarre, pretentious films (lack of narrative is a constant theme throughout the films described in this book) to this day - but the majority are vampire / horror hybrids. The titles tell you everything; *The Nude Vampire*, *Virgins and Vampires*, *Requiem for a Vampire* and so on.

We also have Jesus Franco, who started off making Spanish horror movies (*The Awful Dr Orlof* and *Necronomicon*) and has now pumped out hundreds of improvised sex films; and Borowczyk, who made *The Beast* an extraordinary, now notorious, sex film playing on a variation of 'Beauty and the Beast'.

Really, following the creative histories of these directors, I was struck by how single minded they are to even think of using the sex and horror exploitation genre as a vehicle for their creativity. They must know that the opportunity to make big budget films has long since passed, yet they continue to churn out the flicks for next to nothing at a rate, often, of several a year. This book serves, in part, to try and understand why they do it. It's the vision thing, I suppose. The only trouble is, I don't know where one would go in the UK to see any of their films.

Stephen Payne

Bjo Trimble

Star Trek: Concordance

Titan, 1995, 322pp, £12.99

This book is a comprehensive guide to the original *Star Trek* TV series and films, including some material from later series where the original characters make an appearance. I'm told that this is a revision of an earlier book, but I've no knowledge of the original or of how this version differs.

The book begins with plot summaries and cast lists of the TV episodes and films. Most of this material is available elsewhere, though I found it mildly amusing to be told, for example, that 'The Tholian Web' was entitled

in Japanese 'Crisis of Captain Kirk who was Thrown into Different Dimensional Space'.

The real meat of this book is in the concordance section, where you can look up to your heart's content all the nitpicking little details that delight Trek fans. I enjoyed dipping into this, though I found the dictionary definitions of basic vocabulary a bit irritating. Are Trek fans so verbally challenged that they need to be told, for example, "buy: to obtain or exchange for something of value"? And, in the more generalised entries, the choices are odd: why, under 'friend' for instance, is there no mention of Spock's conflict between friendship and the mating urge in 'Amok Time'?

Let's not carp, though. This is a well-produced book, attractively illustrated - not with the photographs that we've all seen before, but with fans' line drawings. If you love original Trek, if you want to compile Trek trivia, or if you've any ambition to write a Trek novel, then it's a must.

Cherith Baldrey

Ian Watson

**The Second Book of Mana:
The Fallen Moon**

Gollancz, 1995, 546pp, 5.99

Trousers. *The Fallen Moon* is the second part of *The Book of Mana*, which is more a novel chopped in two than a two part fantasy; so read *Lucky's Harvest* first (which I didn't - and events were somewhat confusing). As far as I can tell *The Fallen Moon* is set on the planet Kaleva, a cross between Discworld, Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales and the daffy punk mannerism of 'Viriconium' (this is very British fantasy). Yes, *The Fallen Moon* is a fantasy unlike any other I have read, including Watson's (e.g. *The Book of the River*), and I was totally unprepared for the mixture of humour, intrigue, eccentricity, politics, sociology and very bizarre locale which loads every page.

There is a fascinating attention to detail here, an assemblage of adverbs, an amalgamation of adjectives, that positively reels from the page; not at all what I expected. The story, which is extremely convoluted and bulging with dozens of characters (but listed for easy identification), sort of follows Eyeno and his acquaintances on the trail of the Ukko, which they find at the end (I think), the mocky-men go marching on and everyone is happy. It also includes the weirdest way of killing monsters I have ever come across. I think everyone will find this a pleasant surprise. And trousers.

Stephen Payne

Jane Welch

The Runes of War

Voyager, 1995, £5.99, 495pp

The Runes of War is book one in the Runespell trilogy, and the author's debut novel. It's story concerns a barbarian horde marching on the frontier castle of Torra Alta. Baron Bronwolf is making preparations for the siege when his son, Caspar, is kidnapped. Caspar has found the Druid's Eye, a magical orb of untold power - untold in volume one, anyway. The Baron sets off after his son on his own, leaving his people to face the vicious barbarian hordes. Various adventures ensue before we reach the "Oh, so now we have to go on another quest" conclusion.

The problem with fantasy trilogies is the formula. Each book has to have a relatively simple storyline so that the reader can remember the salient points as he/she reads the following books. Book one must introduce the characters and the obligatory map at the front, book two is usually an uneasy mix of recapitulation and scene setting for the final showdown and book three must climax with a battle between good and evil. Good must win, but it helps if evil is still around in case a further trilogy is called for. And it's all J.R.R. Tolkein's fault! There's nothing wrong with writing within genre limits and, for a first novel, Welch does it extraordinarily well. But to judge this book I really need to read the whole trilogy because it doesn't have a self contained story.

Welch has a clear and breezily readable prose style but struggles to introduce an atmosphere of dread, of dark events over the horizon. Given her natural storytelling abilities I'm sure she could write an entertaining fantasy novel but, in this volume, she is too restrained by the boundaries of fantasy's rampant love affair with tales split into three. I just wish some of these flabby trilogies could be hacked into self-contained 700 page novels, but that would upset the publishers.

Colin Bird

T. M. Wright

Erthmun

Gollancz, 1995, 252pp, £4.99

T. M. Wright's ghost stories are, unlike so many, urban, desolate. A haunted house is as likely to be a derelict brownstone on East 161st Street as a country house in Loamshire.

Wright's world is filled with ghosts and spirits. The realm which, in other hands, is that of nature-elementals or Faery is brought into our own. Unlike most fantasy, this is not medieval folk-tale retold, but something darker which is almost science-fictional in its examination of the nature of the afterlife. Spirits, said the Elizabethan pamphleteer Thomas Nashe, hover around us "as thick as motes in the sun", and Wright explores the truth of that statement.

Jack Erthmun is a New York homicide detective who is faced with a series of bizarre murders which bring him closer to his own childhood. Wright's oblique, episodic style never quite tells us openly who - or what - Erthmun is, although the key episode is presented early enough in the book to allow the reader to concentrate on some of its implications. "Eerie" rather than "horror", *Erthmun* will unsettle rather than scare, but the effects will linger longer.

Andy Sawyer