

**Christopher Priest Special**

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**The Critical  
Journal of  
the BSFA**

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

## Contents

- 3 Editorial**  
*by Gary Dalkin*
- 3 ΨΦ**  
*Letters to Vector*
- 4 Throwing Away the Orthodoxy**  
*Christopher Priest in conversation with Paul Kincaid*
- 10 Mirrors, Doubles, Twins**  
*Paul Kincaid on the works of Christopher Priest*
- 13 A Retreat from Reality**  
*Christopher Priest on the origins of his novel, The Extremes*
- 16 A Christopher Priest Bibliography**  
*Compiled by Andrew M. Butler*
- 17 The Music of the Spheres 4: Jazz and Science Fiction Film Music**  
*by Davis H Wood*
- 19 First Impressions**  
*Book Reviews edited by Steve Jeffery*

Cover: Christopher Priest at the Arthur C. Clarke Award ceremony in May 1999. Photo by Tony Cullen.

## VECTOR

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## Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial • Editorial

The obvious thing to do would be to avoid mentioning it altogether, even by oblique reference. To take the invert snob route. Or I could begin by noting that in 1977 one man changed the face of science fiction forever. That man was, of course, Terry Brooks [known hereafter as TBM – the Terry Brooks Menace] and what he did was file the serial numbers off an easy-reading edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, give it a quick re-spray with something cheap and cheerful, and sell it to a publisher as *The Sword of Shannara*. Sequels followed. Fantasy trilogies and series became the norm, forcing science fiction to mutate into much the same pattern. Cut to 1999 and we are well into the era of the brainless bloated blockbusters. And people like it. It therefore seems inevitable that when George Lucas was looking for someone to novelise *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*, that he would call on Mr. Brooks. It brings things full circle, and saves us the bother of reading Mr. Brooks' latest book, because we can see the movie instead.

Some people will never 'get it' as our American cousins are wont to say. To really 'get it' you had to be somewhere between 5 and 17 when *Star Wars* was originally released. It also helped if you were a boy, as it is a male adolescent power fantasy. For those that were affected it became an important part of their growing-up, and so much more than just another film. Some of the negative reaction to *The Phantom Menace* may be because, inevitably, it doesn't have, can't have, the same affect on 25-40 year old critics as the original had on them when they were still in school. The real test of *The Phantom Menace* will be whether today's children love it the way some of us love *Star Wars*.

I'm sure it's really not cool round these parts to admit to loving *Star Wars*, but I'm going to come right out and say it: *Star Wars* has given me more pleasure than any other film I have ever seen. Which is not

the same thing as saying it's the best film I've ever seen. Just the one I can happily go and see, even now, though of course it's not the same experience, over and over again for the sheer fun of it. [And I'm not talking about seeing it shrunk and cropped into a horrible little box in the corner of the living room. I've never seen any of the trilogy on tv].

The problem people have, and why they shy away, is in the matter of confusing two different things. *Star Wars* was never more than nominally science fiction, in the same way the old *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* serials it was inspired by were never more than simple swashbuckling adventure stories dressed up in technological trappings. It's true of me, and I suspect true of many others, that I loved *Star Wars* because of the grand adventure and epic scale, for the sense of escape. We all wanted to escape like Luke Skywalker. That it was science fiction hardly mattered, even then, because I was also reading 'real' SF the rest of the time. *Star Wars* was some fun than happened along that had nothing to do with the real stuff. The problem may be that there are a lot of people who weren't reading the real stuff, who, when suddenly confronted by *Star Wars* decided that it was what SF must be like. And a lot of people who didn't read SF, but loved *Star Wars*, decided they wanted to read SF if it was like *Star Wars*. So a whole new type of media 'inspired' SF started to emerge. Besides SF and Fantasy there appeared a third, tenuously related-but-not-really-the-same-thing-at-all genre. Sci-Fi, forever scorned by the very name.

Unfortunately today this upstart is what many people are thinking of when they talk about SF. And that, perhaps, is why so many real SF fans have an irrational grudge against Mr. Lucas and all his works. But as he says himself, the *Star Wars* films are just Saturday afternoon kid's matinee pictures. It's nothing to do with science fiction really. There's a new one coming out soon. Enjoy.

by Gary Dalkin



In V203 Andrew M. Butler irked John D. Rickett with the phrase "teaching *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* to a group of mature students" to which Mr Rickett's response (V205): 'I truly fail to see how it is possible to teach a story, a book, a corpus of literature, an author or any similar thing to anyone at all. You might, with luck, show people ways in which they might be able to enrich their own readings or ways in which they can acquire more techniques for applying to the criticism of a book or author.' Andrew replied that "Life is too short to say 'Oh, I'm helping the students to employ a particular reading strategy in their examination of this text this afternoon'" and Gary responded to JDR's charge of Butler's alleged arrogance in using a particular (political) teaching by suggesting: "[Using] imagination and creativity is what a teacher is paid for, and what a good teacher does best. For anything less arrogant you might as well get a robot."

From John D. Rickett, via email:

Thank you for printing my letter and for granting me the courtesy of not one but of two responses. I can fully accept and agree with Andy's

response, and thank him for it. It demonstrates exactly what I was trying, perhaps unclearly, to say; but more of that later.

Gary's response, however, caused me some concern and I wondered why he felt impelled to mount his high horse as an ex-teacher, as though I had somehow impugned the value of the whole race of teachers. That was certainly not my intention.

My view is a simple one. I start from the perhaps surprising stance that you can't sell anything to anyone; people choose to buy or not to buy. Equally I believe that you can't teach anything to anyone; people choose to learn. If it were possible to teach, then we would have a much better educated mass of the population than is the case or ever has been the case.

Thus, Andy's students demonstrated quite clearly that they had been listening to his ideas, had wished to apply them and did so. They, in other words, had chosen to learn and had done so.

Lest you think that I speak from a base of no knowledge or experience in the teaching field, perhaps I should provide some credentials. I was for a number of years in charge of the development and implementation of all management training at all levels from prospective executive intake to the most senior management in a large British international bank. The rôle was a management task for me and did not compel me to undertake direct training. However, I chose to do this in view of certain specialities I had and ran a series of courses for our graduate trainee management intakes and additionally a large number of courses at all levels of management on international commercial banking practice and procedures, on presentation and communication skills and on selling skills for commercial or private bankers.

To this day I do not believe that I taught anything to anyone. I simply created the conditions in which people could choose to learn and, yes, I did tell those on the selling skills courses that you couldn't sell anything

to anyone; you could only create the conditions in which they would wish to buy.

I still think I was a pretty good 'teacher': a lot of my students learnt very well indeed.

I hope this has served to make my previous letter somewhat clearer, and thank you for your time in having listened to me.

*AMB responds: Every time I hear the word "facilitate" I reach for my Browning. The curious thing with the state of student-centred learning (as opposed teaching at the chalk face) is that the majority of students would much rather be taught in the sense of being told what to think. They want me to give them the right answer, nothing more, nothing less. They want to know the six things you need to know about Hamlet and, if they really must be tested on it, they want to know what we're going to ask them. The questionnaires about teaching we give to students tend to be geared toward "Did the tutor create a helpful learning atmosphere?" and "Did the tutor generate fruitful discussion", as if it's all down to her. One set of questionnaires came back with most of them claiming that the group discussions were the best part of the course, oops, module, but that they wanted more time spent on teaching and less on discussion...*

*GSD replies: I felt compelled to mount my high horse because as a school teacher I worked harder than I ever have before or since and your letter seemed to suggest that I had been wasting my time: teachers can't teach, editors can't edit, and words clearly have no meaning at all.*

*People choose to learn, and some people have paid me to teach them privately and individually. They wouldn't do that if they didn't think I was doing something they could achieve equally well by themselves. People can teach themselves in certain circumstances, and no teacher can learn for someone else, but a good teacher most definitely can teach. And there we'll have to agree to disagree.*

**From Jennifer Swift**

I am writing to protest about something that Matt Coward said in his review of *Children of God* in *Vector* 205: 'to treat irrational faith seriously and sympathetically in a work of sf is to risk alienating what might be assumed to be a largely rationalistic audience. Worse, to have as your principal human characters liberal, humanistic, self-aware scientists who are also priests, and not to fully resolve this fundamental contradiction, is downright dishonest, not to mention sloppy.' I have to say that I know plenty of rational, humane, well-educated religious believers. I would not deny that some believers are ignorant bigots, but those who presume that atheism is so obviously true that you needn't

even argue for it are as intellectually blinkered as religious fundamentalists. There are forceful arguments for the existence of God – for example, a lot capable philosophers have argued that a science which is not founded on belief in a divine creator is floating in mid-air. There are also forceful arguments against, especially the argument from horrendous evil. What is so refreshing about Mary Doria Russell's work is that she puts both kinds of arguments in their most powerful form and doesn't tinker with her narrative to give one side an unfair advantage. No one can know for sure in this life who is right, and so it behoves us to listen carefully to thoughtful people on the other side.

*GSD replies: The Society of Jesus, or The Jesuits, was founded in 1534, in the full flower of the Renaissance. To quote the 1997 World Book Encyclopedia: 'Humanism was the most significant intellectual movement of the Renaissance. It blended concern for the history and actions of human beings with religious concerns.'*

*In the article on Humanism by Dr Alan Lacey in The Oxford Companion to Philosophy we read: 'God still remained as creator and supreme authority – the Renaissance humanists were far from being atheists – but his activity was seen as being less immediate, more as a general control than as day-to-day interference, and this enabled a scientific outlook to arise which saw the universe as governed by general laws, albeit these were laid down by God.'*

*Given this intellectual history of Mary Doria Russell's Jesuit scientist heroes I can see no contradiction between their humanism and their faith. While, for Matt Coward to brand all faith irrational, as he appears to do, demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of religious faith: that something cannot, yet, be proved, does not mean that it is 'irrational'. Which of the following beliefs is the more irrational?*

*That the phenomenal complexity of life, the universe and everything sprang into being through random chance, against odds which any statistician who has studied the evidence will agree are so long as to be by normal statistical rules considered scientifically impossible, or that the universe and everything in it is exactly what many people see it to be, the coherent creation of an extraordinarily powerful mind, by definition, God?*

*Letters to Vector should be sent to Gary Dalkin, 5 Lydford Road, Bournemouth, BN11 8SN or emailed to [ambutler@enterprise.net](mailto:ambutler@enterprise.net) and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.*

*THE RE-RELEASE OF CHRISTOPHER PRIEST'S BACK CATALOGUE AND THE SUCCESS OF THE EXTREMES (1998) OFFERS US A CHANCE TO RE-EVALUATE THE WORK OF AN IMPORTANT BRITISH WRITER. HERE PAUL KINCAID INTERVIEWS THE MAN HIMSELF.*

## THROWING AWAY THE ORTHODOXY

**A conversation about sex, innocence and science fiction between Christopher Priest and Paul Kincaid**

**Paul Kincaid:** Let's start at the end. You have just brought out all the *Dream Archipelago* stories collected in one volume. Why have you gone back to that?

**Christopher Priest:** Well, there's a bad reason and a good reason.

**PK:** Let's have the bad reason.

**CP:** The bad reason is a commercial one. John Jarrold suggested buying my backlist for *Earthlight*, and I thought all those books are 20 or 30 years old now. It's a bit depressing how long ago it was. *Inverted World* was 25 years ago. So I said, through my agent: 'I can do you a new book quite easily, *The Dream Archipelago*. It has never been published as a collection, and I'll re-write it and bring it up to date.' He liked that, so he bought it.

The good reason is that they had never been brought together, and

I was really dissatisfied with some of them. Two in particular I was unhappy with and wanted to re-write.

**PK:** Which two?

**CP:** Ah, erm, that one and that one.

The thing is, I'm usually dissatisfied with all my stuff. The two... One is 'The Cremation', which brought me out in a cold sweat when I read it again. It's unpublishable now. It wasn't unpublishable *then*, but the world's moved on. As originally published it was a kind of revenge drama on a woman rejected; I've changed that, what happens between them now is different.

The other is 'The Miraculous Cairn', a short story that, at the time, I thought would become a novel. I couldn't get it together as a novel so I published it as a short story. Twenty years go by, and I think I should

have done it properly. It's the same story, just a bit tighter, a bit better.

And I've written a new short story. Well, it's not really a story, it's linking material, a bit like *The Illustrated Man*. It's called 'The Equatorial Moment' and it's just a description of a natural phenomenon on the Dream Archipelago, then through the other stories it's introduced or referred to.

**PK: You say 'The Miraculous Cairn' was intended to be a novel. Was that before you wrote *The Affirmation*?**

**CP:** I think it was, yes. I felt the Dream Archipelago was over. When I did *The Affirmation* I thought there's only one way to finish the Dream Archipelago, and that's to knock it on the head completely, which is what *The Affirmation* does.

**PK: It reminds me in a way of M. John Harrison's Viriconium stories, where he ended with Viriconium becoming like Manchester or Leeds.**

**CP:** I can understand: you kill your baby. For a long time, the Dream Archipelago was a backdrop, a useful tapestry. One of the things people don't ask me about is the cinema, but films are a big influence on me and at the time, in the '70s, I was watching a lot of films by Eric Rohmer who did these films called 'Contes Moraux', Moral Stories. That gave me the idea of doing an alternative version, Contes Immoraux. All the stories in the Dream Archipelago are about sexual perversion. Putting them into that backdrop was a way of making them cosy. But you grow out of these things, I finally got fed up of watching Eric Rohmer movies.

**PK: I wasn't going to ask about the cinema, but I was going to ask about sex. There is a strong sexual element running through all your stories, really from *A Dream of Wessex* onwards. This perversion is particularly strong in *The Quiet Woman*, and I wonder how comfortable you were writing that, because I thought *The Quiet Woman* in particular looked like a story you weren't very comfortable writing.**

**CP:** Sex in books is actually a sort of cause and effect. What people see is the effect and they never find out the cause, which, with people like me, is quite often simple boredom. I get fed up doing the story, so one morning I think 'I'll put in a bit of cunnilingus,' or something.

*The Quiet Woman* is not a book I'm very interested in, I don't really want to talk about it. I wrote the book and it's over; I don't feel very strongly about it. I don't like it myself, but I know quite a lot of people who've said it's the best thing I've ever written.

**PK: With the exception of possibly *Indoctrinaire*, I think it's the weakest story you've done.**

**CP:** I agree with you. It's not intended to be, but it didn't work out. I finished it, enough, and the publisher was glad to have it, but I look at it now and I'm cold on it. It's like somebody else wrote it.

The sex stuff in there, I felt it had a reason, a place in the story, but it was largely attempting to inject some life into the whole thing. You have to remember that *The Quiet Woman* came out of a very bad period of my life. This is not an excuse. I hit a roll with *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour*, and then the year *The Glamour* came out my life took a major change, which we needn't go into, and I was completely unable to write for several years. On top of that there was that endless bloody debate about my rôle as a science fiction writer and whether I wanted to be associated with science fiction any more. That period, from '85 to '90, which is the period between *The Glamour* and *The Quiet Woman*, is the period when science fiction publishing went bonkers. It's when the spoof fantasies took over, and the *Star Trek* novelisations, and the stuff we have to put up with today. As a serious genre in which writers like Ballard and Sladek and Philip K. Dick could find a voice, it's gone now. Gone forever. So I was feeling less and less inclined to write.

**PK: I want to talk about your attitude to science fiction later on, it's something I think we should clear up.**

**CP:** Oh you can never clear up that one.

**PK: Let's go back to the sexual thing. What runs through so much, from *A Dream of Wessex*, is the triangle.**

**CP:** There's no sex in *The Prestige*.

**PK: But there's a triangle.**

**CP:** There's a triangle, yes.

**PK: A sexual triangle, sexual tension.**

**CP:** It's a quadrilateral, actually.

**PK: Go on, ruin a nice theory.**

**CP:** The thing is, certainly in *The Glamour*, *The Affirmation* and *A Dream of Wessex*, it's very clear: one person of one sex, two people of the opposite sex.

**PK: It's there again in *The Extremes*, except that two of them are dead.**

**CP:** Yes. I think you can keep *The Prestige* out of this because it works on such a different level.

**PK: It feels like it's part of the same range of books – with *The Affirmation*, *The Glamour* and *The Extremes* – in a way that *The Quiet Woman* wasn't.**

**CP:** The sexual triangle is hardly unique to me. It's one of the great engines of literature. But what's your point? I interrupted.

**PK: It's become such a focal point in your novels, a structure that you keep returning to.**

**CP:** It's one of the great verities. I would be very slow to say I write all these novels about sexual triangles as if no one had ever done it before, as if *Romeo and Juliet* had never touched on that.

**PK: But it wasn't there before.**

**CP:** Ah, now you're touching a different point. You see, *A Dream of Wessex* was the key novel, that's the moment where it changes. You can actually see the process changing. That's the point where science fiction starts being subverted, where I'm saying you mustn't take this stuff too seriously, because that's what *A Dream of Wessex* is all about: don't believe in these dreams. Before that I was trying to be what Bob Shaw called 'a science fiction writer who wrote science fiction'. Up to and including, I suppose, *The Space Machine*. But after that I was simply taking on more adult themes. It seems to me that stories are best told through character, and engagement of sex is one way.

**PK: One of the things that interests me about the triangle theme is that the two men are actually mirrors of each other. Then, in *The Prestige*, you actually get into talking about twins, and with your own children being twins I wondered how personal it was.**

**CP:** I can't answer that, because I don't really know. My children aren't the kind of twins that I like writing about. We always think of them as just brother and sister who happened to be born on the same day, their personalities are so completely different. But the kind of twin I'm interested in is the doppelgänger or the identical twin or the unknown twin or the behavioural twin...

**PK: Even the mirror image?**

**CP:** Yes, or the fraudulent twin. *The Prestige* is full of fraudulent twins. One of the things that really grabbed my attention years ago was Graham Greene's thing about 'The Other'. Greene said he was being followed around by someone who called himself Graham Greene, the author. This impostor was always being arrested, busted for things.

Getting back to the sexual triangle: all characters are a reflection of your own personality. You don't think: 'that's me doing those things,' but it's an aspect of me in that situation that might react that way. This other aspect might react in another way.

I'm sorry, I'm ducking this.

**PK: Are you ducking it?**

**CP:** I don't know. It's something I write about and it seems it's like life and death and the whole damned thing, it just comes into it.

**PK: As a critic you constantly assume that the author is aware of everything they're writing, and very often they're not, it's just what seems right for the story at that time.**

**CP:** Oh, you're completely aware, except that later you forget.

I was interviewed years ago, when I was still living in Pewsey, by somebody from a magazine that was published in Salisbury. He started asking me questions about philosophy. I bluffed my way through, and it later turned out that the philosopher he was quoting was a character from one of my books, Deloinne from *The Affirmation*. I was absolutely gobsmacked by this because it sounded quite good to me and he was quoting all this really deep stuff, and I'd made it all up. At the time, when I was writing it, I felt that was good stuff, but fifteen years later you've forgotten all about it.

Also, the moment of perfection in a novel is the day you've finished it. You've got your manuscript and nobody's seen it, no one at all, not even your wife. At that point it's in a state of original innocence, but from that moment on the novel is never the same. Your wife says you've spelt this wrong or couldn't you have done that better; you send it to your agent and your publisher, the copy editor goes through it and the proof reader, then you do your own proofs. By the time the thing comes out and the reviewers go at it, it's in another domain. The actual innocent thing you wrote, what you intended, is something you have great difficulty recalling. Especially after you've had a number of reviews and you get people interpreting things.

**PK: Is there any book you've written that you think is right?**

**CP:** The one I'm fondest of is *The Prestige*.

The way I work is, when I think of a novel it's 100% perfect. That's the novel I'm going to write, that's the novel I aspire to. By the time I've written it, I've come to an accommodation with the fact that it's not going to be 100%. The accommodation is usually between 55 and 65%, but with *The Prestige* I kept it to about 70%. That's how I feel. It's closer than any of my novels to what I conceived.

**PK: You talk as if you have the whole novel in your mind before you actually start.**

**CP:** Yes.

**PK: You do?**

**CP:** No, but I talk as if I do.

**PK: You don't actually know where it's going?**

**CP:** No. With *The Prestige* I had this idea – maybe it was a stupid idea – of the magic trick that no one knows how it's done. I was amused by that, and it was enough to get me going. It grew crystals as I was writing it. Every day you wake up and think: what am I going to do on the book? Gradually you get this Olympian ideal of what you want, then you settle for something less than that.

**PK: What about *The Glamour*, which is one of the books you've returned to and re-written.**

**CP:** With good reason.

**PK: I remember receiving the first edition and writing a review, then seeing you in a pub before my review appeared. I told you I really liked the book except for the ending. About two days later I got a new ending in the post. So you were never satisfied.**

**CP:** *The Glamour* is unendable. It's not a plot, *The Glamour* is a set-up, it explains an idea. The characters are the medium of that. But at some point you've got to finish the book, and when I did the first version, the

Cape version, I came to a particular way of ending it. But the American publishers said, 'you've got to come to a more positive ending'. They wanted me to resolve it in some way, and I didn't think it was resolvable. So all I did was rewrite that ending – it's a bit more lucid, a bit more spelled out. Then, of course, I couldn't stand the Cape ending, but it had already come out. So I got Abacus, who did the paperback, to use the Cape text with the Doubleday ending. Now I had these hybrids. I had the original text in Cape which wasn't very good because it had a bad ending; I had the Americanised text from Doubleday which I didn't much care for because it was Americanised, but it had a much better ending; and then I had the British text with the American ending. I had no definitive text, and that feels untidy. Then I did the radio play, and I got some really good ideas for little scenes I felt would work better. And then I got all these letters. It really provoked correspondence, people saying it happened to me once. It was definitely an idea that attracts people's attention.

The reality of what happened was that since *The Quiet Woman* all my books have been on computer, and I found it extremely handy to have the text on computer. I thought what I'd do is re-type *The Glamour* word for word and cherry-pick the bits I like so I'd end up with a definitive text. I'd done about 30 pages of this when Simon and Schuster said they'd publish it, so I had to go on and finish it.

**PK: Are you happy with the revised text?**

**CP:** I haven't read it. Not since I wrote it.

**PK: It's like the revised text of *The Magus*.**

**CP:** You see, I don't like the revised text of *The Magus*, it's too knowing. Aldous Huxley said this about *Brave New World*; he looked at it and he winced, but he knew if he rewrote it he'd take out of it what was good as well as what was bad. And that really is a danger.

I haven't rewritten most of my novels. Most of them are intact. Up to *The Prestige*, which is the ninth novel, I see my books in three groups of three. There are three which I feel I can stand my reputation on, three which are good near-misses, and three which I'm not very happy with at all. *Indoctrinaire*, *The Quiet Woman* and *The Space Machine* are in this bottom group. In the top group I'd put *Inverted World*, *The Affirmation* and *The Prestige*. Then *Wessex* and *Glamour* and *Fugue* are the near misses.

**PK: I might have put *Wessex* in the top group as well, coloured by the fact that it feels like it's laying the groundwork for the books that came after.**

**CP:** It is a transitional novel. When I wrote it, I knew it was a transition because at that point I wanted to get out, I wanted to change what I was doing, I felt inhibited by science fiction.

**PK: OK, let's lay this thing about you and science fiction. I've seen some of the essays you wrote at the time about leaving science fiction, yet you constantly say you're being misquoted.**

**CP:** No, I think I've been misunderstood. What you have with science fiction is an orthodoxy. It shouldn't be that, books should not be an orthodoxy, but science fiction has rules. People say, you can't do that in science fiction. This is sf, this isn't sf. All the time you're getting orthodoxy, the politically correct thing. All my life, ever since I've been old enough to think for myself, whenever I feel an orthodoxy coming on I want to break it. If someone says, 'you can't do that', my first question is 'why not?' Even if, at the end of the day, there's a good reason why I shouldn't go on the grass, my first question is 'why not?'

With science fiction people say you can't do that, there's the golden rule of science fiction. Who formed the golden rule? What does it mean to me? The more I asked that, the more I thought all the orthodoxy was just rubbish. People didn't understand the nature of the medium. I approached it through writing essays and Guest of Honour speeches, but I could see peoples' eyes glazing over. People don't want that, they want the easily understood. I wrote an essay, I thought a really good

essay, called 'It Came From Outer Space', with the whole idea that science fiction is an 'it'; 'it' has rules, you can tell 'it' when you see it. What we're talking about are many different books, hundreds of different writers with different levels of aspiration and ability and interest, and they're all cobbled together into something called 'it'. And that must be wrong, that must be a fallacy.

**PK: Going back to your early stories and novels, did you think they were archetypally science fiction?**

**CP:** I've been going through my stuff recently and most of my early short stories really aren't short stories at all, they're set-ups. They adumbrate an idea, then drop it. 'An Infinite Summer' is the first real short story I wrote, everything before that isn't really a story.

Basically, 30, 35 years ago I decided I wanted to be a writer, and I'd never written anything. I've spent 35 years learning the trade. So the stuff I did at the beginning, without undermining it, well-intended and serious as it was at the time, is largely inept. I feel now that after 30 years I'm at last writing books I want to write. I'm now where I want to go.

**PK: You've defined your own genre?**

**CP:** I don't know. *The Extremes* is as close as you're going to get to a trad sf novel. This is largely the point I've been making, about being trapped in genre expectations and genre thoughts. I remember reading something in SFWA once, a letter from someone who said: 'There's only one way to write science fiction. Whenever I get to a scene I think, how would Isaac write this?'

That way, what do you end up with? If you write like Isaac or Robert or Poul or whoever, you end up with something that's second best to the writers you aspire to be. There's a lot of that, and if you work within the orthodoxy you think: what would *Interzone* publish? I've never written for *Asimov's Magazine*, what sort of story would they like? If you do that you're writing from the top of your head, not the bottom of your heart. What I've been trying to say to people is: throw away your orthodoxy, get into yourself, re-imagine what you want to do, and if it comes out as something that looks like science fiction, so be it. But don't write it because you think Arthur C. Clarke would have written this way, because at best you end up with a second-hand imitation.

**PK: Do you consider yourself a science fiction writer?**

**CP:** No.

**PK: Do you consider yourself a writer who writes science fiction?**

**CP:** The truth is, I don't read science fiction. I haven't read science fiction for twenty years, I haven't read science fiction with any pleasure for twenty-five years, probably even longer. But on the other hand – this is the interesting thing – broadly speaking I'm best appreciated within the science fiction world. People like yourself and Clute and Roz Kaveney and some people in America, who know the science fiction field, they get to the point of what I'm writing about very lucidly and quickly. You're reviewed in *The Times* or somewhere, it's like they're coming from another world. For instance John Fowles, who we were talking about earlier, reviewed *The Prestige* and gave it the most negative review it got anywhere in the world. He hated it, although he was bending over backwards to be nice to me. My view is, he completely misunderstood it.

**PK: Fowles really liked your stuff early on.**

**CP:** He said he did. I think he was being kind.

**PK: I don't know, but that must have been more science-fictional than *The Prestige*, which is a good magic realist novel if you want to give a category to it. It seems like something that would appeal to the author of *The Magus*.**

**CP:** Well, yes. Fowles was a big influence on me. I've always felt Fowles is the kind of writer who opens doors, and though he doesn't necessarily go through himself, he shows you it's there. I wouldn't say I

uncritically admire everything he's written, because I think he's written some real turkeys, but I think that *The Magus* and *Daniel Martin* are smashing novels.

**PK: And *A Maggot*?**

**CP:** The one about the Shakers? That's all right, but the most boring stuff in there is the flying saucer stuff. This is what he said about *The Prestige*: he loved the stuff about the cigar smoke and velvet, the old theatres. But the stuff about Tesla, the machines and sparks, he said was going too far. The imagination has limits and you mustn't venture into that territory because you're venturing into the unbelievable.

**PK: I don't understand how anyone who wrote *The Magus* could say that. *The Magus* is all about the fact that the imagination doesn't have limits.**

**CP:** Exactly. But I really just felt he was out of sympathy.

I get reviews in newspapers, and they just don't understand. I suppose every writer who gets a negative review feels that, but with *The Prestige* I've had hundreds of reviews, particularly in America, and with just one or two exceptions they are wholly favourable. Not just favourable, many of them were shouting about it. I can't think of another novel written by anybody that has had such a uniformly good press, it seems an extraordinary thing but there you are. I feel there's a kind of critical consensus about the novel, so when Fowles goes against that I think it's not just that he didn't like the book, he's out of step somewhere.

I've had such lousy reviews in my life, I feel free to enjoy the good ones. When you've had reviews like I had for *Inverted World*...

**PK: I remember, years ago, seeing a review in the mainstream press which was full of snobbery about the fact that you were a science fiction writer and therefore, inevitably, the book was not good. I believe it was for *The Affirmation*, and I was thinking, hold on, this isn't exactly science fiction.**

**CP:** Peter Ackroyd wrote that one, if I'm thinking of the same one. We never forget.

**PK: So the science fiction critics are the ones who most immediately understand where you're coming from.**

**CP:** Yes.

**PK: That doesn't necessarily mean you're writing science fiction.**

**CP:** What I think I'm doing is re-inventing science fiction. It seems to me there are basically two approaches to science fiction. One is the Wellsian approach. Wells wrote science fiction as a primitive, he was interested in the science. What was it Rebecca West said? Something about him being absorbed in airships and colloids? But Wells was genuinely interested in all that, he was an unlettered schoolboy who taught himself to read the great novels and he was taught by Thomas Huxley, and he started to write at a remarkably young age. He was born in 1866 and *The Time Machine* came out in 1895, he was 28, 27 when he started writing it, a very young man with no literary background. Although he changed as he went on, his great novels were the ones he wrote before 1900.

And there are other writers – the famous ones are Stapledon and Orwell and Huxley – who, down the years, have written works which the science fiction world would instantly recognise as science fiction. But the authors themselves would have been horrified to realise that that's what they'd written. Stapledon, apparently, was in contact with Eric Frank Russell, who sent him some pulp magazines. Stapledon said take these horrible things away from me. He had no interest in that kind of stuff.

If you accept that – that there is a primitive, instinctive way of writing science fiction – the next thing that happens is that Gernsback published the first pulp magazines, and in the first three years he published almost everything that Wells had written up to that point,

including serialisations of six of his novels. We know those early pulps were imitated, everyone wrote stories based on stories they had read, and gradually the orthodoxy grew up. I said earlier, the bottom of the heart and the top of the head: the bottom of the heart produces Wells and the top of the head produces Murray Leinster. Both perfectly adequate in their own ways, but actually universes apart.

I joined the sf club, as it were, in the '60s, and soon after that there was a boom in science fiction. It wasn't the New Wave, it was what Tom Disch called the Labor Day Club, the George Martins and the Gardner Dozoises and the Jack Dannels and people like that. What was so interesting about this boom was that it was entirely top of the head stuff, it was entirely derivative of the science fiction that had gone before. It was utterly, utterly mediocre, almost everything published in the '70s by the new writers emerging then was sophisticated in some ways and elegant and worked and wrought, but it was dead-headed and dead-hearted, and it's now mostly forgotten, thank God. There were good works in the '70s, *The Dispossessed*, stuff like that, but that all seems to me to be such a dead end. I'll give you an example: *Strangers* by Gardner Dozois, one of the worst novels ever written, and he's a good short story writer.

**PK: The original short story, 'Strangers', is excellent. But I agree, the novel is dreadful.**

**CP:** That, to me, is an archetype of the 1970s, a well-intentioned, boring, empty book.

Now, to put me into this equation: I started writing in the '60s, wrote a few short stories, got caught up in the New Wave which didn't really interest me. *Indoctrinaire* was published in 1970, so I'm a writer of the '70s, that's where I start. That process of realisation, that the Ed Bryants and the George R.R. Martins, the hot writers of the '70s, were actually no good, can be paralleled in my own writing. In 1973, I'm writing *Inverted World*, but by 1979 I'm writing *The Affirmation*. In a very short period of time I changed direction, because I realised their stuff wasn't worth writing. If the best you can come up with is elegant, well-wrought nothing, then you might as well not be writing at all. What I wanted to do was to re-invent it, find the heart and not the head.

**PK: But along the way, in *Inverted World*, you wrote what must count as one of the four or five most inventive and original science fiction novels ever written.**

**CP:** Ah, it was a period, as John Lennon said. I quite like *Inverted World*, it's got energy.

**PK: It's got a lot of invention too. Every perception is new.**

**CP:** I remember writing it. I wrote that in white heat, it was one of the great experiences. I was living alone in Harrow and they had these playing fields belonging to Harrow School which I could use because I lived in one of the houses that backed on to them. Most of the time I had this huge field to myself, so every day I'd go pottering about thinking about *Inverted World*. From that field you can see Harrow Hill, and on top of the hill is Harrow Church with the steeple, and I used to look at that and think, that's the inverted world. The whole thing was written in that field. Then I'd go back inside and write like a dervish. What was published was effectively first draft, I never revised it. Oh boy, I wish I could write like that now.

**PK: You take a long time now?**

**CP:** You've got to be young, you've got to believe in it.

**PK: Okay, let's go back to *A Dream of Wessex*. When it appeared you were beginning to feel disenchanting with science fiction?**

**CP:** Yes.

**PK: But it fit in so precisely with what was being written in science fiction. It matched with *Road to Corlay* by Richard Cowper, for instance.**

**CP:** But that was years later.

**PK: No, 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' was the year before, *The Road to Corlay* the year after.**

**CP:** The opening of *The Road to Corlay* is embarrassing to me, how close it is.

**PK: I just assumed there was some weird synchronicity going on.**

**CP:** I think there was. It's embarrassing to me because I think if writers do something similar to other writers it means you're not imagining properly. It shouldn't happen that another writer should touch the same thing. That used to be my argument with Ian McEwan, that many of his early short stories were similar to the work of other writers and it seemed he was imagining only to the first or second level, not going deeper and coming up with something fresh. That happened four or five times with McEwan early on, and I would have thought that should have given him serious pause for thought. And when I read *The Road to Corlay* I was really depressed because you know Cowper's a mate of mine, and I didn't want him to think that he and I were thinking alike.

**PK: You don't suppose that you and he had met sometime, talked over ideas and sparked off the same thing?**

**CP:** It's quite possible. In many ways that is its own argument, that is why I am so down on science fiction, because you do get the tropes, you get the phraseology.

**PK: But aren't the tropes part of the life of science fiction? The excitement of it?**

**CP:** Who for? I know there's a big readership who want the same thing over and over again. I'm not interested in that readership, I know they're not interested in me.

**PK: You want to do something different with every book?**

**CP:** I want to do something that's mine. I don't want anyone to read it and think: oh, Richard Cowper could have written that. Now, because of that with *A Dream of Wessex*, I make really sure that that's the image I want. Here's an idea for a story – the first level. Can I do it? That's the second level of imagination. The third level is: does it matter to me? Then, if you get past that, you come up with something that's really your own.

That's what so much of science fiction is, it's written to the second level of imagination.

**PK: But so much fiction, not just science fiction, is like that. You've already quoted Ian McEwan, I think he has got better.**

**CP:** I think he's got a lot better. I think he had the same thing, you know; I think he finally worked out what was going on.

**PK: In many ways, since leaving the science fiction field, that generation of writers – McEwan, Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro – is the one you're most associated with.**

**CP:** I've got nothing in common with them. I don't want to have anything in common. It's another bloody orthodoxy.

**PK: I can sometimes see a similarity in tone between what you're writing and what someone like Ian McEwan or Graham Swift is writing.**

**CP:** I'm closer to William Boyd. I really admire Boyd. He's got rough corners and dodgy bits which I look at and think, yes, that's me. He has the same failings as me, and I like that.

The thing is, you and everyone, you're falling into the booksellers' trap, you want to know where to place things. Once you say a book is about football, they respond, oh thank God it's about football, we can deal with that. I don't like football, there's nothing on earth would make me read a book about football. If you told me Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has written one of the great literary novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century about football, nothing would make me read it. It's quite likely I'm missing something worth reading, but my prejudices are intact. And there are



many more people with similar prejudices about science fiction who will not read science fiction.

I don't want to exclude anyone, I don't want anyone to look at any of my books and say I don't want to read that, it's about football. I'd like people to pick up on my stuff because of what I've written, not because five years ago they read a pile of Jerry Pournelle and think that I write the same stuff.

You lose as well, maybe someone who reads a great novel by Ballard or Aldiss. But I don't want them for that reason, either, to think this might be as good as Aldiss or Ballard. I want them to pick it up because it's me.

The other side of the coin is that people in the science fiction world will pick it up no matter what it's called. The sf world has very good bush telegraph.

I've never, ever said to a publisher you mustn't put science fiction on the cover. When *The Prestige* was going through, my first book with Simon and Schuster, about six months into production one of the young women in the art department said, 'We had someone in here the other day who said this is a science fiction novel. It's not science fiction, is it?' That was the first mention that anyone at the firm had made about science fiction to me. They'd read it and bought it and were producing it just on the basis of what it was.

**PK: There's something a little – odd, I suppose – about the fact that it comes in and wins both the James Tait Black Memorial Award and the World Fantasy Award.**

**CP:** It's neither a literary novel nor a fantasy novel.

**PK: But it's somehow both?**

**CP:** I think some people would see that as my vindication. But I don't feel vindicated, I don't feel that's shown 'em. I was extremely pleased to win the James Tait Black. Have you ever seen the list of previous winners? That's a club I don't mind joining, so I'm very proud of that. The World Fantasy Award? Nobody hates fantasy more than I do, so to win the award for the best fantasy novel is like being told I've written the greatest novel in Romanian. But you don't give yourself awards. The people behind it wanted to give it to me, and I accepted that with pleasure. It made a big difference in America. They've increased the print run of *The Extremes*.

But there's a question you can ask me, I don't know what the answer is. I saw the review of *The Extremes* you did in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. But there was a preamble, which you'd put in the *apa Acnestis*, and I wish you'd incorporated it in the full review because then I could argue with it. So why don't you ask me why I'm such a lousy stylist?

**PK: Why are you such a lousy stylist?**

**CP:** That's a good question. That isn't quite what you said.

**PK: What I actually said was: He never uses emotional language, if you take the words at face value the emotion is flat the whole way through. It is as if everything is written from outside, almost reportage. He uses viewpoint characters, but we are never told how they feel; we are told simply and dispassionately what they experience, and we supply the feelings for ourselves. This comes across particularly in *The Extremes* because it is far and away the most violent book he has ever written. I find it obvious that Chris hates violence of any sort, though right now I have no way of knowing whether that stems from my familiarity with his work or my familiarity with the man. But you don't get any authorial voice telling you that this is horrible, in fact all the emotions conveyed by the central character (as are the emotions of virtually all his characters in every one of his books) are ambiguous.**

**CP:** This is part of the old internal dialogue that goes on all the time, like is it sf or not. There's no definitive answer and there are contradictions

all the time, but broadly speaking it seems to me that English fiction is written in one of two ways, one with the emphasis on language and one with the emphasis on story. On the whole, the writers of fine language, the literary stylists, are deemed to be producing the superior form. The thing is that narrative art is identified with bestsellers, romances, thrillers, and so on. Most sf is written in this plain workmanlike prose, while a lot of literary fiction (not all) is written in the fine style. To my mind, this is a false distinction, there are only good books and bad books. The style that interests me is transparency. The Americans call it the art that conceals art, George Orwell calls it the clean window.

**PK: That's what I realised reading *The Extremes*. You have to create your own emotion for every character. It's all there but you don't tell us, we have to put it in. So you're getting the reader to do more work than we're used to. That's why the early ones felt flat. They weren't flat at all, but you weren't making it easy for us emotionally.**

**CP:** That's not an intention, but I think it's an effect. Take sex, getting back to sex, I've really come round to the idea now that the less sex is described the better. It wasn't true in the past, I put some dirty old stuff in, in the past. But that liberates you, you don't have to do it again because it shows you know all the dirty bits. Also, it seems to me, it's like breathing. How often can a reader take a description of someone breathing or eating, it's such a commonplace. With sex I feel now, in my middle age, they get into bed and they pull the blanket up over their heads, and the next morning they get up and get on with the story. Because what they got up to was quite possibly highly enjoyable but not very original.

Also, there are other feelings, like when someone dies. You have this... it's not really shrinking away but you don't want to define it, you want to give people enough to know that it's happened and then leave them to it.

**PK: Do you cut out a lot when you're re-writing?**

**CP:** I tend to add, to build things up. Or I cut out big chunks. I'll work on a chapter over and over, then suddenly decide it'll be better without it. *The Extremes*, if I showed you the first draft it's a completely different book.

**PK: Was that when it was called *The Cull*?**

**CP:** No, *The Cull* never really existed as a book, it was going to be a TV series. I sold the book as *The Cull* but the moment I started writing, I couldn't call it that.

*The Extremes* was a very difficult book for me to write because it's basically about an issue, and I don't write issue books. The thing that bugged me was this feeling that I had to take a stand on the gun laws. In fact, I'm a sort of definite don't know. I can see arguments on both sides on just about everything, including gun law. But it's such a shocking thing that it's not something you can back away from.

I'm having the same problem with *The Gloss*, which is the novel I'm writing now. It's set in the Second World War, and I'm not a war novelist. Though I have strong personal views on war, they don't fit into the kinds of novels I write. So at the moment the problem with *The Gloss* is finding the way into the material.

**PK: One of the things I commented on in my review of *The Extremes* was that it was about violence, and you don't write about violence.**

**CP:** It's got violence in it.

**PK: It's about violence.**

**CP:** Yeah.

What can you say about violence that's worth saying that hasn't been said before, and possibly better? This is the thing about the Second World War. What can I say at this late stage that would be original, worth saying, never been said before?

**PK: So why are you writing about it?**

**CP:** It's a very personal novel. It's about me, really, since I was born in the war. I am of the last generation who can write about the war. I was born in it, though I have no memory of it at all — well, I have one memory. The war has overshadowed my life. You know this yourself, you were in Manchester. My memory of Manchester is acres of rubble, and a lot of it is still there you know. That was a powerful thing, and something I want to write about, but I don't really want to take on the

war, so I've got to find a post-war approach.

**PK: Is it going to be science fiction?**

**CP:** Oh yes. Oh no. Oh, I don't write science fiction. It's about the Gloss, so everything will become clear.

**PK: Christopher Priest, thank you.**

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TO ACCOMPANY HIS IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW, PAUL KINCAID HAS WRITTEN A TWO PART ARTICLE ABOUT CHRISTOPHER PRIEST'S WORK.

## MIRRORS, DOUBLES, TWINS – Patterns in the fiction of Christopher Priest

by Paul Kincaid

### Part 1: In the Dreamtime

**I once thought that the emphatic nature of words ensured truth. If I could find the right words, then with the proper will I could by assertion write all that was true. I have since learned that words are only as valid as the mind that chooses them, so that of essence all prose is a form of deception.<sup>1</sup>**

In his earliest work, Christopher Priest wrote within the conventions of science fiction. Early novels – the psychological isolation of *Indoctrinaire* (1970) or the variant on the typically British catastrophe story in *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972) – gave little notice of the dramatic invention of *Inverted World* (1974) in which he presented, with rigorous authority, a world turned inside out. *Inverted World* was, rightly, one of the most acclaimed works of British science fiction to come out of the 1970s, yet even this, with its startling originality, did not yet display to the world the unique and distinctive voice that has been the hallmark of Priest's work from the mid-1970s onwards.

There are many features which make up this distinctive voice: the prose, of course, which is controlled and transparent; the central role played by psychology in his work, particularly the emphasis on sexual dysfunction and perversion; and the place of the secondary world. His later work is full of doubles, pairs, echoes. Sometimes they are twins, as in *The Prestige* (1995); sometimes mirror images, as the playmate that Teresa shoots at the start of *The Extremes* (1998) is a mirror image, she is symbolically shooting herself. Typically, sexual relationships are triangular, each central female character finds herself torn between a pair of lovers who echo each other. Even more common is Priest's use of a secondary world, sometimes specifically identified as the land of dream, as a way of refracting psycho-sexual aspects of our own world. In this essay I want to look at these doublings and the role they have played in the work of Christopher Priest since the mid-70s.

The other world parallels our own, reflecting it as in a distorting mirror. It is a world made up of our desires and hopes, a secret, personal place, and if we don't always recognise it, it is because we are not always comfortable with what it might reveal of ourselves. It is the world we dream, but then we forget our dreams as daylight comes. This is the world Christopher Priest writes about, the world he has made as uniquely and identifiably his own as Robert Holdstock's Ryhope Wood or M. John Harrison's Viriconium. We get our first glimpse of the role this secondary world is to play in his work in *Inverted World*, in that famous ending where, after spending the whole novel so far in the city as it trundles through its dreamlike distortions of squat or elongated characters (like people glimpsed in a fun house mirror) we suddenly shift into a familiar waking world that lets us look back and reinterpret the dream. But this was really a tentative start, and the double world of Earth and Mars in his

next novel, *The Space Machine* (1976), was too tied to its Wellsian source material to explore the idea with any real conviction. The approach that would build into his strongest fictions, however, was clearly being developed because all of a sudden it emerged in three very different forms at once.

The first was in his short story 'An Infinite Summer' (1976) which, as Priest tells us in the introduction to his collection *An Infinite Summer* (1979), grew out of *The Space Machine*: 'I wrote the story in the middle, literally, of the novel; somewhere in Chapter 13, to be precise.'<sup>2</sup> In this story he recognised that the power of the parallel world lies more in its atmosphere than its detail. We do not need to know anything about the world of the future whose emissaries precipitate the story by freezing various tableau. We do not need to know how or why Lloyd is released ahead of time, to wander like a tangible ghost through the Richmond of 1940, a world he does not understand in the midst of a war that means nothing to him: 'Thomas Lloyd, of neither the past nor the present, saw himself as a product of both, and as a victim of the future.' (ISp28) In some ways this description could apply to any of us, but Lloyd's circumstances, literally caught between worlds, lends it a special poignancy within the context of the story. In *Inverted World*, Priest had taken us directly into the world, Helward Mann who, famously, 'had reached the age of six hundred and fifty miles'<sup>3</sup> was fully of the world of the city, for him the reality of that world was unquestioned (as it was for the reader, until the revelations at the end of the book). With 'An Infinite Summer', however, what was more important was that Lloyd did not fully belong in the world in which he found himself, it was not solid and real for him. From this point on, Priest's characters would typically be between worlds, caught in a moment of transition. In 'Palely Loitering' (1978) for instance – a story that seems to serve as a rather more elegantly written and emotionally complex companion piece to 'An Infinite Summer' – the hinge about which the whole story turns is the moment Mykle first jumps from bridge to shore, the moment of transition between times. As in 'An Infinite Summer', there is a 19th century sensibility behind the story, again there is the basic plot device of lovers separated by time; but in this story, with its central image of the flux stream crossed by bridges angled to lead to Yesterday, Tomorrow or Today, the youthful infatuation builds into something altogether darker.

She frightened me because of the power she had, the power to awaken and arouse my emotions. I did not know what it was. Everyone has adolescent passions, but how many people have the chance to revisit those passions in maturity?

It elated me, but also made me deeply melancholic.

<sup>1</sup> *The Affirmation* (London: Faber, 1981), p1. All subsequent quotations from this book will be marked in the text thus: (Ap1)

<sup>2</sup> *An Infinite Summer* (London: Faber, 1979), p9. All subsequent quotations from this book will be marked in the text thus: (ISp9)

<sup>3</sup> *Inverted World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974, London: New English Library 1975), p11.

(ISp96)

Both Lloyd and Mykle are caught between times, but where, for Lloyd, this trap is an incomprehensible barrier to an essentially innocent romance, for Mykle it signifies also an ambivalence of feeling. The movement between secondary worlds is starting to become, also, an emotional movement. In *A Dream of Wessex* (1977) Julia's movement between worlds is also a movement between lovers, as is that of Susan moving between the everyday and the invisible in *The Glamour* (1984, revised 1996), as indeed, in a sense, is that of Teresa moving between America and Britain, between everyday reality and virtual reality in *The Extremes*. This transition between worlds, with its endless reflections one upon the other, also helps to account for the traditional figure of the sexual triangle which has become such a feature of Priest's work. The worlds and the lovers partake of each other, explain and describe each other, so that Niall is the personification of the glamour, Gerry Grove is the personification of Extreme Experience, and the movement of their lovers towards and away from them reflects the movement between worlds.

This sense of moving between worlds without fully belonging to either creates a poignancy that Priest is starting to use to emphasise the atmosphere of his secondary world over the physicality that had been its primary characteristic in works like *Inverted World*. While the darkening of the sexual mood noticeable between 'An Infinite Summer' and 'Palely Loitering' gathers apace, becoming an essential component in the structure of the Dream Archipelago and its avatars.

If 'An Infinite Summer' gave this mirror world its sense of mood, its emotion, then the next expression gave it a shape, and started to give it a location. The first Dream Archipelago stories would appear the year after *A Dream of Wessex* was published, but the novel was clearly setting the scene for the later stories. The Dream Archipelago – 'more an idea than an actual place, but if it has a correlative reality then it would be a kind of fusion of the Channel Islands and Greece, with bits of Harrow-on-the-Hill and St Tropez thrown in for good measure' (ISp10) – is unmistakably foreshadowed in *Wessex*. In his first experience of the Dream Archipelago, for instance, Peter Sinclair feels:

It was as if I had somehow crossed over into another universe, one where the degree of activity had been perceptibly increased: reality's tuner had been adjusted, so noises were louder, colours were brighter, crowds were more dense, heat was greater, time moved faster. I felt a curious sense of diminished responsibility, as if I were in a dream. (Ap57)

There is a similar sense of a world that is a perpetual holiday resort in one of our first glimpses of Dorchester in *A Dream of Wessex*:

Harkman relished the lightness and cleanness of the air, the decadence of the architecture, the narrowness of the streets. It was a town with a sunny hangover; the night-clubs and bars of Dorchester catered to the tastes of the visitors late into the night, and the shutters and louvred doors of the villas and apartment-blocks were closed against the freshness of the morning.<sup>4</sup>

The sexual duality that Priest is starting to explore in these stories is reflected in this movement into the light of the secondary world. Julia 'was escaping from one man she detested, to seek another she did not care for' (DWp4). The

man she detests is Paul, manipulative and cruel:

Then he smiled at her, seeming to seek her approval, but saying with his eyes what she was to learn a hundred times over in the months ahead: I possess you and control you. There is nothing of yours that I cannot touch or colour. There is nothing of yours you may call your own. (DWp83)

The man she is seeking is David Harkman, a man she doesn't know well but who at first seems rather colourless – 'stable and authoritative, but not ambitious' (DWp4) – but who is soon identified with the light and colour of the dream world *Wessex*.

The story begins in a near future of terrorist bombs and increasingly repressive government (a political situation which feels very close to that presented in *The Glamour* which opens with Richard Grey recovering after being blown up by a terrorist bomb). It is a hard, destructive world, a natural setting for Paul Mason 'who had almost destroyed her once' (DWp1). But this world also contains within it the means of her escape: the Ridpath Projector. This projects volunteers into a consensus dream world, a future in which seismic activity has separated the area around Dorchester off from the rest of Britain, turning it into the isle of *Wessex*. In this dream future Britain is under an intensely bureaucratic communist rule, but the more untrammelled lifestyle of *Wessex* is tolerated as a way of attracting tourist money (thus the duality of modern Britain and the dream future is mirrored in the duality of communist Britain and relaxed *Wessex*, yet more layers in a novel in which everything has its parallel). Although the Ridpath Project is supposedly a sociological experiment, it is clear that most of the volunteers relish the escape into the dream *Wessex*. Indeed, David has become so absorbed into the dream that he has resisted all attempts to lure him back into the present. It is, perhaps, significant that this mirroring between the worlds is made concrete by the use of mirrors to summon dreamers out of the dream:

Her gaze became locked with that of her reflected self. The same fright and fascination were there, drawing her in, holding her in the limbo of the illusory mirrored world. She became two-dimensional, spread across the plane between glass and silver. She felt a last, terrible compulsion to run, to hide, but it was too late and she was held in the mirror. (DWp56)

Julia has the task of going into *Wessex* to find David and bring him out, but at the same time Paul joins the project. As Julia becomes more attracted to David, so he becomes more closely identified with *Wessex*. Paul, on the other hand, who will not let her go and tries to destroy David, is a malign influence who literally corrupts the dream.

While he had been inside the vault the wind and rain had increased, gusting in from the heaths. The smoke from the oil-refinery poured over the town, dark and depressing and greasy. There were very few people about and the trees along the front were dulled and dirty. (DWp143)

Through Paul the worst aspects of the modern world are seeping into the dream, bad weather, pollution, alienation. The dream that is intimately associated with David is, by contrast, a place of sunshine, bright colours, happy crowds. Thus the sexual triangle, the contest between David and Paul for Julia, is also the contest between David and Paul for *Wessex*. The setting and the psycho-sexual tension that are the two entwined strands of the story are inseparable, each reflects the other.

<sup>4</sup> *A Dream of Wessex* (London: Faber, 1977), p24. All subsequent quotations from this book will be marked in the text thus: (DWp24)

This doubling of sexual conflict and setting becomes even more apparent in the Dream Archipelago stories, in which the distinctive manner of storytelling that Priest has been developing through 'An Infinite Summer' and *A Dream of Wessex* finally flowers. Priest has, to date, written only one novel and five stories set in the Dream Archipelago (the omnibus edition contains a new piece which serves as linking material though it hardly amounts to a story in its own right) but the place has a disproportionate role in any study of his fiction. The idea at least, if not the place, has a defining influence on all his subsequent fiction. The social other world of the glamorous, the virtual reality of *The Extremes*, even the stage magic of *The Prestige* are all versions of the dream world made real that is the Dream Archipelago.

The first Dream Archipelago stories came quickly on the heels of *A Dream of Wessex*, as if that summery island setting just off-shore from a threatening northern bulk had provided a seed from which a far more complex vision had grown. But the relatively simple sexual tensions in that novel between the threat of Paul (possessive, destructive, a grim modern world of pollution and violence) and the haven of David (loving, caring, a bright future of sunshine and clarity) have darkened even more. The hot, dusty, Mediterranean colonnades of the Dream Archipelago provide a landscape upon which are played out games of voyeurism and sadism. Here, sexual affairs are, as Sheeld discovers in 'The Cremation' (1978), 'incongruous, intriguing and dangerous'<sup>5</sup> and that is reflected in the nature of the Archipelago. The Archipelago is made up of a chain of islands that stretch right around the planet's equator, so many islands in fact that from any one it is always possible to see several others. The islands are anomalous in more ways than one: for a start there is a curious time-dilation effect around the islands; for another there is a seemingly endless war going on between the nations of the northern continent, a war which is fought primarily on the mostly-uninhabited southern continent, and the islands form a neutral zone, but one where tensions inevitably run high; moreover, for a curious combination of legal and psychological reasons, visitors to the islands are rarely if ever able to leave again. Despite this last, all the Dream Archipelago stories (with one exception, 'The Negation' (1978), which is set in an icy mountain border post during the war and doesn't refer to the islands at all) concern visitors to the islands. This helps to generate the sense of transience and estrangement that is so vital a part of the secondary world as Priest creates it. It is, above all, a sexually threatening place, as the narrator of 'Whores' (1978) discovers. A soldier, recuperating in the Dream Archipelago from the disturbing effects of 'synaesthetic gases' (DAP49), visits a local woman he thinks of as a whore only for it to have a devastating effect:

My dreams were rich and textured with agony, and lurid colours, and an uncontrollable and unfulfilled sexual desire. Images of Elva's mouth haunted me. I awoke in the morning with what I thought was an erection, but instead the sheets of the bed were stiff with the blood from my wounds. (DAP70)

Another potent but unconsummated sexual encounter between Graian Sheeld and the enigmatic woman he encounters in 'The Cremation' ends as 'a spasm of excruciating pain coursed through him' (DAP114), while in one of the most powerful and disturbing of the Dream Archipelago stories, 'The Watched' (1978), the voyeur Yvann Ordier finds himself mysteriously translated into the central role in the sexual ritual he has been spying upon. It is this that is the key to the Dream Archipelago stories, the mirroring of effect that turns the predator into the victim. Ordier, the watcher, ends up as the one

who is watched, the soldier in 'Whores' feels he is in control of his relationship with the woman but discovers to his cost that he is not. As Lenden Cros, the narrator of 'The Miraculous Cairn' (1980), realises, 'I could not shake off the idea that our roles were reversing' (DAP136).

It is this sense that, psychologically if not physically, the Dream Archipelago is truly an inverted world, that makes it the perfect setting for one of Priest's finest and most disorienting novels, *The Affirmation* (1981). If *A Dream of Wessex* was his first attempt to create a novel of dualities, *The Affirmation* develops that idea to an astonishing degree. Everything has its echo, each character is reflected in a distorting mirror, everyone has a double. As M. John Harrison would later do with 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium' (1985), Priest destroyed the landscape of his imagination by making it directly accessible from this world. In this case Peter Sinclair is a young man whose world, mental and social, is disintegrating around him: his father dies, he loses his job and he becomes alienated from his girlfriend when she attempts suicide (it is a sign of his mental alienation from the world that he has no real concern for why she should attempt suicide or how she might be afterwards). To escape these troubles, he moves to a cottage in Wales where he lives rent-free on condition that he redecorates. In his imagination he does redecorate, creating in particular a perfect white room which is the room he uses to write, but the failure of his engagement with the world is soon shown when his sister Felicity arrives: 'Peter, what's been happening to you? Your clothes are filthy, the house is a tip, you look as if you haven't eaten a proper meal in weeks.' (Ap28) He hasn't, because the world has become only as real to him as his imagination can make it; far more important is his manuscript, which started out as an attempt at autobiography which would make sense of how his life got this way, but more and more the autobiography has become subsumed in an imaginative recreation of his life in which he lives in a city called Jethra, within sight of the Dream Archipelago. That this reimagining of his life is important to him – 'I had imagined myself into existence' (Ap15) he announces at one point, and latter calls it 'a definition of myself' (Ap39) – is reinforced by the story of his Uncle Billy, a glamorous character who disappeared while Peter was a child. At first Peter was told that Billy was working abroad, but eventually he learned that Billy had died in prison. The story, however, continues to have as much validity in Peter's mind as the reality:

Both versions of him were true, but in different qualities of truth. One was sordid, disagreeable and final. The other had imaginative plausibility, in my personal terms, and furthermore had the distinctly attractive bonus that it allowed for Billy to return one day. (Ap19)

For Peter, both versions of his own story are true, but the Dream Archipelago is the more attractive and readily overlays his quondam reality. When Felicity arrives, for instance, he sees her primarily as her alter ego, Kalia:

I felt an odd sensation of recognizing her, as if she were somebody I had created. I remembered her from the manuscript: she was there and her name was Kalia. (Ap27)

Felicity takes Peter back to her home in Sheffield, he slowly recuperates, genuine repairs are made to the cottage in Wales, and eventually Peter meets up again with his girlfriend, Gracia. But this story is interwoven with the story of Peter Sinclair who lives in Jethra and who has just won the lottery. The lottery prize is treatment for immortality which takes place in the Dream Archipelago, so Peter sails to collect his prize and on the way meets and falls in love with a girl called Seri. At first it might seem that this is simply the imaginative recreation of his own

<sup>5</sup> *The Dream Archipelago* (London: Earthlight, 1999), p75. All subsequent quotations from this book will be marked in the text thus: (DAP75)

life that Peter in our reality has written, a fairly familiar duality. But Priest takes it a step further, confusing realities: this Peter has also written a story of his life, and this story also fictionalises the truth, describing a Peter who lives in another world, in a city called London. When Peter and Seri eventually arrive at the clinic, he discovers that the athanasia treatment has the effect of wiping out his memory, so in preparation he is meant to write the story of his life. This Peter decides to use his reimagination of his life, declaring, as another Peter in another world has already done, 'I had already become what I had written. I was *defined* by my work.' (Ap84)

This complex echoing of one world upon the other, so that it is impossible to tell which is the 'real' world and which the 'imaginary' one, turns the book into an examination of what it is that does define us. Memory, and in particular the fallibility of memory, is a theme that sounds throughout the novel from its opening pages when we are told 'The mind erases backwards, re-creating what one remembers' (Ap6), and it is significant that in both worlds the manuscript comes to an end with the same broken sentence: 'For a moment I thought I knew where I was, but when I looked back-' (Ap35). Yet for all its fallibility, and despite Peter's assertion that 'the artistic recreation of the past constituted a higher truth than mere memory' (Ap134), the importance of memory is stressed over and over again, particularly as Peter prepares for the athanasia treatment:

But life *is* memory. As long as I am alive, as long as I wake every morning, I remember my life, and as the years pass my memory becomes enriched. Old men are wise, not by nature but by absorption and retention, and by the accumulation of sufficient memories to be able to select what is important.

Memory is continuity too, a sense of identity and place and consequence. I am what I am because I can remember how I became it. (Ap124)

Here, the identification of self and place is spelled out. As Julia did before him in *A Dream of Wessex* and as Susan will after him in *The Glamour*, Peter's journeys across the boundaries between real world and dream world are intimately connected with issues of self identity and with psycho-sexual conflicts. As Peter gets together again with Gracia, for instance, we see that she and Seri are not avatars of the same person but distinct if complementary characters, forceful or pliant, liable to break as Gracia does or to bend as Seri does. When the two worlds start to overlap it is clear that Peter's failure to cope with the needs and demands of a relationship are highlighted by the way his imaginative portrait of his girlfriend differs radically from her reality (this is true of both Peters in both worlds):

A creation of my manuscript, she was intended to explain Gracia to me. But the events and the places described in the manuscript were imaginative extensions

of myself, and so were the characters. I had thought they stood for other people, but now I realized they were all different manifestations of myself. (Ap187)

More importantly, the two Peters are different. The duality is a way of asking who we are, or rather the double, the twin, is who we are not:

In the fugue the dream dispersed, leaving a void. Life returned later, in the form of this calm-eyed, patient woman, returning my memories to me as if she were a hand writing words on blank paper. (Ap132)

The manuscript, the imagination, fills in the blanks of who we are. Until we arrive at the most powerful, the most shocking moment in the whole book:

I spread the battered pages across the bed, like a conjurer fans a pack of cards. The words, the story of my life, the definition of my identity, lay before me. It was all there: the lines of typewritten text, the frequent corrections, the pencillings and notes and deletions. Black type, blue ballpoint, grey pencil, and brown whale-shaped droplets of dried blood. It was all of me.

'There's nothing there, Peter! For God's sake, it's blank paper!' (Ap196)

In 'An Infinite Summer' the dual world of an Edwardian man trapped like a ghost within Second World War London works mostly to evoke a poignant atmosphere. By *A Dream of Wessex* that atmosphere had already begun to coalesce into issues of sexual identity which took form in the moment of crossing between worlds. The early Dream Archipelago stories delved deeper into that sexual identity, looking at darker issues such as perversion and cruelty. But it is our own individual identity that is questioned and undermined in *The Affirmation*, and it is this selfhood that becomes ever more tenebrous, ever more open to question, in the books that are to follow.

There is no easy resolution of these questions, there is no certainty about who any of us are. Our identity is defined by our memory, yet memory is as fallible, as treacherous, as the stories we conjure on an empty page. It is no surprise that *The Affirmation* ends exactly as the two aborted memory-manuscripts end within it: 'For a moment I thought I knew where I was, but when I looked back-' (Ap213)

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PART TWO OF THIS ARTICLE WILL APPEAR IN A FUTURE ISSUE OF VECTOR – EDS.

IN THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE, CHRISTOPHER PRIEST GIVES AN ACCOUNT OF THE LENGTHY ORIGINS OF HIS BSFA-AWARD-WINNING NOVEL THE EXTREMES.

## A Retreat from Reality

by Christopher Priest

How does an experience turn into an idea for a novel? More to the point, since we have experiences all the time, how does one particular incident select itself from the sludge of memory to make the transition? Sometimes you can trace the process, perhaps instructively glimpsing the method. Here's something that happened to me.

About a decade ago I was living in a village called Pewsey, situated in countryside due west of London, about an hour and a half's drive from the capital. Pewsey is an unglamorous but

liveable place, surrounded by hills, farmland and high plains where the army exercises. Stonehenge and Avebury Circle are in its vicinity. The area is reasonably close to the M4 motorway, which connects London and South Wales.

In those days I was running a tiny mail-order software business with David Langford. Once a week, to keep up with paperwork, I would drive over to Dave's place in Reading, about an hour away. The route I usually followed led me along a narrow road skirting the northern edge of Salisbury Plain, then

joined the M4 motorway near Hungerford, a pretty riverside market town situated in a broad valley.

One hot day in August 1987 I was coming into Hungerford by the usual road, brain enjoyably disengaged and running in neutral. Traffic was light, the way was familiar. Hungerford is approached from the direction of Pewsey through open agricultural countryside, the edge of town making a sudden transition. The road slopes down through the houses, leading more or less immediately into the High Street.

As I drove towards the town that day I saw what I thought at first was a bright light in the sky, somewhere off to the right. When I looked directly at it I couldn't see it properly, while still being aware that it was there. It was distracting and puzzling. When I looked back at the road the light was shining again, nudging at the edge of vision.

I suffer from occasional attacks of migraine. As fellow-sufferers will know, the first sign of a migraine is often exactly this: an unseeable bright source off-centre of vision. When I realised what it might be I groaned to myself. It's almost impossible to drive with a full-blown migraine attack going on. I saw a place to stop on the side of the road and pulled over. I had to decide whether to drive on, or go home, or simply wait until it had passed.

I got out of the car and took stock. I was less than half a mile from Hungerford and I could see a few of the larger buildings ahead. I felt no other symptoms of migraine, but the puzzle of the light remained. Although I could now look more or less directly at the point of light it was impossible to see what was causing it. In that part of the world you often see strange lights in the sky but they almost invariably turn out to be something to do with military exercises, up on Salisbury Plain.

The migraine, if that was what it had been, went no further and within a few more seconds the light too had disappeared. I mentally noted where it had been – from where I was standing it appeared to be directly over a school building, away to the right on the edge of the town – then I drove on.

The whole incident had lasted no more than a minute. I passed slowly through the centre of Hungerford – traffic always gets delayed in the High Street – and within a few more minutes I was speeding along the motorway and had forgotten all about it.

An hour and a half later my wife Leigh telephoned me at Dave Langford's place.

'When you come home this evening, drive the long way round,' she said. 'There's been a shooting in Hungerford and the town has been sealed off by the police. It's all over the news.'

The massacre at Hungerford was indeed all over the news that day, to the exclusion of almost anything else. The story travelled round the world. A dysfunctional young man called Michael Ryan had gone berserk with a Kalashnikov automatic rifle in the centre of town, shooting at anyone he saw. In the space of under an hour he had killed fourteen people, including several children, and badly wounded fifteen more. He was eventually cornered by the police, whereupon he shot himself. The final siege took place inside the school building I had happened to notice because it appeared to be beneath the light-source in the sky.

The fact that I had been there in Hungerford 'at the time' did not dawn on me straight away. The immensity of the disaster removed any notion that I might have been personally involved. It was a shattering event, because gun incidents of this kind are rare in Britain and they come as a shock. Guns are not routinely carried either by the police or by law-breakers. The shock was made more intense because of the type of place Hungerford is. It is in many ways a typical English country town, with hundreds of small and beautiful houses, most of them dating from the

19th century and before, there is a weekly market, an annual town festival, and many of the shops specialise in crafts, antiques or secondhand books. For the people who live in Hungerford there is a strong sense of community: afterwards, when the reckoning of the massacre began, it was found that just about everyone in the town knew who the victims were. The grief flooded the town.

Indeed, such was the suffering of those who really were there on the day that to me it felt impertinent even to think of myself in the same category. During my short drive down Hungerford High Street I had not been in any danger, I had not heard gunfire, I had not even sensed there was anything wrong, but when I checked the timings it was clear that Michael Ryan had already started his deadly adventure during the minutes I was passing through.

In his autobiography *A Sort of Life* (1971), the novelist Graham Greene describes a gruelling incident that took place while he was being treated for appendicitis in hospital. A ten-year-old boy was brought in with a broken leg; the parents were told they could go home, but shortly after they had left complications set in; the parents were summoned back; the boy died. While the other patients shut out the sounds of the mother's pitiful cries by listening to their radio headphones, Greene watched and listened. 'There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer,' he writes, chillingly. 'This was something which one day I might need.'

After Hungerford, a splinter of ice embedded itself in me and would not come out when I pulled at it.

Life went on. I continued to drive through Hungerford from time to time, but did not dawdle and did not look around. Sometimes Leigh and I went shopping there, and we would hope not to see people in the streets whose faces might be familiar from some past TV news bulletin. Something terrible and tragic hovered over the little town. To be in Hungerford or anywhere near it was to learn what the aftermath of collective grief was like. In a word, numbness.

I hadn't much idea how I wanted to write about my marginal experience, but even so the compulsion to do so would not go away. All I had were vague thoughts about the feeling of unreality of it all, plus a worrying sense that the other events of that day had been so overshadowed by the massacre that a kind of collective amnesia existed. What else had gone on in the world on August 19, 1987?

While waiting for coherence I put thoughts of Hungerford as far to the back of my mind as possible and wrote *The Quiet Woman* instead. Some time later I wrote *The Prestige*. Neither of these has anything remotely to do with killing sprees.

Years went by. Sometimes I am surprised by how slowly novels germinate. In this case, in addition to the usual difficulties of sloth I felt daunted by the problem of presumption.

In short, what right had I to use this unqualified disaster as the basis for a novel? My feelings of distress about what happened were no more acute than those of anyone else who hadn't been directly involved. Every time I was in Hungerford I went through such thoughts. The massacre was too personal to those directly affected, too inexplicable, too close to home in every sense. It wasn't, in Greene's phrase, something I might need.

Then there was the question of the gun agenda. Living in a country where there are few guns in private hands I have the luxury of not having to take a stand on the issue, pro or con. Gun control is of course an important issue in many countries, especially the US, but in Britain it is not. We have anti-gun laws and on the whole these, together with a more general national disposition against the holding of private weapons, have ensured that a gun culture does not exist. Of course some people break the law, as some always will. At the time of the

Hungerford massacre it was illegal for most people in Britain to own or carry most types of guns. Afterwards, in spite of the evidence that Michael Ryan was a one-off case, the anti-gun laws were tightened up. After the Dunblane shooting in 1996 the law was changed yet again, with the effect now that all guns – including sporting weapons – are banned.

Novelists require detachment, irony, a sense of the metaphoric, none of which was appropriate to writing about an event like Hungerford. More than this, my novels are not 'issue' novels. They are works of the imagination, usually concerned with the quality of memory, with questions of identity, twins and doubles, narrative unreliability. A novel which would directly confront the issue of gun control seemed like nothing I could ever write because I had never written like that. I doubted that I had anything to say that would be original or interesting.

Even so, thoughts of the novel persisted, even beginning to take shape as a story. The media dimension interested me, for instance: the way that other news had been effectively blacked out on the day. I wondered what it would mean if one of the other news stories that hadn't reached the British media on August 19 happened to be a similar gun-spree incident somewhere else. Maybe one that was itself so shocking that in its own country it wiped out, at least temporarily, local coverage of the Hungerford shooting. When it was eventually realised the two events were contemporaneous, were mirror images of each other, they would always be linked historically. Maybe they would have other similarities. The possibility of coincidence, the duality, began to make it feel more like one of my own subjects.

We eventually moved away from the Hungerford area and this helped detachment to develop. In the early 1990s I tried to tackle the story through a television script commissioned by the BBC. The idea of this was an exploration of the motives of a spree gunman, cast in the form of a psychological thriller. The central character was an FBI agent who came to Britain to investigate possible links between two outburst gun events that happened on the same day. The title I gave it was **The Cull**, which might suggest something of the way I was then thinking. In the end the BBC went off the idea and the script was never finished but the act of writing something down had helped shape a story at last around the event.

I took the work to my UK publishers and suggested a novel might lie therein. They agreed and we did a deal.

A few weeks later, on the day the contract arrived for signature, and a few minutes after I had mailed back the signed copies, a dysfunctional middle-aged man called Thomas Hamilton went into Dunblane Primary School and shot dead sixteen small children and their teacher.

By this time I had my own children. They were the same age as those murdered in Dunblane. That very week they had brought home their classroom photographs, teacher and small children saying 'cheese' to the camera in unison. Their innocent pictures looked to me almost identical to the tragic ones from Dunblane that were now on the front page of every newspaper.

What had long seemed a difficult novel to write now assumed the proportions of the impossible. On the one hand I felt besieged by the magnitude of outside events, on the other I was assailed by self-doubts. The thought of writing fiction that could be seen as an exploitation of tragedy was abhorrent to me. Every instinct in me wanted to drop the idea.

But Greene's splinter was still firmly embedded, and there was the small matter of a book contracted to a publisher.

In the short term I procrastinated, a common failing in some writers and certainly in me. Months later I did at last start work but the unfinished draft I produced was not a good one. I had approached it with the intention of 'novelising' my own TV script, thinking that it would provide a start. My novels generally take on a life of their own once I get stuck into the work, and I

thought and hoped that would happen again this time. In fact it didn't: the script of **The Cull** seemed synoptic and terse, lending itself not to expansion but to pages of padding. I broke off after several months of fruitless work and sought relief in writing instead a novel for children.

While I worked on that I would glance occasionally at the abandoned draft of the massacre novel. It always made me feel sick at heart to see it.

Again, though, the break brought a certain detachment. I was starting to forget the details of what had happened in Hungerford. The events had run through my mind so many times that I was no longer sure of the difference between what I knew had happened and what I thought had happened. This was to me a good sign. Unreliable memories can be more useful to a novelist than research, if you treat them the right way.

Then there was the FBI agent. A half-developed idea I'd had for the unfinished TV script was based on one of those trivial facts that embed themselves in your memory. I knew that the FBI use a kind of point-and-shoot arcade game to train its agents to respond to violent situations. It seemed to me that it would be only a short step from this to using a full virtual reality system. Although VR has become a familiar device in science fiction, the parallel between it and the numb sense of unreality I had detected in Hungerford gave the use of VR a metaphorical purpose.

But the final key to any novel is discovering the point where you can feel personally committed. In this case, my unique involvement in Hungerford on the day was a slim one: I had been momentarily distracted by the glimpse of a light.

It might have been a migraine attack, it might have been a military flare, I might have imagined the whole thing. Several people have assumed, when I've related the story, that I'm about to describe a UFO sighting or some such thing. I still believe something distracted me and I don't know what it was. But at the same time, just as important, I'm no longer even sure that anything at all actually happened.

The power of the mind to confabulate convincing memories from nothing is an astonishing and little understood phenomenon. Once again, uncertainty was my muse.

With the children's book completed, I went back to the novel. The first thing that changed was the title: now it was called *The Extremes*. Virtual reality is an extreme experience, which was my starting point. Freed of thoughts of a cull, of multiple murders, of attempting to find some kind of sane explanation for the cause of outburst murders, I began instead to imagine the inner world of a psychopath, to think about the edges of reality, the frailty of memory. *The Extremes* became a novel I was able to write.

In his autobiography, Graham Greene urges novelists to remain in ignorance of themselves and to forget easily. 'What a novelist forgets,' he says strikingly, 'is the compost of the imagination.'

Some events are harder than others to forget, and some should never be forgotten at all, but novelists are not historians and novels do not have to be literally true. Stepping back from reality, turning away from a blinding light, is one way of finding out how to write them.

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*CHRISTOPHER PRIEST ASKED US TO POINT OUT THAT SINCE THE ABOVE WAS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN FOR AN AMERICAN READERSHIP, HE SPELLED SOME THINGS OUT MORE THAN HE MIGHT FOR A BRITISH AUDIENCE – SUCH AS GEOGRAPHY. THE EXTREMES WAS PUBLISHED IN BRITAIN BY SIMON AND SCHUSTER AND COMES THOROUGHLY RECOMMENDED – EDS.*

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compiled by Andrew M. Butler

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IN HIS STUDY OF SF, NEW MAPS OF HELL, KINGSLEY AMIS COMPARED SF TO JAZZ, WRITING OF "THE ADDICTS, WHO FORM THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF SCIENCE-FICTION READERS... TO WHOM, NATURALLY, ENTERTAINMENT IS NOT INCIDENTAL BUT ESSENTIAL. AS IS THE WAY WITH ADDICTIONS, THIS ONE IS MOSTLY CONTRACTED IN ADOLESCENCE OR NOT AT ALL, LIKE ADDICTION TO JAZZ." IN THE FOURTH OF OUR SERIES ON SF AND MUSIC, DAVIS H. WOOD EXPLORES THIS INTERSECTION.

## The Music of the Spheres Part 4: Jazz and Science Fiction

by Davis H Wood

In 1816, the young Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley spent a "wet ungenial summer" on the shores of Lake Geneva, writing the story of Doctor Frankenstein and his creation, a fictitious creature who, shaped by the revulsion and persecution of those around it, turned into a monster. In the real world beyond, her fellow Caucasians, heedless of revulsion and persecution, happily maintained the grim Atlantic trade in human flesh, feeding the monster of slavery. Both monsters, fact and fiction, exemplify pain in exile.

Yet, unwittingly these two monsters were themselves to be instrumental in the birth of two popular and enduring art forms of the twentieth century.

By the end of the nineteenth century the writer H. G. Wells, cosseted in the gentle landscape of middle-class England, had penned *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), novels which, when linked with that of Shelley's, were to be seen as the templates for genre sf. Across the Atlantic, barber Buddy Bolden, in the harsh racist climate of the southern states of America, was – blowing a trumpet which they said could be heard twelve miles away on a clear night – helping to shape the sound of music that was to become jazz.

Thus we are at a unique viewpoint for this investigation of the intersection of sf and music.

Ian J Simpson charted the influence of sf on a generation of musicians who absorbed the sf tropes through a vast back catalogue of words and visual stimuli [Music of the Spheres 1: The Influence of Science Fiction on Modern Popular Music *Vector* 203] and Tanya Brown pointed out "Science Fiction is primarily a twentieth-century genre, and thus the majority of the classical canon predates it" [The Music of the Spheres 2: Classical Music and Science Fiction *Vector* 204 p. 19].

Science Fiction and jazz were born the bastard twins of a booming new century. They were both nurtured by innovative technology the new century brought to the American way of life; innovations that forever changed popular culture: the phonograph and the pulp magazine.

It is not the intention of this article to cover the use of jazz as a plot device in sf writing, though such a scholarship might be rewarding, nor is there any intention to claim that the jazz musician is creating science-fictional music (however 'alien' jazz may sound to the listener). There is nothing definitive about the titles discussed – they merely reflect examples from my personal collection of jazz music. So, this is a limited survey with no pretensions of an in-depth study; it covers only a fraction of the output of jazz music since its inception (I must admit that I have searched in vain for any early touching of souls between jazz and sf; I could find little or nothing in the first thirty years of recorded jazz prior to World War II, which reflects genre sf/fantasy).

But, inevitably there comes a time when their paths do meet. By the nineteen forties both camps were perceived to be in upheaval. The editor John Wood Campbell and his group of authors were busy rewriting the framework for pulp magazine sf, and downtown, alto sax player Charlie Parker with pianist Bud Powell and their disciples were rewriting the rhythmic ground rules of jazz.

*I'm not really from this planet. I did something wrong on my planet and they sent me here to pay my dues*

**Johnny Griffin (tenor sax player)**

Long before the "spaced-out and stoned rockers of the 1960's generation" there was a teenage generation which got its kicks from a far stranger world and culture. In the forties and fifties popular music was largely the output of the Swing Big Bands and romantic crooners. So when the Afro-American innovators of be-bop with their drug based

culture, outrageous dress and private language appeared on the scene the lure to belong was a magical potion for a teenage generation who had just endured five years of a war which had culminated in the birth of the atomic bomb. Here were music and musicians viewed with horror by the establishment; here was *someplace* to go to escape the shackles of parental control. This was their music, a music of the future. Soon their heads were filled with the sounds of *Anthropology*, *Glass Enclosure*, *Cosmic Rays*, *Zodiac Suite*, *Things to Come*: the titles of the tunes they loved were echoing an sf/fantasy connection.

Stan Kenton introduced the term "progressive jazz" to the popular music world. It was a vapid term to describe the bombastic music he so often performed; a naive attempt to meld classic form with jazz rhythm. However, from this mish-mash of clashing styles occasional gems emerged. In 1951 Kenton premiered Robert Graetinger's *The City of Glass*, which the composer described as a neo-classic work for jazz orchestra. This is a compelling, if difficult work (both to play and follow). It uses strident dissonance, angular rhythms and unusual key signatures to create a picture of a vast sterile city of the future and is possibly the first real use of sf imagery in jazz. It certainly fed the angst of a youth culture growing up in the shadow of the dawn of the atomic age. Graetinger was ahead of his time and both he and his work plummeted into obscurity. In recent years there has been a revived interest in his work, particularly in Europe.

Shorty Rogers, a trumpet player, writer and arranger from the Kenton ranks, must have seen the September 1954 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* featured Fred Brown's *Martians, Go Home*. His 1954 number *Martians, Go Home*, is a blues based number, featuring Jimmy Guiffre playing clarinet in low register. When you listen to it the dark-toned sound has an otherworldly quality that reflects the inspired christening of the number. Rogers's titles were redolent with sf/fantasy themes and tropes: *Infinity Promenade*, *Tale of An African Lobster*, *Planetarium*, *Astral Alley*, *Chant of The Cosmos*, *Way Up There*, *Stratospheric*, *Sweetheart of Sigmund Freud*, *Dark Shadows*, *Martians, Come Back*, *Here's That Old Martian Again*, and *Keeper of The Flame* – which if it wasn't, ought to have been a story by Merritt or Lovecraft.

Composer/bassist Charles Mingus in his autobiography *Beneath the Underdog* recalls that as a teenager he was a fervent reader of H G Wells and loved anything on the themes of ESP, the paranormal, the weird and the fantastic. It's possible to see the influence of these interests in many of the titles of his compositions. One of his early attempts to fuse jazz and poetry *The Chill of Death* had some fairly **Weird Tales** orientated lyrics.

The chill of Death, as she clutched my hand  
I knew she was coming, so I stood like a man  
She drew up closer, close enough for me to look into her face  
And I began to wonder, 'Hadh't I seen her some other place?'  
She beckoned for me to come closer, as if to pay an old debt  
I knew what she wanted; it wasn't quite time yet

Mingus had a strong dystopian outlook on life. He held no great truck on the world becoming a better place. If you listen to his *Pithecanthropus Erectus* from 1956 which is now recognised as an important step in the direction of freer synthesis in jazz, you get a strong sense of Mingus attempting to picture what he described as "the story of mankind's struggle out of chaos, up and down the Freytag's Triangle of hubris and destruction, back to chaos" – Mingus was doubtless quoting a sort of watered-down Spenglerism which was still fashionable

in some quarters at the time. Other titles which reflect his reading interests include, *Weird Nightmare* (1946) *Possessed* (1951), *Precognition*, *Extrasensory Perception* (both 1952), *Hallucinations*, *Spontaneous Combustion*, *Jack The Fieldstalker*, *The Pendulum at Falcon's Lair* (all 1953), *Fantasy* (1954), *Reincarnation of a Love Bird* (1957), *Oh Lord, Don't Let Them Drop That Atom Bomb On Me* (1961), *Moonboy* (1962).

Composer pianist **George Russell**, who reworked the Lydian chromatic concept of tonal organisation (one of the "ecclesiastical modes" recognised in mediaeval music, which existed prior to the general adoption of the major & minor keys) into his jazz compositions, assembled a roaring big band to give us *Jazz In The Space Age* (1960) with *Chromatic universe* and *Waltz From Outer Space*. **Don Ellis**, a musician concerned with the freeing and expansion of tempo and meter, produced *How Time Passes*; the impetus was his reading of books and articles concerned with the function of time, time relationship and the elasticity of time. Diligent searching will uncover *Mu* and *The Relativity Suite* with numbers including *March of The Hobbits* both by trumpeter **Don Cherry** and drummer **Ed Blackwell**. *Shangri-la* – from trumpeter **Donald Byrd**, *Infinity*, *Out of this World*, *Interstellar Space* – by the great **John Coltrane**, *Return to Forever* – **Chuck Corea**, *Exploring the Future* – **Curtis Counce**, *Zodiac Variations Suite* – **John Dankworth**, *Flight of the Foo Birds* – **Count Basie**, *Captain Marvel* – **Stan Getz**, *Earthrise*, *Metropolis*, *Citadel/Room 315* – **Mike Westbrook**, *Milky Way*, *I Sing The Body Electric* – **Weather Report**, *Atlantis* – **McCoy Tyner**, *Vision of the Emerald Beyond*, *Between Nothingness and Eternity*, *Apocalypse*, – **Mahavishnu John McLaughlin**.

**Duke Ellington** was the most creative figure jazz has yet produced. His career spanned the years 1917 – coincidental with the first jazz recording by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band – to 1974 and during that time embraced all forms of music from the New Orleans jazz idiom, through dance halls and concert platform, to sacred music in Westminster Abbey. Ellington, a painter and writer, also ventured into the world of fantasy and science fiction. In the twenties and thirties he appeared at the famous New York Cotton Club performing what the musical press described as Jungle Music – though the fantasy floor show which accompanied him, with its half-naked nubile dancers was more *Sheena*, *Queen of the Jungle* in context than any reflection of the composer's Afro-American ethnic origin.

In 1939 not long after he broadcast his Martian radio scare, Orson Welles suggested to Ellington that he write a stage musical. The concept was a fantastic allegory set in a Broadway musical form and featured jazz as a beautiful woman Madam Zajj. But the social climate was not right and Broadway would not accept a Negro revue like this. However, in 1957 Ellington revived the idea, and through the medium of television premiered his composition *A Drum Is A Woman*. Madam Zajj starts life as an elaborately constructed African drum before magically transforming to a woman. The story line traced the history of jazz from its African origins through the Caribbean to New Orleans, Chicago and New York. A final section – *The Ballet of the Flying Saucers* – is set in the future when jazz reaches the moon. Other works reflect the sf/fantasy elements including the suite, *Night Creature*, which is based on Ellington's vision of "that imaginary monster we all fear we shall have to meet some midnight", and as a welcome to the age of Sputnik: *Launching Pad* and *Blues In Orbit* (1958).

*Hit that jive, Jack, put it in your pocket till I get back, ain't got time shake your hand, going into space as fast as I can.*

**Sun Ra**

**Herman Sonny Blount**, pianist and arranger, is the true guardian of sf in jazz. Crackpot, genius, innovator, he was one of the first in jazz to use electronics, the electric piano (in 1953), the Moog synthesiser, and the rocksichord – an electric keyboard that combines the sharp attack of the harpsichord with the glossy, sustained sound of an electric piano. The story goes that in the late forties, Blount had a close encounter with a flying saucer. A deputation of aliens told him he was really Sun Ra, a Saturnian, and his mission on earth was to spread the music of the solar system (**Karlheinz Stockhausen** had a similar vision which led him to say: "It's an inner revelation that has come several times to me, that I have been educated on Sirius, that I come from Sirius"). Immediately Blount assumed the mantle of **Sun Ra** and began spreading the message "I've been sent here to help people. My mission is to try and save this planet" through his Solar Arkastra.

By 1955 he was live on stage with his rampaging big band. It was a show to blow the mind, his musicians resplendent in weird and

wonderful robes and dazzling space-age headgear, with jugglers, dancers and fire-eaters, all his shows mixed theatrics with collective improvisation, electronic atonality, layered counterpoint, bizarre pairings, dense orchestrations and massive percussion sections. An example of this can be heard on *Black Myth/Out in Space*, a recording from the Berlin Jazz Festival of 1970 (and recently re-released). The shock of the audience when the Arkestra responds to June Tyson's opening vocals with a full-throttle atonal scream is almost palpable. His music and his stage presence was indeed *light-years* ahead of the market. There are even fans who claim that the spaceship in *Close Encounters* was playing a Ra tune. An alien on his adopted planet he never had the "commercial" success his work demanded. This was left to those exponents of modern popular music – Bowie (1969), Clinton (1970s) – to *reinvent* his stage shows, and even as late as the nineties for acts like GWAR and Man or Astroman to usurp his myth and character.

Sun Ra left us in 1993 aged 79 earth years: he always claimed to be over 5000 galactic years old.

His legacy to us is a cornucopia of music laid down on over 200 albums all of which are an aural and visual experience. They are the most complete sf/fantasy influenced packaging of jazz you will come across. Look out for *Jazz in Silhouette*, *Monorails and Satellites*, *We Travel The Spaceways*, *Visit Planet Earth*, *Interstellar Low Ways*, for their superb sf artwork. The list is seemingly endless with *Atlantis*, *The Magic City*, *The Sun Myth*, *Nuclear War – get up off your ass, or you can kiss your ass goodbye*, *Cosmic Chaos*, *The Heliocentric World*, *The Nubians of Plutonia*, *Pictures of Infinity*, *The Solar-Myth*, *Other Times*, *Shadow World*, *The Band From Outer Space*, *Next Stop Mars*, *Outer Spaceways Incorporated*, *Outer Nothingness*, *Nebulae*, *Dancing in The Sun*.

Well, he's dead and gone now, back to where he lived in his music:

*You're on spaceship earth,*

*you're outward bound,*

*out among the stars,*

*destination unknown.*

*Destination un-known.*

*Des-tin-a-tion un-knooooooown.*

Tanya Brown has asked the question of whether aliens would be impressed by earth music and points to "incorrect interpretation with shattering effects" as a possible/probable outcome of listening without a reference point. Maybe the jazz musician, as an improviser can hurdle the barrier that formal construction may erect. Take a tune (message) play it this way, take the tune and play it *this* way, take the tune and play it ... well, one can dream, can't one?

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# First Impressions

## Book Reviews edited by Steve Jeffery

**Kevin J. Anderson – *Blindfold***  
Reviewed by Stephen Deas

Atlas is a struggling colony, a society held together by Truthsayers – infallible agents of justice who gain their power by use of Veritas, a telepathy drug. Without the Truthsayers, Atlas would descend into chaos, and suddenly, inexplicably, Truthsayers are getting things wrong...

...At least, that's the theory, although I get the impression that without the Truthsayers, Atlas would get along just fine.

*Blindfold* is billed as an sf thriller and makes no pretence to be anything else. And if you already know that Kevin Anderson's main claim to fame is a prolific output of *X-Files* tie-in novels, you won't be surprised to discover it sets out to be a conspiracy thriller.

Sf purists should probably avoid this book. What we have is a Bubble and Squeak of sci-fi bits and pieces all thrown together without much thought. There's a space elevator, the Veritas drug, a couple of other bits and pieces, but take those away and everything looks remarkably twentieth century. To be fair, Anderson makes a reasonable attempt to make the background coherent, and for a thriller with sci-fi trappings I think he does enough, occasionally a little bit more than

enough. Occasionally. But a carefully thought out future history it ain't.

So does it thrill? Bad things are happening for sure, but is anyone going to care what and who and why? Is it going to keep you reading past bedtime...?

Probably not. The question of what's going on isn't an issue – it's more of 'how'. The plot is certainly twisted and convoluted, but it lacked enough elegance to sustain my interest on its own. The question of 'who' is answered almost at once (for the hard-of-understanding, the villain can be spotted reading his favourite author – Machiavelli. Sigh). And the question of 'why' isn't answered at all, which is a pity, because the villain is one of the more interesting characters – he often exhibits a surprising understanding of the colony and the processes of ecological and social change going on, and could have stolen the show, given half a chance. Unfortunately he isn't, and so all that's left to do is to watch a pleasantly paced conspiracy unravel, and wonder how the hell the villain ever thought it could work in the first place.

Definitely a B-movie. But a well directed one.

**Catherine Asaro – *The Radiant Seas***  
Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Tor Books, 1999, 464pp, \$26.95 ISBN 0-312-86714-X

Fourth in a series of related novels concerning the rivalries among various factions of three galactic empires, *The Radiant Seas* neatly demonstrates a hybridisation of the genre that is becoming increasingly common. Here, a traditional hard sf novel of interstellar action and intrigue has grafted onto it a romantic subplot featuring two eloped lovers, Sauscony Valdoria (Soz) and Jaibriol Qox II (Jai), star-crossed aristocrats-in-exile from opposite sides of the conflict between rival camps

of the Skolian Empire and the despotic Eubian Concord.

However, those expecting something akin to a bodice-ripper in space will be pleasantly surprised, as *The Radiant Seas* stands as a laudable work of sf in its own right. The novel's romantic elements are successfully and, in general, unsentimentally integrated into a book whose epic plot and well-conceived far future background provide solid, if not cutting-edge, genre entertainment. If *The Radiant Seas* is sometimes

too involved for its own good, sending the reader hurrying back to the *dramatis personae* listing at worryingly frequent intervals, then there are other ample rewards to be found within its pages.

Not least of these are Asaro's sensitive portrayals of her leading characters, both good and bad, and her adept handling of the realities of interstellar politics and conflict, clearly modelled on classical Greek and Roman precedents. In counterpoint to the well-observed, almost Machiavellian, political interactions between characters, Asaro proves she can write some fine action scenes, including a particularly stirring space battle which pits two vastly experienced military commanders against each other to devastating effect. Asaro also brings some of her background as a research scientist to bear in the novel's interesting speculations concerning the role of genetics and technologically enhanced telepathy, which lend the book greater depth and prove crucial to the unfolding plot.

After a scene-setting first two hundred pages, the novel

really comes alive when Jai is kidnapped by his own people and forced to assume his appointed role as their ruler. As new leader of the Skolian Empire, Soz must battle to save him and her own people, whilst keeping the secret of their relationship hidden from both her friends and enemies. Events build towards a genuinely thrilling conclusion, paving the way for forthcoming sequels.

Asaro is a regular contributor to *Analog* magazine and this novel is in some ways a typical product of the *Analog* school of writing – a piece of work which sits firmly in the safe heartland of the genre. Those seeking elegant literary style (à la Gene Wolfe) or mind-expanding ideas (à la Greg Egan) will be disappointed. However, anyone looking for a novel displaying traditional genre virtues of thoughtful world-building and gripping storytelling will find *The Radiant Seas* just to their taste.

## Gregory Benford – *Deep Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia*

Bard (Avon), 1998, 225pp, \$20.00 ISBN 0-380-97537-8

Reviewed by F. Christian

Gregory Benford's first non-fiction book is both a study of communication across time and a review of the author's recent work, in this and other fields. Covering our interpretation of relics such as clay tablets, henges, and the Seven Wonders, and the possible intentions of those leaving such information and structures, the book then moves on to current attempts to convey information to our descendants. These include time capsules- and their problems, including recalling their location and desired excavation date.

These are divided into four sections. The first of these are what most would regard as direct communication, on Earth and in space. The Earth-based ideas are centred around the author's work, for the US government, on the difficulties of marking a radioactive waste store in such a way as to convey the idea of 'danger' for ten thousand years.

The space-based section, on the other hand, is centred around a more optimistic approach, telling the future about the achievements of the present. This is a process which has already begun, with the plaques on the Pioneer 10 and 11 spacecraft, the Interstellar Record of the Voyager missions, and various other plaques and CD-ROMs now scattered around the solar system, and which a group, including the author, hoped to continue on board the Cassini and Huygens landers to Titan, by sending an engraved diamond disk on each of the spacecraft. The development of designs for the disk makes interesting reading, but the project was never carried through, and Cassini left Earth with the Digitized Versatile Disk, carrying over 600 000 signatures, rather than (potentially) more interesting data about the makers of the probe. Sadly, the Benford's understandable disappointment at this turn of events leads to a rather acrimonious few chapters.

The final two sections concern the ecological "message"

which will be sent into the future, by the preservation of extinct or endangered species and by the state of the Earth as a whole. A certain bitterness can again be seen, as the author rewrites an earlier paper, rejected during peer review by the major scientific journals. An interesting case made for his ideas, however, along with a fair rebuttal of objections to it. The idea is for a "library of life," a large as possible random sampling of the species currently alive, preserved as cell samples in liquid nitrogen, in the hope that future generations would have the technology and inclination to re-create the species which had been lost in the interim.

The final chapter of the book (in this reviewer's opinion) veers still further from the title and spirit of the book, professing to discuss the message which we leave in the Earth itself. In reality, this is a summary of the author's theories on global warming, and specifically ways to alleviate the problem *without* reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. Many of these, such as the small orbital parasols shielding us from the sun, seem unlikely to be implemented, but others ("buy a car, plant a grove of trees") provide genuine methods for the reduction of gases, particularly CO<sub>2</sub>.

On the whole, this is a highly enjoyable and informative book, covering a wider range of topics than the title would suggest. There is a certain tendency to portray the author (at some length) as 'the maverick outsider,' in need of the reader's sympathy. As this is not accompanied by the corresponding lack of accuracy often seen, it can be forgiven. This reviewer's greatest complaint is that figures, though systematically numbered and located, are not referred to in the text. Otherwise, highly recommended to anyone – there is no 'hard' science or maths involved, and the writing style is excellent.

## Joanne Bertin – *The Last Dragonlord*

Earthlight, 1999, 398pp, £9.99, ISBN 0-684-85168-7

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Another first fantasy novel by an American author, and one that looks promising.

The Dragonlords in the title are shapechangers, able to transform into dragons at will. They are a very rare phenomenon, and as such, have sat in judgement over true humans for millenia, arbitrating their disputes, wars and political machinations. It is under such circumstances that we meet Linden Rathan, the so-called Last Dragonlord.

As the youngest Dragonlord, Linden is sent to Casna with the more experienced (and soul-twinned) Kief Shaeldar and Tarlna Aurianne to judge a regency dispute. At over 600 years old, Linden himself has yet to find his own soul-twin. In the world Bertin creates, all Dragonlords' souls have a twin and the

formative years of their lives revolve around finding that twin.

In Casna the king has died, and the heir is but a sickly youngster who needs a regent until he is old enough to take up the crown himself. Naturally, as with many good fantasies, scheming and plotting abounds as one group in Casna attempts to snatch power. The plot takes a much more serious turn however, when one of the groups is revealed to be using the regency dispute as a cover in their attempt to challenge the dominance of the Dragonlords – they being aware that none have been born since Linden Rathan. In order for any action against the Dragonlords to succeed, much more must be known about them, and Linden is trapped into supplying the information that could well see the end of the Dragonlords' role

in true-human affairs. In the Dragonlord's history, the Fraternity of Blood had nearly destroyed them, and neither Linden, Kief or Talnar, can imagine such a threat existing again.

Although the world Bertin has created is not greatly explored, tending to remain very centralised around Casna and its immediate vicinity, she has produced a believable and comfortable setting in which to base an engrossing story of political intrigue and ambition. Her characters are very well drawn and instantly liked or disliked, depending on their role in

the story. The various plot strands are cleverly interwoven to create avid interest whichever group, or part of the plot, Bertin expands at any given time. This provides a very satisfying build-up to an ending, which, whilst tying up all the loose ends, leaves plenty of room for the next book.

This is an excellent, yet undemanding read, and I shall look forward to following these characters in the next book, *Dragon and Phoenix*.

**Alfred Bester – *The Stars My Destination***

**Samuel R. Delany – *Babel-17***

**Philip K. Dick – *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?***

**Gene Wolfe – *The Fifth Head of Cerberus***

**Roger Zelazny – *Lord of Light***

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Millennium, 1999, 258pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-814-0

Millennium, 1999, 193pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-805-1

Millennium, 1999, 210pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-813-2

Millennium, 1999, 252pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-817-5

Millennium, 1999, 261pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-820-5

Buy these. Read these.

Is that enough? No, even your Reviews Editor is not going to allow himself to get away with four words, however perfectly they express my sentiments to these next five (Nos. 4 to 8) of Millennium's laudable series of 'SF Masterworks' re-issues. [Nos.1 and 2, Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* and Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, were reviewed by L.J. Hurst in *Vector* 204, while No. 3, James Blish's *Cities in Flight* is reviewed elsewhere in this issue.]

This, then, is the way the future was, or at least as it was between 1956 and 1972 (a period that also runs from my entrance to the world and my own, personal, Golden Age of Science Fiction between the ages of 11 and 16).

Strangely, this is also the way the future largely turned out, if not actually outside in the mundane world, then in the shaping of the course of science fiction up to the present. Many of the central themes and concerns of those books are true today: themes of identity, difference, language and narration, of what it is to be human, and the first indications and inspirations of what, later, would become cyberpunk.

So are these ur-texts, of historic and academic interest, worthy but plodding and a little dull compared to today's science fiction? No. Far from it. These are five books by writers at the near peak of their form, exploding with ideas, new techniques, excitement and an often furious energy.

One thing you notice immediately is how short they are.

They are models of a tightness and economy that often seems lost today. Delany, for example, packs more originality, ideas, tension and intensely visual spectacle into a mere 190 pages than many current day authors achieve in three or four times that length.

The earliest is Bester's 1956 *The Stars My Destination* (originally published in the UK under the title *Tiger! Tiger!*), a true classic of science fiction (and containing one of the best opening lines of the entire genre), and a revenge story based on that other classic of revenge dramas, Dumas's *The Count of*

*Monte Cristo*. Bester's Gully Foyle, abandoned, cheated, betrayed and marked with a flaring demon mask (hence the Blakean reference of the original UK title) is not so much a man as a force of embodied will, a driven obsessive, one of science fiction's true legendary monsters, even in an age of freaks and grotesques.

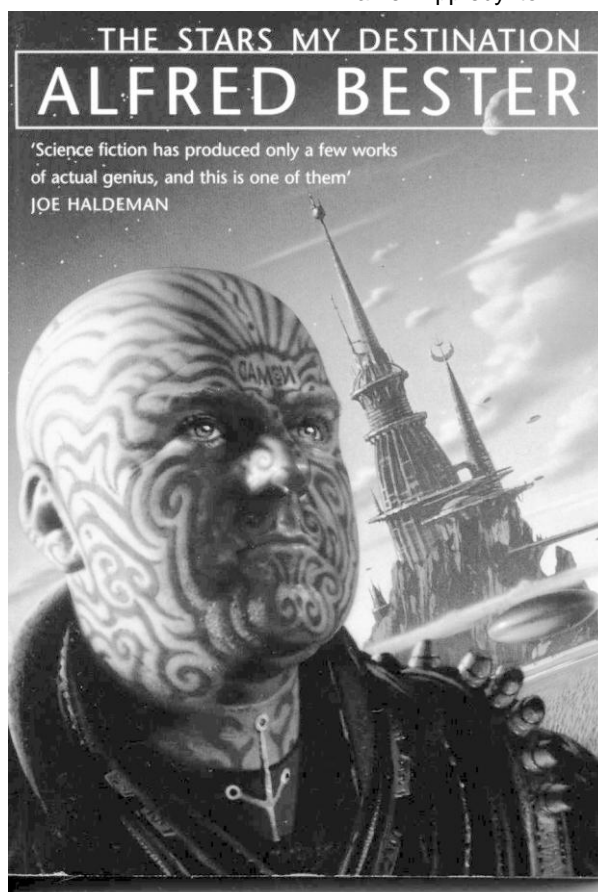
Even that future is not as freakish and grotesque as the one that linguist and poet Rydra Wong introduces Customs Officer Daniel Appleby to in her search for a ship crew among the

cosmetiform, barely human (and some not even technically alive) spacers who hang out in Transport town. Rydra, a precocious linguistic genius, has only 10 pages of double-spaced typewritten garble under the code name Babel-17 that might be the clue to breaking the Invaders' 20 year attacks on the edges of human space. Babel-17, though, even as Rydra begins to decipher it, turns out to be as much a weapon as a language. This theme that language is a tool that shapes – and constrains – perception or reality, and identity, is of key importance in much of Delany's work, right up to the *Neveryon* series. But an impression that this is all difficult and academic stuff is misleading; *Babel-17* is equally a sustained playful, sensual (and sexual), assault on the senses packed into under 200 pages.

Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is probably best known now as the book behind Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, although it is not, by a long way, the same book as Jeter's novelisation of the film. Dick's sf novels are marked with a level of

absurdist black humour, as well as an odd mystic humanism (that would transform into an even odder gnostic Christianity in the *VALIS* sequence) and small – though not to their protagonists – domestic tragedy that adds to a very human poignancy.

*The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, a fix-up of three interlinked stories ("A Story," by John V. Marsch' and 'V.R.T' as well as the title story) by Gene Wolfe, combines the immediate and pressing questions of identity and humanity of Dick's *Do Androids...* and the language games of Delany. The game of



the title story is to try and work out the identity of the unnamed narrator, although this actually masks (or distracts from) a far more compelling puzzle about the nature of the indigenous aboriginals and human colonists of the twin worlds of Sainte Anne and Sainte Croix (and one that is clumsily blown by the jacket blurb) that is played out across the three stories.

That marring inattention to detail of Millennium is shown again in Zelazny's *Lord of Light*, which is unfortunately littered with typos (all of which are curiously absent from my 1973 Panther edition), and a typesetting glitch that truncates the last letter of each line in the 'About the Author' note at the end of the Delany volume. Nevertheless, *Lord of Light* is an almost classic embodiment of the Clarke dictum about 'sufficiently advanced technology being indistinguishable from magic', or in this case mythology – that of the Hindu pantheon. In the far future, long

after the death of Earth, the original colonists of a new world, the First, have set themselves up as quasi-immortal gods. Against them is another of the First, Mahasamatman, who some call the Buddha, others Maitreya, the Lord of Light, although he prefers plain Sam. Drawing inspiration from the epic Indian poem of the battle between good and evil, the *Mahabharata*, *Lord of Light* is enthralling, often very funny (and just where *did* Pratchett get the inspiration for his ape Librarian?) and, at the end, surprisingly tender.

It's a shame to end on something of a carping tone, because this is an entirely laudable enterprise from Millennium, and the further titles announced in the series are equally looked forward to (but where is Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* – or indeed any female authors?)

### James Blish – *Cities in Flight* Reviewed by Chris Hill

Millennium, 1999, 605pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-811-6

In the early part of the next century, two discoveries are made almost simultaneously: anti-agathic drugs and 'spindizzys' – devices which allow faster-than-light travel. During the next thousand years, many of the cities of Earth are surrounded by spindizzy fields and launched into space as interplanetary merchants. The four novels in *Cities in Flight* principally follow the fortunes of New York City.

*They Shall Have Stars* chronicles the discovery of the drugs and the spindizzy or, to be more accurate, chronicles the discovery by two outsiders that the discoveries have been made.

*A Life for the Stars*, which read strongly like a Heinleinian juvenile, tells the story of a boy, Chris deFord as he is press-ganged into service on one of the city ships, is transferred to New York and rises to become city manager.

*Earthman, Come Home* is the longest, and most episodic, of the novels and follows a number of incidents in the career of New York city and it's mayor, John Amalfi. These events lead to the final breakaway between Earth and the cities.

Finally *The Triumphs of Time* (originally published in the UK as *A Clash of Cymbals*) is about the unexpected end of the universe and Amalfi's part in the start of the next one.

The first of the stories that make up this series was originally published in 1950. The cosmology is dubious by modern standards, although fairly accurate for the time it is written, I suspect. It is also rather sexist, particularly in the third part. At

one point a group of native women are used as bait in a trap and throughout women are not allowed any part in running the cities.

However, putting these points aside, it is a remarkable piece of work. It has a fairly pessimistic, not to say dour, tone throughout much of the story. In places it reminded me very strongly of Stephen Baxter's Xeelee stories. There is the same view of large parts of human history through the eyes of people with a privileged viewpoint, although produced by different means (longevity in Blish's case, time dilation in Baxter's). There is also a strong feeling of the transience of the human race, particularly in *The Triumphs of Time*, although this does clash with the, again rather Heinleinian, 'Competent American' figure of Mayor Amalfi.

If there was one major problem I had on a personal level with the books it is the rather bloody-minded approach to problem-solving that is exhibited, particularly in *Earthman, Come Home*. In more than one instance Amalfi, and his city manager Hazleton, are prepared to make any sacrifice in order to achieve their ends, up to and including the possibility of destroying all life on one planet.

However, quibbles aside, *Cities in Flight* is a true classic of science fiction and its influence on modern sf cannot be denied. Millennium can only be congratulated for once more making it available.

### Ben Bova – *Sam Gunn Forever*

Avon Eos, 1999, 278pp \$5.99 ISBN 0-380-79726-7

### Martin Scott – *Thraxas*

Orbit, 1999, 220pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-729-3

### Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Two very different books. One fantasy, one sf. But both about loveable(!) rogues.

Thraxas is a P.I., the cheapest Sorcerous Investigator in the whole magical city of Turai. He would be just like Philip Marlowe if he weren't hugely overweight. And softhearted. His only worry is where the rent is going to come from; being cheap doesn't help pay bills!

Sam Gunn, on the other hand, is fit as a fiddle. Well, he may be old, but he is an astronaut, and they have to be fit. He is short, though, and as unprincipled a rogue as you are ever likely to come across in space. Sam's supporting cast are a bunch of crusty astronauts, voluptuous female spies and tricky lawyers.

Turai is a magical city. In fact it is probably the magical city that is the setting for just about all the fantasy stories set in magical cities. Except that it doesn't have a river running through it. It does have Elves, Orcs, Dwarves, Dragons; all the usual stuff. The only things that might have raised this above the norm are the anti-hero hero – but really, he's just Frank Cannon or Henry Crabbe in a fairy story – and the emancipated treatment of the women. This lot don't simper, they fight and

drink as well as any man. But that's been done as well, beginning with Eowyn and going all the way to Granny Weatherwax.

And Space is, of course, the Final Frontier. Sam Gunn is the latest in a long line of smart-arse, woman-chasing capitalists. He is not likeable; I don't think that he's meant to be, but as I read my way through his exploits, I realised we are supposed to have a grudging admiration for his get-it-done and make-a-profit-at-the-same-time approach. Personally, I loathed the whole concept. I felt profoundly sorry for the people he left behind him along the way in his headlong urge to profit out of... well anything, it seems. But these misguided souls apparently don't deserve our sympathy, because although, by their own admission (they are the narrators of these stories) he used them up and discarded them when they were no longer useful, they all still have a grudging admiration for his get-it-done etc. etc. If you like that sort of thing then you'll like this sort of thing. I don't. And didn't.

By comparison, *Thraxas* was good. There were actually enough twists and turns in the plot to hold the interest, and the very familiarity of the settings meant that I could concentrate on

what was going on, rather than why should it be going on. This isn't leading edge fantasy. But it's fairly harmless. At least it's

the villains who are out to exploit everyone in sight.

### Kirsten Britain – *Green Rider*

Earthlight, 1999, 504pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-684-85828-2

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This novel, the author's first, is set firmly in heroic-fantasy-land, here known as Sacordia. As the story opens, Karigan G'ladheon, a merchant's adolescent daughter, has just been expelled from school -- in fact from THE school at Selium. She is on her way home to give her father the bad news before he hears the Dean's version. But in the middle of the forest a dying messenger, a Green Rider, appears and charges her with the completion of his task, to deliver a vital message to the King, Zachary, in his castle at Sacor City. A deadly force of ancient evil is about to be unleashed, etc., etc.

Karigan dutifully takes the rider's message, his sword and his horse, and sets off to find the King. Guided by the uncanny



wisdom of the horse (whom she names The Horse), her journey turns into a grand tour of Sacordia, and a fine introduction to many of its magic-users. At the end of the book, she delivers her message, treachery is unveiled, there's a big fight, but evil is not completely vanquished and enough loose ends are left dangling (including a couple of potential boyfriends for Karigan) to see the author though at least a couple of sequels. Apart from the really worrying question of whether Evil is really going to be ultimately vanquished or not (don't hold your breath), the main issues left to resolve are whether Karigan is going to end up joining the Green Riders, and who she's going to marry. Personally, I'm rooting for The Horse.

### Eric Brown – *Penumbra*

Millennium, 1999, 346pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85798-592-3

Reviewed by Brian J. Robb

To use a football analogy, Eric Brown's *Penumbra* is a sometimes frustrating novel of two halves. Although slow to start, this tale of jaded commercial pilot Joshua Bennett and Rana Rao, a Calcutta police lieutenant with a secret past, does prove surprisingly engaging for close to two thirds of its length.

Bennett finds himself teamed up with gamin Buddhist Ten Lee on a routine flight which ends in a near-fatal accident. Meanwhile, Rana Rao sees herself promoted away from looking after the welfare of Calcutta's street kids – an area in which she has a strong personal interest – to work on the baffling homicide case of the so-called Crucifix Killer.

As these two storylines slowly converge, Brown takes his time to develop welcome emotional depth in his main characters, especially Bennett, who is struggling with his attachment to a holographic artificially intelligent recreation of his sister Ella, who died at the age of 10.

Eventually, Bennett escapes his problems by taking up an offer from millionaire space explorer Charles Mackendrick to pilot a craft on an unorthodox mission to the mysterious planet of Penumbra. This is located on the outer rim of the galaxy, way

beyond the furthest range of the Expansion, the area of space explored by man. Also along for the ride are Ten Lee, who sees the trip as an opportunity to further confirm her spiritual beliefs, and the dying Mackendrick himself, seeking salvation in the stars.

As the story builds, questions are answered and mysteries solved – but there's always more waiting to be investigated. Some of these are resolved too quickly, such as the discovery, in what seem to be alien ruins on Penumbra, of a century-old picture of the Eiffel Tower. The delightful frisson this discovery gives rise to is lost when the (rather mundane) explanations follow within a couple of pages.

By the end, though, *Penumbra* turns into an almost Flash Gordon style run-around, with colonial governments, rebel factions, a serial killer out for revenge and insectoid aliens who harbour the secret of the universe (of course). It's a shame that what starts out as an almost literary sf piece should give in to the urge to grab the iconography of decades of pulp fiction and then proceed to do nothing new with it.

### Eric Brown – *The Web: Walkabout*

Dolphin, 1999, 112pp, £3.50 ISBN 1-85881-643-2

### Pat Cadigan – *The Web: Avatar*

Dolphin, 1999, 99pp, £3.50 ISBN 1-85881-641-6

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Let's start with a confession. I don't much like shared world stuff with glossaries. I was particularly irritated by the way both authors had to use the old-fashioned spider puns to describe the virtual world of the Web. In both books teenagers with interesting lives (female Aboriginal football star in *Walkabout* and quadriplegic from an Amish-style community in *Avatar*) enter the "Web" for the first time and have adventures which have broader repercussions, for themselves and the real world.

I am very fond of Pat Cadigan's work and having refrained from buying *Avatar* for myself, was pleased to be given it to review. I was prejudiced against Eric Brown's *Walkabout* for stealing a famous title (yes, I know there's no copyright on titles but it still feels like stealing). I feel this may raise false expectations in people who know the novel and film.

The theme of *Walkabout* is important within this book. Our protagonist learns through her adventures to accept both halves of her cultural heritage – both the modern side represented by football and the traditional represented by going walkabout –

but overall I didn't feel this was quite enough to overcome my initial prejudice.

I enjoyed both books, although the football matches in *Walkabout* left me cold and I'm not sure if there are young people who enjoy books, computers and football. *Avatar* was excellent, a real page-turner with genuinely sympathetic characters.

Would the target audience – teenagers – enjoy these books? I sadly suspect that they're way above the head of your average teenager. I suspect real readers will have progressed to full-length adult books by now and may well overlook these gems.

The short blurbs at the end of the books, introducing other titles in the series, show a wealth of ideas to be explored in this shared world, and well-established sf authors like Steve Baxter and Ken MacLeod have contributed stories. I would certainly be interested in reading more books in this series – which is a ringing endorsement given my opening statement.

**Edwina Currie – *The Ambassador***

Little, Brown, 1999, 439pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-316-64830-2

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

In politics, those who can, do. And those who can't any more write books about it.

Edwina Currie has turned away from the voting-and-bonking blockbuster to look ahead 100 years. The passage of a fictional century typically allows political, societal and scientific development to be apparent, while also providing for plausible linkages to the trends and even some of the personalities all too familiar in popular science and current affairs today.

In 2099 the European Union, enriched by membership broadened beyond the ties of history or geography, is the major

player in a world less globalised than current concerns anticipate, while an increasingly insular and conservative USA trails China into third place in the world pecking order. The EU has wholeheartedly embraced the opportunities offered by gene technology, with American disapproval and distrust echoing contemporary fears: "...in human advance you can never say, *This far and no further*. You scientists recognise no limits. If you see a horizon you go bounding towards it."

Currie's vision of a possible future is constructed with considerable infodumping in repeated

briefings of the very new US representative to the Court of St James; but the ambassador-as-outsider becomes an acceptable, if unoriginal, mechanism for the gradual revelation and understanding of the underlying malaise in the brave new European world. The EU elite of the new millennium are genetically enhanced 'copies' or Nuclear Transplants; cloning itself meets with official disapproval – and thus unofficial sanction and abuse. Most copies, and most ordinary citizens



who aspire to be able to afford enhancements and a better future for their children, support the main programme; after all, it has eradicated most disease and led on to more personal improvements and benefits.

Not too far beneath the surface, however, rumble the underclass; the poor, the disaffected and a few copies with scruples. Moving across the spectrum from the unmentioned to the secret are horrid mutations from nuclear accidents, political demonstrations, remote prison camps for dissidents, and failures of the genetic programme who are swept under the tarpaulin. Is England heading for its third revolution?

There's a lot in *The Ambassador* which is thought-provoking, wry and imaginative; it's quite well-structured and has good pace. There's also a lot of clunky writing, and the plot plays too obviously to sketches of contemporary concerns: conspiracies in the political and bureaucratic establishment, global geopolitical and environmental trends, GMOs, public health and the untrammelled pursuit of scientific advance. In her fourth novel, Currie's style still seems naïve

and not particularly fluent – her narrative can be heavy-handed, with snippets from the future dropped too knowingly – and she is often only tentative in her satire.

This is unremarkable science fiction bound up with a political thriller, a millennial novel, and a rather shallow love story. You might be intrigued by the ideas and the future vision. Don't be put off by the author. But consider being put off by the writing, the characters, or the plot.

**Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (eds) – *Silver Birch, Blood Moon***

Avon Books, 1999, 371pp, \$13.50 ISBN 0-380-78622-2

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This is the fifth collection of reworked fairy tales which these editors have produced, beginning with *Snow White, Blood Red*, and the third that I have reviewed. I'm beginning to feel that I have nothing more to say except: it's marvellous; go and buy it. However...

The introduction refutes the idea that fairy tales are and always have been for children, and points out how the original versions of the sanitised stories that have been offered to children since the Victorian period are much darker, more complex and more ambiguous. They deal with fundamental themes and are addressed to an adult audience. The writers in this collection, as in the others, have reworked their material to reach back to the older forms of the stories and produce something that is powerful and new.

Reading the collection, I was struck by a sentence from Nancy Kress's story, 'Clad in Gossamer': *Things may not always be as they seem*. That sums up many of these stories. The children's versions are so familiar to us that we think we know what the point is; we think we know what they mean. Here we're often presented with a new angle: suppose it was like this

instead? The Kress story itself looks again at the story of the Emperor's new clothes, and suggests a different interpretation. Tanith Lee, in 'Kiss Kiss' turns the story of the Frog Prince on its head; while retaining the 'what' happened, she changes the 'why' and the 'how', and makes a pretty romance into a heartbreaking tragedy.

I've said in previous reviews that I personally prefer stories set in a timeless fantasy world to those brought up to date and set in the present. The material seems more unconstrained, readier to take on new shapes. That said, I realise that not all readers would agree with me, and I found one of the most impressive stories Wendy Wheeler's 'Skin so Green and Fine', which places the story of Beauty and the Beast in a completely different cultural context.

As well as the writers I've already mentioned, there are stories by Gary Kilworth, Neil Gaiman, Robin McKinley and many other familiar names as well as writers I enjoyed meeting for the first time. I can only finish by repeating what I said to begin with: it's marvellous; go and buy it.



**Charles de Lint – *Moonlight and Vines***

TOR Books, 1999, 381pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86518-X

Reviewed by Janet Barron

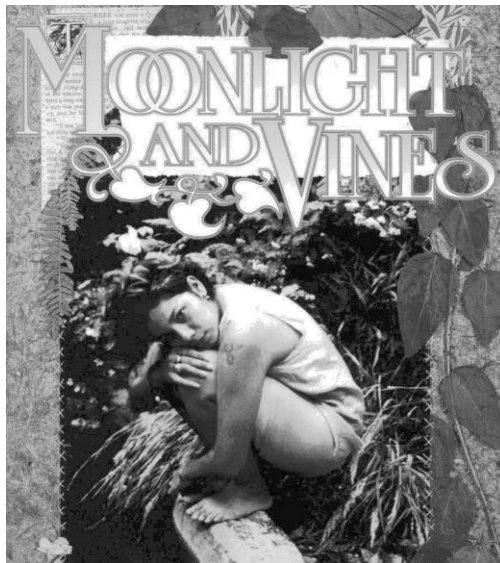
*Moonlight and Vines* is de Lint's third collection, the others being *Dreams Underfoot* and *The Ivory and the Horn*, and anyone to whom it comes as an introduction to his work is in for a treat.

There are no surprises in the settings of these 23 stories. As a de Lint reader, and also a reader who relishes the shock of the new, when I gave the pages a preliminary flip I did wonder; is this lode not mined out by now? Will I feel as though I have read these stories before?

But no. There's still silver in 'tham thar hills'.

The territory is one de Lint has made all his own. Physically, this is the North American city of Newford, with the painters, poets, musicians, writers and dancers from its seedier quarters. Metaphysically, it's the hinterland where the mundane meets the inexplicable and where all the things we know to be true are thrown into doubt.

Gathering these pieces between two covers does have a downside. It underlines the narrow social stratum from which de Lint draws his characters. The people who are granted a redemptive, revitalising glimpse of Otherness are already living in the cracks of society. No one with mortgage, pension, kids, or



steady job need apply. While undeniably appealing to that bit of us that would like to chuck it all in and run off with the raggle-taggle-gypsies-O, I found myself wishing wistfully for contrast, thinking, what would a paramedic make of all this? Or a physics teacher? Or a lawyer?

But the upside is that the artists' social circles overlap at times, so that the main character in one tale will be on the periphery of another. These sideways glimpses enrich the overall effect that de Lint, in exquisite prose, is giving peeks at real peoples' lives.

There are no shockingly outstanding stories here, but neither are there any that miss that elusive other-worldly pulse.

Memorable pieces include 'The Big Sky' in which a dead musician has to face his life to move on, 'Held Safe by Moonlight and Vines' showing the poignancy of the gap between childhood potential and adulthood actuality, and 'The Pennymen' with its haunting ambiguity and

convincing resolution.

Finally, a satisfying sense of closure and enclosure is achieved by the artful framing of the collection by two stories showing writer Christy Riddell as he first encounters and then embraces something of magic, and, some years on, what came after.

**Graham Edwards – *Stone and Sky***

Voyager, 1999, 357pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-651070-1

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The reader of *Stone and Sky*, Book One of The Stone Trilogy, cannot help but feel sorry for this fantasy novel's hero, Jonah Lightfoot. In what must be the most exhausting fifty pages of any book, Jonah experiences the eruption of Krakatoa, which is instrumental in transporting him to another world, recalls an earlier episode in his life when his father and brother were crushed to death by one of the Crystal Place dinosaurs, and his newly-met, beautiful female companion kicks him over the edge of a cliff – he later learns that she has been possessed by the spirit of an evil, immortal dragon whom only he, Jonah, can vanquish.

A few more pages suffice to narrate the history of the dragon, Archan, whose story encompasses the plot of Graham Edwards' earlier epic dragon saga (*Dragoncharm*, *Dragonstorm* and *Dragonflame*).

After this hectic beginning, the pace of the novel slows considerably. The world in which Jonah and Archan find themselves is Stone: a vast, seemingly endless, vertical wall of

blocks of rock interspersed with vegetation, with ledges wide enough to live on and structures built into it.

Stone is actually a world between other worlds, whose inhabitants have been precipitated from their own worlds and times by extraordinary events such as volcanic eruptions. Unfortunately, the need for Jonah – and through him the reader – to be given explanations as to the nature of Stone results in a number of 'info dumps' which interrupt flow of the plot. There are also occasions when Jonah discovers something that absolutely screams "deus ex machina", which tends to detract from the novel's credibility.

In fact, credibility is *Stone and Sky's* problem. There are some interesting ideas here, but the depiction of Stone itself fails to convince as a credible background, while the fact that any potential hitches or inconsistencies are explained away by the very air of the place being magic prevents the suspension of disbelief so necessary when reading this type of novel.

**David Farland – *Brotherhood of the Wolf***

Earthlight, 1999, 596pp, £9.99, ISBN 0-684-86055-4

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

*Brotherhood of the Wolf* is Book Two of *The Runelords*, but it doesn't actually say whether this is a trilogy or an on-going protracted series like those of Robert Jordan or Terry Goodkind. A bit of a worry really, because one never knows what one is letting themselves or the bank balance in for by enjoying the first of these – which I did, hugely.

Farland carries straight on from the events at the end of *The Sum Of All Men*. The Wolf Lord Raj Ahten, having recovered from his defeat at the hands of the Earth King, Gaborn Val Orden, is now raiding with the armies of Indhopal further and further north into Rofehaven, destroying principalities as he goes.

Now back at castle Sylvarresta, Gaborn, new into his powers as Earth King, is less worried about Raj Ahten than he is about Reavers. He realises that Raj Ahten is not *the* threat to mankind; that he may have to sue for peace and join with Raj Ahten in order to face the real threat. Torn by indecision, and partly ignorance of his new powers and his purpose as Earth King, Gaborn sends disgraced knight, Borenson, on a mission into Indhopal that may sway the hand of Raj Ahten – thus giving mankind at least a chance of survival. Raj Ahten however, wants only two things, the 40,000 forcibles that Gaborn stole/captured from him, and lordship of the whole of Mysteria so that he alone can save mankind from the Reavers.

The Reavers, and you really do have to read these books to find out just what Reavers are, are issuing from the ground in their hundreds of thousands, destroying everything in their path. Whilst Raj Ahten heads for Carris and prepares to lay siege in an attempt to lure Gaborn, and Gaborn himself begins the political machinations of amassing an army to take to Carris to persuade Raj Ahten what the real threat is, the Reavers are heading for, yup, you guessed it, Carris.

The Wild, conjured by the Earth Wizard, Binnesman, in the first volume of this series, makes a reappearance in this book and is one of the most fascinating developing characters in the series so far.

In *The Sum Of All Men*, Farland introduced a world where, typically, in a fantasy role-gaming sense, the characters could take attributes from other characters in order to heighten their own senses and abilities. Raj Ahten was to be the Sum of All Men in that he had many thousands of others' attributes, effectively making him superhuman. This is, in this second

volume, much more a 'given', so it helps greatly if the reader has read the first volume in the series, but is not actually essential.

The curse of all reviewers is word-count, and this is one of those books when whatever word-count you are given by the editor, it simply isn't enough. Farland has produced a fully realised world with well-drawn and interesting characters. There is so much going on in the plot that the reader can get engrossed for long periods at the expense of all else, and I would highly recommend this book, and indeed this series, to any fantasy fan. Its only drawback is that the book is published as a huge slab of paper in paperback format, and as such, is very difficult to read on the bus, and does one's wrists no good at all.

*The Sum of All Men* was reviewed in V200 by John D. Owen. See **Particles** in this issue.

**Charles A. Frost – *The Troubled Earth***  
 Reviewed by Colin Bird

CAF, 1999, 216pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-9535029-0-2

I assume from the fact that the publisher's initials match the author's that this book is an example of self-publishing. Nothing wrong with that. Publishers are taking less and less of these days. A self-published novel (*Knowledge of Angels* by Jill Paton Walsh) has even been shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

I suspect that Charles A. Frost has more obstacles to overcome before he can achieve such literary greatness. For one thing he's going to have to read some recent sf – like from the last fifty years! Because *The Troubled Earth* reads like a rightfully neglected work by a pulp writer from the early part of this century.

The story concerns a war between a migrating horde fleeing south from post-apocalyptic desolation into the rich lands of the U.I.S. Federation in the year 2165. Ruthless warmonger, Peter Stallard, initiates a violent confrontation with the invaders wherein robots built by his company begin to decimate the desperate refugees. Stallard is using the conflict to seize power

and to achieve his dream of global domination. His only worthy opponent is the enigmatic Tader Hem who appears sporadically wielding advanced weaponry against Stallard's forces.

Oh dear. I admire anyone who publishes their own book but I really have to review this in the context of the professional marketplace. And against professional criteria *The Troubled Earth* falls down on all fronts. The narrative is stilted and predictable, the characterisation never rises above arch stereotyping and the prose is dry and colourless.

Mr. Frost has obviously put a lot of effort into getting his manuscript into print and I hope he is satisfied with the results of his labours. However, as science fiction, *The Troubled Earth* is so painfully old-fashioned that I can't recommend it to anyone but the author's relatives and close personal friends.

*The Troubled Earth* is available from CAF Publishing, 100 Bronybuckley, Welshpool, Powys SY21 7NQ, for £5.99 incl. p&p

**James Alan Garner – *Vigilant***  
 Reviewed by Chris Hill

Avon Books, 1999, 374pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0-380-80208-2

On the planet Demoth, a plague has decimated the Oolom colonists, leaving the human population untouched. Faye Smallwood, the daughter of the human doctor who runs the hospital where a cure is found, is devastated by 'Survivor's Guilt'. Some years later she joins an organisation, 'The Vigil', which is charged with policing government decisions. When a number of Vigil proctors are killed by androids, Faye's life is unexpectedly saved by a mysterious entity. As she and others investigate the murders she gradually discovers that there is more to the advent of the plague than anyone thought.

There are several things wrong with *Vigilant*. Characterisation is a problem: the self-centred, tough-talking protagonist is difficult to like (given that she behaves just like a man pretty much throughout, I cannot see why Gardner made his lead female unless it is out of some sort of misguided political correctness) and many of the other characters and relationships are straight out of *The Soap Opera Book of Clichés*. There is much unconvincing future slang and he forgets that the purpose of simile is to communicate

information, not obscure it.

I am not entirely convinced about the galactic civilisation. The League of Peoples, which consists, in part, of races far in advance of humans, has edicts against taking any weapons into space, or travellers even *intending* to do people harm at their destination. Such people would be declared 'non-sentient'; races would be interdicted and individuals would never reach their destination. Most characters seem to approve, but it seems rather fascist to me. After all, who is that pure in heart?

Having said all that, once you get past the rather self-indulgent first third of the book what you have left is a competent science fiction thriller. It is well-plotted and entertaining with no irritating loose ends left dangling at the finish. I did find myself wanting to finish reading it out of enjoyment, rather than just because I had to review it, which is always a good sign, I think.

This is Gardner's third novel and I think if he can tighten up his characterisation and dialogue he will be a writer to watch.

**Alan Grant – *Batman: Anarky***  
**Michael A. Stackpole – *Requiem for a Rogue***  
 Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

Titan, 1999, 207pp, £12.99 ISBN 1-85286-995-X

Titan, 1999, ?pp, £9.99 ISBN 1-84023-026-6

*Requiem for a Rogue* collects issues seventeen through twenty of the Dark Horse comic book series *Star Wars: X-Wing Rogue Squadron* based on the books written by... based on the

movie... you get the picture. After a brief prologue, the main action involves the Squadron's search for a missing spaceliner. The story action is fast paced with plenty of TIE-fighter battles

and hidden masters of the Dark side (of course). The artwork is good – clean, well-coloured and detailed. However, overall it's juvenile stuff with some excruciatingly bad dialogue straight out of a seventies war comic and ludicrous plotting, but if you've got a young *Star Wars*-mad relative who's got a birthday coming up it may be worth a look.

*Batman: Anarky* is much more interesting. It collects a number of stories together featuring the character Anarky, from his first appearance to the miniseries *Metamorphosis*. The best Batman villains are the ones that hold up a dark mirror to the Batman himself, which Anarky certainly does. And Anarky's not even a real villain but a vigilante just like the Bat, whose actions come from personal beliefs rather than personal tragedy. Instead of just attacking the criminals that this society produces, he wants to bring down corrupt society itself by attacking the power-hungry, money-grasping elite. This is very off-the-wall left-wing stuff for an American mainstream comic and should be praised. The final story, without letting up on the action, goes into a detailed philosophical discussion into the nature of evil and man's free will.

*Batman: Anarky* was scripted by Alan Grant, who was also responsible for one the greatest recent Batman villains, the Ventriloquist (who makes an all too brief appearance near the end of *Anarky*). In his introduction Grant explains that at the time he created Anarky he was a card-carrying member of the British Anarchist Party and wanted to see how his ideas would play out in Gotham City. As Grant acknowledges in his introduction, Anarky is inspired by Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*, even the costumes are remarkably similar, as is their anarchist philosophy. Strangely Anarky looks very reminiscent to a Roman Catholic cardinal which is never explained. The artwork itself ranges from irritating bog-standard DC to pretty impressive, but stylised, at the end, interspersed with recreations of some of the excellent covers.

A bit '*V for Vendetta*'-lite but still well worth a look. Bit pricey though.

(Stop Press: Anarky has just been given his own series; unfortunately they've turned him into another identikit over-powered superhero!)

### Jon Courtenay Grimwood – *reMix*

Earthlight, 1999, 360pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-671-02222-9

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Two or three centuries hence a steel-eating nanetic virus is sweeping across Europe from Azerbaijan. In a crumbling storm-racked Paris, Lady Clare, head of the French Empire's Directorate of Internal Security, is being blackmailed into recommending surrender to the latest incarnation of the Reich. LizAlec, Lady Clare's surrogate daughter, has been kidnapped by a political rival turned traitor. Fixx, a DJ/musician with three prosthetic and one natural limb, is coerced into going to the moon to find the abducted teenager. Two cloned assassins are also on LizAlec's trail, but before anyone can find her she finds herself bound for The Arc: a vast space station owned by Brother Michael's apocalyptic religious cult.

Down these mean streets even a legless man must walk. There's some imaginative world-building here, but it's only background to the same old sour cyberpunk. A jaded nihilism infects the narrative, with no opportunity overlooked to portray humanity as sordid, vile and vice-ridden. Characters are hard, cynical and cold, differing only in the degree to which their humanity has burned out. Earthlight's blurb boasts that the book is 'vicious', and it's true: *reMix* features lovingly-described torture, attempted rape, sexual abuse and extreme violence. Gratuitously, in that they add nothing to a fiction devoid of any

discernible purpose.

The front cover carries a line not from a sf magazine but from *New Woman*: "william gibson meets quentin tarrantino". The quote is lazy, combining the obvious reference to Gibson for anything cyberpunkish with the umpteenth instance of mindless media fawning over the over-rated Mr. Tarrantino, and meaningless, in that Tarrantino doesn't write sf novels. The design is after the fashion of current 'dance music' graphics. Herein lies much of the problem, for within and without, *reMix* is so achingly contemporary in its attempts to appeal to those who normally wouldn't be seen with an sf novel, that it fails as an sf novel. For all the changes two centuries have wrought on some aspects of the world, this is still a future in which Fixx's work is available on DVD, Tampax is a known brand, and you can buy a Sony neural link at the Virgin MegaStore.

Grimwood's prose is occasionally clever and wryly amusing, but mostly it is just gutter-mouthed in its self-conscious hipness. Locus is quoted saying "Fiction so trendy you can wear it!" If so, the Emperor's New Clothes must be made out of copies. Slow, devoid of appealing characters, excitement, wonder or original scientific speculation, *reMix* is the sort of book that reminds you why you stopped reading sf in the first place.

### David G. Hartwell and Glenn Grant (eds.) – *Northern Suns*

TOR Books, 1999, 382pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86461-

2

Reviewed by Colin Bird

It's always difficult to determine the national characteristics of a country's sf output and this anthology makes a half-hearted attempt via linking editorial introductions and a concluding essay from expatriate Canadian critic John Clute. *Northern Suns* is the companion volume to the 1994 collection *Northern Stars*, compiled by the same editors, and offers 21 stories of recent Canadian vintage. The editors have used a fairly loose definition of "Canadian authors" as citizens who write in Canada, immigrants writing in Canada or citizens who write elsewhere but identify themselves as Canadian writers when asked.

For years Canadian sf writers (such as A.E. Van Vogt) had to write for US markets or submit work to the more literary markets in their own country. Much Canadian sf has thus been hidden under labels such as 'fabulation' or 'allegory'. An extreme example being Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* which has had all genre associations stripped away by its academic champions who refuse to consign such a serious novel to the science fiction dustbin.

But things change. Canadian authors such as Robert Sawyer have succeeded in both US and home markets.

Anthologies such as the *Tesseracts* series (and the volume currently under review) have highlighted the wealth of home grown talent and gleefully exploited the schisms between literary speculative fiction and sf by placing stories from both sources side by side. The influence of Canadian culture can be clearly seen in the work of immigrants such as William Gibson and Michael Coney. Canadian SF is a force to be reckoned with.

The literary definition game is an amusing way of starting pub arguments but I think it would be more constructive to examine the quality of the writing on offer here. Examining the contrasts between the two best stories, Margaret Atwood's 'Freeforall' and Karl Schroeder's hard-sf 'Halo', should be left to English Lit students. Of more relevance is that they are both finely crafted stories, with richly defined characters.

Other, more parochial, tales such as Eric Choi's 'Divisions' and Jean Pierre April's 'Rêve Canadien' are less interesting to outsiders. The former tale covers negotiations between Canada and a separate Quebec in obsessive detail; in the latter nationalism bleeds from the page – check out the number of times the name "Canada" appears in the text. If there is a

definable strand here then it is the frequency of alternative histories in which matters of national identity are brought to the fore.

However, stories such as Sally McBride's 'The Fragrance of Orchids', a delicate tale of alien love, and Derryl Murphy's 'The History of Photography', an elegy for mankind told in the form of

a love letter to a dying art, are simply impressive pieces of writing whatever the national context. Indeed, the issue of Canadian identity need not concern anyone who wants to dip into this fine collection for an impressive range of stories, many from writers who will be new to UK readers.

**G. Miki Hayden – *Pacific Empire***

JoNa Books, 1998, 197pp, \$12.95 ISBN 0-9657929-1-9

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

This is a collection of nine linked short stories set in an alternate world where Japan won the Pacific War by a successful strike on the US fleet at Hawaii two years before our world's Pearl Harbor, following which it went on to conquer South-East Asia and the Western Pacific before the European Allies could organise an effective resistance. The US never entered the Second World War at all; and hostilities in Europe were concluded in 1942 with the defeat of a Hitler too syphilitic to continue as German leader. The Soviet Union is barely mentioned.

As a scenario, it lacks detail and throws up lots of unanswered questions; but it is deployed primarily as background to the stories, which focus on selected members of successive generations of three related Japanese families at various points during the sixty years since the alternate 1939. Some of the stories have a vestige of plot, with a spy to unmask or a murder to investigate; some are mere anecdotes from their characters' lives: the traumatised war veteran who finds new purpose as a Buddhist monk, the widow who invests her aristocratic patron's wealth to gain stock market leverage and eventual revenge on the man who killed her maid. Only in the

first few stories do the characters have some peripheral involvement with the Pacific War and its immediate aftermath.

Nevertheless, this ought to be interesting; but the result is unsatisfactory. One reason is that the writing is not particularly inspired: "workmanlike" is the best description of the prose, and in places there are some jarringly clunking phrases which require to be read twice to make their meaning clear. Another reason is that – perhaps because of the rather flat prose – the sense of strangeness one expects (clichéd though it may be) to find in descriptions of Japanese culture and society is lacking: the characters are Japanese only in name, and their Western veneer is all-pervasive. Thirdly, because the alternate world is primarily background to the stories, there is no real reason for it – the further we get from the alternate 1939, the less necessary it becomes. Not least because, by the end, the alternate world Japan has decided that trade rather than militarism is the most efficient means of constructing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere; just like our own. Scarcely an alternative.

JoNa Books are available from Box 336 Bedford, IN 47421 USA

**Stephen King – *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon***

Hodder & Stoughton, 1999, 216pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-340-76558-5

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Brevity does not preclude scope in fiction; especially when the author is as economical, perceptive, and just plain smart as Stephen King with *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*. At 216 printed and occasional unprinted pages (including the Author's Postscript), it's a veritable short story by his usual doorstep standards.

The minimalist plot could be sold to a Hollywood script editor in one sentence: A nine-year-old girl gets herself lost in the woods, pursued by an invisible monster. King's agent is probably doing just that, even as I write these words. (The deal will doubtless have been struck by the time you read them.)

Trisha McFarland is the little girl lost, whose parents have just been divorced. While tramping the Appalachian Trail with her mother, Quilla (Andersen), and elder brother, Pete, she slopes off for a mainly therapeutic pee. She's soon wrong-headed on *A Walk in the Woods* that owes nothing to Bill Bryson.

"The world had teeth and it could bite you with them anytime it wanted" is the kick-start first sentence. Trisha gets bitten by just about everything – both physical and metaphysical – though she does some mean biting in return. King suggests multiple images for the 'God of the Lost' monster without a definite one emerging – until very near the climax. And even then . . .

For Euroreaders, Tom ('Flash') Gordon is based upon the renowned bowler – no, pitcher – with the Boston Red Sox rounders – no, baseball – team. Trisha stays at least half-sane by following a Red Sox v. New York Yankees game on her Walkman radio. Major-league Tom eventually seems to hit the Trail himself. The baseball/Wild Wood descriptive passages often read like a teleprompt-booth accident cross between *The Natural* and *Lord of the Flies*.

"You could be beaten... but you must not beat yourself" is King's stiff little, baseball-derived moral. But it isn't all Deep Thinks. Movie/TV in-jokes abound. For example, Trisha vaguely recalls some "science fiction movie in which the hero had lured a rampaging dinosaur into running over a cliff to its death" (p.35). Give up...?\*

Stephen King is one of those rare writers reliably capable of making an intelligent answer to the question: "What happens next?" *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* proves beyond any reasonable doubt that he has become *the* modern storyteller – if his ingenuity, feeling for a situation, and fluent personal style are taken into account

\* *The Beast of Hollow Mountain* (1956). It makes *Jurassic Park* look like *The Flintstones*, believe you me.

**Stephen Leigh – *Speaking Stones***

Avon Books, 1999, 330pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0-380-79914-6

Reviewed by Robert W. Hayler

On the planet Mictlan racial tensions between the indigenous reptile-like race and the long-established but still precarious human colony are fuelled by the abduction of a human girl. Sent to investigate the crime and to diffuse the potentially catastrophic situation are a group of Sa, the religious community made up of members of a hermaphrodite third gender now common to both species. Misunderstanding,

prejudice and violence threaten to thwart their attempts at reconciliation. The book is a sequel to Leigh's *Dark Water's Embrace*.

This tale isn't too bad. The differences (and similarities) between the two races are well drawn, and the some of the politics simmers nicely. The conclusion to the crime story is obvious a way off but successfully handled when it does arrive.

The overall conclusion is suitably epic. However, despite these recommendations, the book suffers from having a staccato, choppy format. The novel is made up of tiny sections, most lasting only two or three pages. We flit between the points of view of the main protagonists and various walk-ons, snatches of poetry or folklore and background-providing journal entries. None of this is hard to follow but it does eventually become exhausting.

The problem seems to be that Leigh has enjoyed doing his

world-building research and is reluctant to leave anything out. The format does allow him to introduce information that a more linear narrative would not provide but I think the rhythm and thrust of the story suffer as a result. I also find his attempt to universalise what is not much more than a yarn by including quotes from books about Native Americans and the Irish Uprising to be in questionable taste. In his acknowledgements Leigh praises his editor, but I suspect she should have taken a firmer hand.

### Nick Neilsen – *ELV 2: Time's Square*

Voyager, 1999, 240pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-649889-2

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Should you judge a book by its cover? If so, then this is a sub-Pratchett juvenile that is not as funny as it thinks it is. However, when I read this book, I found myself laughing aloud in places and then being swept along by the breakneck time-paradox plotting.

The humour is largely based on the incongruity of what we know of the world and what sense our intrepid heroes are trying to make of the past, aided only by a corrupt database that, in its most accurate entry, defines mice as “the extinct majestic kings of the jungle with their long trunks and huge ears”. Of course, Koestler defined all comedy as essentially based on incongruity, so I guess that’s not really a problem. I do feel that to make sense of the best of the comedy, you need a larger frame of reference than that possessed by your average teenager (unless said teenager is on the Oriel College *University Challenge* team).

This is *ELV-2*, but after the first paragraph I didn’t feel too lost for not having read *ELV-1*. An “important meeting” gives

you the expository lump necessary for this adventure, which then sweeps you away into the knotted ball of string that is the time-line of the plot. I found the best way to follow the path of the adventure was just to go with the flow and let the blinding headaches suffered by characters and reader alike warn you when matters were getting a little too complicated. If you’ve ever seen *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* you will be familiar with the device used to resolve problems here.

“How are we gonna get out of this one, Dude?”

“Hey let’s just remember afterwards to go into the future and put a trash can here.”

CLANG.

“Excellent! <air guitar riff> We remembered.”

After a while this can get a little wearing.

Apart from this, I did enjoy this book – but I suggest you only read it if you’re already in a silly mood. If you are feeling at all self-important, you will hate it.

### Stan Nicholls – *Bodyguard of Lightning*

Millennium, 1999, 298pp, £9.99 ISBN 1-85798-557-5

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

*Bodyguard of Lightning* is the first book in the series *Orcs: First Blood*. It’s an enjoyable fantasy, but despite being easy to read with a well told story, it’s one I’d recommend for adults rather than a juvenile market.

When humans colonised Maras-Dantia they disrupted its magic, climate and economy. This ‘stealing’ of the magic is a major source of the antagonism between humans and the other races. The disruption to the economy leads to the Orc War Council selling Stryke and other orcs to Jennesta, self-proclaimed Queen, and a hybrid of mixed human and nyadd blood. Her very existence is seen as an abomination by the Unis and her behaviour does nothing to counter that view. She is impatient, “seeing any obstacles to her gratification as an intolerable burden”, and a true sadist who gains pleasure from pain and fear of others. This characterisation combined with a few fairly explicit sex scenes leads me to recommend the novel, but to suggest caution in giving it to some younger readers.

The standard of prose is high; for the most part the writing itself is unnoticed, so it does not distract from the well-paced story. However, Nicholls’s use of some evocative phrases – for



example at one point events in the middle of a battle are described as seeming “Laggard-paced, as though seen with a dreamer’s eye” – add to the atmosphere, and the

characterisation, both of individuals and of races, is excellent.

Although they are sympathetically written – indeed I felt a real empathy with Stryke – the orcs are not turned into some poor misunderstood creatures that do not commit the atrocities they are accused of. But those atrocities are put into perspective against those of other races, and Nicholls makes a valid attempt to show why the orcs act as they do. A series of ‘dreams’ sent to Stryke show how life once was, and perhaps could be again, for the orc tribes: a theme which may be developed more fully in later

books. The issue of the relationships between the different races remains, for the most part, in the background, but is explored slightly in the relationship between Jup, a dwarf sergeant in Stryke’s war band, and the orc, Haskeer. Jup, however, is largely indifferent to Haskeer’s racist taunting, which by human cultural standards seems odd and does not quite work for me.

### Larry Niven – *Rainbow Mars*

Orbit, 1999, 227pp, £16.99 ISBN 1-85723-844-3

### Larry Niven – *The Flight of the Horse*

Orbit, 1999, 212pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-841-9

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

Old sf writers don’t die, they just revisit the stomping grounds of their youth. To coincide with the publication of his new novel,

*Rainbow Mars*, Orbit have reissued Niven’s 1974 collection, *The Flight of the Horse*, containing five stories (plus two

unrelated bonus pieces) featuring the first appearance of Hanville Svetz, the less-than-heroic time traveller from a polluted and barren future Earth. Sent backwards in time by the Institute for Temporal Research to snare extinct species of animals for the collection of the Secretary General of the U.N., Svetz's missions inevitably succumb to unforeseen complications.

Each story in the sequence is predicated on the idea that, since time travel is prohibited by the laws of physics, then a working time machine is a device more appropriate to the genre of fantasy than of sf. This gives Niven the perfect excuse to have his literary cake and eat it, sending Svetz off

on alternate timelines in such fantastic pursuits as hunting a unicorn (the title story), battling sea monsters/Moby Dick ('Leviathan'), and encountering a very gothic world populated by the descendants of wolves ('There's a Wolf in My Time Machine'), whilst still adhering to the underlying principles of his own brand of problem-solving hard sf. The time paradoxes and cultural misunderstandings that ensue make for fast, fun, but ultimately disposable reading. Like the proverbial Chinese meal, you may find yourself hungry for something more substantial minutes later.

Twenty five years later, Niven belatedly offers us *Rainbow Mars*, his first solo novel since *Destiny's Road*. As he admits in the afterword to the book, the market for scientifically accurate Mars books has recently become thoroughly saturated. Rather than play writers like Bear and Robinson at their own game, he instead chooses to take a different approach. As in *The Flight of the Horse* the conceit of time travel and alternate timelines allows Niven latitude to explore a Mars that never existed: a Red Planet of the pulp sf imagination, complete with canals and indigenous lifeforms culled from the works of earlier writers like Bradbury, Burroughs, Wells and Heinlein.



Returning to the future after his latest adventure, Svetz is almost immediately sent off to Mars on a mission across space and time to recover seeds from a vast alien plant that has grown into an areo-synchronous orbital tower. However, he and his two companions, Zeera and Miya, quickly discover that things are not quite as simple as they were led to believe. The

presence of the bizarre floral parasite threatens the very future of life on Mars, and our protagonists (and their advanced technology) soon come to the attention of the doomed planet's intelligent inhabitants, naturally desperate to flee their dying world. Needless to say, after many

adventures Svetz and company eventually escape back to Earth, but they soon discover that their problems have only just begun.

Despite the passing years, Niven's writing thankfully hasn't succumbed to flabbiness or verbosity, with *Rainbow Mars* rattling along to a conclusion in just over 200 pages. As ever, the quality of the prose is functional, rather than inspired, but then no-one ever read Niven looking for great literature. What you get here is a novel of neat notions, competently executed. The extensive use of other authors' works may strike some readers as a trifle lazy, but Niven plunders, incorporates, and acknowledges his sources in such an engaging manner that it's hard to take offence, even if, at times, the novel seems merely a collection of ideas in search of a plot. *Rainbow Mars* may not represent Niven at the height of his powers, but it's no embarrassing coda to the career of one of sf's major writers.

The 1999 Tor edition of Niven's *Rainbow Mars*, also the first hardcover edition, has somewhat different contents, including the five stories originally collected in *The Flight of the Horse*, plus an Afterword, 'Svetz and the Beanstalk'. Tor 1999, \$24.95, 316pp, ISBN 0-312-86777-8

## John Luther Novak – eXistenZ

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Simon & Schuster, 1999, 235pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-671-03308-5

eXistenZ the game leads two ways: into reality or into the game. eXistenZ the novelisation of the film leads into the fictional worlds of its author, Christopher Priest (Novak is a barely hidden pseudonym). As eXistenZ has appeared in the same year as Priest's own original work about games playing, *The Extremes*, almost every reader is bound to realise that all these roads exist and will travel down some of them at least.

In a church hall somewhere out in the boonies Allegra Geller will go on-line with members of the audience as they experience the world of eXistenZ, the new game she has developed and is now beta-testing. In earlier Cronenberg works, Antenna Research would have rushed out the game with faults and the disaster would have followed from that, but just as Cronenberg has given up the media world of television he explored in *Videodrome*, he has moved on to the new fashion. The fault may not lie in the company, it may lie in ourselves (if we are games players).

Ted Pikul, an intern in the company training scheme, is Allegra's bodyguard, and oddly unaware of what the company does. Lacking the bioport on his back he can never have played games; and does not realise the importance the reclusive Geller plays in the world, nor the hatreds she has incurred. When the

demonstration ends in a bloodbath, Pikul has to take Geller on the run, and, wanting to get into her pants, he has to get into her bioport by agreeing to a fitting of his own.

Pikul and Geller go into hiding, and there they can explore the world of eXistenZ, a world that mimics our own (or Cronenberg's at least). The inspiration for the film – and this gives you some idea of Cronenberg's weltanschauung – came from a 1995 interview between the director and Salman Rushdie). Much of the last hundred pages is set in that ludic world.

Whether Novak has, in turn, amplified the underlying philosophy I can't be sure, but it was put in a couple of quotation of Nietzsche's: "He who fights with dragons may someday become one", and "Beware of looking too long into the abyss, for the abyss may one day look into you". The web-site for the film puts it another way: before the film ends the players are not playing the game, the game is playing them. Novak becomes Priest towards the end when Pikul and Geller have to consider their beginnings: were a games goddess and a management junior really thrown together in a distant township, or were the events of the opening pages already occurring long after the game began?

**Robin Hobb – *The Mad Ship***

Voyager, 1999, 673pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00225479-4

**Robin Hobb – *Ship of Magic***

Voyager, 1999, 880pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-649885-X

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

These two books come alive from the very beginning with a simple yet evocative description of a sea serpent shedding his skin and declaring to his group – his tangle – that the time has come to leave their home and return to their place of origin. (We discover why much later).

From there, we are transported to the world of humans and meet some of the protagonists whose lives are destined to become entwined. The catalyst is the death of Ephron Vestrit, former captain of the livenesship *Vivacia*. Livenesships are made of wizardwood, and have figureheads that can think and speak. By an old tradition, three generations of the family owning a livenesship have to die on his or her deck in order for the ship to be 'quicken' and come truly alive. Ephron is the third generation. His death causes a radical change in the lives of his family, in particular his daughter, Althea, who expects to inherit the *Vivacia*; instead the ship goes to her sister Keffria and thence to Keffria's husband, Kyle Haven, her present captain. Also affected is Kyle's eldest son, Wintrow, a priest in training, who is at home when his grandfather dies and who gets dragged unwillingly into life on board ship. Althea, incensed, goads Kyle into swearing by Sa, the main god of the land, that he will give her the *Vivacia* if she gains a ship's ticket, and she sets out to do just that.

But the story does not just concern the Vestrits. It has pirates, including Kennit, who dreams of becoming a pirate king

in his home port of Divvytown and desires above all else the prize of a livenesship (which he eventually gains, but at considerable cost to himself).

The livenesship families are in perpetual debt to Rain Wild Traders, suppliers of wizardwood and also purveyors of magical goods to the Traders of Bingtown. The yearly payment, taking generations to pay off, is made in gold, or blood: the marriage of one of the Trader family into the Rain Wild family. This prospect faces the Vestrits as their fortunes decline.

And then there is the Paragon, another livenesship, who is reputed to be insane, and who killed more than one crew; he is blinded and chained to the beach, where he can be seen by anyone sailing into Bingtown Harbour. He is left alone, aside from the children who torment him. Plans are being made to sell him, and are proceeding slowly.

Book Two picks up immediately from the conclusion of Book One, and continues to relate the varied fortunes of the protagonists, though with a few unexpected twists and turns, and the introduction of characters who have only previously been mentioned.

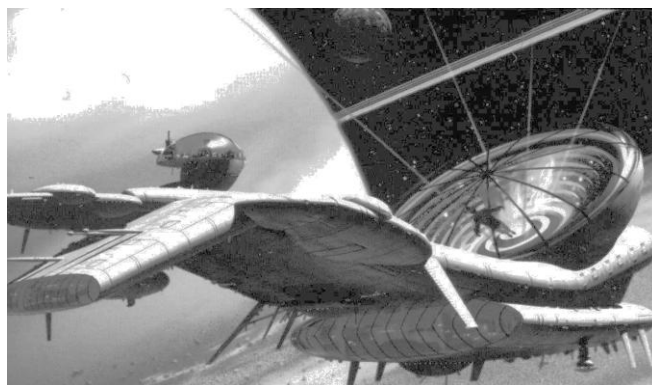
The result is enough tantalising loose ends to adequately fill a third volume. Robin Hobb has done an excellent job in creation of memorable characters – human, ship, reptilian – and I look forward immensely to Book Three.

**Kim Stanley Robinson – *The Memory of Whiteness***

Voyager, 1999, 351pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648256-2

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

Robinson's *The Memory of Whiteness* presages the Martian trilogy – the domed settlements on the gas planet moons, terraformed Mars, the city of Burroughs with its Red and Green factions. The narrative thread is the Holywelkian Orchestra's Grand Tour of the planets, designed for its Master, Johannes Wright, to disseminate, via the non-representational medium of music, those insights into the nature of reality intuited by the mathematician-musician Holywelkin, the Orchestra's originator. In concert performances, the interpretative Master controlling every instrument, the consciousness of every listener is powerfully affected. An implicit paradox is that this physical construct, to all appearances no more than a grotesquely huge, mechanical one-man-band, can yet mediate numinous experiences. In this, it reflects the metaphysical paradox central to the novel: that while free will and spontaneity imbue and energise life experiences, the ultimate nature of that which exists (as realised in Johannes's revelation on the asteroid *Icarus*) is



deterministic – imaged (and remembered) as an infinity of merged white flower-petal universes, "all fixed for ever, eternally, unchanging".

Johannes's mission and his person are perpetually shadowed by the ambiguously motivated 'Greys', a sect with whom his treacherous colleague Ekern has some kind of relationship. This conspiracy, countered by Johannes's minders, provides the story's suspenseful element. On one plane, Ekern wins; on another, the lasting victory is Johannes's. The drama is played out on the stage of planets and "whitelines" and "whitsuns" (the planetwards projections of life-sustaining solar energy).

The author allows himself the license of imaginative departures from the hardest of hard sciences, often to wonderful effect in his creation of asteroidal and satellite communities. The sustained authorial framing convention of the "Dear Reader" address strikes a confiding rather than a fustian note, helping to give the whole story more the air of speculative fable than of socio-scientific extrapolation which characterised the R/G/B Mars novels.

**Kim Stanley Robinson – *The Martians***

Voyager, 1999, 400pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-225358-5

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

There can be little doubt that one of the most significant events in science fiction over the last decade has been the publication of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy. These three huge books chronicled the slow transformation of Mars from first landing to the moment it started sending out its own pioneers to other worlds. They were books dense with information, packed

with political and ecological debate, convincing in their evocation of a raw, unspoiled landscape. They were instantly and justly acclaimed as classics within the field, which is not to say that they were perfect. It was clear, for instance, that Robinson's real passion is for landscapes barely touched by human hand (immediately before the trilogy he had written

about the Himalayas, immediately afterwards he wrote about Antarctica) and the longeurs in the books became more noticeable the more the landscape was tamed. Dramatic moments would drift away without being fully resolved (the assassination of John Boone which opened the very first volume in the trilogy somehow never seemed to acquire the dramatic point it should have had). Characters would tantalise without really taking on form (Coyote, the stowaway, surely warranted far more attention than he got).

Now Robinson has produced a pendant to the trilogy which corrects some of those problems while emphasising others. This is a collection of what, for want of a better word, we shall call stories, though that suggests far more coherence, far more narrative drive, than many of these pieces offer. The full text of the Martian constitution, along with a commentary on that constitution, are the sort of thing only an obsessive really needs; and two stories which are in effect alternate histories of this fictional future seem utterly pointless, telling us nothing particularly fresh about either the characters or the future. Elsewhere there is a scatter of pieces, some as short as half a page, which read as if they are out-takes from the trilogy; they start in the middle, end not much further on, and out of context are generally meaningless. Occasionally these cast a fresh light on the trilogy – there are a couple of pieces which fill in our knowledge of Coyote, for instance – but even these barely stand as stories in their own right and would have worked far better slotted into their allotted place in an expanded 'Director's Cut' of the trilogy. There is also a selection of poems (curiously

the poem that gives its name to this section of the book is not actually included) which serve to show that however talented a wordsmith Robinson may be, he is no poet. All of these pieces are essentially plotless, one reads them only to rediscover Robinson's Mars, to savour once again his detailed almost obsessive descriptions of hiking, climbing, swimming and sailing in the wilds of the terraformed planet.

What we are left with when all of that is swept aside are two Martian stories that predate the trilogy, 'Exploring Fossil Canyon' from 1982 and 'Green Mars' from 1985, which are easily the best pieces in here. Two other new stories, 'Sexual Dimorphism' and 'A Martian Romance', almost capture that quality except that what passes for plot is left dangling at the end, as if Robinson has become so concerned with describing his Mars that he has forgotten some of the basic skills of storytelling. Somehow, even with these stories (the most substantial pieces in the book), *The Martians* comes across as being all on one level. The familiar characters, brought into sharp focus in these vignettes, seem neither as distinct nor as interesting as they did in the trilogy. The grand sweep of history, one of the real overarching delights of the trilogy, the grandeur and tragedy of the Martian endeavour, is lost in a series of isolated incidents that seem of little moment. Only right at the end, in the aptly-named 'Purple Mars' – a delightful little divertissement in which the writer, beset by family interruptions and normal suburban life, types 'The End' to his Martian trilogy – does the book change pace and acquire any vigour and liveliness.

### Frank Ryan – *The Sundered World*

Reviewed by John D. Owen

Swift, 1999, 393pp, £16.99 ISBN 1-874082-23-5

Frank Ryan is obviously an experienced author, but plainly not a fantasy writer, even though with *The Sundered World* he is trying to become one. He doesn't really know the tropes of the genre, the steps by which a reader is drawn into a writer's fantasy world. Instead, he confuses like hell.

This volume starts off in a London more in common with *Mad Max* than the modern day, where Alan Duval is attacked and knifed, before being transferred to a bleak, winter mountain wilderness, where he is rescued and tended by the strange spider's web-clad Granny Ddu. In the course of his recuperation, we begin to learn of an adventure Duval had as a boy in Ireland, which seemingly opened a way into another world, Tír, into which he has now fallen. So, in a few pages, Ryan has covered sf (the altered, anarchic London), high fantasy and Celtic fantasy with a touch of horror. Thereafter he does, at least, settle down a bit to straight fantasy, as Duval miraculously becomes the Mage Lord, complete with triangular 'oracular' embedded in his forehead, through which he can read minds and work magic. Naturally enough, he also has a deadly evil adversary to battle against through the course of this volume and the next.

In his favour, Ryan does have a pleasing writing style, direct and clear (though he does lapse occasionally into Stephen Donaldson style prolixity, using ten dollar words where ten cent ones would do), and keeps the action careering along nicely. Characters aren't his strong point, though – Duval is never convincing, taking to his new role much too easily (especially since he is supposed to be a scientist on Earth), with too little questioning of the circumstances. The other characters barely exist except as stooges for Duval. The plot clunks along, changing gear all too audibly along the way, and Ryan's imaginings rarely rise above the ho-hum, seen-it-all-before level.

So, not a successful attempt at cracking a new genre for Frank Ryan. It's a fairly intense but shallow story, the first in a series. I won't feel any loss if I don't read the next volume, I'm sure, as there is nothing here that would really make me seek it out. One has to ask whether *The Sundered World* is another case of a mainstream author unwisely trying to muscle into lucrative genre work, in which case the advice to Ryan might be "Don't give up the day job."

### Matthew Thomas – *Before and After*

Reviewed by Chris Amies

Voyager, 1999, 425pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648302-X

It's to be expected that the forthcoming millennium, as well as producing vast quantities of what are commonly called 'nut books', should produce a novel or two sending up the whole process of millennialism. Not that the phenomenon is new; much of it seems to have its roots firmly in the Spiritualism of a century ago and the convenient rise in Egyptology about the same time – Arthur Conan Doyle was a fervent believer in the Curse of Tutankhamun as well as in the Cottingley Fairies. These strange parents, table-rapping and tomb-raiding, together ensured that Pyramidology was to become a firm favourite with the nut-book crew, a Turin Shroud for the alternatively mystic. *Before and After* brings in an alien origin for the Pyramids (another favourite among those who can't believe that humans five thousand years ago had any brains nor imagination), and lets fly with Goddess-worship, demons, End

Times cults, and the undying figure of Nostradamus, here turned into a University lecturer called Michael D. Nostrus. The 'immortal sage' bit is more usually associated with the Comte de St-Germain, and your reviewer was reminded of Robert Rankin's 'Professor Slocombe', an incarnation of St-Germain in *The Antipope* and later books. Indeed, *Before and After* is something like a nostalgic trip to early Rankin-land, in the days when he didn't think 'stark raving bonkers' was the same thing as 'funny'.

There's a Final Battle which is a bit too Dungeons and Dragons-ish (Cacodemons? Chaos Knights? Oh come on now), and some of the jokes and political satires go on too long; I hope and suspect Thomas's next novel will rein in that tendency a bit. Of the characters, Adam and Andy (sounds like a double-act) could have done with some editing to make them more



distinguishable one from the other; they're too similar and have very similar names. Thomas does have a good style though,

and knows how to load and spring a sentence. With a bit of editing he could be on to a winner.

### Vernor Vinge – *A Deepness in the Sky*

Tor, 1999, 606pp, \$27.95 ISBN 0-312-85683-0

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Vernor Vinge's follow-up to his 1992 Hugo Award winner *A Fire Upon the Deep* forms a sort of prequel to that novel, set some 30,000 years earlier in the same universe, but many thousands of years into our own future. In these times, the Queng Ho Traders, having rejected the empire-building dreams of the now-discredited Pham Nuwen, roam the Slowness, forging a loose community of worlds and goods and knowledge.

One of these expeditions takes a fleet of Queng Ho ships to the vicinity of the OnOff star, where the spider-like inhabitants of the planet Arachna, about to emerge from periodic long hibernation, are on the verge of ascending from a warlike industrial revolution into a nuclear and information age.

But the Queng Ho are not alone in their interest in Arachna. Their fleet arrives at the same time as another from the more exploitative Emergents. As both races await in uneasy truce the relighting of the OnOff star, and a new phase of Arachnan civilisation, a sneak attack leads to a devastating battle that destroys all but a few ships on either side, and leaves the Emergents' leader, Tomas Nau, enforcing a precarious peace between remaining personnel of both sides.

The Arachnans' ascent into a new technological age is catalysed by the maverick genius of the Spider Sherkaner Underhill, who has already masterminded one previously unthinkable strike, carried out in the depth of the Dark, to cripple the rival Tiefer nation.

The Spiders' exploits, and particularly those of Sherkaner

and his family, become a form of soap opera for the surviving Queng Ho and Emergent crew, waiting out of detection range above the planet.

Throughout, Vinge sustains layers upon layers of complexity and deception that are almost Banksian – indeed, the feel of the thing does have definite echoes of the Culture – that it's not until over halfway through the 600 odd pages that you get a clear idea of most of the hidden agendas that motivate a wide range of characters, both human and alien. It is something of a *tour de force*, and one that keeps you guessing, and almost constantly wrong-footed, right up until the end. At times it can descend into cuteness (Vinge has a way of anthropomorphosing even the most outrageous aliens), but even this can be understood as a result of the human eavesdropping on the Spider world, and the inventive translation of names and concepts that fuel the shipside soap-opera broadcasts. When Sherkaner's family is kidnapped by Tiefer agents, the pressure on Nau to intervene comes from all sides, and forces an almost fatal miscalculation.

*A Deepness in the Sky* looks set to repeat the success of the deservedly lauded *A Fire Upon the Deep*. It has everything, a galaxy spanning space-opera adventure, plots within plots, charm, strangeness, excitement and a depth of characterisation that can be alternately heartbreaking and chilling. I cannot recommend this one highly enough.

### Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen – *Deep Space and Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos*

Praeger, 1998, 264pp, \$27.95 ISBN 0-275-96225-3

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

I changed my mind about this book while reading it, which shows that reviewers can't get away with reading the preface, checking index and notes and skimming through a few pages. I did all this, of course, and found a book where the authors – academics and long-standing *Trek* fans – had done what many such people do: decided to write a conference paper. And soon the paper became a book. And the book, as so often, had a gaping hole in the centre of it: the references to science fiction in this study of the most popular of genre TV programmes are so few and general as to be worthless. You would not recognise, if you read this book, that many of the narrative ideas and stances described in it are the common stock of a vast body of literature and film.

Yet Wagner and Lundeen have, in other areas, actually done an excellent job in contextualising *Trek* and *Trek* criticism. In writing about *Star Trek's* status as "a mythic reference point for American society" they have avoided, for the most part, the lukewarm New-Agey '*Trek-as-religion-substitute*' and the wilder excesses of pop culture as postmodern icon. They do, in fact, discuss the p-word late in the book, as well as introducing their approach to mythology as a cultural artefact (in Chapter 1) with references to aspects of critical theory (Gramsci on hegemony, semiotics, Barthes, etc.). This, though, is carried so lightly as to terrify none but the most committed anti-intellectual. Writing for a general readership, they have nevertheless incorporated much of the academic 'study' of *Star Trek*, and explain and discuss its various stances on issues such as sexuality and race. Their chapter on the concepts of evolution, progress and destiny, for example, discusses Darwinism and the 'pop evolutionism' which lays purpose and meaning on the process of natural selection. An understanding of how this 'pop evolutionism' is used in politics and popular culture serves to contradict (and explain the contradiction in) *Trek's* mythos of teleology. Later, their claim that the programme in the '80s and

'90s has attempted to mediate between modern liberal-humanism and post-modern doubt and uncertainty may be another way of saying that this essentially optimistic comfort-programme for the mass American TV audience has taken on board the way a 'myth of redemption' has to confront real problem areas. But if so, that suggests that critical theory actually does mean something when applied to popular culture.

But where do we go from here? I'm not convinced (nor do I think that the authors set out to convince anyone otherwise) that *Trek* is much more than a popular TV programme which reflects the dreams and wishes of its audience in more complex ways than is often thought. If we want to see further examples of how, as Wagner and Lundeen sometimes say, "science fiction does [this or that]" so that we can see the programme in the context of similar cultural artefacts, we get very little help from them. The authors of this book have discussed how *Trek* works as cultural myth admirably, but if, for example, someone writes a book about Shakespeare as cultural myth shouldn't we expect that they refer occasionally to, say, Marlowe, Jonson, Kyd, Middleton, and how Elizabethan dramatists and their audiences interacted? I liked this book a lot more than I thought I would. It's sensible and knowledgeable. But do Wagner and Lundeen know any sf other than *Star Trek*? I think we should be told.

Praeger Books are distributed by the Eurospan Group, 3 Henrietta St, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

**Freda Warrington – *The Amber Citadel***

Earthlight, 1999, 599pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-671-02190-7

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Reading that this novel is Book One of the Jewelfire Trilogy, and finding characters with names like Eldareth the Wanderer, I'd have expected some kind of sub-Tolkien clone, if it wasn't for the name of the author. It's good to say that this is more than the average genre fantasy.

After a couple of introductory sections to arouse the reader's uneasiness, the novel starts off with a rural idyll in a remote corner of Warrington's fantasy world. The idyll is rapidly disrupted by troops, aided by some occult forces, whose nature is not clear to begin with, who are conscripting young people for the king's great building project. Ysomir, because of her skill in stone carving, is taken from her village; her sister Tanthe, her lover Lynden, and Lynden's brother Rufryd set out to follow and rescue her.

From this straightforward beginning the novel branches out into greater complexity, as the reader discovers why the king has embarked on this project, what is happening to him and to the lands he rules, and how the non-human but intelligent races of the world are involved. There's also a growth in complexity in the way the central characters are portrayed, and in how they develop. The relatively simple needs of Ysomir and her

rescuers can't be fulfilled unless they do other things first, and for that they have to become different people.

*The Amber Citadel* is very enjoyable, with real horrors and wonders along the way. I appreciated Warrington's world-building, especially in the variety of landscape, and in her descriptions of various communities. There's a solid feel to it all. One aspect I particularly liked is that the cultural life of the world – especially a literary culture – plays an important part. My one adverse criticism here would be that I found the religion rather naive and sketchy, though by the end of the book there's some indication that this is intentional, the view of the characters rather than the author; there may be more development to come in future volumes.

By the end of this first book the major issues are resolved, though there are several loose ends, notably in the untidy and therefore realistic relationships between the characters. Plenty of scope for volumes two and three. And the last chapter contains a startling turn of events which left me really annoyed that I couldn't go on with the story right away. I'm looking forward to the continuation.



THESE ARE SOME OF THE OTHER BOOKS WE HAVE SEEN RECENTLY. A MENTION HERE DOES NOT NECESSARILY PRECLUDE A REVIEW IN A LATER ISSUE OF VECTOR.

**John Barnes – *Earth Made of Glass***

Millennium, 1999, £6.99, 416pp, ISBN 0-75281-658-6

Barnes's husband and wife diplomatic team from *A Million Open Doors*, Giraut and Margaret Leones, both raised in different (and almost diametrically opposed) cultures, now find themselves on a world in which isolationist Tamil and Maya colonies are pushed, by a natural disaster, into close proximity and escalating conflict. Reviewing this in V201, Farah Mendelsohn was not impressed, finding problems with both characterisation and Barnes's apparent espousal of "free market capitalism" as the driving economic force behind the 'Thousand Cultures' worlds.

At least this A format Millennium edition corrects the unfortunate marketing lapse that led to the jacket blurb of the original Orion edition apparently describing a completely different book.

**Arthur C. Clarke – *Expedition to Earth***

Orbit, 1999, £5.99, 180pp, ISBN 1-85723-91-0

First published over 45 years ago, Clarke's first collection comprises 11 tales written between 1944 and 1948, together with a new (1998) short preface. Of particular interest (and blazoned across the cover) is the inclusion of 'The Sentinel', a modest 11 page story which gave rise to *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

**John Clute and John Grant (eds) – *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy***

Orbit, 1999, £19.99, 1076pp, ISBN 1-85723-893-1

Now in paperback, practically indispensable if you haven't already mortgaged your pets or children for the hardback first time around, this massive summation and overview of fantasy is

not without its problems, as Paul Kincaid commented in V194, but almost any enterprise of this scope and ambition is bound to fall somewhere. One of the biggest problems with fantasy is definitions, and for this, Paul Kincaid notes, the editors "have practically had to invent an entire critical language for fantasy", an enterprise that would entirely justify a book of its own. And effectively it turns the *Encyclopedia* into two books in one, a analytical (and highly individual) "narrative model" of fantasy running alongside and threaded through the thematic and author entries. This edition also contains a 25,000 word Appendix containing corrections, updates and articles omitted from the first edition (notably, entries on Alasdair Gray, Gwyneth Jones and Shirley Jackson, as well as thematic entries on Russia and Manga, are restored, and hopefully any subsequent edition will see these reintegrated into the main text.)

**Jack McDevitt – *Moonfall***

HarperCollins, 1999, £6.99, 544pp, ISBN 0-00-651170-8

A disaster novel scenario, in which, in 2024 and the opening of the new moonbase, a high speed comet hits the moon, shattering it and sending pieces falling to Earth. While Chris Hill, in V204, rated it "enjoyable, even at times quite gripping" and "head and shoulders above cinematic rivals like *Armageddon*", this thriller/soap-opera mix was ultimately one to "read, inwardly digest, instantly forget."

**Kate Elliot – *Prince of Dogs***

Orbit, 1999, £6.99, 612pp, ISBN 1-85723-723-4

The second book in Elliot's 'Crown of Stars' trilogy after *King's Dragon* suffers, according to Vikki Lee in V204, from 'middle book syndrome', and is marred by "endless pages plodding

around on the 'king's progress', a sort of endless state tour, with a bunch of petty, squabbling court dandies and a king who has all but lost the will to live following the death of his beloved son". However, it progresses the story of the four main characters and combines a number of plot threads "some of which are intriguing, several, though, tedious" with enough momentum into the next volume "provided one has time to wallow though all the padding".

**David Farland – *The Sum of All Men***

Earthlight, 1999, £6.99, 661pp, ISBN 0-671-02261-X

Very highly rated by John Owen when first reviewed in V200, this, Farland's first novel, was described as a truly original fantasy, fast paced and riveting and that "the characters are well realised, and more importantly, they have motives for their actions" even when those actions are morally or ethically questionable.

**Peter F. Hamilton – *A Second Chance At Eden***

Macmillan, 1999, £10.99, 431 pp, ISBN 0-333-73853-5

A collection of a novella and six short stories set in Hamilton's 'Night's Dawn' universe. "[W]ell crafted, featuring inventive plotting and strong resolutions" and "An excellent first anthology," wrote Gary Dalkin, reviewing the hardback in V203, "showing signs of Hamilton clearly maturing into one of Britain's finest sf writers."

**George Lucas – *Star Wars® Omnibus: A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back, Return of the Jedi***

Orbit, 1999, £9.99, 505pp, ISBN 1-85723-941-5

Somewhat curiously this £9.99 omnibus edition is reissued by Orbit simultaneously with the three original books of Star Wars trilogy it comprises: George Lucas's *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Donald F. Glut's *The Empire Strikes Back* and James Kahn's *Return of the Jedi*, all from Orbit at £5.99 each.

**Elizabeth A. Lynn – *Dragon's Winter***

Pan, 1999, £6.99, 442pp, ISBN 0-330-35557-0

In V201, Vikki Lee's overriding impression of Elizabeth Lynn's return to fantasy, some 10 years after her 'Chronicles of Tormer' trilogy, in this tale of magic and shapechanging, was of "Lynn's seeming coldness towards her characters and her penchant for removing them from the story before the reader has really found out a great deal about them, and usually doing so in an extremely brutal way". The tale of two brothers, sons of the Dragonlord Kojiro Atani, the elder, Karadur, a shapechanger like his father, the younger, Tenjiro, a sorcerer, and jealous of his elder brother's abilities, which he sets about stealing. "It is a cold book, devoid of any semblence of human warmth and hope."

**Julian May – *The Perseus Spur***

Voyager, 1999, £5.99, 300pp, ISBN 0-00-648213-9

**Julian May – *Orion Arm***

Voyager, 1999, £16.99pp, ISBN 0-00-224624-4

*Orion Arm* is Book 2 of 'The Rampart Worlds' series started in *Perseus Spur*, about which, after a promising start when the hero's house is eaten by a giant sea-toad on the Brillig Reef, Andy Mills had misgivings in V202 with "a journey which could have been exotic or humorous but is instead a bog-standard space adventure" and ultimately ends up "a pedestrian space melodrama" of what appear to be Heinleinian clichés, anachronistic references and 'as you know, Bob' info dumping.

**L.E. Modesitt Jr. – *The Spellsong War***

Orbit, 1999, £6.99, 656pp, ISBN, 1-85723-726-9

Reviewed together with *The Chaos Balance* by Alan Fraser in V199, these were highly recommended by Alan for Modesitt's "strong characters who both suffer and are developed during the narratives, great attention to detail in the depiction of the different worlds, especially thir various societies and magic systems, together with plots that carry the reader effortlessly to the last pages."

**Jane Routley – *Fire Angels***

Avon Eos, 1999, \$6.99, 500pp, ISBN 0-380-79427-6

Routley's second novel, continuing the story of *Mage Heart*, impressed Lynn Bispham when she reviewed it in V201. *Fire Angels* continues the story of Dion, a powerful mage and, unusually in this world, a young woman, now forced to confront a both a demon, witch-burners and the unfamiliar intrigues of the court of the Duke of Gallia, and carries it off with a style and originality that, Lynn Bispham comments, make Routley "unreservedly recommended" and "certainly a writer to watch."

**Fred Saberhagen – *The First Swords***

Tor, 1999, 605pp, US\$16.95, ISBN 0 312 86916 9

**(Particle Review by Mat Coward)**

The cover of this paperback claims that it collects the first three books of The 'Book of Swords' sequence "for the first time in one volume," although at least one reference work lists a similar omnibus as being published in New York in 1985. Either way, many fans of the series will no doubt be glad to add this cheap and cheerful omnibus to their shelves.

The gods commission Vulcan to produce twelve magical swords, and scatter them around the world, so that they can enjoy the typically god-like sport of watching mortals go to war. But Vulcan can't resist adding to the fun with a little joke of his own – these swords can kill gods.

**Robert Silverberg – *The Alien Years***

Voyager, 1999, £6.99, 453pp, ISBN 0-586-21110-1

Reviewed in hardback by Andy Mills in V199, Andy professed himself puzzled by what seemed to be something of a curate's egg, with Silverberg's accomplished storytelling and imagination, particularly his "spectacular and unknowable" aliens, dashed against some slack editing and occasional "clumsy and hackneyed writing".

**Alison Spedding – *The Streets of the City***

Voyager, 1999, £5.99, 338pp, ISBN 0-04-440148-5

Final part of what is described as a historical fantasy trilogy, 'A Walk in the Dark', following *The Road And The Hills* and *A Cloud Over Water*, in which heroine adventurer Aleizon Ailix Ayndra is trying to reunite the Empire, while facing a challenge from the Lord Regent, Sukalon, plots, and kidnapping by the evil Lord Sandar. "As bold and subversive as it is sweeping and romantic" says the *New Statesman*, while *Locus* draws comparisons with both the richness of Mary Renault and the "clear-eyed toughness" of Cecilia Holland.

**Sheri S.Tepper – *Six Moon Dance***

Voyager, 1999, £6.99, 454pp, ISBN 0-00-651187-2

Previously reviewed by Steve Jeffery in V203, "*Six Moon Dance* is typical, if not classic Tepper, with pace, charm, awful puns, surprises, and a blend of fantasy and sf", but, to the detriment of the book, overloaded with invention, and ultimately fails because just too many things are going on at once. Something of a disappointment after the stunning *The Family Tree*.

**David Zindell – *War in Heaven***

Voyager, 1999, £6.99, 791pp, ISBN 0-586-21191-8

Concluding the 'Requiem for Homo Sapiens' trilogy (*The Broken God, The Wild*), which follows on from *Neverness*, the enormous length, "glacial slowness" and largely off-stage action of the final war until Mankind is projected towards ultimate godhead rooted in a mathematical Omega Point finally defeated reviewer Brian Stableford in V201, who felt that "life is too short to waste on 2,000 page epics" "punctuated with rhapsodic expository bursts of purple philosophy."

## Vector 206 – Index of Books Reviewed

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Kevin J. Anderson – <i>Blindfold</i> [SD]   | 19 |
| .....   |    |
| Catherine Asaro – <i>The Radiant Seas</i> [AS1].....                                | 19 |
| John Barnes – <i>Earth Made of Glass</i> [P]  | 34 |
| .....   |    |
| Gregory Benford – <i>Deep Time</i> [FC] .....                                       | 20 |
| Joanne Bertin – <i>The Last Dragonlord</i> [VL] .....                               | 20 |
| Alfred Bester – <i>The Stars My Destination</i> [SJ] .....                          | 21 |
| James Blish – <i>Cities in Flight</i> [CH] .....                                    | 22 |
| Ben Bova – <i>Sam Gunn Forever</i> [JW] .....                                       | 22 |
| Kirsten Britain – <i>Green Rider</i> [ST] .....                                     | 23 |
| Eric Brown – <i>Penumbra</i> [BJR] .....  | 23 |
| Eric Brown – <i>The Web: Walkabout</i> [PH] .....                                   | 23 |
| Pat Cadigan – <i>The Web: Avatar</i> [PH] .....                                     | 23 |
| Arthur C. Clarke – <i>Expedition to Earth</i> [P] .....                             | 34 |
| John Clute and John Grant (eds) – <i>The Encyclopedia of Fantasy</i> [P]            | 34 |
| .....   |    |
| Jon Courtenay Grimwood – <i>reMix</i> [GD] .....                                    | 27 |
| Edwina Currie – <i>The Ambassador</i> [CB2] .....                                   | 24 |
| Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (eds) – <i>Silver Birch, Blood Moon</i> [CB1] ..... | 24 |
| Charles de Lint – <i>Moonlight and Vines</i> [JB] .....                             | 25 |
| Samuel R. Delany – <i>Babel-17</i> [SJ] .....                                       | 21 |
| Philip K. Dick – <i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</i> [SJ] .....             | 21 |
| Graham Edwards – <i>Stone and Sky</i> [LB] .....                                    | 25 |
| Kate Elliot – <i>Prince of Dogs</i> [P] .....                                       | 34 |
| David Farland – <i>Brotherhood of the Wolf</i> [VL] .....                           | 25 |
| David Farland – <i>The Sum of All Men</i> [P] .....                                 | 35 |
| Charles A. Frost – <i>The Troubled Earth</i> [CB3] .....                            | 26 |
| James Alan Garner – <i>Vigilant</i> [CH] .....                                      | 26 |
| Alan Grant – <i>Batman: Anarky</i> [GW] .....                                       | 26 |
| Glenn Grant, David G. Hartwell and (eds.) – <i>Northern Suns</i> [CB3] .....        | 27 |
| John Grant, John Clute and (eds) – <i>The Encyclopedia of Fantasy</i> [P]           | 34 |
| .....   |    |
| Peter F. Hamilton – <i>A Second Chance At Eden</i> [P] .....                        | 35 |
| David G. Hartwell and Glenn Grant (eds.) – <i>Northern Suns</i> [CB3] .....         | 27 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| G. Miki Hayden – <i>Pacific Empire</i> [JN] .....                              | 28 |
| Robin Hobb – <i>Ship of Magic</i> [LH] .....                                   | 31 |
| Robin Hobb – <i>The Mad Ship</i> [LH] .....                                    | 31 |
| Stephen King – <i>The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon</i> [GA] .....                 | 28 |
| Stephen Leigh – <i>Speaking Stones</i> [RWH] .....                             | 28 |
| George Lucas – <i>Star Wars®Omnibus</i> [P] .....                              | 35 |
| Jan Lundeen, Jon Wagner and – <i>Deep Space and Sacred Time</i> [AS2]<br>..... | 33 |
| Elizabeth A. Lynn – <i>Dragon’s Winter</i> [P] .....                           | 35 |
| Julian May – <i>Orion Arm</i> [P] .....  | 35 |
| Julian May – <i>The Perseus Spur</i> [P] .....                                 | 35 |
| Jack McDevitt – <i>Moonfall</i> [P] .....                                      | 34 |
| L.E. Modesitt Jr. – <i>The Spellsong War</i> [P] .....                         | 35 |
| Nick Neilsen – <i>ELV 2: Time’s Square</i> [PH] .....                          | 29 |
| Stan Nicholls – <i>Bodyguard of Lightning</i> [KT] .....                       | 29 |
| Larry Niven – <i>Rainbow Mars</i> [AS1] .....                                  | 29 |
| Larry Niven – <i>The Flight of the Horse</i> [AS1] .....                       | 29 |
| John Luther Novak – <i>eXistenZ</i> [LJH] .....                                | 30 |
| .....  | 31 |
| Kim Stanley Robinson – <i>The Martians</i> [PK] .....                          |    |
| Kim Stanley Robinson – <i>The Memory of Whiteness</i> [KVB] .....              | 31 |
| Jane Routley – <i>Fire Angels</i> [P] .....                                    | 35 |
| Frank Ryan – <i>The Sundered World</i> [JDO] .....                             | 32 |
| Fred Saberhagen – <i>The First Swords</i> [P]<br>.....                         | 35 |
| Martin Scott – <i>Thraxas</i> [JW] .....                                       | 22 |
| Robert Silverberg – <i>The Alien Years</i> [P] .....                           | 35 |
| Alison Spedding – <i>The Streets of the City</i> [P] .....                     | 35 |
| Michael A. Stackpole – <i>Requiem for a Rogue</i> [GW] .....                   | 26 |
| Sheri S. Tepper – <i>Six Moon Dance</i> [P] .....                              | 35 |
| Matthew Thomas – <i>Before and After</i> [CA] .....                            | 32 |
| Vernor Vinge – <i>A Deepness in the Sky</i> [SJ] .....                         | 33 |
| Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen – <i>Deep Space and Sacred Time</i> [AS2]<br>.....  | 33 |
| Freda Warrington – <i>The Amber Citadel</i> [CB1] .....                        | 34 |

.....

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Terri Windling (eds), Ellen Datlow & – <i>Silver Birch, Blood Moon</i> [CB1] ..... | 24 |
| Gene Wolfe – <i>The Fifth Head of Cerberus</i> [SJ] .....                          | 21 |
| Roger Zelazny – <i>Lord of Light</i> [SJ] .....                                    | 21 |
| David Zindell – <i>War in Heaven</i> [P] .....                                     | 35 |

**REVIEWERS KEY:** AS1 – Andrew Seaman, AS2 – Andy Sawyer, BJR – Brian J. Robb, CA – Chris Amies, CB1 – Cherith Baldry, CB2 – Colin Bird, CB3 – Claire Briailey, CH – Chris Hill, FC – F. Christian, GA – Graham Andrews, GD – Gary Dalkin, GW – Gary Wilkinson, JB – Janet Barron, JDO – John D. Owen, JN – Joseph Nicholas, JW – Jon Wallace, KT – Kathy Taylor, KVB – K. V. Bailey, LB – Lynne Bispham, LH – Lesley Hatch, LJH – L. J. Hurst, P – Particle, PH – Penny Hill, PK – Paul Kincaid, RWH – Robert W. Hayler, SD – Stephen Deas, SJ – Steve Jeffery, ST – Sue Thomason, VL – Vikki Lee,

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|---|--|
| <b>Kevin J. Anderson – <i>Blindfold</i></b>   | Voyager, 1999, 377pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648306-2             |
| Reviewed by Stephen Deas  |  |
| <b>Catherine Asaro – <i>The Radiant Seas</i></b>                                      | Tor Books, 1999, 464pp, \$26.95 ISBN 0-312-86714-X         |
| Reviewed by Andrew Seaman   |  |
| <b>Gregory Benford – <i>Deep Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia</i></b> | Bard (Avon), 1998, 225pp, \$20.00 ISBN 0-380-97537-8       |
| Reviewed by F. Christian  |  |
| <b>Joanne Bertin – <i>The Last Dragonlord</i></b>                                     | Earthlight, 1999, 398pp, £9.99, ISBN 0-684-85168-7         |
| Reviewed by Vikki Lee   |  |
| <b>Alfred Bester – <i>The Stars My Destination</i></b>                                | Millennium, 1999, 258pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-814-0         |
| <b>Samuel R. Delany – <i>Babel-17</i></b>   | Millennium, 1999, 193pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-805-1         |
| <b>Philip K. Dick – <i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</i></b>                   | Millennium, 1999, 210pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-813-2         |
| <b>Gene Wolfe – <i>The Fifth Head of Cerberus</i></b>                                 | Millennium, 1999, 252pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-817-5         |
| <b>Roger Zelazny – <i>Lord of Light</i></b>   | Millennium, 1999, 261pp, £6.99, ISBN 1-85798-820-5         |
| Reviewed by Steve Jeffery   |  |
| <b>James Blish – <i>Cities in Flight</i></b>  | Millennium, 1999, 605pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-85798-811-6          |
| Reviewed by Chris Hill  |  |
| <b>Ben Bova – <i>Sam Gunn Forever</i></b>   | Avon Eos, 1999, 278pp \$5.99 ISBN 0-380-79726-7            |
| <b>Martin Scott – <i>Thraxas</i></b>  | Orbit, 1999, 220pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-729-3               |
| Reviewed by Jon Wallace   |  |
| <b>Kirsten Britain – <i>Green Rider</i></b>   | Earthlight, 1999, 504pp, £9.99 ISBN 0-684-85828-2          |
| Reviewed by Sue Thomason  |  |
| <b>Eric Brown – <i>Penumbra</i></b>   | Millennium, 1999, 346pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85798-592-3          |
| Reviewed by Brian J. Robb   |  |
| <b>Eric Brown – <i>The Web: Walkabout</i></b>   | Dolphin, 1999, 112pp, £3.50 ISBN 1-85881-643-2             |
| <b>Pat Cadigan – <i>The Web: Avatar</i></b>   | Dolphin, 1999, 99pp, £3.50 ISBN 1-85881-641-6              |
| Reviewed by Penny Hill  |  |
| <b>Edwina Currie – <i>The Ambassador</i></b>  | Little, Brown, 1999, 439pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-316-64830-2      |
| Reviewed by Claire Brialey  |  |
| <b>Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (eds) – <i>Silver Birch, Blood Moon</i></b>        | Avon Books, 1999, 371pp, \$13.50 ISBN 0-380-78622-2        |
| Reviewed by Cherith Baldry  |  |
| <b>Charles de Lint – <i>Moonlight and Vines</i></b>                                   | TOR Books, 1999, 381pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86518-X         |
| Reviewed by Janet Barron  |  |
| <b>Graham Edwards – <i>Stone and Sky</i></b>  | Voyager, 1999, 357pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-651070-1             |
| Reviewed by Lynne Bispham   |  |
| <b>David Farland – <i>Brotherhood of the Wolf</i></b>                                 | Earthlight, 1999, 596pp, £9.99, ISBN 0-684-86055-4         |
| Reviewed by Vikki Lee   |  |
| <b>Charles A. Frost – <i>The Troubled Earth</i></b>                                   | CAF, 1999, 216pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-9535029-0-2                 |
| Reviewed by Colin Bird  |  |
| <b>James Alan Garner – <i>Vigilant</i></b>  | Avon Books, 1999, 374pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0-380-80208-2         |
| Reviewed by Chris Hill  |  |
| <b>Alan Grant – <i>Batman:Anarky</i></b>  | Titan, 1999, 207pp, £12.99 ISBN 1-85286-995-X              |
| <b>Michael A. Stackpole – <i>Requiem for a Rogue</i></b>                              | Titan, 1999, ?pp, £9.99 ISBN 1-84023-026-6                 |
| Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson  |  |
| <b>Jon Courtenay Grimwood – <i>reMix</i></b>  | Earthlight, 1999, 360pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-671-02222-9          |
| Reviewed by Gary Dalkin   |  |
| <b>David G. Hartwell and Glenn Grant (eds.) – <i>Northern Suns</i></b>                | TOR Books, 1999, 382pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-86461-2         |
| Reviewed by Colin Bird  |  |
| <b>G. Miki Hayden – <i>Pacific Empire</i></b>   | JoNa Books, 1998, 197pp, \$12.95 ISBN 0-9657929-1-9        |
| Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas   |  |
| <b>Stephen King – <i>The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon</i></b>                            | Hodder & Stoughton, 1999, 216pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-340-76558-5 |
| Reviewed by Graham Andrews  |  |
| <b>Stephen Leigh – <i>Speaking Stones</i></b>   | Avon Books, 1999, 330pp, \$5.99 ISBN 0-380-79914-6         |
| Reviewed by Robert W. Hayler  |  |
| <b>Nick Neilsen – <i>ELV 2: Time's Square</i></b>                                     | Voyager, 1999, 240pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-649889-2             |
| Reviewed by Penny Hill  |  |
| <b>Stan Nicholls – <i>Bodyguard of Lightning</i></b>                                  | Millennium, 1999, 298pp, £9.99 ISBN 1-85798-557-5          |

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

**Larry Niven – *Rainbow Mars***

Orbit, 1999, 227pp, £16.99 ISBN 1-85723-844-3

**Larry Niven – *The Flight of the Horse***

Orbit, 1999, 212pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85723-841-9

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

**John Luther Novak – *eXistenZ***

Simon & Schuster, 1999, 235pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-671-03308-5

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

**Robin Hobb – *The Mad Ship***

Voyager, 1999, 673pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00225479-4

**Robin Hobb – *Ship of Magic***

Voyager, 1999, 880pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-649885-X

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

**Kim Stanley Robinson – *The Memory of Whiteness***

Voyager, 1999, 351pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648256-2

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

**Kim Stanley Robinson – *The Martians***

Voyager, 1999, 400pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-225358-5

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

**Frank Ryan – *The Sundered World***

Swift, 1999, 393pp, £16.99 ISBN 1-874082-23-5

Reviewed by John D. Owen

**Matthew Thomas – *Before & After***

Voyager, 1999, 425pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-00-648302-X

Reviewed by Chris Amies

**Vernor Vinge – *A Deepness in the Sky***

Tor, 1999, 606pp, \$27.95 ISBN 0-312-85683-0

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**Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen – *Deep Space and Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos***

Praeger, 1998, 264pp, \$27.95 ISBN 0-275-96225-3

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**Freda Warrington – *The Amber Citadel***

Earthlight, 1999, 599pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-671-02190-7

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

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Arthur C. Clarke – *Expedition to Earth*

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Jack McDevitt – *Moonfall*

Kate Elliot – *Prince of Dogs*

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