

John Bray

Exet

hey, Captain, don't you want to buy some bones, chains and toothpicks?

THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE LESS CAREFUL READER

An Epistle to the Oxoniens; published by O.U. Speculative Fiction Group in early Hilary 1988

So This Is Real Life? You're Telling Me!

Err... oh, hello. Yes, it's that time again. Here it is, the first fantastically fun-filled and indeed frolicsome newsletter of the term (it says here). Packed full of... er... tremendously exciting book reviews (including, for no readily apparent reason, a number of oldies), the odd gripping tv/film thingy, Neal rambling about comics, and... and... uh... oh yes... most arcane and eldritch of all, the great and good Phil Raines' record player. And... gosh... some of you lovely people actually sent me things! Whoopee! Er... Yes, well, Er... exciting things this term. Well... we might be getting some speakers, and we ought to be having the Annual Dinner, and we'll definitely be having a strictly fair and democratic election, so if you want committee heavies to come round and tread on your fingers, go ahead and stand. Oh, and we'll be sending a silly games team to Picocon, a one-day convention at Imperial College London at the beginning of February. I have a list of people who showed themselves capable of doing the Astral Pole at the last discussion meeting, and am prepared to use it. Come on, self-humiliation is great fun and a useful skill for the outside world, so why not get in some practice now! (The university does not award Blues in silly games, but I don't mind awarding Fetching Shades Of Purple instead.) Er... Yeah. Well, that's about it for introductions. I'll just leave you to-- (Do you realise you haven't mentioned once that this is being written on David Bowie's birthday?) ... Er... oh, ah... sorry about that, it just sorta slipped out... Just keep up with-- (I could understand you not mentioning it was Elvis Presley's birthday, but David Bowie?) ... Er... uh... (well?) I'm completely lost for words. Un.

8 January 1988 (there, will that do?)

Charts Of Powerful Trouble

The Bestseller Lists Considered As A 20th-Century Horror Novel

Here are the fastest-selling sf/fantasy novels of 1987, as listed in *The Guardian*, 8 January. (List supplied by Mo Holkar, to whom gratitude.) The 'position' figure indicates where the novel figured in the overall chart.

Pos.	Title	Author	Roodle
8	The Magic Cottage	James Herbert	£1,709,133
12	Il	Stephen King	£2,356,555
36	The Bagman Books	Stephen King	£1,004,019
37	Malaprop's (Grauntds Of The Vest)	David Eddings	£598,508
38	The Mirror Of Her Tedium	Stephen Donaldson	£771,597
43	Fundament And Earth	Isaac Asimov	£622,744
47	A Darkness At Sethanon	Raymond E. Fastbuck	£604,352
67	Contact	*Carl Sagan* (ho-ho-ho)	£507,731

That is it, in the Top 100 (I was wondering whether to include the astrology books as being infinitely more fantastic than any of the above, but decided I couldn't face reading how such they'd made their authors. At least Stephen King does some sort of work for his money). I should clarify that this refers to paperbacks first appearing in 1987. For sales volume, look up the price in your local bookshop and divide into what *The Grauntd* euphemistically calls 'product'. For comparison, the winners were Jeffrey Archer (£4.8M, minus presumably £2000 expenses), Jackie Collins (£3.5M) and Wilbur Smith (£3.2M), in that order. And we let the people who buy this stuff elect our government (This sentence was brought to you by the Nameless Anarchist Morde.). I despair.

If Music Be The Food Of Love... Prepare For Indigestion

Best selling sf/fantasy books of some unspecified period, probably near the end of 1987, according to Dave Baldock of Forbidden Planet as featured in the February 1988 *O...*

1	Terry Brooks	Black Unicorn
2	Mike Jefferies	Palace Of The King
3	Garry Kilworth	Vizard Of Woodworld
4	Roger Zelazny	Blood Of Amber (bk 7 of series)
5	ed. by George R R Martin	Night Visions
6	Terry Pratchett	Equal Rites
7	Adrian Cole	Throne Of Fools
8	James White	Star Healer
9	Alan Dean Foster	Time Of The Transference
10	J M Dillard	Blood Thirst (Star Trek 6)

And yes, the ones you haven't heard of do seem from the synopses to be generic fantasies. Over to you, Mr Sadler... The same *O* also divulges the exciting information that of the least popular videos of the year at some place in Berwick Street, *Howard The Duck* scraped in at 10 (Is it a bird? they wonder. Is it a plane? No, it's a dirty great \$40 million turkey), while *Swamp Thing* made it to the heights of number 8.

LC's The End Of The Group As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)

Library Meetings

Need a fix of Fanthorpe? A dose of Unaware? Got to feed the Meinlein habit? Well, OK, but don't blame me if you get sneered at. You deserve it. People with halfway functioning brains, on the other hand, are welcome to turn up to 60 Woodstock Rd, r/n 2 in St Anne's to gratify their literary appetites (of course, I can't guarantee that you won't get sneered at as well). Time is, as always, Sunday evenings from 8:15 - 9 pm, after which we adjourn to the *Freestwich Room*, St John's (sc, 196) for sneering, drinking and the ritual humiliation of the President. (Plus a change...) At closing time it's back to the library for more of the same only with cheap instant coffee and surrealist biscuits.

The library meetings are brought to you by Paul Cray (the librarian) and Matthew Seaman (Our Man In SJC).

Discussion Meetings

Here is another stop in the endless search for coffee and biscuits (my contribution to the literature of the human condition). Sneering and humiliating the President are once again the order of the day, but a brief break will occur during which talks will be given on:

- 1st week: "Comparable to Fanthorpe at his best": Robert A Heinlein (Paul Narrow)
- 2nd week: "I am sure something like this happens in Martian line-Slip, and the consequences are not at all good": The SF Convention Considered As A Helix Of Second-Hand Philip K Dick Novels (a sales pitch by Ivan Iovelson (under duress))
- 3rd week: "Never let me down again": The Joy Of Gravity (John Bray)
- 4th week: The Derivation Theory Of The Universe. SF As Skin Complaint (Paul Cray)
- 5th week: I was a teenage John Styles: Neal's structuralist analysis of generic fantasy (Neal Tringham)

The infinitely generous Mark Davies flings wide the doors of Trinity 11/8 every Wednesday at 8:15 pm.

Video Meetings

Desperately seeking coffee and biscuits... not to mention conversations that go on till 4 am punctuated only by an occasional cackle from a darkened corner where main host is reading *The Light Fantastic*... I renege when every OUSFG meeting was like this, he sighed wistfully into his cup of tea (then I discovered Sairnoff). Regardless of which, videos will continue to be shown in the Sir Christopher Cox room in New College on Mondays of even weeks. What we are showing is... er... well, we'll let you know.

Erratica

Speaker Meetings: We hope to have some or all of Iain Banks, Brian Aldiss and Alan Garner coming this term. No confirmations yet, though. **CUSFS:** OUSFG will probably be paying a visit to its 'better half' at Fenland Poly this term, probably at the end of 7th week. Again, no confirmation due to letter, consumption of Royal Mail 'service', by. **Il Banquet:** I blame this one on Trinity College who seem completely unable to keep track of their own administrative procedures. Hoping for Friday 6th week: cost around £12 (margin of error several pounds). Details as soon as possible. I don't want anybody to end up missing it due to lack of notice 'Quite fun, I suppose...' --M. Tringham (unsolicited testimonial)

Elections

These have been fixed.

(What do you mean, there's more?)

Athen... Elections

These have been fixed for 9 pm on 27 Feb, the 6th week library meeting (which will therefore be the AGM). If you want to stand for an officer or committee position, simply find a seconder and hand in the nomination to any of the present officers (Ivan Iovelson (New), Fiona George (St Hugh's) or Mo Holkar (Hertford)) by Sunday 5th week (20 Feb). Any thrilling notions or constitutional amendments you want voted on by the AGM to Fiona (via a or Mo if necessary, as seems likely) by the same date. There will be an Election Special *Spung* in 5th week giving details of the AGM and hopefully the Banquet too. (You know, I'm not sure I didn't prefer the first version.)

Scraping The Barrel

Yes, it's that old chestnut again... but this time *The Best Of Sfinx* is absolutely, definitely, positively *GO!* As soon as John Grandidge gets up the artwork he's been 'working on' for the past year or so. Meanwhile, in the small hours of the morning, Neal thrashes in his sleep. Sweat beads his brow and tortured moans escape his mouth. "Aaargh," he informs his pillow. "Sfinx 5. You know it makes AAARGH NO NOT THE GREEN BATS I'LL DO ANYTHING AARGH." Such is life. Stories, artwork, money to Neal Tringham (Exeter), Paul Cray (St Anne's) or Ivan Iovelson (New). Please. Or I'll break yer arm.

The Newsletter

Well, I don't want it any more. Somebody else's turn, at least after my swanspung. Volunteers? Or do I have to buy you a drink? (Actually I'd quite like to carry on but even I think it might be wise to drop it during Finals.)

Thank You For Talkin' To Me Liverpool

"I once went to a SF convention, and I was so shocked I didn't write again for two years." --J. G. Ballard.

Picocon

The Imperial College SFSoc convention. This year it's on Feb 6 from 10 am - 7 pm (or so). Cost is (I think) £2.50, and since a day return to London on the coach is less than £3 it could be the cheapest con you'll ever attend. And (repeat after me) you *will* attend. As I mentioned in the intro, we have to send a team of three for the silly games competition, and while I know that at least three expert self-humiliators will be going, I quite like to find some new faces (so that I only have to sit by and laugh). Come out with your hands up.

The Guest of Honour is the mighty and thoroughly hysterical Terry 'Where Have I Seen This Before' Pratchett, who is worth the money by himself. There will also be a chance to meet lots of interesting people from CUSFS.

books and London area random (I hope); or if that doesn't appeal to you, there will be the usual mess of films, panels, talks, book etc. All this and back in time for local hero of *The Magic Toyshop* (argh, decisions) at the Phoenix. What more could anybody want? (well, preregistration info for a start. Calling Agent Dave...)

Follycon

April 1-4 (Easter weekend), Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool: £12 supp, £18 att. Guests include Gordon R Dickhead, Gwyneth Jones, Len Wein, Greg Pickersgill (as in 'I want to be the next' --Paul Cray), Peter Norwood, Diane Duane and possibly some others I've forgotten. The Eastercon, the British National SF Convention, the... Mm. Yes, well, the most expensive convention of the year, true; but you do get an awful lot for your money.

Conline

August 5-7, Oxford Poly: £4 supp, £9 att. Guest of Honour Terry Pratchett. If you only go to one convention this year, make it this one. (And if you don't, give us the money anyway.) Why? Because Maria and I have learnt the words to *Don't Throw Up*; and if you don't join we'll sing it to you. (This is no idle threat; we sang it to some CUSFS people at the last Eastercon at about 2 am while we had them trapped outside the first-floor lifts, and next time we saw them they paid up without a word.) Other reasons: we need participants for the musical version of the *Foundation* trilogy--after all, we can't give all the parts to Neal; there will be lots of exciting workshops to thrill and delight newcomers to fandom (first-years: this means YOU); and of course the all-conquering toast parties!!! (Oh yes; and it'll be cheap.)

ConFiction: The Worldcon

August 24-27, 1990, Netherlands Congress Centre, The Hague. GoHs: Joe Haldeman, Harry Harrison, Wolfgang Jeschke, Andy Porter, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. Prices have now gone up; rates to 31/12/88 are £16 supp, £37.50 att (money should be sent to the UK agent Colin Fine, 28 Abbey Rd, Cambridge, CB5 8HQ to avoid tiddliness with currencies). Worldcons are hell but curiously addictive; there's a bizarre sort of fun to going 5 days without a decent night's sleep, searching the nearest city for a restaurant that can cope with 15 people of mutually incompatible tastes and trying to fit in (and indeed find) the odd programme item into a hectic schedule of looking for Maria... Definitely one to join, as it will probably be the last European Worldcon this millennium (though Zagreb and Berlin are amongst the 7 (count 'em, 7) bidders for 1994...).

Sales pitches for all of the above will be delivered at the 2nd week discussion meeting.

Dead Letter Office

Surrealists Of Gori: A Sort Of Excuse

It was way after midnight, and giant cups of tea were flitting around my head. For a horrible moment I seemed to see unsold copies of *Fear And Loathing In 10 Herton Street* chasing them around the room, but I knew that was just the drugs. "By the way," Neal was saying, "do you want me to do that thing about authors you were talking about for the newsletter?"

"Well," I said, "I'm not sure. No-one seems to be for or against it. I don't know if it's worth doing or not."

Chris looked down from where he was experimenting with methods of suspending himself from the kitchen ceiling by his left ear. "I'd be quite interested," he said.

Neal sort of fell off his chair as I cackled evilly. "OK," I told him harshly, "that's a 100% positive response. Off you go and can I have 200 words plus a book list by the weekend please." He looked weakly at me and asked who I wanted him to do. "That's your problem," I gritted. "Someone not too well-known, but interesting, who's done enough to be worth writing about."

"Cordwainer Smith?" he suggested, his face lighting up. Chris thought that would be interesting. "OK rat," I told Neal, "you'll do J. G. Ballard and like it."

"Do you want a review of *Violent Cases* as well?" he asked hopefully. It seemed like a small concession to make and besides I could always cut it on the grounds that it wasn't sf.

"Yeah," I drawled, "I'll take it."

At this point (allowing for certain temporal distortions induced by Phil's record player) Chris' bean bag started smouldering in a corner as the house gradually began to catch fire. Chris fell off one wall onto another and Neal exploded with a thunderous crash.

It ain't easy being a surrealist.

from the *Tales of Yn'jook*

Ballard's Ballads (or some equally inane title) (Neal's exact words --ed.)

One way of summing up J. G. Ballard's work is to point out that, though he has been nominated for the Booker Prize he has never won either the Nebula or the Hugo (or indeed the World Fantasy Award, the Jupiter or any others I may have forgotten). Another way is to quote Max "D" Connor: "Very sick. Perverted and disgusting" (after reading *Crash*) (quote reprinted as Self-Analysis For Fun And Profit, Mainly Profit By Friends Of Max Publications--available from the Merchandising Officer, Penny Neal (Somerville). --ed.) Ballard is obsessed with alienation and ways of relating to reality that can be described as, at best, elliptical. He has developed a whole vocabulary of individual symbols to express that--wrecked space capsules, deserts, cracked expanses of concrete... (The observant reader may detect a certain pessimism in these choices. This is very observant of it.) But despite the deep distaste or boredom with which many sf fans have viewed his work, he is certainly one of the few truly original sf writers, a hero of the British New Wave (not to mention me). David Pringle describes his stories as "constituting a 'true' dream vision of our times" which I suspect is fair enough though he remains a little uncertain as to just how many people can be included in the "our". In any event, I would put Ballard's works in the same class as Dick's complete output--or Kafka's for that matter. And finally--if you're looking for complex and interesting character interaction, avoid him like the plague.

As for specific book recommendations:

The Terminal Beach: The UK edition is probably his best collection of short stories.
The Crystal World: The best of the early disaster novels, each of which (apart from the uninteresting *The Wind From Nowhere*) inverted the standard disaster novel formula by having the hero somehow sympathise with the strange and partly metaphysical catastrophe overtaking his world.

The Atrocity Exhibition. This contains (I think) all of Ballard's "condensed novels" (an experimental form of writing in which he tried to give the essence of a work without bothering with details like plot or characterisation--or indeed, in some cases, comprehensibility) except *The Terminal Beach* (included in guess which collection). The condensed novels here describe the "hero's" attempts to confront reality and the human impulses towards sex and destruction from a variety of slightly differing viewpoints (warning: this book contains a moderate amount of sexually dodgy material. Please conceal it from your impressionable parents, etc. etc.) (but I thought we were into corrupting people, Neal. --ed.)

Crash: This seems to be the end development of Ballard's obsession with automobiles as symbols of sex, mutilation and death. Fairly strange. (Warning: this book contains quite a lot of etc. etc.)
Empire Of The Sun: Nominated for the Booker Prize, this is not technically sf, but its story of a young boy growing up in a Japanese POW camp during the Second World War shares many themes with his earlier work, not to mention the thrill of trying to guess which bits actually happened to him (Ballard was interned in a Japanese POW camp, etc. etc. I don't think this 'etc.' is supposed to denote moral depravity, but don't be too pessimistic, eh? --ed.) Or so they say (I haven't actually read this one).

Neal Tringham

Immoral Kiosk

The Eleventh Hour: Invisible Television (Channel Four)

It's only recently that advanced video techniques have become available to the small, non-commercial film-maker, but many have already begun to take advantage of them to produce strange and wonderful pieces of film, some of which have been shown over the past few months on Channel Four at 11 pm on Mondays as *The Eleventh Hour*. I saw some bits of Belgian surrealism a while back and wasn't impressed, but was persuaded by the trailers to tune in again on 21 December for *Invisible Television* a sort of *Emu's Broadcasting Company* (does anybody else remember that?) operated by Peter Brady, the Invisible Man himself.

Frankly I was stunned. The technique being used was "scratch video" (so-called by analogy with scratch music); the director would haul small bits out of whatever archives were available and stick them together in a way in which they were most certainly not intended to go. The most impressive example of this was the first "programme" (for the benefit of those deprived few to whom *E.B.C.* is unknown; *Invisible Television* consisted of ten or twelve "subprogrammes" strung together with links by the "host"/anchorman. It was itself a single one-hour programme, not a continuing series. (This clarification was deemed necessary by my heroic proofreader, the long-suffering Mo Holkar, who seemed mildly dogged by the unedited version. Now, of course, the review will be incomprehensible anyway because of the clever way I've managed to paste a whacking great parenthesis into the middle of a previously moderately lucid sentence. Cackle.), a quiz show called *Stardust* in which answers were provided by Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter and Richard Nixon to questions from... Bob Holness? (For the record, Ron and Nancy made it to the Gold Run.) Other programmes pasted their bits together in different ways: *Brady O.D.* manufactured a dialogue between its participants by cutting two old b/w films together, and followed this with selected Maggie Thatcher pronouncements on the health service, suitably edited of course, cut in with Arthur Daley sitting in his hospital bed making cynical comments (also taken way out of context).

The best (i.e. most horrifying/effective) of the scratch video pieces was *The Naked Inner Cities*, which began with a selection of cuts from news items of urban wastelands and troops in (I think) Northern Ireland, shown over a suitably menacing soundtrack, and then offered us more of Mrs T. And this time the editing was on terrifying. Rather than taking things out of context but letting them stand, though, the director fixed on individual phrases and cut them in half; thus, "We are implacably opposed to..." was tacked onto "...trade union members, all two million of them, teachers, labourers, doctors..." (approximated from memory, but that was the spirit of the thing). And the piece ended with Thatcher declaiming, "All must suffer the full rigour of the law," as the camera panned along the barbed wire of a prison wall. Brutal isn't it?

I think, though, my favourite programme was *Coyasquashy*, the special effects showcase. Now these aren't big six. All the director was working with was fairly basic, well-known techniques (e.g. false colour, superimposition after the fashion of CSO), and a budget infinitely smaller than that of, say, *Star Wars*. Surely Industrial Light and Magic could have done better than this? Yes... but once you're past a certain minuscule level of six, quality of picture matters far less than quality of direction--which is why *Invisible Television* got infinitely better value for money than George Lucas. As for the film itself; it's an example of what Neal informs me is called "visual poetry" (I think--he wouldn't tell me what visual poetry is, so I'm extrapolating from the one example he gave me)--a non-narrative, non-documentary collection of images designed to evoke feelings rather than intellectual involvement. A sequence of overlaid, unconnected images rendered in nameless blasphemous, non-Euclidean etc colours flash past to a relentless Philip Glass-style soundtrack. Rivers, trees the moon, human bodies, exploding fireworks... the images are powerful and there is a very strong energy here. Unlike the tedious, glossy, sanitised 'flow' of *Star Wars*. Video punk?

I thought this was a marvellous programme. It made me laugh, and it made me shiver. It impressed me on a technical level, but also on an artistic one. It made satirical points, perhaps over-didactically (*The Naked Inner Cities* being a prime example of this) but usually entertainingly, but let up enough for it not to get annoying. (The 'let-ups' did often satirise too, but not as heavy-handedly.) So, for me, convincing proof that surrealism is as alive and kicking as ever.

Surrealism... aye, there's the rub. A lot of people can't cope with surrealism, or don't see the point of it. Others don't like it because, while they are happy to admit that it's a valid technique, they find it impossible to separate the good from the bad. These people would find *Invisible Television* boring or irritating, and it's an understandable reaction. I suspect that if any of the bits had gone on for more than about ten minutes I would have lost interest (it may be clever but cleverness can only sustain an idea for so long); but the longest ones were only six or seven, and most of them justified it, so I was happy. But some people have less tolerance for this sort of thing than me. If you're one of them, avoid *The Eleventh Hour*. But if you saw and enjoyed *Alchemists of the Surreal* (the BFI compilation of shorts by such masters of the form as George Melies, Jan Svankmajer and the Brothers Quay) when it came through Oxford last year--or indeed some of those same films when it showed them at 1:30 on over 100s--then it certainly deserves your attention.

If you are interested, we'll be showing a naughty video of the programme after the second week video meeting (I don't think we can justify it as a main feature, as it's probably of minority interest and may not even fall within DVSFG's terms of reference. Not that it ever stopped us before.).

Ivan Towles

Spaceballs (dir. Mel Brooks)

"Back in the '70s, when his *Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein* raised Mad Magazine genre-parody to new lows, the notion of Mel Brooks turning his manic attention to the George Lucas SF blockbuster would have seemed wonderful, but now that he's finally got around to doing it, the sad fact is that we're in Turkeyville. This is more like *High Anxiety* than *Young Frankenstein*, which means that what we get is *Star Wars* as interpreted by a promising high-school glee-club who have somehow been awarded a mega-budget... [I don't think I can take much more of this, --ed.] ... Brooks seems unable to muster sufficient interest in *Star Wars* to parody it with anything other than the lowest of energy levels. ... It'll probably work really well on television, but it would have to be a vet afternoon in hell (or Middlesbrough, for that matter) before paying out cash money to see it in a cinema would seem like an even faintly worthwhile proposition."

(This does seem to sum up the general critical consensus, --ed.)

Charles Shaar Murray, Q

Robocop (dir. Paul Verhoeven)

"Set slightly in the future, *Robocop* posits a Detroit police force operated by a private company, the sinister Omnicorp, who in an attempt to solve their industrial relations problems are trying to develop a mechanical law enforcement operative, one insusceptible to the temptations of higher wages, pension schemes and personal safety. When the first prototype robot-cop, ED 209, malfunctions and makes a mess of a junior executive all over the boardroom, the Robocop project of thrusting yuppie Miguel Ferrer gets brought onto the front burner."

"All he needs for his cop is a human brain to control the indestructible prosthetic body, and this is, conveniently, all that remains of the unfortunate cop Murphy after he's been shot to bits... But though technicians have wiped Murphy's conscious mind in order to reprogram it, Robocop still dreams: of his wife and child, of the villains who killed him and ultimately of vengeance."

(There's plenty more which I lack the energy to type in full. The gist is that this is a jolly good film with black comedy, moral decay, social satire, nice six and lots of fast edits. Sounds like a better version of *Bladerunner*, possibly even good enough to be worth watching. This reviewer gave it five stars (out of five), and Phil Raites (of the photographic tendencies) recommends it too, --ed.)

Andy Gill, Q

Flea-Pit Report (Jan/Feb 88)

Phoenix, Walton Street:

15-21 Jan	<i>Spaceballs</i>	4.15, 6.30, 8.45
22 Jan	<i>Blue Velvet</i>	11.00
6 Feb	<i>The Magic Toyshop</i>	11.00
Penultimate Picture Palace, Jeune Street:		
23 Jan	<i>Repo Man/Suburbia/Subway</i>	6.40/8.20/10.00 (triple bill)
26 Jan	<i>Alchemists of the Surreal/</i> <i>the films of Jean Vigo</i>	7.30 4.30, 10.00 (double bill)
29 Jan	<i>Highlander/The Wall</i>	8.00/6.15, 10.00 (double bill)
6 Feb	<i>Brazil/The Meaning Of Life</i>	7.30/5.50, 10.00 (double bill)

Not The Moulin Rouge, High St, Headington:

24-29 Jan	<i>The Untouchables/Blue Velvet</i>	8.00/10.00 (double bill)
every Sat	<i>Blues Brothers/Rocky Horror</i>	8.00/10.15 (double bill)

The P.P.P. will also be showing a number of uncertificated films which do, I think, fall firmly within the realms of speculation, but (for example) *120 Days In The City Of Sodom* is not, one suspects, the sort of thing OUSFG was created to foster. (The fact that it has over the past 25 years persistently fostered some pretty basic naughtiness is, of course, entirely beside the point. It isn't supposed to. Really.) Neal say, however, be going to see them again and would no doubt love to be accompanied...

Looks like a good season for people interested in jazz, Talking Heads and serious weirdness; the rest of you will have to make do with *Spaceballs*, I look saug.

"If We'd Been Living In California..."

John Crowley: *Aegypt*

You may remember reading a review in the early Michaelmas newsletter of John Crowley's last (1981) novel, *Little, Big* in which the word "perfect" was hurled about with moderately reckless abandon. And quite rightly so. It was, after all, one of the most intricate and interesting sf books around, not to mention the beauty and magic of its writing and indeed subject matter. But it did rather raise the question: what next? How can you follow perfection? Certainly not by having another try at the same thing!

So in a way I am rather pleased to announce that, with all due respect to *Little, Big*—and, make no mistake, that is one of the finest sf novels ever written—that "perfect" book was nothing more than a dry run for the massive new four-book sequence, *Aegypt*.

This book, perhaps more accurately referred to as *The Solitudes*, is only the first part of that sequence: but, this being Crowley, it's fairly safe to assume that the whole is going to be included in the part; so I feel morally justified in vainglorious about *Aegypt* as a whole. The structure echoes that of *Little, Big*: the work is divided into two prologues and twelve parts, which are grouped in threes (they mirror the houses of the Zodiac, which have this same grouping, and the parts are titled with words summing up the characteristics of the house), each of which is split into untitled chapters. This volume has the prologues and the first group, under the title *The Solitudes*.

The events of each part reflect the concerns of its Zodiacal house, as summed up in its title. Thus Part One, *Vita*, introduces us to the person and history of Pierce Moffett, a historian who, having just lost his job teaching at Barnabas College, is on his way to another interview when he becomes stranded in the rural village of Blackbury Jaws in the Faraway Hills. Inspired by questions like "why do people believe gypsies can tell fortunes?", he comes to theorise the existence of Aegypt—a strange, mystic country from which traditions like the alchemical and astrological derive—and hence concludes: *there is more than one history of the world*.

In Part Two, *Lucrum*, Pierce decides to abandon the job he had taken at Barnabas and write a book about his ideas, which an old girlfriend in publishing enthusiastically agrees to buy. He returns to Blackbury Jaws to begin work; meanwhile, in the village, the second viewpoint character, Rosie Mucho, is divorcing her husband and getting into awful tangles about dividing their "stuff" (*lucrum*). And in Part Three, *Fratres*, Pierce becomes

part of the community and gets involved with a foundation investigating the legacy of the local historical novelist, Fellowes Kraft.

Which might sound like a fine opening to a novel, but not enough to fill 390 pages. Well, it is only the opening to a novel, though it's an excellent read on its own, and the 390 pages seem barely adequate to hold everything that Crowley wants to put in. For a start, a good third of the text, and almost all of it towards the end, consists of extracts from *Ritten Apples*, about Dr John Dee (and the young William Shakespeare), and an unfinished novel about Giordano Bruno, both by Fellowes Kraft. This being Crowley, one is unsurprised to find that both of these stories, as well as Pierce's own book, mirror *Aegypt* to a greater or lesser extent. (It's virtually axiomatic that any book mentioned in a Crowley novel is isomorphic to that novel on some level. Try it, it works.) And a fair amount of the book is devoted to John Crowley's thoughts on history, Hermeticism, Literature and Everything In General, which, though occasionally odd, are always interesting and often provocative (I offer but one example: plot = symmetries. I don't agree—plot is surely the vehicle for symmetries, not the symmetries themselves. (mind you, with Crowley it's hard to separate the two)—but it's an interesting idea, and not one I'd want to dismiss out of hand. My God, I'm starting to sound like Neal.)

What is a bit of a shock is that the whole thing is so readable. I had a fair amount of trouble with *Little, Big*; given that *Aegypt* works with so many more different plotlines and is loaded down with the pontifications of John Crowley, and that my agents assured me it was virtually plotless, I didn't expect to be able to read it straight through without grinding to a halt once. At best I hoped I could finish Part One in a week or so and then finish the rest in a couple of days (like I did with *Little, Big*). But no, the new book is much easier going. Maybe it's because the narrative is framed instead of free, or because not all the character names sound alike, or maybe it's just that the printing isn't so damn dense (neer ye not; close-printed books are not as easy to read as normal ones; mind you, *Little, Big* had to be close-printed, for reasons which should be obvious to the reader).

Then again, Crowley's prose style has certainly developed. Seven years ago it evoked magic and innocence; the world seemed to bask in a perpetual rural summer afternoon; even winters in the City seemed fine and crisp. Even when Russell Eigenblick cast his winter over America, there was still a warm fire burning at Edgewood. (Subjective? Yes, I can't help but describe my reactions to the style, except to say that most people whose judgment I respect felt that *Little, Big* was beautifully written. Hold on, the rather more objective bits about Theme, Structure and Capitalised Essences are coming.) *Aegypt*, at least as yet, does not have the exuberant overtones of the earlier book; there is no opponent, everybody and everything seems sympathetic. So the style has developed even further in this direction. Apart from his descriptive powers, the author makes everything seem potentially magical. Let me quote two examples, picked simply because they're easy to find: the first is from the Prologue in Heaven, extracted from *Ritten Apples*, and the second is the opening of *Vita*:

There were angels in the glass, and four six many of them, each one shuffling into his place in line like an alderman at the Lord Mayor's show. None was dressed in white; some wore fillets or wreaths of flowers and green leaves in their loose hair; all their eyes were strangely gay. They kept pressing in by one and two, always room for one more, they linked arms or clasped their hands behind them, they looked out sailing at the two portals who looked in at them. All their names began with A.

If ever some power with three wishes to grant were to appear before Pierce Moffett, he she or it (dunno, fairy godmother, ring curiously inscribed), would find him not entirely, unprepared, but not entirely ready either.

If that doesn't touch something in you, you've got a hole in your soul. OK, objectively freaks, here come the Capitalised Essences. Theme: everything, specifically history. Perhaps the main project of the book is to demonstrate how in Crowley's evocative phrase, "history hungers for the shape of myth." But there is far more to *Aegypt* than this staple (well, complex, then) idea. It's Mor of the Renaissance is so tightly tied in with the hermetic ideas of some of its thinkers that it's not going too far to describe it as a novel of the history of ideas itself. Meanwhile, Rosie is caught up in a bitter-sweet love story—an intelligent one, of course, and one which I am sure will eventually come to mirror the larger concerns of the sequence (the whole, you will recall, being included in the part in John Crowley novels). At this stage, with only a quarter of the story to work on, it's hard to say.

The same caveat applies to structure. *Little, Big* had a structure so rigid it was almost crystalline (gosh posh pretentious stuff go it molesworth go it); the new novel seems to flow much more freely, the author having lost his neurotic need to have everything mirror everything else. I imagine that this will turn out to be an illusion, and that the structure will be as rigid as *Little, Big*'s, only brought out far more subtly.

Let's go over now, let me wind down. I am overwhelmed, I am utterly confident that the complete *Aegypt* will turn out to be one of the crowning achievements of sf, certainly outdoing anything available at the moment. The only thing I can think of that might compete with a properly-structured (and Crowley wouldn't allow himself anything less) quartet of books this good is *The Book Of The New Sun*. If Mr Wolfe wants to retain his place in my heart he is going to have to buck up his ideas; even this first quarter of *Aegypt* has the tranquillity, beauty and complexity of *Peace* informed by the learnedness, structural sensibilities and love that permeated *Little, Big*.

All of which leaves me with one problem. I used up most of my stock of complimentary adjectives on the earlier book. There were an awful lot of them. It was a very fine book.

How do I go about telling you that *Aegypt* is better?

Ivan Towlson

John Barth: *Giles Goat-Boy*; or, *The Revised New Syllabus*

... Granted that long novels are selling well lately, one surely understands that mere bulk is not what sells them; and when their mass consists of interminable exposition, lecture and harangue (how gratified I was to see that windy old lunatic Max Spielman put to death), it is the very antidote to profit. Indeed, I can't imagine to whom a work like *R.N.S.* might appeal, unless to those happily rare, more or less disturbed, and never affluent intelligences—remote, chunky, ineffectual—from whom it is known the author receives his only fan-mail.

As soon as you see the size of this monstrosity (813 pages, including a fair bit of "editorial" criticism) you know it's either going to be a fantasy trilogy, a Serious Literary Epic or a Tolkien laundry list (it *might* be an American edition of *I Will Fear No Evil*, but it seems unlikely.) Since it is weighed down with recommendations, but from the *Daily Telegraph* and *Listener* rather than Anne McCaffrey, Gene Wolfe, Stephen King

etc., one is justified in assuming the second. Which may or may not be an encouragement. Fantasy freaks after exhuming Prof. Tolkien should skip to the reviews below by Messrs. Sadler and McLeish. The rest of us can curl up in an armchair and, like, get really heavy, man. And I'm afraid it is a bit heavy at times--it's no more welcoming to the casual reader than, say, *The Book Of The New Sun* or *Little, Sig*, but, like them, it offers the careful reader a lot to chew on.

Those two examples were not chosen at random. In terms of formal structure, they are two of the most complex and interesting books I know, and *The Revised New Syllabus* has a comparable complexity. It self-refers through devices similar to *New Sun*, such as the play (Severian plays Death in Dr. Talos' *Eschatology And Genesis* in *The Claw Of The Conciliator*, and George at one point visits the theatre to see *Taliped Decanus* (a hilarious "translation" of the Oedipus myth into R.N.S. terms)). But the real similarity is to *The Book Of The New Sun*, and it lies in subject matter.

For the benefit of the illiterate few who still don't know, *The Book Of The New Sun* concerns itself with the coming of a Messiah who will regenerate the Earth's dying sun. (Aarrggghhh! You lose an awful lot trying to condense 1200 pages into 12 words!...) *Giles Goat-Roy*, on the other hands, deals with the emergence in a thinly (i.e., not at all) disguised version of contemporary (1986) America of a Christ figure offering temporal peace and spiritual salvation to all humankind. The two complement each other almost perfectly: Wolfe offers us a hero who virtually backs into being the agent of the Second Coming and the Kingdom of God; while Barth has one who consciously decides that he is going to be the new "Grand Tutor" and has to go through a pretty difficult struggle to succeed (indeed, we don't even know the outcome by the end of the book--in this respect R.N.S. is identical to *R.M.S.* (not counting *The Urth Of The New Sun*)). Stop press--Barth actually makes the same distinction himself (p. 127; for Moishe leading his people into the Promised Land read Severian bringing the New Sun; for "Dean" Arthur read George).

I think that without a bit more explanation this review is going to get increasingly incomprehensible, and, such as I respect the latest developments in post-structuralist critical theory, I'm not convinced that this is entirely the right way to go about this sort of thing. So... ***** Spoiler Warning ***** George is an orphan brought up with a goat herd by Herr Doktor Professor Maximilian Spielman, chucked out of college for speaking his mind. The world is simply the University, which is divided into a number of (often rival) colleges; it was founded some indefinite time ago by a near-mythical figure known only as the Founder, who left behind him a Syllabus (now known as the Old Syllabus) for Graduation, and since then there have been a number of Grand Tutors, including Sakhyan (with the Syllabus of Baisa) and, most influential in the story, Enos Enoch (the of the New Syllabus). Most of the action takes place in New Tammany College, biggest of the West-Campus Internationalist colleges, an armed camp implacably opposed to the Student-Unionism of the East-Campus colleges led by Nikolai College. During the Second Campus Riot (against Siegfrieder College) New Tammany developed an EAT-ray (Electroencephalic Amplification and Transmission--windzap), which they used to wipe out a couple of quads in Amaterasu College and put an end to that part of the Riot; other colleges soon got the EAT technology too, and now the West and East Campus computers VESCAP and EASCAP are sitting metaphorically glaring at each other, programmed to EAT the other side's population basically whenever they feel like it... But there is a get-out. A Grand Tutor can safely enter VESCAP's Belly and change its AIM (Automatic Implementation Mechanism) --and George decides he's found his vocation.

So George goes to New Tammany College and matriculates. He doesn't know what he's supposed to be studying--VESCAP has only told him to "PASS ALL FAIL ALL" but he passes through Scrapegoat Grate in approved Grand-Tutorial fashion and receives his Assignment. The rest of the book describes how he first makes an appalling hash of things and brings the University to the brink of Riot, then finally understands the Assignment and completes it, only to be hounded out by the students of the college, who think someone else is the Grand Tutor. George comes back and kills the someone else, at which point the book ends (apart from the Posttape, Postscript, to the Posttape, and Footnote to the Postscript to the Posttape...).

***** End Spoiler Warning ***** So what do we have so far? A Serious Literary Epic of great structural complexity about a sort of Second Coming... don't you think that sort of thing has been superseded by *The Book Of The New Sun*, which does all of the above and more? Well, no. Because Barth's book (apart from dealing with a different concept of the Second Coming) does more as well. In the same way that Wolfe weaves in questions of identity, he weaves in questions of authenticity, accuracy--in general, truth. Assuming there can indeed be only one Grand Tutor, which of the three appearing in George's story is it: the inscrutable Living Sakhyan, the popularly accepted Harold Bray, or George the GILES, son of VESCAP, himself? Well, we know, because George tells us about the Grand-Tutorial ideal: Laboratory Eugenic Specimen program, and how Harold Bray told George that he was a false Grand Tutor sent to pave the way for the real one... But wait! We only have George's word for all this... And then who is the real Peter Greene? The self-deluding redneck or the disillusioned cynic? Is Maurice Stoker really trying to be the Dean o' Flunks, or is he trying to Graduate people by playing it? Why does George spend so much of his time disguised as Harold Bray?

Is the *Revised New Syllabus* itself genuine? It's almost as fascinating and frustrating as *Illuminatus!*... Final remarks: the writing is efficient and readable rather than wonderfully evocative or whatever; the characters are interesting and well-drawn (but rarely lapsing into stereotype); the editorial apparatus that precedes the book is clever and interesting but rather heavy going, though the stuff at the end is good (is John Barth genuine!...). There's a fair amount of humour, too, especially in the earlier sections, which helps to tide the reader over the often irritating University/our world analogy (I got awfully annoyed at being constantly expected to play spot-the-reference--but the allegory does play a vitally important role in alienating the text and hence (at least according to formalist critical theory) making it new to the reader and hence more effective). Such few complaints as I have seen irrelevant in the face of George's story. Thoroughly essential reading. A-plus!

Ivan Towlson

Raymond E Feist: *The Riftwar Saga*

What's this? you say, throwing up your hands in horror. Not a review by Rob Sadler! But he reads *Dunarest* and *Meinlein* and other things too awful to mention--what's he doing reviewing things in that vehicle of good taste, *The DUSFG Newsletter*? Well, in between the crap I also read quite a lot of crap fantasy (and no, it's not all crap)--sometimes I even read some halfway decent fantasy.

At the risk of howls of derision from the audience I'd like to recommend the Riftwar Saga by Raymond Feist for this category. The last book in the series, *A Darkness At Sethanon*, was published in small format for the first time this (i.e. Michaelmas --ed) term, so the whole set is now available without an overdraft--alternatively talk to a friendly second year fantasy freak.

For fantasy readers these are really a pretty good read, being (a) pretty thick and (b) full of all the good things of fantasy *etc.* I assume that somewhere along the line this got mixed up with an advert for breakfast cereal. --ed, such as magic of fairly hairy types, dragons, and quite a lot of hacking. Beautiful princesses and daring princes also feature quite heavily. Quite enough to make any serious sf reader sick. But seriously Feist manages to put it all together with little of the corn usually associated with the genre, and quite a touch of humour at times as well.

The first book *Magician* can be read on its own, having what appears to be a fairly self-contained story of interuniversal war starting and being brought to a conclusion by a serving boy called Pug. The book is quite long enough to sort out any confusion this may appear to hold into a pretty coherent story. The second too, starting with *Silverthorn* pick up some threads that apparently weren't as well tied off as you thought, and neatly make quite a lot more story out of them, following slightly different characters introduced in *Magician*.

Anyone who reads fantasy really ought to try these as they're a lot better written than a lot of the stuff available at the moment, yet contain the very things that appeal to fantasy readers (I wouldn't have read these otherwise).

For all those who've read these but don't visit bookshops very often, *Daughter Of The Empire* is Feist's most recent book, about one of the worlds visited in the Riftwar Saga. This is different to the others being mainly politics (where backstabbing is for real), but is still pretty good. Worth reading the others first, though. **Rob Sadler**

Gene Wolfe: *The Urth Of The New Sun*

Well, no-one can accuse me of coming to this book with my mind already made up about it. When the back of *The Citadel Of The Autarch* announced that a fifth *New Sun* book, independent of Severian's narrative was coming, I could hardly wait. Then it finally did arrive, and I read a review in *Locust*. "Aarrgh!" was the first phrase that came into my head, narrowly pipping "Sell-out!" at the post. Then I was standing in the Conspiracy dealers' room lusting at a stack of copies (£11.55 apiece) when Neil Gaiman (see, Phil, I can drop names, too!) appeared talking about it, and when I accosted him and begged for reassurance he informed me it was jolly good and not a sell-out at all. I was slightly but not entirely reassured. So when it came into the Central Library I had no idea at all what to expect from it. Will he wreck the ending of *The Book Of The New Sun* to pacify the Aides of this world? Will he try to sell it to the Sadlers by having Severian's trial consist of battling fearsome monsters? Will he try to persuade Nev Era to push it to the top of the bestseller lists by having Severian refer to the ancient muse Elron in much the same terms as we speak of Homer? Can it be? Can't be! (c) 1987 New Era Publications.

Thankfully, no. Having said that... I still have very mixed feelings about *The Urth Of The New Sun*, most of which I can resolve into a vague sort of satisfaction by regarding it as not part of the Book Of The New Sun. Unfortunately, some parts of it have to be connected to *B.N.S.* or they don't make sense--but I do rather feel that these should have been left as unresolved as possible--part of the fascination of the quartet was in the slingshot effect ending, which left the reader to extrapolate what was going to happen after Severian left for the stars and the trial which he hoped would win him the New Sun. For Wolfe to fill that in not only spoils the fun but is also rather superfluous. Or should be. We all knew Severian was the New Sun/Conciliator, and the new book only confirms that; but what about the consequences? Here we are with a Second Coming and the advent of heaven on Urth; what Wolfe reminds us of is that we shouldn't have expected it to come just like that. *Giles Goat-Roy* acts out the patterns of the Gospels (the Revised New Syllabus, remember!). *The Book Of The New Sun* acts out the beginning of the patterns of Revelation, and points the reader in certain directions indicated by those patterns. What Wolfe played down in the first four books is suddenly brought home in the fifth: the Second Coming is also the Apocalypse. Should have seen it coming.

As for the things we did see coming, they're pretty much taken for granted. When the New Sun appears, it plays a poor second fiddle to the Apocalypse, and quite right too because we don't need to be told about it (anybody with the intellectual ability to get this far will have been expecting it ever since halfway through *The Shadow Of The Torturer*). But this doesn't alter the fact that he does spend half the book telling us about then, and mixed in with that we also have to suffer the Hieroglyphs (angels, sort of) telling us every couple of pages, "Oh, by the way, you remember such-and-such? Actually that was us manipulating events. Clever, stuff eh?" But there's nevertheless some worthwhile stuff in there, and as always it's beautifully written (though I thought I detected some dilution of Severian's lovely classical style--shame).

But it's when Severian gets back to Urth that Wolfe really hits stride; the second half of the book easily bears comparison with *The Claw Of The Conciliator* or *The Citadel Of The Autarch*, and in places compels it (when Severian wanders around the villages, it's hard to avoid remembering a similar section from the latter). He also, to Neal's considerable dismay, hits a Gene Wolfe time travel plot. I have not tried to unravel this and do not intend to. *Free Live Free* scrambled my brain quite thoroughly, thank you (you mean you weren't always like this? --MH2); more than enough for one lifetime. This one involves Severian discovering that he can walk the Corridors of Time (which, incidentally, resemble a field with some streams in it, not corridors at all), this being something to do with the fact that he literally is the New Sun and thus possessed of tremendous power, whereupon he does, frequently, and occasionally to the considerable bafflement of the reader. In his travels he meets Taar (the great autarch) and Typhon (the megalomaniac with two heads in *The Sword Of The Lictor*, only before he went to sleep) not to mention numerous other interesting people both alive and dead, many of them himself. (Apu-Punchau from *Claw* gets explained away, not very sensibly I'm afraid, though it does tie in with *B.N.S.*'s "identity" theme.) Our hero also develops a nifty line in miracles, in particular blotting out the sun, which I'm pretty sure refers to something in the Bible. Perhaps one of our resident Christians could enlighten or correct me. Eventually he pops up in post-New Sun times to find that he and a few others who survived the Apocalypse have been deified.

Diagnosis: rampant schizophrenia.
Recommended cure: read and reread until the blasted thing makes sense.

I think I thought this was a fine piece of work. It's definitely worth reading in itself. But I really wish it hadn't had to go on the end of *The Book Of The New Sun*. It just doesn't fit.

Ivan Towlson

David Eddings: *Guardians Of The West*

"David Eddings is in a comparable imaginative league to Tolkien." No, it doesn't actually say that on the back cover of *Guardians Of The West*--so as the only first book in a fantasy series published this year not to do so

Philip K Dick: *VALIS*
This book is fucking bizarre.

Neal Tringham

John Calvin Batchelor: *The Birth Of The People's Republic Of Antarctica*
It starts well, with narrator Grim Fiddle being conceived in a phone booth in a crowded Swedish bar. He is born, returned to his father (an American expatriate/draft-dodger), he grows up and then his father strangles the man who married his ex-girlfriend, who had come to Sweden to receive a Nobel Prize. The father gets thrown in prison, a "light" sentence which ultimately sets off a revolution by religious fanatics led by Grim's grandfather (on his mother's side). (By now we're up to the late 1990s.) With grandfather's help, Grim and some friends escape Sweden with his father as Stockholm burns to the ground. Denied permission to land anywhere, they enter the Atlantic and encounter the "fleet of the damned", a collection of boats carrying dying refugees, whom the priests in charge have convinced themselves by some neat theological arguments should not be looked after. Eventually they get to the Falklands and South Georgia and try to preserve a little corner of civilisation.

At this point I got extremely bogged down. The first half of the book, covering Grim's bio, his escape from Sweden and the encounter with the fleet of the damned, is powerful and often horrifying. But I have been unable to finish the book because of the tedious politicking of the South Atlantic sections. Recommended all the same.
Ivan Towilson

(Five and a half pages of solid book reviews and only one of them derogatory. Not a very impressive showing... I remember the good old days when we would tear books apart with our teeth. Now we recommend Fastback and Eodings to the masses. Ye gods, --a more careful reader.)

We Can Shoot You (Some Comics Reviews by Neal Tringham)

Blood (Jon DeMatteis (author: Moonshadow), Kent Williams)

Blood is in the Marvel Epic line, and despite being heavily plugged as a Dracula comic it seems to be an allegory of life... but isn't nearly so bad as that might lead you to expect. The artwork is very nice, occasionally reminiscent of Sienkiewicz's *Talost certainly misspelt* -- *NY* better moments. I wasn't particularly impressed by the scripting of the first two issues (very impressive sounding--but what was its relevance to the fundamental existential dilemmas of modern man, I asked myself? More importantly, did it actually mean anything?) but I liked the third (and current) issue--man's experience of God, death and divorce in a single package. This and *Miraculous* (see mid-Michaelmas *Spung*) get the Tringham Comic Of The Month Club recommendation at the moment, anyway...

Hellblazer (Jamie Delano, John Ridgeway)

This is the spin-off comic from *Swap Thing*, featuring your hero and mine (well, mine, anyway). John Styles Constantine. I found it a lot better than I expected, but not as good as I'd hoped. The first couple of issues told a fairly good horror story, with some nice touches and art varying from competent to good. The third issue was a mildly rabid yuppie/New Conservative parody--amusing in places but I thought it was very over the top... Probably the best horror comic around (not that that's saying all that much), and certainly worth a look. Likely to become a collector's item at some stage. And John Constantine? Not a bad characterisation, fairly close to Alan Moore's, but I felt this version was excessively 80s British Unidentified Flying Radical Chic (lines like "Forget about the money. I'm talking about the real world, Midnite" tend to put me off, I'm afraid).

The Adventures Of Luther Arkwright (Bryan Talbot)

Psychic powers, incredibly significant ancient stones, multiple realities and Tantric sex--what more can you ask from one comic? Well, good art for a start. I didn't like most of the pictures in this one, I'm afraid, though there are certainly exceptions--the back cover of issue 2, for example, which I thought was lovely. The scripting isn't bad, but I didn't find anything particularly original in its story of black baddies from beyond out to destroy/take over the various alternates of Earth. Nor did I find the story-telling technique--heavily reliant on cross-cutting from one time to another--very intriguing, though it's at least unusual and does keep up suspense. To be fair, there are hints that later issues may be more interesting. Being a comics freak (or at least a freak, I suppose) I shall keep on buying this, but I wouldn't advise you to unless you are too.

Green Arrow (Grell, Hannigan and Orlando)

DC certainly seem to be taking advantage of the opportunity to rewrite all their heroes from the ground up after the "Nasty Things Happening In Lots Of Different Places All At The Same Time" maxi-series (which revolved around an unfortunate disaster in the space time continuum (known to Zool addicts as subplotspace) and the subsequent disappearance/reviving of a good deal of the history of the DC universe). Latest in the line is Green Arrow, who was given a thorough working-over in the *Longbow Hunters* mini-series before starting in this, his very own comic. To summarise: no more silly arrows, no more silly villains, and not many more silly quips. What we have here is a Daredevil/Batman style of "realistic" street hero, with real moral problems and real nasty situations to deal with. It's done fairly well in the first couple of issues, with only one embarrassing moment in the script and two nice cover paintings by Grell (though the interior art varies from competent to dodgy)--but this is very much Frank Miller's territory by now, particularly the Miller of the first run of *Daredevil* issues, and I doubt we're likely to see anything really new.

Iodine In My Coffee

The OUSFG mugs have been ordered, and we hope to have them for the 2nd week library meeting. Keep your money handy. Meanwhile, the new design for the sweatshirt has arrived from the pen of Martin Pickles. Some people have asked whether it will be possible to order sweatshirts with the old design. The answer is, only if there is sufficient demand. When we take orders (after the mugs have arrived; we can't carry two orders of this type at once, we don't have the spare cash), we'll find out how many people want what and see what happens. Bear in mind that there are minimum orders, and that small orders cost more than large ones.

Exhuming McCarthy

The Tongues Of Men And Angels

"This is something Meinlein said, it's nothing to do with reality." (Simon McLeish)
"Haa, yes, I can imagine Meinlein writing the Old Testament." (Paul Marrow)
"I don't want a drink. I want to take all my clothes off." (Melanie Drymond)
"You don't have to put whipped cream up my skirt--I'm going to do it anyway." (Kath Mort)
"When it's going round it's very perturbing, especially when it's that big--and bright pink." (Chris Hughes)

"I can handle it up to the bright pink bit..." (Chris)
"I could tell when Tim was frightened, because his knees tightened around me." ("The Unknown Biker", (Richard Lucock))

"It's not exactly putrid--but it's pretty ineffectual." (Becca Heddle)
"We've all got better things to do with our mouths than talk." (Jane McCarthy)
"Every time I open my mouth Ivan gets out his cheque book and starts writing." (Jane)
"It's incredibly painful, and you'd best make the most of it, 'cos I'm not doing it again." (Rob Sadler)
"...how true, muttered the editor."
"Mahler's 10th symphony--the bit where it goes da-da-da about fifteen times--that's when you throw the record player in the bath." (Phil Raines)

...and so, having effortlessly proved that the art of cheap innuendo is alive and well and living at 94 Bullington Rd, we move on to...

...The Grovelly Bit

I have a long list of people to eulogise for the last newsletter. The following people helped distribute or otherwise mutilate them: Matt Bishop, John Bray, Adrian Cox, Paul Gray, Fiona George, Chris Hughes, Paul Marrow, Simon McLeish, Martin Pickles and the eternal Neal Tringham (a patron saint of newsletter editors if ever there was one (which there wasn't)). Boo-hiss to the New College photocopier for breaking down for 4 days about 3 hours before I needed it; slightly smaller boo-hiss to the engineer who appeared just as I'd finished doing the newsletter and proceeded to repair the thing properly; slightly bigger boo-hiss to the Department of External Studies, who rang me up one rainy Thursday afternoon to tell me about their day school on 1st that Saturday ("Um, well, yes, we'd be interested, but I'm not sure I can tell 100 people in the next 36 hours..."). Oh, well, we've got some programmes set aside for you... "OK, I'll send out what I can. (Puts down phone and stares out at rain. Thinks of distance to DES.) Oh dear, this isn't going to be very pleasant." In consequence, Patience-Of-A-Saint award goes to Penny Heal for floors (twice), organs (about 50 times) and tea (more times than was strictly good for me, I suspect). This is what happens to people who live too close to Vellington Squargh.

Haa, I think I may have got a little carried away there, but it was fun.

Their Finest Hour

Neal has been searching those few books in his collection which fail to appear in *Ghastly Beyond Belief* for evidence as to why they should, and in the process slipped me a few exceedingly odd sentences. As you will see.
"They're demon yuppies--soul-brokers from Hell!"

"I think we should kill him and eat his brain," said Mr Frostee.
"That's not the answer to every problem in interpersonal relations," I told him.

"Christians," Kevin agreed. "Who aren't human beings but something without sex organs designed to look like human beings, but on closer inspection they are human beings; they do have sex organs, and they make love."
"Even if their skulls are full of electronic chips instead of brains," I said.

"They're my entrails and I won't have them read by a bungling amateur."
"...ten for a tower of turbulent toast..."

I leave it to the massed ranks of OUSFG physicists to provide a description of precisely how toast/turbules.

Dead Fingers Torque

This, at least as far as I'm concerned, is the last of the epics. I'll be putting out an Election Special of *The Spung* sometime in mid-term, but someone else will have to take over the newsletter as of next term. Qualifications required: must speak English or some close approximation thereto; own typewriter preferred. Applications wrapped around a brick to Ivan Towilson, New College by the beginning of 5th week, please.

Wild Mountain Time (again)

Credits for this issue: first and foremost Chris, who bought the teabags. Second I modestly place myself for editing, writing, typing, photocopying, collating and distributing (I hope you people realise what a deeply egocentric megalomaniac self-sacrificing person I am). People who have actually done something worthwhile: Neal for lots of verbiage, and Mo, Rob and Simon for their contributions. Special thanks to Mo for information, advice and proofreading. Bits of this newsletter were based on, lifted from or inspired by *The Guardian*, *O. Alarums & Excursions* and *Thyme*. The title was derived from Jack L Chalker's publishers ("Ah, Jack, we'd, er, like you to, er, simplify your books a little--for the, um, less careful reader!") and the subtitles were twisted out of Magazine, Vin, my own poisoned warped subconscious, DOOBHAT, R.E.M., Max, O'Connor, Sly and the Family Stone, John Noran, Neal's warped conscious, Frank Zappa, Muddy Waters, David Lane (though I assume he nicked it anyway), William Burroughs and Bob Dylan. Serious culture, man.

This newsletter was eaten by a cheapo word-cruncher which won't even tell me such vitally interesting statistics as how many letters there are in the issue or how many carriage returns I've used. Furthermore, it keeps refusing to spit it out again when I ask it to. Fear, loathing.

it must have something going for it. Another recommendation is that Anne McCaffrey didn't think it was the best read of the year...

Some people (Ivan for example) would probably claim that this could well mean it wasn't even as good as the many books about which the above have been said [Most? *Thought never crossed me mind, guv. --ed.* but I would like to point out that it could hardly be worse than (say) *Sword of Shannara* or *Daughter of Regals*. David Eddings is an author you either really like or think is awful. Personally I like him; that's why I'm reviewing this (apparently the committee couldn't find anyone else willing to read it...) [*if only this were true --ed.*]. The book is the first in a new quintet which is the sequel to the Belgariad quintet. Those of you who have read *Enchanter's Enigme* may have thought that after such a (final and predictable) ending there was not much that could be written as a sequel. However, there are hints that all is not over in *Castle Of Wizardry* and *Enchanter's Enigme*.

It is hard to explain the plot of the book without explaining some of the plot of the first five books, so if you haven't read them but do intend to and don't want to know the ending (which you will probably work out by the middle of book 3 anyway), don't read this synopsis, read the Belgariad first.

The first half of the book is about various points in the ten years or so following the killing of Torak--for example, stormy moments of the marriage of Garion and Ce'Nedra. This is mainly the clearing up of loose ends left over from the end of the other books. The Bear Cult resurfaces and there are attempts on the life of Ce'Nedra. The main action begins when Brand, the Rivan viceroy, is killed. This is followed by the siege and destruction of Jarvikshola, the Bear Cult's stronghold in Cherek, after which Garion receives word that his baby son has been kidnapped. He follows a fake lead to Rheon in Oransia where he discovers that he must set out on yet another quest to destroy all evil in the world (again). [*Has anybody else ever wondered whether it might not be a good idea to ban anyone from writing generic fantasy unless they have at least one degree in linguistics? --ed. after he's finished throwing up*].

[I am very bad at writing plot summaries. A better idea can probably be gained from the back cover.] I enjoyed this book a lot. I thought that some of the metaphysical imagery was really particularly effective and interesting rhythmic devices too which seemed to count. [*at this point there was a sound best described as like the sound of Ivan tearing Simon limb from limb and performing a rain dance around his head, all the while gnawing on a finger, were he disposed to doing such things. Since he would never even contemplate it, it must go undescribed. --ed.*]. It has the same small humorous touches that characterised the Belgariad. It suffers however from a lack of action in the first half in the same way as several books in the first series did. It is worth reading, perhaps even worth buying, but I would advise reading the Belgariad first. I am looking forward to the next book, the next four books, the next quintet, the next... *BLAM.*

Simon McLeish

Iain Banks: *Consider Phlebas*
Iain Banks: *Espedair Street*

In his first three novels, Iain Banks concentrated on blending reality with fantasy--either explicitly as in the fantastic narratives of *Walking On Glass* and *The Bridge*, or implicitly, as in the unbelievably distorted perspectives of *The Wasp Factory*. In these two 1987 novels, he separates the two strands of his writing interests with potentially stunning effect. Imagine a spate opera informed by mainstream literary sensibilities, not to mention Banks' undoubted command of both style and structure. (It may help you to consider *The Book Of The New Sun*.) Or a mundane realistic novel about an aging rock star tinged with something somehow out of the ordinary. (Hint: *The Wasp Factory*.) What more could any of us want?

So much for what could have been. Neither of these books really approaches anything Banks has done before, and in the case of *Consider Phlebas* we actually have a fairly serious turkey.

The plot is routine space opera: a super-duper artificial intelligence belonging to the Culture gets shot down and crashes in an underground bunker on a neutral/protected planet, from which it must be recovered before the Idirans (BEWs with whom the Culture is at war) get it. The protagonist, the Changer Bora Horza Gobuchul, is working for the Idirans and gets sent after the AI. Escaping from a ship about to be blown to bits, he is picked up by a mercenary group, gets involved in a disastrous raid on something called the Temple of Light, is zapped off to the local ringworld (which is about to be disintegrated), takes control of the mers, goes after the AI and gets killed. It's not even particularly well written.

No doubt this novel has some features of interest, but frankly I don't see much to recommend it. *Espedair Street* is better. However, it isn't speculative fiction by any stretch of the definition, so I won't say too much about it. Basically it consists of a Roger Waters-ish rock star reviewing his life and getting depressed about it. It's well-written, and the framing narrative technique (lifted directly from David Lodge's *Jinker, You're Baray*, though it's hardly rare, and like a more rigid version of *The Wasp Factory*'s structure) is effective, but I think the story is too familiar to most people (and those to whom it isn't probably wouldn't be interested). Worth borrowing, at any rate.

Neither of these books is out in paperback at the time of writing, but Oxford Central Library has both of them.

Ivan Towlson

I Moxzlewot: *The Chequebook Of Gene Wolfe*

This vast and imposing novel is in the high tradition of Norman Vincent Peale, and demonstrates that Mr Moxzlewot is truly a worthy successor to the greatest philosopher of the modern age. The book begins with Gene Wolfe, an artistic genius with a wife and four children who are starving because he hasn't the money to advertise his work on Underground escalators and thus reach the bestseller lists, sitting despairingly in a dingy hotel room, contemplating suicide. But as he is opening the notebook in which he keeps the synopses of his time-travel plots he is distracted by a glowing beam of light which shoots through the window and falls upon... the *Mission Saint* advertising package which Elron Enterprises have caused to be placed in every hotel bedroom in America. [*Not to mention Brighton. --ed.*]. Staring at the mailed fist on the cover, emblematic of all that is best in our way of life, he realises that he is saved! The very next day he gets a job writing objective artistic appreciations of the Master's books, which by the generosity of this great and good man ghost Operating Thetan Level 7A are soon placed on the front covers of every one of his volumes (and, indeed, by an interesting temporal inversion reminiscent of Mr Wolfe's own work, on the covers of all previous editions as well). For the next 500 pages Mr Wolfe becomes very rich and very happy, then even richer and still happier, and then yet richer... Such is the triumph of the American Way.

[I don't want this published under my name, okay?] [*Okay. --ed.*]

Noel Trogham

Russell Miller: *Bare-Faced Messiah*

I have more than a passing interest in the Church of Scientology. I had a room-mate when I first went to university in 1977, who, over a period of months, was progressively brainwashed by the Scientologists and persuaded to abandon his studies 2/3rds of the way through his first year. I have glanced through *Dianetics*, and found it to be impenetrable crap, but was left curious as to what has clearly captivated many people over the last few decades, so I was interested when Miller's biography of the cult's founder was published recently.

The author is an investigative journalist, which is some indication of the writing style, which, while not exceptional, is certainly clear and factual. *Bare-Faced Messiah* describes the true story of L Ron Hubbard's life, which, though extraordinary, is no patch on the web of lies Hubbard spun. The book describes Hubbard's early life in some detail--it conflicts on most counts with the official biography produced by the Scientologists. He attended university, but flunked out. Began writing pulp fiction. During the war had an undistinguished career (not receiving 28 medals, as he later claimed). After a few years drifting, LRM published *Dianetics--The Modern Science Of Mental Health* in 1950, and a few years later founded the Church of Scientology. I'm not going to go into the details of LRM's career--read the book. Miller does a good job of sifting out the truth from the fiction of Hubbard's life.

My main reason for describing the book [*this review appeared in Alarums & Excursions 149, a role-playing games apa --ed.*] is that it is a good example of a modern-day real cult--with approximately six million members LRM was earning some incredible amount of money by the time he died. The Scientologists managed to infiltrate number of Government departments in order to protect themselves, and to get advance warning of legal action against them. For this crime, Hubbard's wife and a few others were sent down for a few years. The Church of Scientology advocates quick responses to attacks, such as by copious litigation. This was one of the tactics they employed against Miller. In addition, they attempted to frame him for murder twice, and threatened journalists working for *The Sunday Times*, who were publishing extracts.

Incidentally, Hubbard claims to have visited Heaven twice (43 trillion and 42 trillion years ago), and on the second visit it was apparently looking a bit run-down and scruffy!...

The Church of Scientology is an evil pervasive cult, which preys on the weak and depressed; for example, people attending drug rehabilitation programmes are specifically targetted. Read this book.

Robert Saunderson

Alison Lurie: *Imaginary Friends*

I'll be quick about this, as *Imaginary Friends* (recently reissued as a hideously expensive paperback but available from the Central Library) isn't sf, and is perhaps only of indirect associational interest. It's Lurie's study of small-town strangeness, focussed on a small religious cult group, the Truth Seekers, who believe they are in contact with beings of pure energy from the planet Varna. The narrator is the junior of a pair of sociologists who infiltrate the group to study its behaviour (especially w.r.t. internal opposition and blatant disproof of its belief system) but, despite their attempts to remain objective and non-directive, are unable to remain uncommitted and uninvolved, especially as the webs of jealousy and mutual (and self-) denunciation within the cult become more apparent. The book is interesting, the climax is well done and the tying-up-of-loose-ends bit throws a disturbing and disorienting light on the main body of the novel. Although the narrator struck me as being remarkably ignorant of sociological methods for a supposed Ph.D., *Imaginary Friends* is still worth reading; and if anybody is reading *Bare-Faced Messiah* or any of the other sf-cult books around, it seems to me that this would make a very interesting comparison.

Ivan Towlson

Gene Wolfe: *The Devil in a Forest*

This is one of Wolfe's less acclaimed works; written in 1976, around the time of *Pease*, it's an early and not particularly sophisticated novel of 200 pages, set in a mediaval English village. There is a spate of murders, which the villagers connect with the depredations of a local highwayman; they form themselves into a militia against him, and become mixed up in the activities of the regular army (who are seen as brutal intruders, definitely to be feared rather than welcomed) and the more sinister behaviour of the charcoal burners, a self-contained community living apart from the village, who still cling to many pre-Christian habits.

The plot and setting are not particularly remarkable, being very much along the lines travelled by "children's" authors such as Treece, Paton Walsh, Aiken and so on. Wolfe uses a child as protagonist--Mark, the weaver's apprentice--a device favoured by these writers. However, Wolfe being Wolfe, Mark's perspective is not quite that of more mainstream child heroes--he presents a credible rather than plastic character, whose thoughts and behaviour are a good deal more interesting than those of (say) Eddings' Garion.

Although *Devil* can be read just as a juvenile historic fantasy, it contains rather more significance than that label suggests. The struggle between Good and Evil is enriched by the deeply equivocal positions of most of the characters, and powerful symbols bring to life the secondary struggle between the forces of the New (represented by Christianity, which at this time has not yet fully won the village's loyalty) and the Old (exemplified by the charcoal burners' curious rites).

To conclude, while *Devil* is by no means one of Wolfe's great works, it's not without value and certainly repays attention. Also, it's a very good read, thanks to his stylistic genius and a slightly different treatment of an old theme.

Mo Holka

Neil Gaiman (writer), Dave McKean (artist): *Violent Cases*

This graphic novel (for those who don't know, a graphic novel is a self-contained comic whose producers want it to be taken seriously by reviewers in the New Statesman) is the work of two virtual unknowns in the comics field. Neil Gaiman is a (moderately) established sf writer, the script for *Violent Cases* having started life as a story produced for the Milford SF Writers' Workshop, while Dave McKean is a new (British) artist, obviously heavily influenced by Bill Sienkiewicz (I wonder if I spell it this way last time?) [*Don't ask me, I only edit the thing. --ed.*]. The book itself is about a young child's view of his life and his meetings with Al Capone's osteopath, through whose influence the boy's fairly normal childhood in 60s Britain and the lifestyle of gangsters in 20s Chicago are gradually brought together in some mystical sense. The artwork is both excellent and appropriate to the story, a number of effects being evoked purely visually. And while it is similar to Sienkiewicz's work, it is by no means identical. All in all, this is an eerie, unusual and interesting comic. Recommended even if you don't normally touch the things--although considering the price, non-collectors would probably be well advised to try and borrow a copy off somebody rather than buy.

Neal Tringha