

FEAR

👁️ HORROR 👁️ FANTASY 👁️ SCIENCE FICTION 👁️

EXCLUSIVE

**ANTHONY
HOPKINS
Breaks his
Silence**

**Stan Lee's
WEB OF
MARVELS**



**PUPPETMASTER II
Out of the
toy box**

**GARY BRANDNER
Tooth and Claw**

Reviews 👁️ Competitions 👁️ Fiction



As the days grow longer and the planet moves closer to the sun in a desperate attempt to throw off winter gloom and despondency, it's only natural that a magazine whose sap is rising as fast as its readership should turn its mind to spring.

Lambs, as well as being tasty, are pretty damn seasonal. Is it a coincidence we wonder that this is the time of year that Anthony Hopkins chose to break his silence and talk about *The Silence Of The Lambs*? Coincidence or not, it sounds like a bleating good film to us. A shame that we couldn't organize the sachet of mint sauce as a free giveaway on the cover.

In ancient religions and legends, spring is a time of mystic rebirth, a time to take stock and press ahead - it's a time of optimism. And slotting into that mythic theme we have Charles de Lint talking about shamanism and folklore in *Greenmantle*.

Spring cleaning is on the agenda for some, and to help you blow away the winter cobwebs we've got an interview with Spider-Man creator, Stan Lee. And just as the buds are poised to burst, we've got all our usual goodies ready to burst out of our pages and bloom deep in your minds . . .

FEAR

ISSUE 28

APRIL 1991

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There's only one thing worse than a woman's wrath and that's a women's wrath that's been built into a psycho android. JB Macabre reports from the front line.

Duncan Gibbins obviously doesn't have much truck with the old line about women being the gentler sex. In his forthcoming *Eve Of Destruction*, for example, it's a woman who constructs an android for the army and makes it in her own image too - whatever happened to domesticity and the mothering instinct?

During a test of Eve VIII, the android's programming is damaged and its secret battlefield mode is locked into position. Dr Eve Simmons, played by Dutch actress Renee Soutendijk, has not only created this hi-tech machine, endowing it with human characteristics, the good doctor has also programmed the android with her own personal history. Burdened with the doctor's repressed sexuality and childhood traumas seething in its electric psyche, Eve VIII begins a mission to avenge all the wrongs of her architect's past. The ultimate solution to the problems - wholesale destruction.

Counter-insurgency expert Jim McQuade, played by Gregory Hines, is called upon by the government to seek out and terminate the deviant android. Dr Simmons joins McQuade on his cross-country quest, and a jolly time is had by all.

The film is directed by Duncan Gibbins and produced by David Madden, from a script by Gibbins and Yale Udoff. The film also features three-time Oscar nominee Peter Lamont as production designer and Alan Hume as director of photography.

'We really wanted to make a picture about a modern women,' said Yale Udoff, 'one who faces the same problem as many men who give up everything for their job. As she is mesmerized by her work, Eve becomes, in effect, less human.'

'Though the film involves a robot, it's actually about real characters and real people,' said director and co-author Gibbins. 'Essentially, it's about a woman's mind. Eve VIII gets the

chance to go back and do it all again - something we all wish we could do.'

Gibbins began his career as a BBC TV-reporter producing over 200 documentaries for the network. He then went on to direct several musical videos including, *Who's That Girl?* for the Eurythmics, *Wake Me Up Before You Go* for Wham and Glenn Frey's *The Heat is On*. His first feature film was *Fire With Fire*, in 1986. He cowrote the 1989 HBO film *Third Degree Burn* with Yale Udoff.

FANTASTIC REALISM

Producer David Madden said, 'I think we've struck a balance between a kind of fantastical story and a realistic, honest approach to what could happen if this premise became real. We've gone to great lengths to make all of the film's imagery authentic in terms of how the military operates and how they might, in fact, track such a situation.'

The leading man, Gregory Hines, found the chance to play counter-

Mothering instincts predominate for Renee Soutendijk (above). 'Straight laced and mission orientated' Gregory Hines (right) is McQuade



THE WORLD OF FEAR

EVE OF DESTRUCTION

insurgency specialist McQuade an intriguing challenge. 'Unlike the loose, likeable guys I usually play, this character is much more straight-laced and mission orientated.'

Playing the startlingly diverse and divers roles of scientist and android is Renee Soutendijk who was eager to have the opportunity to take on the dual role. 'Eve VIII is an extreme character, by turns unpredictable, and sexy, while Dr Simmons is much truer to her emotions and, in the end, becomes more feeling and real.'

Madden considers Hines and Soutendijk the perfect team to play these intense characters. 'For McQuade, we wanted someone who was convincing as both a military marksman and had the athletic ability and physical power required for the part. Gregory brought a level of compassion and perspective to the role

that made McQuade a much smarter, more reflective kind of military character than ordinarily seen.

Renee has both the beauty and the acting talent to be sexy and terrifying as Eve VIII, but also possesses the innate intelligence and humanity to play a sophisticated scientist believably.'

While Hines and Soutendijk were hard at working creating their characters, production designer Peter Lamont was establishing the look of the film. Lamont started in the art department on the 1963 film *Goldfinger* and has moved up through the ranks to become production designer on *For Your Eyes Only*, *Octopussy* and *License To Kill*. Peter has been nominated for Academy Awards for his work on *The Spy Who Loved Me* and *Aliens*. In addition, his credits include *The Seven Percent Solution*, *The Boys From Brazil* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Eve Of Destruction should be invading your local video store in the next few months.

THE WORLD OF FEAR

HOT POPCORN

We always thought popcorn in the movies was just a light snack. JB Macabre corrects any possible misunderstandings.

A wild-eyed man with a dagger, a beautiful woman sacrificed on an altar, a young girl escaping through walls of flames, running for her life. These are the terrifying visions that unfold in Maggie's dreams night after night. Each morning she wakes and records these bits from her dreams. A dedicated film student at a local university, Maggie sees her dreams as material for a screenplay. However real and disturbing they seem, she believes that they are just strange ideas that have captured her vivid imagination.

As Maggie and a group of her fellow film students prepare to hold an all-night Horrorthon film festival to raise money for their department, they come across a mysterious film canister which contains a long-lost cult horror film, *Possessor*. As they watch the film, Maggie becomes disturbed as scenes from her nightmares unfold on the screen. The line between fantasy and reality blurs as she pursues the mystery of this film that may be the key to her nightmares.

Mark Herrier makes his feature film directing debut with *Popcorn*. The film was written by Tod Hackett, from a story by Mitchell Smith. Torben Johnke and Sophie Hurst produced

and Robert Clark handled the films special effects make-up. The film features four films within the main film that pay an offbeat homage to the horror and SF gimmick B films of the 50s and 60s. 'It's really *Phantom Of The Opera* meets *Ten Little Indians* in a B-movie festival,' said star Tom Villard. 'It's a really good scary movie that



creeps into your dreams at night.'

Popcorn has been described by many as a roller coaster ride, as the action moves from the naïve, happy mood of the students preparing for their festival of horror movies, to terror and suspense as unknown, invisible powers begin to create havoc among the students and audience in

LARCENY, LOVE AND LASERS

February 7, 1991 was the day that mortars fell on No. 10

Downing Street and a blizzard blanketed London. It was also the day that a brand new bookshop opened on Charing Cross Road.

Murder One incorporating New

Worlds and Heart Lines is the idea of writer and publisher Maxim Jakubowski. 4,000 square feet of shop makes for a light and airy display of a comprehensive selection of genre books: crime and mystery; romantic fiction; and science fiction and fantasy. The only problem is that the SF's downstairs and to get to it you have to skirt dangerously close to the romantic fiction section!

The Murder One, New Worlds and Heart Lines megastore can be found at 71-71 Charing Cross Road, London WC2.

performances, Tom Villard plays the burned and disfigured Toby. For the film's final scenes, Villard spent six to eight hours a day in make-up. Robert Clark oversaw the precise operations of applying the prosthetics to create Toby's burned face.

'The masks had to be created so they could be put on and taken off quickly on camera by Villard in a completely realistic fashion in order for the audience to fully believe in and become caught up in the scene,' said co-producer Hurst. 'The unique make-up design and prosthetics include the loose floppy ears on Toby's head. This effect is highly realistic because it appears as though Toby's real face is a mask.'

'I'm proud of those scenes,' said Villard in regards to the scenes where his character wears several different masks. 'We shot them on and off for about three weeks. It took extraordinary co-ordination and patience, but I think the results are pretty seamless.'

'The word trooper doesn't begin to define what a wonderful, charming, patient actor Tom Villard is,' said Mark Herrier. 'I can't think of another actor who would go through what he went through — sometimes enduring eight to ten hours in the make-up chair and three make-up changes in a day — and still be so energetic that he lifts everyone else's spirits on the set and gives a great performance, to boot.'

To find the film's Grand Old Movie Palace, The Dreamland Theater, the cast and crew spent nine and a half weeks shooting in Jamaica. The Ward Theatre in Kingston served as the principle set. Built in the mid-1800s it is still a legitimate theatre. However, filming in Jamaica did have its challenges.

'Jamaica isn't exactly Hollywood,' said Clark. 'And they don't have all the technical knowledge or equipment we always needed to do our effects. But, I must say, they always came up with substitute or make-shift parts which enables us to do very sophisticated things. For example, I needed a very strong plaster and went to a dental lab there, hoping to find something. The dentist convinced me that this particular plaster he had was tough stuff, by grabbing a pair of teeth and demonstrating its strength to me.'

Popcorn is released in the US by Studio Three Film Corporation.

the theatre,' said producer Torben Johnke.

MUTANT MONSTER MOSQUITO

Each victim meets their end as a result of something to do with the Horrorthon. In *Mosquito*, shown in 3D, an eight-foot replica of a giant mutant mosquito runs amok, impaling its operator. *Attack Of The Amazing Electrified Man*, shown in *Shockscape*, has one of the film students getting the biggest shock of all. Rounding out the bill is *The Stench*, shot in Aromarama.

'We had a lot of fun making those movies,' remarked Robert Clark, special effects make-up supervisor. 'We were really free to create outrageous effects because those movies were purposefully off-beat. It allowed us to do lots of interesting things.'

The film features a very impressive cast list. It stars Jill Schoelen (*The Stepfather*), Tom Villard (*Heartbreak Ridge*), Dee Wallace Stone (*ET*), Derek Rydall (*Night Visitor*) and special appearances by Ray Walston (*My Favourite Martian*) and Tony Roberts (*Serpico*).

Though all the stars are put through their paces and turn in fine

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HOWLING SUCCESS

Tooling up with silver bullets and keeping a wary eye out for full moons, David Whitehead went out in search of Gary Brandner — lycanthrophile and prolific author.

Although he didn't begin writing fiction until he was well into his 30s, Gary Brandner — now rightly regarded as one of the horror genre's most consistently reliable shock-masters — has been extraordinarily productive during the past 20 years. Today, he can lay claim to a body of work that includes almost 30 novels (*The Howling*, *Walkers*, *Carrion*, and so on), 60 short stories and several screenplays, with the promise of more to come in all three spheres.

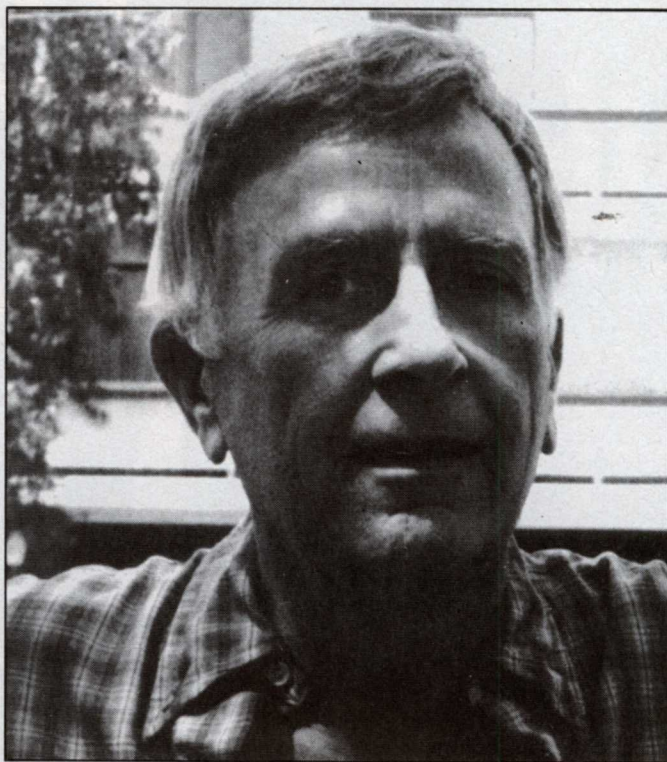
Born in Sault Saint Marie, Michigan, on May 31, 1933, Brandner knew a somewhat nomadic childhood. 'What I remember most about my early life is moving from town to town. My father worked for the US Forest Service and was frequently being transferred. I lived in a dozen different cities before I was ten.'

As the perpetual new kid in town, Gary spent a lot of time playing alone. 'I made up games and imaginary companions, a practice I put to use later in fiction.'

He received a BA in journalism from the University of Washington in Seattle, but the Korean War intervened before he could fulfill his ambition to become a sports writer. Serving with a coastal artillery battalion at Port Angeles, he rose swiftly through the ranks. It may not sound glamorous now, as Gary concedes, but when you remember that no enemy troops ever came ashore from Puget Sound, you can understand why he is proud of the time he spent in uniform.

'I had always done some form of writing. Journalism, advertising, technical writing, but I didn't try my hand at fiction until I was in my 30s. The reason is that there was a lull in the aerospace industry where I was working at the time. I had a bit of money saved up, and no responsibilities other than my cat. It seemed like a good idea to take a year and see if I could sell anything.'

He was lucky. Within a couple of months he started selling short stories. 'At my reduced scale of living, they kept me going for a while.'



WEREWOLF REVOLUTION

Gary also wrote half a dozen mainstream novels and a couple of straight thrillers before he settled down to scaring people, but although these early novels (which include *Saturday Night In Milwaukee*, *The Aardvark Affair* and *The Beelzebub Business*) never made the bestseller lists, his revolutionary 1977 werewolf novel, *The Howling*, did — in no uncertain terms.

The story — which revolves around a weird town called Drago, which is a haven for lycanthropes — was given a further boost when Daniel H Blatt bought the film rights a few years later and turned it into what many now consider to be the definitive werewolf movie.

'*The Howling* was a fine movie. It was scripted by John Sayles and directed by Joe Dante, with no real input from me, unless you want to consider writing the original book an input. Joe Dante, for one, apparently did not. Nevertheless, I like it, and never deny my participation, however marginal.'

He does, however, consider the parade of movie sequels embarrassing. 'I admit to having written the first draft of the *Howling II* screenplay, finally bailing out when they changed the locale from Mexico to Spain to Transylvania, wanted Fernando Rey in, then out, added Christopher Lee and apparently decided to spend about 12 dollars on special effects,' the author explains with a shake of his head. 'And those that have followed aren't a whole lot better. *Howling V*

Gary Brandner loves the company of wolves

somehow managed to be a werewolf story without a werewolf. *Howling VI* is now in production (and about to be released on video through Palace), and *Howling VII* is under option.'

Gary continues to get a 'Based on' credit for these, but so far he has not been asked to contribute. He has, of course, continued the saga in two novel sequels, *Howling 2: The Return* and *Howling 3: Echoes*. 'After that I thought I'd retired from the werewolf business. But just lately I've been getting the urge to pick up the story once more and see what might have happened to my characters.'

MONSTROUS INFLUENCE

Although Gary doesn't wish to remain known solely as a horror author (his previous novels also include a Wimbledon story entitled *The Players* and the acclaimed oil-drilling saga *Offshore*), the monstrous has continued to influence his work, as evidenced by such mass-market winners as *Cat People*, *Hellborn*, *The Brain Eaters*, *Quintana Roo*, and *Floater*. His 1980 novel, *Walkers* (aka *Death Walkers*), even picked up an honourable mention in the prestigious *West Coast Review Of Books*.

He writes to a set routine, beginning each day at nine o'clock, breaking for lunch at one, resuming work at two and writing through until five. Not all of this time is spent tapping away at

the WP, though. 'A lot of it is just staring up at the ceiling, although for me that, too, is a form of writing, even if you do have to convince your loved one that you're not just goofing off!'

Gary and his wife live in Northridge, California, a location he finds convenient for his involvement with the movie business. He is quick to point out, though, that he is first and foremost a novelist, and that his involvement with the movies is only peripheral. 'I actually appeared in one film, a picture called *Satan's Storybook*, with Ginger Lynn Allen, but mainly I've adapted my own books, notably *Howling II*, with execrable results, and *Cameron's Closet*, which I thought was not half-bad.'

His 1988 shocker *Floater* also had the movie option bought. 'Floater came close to being a movie. The rights were sold to Empire Pictures and I was assigned to do the screenplay. Tobe Hooper, the *Texas Chainsaw* man, was going to direct. We were well into the first draft, and building a rare rapport between director and writer, when the Writers' Guild went on strike. For several months I was prevented from working on it or any other script, and since delivery was delayed, the production money pulled out and the project was abandoned.'

BORN

Owning a restaurant can be very useful as John Gilbert found out when he talked to Michael Elphick about garlic and vampire motorcycles.

Few restaurateurs would willingly loan their premises out to a low budget crew who wanted to shoot fight sequences, and the producers of *I Bought A Vampire Motorcycle* might have had problems had not one of their stars also been a restaurateur.

Fortunately, Michael Elphick, who is primarily known for his portrayal of that roguish motorcycle despatch rider Ken Boon in the ITV series, had no reservations about playing the garlic-chewing Inspector Cleaver in the low budget shocker, or allowing his restaurant to be used in the brawl between a motorbike gang

UK PUBLISHERS

For too long now, Gary has been conspicuous by his absence on the UK book scene. Severn House has been reissuing some of his earlier novels in impressive hardcover editions, but both *Floater* and Gary's latest novel, *Doomstalker*, have yet to find a British publisher.

'I hope to become more visible again in the UK sometime soon. But at the moment I'm in the sticky process of changing both literary agent and American publisher. When the kinks are worked out here, I can turn my attention to foreign publication. Meantime, I'm very happy with the look of the Severn House editions.'

Asked about *Doomstalker*, Gary Waxen enthusiastic. The book is a demonic, multi-layered thriller which many American critics are already proclaiming as his best work. It's about small towns and friendship, marital strife and the generation gap, religion versus demonology, sex, identity and fear of the past. It's about the ugliness of graffiti, the unevenness of criminal justice, and the taste of Mexican food. It's probably one of my darkest stories, and although it ends on a hopeful note, my protagonist, an LA cop named Brian Kettering, has to endure some godawful experiences, both real and metaphysical, to get there.

It has been suggested that Gary bring Kettering back for a sequel, although he has no such plans. At the moment, he is working on a new horror novel tentatively entitled *Rot*, but



A made-to-order belt buckle started the snowball of success rolling for the intriguingly named Somerset-based Bulldog Buckle Company. Owned and run by two brothers, Graham and Simon Lane, it was formed towards the end of last year when, after months of research, they discovered that, while there was a massive selection of American buckles available, the British market remained untapped.

Their bulldog motif was created when a Marine entered their shop and complained about the lack of British buckles. They asked him what would go down well, he thought for a moment and said, 'What I want is a buckle like this...' Lifting up the

sleeve of his T-shirt, he displayed a beautifully tattooed Bulldog. This set the ball rolling with six distinctive Bulldog buckles, a Rick Wakeman buckle to promote his tours, a Ninjutsu buckle for their association, and, of course, the first edition of four Dragon buckles in the Dragon's Lair range.

The company has also produced a range of matching Dragon's Lair T-shirts, each of which features a different full-colour design. They are also in the process of creating a new series of products. For more information on the new range contact: The Bulldog Buckle Co, 10 The Bridge, Taunton, Somerset TA1 1UG.

at this stage prefers not to give too much away.

'I would tell you about it,' he says

with a laugh, 'but I always remember Hemingway's advice: 'If you talk about it, it goes away.'

TO BE WILD

and co-star Neil Morrissey - who also co-stars in *Boon*. 'A lot of it was filmed at the White Swan which is my place in Henley. They used the big banqueting hall, and fortunately nothing got broken.'

Some critics were unkind enough to say that Elphick could have broken his career on the wheel of this particular 'cycle, but Elphick formed the same opinion as the film's fans and didn't need to be inveigled into making the movie by the writer Michael Miller or director Dirk Campbell, both of whom he knew from his work on *Boon*. 'Michael gave me the script and I found it very interesting. I don't think he actually wrote it for me but since we were all involved in *Boon* they asked me to do it. It was a laugh: nothing deeper.'

The last response is by way of explaining that he is not a horror fan, although his film credits include a brief appearance in Gordon Hessler's 1970 chiller *Cry Of The Banshee*, and he was very surprised that it garnered the rave response from most of the audiences who saw it at Black Sunday or during a limited theatrical release last year. 'I was very surprised, but then I saw it with an audience of students in Birmingham one night and they



raved about it.'

After the release of *I Bought A Vampire Motorcycle* from Braveworld this month, Elphick can be seen among a British cast in the movie musical *Buddy's*

Song, which also stars Chesney Hawkes and Roger Daltrey, and a new series of *Boon* which starts later this month. 'It'll take most of the year up because it goes on until November.'

SNIP! SNIP!

- Gollancz and Radio 4's Bookshelf programme are running a competition for new fantasy writers. The competition, which closes on July 31, 1991, is open to anyone who has not had a fantasy novel published. The first prize is £4,000 plus publication of your novel. Would-be fantasists should write for an entry form and competition details to: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 14 Henrietta Street, London WC2E 8JQ.
- This year's Mexican at Harrogate is scheduled to include a 'scratch' performance of sexual texts within and outside of SF. Colin Greenland, M. John Harrison, Simon Ings and Geoff Ryman are set to tread the boards. Music and sets courtesy of Dave McKean if he can find the time.



David Lynch

- David Lynch's new movie is *One Tiny Saliva Bubble*. He has just finished work on *The Cabinet of Dr Ramirez* and intends to produce yet another series of *Twin Peaks*. We just can't wait - but we'll have more info in a month or two.
- Pan is pinning its horror hopes on first time novelist Graham Joyce. The Coventry-born writer's first novel, *Dreamside*, is published in May and features an attempt to harness the power of dreams with disastrous results.
- John Carpenter's next film will be a remake of the Universal classic *Creature From The Black Lagoon*. Alien creator HR Giger will produce the new *Creature*. The movie will form part of a series of Universal monster movies which already includes Clive Barker's *The Mummy*.

THE GREY ROSE BLOOMS

Genre crossing is a neat trick - when it works. Charles de Lint has no problems on that score, reports John Gilbert.

The storytelling lyrics of folk music lie at the tender heart of Charles de Lint's fictions. He grew into adulthood as a musician, as opposed to a writer, doing Celtic music which is not so well known over here in Canada. I spent 14 years in a band and worked in a record store before I fell into writing. I ran across a guy called Charles Saunders who wrote African fantasies and he got me more enthused in writing than I had ever been, and got me to submit things to small press magazines.

His first professional sale was a short story called 'The Fane Of The Grey Rose' published in *The Swords Against Darkness* from Zebra Books. 'I realized that I could make a living doing this. I wrote a couple of novels before sending anything out and I sold my first books during one stretch

FILMS WITH A VENGEANCE

Plans are underway for the Society of Fantastic Films 1991 Festival. This year's theme is British fantasy, horror and SF movies. Guest of honour is Brian Clemens (*The Avengers*, *Captain Kranos*, and *Dr Jekyll And Sister Hyde*). Further guests have yet to be announced.

The venue will be the Trusthouse Forte Excelsior Hotel, Manchester Airport from October 4 to October 6, 1991. For tickets and/or further information contact: Society of Fantastic Films, 95 Meadowgate Road, Salford M6 8EN.



in 1983.'

The Dutch-born Canadian sold three of those novels in two weeks. 'The first few books were high fantasy, and then my wife suggested that I try something contemporary. I did one draft of another book which didn't work out and then I did *Moonheart*.'

De Lint's considerable experience as a folk singer came into play when judging the style of the novel. 'I had the idea of juxtaposing mythic matter with the modern world and that would exaggerate what was happening in the real world.'

Although de Lint is a renowned fantasy, horror and SF writer in the States, Pan decided to launch his British career with *Moonheart* and *Greenmantle*, which combine organized crime, shamanistic fantasy, rites of passage and romance. The reason is not immediately apparent until you take a look at some of his covers and discover the horrors of typecasting within the American publishing industry. 'When you've written a few high fantasies they decide that you're a high fantasy writer. No matter how modern you get, they still see you as a high fantasy writer. In America, the cover for *Greenmantle* has a picture of Conan the Barbarian with a deer's head on it!' Some readers do, however, get past this high fantasy packaging. 'People have come up

to me and said, I don't normally read this stuff, but I read your book because I like to read suspense.'

PARALLEL MYTHS

Indeed, *Greenmantle*, his latest British release, has had its fair share of stereotype trouble. The novel contains very little fantasy but his publishers wanted him to take all the organized crime elements out. The book would not have survived, but fortunately de Lint's arguments, that the image of the mafia portrayed in *Greenmantle* ran in parallel with the myths perpetrated by the book's central Mystery, won against the opposition. 'The mafia in *Greenmantle* resembles the real thing,' he laughs cautiously, 'the mafia in my book is a romanticized version. I also wanted to get across its amorality.'

Greenmantle also shows that even the most vicious of characters can change for the better given the right circumstances. In this case an ex-mafia hitman, on the run from his former bosses, yearns to become part of a one parent family which has moved into his lonely neck of the woods. 'When working on a book or story, the characters have to change to some degree: that's the whole point of reading a book. I didn't play up his background too much, but one of the points of the novel

is that his experience with the Mystery made him change.'

Although the characters within *Greenmantle* get heavily involved with the Mystery (or Green Man) and its surrounding mystique, de Lint purposefully distances himself from any pagan or shamanistic practices. 'I'm not involved in either: it's just a story to my mind. When I'm writing a contemporary book and I want to have somebody involved with the occult, I don't have to be interested in anything to do with mystery or the old practices.'

That said, his upcoming British releases are all steeped in folklore. 'The next one coming out is *The Arrow*, and I think that'll be in 1992. It's a contemporary fantasy with dream motifs and a vampire figure who feeds off people's creativity rather than blood. My newest book out here is called *The Little Country*, and it should be published in Britain in 1995 - it's set in Cornwall. I've also done some stories for the Marvel comic book anthology *Open Spaces*, and just sold Pan three more books. They include *Spirit Walk*, which is a sequel to *Moonheart*, and *Mulengro* in which some of the characters are gypsies.'

It sounds as if the growing army of de Lint fans will be well nourished during the next decade.

WYRD SISTERS TREAD THE BOARDS

Terry Pratchett has authorized an Oxford amateur drama group's request to produce a stage version of *Wyrd Sisters*. The production, by Oxford's Studio Theatre Club will be staged from May 15 to 18 at the Unicorn Theatre in Abingdon.

Previous plays put on by the club have included Monty Python's *Holy Grail* and *Life Of Brian* plus Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue* and *Blott On The Landscape*. Pratchett's humorous fantasy seems to follow on quite naturally.

At the time of going to press, the club's secretary, Stephen Briggs, was hoping that Terry Pratchett would be able to attend the first night.

For further information and ticket enquiries contact Stephen Briggs on 0865 69625.

HORRORSNOW



What better place to site a hotbed of sleaze and depravity than the cooling snows of Avoriaz. FEAR's Nigel Floyd reports on the local fantasy film festival.

Winding up the steep, dark mountain road, it was impossible to gauge what kind of a place Avoriaz — venue for the 19th Festival of Films Estrange et Fantastique — would prove to be. When I flung back my curtains next morning, however, the view was breathtaking. Perched 2000 feet up on the French/Swiss border, it was an incongruous but magnificent setting for a film festival.

It wasn't until later that I thought of the snow-bound Overlook Hotel setting for *The Shining*. There was no axe-wielding Jack Nicholson, though, and no maze — although the mysterious system devised by the press office for contacting visiting directors featured a lot of dead ends.

But that was after a *Night Of The*
12 April 1991 FEAR

Living Dead. Given that such a remake is at best dubious and at worst utterly redundant, it wasn't half bad. Although the use of colour and state-of-the-art make-up effects add little, Romero's revamped script beefs-up the character of Barbara, adds further complexity to the tense relationships within the besieged house, and introduces some powerful scenes to the already apocalyptic ending. As my good friend Kim Newman remarked as we slid back to the hotel, 'This is what we came for, right? Flesh-eating zombies, disembowelling and gruesome death.' I had to agree.

PURGATORY

After a disturbed night's sleep, I emerged next morning to see Charles Winkler's *Disturbed*, which — like many of the best films — was shown out of competition. A dark comic tale with a predictable plot but plenty of nice touches, it featured a wonderfully deranged performance from Malcolm McDowell as a perverted shrink whose past professional misdemeanours come back to haunt him. Less predictable but more patchy was John Harrison's surprise Grand Prix winner *Tales From The Darkside*, an anthology movie based on stories adapted by George Romero from Stephen King (*Cat From Hell*), and by Michael McDowell from Arthur Conan Doyle (Lot 249). McDowell also contributed the neat wraparound story, plus an original and involving tale of his own, 'Lover's Vow'.

The broad spectrum of films avail-

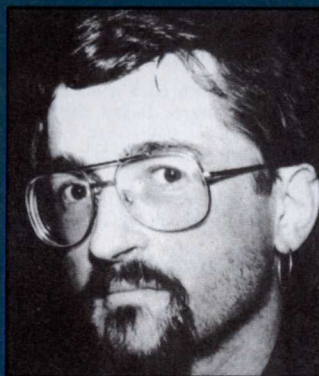


able was typified by *Lovers Beyond Time*, a Greek soft-core porno movie masquerading as a time-travel mystery, and by *The Time Of Miracles*, a religious allegory about a Christ-like figure who appears after Nazi soldiers invade and desecrate a village church. Equally borderline was Otakar Votocek's *Wings Of Fame* — winner of

Fun and frolics (above) in the snow at Avoriaz. Meanwhile, Malcolm McDowell gets to grips with *Tales From The Darkside*

FIRST AMONG EQUALS

Arthur C Clarke Award-judge David V Barrett runs through the short list of contenders with not a hint of bias before the decision day later this month.



Pat Murphy and Colin Greenland

The novels shortlisted for the Arthur C Clarke Award this year are a very diverse bunch. Three are by British writers, three by Americans, and they're all from different publishers (though Grafton has taken over Unwin since these books were published).

To avoid any hint of favouritism, I'll run through the six books in alphabetical order of author, starting with the three Brits. *Use Of Weapons* (Orbit) is Iain M Bank's third novel set in the Culture, a far future interstellar society. Diziet Sma, of the Culture's Special Circumstances department (imagine a cross between M16 and the SAS), has a job for her best freelance agent, Cheradenine Zakalwe. But first she has to track him down and persuade him to take it.

Banks follows Sma and Zakalwe through their current mission, while in alternate chapters tracing back from the present through Zakalwe's own tortured past. Why is Zakalwe the way he is? Does Sma really know as much about him as she thinks she does? This is a story of diplomacy and violence, double-dealing, intrigue and love; complex and powerful.

LARGER THAN LIFE

Mary Gentle's *Rats And Gargoyles* (Bantam) is a baroque drama set on a world which has enough similarities to our own to be unsettling, but where the ruling class are human-sized, sword-bearing, upright rats, and humans serve them. Both races also serve a group of 36 god-demons with some unpredictable and particularly unpleasant habits. This is a world where the gods walk the earth and where magic is real.

Into this strange setting come the White Crow, otherwise known as the Scholar Soldier Valentine, and her former lover, the massive and uncouth Lord Architect Balthazar Casaubon. The novel is very much based on Renaissance hermetic philosophy, but despite that — or maybe because of it — is full of colourful, larger than life,

and down and around the building, held to its surface by grappling hooks, pursued by the most vicious gang of them all — because when you mess with a gang, they're gonna get you. This is a good fast adventure story in an unusual setting, and with sufficient nastiness to keep Jeter's horror fans happy.

ART ATTACK

Red Spider White Web by Misha (Morrigan) is also violent, and even more unusual. It's set in a not-too-distant future America where the options for artistic street people are to work in a deadly factory or to take their chances on the streets of Ded-Tek. And the streets are full of danger and viciousness, people and things out to get you; drugs, viruses, police dogs, and murderers.

Kumo is one artist trying to keep herself alive while also designing and selling her holographic work in the Market. Can she trust her fellow artists when survival is more important than friendship, and when one of them has such mental and electronic powers that he is a god to the people of Mickey-san, the sterile city devoted to entertainment that lies at the heart of Ded-Tek? This is a strange, nightmarish, compelling book.

Finally, Pat Murphy's vision of near-future America, *The City, Not Long After* (Pan), while also containing its dose of violence, has a dream-like beauty. San Francisco is deserted by its old population; it has become home and plaything for a bunch of wonderfully creative artists.

To the city comes a young woman who is searching for her dead mother, for her name, and for a fulfilment she does not understand. But as in most post-collapse worlds, a well-organized army is determined to increase its territory. How can the city, and a bunch of artists, defend themselves against a brutal invading power, without giving up their own peaceful ideals? Strangely, is how, with great fun and beauty, colour and poetry.

So, here are six very different novels, encompassing traditional science fiction forms, fantasy and horror — and between them, a goodly amount of humour. The judges (Neil Gaiman and Roz Kaveney for the Science Fiction Foundation, Cecil Nurse and myself for the British Science Fiction Association, and Professor George Teeling-Smith OBE for the International Science Policy Foundation) meet on Wednesday 20th March to make the final decision, under the watchful eye of Maxim Jakubowski, owner of Murder One, the new triple-genre bookshop on London's Charing Cross Road. The award will be presented that evening (after the blood has been cleared off the floor) by Arthur C Clarke's brother Fred, at the Groucho Club in Soho. We'll give you the results next month.

humorous characters and incidents.

With *Take Back Plenty* (Unwin) Colin Greenland proves that intelligent space opera is still possible in the 1990s. Tabitha Jute is basically a truck driver; but her truck is a rickety space barge with a dodgy drive. To get the money for repairs she takes on a bizarre bunch of passengers who quickly turn out to be more trouble than they're worth.

Greenland throws his characters into one risky situation after another — running from the police, kidnapping, space battles, being marooned on Venus — always escaping from almost certain death into an even more perilous position. Interspersed are Tabitha's reminiscences, in conversation with her ship-computer Alice — and there's more to Alice than meets the eye. This is warm, humorous, character-based space opera.

KW Jeter is better known for his horror than his SF, but *Farewell Horizontal* (Grafton) shows he is a power to be reckoned with in this genre as well. Ny Axter is a graffex — he puts violent pictures and icons on biofoil grafted onto the skin of gang members. But these gangs, and he, inhabit a vertical world: the outside surface of a many miles-high cylindrical building.

The novel follows Axter up

both the Prix de La Critique and the Prix Speciale du Jury Estrange. A witty meditation on the arbitrary nature of posthumous fame, it starts with celebrated actor Peter O'Toole being shot outside a movie theatre by an agitated Colin Firth, who is in turn killed by a falling spot-light. Transported across a misty river to a purgatorial hotel, they join a variety of artists, composers and writers whose continuing occupancy and quality of accommodation depends entirely upon how well the fame they enjoyed while alive has survived them after their demise. It was safe bet for the Critic's prizes, but not an inspired one.

Also in the running were a number of films seen here some time ago, including *Two Evil Eyes*, *Warlock* and *Hardware*, which won the Prix des Effets Speciaux I assumed would go to either *Nightbreed* (winner of the Prix Speciale du Jury Fantastique) or Adrian Lyne's flashily vacuous *Jacob's Ladder* — which had to be content with the Prix Fantastique and Prix du Public. The late night shows suffered from a similar problem, familiar titles like *Meet The Feebles*, *Henry: Portrait Of A Serial Killer* and *Frankenhooker* playing alongside the festival's most degenerate offering, Greek director Nikos Nikolaidis's *Singapore Sling*. Tenuously related to Otto Preminger's classic film noir, *Laura*, this wildly pretentious piece of unremitting sleaze (due to show at London's Scala cinema in late Spring) featured incomprehensible dialogue, insane over-acting, gross eating scenes, bondage, electric shock treatment, and simultaneous sex and vomiting. A collector's item if nothing else.

VETERAN SURREALIST

In between times, I ran into *Hardware* director Richard Stanley and veteran surrealist Alejandro Jodorowsky, before snatching interviews with Malcolm McDowell, Charles Winkler, John Harrison and the wonderful Larry Cohen, whose latest slice of urban paranoia, *Ambulance*, was the best film on offer. Shown out of competition, it continues Cohen's fascination with the transformation of familiar and benign things into the stuff that nightmares are made of. Comic artist Eric Roberts sees a beautiful young diabetic woman taken away in an old-fashioned ambulance; but when he later tries to find her, he can find no trace. The police don't buy it but Roberts and his cantankerous old sidekick, ex-press photographer Red Buttons, are on the case. Pacy, funny and marvellously played, it would have cleaned up if shown in competition.

Perhaps the odd decisions made by the prize-giving jury (which also included Cohen, Jodorowsky, Volker Schlöndorff and Michel Legrand) can be explained by the last-minute replacement of chairman Brian de Palma by a clearly unhappy Michael Cimino.

At the award ceremony, Cimino revealed that he had abstained from voting, 'in order to allow the others the freedom to make the choice on their own, without any attempt to influence them because of the type of films I make, which are very different.'

THE WORLD OF FEAR

DRIVEN TO DIST

More hoots than a barn full of owls, more roaring good fun than a pride of lions breaking out the nitrous oxide, more barking mad than a pack of beagles in an asylum . . . **FEAR**, in association with **JB Macabre**, presents the stateside low down on Dan Aykroyd's latest chilling cut of celluloid comedy.

Taking a short-cut through the back roads of small town America is nightmare enough, but it can also get spooky if you get lost on a decaying, crumbling road. And then some hick bastard cop appears and demands to see your license. In a wickedly comic vision of every driver's worst nightmare, writer-director-star Dan Aykroyd follows just such a scenario for one particular group of travellers.

Chevy Chase plays Chris Thorne, a Manhattan stock market whiz on his way to Atlantic City for a Saturday business seminar. Along for the ride in his slick new BMW are the lovely attorney Diane Lightston (Demi Moore), Fausto (Taylor Negron), and his sister Renalda (Bertila Damas). Taking a detour off the New Jersey Turnpike, the four quickly find themselves in a decaying village: Valkenvania.

Missing a stop sign lands Chris in the court of the 106-year-old Alvin Valkenheiser. Valkenheiser has a special place in his heart for bankers and businessmen because of the way they turned his home town into a waste dump simmering with toxic fumes. Valkenheiser, the judge, finds Chris, a banker, guilty of his traffic violation and sentences him to death.

Behind the Judge's home are his instruments of justice. These two lethal weapons are affectionately known as Mr Bonestripper and Miss Gradentine.

'This is an American Gothic comedy based on the distinctive myth of the nightmare speed trap,' said Dan Aykroyd. People will say: where did



you come up with such a place? It's weird, crazy, bizarre. In fact, this type of environment is well-known to travellers of back roads, especially in the East, places and people like our Valkenvianians are not as far removed from actual life as one would think.'

SMOULDERING HEAPS

Valkenvania is a mythical product of real-life events. Aykroyd referred to a 1990 article published in *The New York Times* that outlined the fate of former coal-mining towns in the Northeast. Towns, abandoned as mining sites, later become dumping sites for toxic materials. The end results are that these peculiar environments of continuously smouldering heaps of tires and subterranean fires, burning in the abandoned mining shafts really exist.

'The look of the picture is a direct outgrowth of my personal observations and actual experiences,' said Aykroyd. 'New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania are states in which one finds old rambling houses that have seen better days - and magnificent dumps!'

'A couple of times, I've been stopped by small-town police and been taken several miles to the JP's residence. In one instance, the place was a circa-1980 clapboard mansion back in some dark old woods with rusting appliances in the front yard.

'The JP was a crazy 70-year-old woman whom the cop had to wake up at 2 a.m. She wasn't too happy at first, but then she started talking and kept me until I thought I'd never get away. This was 1978, but for years afterwards, I pondered that she could have dropped me through the floor and I might never have been seen again.

'In 1988, my brother Peter outlined an idea wherein carloads of yuppies randomly get pulled off the highway by a family of mechanics who cut their Mercedes and BMWs into pickup trucks and send the cars' inhabitants to a V8-driven device called the Bonestripper. A couple of days after Peter told me his concept, I began to write this screenplay, an enhanced recollection of my earlier experiences.'

STRETCHING THE LIMITS OF IMAGINATION

Aykroyd created a group of diverse, startling, and absurdly funny characters that stretched the limits of his comic and technical imagination. But it was special effects make-up artist David Miller who had the job of transforming the stars into the strangest looking human beings ever to show up in a comedy.

David Miller began his career as a

make-up artist at the age of 19. While apprenticing at several creature shops he worked on such films as *Dreamscape*, *Terminator* and *Cocoon*. His first film as supervisor of special effects make-up was Wes Craven's *Swamp Thing*.

That film resulted in him working with Craven on the original *Nightmare On Elm Street*, bringing to life the memorable Freddy Kruger. He also worked on *Nightmare V* and *Friday The 13th IV and V*.

In *Nothing But Trouble* Miller had to help Dan Aykroyd and John Candy play two different characters apiece, which required extensive make-up that had to be applied as quickly as possible. Producer Robert Weiss told Miller, 'Whatever you do, it's got to be great and you've got to be able to put it on in an hour!' Miller took up the challenge and mastered it. By incorporating some new designs into prosthetics, and having a few make-up rehearsals, David was able to turn Dan into the 106-year-old Judge within an hour. For the primitive mutants with good natures and gruesome faces, he built full-body suits that laced up the back and could be covered over with make-up.

Production designer, William Sandell, created the Judge's mansion, the town hall and all of Valkenvania. Sandell began his career as a kinetic

A GREMLIN IN THE WORKS

Gremlins 2 may have been one of the most successful films of last year, and seems likely to repeat the pattern on video as of this month, but at first, director Joe Dante didn't want to make it - and is even now moving into other areas with 'a small-scale comedy drama with kids'.

While the film company Warners Bros was keen to start work on a sequel immediately after hearing that the first movie was a success, Dante had his reservations. 'I was against it. We were still making *Gremlins* when they said that it was time to do a sequel. I couldn't believe it but they were persistent and I eventually said, 'why don't you do it yourself'. They tried and kept hiring different writers, but kept coming back to me on a regular basis.

'Finally, they came back four years later and said that I could do whatever I wanted. I said, 'let me hire my own writer'. After his experiences in the first film,

during which the brass at Warner Bros tried to interfere with the production, Dante was keen to have a free reign, and this time the powers that be kept their word.

This 'desire to meddle', as this director terms it, is natural within film companies. The sequel cost three times the amount of the original and, 'anyone who has laid out that kind of money would have the desire to meddle. In that sort of situation, you have to fight for every single thing, every concept you want to do.'

HORRIBLY CUTE

Dante agrees that *Gremlins* was a horror movie while his sequel plays the mainstream fantasy game, and it could be that which tempted former horror impresario, Christopher Lee to join the cast as the scientist whose attempts to investigate the Mogwi lead to another outbreak of gremlins. It has been suggested that Lee wanted to forget about his genre past and take on more mainstream roles. Dante disagrees. The man who is most famous as Hammer's *Dracula* is still interested in the horror and fantasy fields. 'He has simply attempted to go on in his career from a base where he felt

REACTION



Demi Moore (left) keeps strange company while Dan Aykroyd meets one of Mr Bonestripper's friends

sculptor and his first film work came as an assistant art director on Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*. His credits include such films as *Dead And Buried*, *RoboCop* and *Total Recall*.

The interior of the JP's house was built on two sound stages and Sandell and his staff scrounged every prop resource in town to fill the house with hundreds of living details. 'Like many of these old timers the JP accumulates stuff,' said Sandell. He'd had to figure out how to make a buck off anything, so he tends to collect things, waiting to turn them over. So the inside of the house is littered and layered with collections: clocks, radios, trophies, fix-

tures, dolls, bird cages, whatever caught his fancy.'

Nothing But Trouble is written, stars and marks the directional debut of Dan Aykroyd. The film also stars Chevy Chase, Demi Moore, John Candy and Taylor Negron. So, the next time you head off the highway trying to save some time, you might find a bizarre little town waiting and offering *Nothing But Trouble*.



he was stifled. He made a lot of pictures that are totally forgettable, but having worked with him I think he's a lot better than that.'

Remaining with the horror element in both *Gremlins* movies, Dante had a few choice words to say about the rivals — or rip-offs — for fans' affections. 'I saw part of *Critters*, and they were kind of cute. They used some of the ideas we cut out of *Gremlins*. I also saw part of *Ghoulies*, but it's best if I don't say anything about that.'

Gremlin fans may be sad to

hear that, as far as Dante is concerned, there will be no more *Gremlins* movies. 'We deliberately put so much into the second one so that it would be difficult to do or say anything else about the gremlins. I don't want to be accused of repeating myself.'

That certainly seems like laying down the law, but who knows, another four years may pass, Warner Bros might get restless again and Dante might again be offered a deal he cannot refuse.

John Gilbert

GULFS

It's amazing, the double standards which some people apply to life, and no more so than during a time of war. On one hand, the television networks are deleting comedies such as 'Allo 'Allo from the schedules (*come to think of it, that's not such a bad thing - it ought to be extended to peace time too*), refusing to review brilliant SF films such as *Miracle Mile* because of their themes and suggesting that sporting fixtures be cancelled because of the conflict in the Gulf.

On the other hand we have blanket, jingoistic, around the clock multimedia war coverage, promoting real life horror stories of rockets, bombs and chemical weapons. Add to that the behaviour of some companies who are using the conflict to increase newspaper circulations or cash-in on the sale of toys such as model Patriot missiles, and you have, to my mind a bunch of hypocrites and a shameful state of affairs.

Even I was drawn into the fray when a simple piece of PR fluff for Shaun Hutson's latest book was double-billed with a real war debate on Central Television. The interviewers had no idea of the horror genre, insisting, for their own aims, that Splatterpunk was the new wave of horror, and linking the real war with the gore inherent in some fiction. Was there a need for so much gratuitous fictional violence when such devastation was occurring in real life? After the studio debate we went back to the hospitality suite and watched yet more Central TV saturation of the war. Need I say more?

CONSTIPATED PROS

I congratulate the organizers of this year's London-based International Book Fair for choosing Joan Collins to open the show. It typifies the a-literate, marketing-led, strategy that some publishers take to selling their authors as 'product'.

The publicity blurb for the Fair is sombre and obviously pitched to portray the seriousness of the literary arts. You send the forms back and get your tickets to Olympia and an impressive, if expensive, directory of exhibitors. To be fair, the standholders are very helpful to journalists. You can talk to the company management, have a plastic half-cupful of gnat's piss, discover their latest literary purchases, and perhaps even meet a few of their authors. Sarcasm notwithstanding, it's a pretty good show and, until this year, I was all for it.

Two aspects of the 1991 Fair have changed my mind. Firstly, the appearance of Joan Collins, who will open the show and then tour the stands like a queen bee at the height of her literary powers. Forget that she has only written two negligible novels — I've taken the precaution of reading them both, so I can comment — but I start to steam when I realize just how many worthy writers there are to do the honours. Ms Collins is a well known, and quite good, actress, but asking her to open an International Book Fair is

like getting Shaun Hutson to present the Booker Prize. Full marks for performance but lacking something on the literary side — if we take the spectrum as being between Popular and Literary poles.

I do believe that Britain's greatest book event should have some respect for the talents of the writers. After all, that is what the publishers should be promoting, not cover packaging and posters. Yet, I sometimes wonder whether they have lost sight of the reason for their existence. Oh well, who knows? It could get worse. Next year the show might be opened by Ed the Duck — if he's back from his stint at the Olympic games.

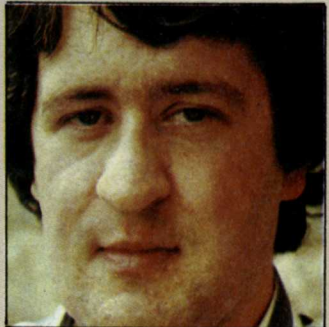
SOUND SUSPENSE

Radio gets my one and only piece of praise this month for the sterling work it has been doing in the promotion of the fantasy genres.

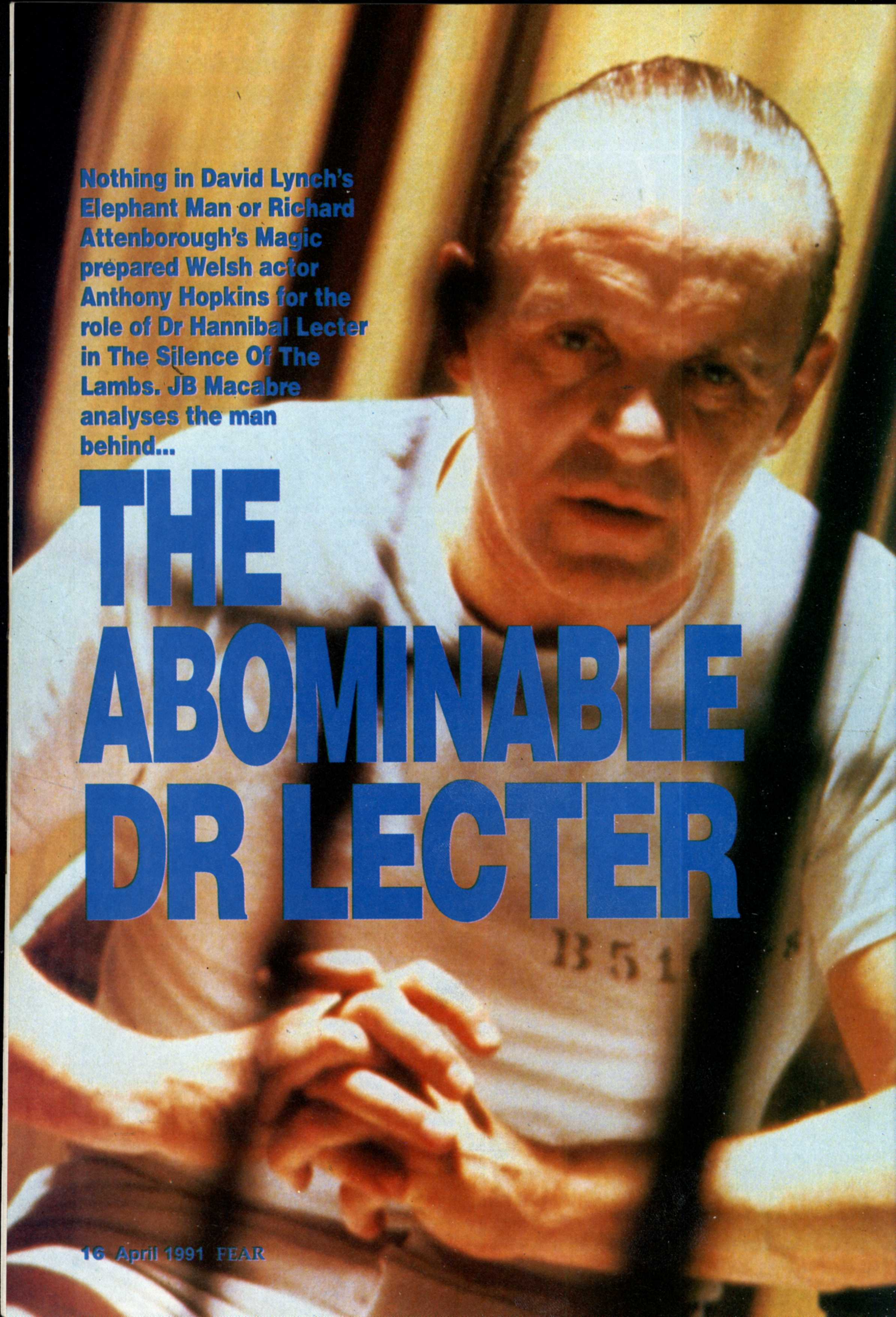
I still believe that radio can be as effective as film or television, and that it portrays atmosphere like no other medium. Time and again it has been proven that sitting near a radio in the near dark and listening to a ghost story with OTT sound effects will ice up the nervous system.

Fortunately, the current crop of radio producers appear to agree with my view. The recently inaugurated Radio 5 has aired a children's fantasy series called *The Shaman's Stone* and recently transmitted a series of Ray Bradbury short stories from *The Golden Apples Of The Sun* in twice weekly half-hour slots. Radio 4 has just been featuring the return of the the Man in Black with *Fear On Four*, while, as I write this, JG Ballard is providing the *Morning Story* — again on Radio 4. Ghost stories are also popular on 4's drama slots, and, genre authors appear every now and then in *Bookshelf*. In non-fiction mode, *Kaleidoscope* is still one of the few programmes that takes horror/fantasy seriously, while *Women's Hour* is a fertile ground for interviews with the likes of Angela Carter.

So, what's the moral of my missive? Don't take your radio set for granted. It does more than hammer out hard rock all day. Pick up a paper and keep an eye on the sound schedules. You'll be surprised.



John Gilbert



Nothing in David Lynch's Elephant Man or Richard Attenborough's Magic prepared Welsh actor Anthony Hopkins for the role of Dr Hannibal Lecter in The Silence Of The Lambs. JB Macabre analyses the man behind...

THE ABOMINABLE DR LECTER

I think the most peculiar part about the character is his name - Lecter. Hannibal Lecter,' says Anthony Hopkins of his role as the infamous psychopathic psychiatrist in Thomas Harris's *The Silence Of The Lambs*.

'The Lecter sound. It started some kind of mechanism going in my brain. Lecter. I saw a black box, like a black clock, something black and shiny, something veneered, a lacquered black killing machine. The man is very mechanical. All the onomatopoeic associations of the name. I put the image together, and when I came from London to do it, I'd already decided on the physical nature of it.'

Hopkins began to know Lecter in a way that his creator, Thomas Harris, might. He was able to strip away all of Lecter's layers and see the real monster. 'The part came off the page into my brain. I knew the voice. I knew what he looked like. I don't know why,

manipulates people. I saw it in images, as I was learning my lines. He was a dark shadow. He was a bogyman!'

RED LIGHT

Lecter is a very demanding physical character. In one of the many scenes between FBI agent Starling (Jodie Foster) and Lecter, the camera remains on Hopkins for a long time. Hopkins looks into the lens and does not blink once. The viewer can feel the intensity and the physical command radiating from the screen.

'Discipline,' says Hopkins. 'Your eyes get dry, but you look at a spot in the camera, a little red light on the lens. Once you start doing that, you begin to feel slightly different, you feel the power of one's own obsession, the power in one's head. But as soon as the shot is over, you resume your normal psychology.'

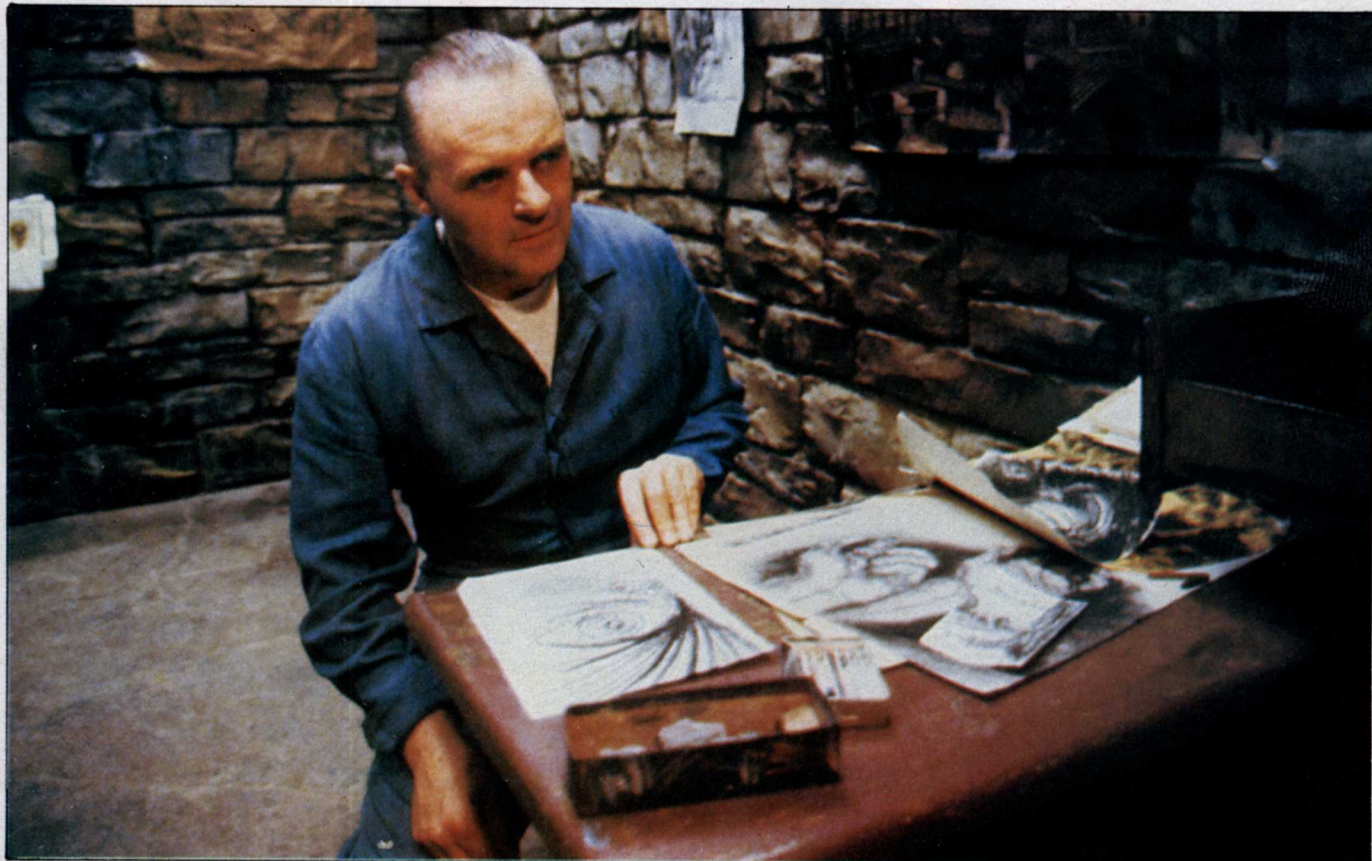
Hopkins also found the make-up useful in creating an atmosphere with which to draw

chance to play a game, to flirt with something that's so diabolical, knowing it's only fiction. During that scene where I was tearing the guy's face off, we had a rubber bone, and I had one end and he had the other.

'It is always at night, moonlight, doors flapping in the breeze, and I know some menace is in the house with me'

Jonathan would yell cut!, and I'd say, This is a hell of a way to make a living, isn't it?'

Overall, Hopkins found *The Silence of the Lambs* to be one of the most enjoyable experiences he's had in very long time. 'Working



but the impression was left in me of a kind of dark angel of death.

The Silence of the Lambs is a kind of dark fairy story. I wanted to make Lecter the devil

'I saw a black box, like a black clock, something black and shiny, something veneered, a lacquered black killing machine'

in his subterranean lair. There's a line in Tom Harris's book where Clarice looks into the eyes of night. Lecter is everyone's nightmare. He lives in the darkness. He controls and

Lecter out of himself and onto the screen. 'When I started to do the make-up it helped to create more of a chill, something slightly more supernatural. Bela Lugosi came to mind. I saw Dracula in the hall of his castle waiting for Jodie to arrive.'

The make-up was not Hopkin's only aid in bringing Lecter to life. Several years ago he went through troubled times, times at which he felt that he had encountered the nature of Lecter. 'I lived near the edge, very dangerously. I wanted to destroy myself and everything around me, and every so often I'd look down into the horror that I could unleash from myself. I was in a state of self-destructive mayhem, and I think that playing the part of Lecter was the same thing. It was like going into the cave with the monster, having a smell of it and coming out.'

With all the hard work and physical demands of the film, Hopkins was still able to have a good time. 'It was great fun, a great

with Jonathan Demme, a great director, and Jodie Foster, a great actress, it was easy to make this film. It was the happiest time I've had in years. I couldn't wait to get up in the morning and go to work. It wasn't work. I had fun! I used to creep up to people in the morning when they were having coffee and spook them.'

The film ends with Lecter once again at large. For Hopkins, Lecter will still have a place in his nightmares. 'When Lecter escapes, that's like something out of one's infancy, isn't it? When I was a child, I used to have this recurring dream. I'd come into the house at night, and the doors are already open and I don't know who is in the house, and I see doors open to the back garden. It is always at night, moonlight, doors flapping in the breeze, and I know some menace is in the house with me. That's the theory I have about Lecter.'

'That's what Lecter is exactly!'

THE SOUNDS O



In *The Silence Of The Lambs*, Harris exposes Clarice Starling, a young and intelligent FBI recruit, to the likes of Dr Lecter. Special Agent Jack Crawford assigns Starling to the Buffalo Bill case. In the hope of getting a lead on the serial killer, Starling is sent to try and recruit the assistance of sociopathic Lecter. Agent Crawford reminds her to remember the rules and advises her against telling Lecter anything personal. Armed with only her wits and an FBI questionnaire, she has to face Lecter and try to save a missing woman from the hands of a twisted killer.

Director Jonathan Demme began his film career working for Roger Corman's New World Pictures. In 1974, he made his directorial debut with *Caged Heat*. His film *Melvin And Howard* opened the 1980 New York Film Festival and won best picture from the National Society of Film Critics, the New York Film Critics' Best Picture award and Oscars for writer Bo Goldman and co-star Mary

Steenburgen. He went on to direct such films as *Something Wild*, *Married To The Mob* and recently produced *Miami Blues*. In addition he directed the Talking Heads concert film *Stop Making Sense*. When the offer to direct *Silence* came he pounced on the project.

FEMALE PROBLEMS

'Orion sent me the book and I started reading,' said Demme. 'I leapt at the chance to get involved with characters of such dimensions, and a story with so many complicated and interesting themes.'

Though extremely interested in the project, he saw it as much more than a film about serial killers. 'I was repelled by the idea of doing a film about a serial killer,' said Demme. 'I saw the films in terms of a woman protagonist at the forefront. A woman in jeopardy, and a woman on a mission. These are themes that have a tremendous appeal to me as

a movie goer, and as a director. Besides, I've always been a sucker for a woman's picture.'

The film stars Academy Award-winner Jodie Foster as Clarice Starling, Scott Glenn as Special Agent Jack Crawford and Anthony Hopkins as Dr Hannibal Lecter with Anthony Heald as Dr Frederick Chilton, and Ted Levine as the serial killer Buffalo Bill.

Hopkins brings an abundance of talent to the role of the intelligent sociopath, Dr Hannibal Lecter. His credits include such films as *Magic*, *The Elephant Man*, *The Good Father* and *Desperate Hours*.

THE SPIRIT OF LECTER

When Demme began his quest for Lecter, he felt it would take a very special actor to bring the character for his film to life. 'More than anything, I wanted to be loyal to Harris's spirit of Lecter from the novels and the script. You read

F SILENCE



them and get this certain feeling about Lecter which stands out., I think, certainly more so from all other characters in similar works of fiction. Now he's got to be on screen. Luckily, I was able to get Anthony Hopkins to bring him to life. He has the ability to project an extremely heightened intelligence, which is the key to Lecter. Words just roll off Tony's tongue. He knew exactly what had to be done.'

While working with Hopkins and Foster for the first time, the film reunites Demme with such actors as Scott Glenn and Charles Napier and production members like cinematographer Tak Fujimoto, production designer Kristi Zea, editor Craig McKay and costumes designer Colleen Atwood. The film also features cameos by such filmmakers as George Romero and Roger Corman.

'Roger is always busy working on his empire so that the only way I can get to see him is to offer him a role in a movie,'

Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn) doesn't get much out of a wired up Lecter, but Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) has plenty to say

said Demme. 'Not only am I fond of Roger, but he was good as the senator in Coppola's *Godfather II* and the factory owner in *Swing Shift*.

'When we came to Pittsburgh I called George. You've got to call the King when you come to town. Later, I wondered if we could get George to do a cameo, so I called him and he came on in.'

The Silence Of The Lambs is being released in the UK by Rank at the end of May. Keep your eyes peeled for local details.

JB Macabre

WHO IS THOMAS HARRIS?

This enigmatic author of only three novels is a mystery even to his publishers. He writes one highly researched thriller every seven years, won't normally do interviews — although he recently did one with *GQ* magazine — and fights shy of all forms of publicity.

One of the reasons for Harris's attitude towards the press is that he once was a journalist, knows their games and has himself been misquoted by members of his former profession. He also believes his books speak for themselves — and I tend to agree.

His first novel, *Black Sunday*, was published in the mid 70s and quickly grabbed by Hollywood. Directed by John Frankenheimer (whose other credits include the horror turkey *Prophecy*), it stars Robert Shaw as a policeman intent on stopping a terrorist outrage overshadowing a football game in Miami Superbowl. Shortly after the Black September incident at the German Olympics, many critics saw the film as a cynical attempt to make money out of not-long-forgotten violence.

Black Sunday sank, but Harris's next novel, *Red Dragon* (1986), took the critical world by storm and again was snatched up by the film-makers, this time in the form of Michael Mann who retitled the work *Manhunter*. The novel follows FBI agent Will Graham (William L Peterson) on his frantic search for the psychopathic Tooth Fairy. Graham is different from other detectives in that he tries to put himself in the mind of the murderers, reasoning out their movements and mental aberrations to an extent that sometimes leaves him in a dangerous mental fugue.

Manhunter starred the inestimable stage actor Brian Cox as Graham's nemesis, the psychopathic Dr Hannibal Lecter, but he was not asked for a return performance in Jonathan Demme's film version of *The Silence Of The Lambs* — that job went to Anthony Hopkins. In both books, Lecter remains in prison for his crimes and occasionally throws titbits of information about the mental habits of other psychopaths to an eager Will Graham. He is, however, very clever and dangerous. At one point in *Red Dragon* he is able to find out where Graham's family lives and send the Tooth Fairy after them — without leaving his prison cell.

The Silence Of The Lambs features yet another serial killer, this time called Buffalo Bill, who carves up women and dresses in their skins à la Ed Gein. FBI special agent Jack Graham enrolls the aid of FBI trainee Clarice Starling to weasel information from Lecter regarding Bill. The cryptic and perverse confrontations eventually lead to the apprehension of Buffalo Bill, but only because Lecter uses information about him as a diversion for escape. At the end of the novel this brilliant and deadly man is on the run and no doubt the next novel from Harris, due out in late 1992, will follow his escapades.

John Gilbert

PULLING THE STRINGS OF FEAR



Can you imagine The Woodentops with flame throwers and personality problems? Neither could we, so we sent JB Macabre down on the set to see what was happening with David Schmoeller's script for *Puppet Master II*.



Several years ago a strange and hideous group of murders took place at the old Bodega Bay Inn. A team of researchers is sent to investigate. The crew is led by a beautiful research scientist, Carolyn Bramwekk (played by Elizabeth MacClellan) and Michael (played by Collin Bernsen), the son of one of the investigators who disappeared on the first night of their visit. However, their less than genial host at the hotel is none other than Andre Toulon (Steve Welles), the dead puppet master resurrected by his band of deadly puppets.

The puppets are back with a vengeance. And this time there's a new member to the ensemble, Torch. Of Toulon's tiny arsenal, Torch is the most formidable weapon. He was first envisioned by Executive Producer Charles Band and artist Lee MacLeod, but it was the responsibility of David Allen, the special-effects artist to bring him to life.

'I tried to reproduce Torch by imagining what he'd look like in three dimensions,' explained Allen. 'Torch had a Darth Vader-like appearance, since both characters were

based on German military designs. I made Torch out of ten component parts, using high-impact urethane for the body and fibre glass for his helmet. My assistant, Dennis Gordon, came up with the idea of Torch having bullets for his upper teeth, which was the only change from the original painting.'

FLAMING EFFECTS

Allen's greatest challenge was creating the effects for the weapons that give Torch his name. 'I'm not a pyro man, which made it interesting to devise the Torch effect. A flame thrower is a pretty dramatic weapon, because it attacks our primal fears. So we ended up with a visual that was almost like holding a match in front of a spray can. A flammable liquid was forced through pipes in Torch, and was ignited just as it escaped from his metal stump. The flame would go on for six feet, which was long enough to get out of the frame line.'

Allen first work with Band on the 1976 film *Laserblast*. But his passion for effects began at the age of six when he saw a reissue of *King Kong*. Allen has worked on several features, including Joe Dante's *The Howling* and Larry Cohen's *The Stuff*; he has also received an Oscar nomination for his work on *Young Sherlock Holmes*. Recently, he has

worked on *Ghostbusters II*, *Robot Jox* and *Honey I Shrank The Kids*.

Richard Band, who has created some of the most interesting music for projects by his brother Charles and director/producer Stuart Gordon, is responsible for the film's brooding musical score. His compositions can be heard in such films as *Reanimator*, *From Beyond*, *Dolls*, *Prison*, *Puppet Master I & II* and *Bride Of Reanimator*.

'The puppets are back with a vengeance. And this time there's a new member to the ensemble, Torch'

Charles Band, who ran Empire Pictures for several years, founded Media Home Entertainment, the first major independent video cassette distribution company. He has produced over sixty films, most having been in the science fiction, horror and adventure genres. While most have had theatrical releases, many have been designed specifically for the foreign market and video sales.

Band is also breaking into new areas with both *Puppet Master* projects. Full Moon Entertainment has signed a deal with Malibu Graphics, the country's largest independent comic publisher, to turn the scripts into comics. Also, they are in the process of closing a deal with a video game manufacturer to turn *Puppet Master* into an arcade game.



The company is also pressing ahead on the film front, production on several new film projects are about to begin. *Whispers And Shadows* will be written and directed by David Schmoeller, two films are to be co-written and directed by Albert Pyun (*The Sword And The Sorcerer*, *Captain America*), *Arcade* a horror film and *Dollman* a thirteen inch superhero. Also, later this year Stuart Gordon's *The Pit And The Pendulum*, starring Lance Henriksen is due for release.

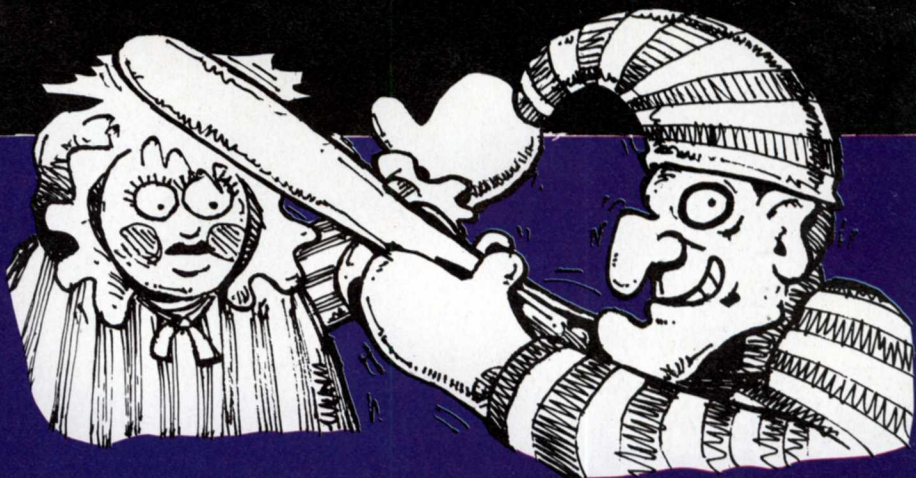
The puppets play for keeps as all about them lose their heads

Puppet Master II will be making it's way to video shelves sometime in March. The video will also contain *Video Zone*, Full Moon's new video magazine complete with the *Making Of Puppet Master II*.

MARCH OF THE PUPPET MASTERS

Puppets, like their human clown counterparts, were once regarded as tragic figures rather than ridiculous comedians. The original Punchinello shows toured the small townships in much the same form as those that visit contemporary English beaches. Bright red and white striped booths housed the simple moral tale of a man who beat his wife and murdered his baby. Law, in the form of a hangman's noose ended the story, but it was not until much later that other influences such as the ruff-necked dog, sausages and crocodile were introduced.

Marionettes of various types have always been a firm favourite with horror-film makers. Their stiff approximation of life, cold painted faces, and obvious mechanical stiffness, can chill even the hardest of adults on a dark night. Disney succeeded in painting an emotional picture with the feature length cartoon *Pinocchio* in 1940, and Jim Henson pulled off a conjuring trick with the Muppets but it is films such as *Magic* (1978) with Anthony Hopkins, Paul Wegener's *The Golem* (1920), *Tales That Witness Madness* (1973), Stuart Gordon's *Dolls* (1987), *Child's Play* (1988), and, of course, the two *Puppet*



Master films (1989/90) that are best remembered by horror fans.

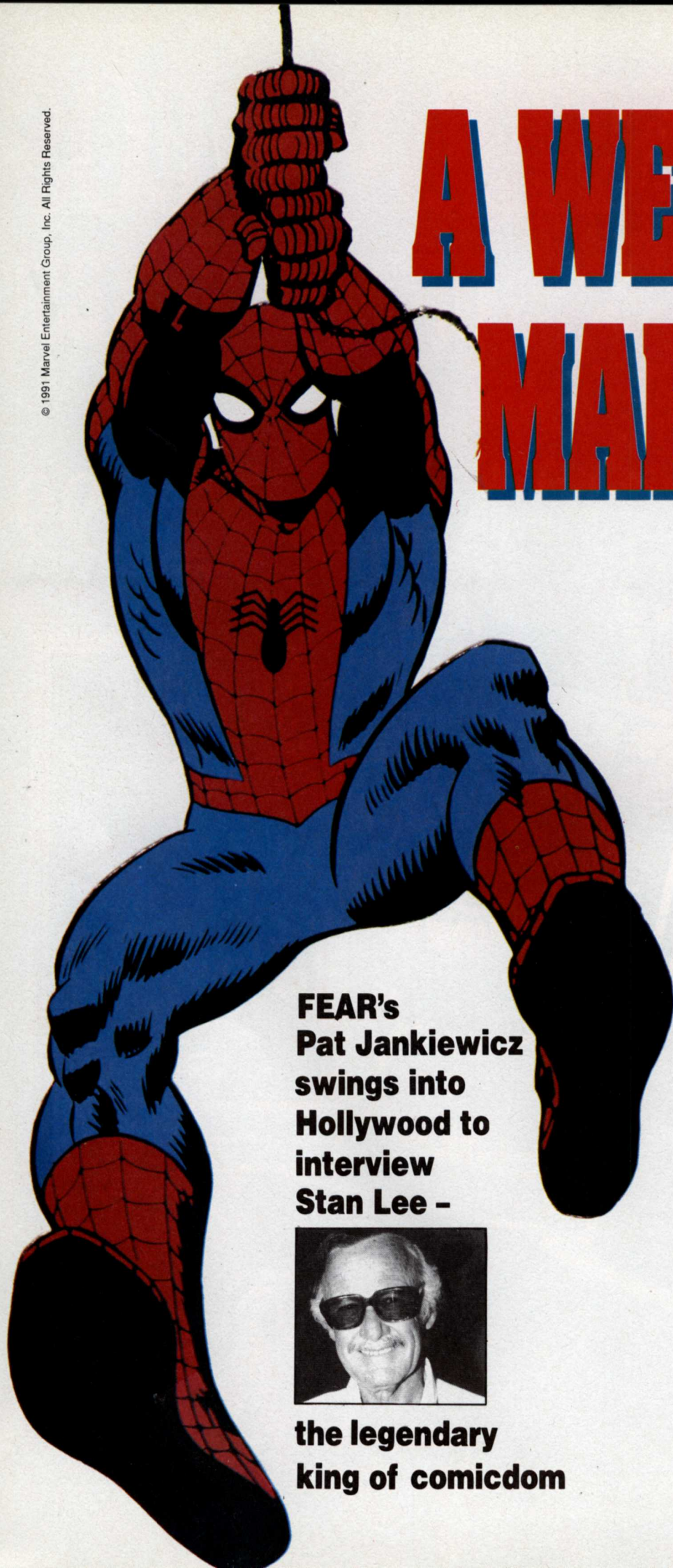
Television has had its fair share of puppets. Leaving aside such delights as *The Woodentops* or *Andy Pandey*, SF puppet fans were spoiled for choice in the 60s and 70s with *Supercar*, *Fireball XL5*, *Thunderbirds*, *Stingray*, *Captain Scarlet* and *Terrahawks* (all from the Gerry Anderson studios). Puppets also played their part in the BBC horror series *Supernatural* where a Frankenstein-like showman made humans into marionettes. They also showed up in *Dr Who* with the Autons — deadly dummies from outer space — and the ITV supernatural childrens' chiller *Ace Of Wands*.

Books, on the other hand, have rarely used puppets for anything other than titles — for instance, Frank De Felitta's recent horror novel *Death March Of The*

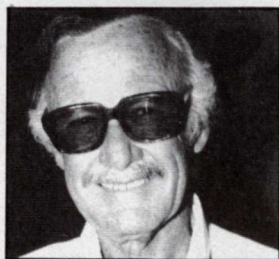
Marionettes. Indeed, the closest that the three best-selling horror writers in this country — James Herbert, Stephen King, and Clive Barker — have come to the marionette theme is within sequences from King's *IT* and, to a greater extent, from *The Tommyknockers* in which several inanimate objects go on the rampage. There appear to be two reasons for the omission of dolls and puppets within the contemporary horror novel. The first is that, perhaps, they are seen as too old and clichéd. More provocatively, it could be argued that the terror induced by the disturbing puppet facsimile of life is best evoked on the screen: can any modern horror writer match that primarily visual impact? It's up to the horror writers to prove that.

John Gilbert

A WEB OF MARVELS



**FEAR's
Pat Jankiewicz
swings into
Hollywood to
interview
Stan Lee -**



**the legendary
king of comicdom**



Marvel Productions, a leader in both the comic book and animation industry, is probably the only company in the world that has bathrooms designated Spider-Men and Spider-Women - a bizarre

testimony to the power and impact of Stan Lee's most famous comic book creation.

Lee, has been the creative force behind Marvel since the early 60s. A tall, wry and enthusiastic man clad in jeans, an open-collar shirt and sneakers, he became a leading figure of pop culture in the 60s and 70s. His flawed, realistic fantasy characters Spider-Man, the incredible Hulk, and the Fantastic Four among others, have made Marvel the industry juggernaut it remains today, with an annual income of a whopping \$100m.

His characters were permeated with a refreshing sense of literacy. When a standard comic book line of the time was 'Take that!', Lee's characters exchanged nervous patter. Lee's villains had the sharp tongues of well-read college professors while his heroes were filled with self-doubt and dubious motives like money and fame.

Now it appears that Lee's fast-paced stories have become the movies of today, from Arnold Schwarzenegger's unstoppable rampage in *Terminator* to Bruce Willis's Spider-Man antics in *Die Hard*. But, it's no surprise Hollywood is impressed by Lee's work; Marvel Comics has always used film techniques like flashbacks, point-of-view shots, close-ups, fade-outs and montages.

Film-makers as diverse as James Cameron, Federico Fellini and Charles Band have acknowledged Lee and Marvel as an inspiration. Sean Raimi, who did the comic book styled *Darkman*, declares 'Stan Lee was one of my childhood heroes, and he's still one of my heroes!'

Lee is pleased to finally have a say in the film world. 'I'm a little fish but it's fascinat-

ing because it's all so new to me.

'Before, it was very frustrating because a lot of the movie and TV shows I've worked on didn't have enough of the Marvel style.

The best example is the *Superman* movie. The first movie had a lot of the Marvel pacing, yet they never had that kind of stuff in the *Superman* books. I used to figure if we ever did Spider-Man the right way, the way the books have done him, people would think we were imitating Superman! You can imagine how that makes me feel!

The previous Hollywood adaptations of Lee's character robbed them of their eccentricities, watered down their personalities, and placed

them in the blandest situations possible. 'Yes, I've never liked the way our characters have been portrayed.'

The Spider-Man TV show is particularly galling to Lee because he was hired as a consultant. 'I used to yell and scream, and tell them what was wrong, but they didn't pay attention!

'I loved it when they did the movie *Breathless* with Richard Gere quoting the Silver Surfer and the movie *Adventures In Babysitting* with the little girl in love with Thor. Linda Obst (Producer of *Babysitting*) was a big fan. She did a big, coffee-table book called *The Sixties*, about the most influential

people of the 1960s, and she gave me a page!

'The Hulk TV show has been more successful than anything else,' he notes. While Lee liked the show, he felt it strayed from the comic. 'It wasn't my Hulk, but it was a good Hulk! As for the TV adaptations of some of our other characters . . . I didn't care for Thor, and Daredevil could have been done better.'

Happily, the situation is about to change. Thanks to the worldwide success of *Batman* and the films that followed it, producers are ready to do comic-book heroes and do them right. Major studios now covet Marvel characters. The most ambitiously-planned project is an adaptation of the *Fantastic Four*. 'We haven't started that yet, but the producer, Bernd Eikinger, is a big fan of the *Fantastic Four* - he's loved 'em all his life! He's work-



'Reed Richards (leader of the Fantastic Four) is me when I use big words and bore everybody'

THE FANTASTIC FOUR

At the beginning of the sixties, public interest in superheroes was low, but this foursome of friends soon changed that. The *Fantastic Four* were one of the first 'super teams' and their increasingly popular comic prompted the release of dozens of other superhero titles, including several of Marvel's more successful ones.

The FF, as they're commonly known, are Reed Richards, Susan Richards (his wife), Johnny Storm (her brother) and Ben Grimm (one of Reed's wartime companions). Reed is a scientific genius and built his own spacecraft, but on its maiden voyage, with his friends as fellow crew, his craft was bombarded with cosmic rays. Back on Earth, they discovered the rays had radically changed their physical properties.

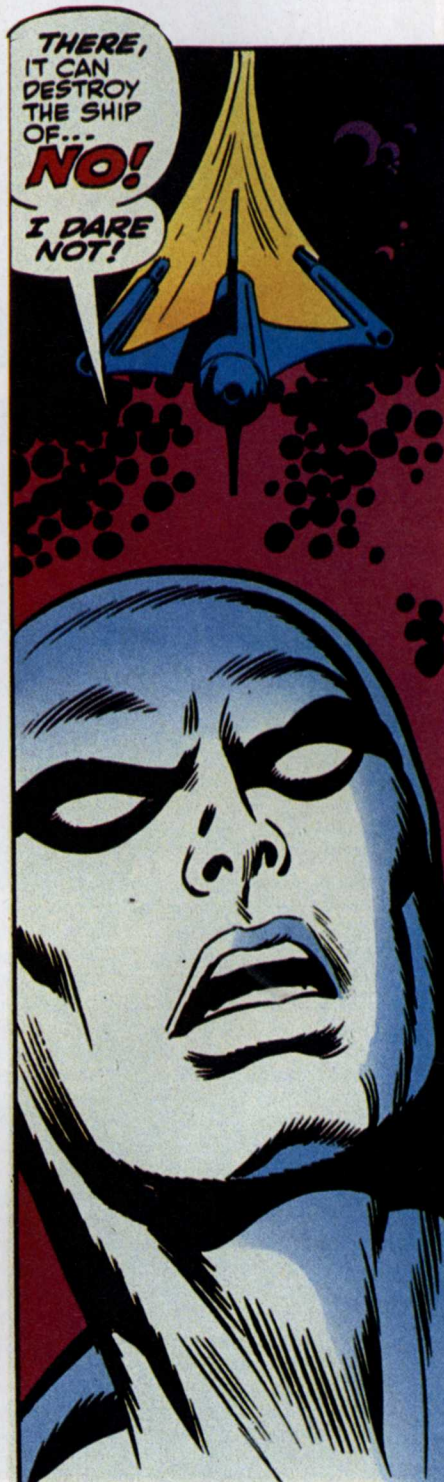
Reed found he could stretch and distort his body like elastic, and gave himself the superhero monicker of Mr Fantastic. Susan can now make herself or other people and objects temporarily invisible, and create force fields of various shapes; logically, she called herself Invisible Girl (later to mature to Woman). By willing it to happen, usually

with the battle cry of 'Flame on!', Johnny's body now becomes living fire. This enables him to fly, project fireballs and control natural flame - a real Human Torch. The cosmic rays dealt Ben the cruelest blow: he became incredibly strong but his flesh turned orange, and unsightly lumps soon transformed into rocky protrusions. His new ugly appearance was so bad that calling himself the Thing didn't make him feel any worse.

The FF's speciality is fighting cosmic/alien menaces such as Annihilus and the near-omnipotent Galactus. Many confrontations have been unintentionally caused by Reed: he created an electronic gateway to another dimension, which he christened the Negative Zone and which holds many bizarre beings.

But the fabulous foursome's most battled foes are much nearer home. Armoured and disfigured genius Doctor Doom is the ruling monarch of Latvaria, a small east-European country. As for the Mole Man . . . his treasured home is just a big cave!

Warren Lapworth





THOUGH THE COSMOS ITSELF MAY BAR THE WAY, I SHALL NOT FAIL!

ONE SUSTAINING PULSE ON A SILVER BOARD?

ALONE AND WEAPONLESS

HEY, NOT EVEN DEATH CAN MARCH HIS RESOLVE!

THE SILVER SURFER

This galactic nomad made his first appearance in *Fantastic Four* but developed a following large enough to justify his own comic. He was once Norrin Radd, a thoughtful humanoid from the peaceful, organized but deathly dull planet of Zenn-La. But all that changed when the huge, awesomely powerful cosmic entity known as Galactus arrived.

To stay alive, Galactus must intake vast amounts of energy, which he draws from entire planets, draining them of life. So when his gaze fell upon Zenn-La, its people were surely doomed - until Norrin intervened. He met Galactus and pleaded with him to save his home world. In return, he would become Galactus's herald, and search out planets for him to devour.

Thus, Galactus bestowed near-boundless new powers to Norrin, whose skin became shiny and as tough as the strongest metal. He was given a board to

transport him at fantastic speeds and obey his slightest mental command: he became the Silver Surfer.

The Surfer has fought countless creatures from several galaxies and many worlds, but only three adversaries have constantly troubled him: Mephisto (a devious, Devil-like villain), the Kree and the Skrulls. The latter two are alien races which have been at each others' throats for many years; their last war dominated the latest series of the *Silver Surfer* comic.

The Surfer's most loathed being is Galactus himself. When Galactus looked upon Earth as his next meal, the Silver Surfer helped the *Fantastic Four* stop him. As he seemed so fond of Earth, Galactus banished him to the confines of our humble planet, which the Surfer rapidly bored of, particularly as it separated him from his beloved girl-friend, Shall-Bal. But after all, no one said being a superhero was easy.

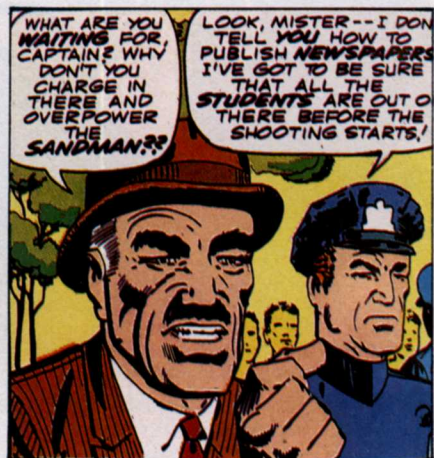
Warren Lapworth

ing with some writers in Germany, trying to come up with a theme of the movie.'

Lee is optimistic about a Spider-Man movie. 'I'm working on stories with the writers for it. It'll be Doctor Octopus versus Spider-Man, with the origin of Spidey and probably the origin of Doctor Octopus told concurrently. It will have Spider-Man growing up, becoming stronger and nicer, and build to a world-shattering climax.

'We'll have the characters from the book, Aunt May, Uncle Ben - for the time he's alive, Flash Thompson (Spidey's high school enemy) and J Jonah Jameson.'

'I want stuff like Errol Flynn's old movies. Y'know, the hero wins at the end, the girl is saved, the last scene is them kissing, everybody's happy! I'm a big fan of happy endings!'



A demarcation dispute looms for J Jonah Jameson

CIGAR CHOMPING

Rumour had it that Lee himself may play the role of J Jonah Jameson, Spider-Man's cigar-chomping boss and chief critic. 'I don't know. If somebody suggests it, I'll be glad to give it a try. I'm not a professional actor and I don't want to do anything to hurt the movie. But, everybody says I look like him!'

Although he may not be a professional, Lee's acting career has taken off with a part in Larry Cohen's *The Ambulance*. 'I've got a real big role in it, about a minute and a half! I play a comic-book editor. I'm also the jury foreman in *The Trial Of The Incredible Hulk*.

Of all his creations, does Lee have a particular favourite? 'Probably Spider-Man and the Silver Surfer. Spidey's just a regular guy and the Surfer's like Everyman, people can identify with him. But I like 'em all. Basically, they're all me.

Thor is me when I'm noble, corny and bigger-than-life, Iron Man is me when I'm being

a businessman, Spider-Man is me when I'm doing everything wrong, and Reed Richards (leader of the Fantastic Four) is me when I use big words and bore everybody. At least, that's the way I used to write 'em, it's probably not that way anymore.'

MARVELLOUS MOVIES

The Incredible Hulk found television fame with the animated cartoon series *Marvel Superheroes* (1966-68). In 1977, the Hulk made his live action debut, in *The Incredible Hulk* which starred Bill Bixby as Dr David Banner (named Bruce in the comic books) and Lou Ferrigno as the jolly green giant. The spin-off series ran until 1982 and a final movie, *Death Of The Hulk* was produced in 1989. As one of Marvel's most famous characters, he has appeared in several pulp novels including *Murdermoon* where he teams up with Spider-Man.

Spider-Man has had a much less successful career. The first live action television movie (1977), in which Spidey was played by Nicholas Hammer, was directed by EW Swackhamer and was a total disaster. A TV series followed. Spider-Man has also appeared in several novels, which include *Mayhem In Manhattan*, by Swamp Thing's Len Wein and Marv Wolfman, and *Crime Campaign*, written by Paul Kupperberg. John Gilbert

Lee has worked with some of the greatest artists in the comics field, such as Jack Kirby, who drew the Hulk and Fantastic Four. Not much is known about Steve Ditko, the artist who co-created Spider-Man and Dr Strange. 'Ditko was a private person; he kept to himself, didn't talk much about himself or his private life. I never felt I really got to know him, but he was just like Jack, a joy to work with.'

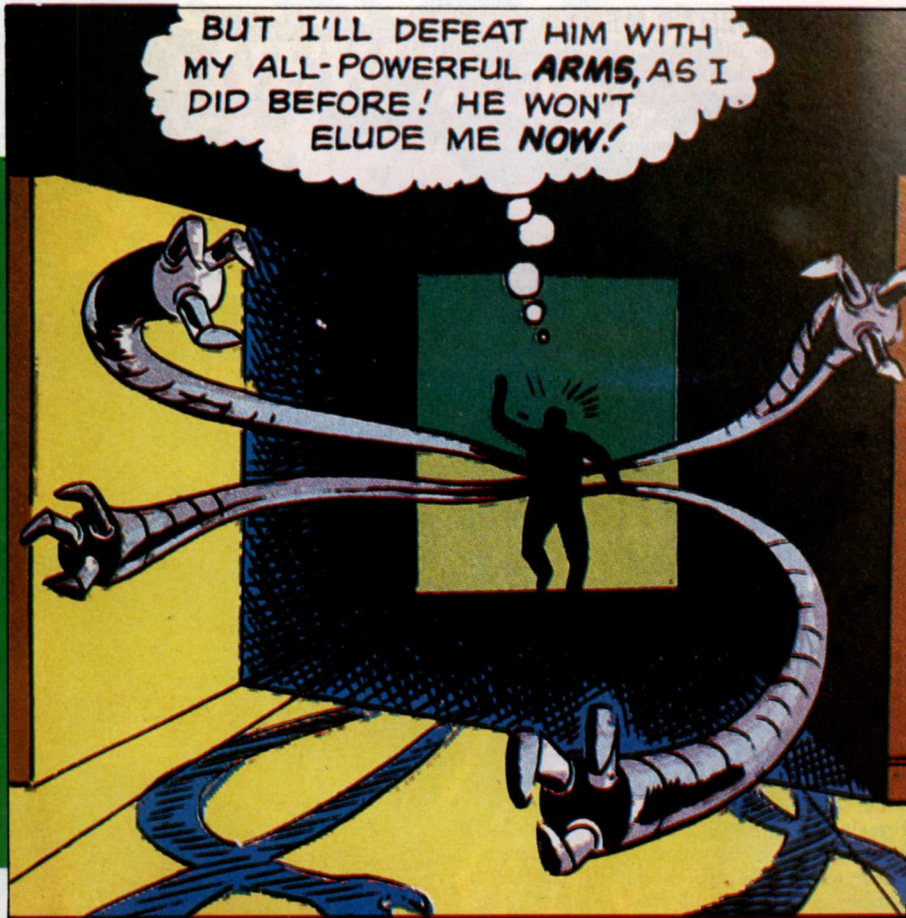
MUSCLE-BOUND ROMANCE

Ditko's original Spider-Man art was a scrawny guy in a baggy suit, a contradiction to the usual muscle-bound supermen 'I wanted Spidey to look like a typical high school kid. I gave the first Spider-Man story to Jack [Kirby], and said: 'Jack, I want this to be an ordinary guy, I don't want him looking like Captain America'.

'But Jack is so used to doing these super-heroic guys, that when he brought in the first few pages, the guy was muscular and glamorous, so I said: 'Aw, forget it, Jack! I'm gonna give this to someone else'. Jack didn't care, he was busy enough and nobody knew it was gonna be a big strip. I thought it would be perfect for Steve.'

Lee feels that artist John Romita, who took over Spider-Man when Ditko left, and co-created Kingpin, Wolverine and The Punisher, is 'The closest thing to a saint! He's one of my favourite people; a real gentleman, as nice as he is talented. He had started out drawing romance strips, so he's used to doing handsome guys and beautiful girls.

'I said 'if you're going' to do Spider-Man, remember; they're just real people, don't glamorize them'. Because of his romantic strip background, it was hard for him not to. In the beginning, he managed to make it look like Ditko's style, but he was holding himself back because that's not the way he draws.



SPIDER-MAN

A wimpy, put-upon, bookworm student is hardly the basis for a successful character, yet this is how one of the most famous superheroes (along with Superman and Batman) started out. Peter Parker was attending a science exhibition when a small, unnoticed spider was 'zapped' in an experiment, and fell onto Peter's hand. In its dying second, it bit his hand. Shaken by the experience, Peter left the science hall.

Outside, he was almost hit by a car, and escaped by crawling up a nearby building. On the roof, he discovered that as well as spider-like adhesive abilities, the radioactive spider had also given him super strength.

He anonymously tested his skills in a free-for-all wrestling match and was then offered a show business manager. He made his famous red and blue costume, used his scientific skills to develop 'web shooters' and dubbed himself Spider-Man. He soon gained fame and fortune as a TV star, but one day, he failed to stop a dashing thief, believing

Dr Octopus extends the hands of enmity

himself to be above stopping petty crime. But soon afterward, a burglar broke into his home and shot dead his Uncle Ben. Spider-Man caught the murderer and found it was the thief he could've so easily stopped earlier. Peter learnt that with great power comes great responsibility and vowed to use his Spider-Man identity only for the good of others.

This origin was told in the last issue of *Amazing Fantasy*, but proved so popular that it led to another title in the *Amazing* series: *The Amazing Spider-Man*. The web-head was set against menaces like the Chameleon, Mysterio, Kraven the Hunter, the Lizard and, most feared of all, Dr Octopus and the Green Goblin. Aided by an instinctive danger warning, his 'spider sense', Spider-Man has defeated them all several times - but *still* can't get his personal life to flow freely.

Warren Lapworth

'So, little by little, we made Peter Parker (aka Spider-Man) better-looking, then John came into his own. John only has one terrible fault: he never realizes how good he is!'

Lee also teamed up with the great artist Moebius on 'The Parable', a Silver Surfer story about the misuse of power. 'I like the message of that story, and I really liked working with Moebius - I'm a fan of his, so it was fun having him illustrate a story of mine.'

What does Lee think of the new breed of

graphic novels like *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*? 'I guess you've got to have variety in life. They're well-written and well-drawn, but it isn't my taste. If I were younger, I wouldn't read comics - I'd get too depressed!'

'I want to be entertained, I want to have fun, I want stuff like Errol Flynn's old movies. Y'know, the hero wins at the end, the girl is saved, the last scene is them kissing, everybody's happy! I'm a big fan of happy endings!'

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THE PRESIDENT'S MEN

Because of his film work, Lee no longer works on comics, but he still writes a popular Spider-Man newspaper strip. 'Because I'm so busy, I only have one day a week to write Spider-Man. Doing a newspaper strip is very difficult. Every word has to be carefully chosen because you have so little room, just 2 or 3 panels a day.

'We've done some crazy stories in it - I'm probably the only one who liked them! In one strip, somebody was manufacturing 'Spidey

'I used to yell and scream, and tell them what was wrong, but they didn't pay attention!'

Jeans', so Spider-Man got angry and sued them, saying 'You can't use my name unless you pay me! Nobody ever does super heroes that way. We even did one about child abuse. I always enjoy working with the artist on it - I do it with Larry Lieber, who's my brother!'

In 1988, the strip got an unexpected boost when then-US President Ronald Reagan revealed that he read it and was 'dying to see how Spider-Man is going to get out from under that great big wrestler' - the cliff-hanger of the time. 'I was delighted! My brother Larry sent him a copy of the strip and he sent Larry a thank-you note and a nice photograph. You'd think Larry would have gotten me one!'

As of January 1991, Lee has done the strip for 14 years. Does he ever have trouble coming up with new stories? 'No - the more you do something, the easier it is to do,' he states. 'When I need a new plot for the strip, I sit down for 5 minutes and come up with a hundred of them!'

The more you do it, the better you know the character, the better you know the character's friends, family, and situations that follow. It was much tougher when I started the strip. I write it like a soap opera, it just happened the hero has super powers.'

Future plans may include a return to comics. 'I may try to publish a few books on the West Coast using artists and writers we haven't used in awhile,' he reveals. 'We won't move the company, but I'll just do a few books on my own, out here for Marvel, with different people. I may even use some foreign artists. Whether we'll do it or not, I don't know, it's just something we're talking about.'

If it did happen, Lee wouldn't write them. 'I don't want to go back and do them. I'll do an occasional one, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life doing them - there's nothing left to say.'

What has been his greatest experience as a writer? 'When writing stories, I always threw in little truths whenever I could, like Thor lecturing against dropping out of society.'

'I hoped these truths would be noticed, and I guess they were. Because one thing that made me very happy was getting letters from kids saying 'I'm graduating college now, would you mind if I used a quote from a story of yours for my valedictorian speech?' Or kids who'd write 'I just got bar mitzvah'd, and for my speech I mentioned something you wrote'. God, that was a thrill!'

28 April 1991 FEAR



THE HULK

The savage hero who's spawned several TV movies and series was once just a mild-mannered physicist, Dr Bruce Banner. At a desert atomic test site, Banner began the irreversible countdown of a nuclear rocket. But then he saw a hapless teenager who'd wandered on to the site, Rick Jones. To save him, Banner pushed Jones into the safety of a trench, but was himself caught in the rocket blast.

Most people know the Hulk as big, green and stupid, but initially he/it was grey and relatively intelligent - and as incredibly strong as he's ever been. It's also widely known that Banner becomes the Hulk when he's angry or hurt, and changes back again when he's 'calmed down', but at first he was only the Hulk at night.

Banner has often tried to rid himself of his loathed alter ego but never succeeded, although the Hulk has existed in different forms. Several months ago, he was a grey Hulk: although cruel, he was intelligent and was employed as a bouncer (of sorts) in Las Vegas, calling himself Mr Fixit. Going back to his roots, it was the setting and rising of the sun which transformed Banner into the Hulk and back.

More recently, the green and grey Hulks fought for control of Banner's mind and body, until the Ringmaster merged the three personalities (green, grey and Banner). Banner is now permanently a green Hulk, with his own intelligence but tainted with the savagery and cruelty of green and grey (respectively). With super-villains and the outraged, fearful public against him, he needs all the help he can get.

Warren Lapworth

ANIMATING THE ANIMUS

Liz Holliday does the time warp with Ursula Le Guin, maps out the politics of power and patriarchy, travels the Tao and learns about the interconnectedness of journeying and self-knowledge.



Tudor Humphries' jacket
Illustration for *Tehanu*

Seventeen years ago, Ursula Le Guin wrote *The Farthest Shore*, the last part of the *Earthsea* trilogy which was to bring her renown as a children's writer. Then she went back to it, with *Tehanu: the Last Book of Earthsea*. This is common practice among big name writers seeking to make an easy buck. Yet Le Guin had a serious purpose to her return.

Her renown as a children's writer has been more than matched by her fame for adult fiction — more than one critic has named her the greatest SF writer of (at least) her generation.

She has been lauded with awards including the Hugo, the Nebula and the National Book Award. Feminists have claimed her for their own, citing her strong moral stance and her emphasis on character over idea.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Le Guin has been involved with politics since the 60s. 'I'm still marching. I think till the end of my life I'll be going round the Courthouse in Portland, Oregon with a sign that says *Stop The Bomb Testing, Get Out Of Vietnam or Abortion Rights* or whatever my government is doing now.'

Despite the strong moral, ethical and political element in Le Guin's work, there is a certain amount of tension between her stated objectives and feminism. For example; the phrase *weak as women's magic, wicked as women's magic*, recurred throughout the original *Earthsea* books.

There is a tradition of hero-stories, whether they are very fantastic or only slightly fantastic. These are the stories about heroes, and quests — all the stuff that comes out of the epics and the Arthurian cycle and so on — which became a written, literary tradition.

The first three *Earthsea* books were written happily and solidly in that tradition. It's very much a man's world. Two of the books





have practically only men in them; and even in the second book, which is about a girl, she is in this man's world. I'm not knocking it. It's a great tradition and I like those books, but this isn't 1972. I think the people who are writing within that tradition are very, very conservative, even reactionary.'

POWER PLAY

I wondered if the feminist reaction to this, partly answered in her 1989 revision of her non-fiction book *The Language Of The Night*, had prompted her to go back and fix things in *Earthsea*.

'I wouldn't put it that way. I found I was able to see *Earthsea* from a different perspective — without fixing *Earthsea*, or changing the rules, which I didn't want to do, because after all it exists, it's there. In the first three books, essentially, you are seeing the world from the point of view of people in power.

Even Tenar, although she is *really* powerless, is in a position of power — she's a priestess of Atuan; and Ged, although he's a prisoner there, is a very powerful person. You're seeing the world through the eyes of people in power. In *Tehanu*, what I could do was show you the same world through the eyes of disempowered people; a little girl who has been raped, a woman who's been widowed, and a man who's lost his powers. It's the same world, but it looks so different. That was kind of part of the fun of it for me.'

Part of this difference lies in the scale of the book: for all its importance — and the events are important in the unwritten future history of *Earthsea*. — the book is very intimate in its scope. 'The scale is what we call domestic. You know, people instead of going on great journeys across the archipelago, they just walk across the island. Of course, what I'm trying to do is say that it doesn't matter. A heroic act doesn't have to be done

with swords and capes and a lot of noise and shouting. Women, children, and middle-aged men do heroic acts all the time, but we don't call them that.'

Heroes are, of course, a key archetype in mythology; and it is from mythology that Le Guin takes many of her themes. Sometimes this is explicit, especially in her earlier works: *Rocannon's World* is obviously using Norse myth as a structure. It's a retelling of Odin's story. I haven't done that much since, except in very recent years every now and then I have done what Adrienne Rich calls a *re-visioning*: you know when a feminist writer takes an old story and re-does it from a woman's point of view. That's a particular feminist enterprise at the moment. I've mostly done it with poetry. It's just using a mythical story.'

CIRCUITOUS QUESTS

On an explicit level, much of Le Guin's work, including even her late science fiction, uses patterns and motifs common in mythology. Of these, easily the most apparent is that of the quest. In her introduction to her novel *City Of Illusion* she says, 'Most of my stories are excuses for a journey. I never did care much about plots, all I want is to go from A to B — or more often from A to A — by the most difficult and circuitous route.'

Typically, the physical movement is mirrored by emotional or philosophical change. Many critics have seen in this a reflection of Le Guin's Buddhist and Taoist leanings. Often, the journey is a circle, ending where it began, as in *The Left Hand Of Darkness*, where Genly Ai travels across the snow-bound wilderness of Gethen. When he returns to its capital, it is with a new understanding, not only of himself and the Gethenians, but of the nature of the larger world. In the *Dispossessed*, the philosophical and physical journey find an echo in the structure of the book. Shevek, the protagonist, travels from anarchist Anarres to capitalist Urras. The novel, which won just about every award going, alternates between flashbacks from his past and his stay on Urras. His physical travels and his coming to terms with the new world on which he finds himself, is paralleled by his growth into maturity on Anarres.

The other major patterns are the ones which relate to the work of the psychologist Karl Jung. It was Jung's contention that the mind is divided into male and female essences, anima and animus; and that the parts of ourselves we try to repress — for whatever reason — become a shadow-self which can only do us harm. Moreover, Jung thought that there was a collective unconscious, a pool of archetypes, imagery and symbolism, upon which we all draw to understand the world — and which accounts for myth, legend and fantasy.

JUNGIAN SHADOWS

The relevance of Jung's teachings to the *Earthsea* trilogy is obvious. I was therefore a bit surprised when Le Guin said: 'That came after I wrote the first three books. I had never read a word of Jung before.' I had assumed that she had been interested in Jung long before that . . .

'Everybody did, and they kept saying it to me, and I kept answering, more or less, *who is this Jung fellow?* My dad was a Freudian, we didn't talk about Jung. He was a four-letter word! So, after I finished *The Furthest Shore* and people kept saying all this stuff

about the Shadow, I went and read Jung got educated and enjoyed him very much. But I'm not a Jungian. Jung helped me over a couple of bad things, and I like some of his ideas a lot. Some of them don't interest me. You can pick and choose.'

Myself, I've always had trouble with the anima/animus concept – the idea that there can be innate and pure male and female types. Le Guin agreed. 'It just makes no sense to me at all. Whereas the Shadow business, and some of the things he said about the archetypes are incredibly fertile. I think Jung figured out how artists work a whole lot better than Freud ever did. Freud had not a clue what makes an artist tick. *One is an artist for fame, fortune and love of women!* God, if you wanted that you'd be a plumber. It's not what you do art for.'

'I think what's very impressive, and very supportive of Jung's ideas about the Shadow,

'My dad was a Freudian, we didn't talk about Jung. He was a four-letter word!'

is that he and I, from such totally divergent places, came and said the same thing. It is a little uncanny.

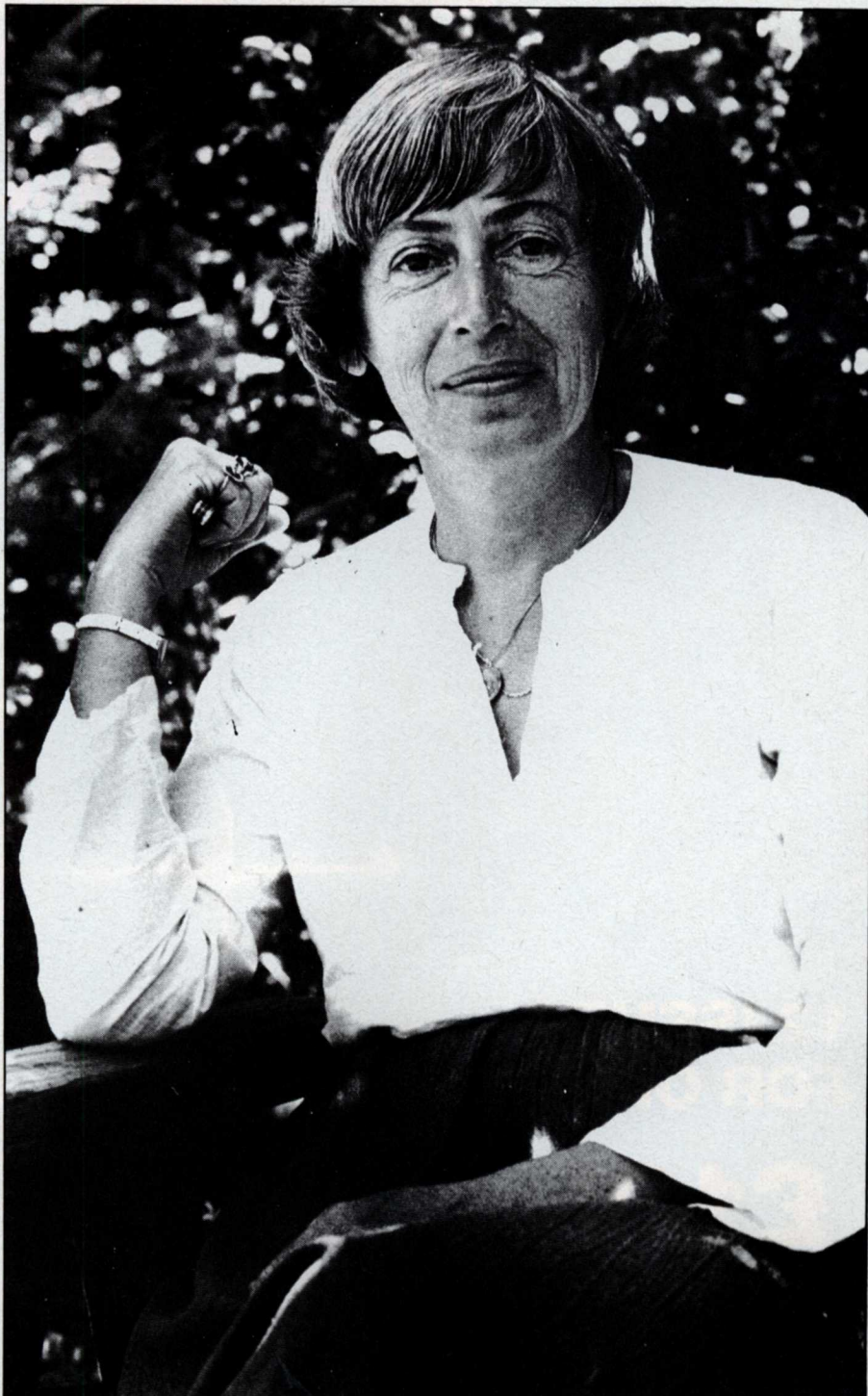
'It's just convergence. Certainly when I first read Jung I had a little prickle in the back of the neck, sort of recognizing something I might have said or thought. Some of it may have been in the air, but I don't remember ever picking it up anywhere.'

SEXING THE DRAGON

The Jungian and Buddhist themes come together in Le Guin's own analysis of the resolution of *Tehanu*. In the end it is not the women who resolve the crisis, it is the dragons: 'But who is the dragon? And what sex is it?'

I probed a little deeper, since my own wish while I was reading the novel was for the ordinary people to sort out the problems. Le Guin was almost apologetic: 'That would have been lovely. That's a really interesting point. You are the first person that has said that to me. In a way I agree with you. And I couldn't do it. In other words, the characters couldn't do it. Therru is a dragon. And — this may reflect some really deep discouragement or despair in me — that Tenar couldn't do it by herself, nor could the child *as a child*. There had to be this other power come in, a new power, an untried power: the dragons. And I guess I feel we've got to find out at this point: some kind of new power because the old ones aren't working.'

I suggested the possibility that the dragons might represent a balance between the male and female. 'Evidently. And also between the human and the non-human. You can see right through my books, almost from the start, my deep disbelief in the human mission to run everything, and to be king of the world. I think we have a place in it, but that everything else is equally important. We are just not the only important creature; so that the dragons are not only male and female, they are human and non-human — human and animal, if you want to call it that.'



Breaking down patriarchy: Ursula Le Guin

This sounds as though the resolution had been carefully planned out. But Le Guin *did* worry that she had made Therru's nature too obvious, and went on to admit that: 'I didn't know what Therru was going to do. I couldn't tell her what to do. If you are going to ask for something new, you can't tell it what to be. It's like having a kid. If you want a kid, you have the kid that you get. It's the same thing with writing a book: if you are really trying to get somewhere new, take a leap into the unknown, you have to do just that; you can't chart your course. So this was a very uncharted book.'

Although *Tehanu* uses the same circular, journeying structure evident in Le Guin's other work, the book lacks a linear plot objective. There are simply problems which people

struggle to solve. 'Everybody is confused in the middle. The world is kind of falling apart. Earthsea is not in very good shape.'

This takes the book away from its predecessors in stylistic form as well as in content. The earlier books were very much in the quest fantasy mould. However desperate Ged's plight, one knew he would triumph, for he was a hero in a black and white world of good versus evil — despite the fact that some of that evil (at least in the first book) came from within himself. 'The first three are all written in a nice comfortable traditional male fantasy. It was a nice male world. Men know it starts here and goes there, and everything is under control. This book is not written inside that male constructed form of literature. This one breaks out of it.'

Ursula Le Guin's The Dispossessed, first published in 1974, is reissued as a hardcover by Gollancz in April this year.

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THE SPIRIT OF THE BACK STAIRS

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

'The butterflies swarmed, their greedy tongues flickering over what little remained of her decaying flesh'

But first, Sarah died.
At the very end, impossibly huge tropical butterflies covered my wife's outstretched hands, materializing out of the air as I watched, as if she had called them into existence merely by thinking her last, confused thoughts in those final moments: iridescent blue Morphos from the Amazon, gleaming under the street lights, and great swallow tails and something the colour of twilight on the upper side, with the serene face of an owl underneath. This particular butterfly perched on the tip of her finger, its underside as inscrutable as Sarah was just then — as we both were — filled with wonder and dread and sadness, unable to find the right words.

But first she died.

And the butterflies swarmed, their greedy tongues flickering over what little remained of her decaying flesh; and she turned to me, as if trying to speak once more, and her face was only a mass of dark wings rippling across her skull, a thing of dreams, impossible even for New York, but what is one more incongruous detail among so many?

'I'm back,' she said.

But first she died, suddenly, *snap!*, the jaws of the city closing impersonally over her. There I was, at home, committing literature, what my own mother had once called the next worst thing to Allen

Ginsberg, when a phone call told all: that Sarah had died on the subway not an hour before, in a freak accident as the press of a crowd of unruly teenagers just out from a rock concert had quite randomly, with no malice aforethought or even recognition, shoved her off the platform at the very moment the train arrived — which proceeded to cut her in half.

'I'm back,' she said.

I went to the morgue to see her. I had to do that eventually. A policeman was waiting for me, and two morgue attendants. They asked me a lot of grim questions, but politely, as if they were trying to be supportive and didn't quite know how. No one accused me of anything.

Sarah had, once. We'd had our screaming fights. We were talking divorce half-seriously.

I had done my share of accusing too, and things worthy of accusation. Neither of us could claim innocence. But that was over now. All the uncertainties resolved honorably, neatly.

'There's enough left for an open-casket ceremony,' one of the attendants said softly.

How thoughtful.

Her face wasn't touched. Somehow, there on the slab, she lacked even the red, soaking waistline I had been expecting. Possibly they had wrapped plastic around her middle, to contain the mess.

How very tidy.

I was offered a ride home, but I walked, and it didn't even become real to me until I had gone quite a ways along the west side of Central Park, past one, two, three gaping mouths of the hungry subway; and I tried to think, not selfishly of myself, but of her, of the loss of her career, of the actress she would never become and the sets she would never design, and of the off-Broadway production of something called *Macbeth, Moor of Mantua*, which would now look very different – if it ever got as far as opening night. The script had sounded

'She lacked the red, soaking waistline I had been expecting. Possibly they had wrapped plastic around her middle, to contain the mess'

awful, pretentious and trivial – she had died for nothing, for less than nothing, for someone else's verbal garbage, and life went on, the city went on, thank you, its great, glaring heart never missing a beat.

I didn't feel anything at that. I was acting myself, forcing myself into the expected role of grieving husband.

The hurt came slowly, wordlessly, a fog of pain, and by the time I reached our building I was weeping softly.

◆◆◆◆◆

'I'm back,' she said.

◆◆◆◆◆

I sat in the apartment, my apartment now, no *her* apartment – still littered with pieces of her life, her hairbrush by the sink, her unfinished set design sketches on her drawing board, her books on the shelves, her cat hiding under the bed, somehow vaguely aware that something was terribly wrong. I sat there on a bed staring at her things, only beginning to feel the loss, like a soldier who's shot in battle, and it's only like a punch at first, a hard tap that knocks the wind out of him for a minute or two before his nervous system can sort out the astonishing discovery that half his guts have been blown away.

I think hours passed. After a while, it was dark. The phone didn't ring. No one, it occurred to me, no one who mattered anyway, was in on the secret yet. I hadn't called relatives. I hadn't made arrangements.

I could pretend. I did something silly.

The black cat, Pazuzu, scratched my leg ever so gently, then hissed and scooted back under the bed. I looked down. Sarah's white slippers were at my feet.

I thought of the guy on *Soap* who could only talk through a dummy, and when

the other characters hid that, he had to resort to half a grapefruit to voice the otherwise unspeakable.

I wasn't laughing as I put the slippers on either hand, working them like puppets.

It seemed the correct, even the reverent, thing to do.

'She really is dead,' said the right slipper. 'You saw.'

'No,' said the left. 'If we deny it, if we tell a really huge lie long enough – who knows?'

'You do,' said the right.

'Deny it. Moment by moment. That's all any of us have anyway, ever. Just the splinter of time we call *now*. We never know if we're going to live another minute, long enough to say that certain word, or even to exhale. So, deny it with every breath while you still can.'

'You had a lot you still wanted to say. A lot you never got around to,' said the right slipper.

'Yes, I did. I do,' said the left.

'Never wait. If you love someone, if you hate them, if you want to be excused to go to the bathroom, say it *now*. Not later.'

'It's easy enough to tell me that now.'

'Words are easy,' said the right slipper.

'It's the timing that trips you up.'

I dropped my hands into my lap.

'Oh God, I want her *back!*,' I said. 'I want her to come *back*. That's all.'

'Dead people don't come back,' said the right slipper.

'Just this once –'

'Wish it,' said the left. 'Wish it very hard. Lie to yourself. Dream it. Very hard. Day by day, second by second. Fool yourself. In the end it won't matter. Imagine how it might be –'

'Things like that don't happen in the real world,' said the right.

'This is New York,' said the left.

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I was sobbing out loud then, and I heard something stirring in the apartment, behind things, under things; I thought it was the cats at first; pans clanged in the kitchen.

'Peter. *I'm back.*'

I bolted up, tripped, fell flat on my face with a sound that was almost a scream; terrified, puzzled, unbelieving, convinced I was crazy – all at once. I recognized her voice. I knew it. Her voice.

The apartment was empty, of course. A pan had fallen out of the cupboard.

It was only much later, as I had sobbed for what seemed like hours, rolling on the bed, tearing at the sheets, astonishing myself with the depth and intensity of my own feelings, only then realizing that it was all true, really, really true that she was gone, not here, had not returned; only then that my outraged nervous system had figured out what all the signals meant –

Eventually I slept, and imagined, and dreamed, and lied to myself very hard – and Sarah was there, lying on her back beside me, tall and thin and pale, her blonde hair almost white. She still wore her street clothes and high heels, her purse clutched firmly in her immaculate hands. She looked more like an investment broker than a theatre person, spotless, proper, ideal –

I leaned up on my elbow and whispered to her: fond little jokes, funny things we'd

said to one another when we were both 20, telephone pick-up lines, including the ever popular *We can't go on meeting like this*, the perennial classic *Doctor Mbogo's office*. *Less-ay! Less-ay!*, plus the inevitable *Spooch!*, the word which is inherently funny on a syllabic level.

But she did not answer. She just lay there, perfectly still. Moonlight and city-light streamed in through Venetian blinds, making the bedroom a grillwork of bright and dark, the colours muted, and Sarah a statue of flawless marble.

A single black butterfly revealed itself on her chin, opening its wings suddenly, then darted off.

I reached out to touch her, in my dream, and my right hand went through her, cutting her in half, and came up warm and wet.

I drew back, disgusted. I felt the fear rising slowly within me, the helpless dread. I gagged myself with my other hand, to stifle a scream.

Then the image rippled and was gone, and I ran my hand over the bedspread and felt only dust and dirt and a few coarse hairs.

I was aware that I was dreaming then, unable to wake up, listening to traffic noises that surged outside the window like a restless sea.

It was smell that woke me.

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I rolled over, sat up, and choked. The apartment air was thick with a putrid stench I could almost see in the filthy air.

I brushed hair and dust off the bed beside me, looking around angrily for the cat, wondering just what decaying treasure the little dear had dragged in. But I saw nothing.

Sarah's workroom was a mess, papers scattered over the floor, the drawing table knocked over, ink smeared over the oddly Egyptian set-designs, as if some spastic infant had attempted finger-painting.

The inky hand-prints were small and thin, but distinctly adult, distinctly feminine.

The smell was strongest there, around the drawing table and the toppled stool.

I spent the rest of the morning cleaning up, disinfecting, wiping, spraying. The phone rang again and again. I ignored it.

Then I sat for hours at my own typewriter, telling myself the big lie, conducting a continuation of the dialogue of the slippers.

How shall I my true love know from the other one . . . ? She is dead and gone –

No she isn't.

I want her back.

You might not like it.

No?

Yes, The inherent shortcoming of living on lies is that you lose touch with the truth.

Holy platitudes, Batman. That's really profound.

Meaning, did you really love her as much as you now think you did?

Yes. Goddammit. Yes.

Wanna find out?

The phone rang and rang. Finally I rose, went into the bedroom, and answered it. Everyone had found out somehow, already. There were outpourings of sympathy from relatives I

hardly knew existed. Level-headed uncles took over, made plans. The funeral was tomorrow. Should someone come and stay with me?

No, I told them. No. It isn't necessary, because she isn't really dead.

You're crazy with grief, they said.

No. I've never been more clear-headed. She is here, with me now.

We'll be right over, they said.



It was then, as I still spoke, that Sarah put her hand on my shoulder and said softly, 'I'm back.'

I dropped the phone. She turned me around gently. She was there, in the evening twilight, as I had seen her in my dream, immaculately dressed, her purse over one arm, her nails immaculately polished, glistening in the semi-darkness.

She didn't flinch when I turned on the lights, but raised her head slowly and said, 'Hello, Peter.'

'Hello, Sarah.'

The stench was horrible. She drew me towards her, towards a kiss. I gulped, tried to find something to say, tried to pull away. 'No, please, no—'

'What are you afraid of, Peter? That I want to eat you? It isn't like that.' She let go of me. I sat down in a stuffed chair. She sat on the edge of the bed.

I turned off the lights again.

'What are you thinking, right now?' she said.

'I don't know what to think. I can't deal with this.'

'You wished it. You wished it very hard. You must have had a reason, a clear idea of what you were doing.'

I thought I knew then. For a flickering instant I was certain that somehow our whole life together was summed up in this instant, the lines of our existence converging to this pinnacle, this incredible reprieve, in which I would give everything meaning, heal all the hurts, demand satisfaction, make good every bit of neglect, anger and selfishness each of us had ever inflicted on the other. It was as if I were drowning and with everything flashing before me—

And I couldn't find the words. I only felt, numb, empty.

'This is just too . . . strange. I'm afraid,' I said at last, almost weeping for the feebleness of that excuse.

She smiled. I felt a twinge of hope just then. I tried to convince myself that she had actually returned to life, that we could go on as before and maybe do better; but as I watched her face seemed to crack slightly. The lines around her eyes were, ever so minimally, disturbing, different.

'How do you think I feel?' she said. She laughed softly. It was real laughter, her real voice.

The phone rang again and kept on ringing. I turned out the light. The two of us sat there in the deepening gloom, staring at the phone. She nodded, at last, and I reached over and picked it up.

The police sergeant I had met at the morgue spoke, his voice obviously straining for calm. He seemed in shock, unable to say what he had to say.

'Mister Riley . . . there has been a . . . desecration — I don't know how to put it any other way.'

'A what?'

'Your wife's body has disappeared.'

'But that's impossible,' I said. 'Body-snatchers in this day and age? Ghouls?'

'We don't know, Mister Riley. We haven't got much to go on.'

'Well how about this? How about, she got up and walked away, and she's here in my apartment with me right now—'

'Please Sir. You're understandably upset. It is very hard, I know. If there is anything I can do—'

'She got up and walked!' I screamed, and threw the phone away.

'Walked,' said Sarah softly. 'I don't remember.'

'The flesh really was flaking away around her eyes, exposing her cheekbones. The smell wasn't quite as bad now, like old, dirty straw'

I sat back, staring at her. She was no more than an outline in the dark now. The stench was worse than ever.

Tell yourself the big lie.

No. believe it.

'You're the esprit d'escalier,' I said.

'The what?'

'The French have an expression, *the spirit of the back stairs*, meaning the right words that come to you after the situation, is over. When you're leaving, going out the back stairs, you suddenly know what you should have said, what you should have done, only it's too late.'

She reached over and took my hand in hers. Even after those few minutes, her touch had changed. Now it was cold and hard. The smell was overwhelming. It was all I could do not to strike out frantically, not to run screaming and choking out of the apartment.

Instead, I sat there, trembling, and she held me, and she said, 'Don't leave me now. I think we have only a little time. This isn't a return. It's just a visit. Let's use it well. So, please, just for this little while, accept me as I am.'

I couldn't bring myself to flick the light back on, but I could tell from the street glare coming in through the window that she was crying and her tears were black, streaking her fish-belly white cheeks. The skin seemed to be peeling away from her eyes.

She reached up with her hand, a shrivelled, old lady's hand, to brush her hair out of her eyes, and some of the hair came away at her touch.

'So soon,' she said. It was a question mixed with a statement. 'So soon?'

There was a huge, dark stain on the front of her blouse.

I remember what they'd told me over the phone.

You're crazy with grief.

This can't be happening.

We're sending someone right over.



'I think we should go out,' I said. 'We can't stay here.'

'Yes,' she said.

'A last night on the town.'

'Promise me one thing.'

'One thing.'

'You won't be afraid of me?'

'I promise.'

'Promise me another?'

'Yes.'

'That you'll remember me not as I am, but as I was.'

I wept then, again, exhausted, at the end of all resistance. I saw quite clearly that she was changing, by the minute. The flesh really was flaking away around her eyes, exposing her cheekbones. The smell wasn't quite as bad now, like old, dirty straw.

'We have to go,' I said.

So we went. We walked for blocks, zigzagging in and out of streets, south and east and west and south again, past a theatre where a huge, inflated green boot poised to stomp on passers-by. We crossed Times Square, now frantic with early evening activity, the buying and selling of trinkets, sex, lives. We fit right in. No one noticed. No one cried out, pointed.

Only once in a great while did either of us say anything, and then it was only trivial comments, dying sparks of wit, old memories.

We seemed to spend hours window-shopping at all her favourite places, now closed.

'My credit's probably no good anymore, anyway.' She laughed. It was still her laugh.

Later, when the streets began to empty out, but for a few worried stragglers and the last of the hustlers, we came to a place I recognized, where, so long before, just before the two of us were married, we had stood for what must have been half an afternoon watching a street performer in silver tights and an ebony mask defy the laws of gravity as he moved through a machine-like dance with golden balls rolling all over his body.

Sarah paused there, searching for something, but the sidewalk was simply bare.

A single twilight-grey butterfly flew around her head, lit on her shoulder, then was somehow gone.

It had started to drizzle. Traffic hissed by.

We came to a fountain in front of a huge, granite office building. We used to meet there for lunch, back when the two of us had real jobs. Now she dipped her hand into the water, and the flesh fell away like sand, and she held up gleaming white bone. The butterfly lit there, the owl-faced one, appearing for the first time, slowly opening and closing its wings, but I shooed it away and took her hand in mine — *that* hand, the skeletal one — and we walked on.

I wasn't afraid now. I tried to think. I felt an enormous sense of guilt, that we were stalling, wasting what little time we had left with trivia, that there was some important thing we had to do, to get over before it was too late, which would give order and meaning to everything. But I had no idea what.

I tried to explain everything then, to say, indeed, I was sorry, to go over our whole lives and marriage, to pick at the scabs and make the wounds run with



genuine, living blood, but she put a bare-bone finger to my lips and said, 'No. Hush.'

Then there were more butterflies, one, two, a swarm, fluttering against my ears, landing on her shoulders, on her head, one of them exploring the dark recesses of her ear with its flickering tongue.

'I held onto Sarah tightly, all the while afraid that I would break her, that she would crumble to bits in my arms'

She didn't seem to mind. She didn't seem to notice. With the arrival of the butterflies, she was becoming somehow more distant. I was losing her. She was slipping away.

I remembered reading somewhere that in the Orient people believe that the butterflies they see in graveyards are the souls of the recently departed. But I knew it wasn't like that. It wasn't that simple. These were fragments of death itself, come to devour Sarah, to drag her back into the darkness from which she had come, to shorten her visit -

Angrily, I brushed them away. I tried to catch them in my hands and crush them, but it was like grasping at smoke.

There were only more of them.

Sarah walked. I followed her, into Central Park. For just an instant I thought of how reckless it was to go into Central Park at such an hour - I glanced at my watch; it was almost 5am - but I couldn't convince myself that it mattered; not now, not this once.

Sarah walked on, relentlessly as a wind-up toy, and after a time she seemed, indeed, like some frail, mechanical thing. She did not speak now, even when I spoke to her. I could only follow.

A very late, gibbous moon rose above the skyscrapers, flooding the park with light the colour of blood, until the trees were not mere trees and the stones and paths not mere stones and paths, but stark, symbolic, almost cartoonish representations, as if we had walked into a Henri Rousseau painting and fantastic beasts lurked all around us, among the cartoon fronds and ferns and intensely black tree trunks.

The butterflies came by the thousands, surrounding us in a cloud of muted colours, all tinted red by the impossibly bright moon.

Sarah was still searching for something. I couldn't help her. I couldn't find any words at all. The whole thing was a puzzle, an extra few hours granted as inscrutably as it was miraculously, a meaning to be worked out for the rest of my life and maybe beyond. Nothing more. There were no secret words, no final, special goodbyes, none of the significant things you'd be sure you'd have to cram into the last hour of a loved one's presence.

Nothing more. No words at all.

In the end, she staggered and fell and the butterflies covered her entirely, a writhing, dark blanket, but I brushed them away and took her in my arms. She wasn't even a skeleton, but a thing of tatters, an old, cardboard Halloween decoration you might see trampled on the streets in the middle of November.

She spoke a little then. I couldn't make out the words. I listened for a long time before I realized she was reciting the words to an old song we both knew.

*'Go fetch me water from the desert,
And blood from out of a stone.*

Go fetch me milk from a fair maid's breast

That never a young man hath known.'

I sang softly in reply, 'When shall we meet again, Sweetheart? When shall we meet again?' but my voice broke and I couldn't continue.

The butterflies were like a wave, a flickering tide. I saw the beasts in the cartoon jungle then, great-maned lions with eyes of fire, and a zebra striped red and black, and a serpent with a human face, coiled around the base of a hill, regarding us. There were two moons in the sky now, one red, the other white, hardly shining at all, the colour of white paper.

I held onto Sarah tightly, all the while afraid that I would break her, that she would crumble to bits in my arms. I felt her crumbling anyway, diminishing. It was like trying to carry a sand sculpture.

I wore a cloak of butterflies then, the sound of their wings against my ears a constant sighing like a tide, and more, rising almost into coherence, almost into words.

We walked up the hill past the blank-eyed face of the serpent. I knew this place. We stood before Cleopatra's needle, that ancient obelisk the Khedive of Egypt had sent to the people of New York in the 19th century as a token of his esteem. It stood gleaming in the double moonlight, surrounded by benches and little placards explaining what the hieroglyphics meant. We'd been here before, many times in fact. It had been a running joke between us, when we were younger, to make up our own translations, something more interesting than just 'Ra, son of Ra, Lord of Upper and Lower Egypt.'

Now I shook the butterflies off Sarah's face so she could see. I turned her head with my hand, gently.

'Look. Up at the top. It says EAT AT THUMOE'S. There, further down, the sacred moustache cups of 'Im'otep and 'Er'otep, the only Cockney Pharaohs. And those figures, the middle Kingdom Kickers, ancient predecessors of the Rockettes, and -'

I tried to laugh, but was sobbing instead. She made no response at all. I felt her getting lighter every instant, going away, as the butterflies somehow drew away her substance.

There was no revelation, no portentous wisdom from beyond. We two had come together by accident, been separated by accident, reunited by accident, however briefly. We merely lingered as long as we could, savouring, creating memories, filling each pitiless moment one by one, until I held only her bare skull in my hands. White bone flashed beneath the butterfly wings.

'There has to be more,' I said. 'No. This isn't right. There has to be more than this.'

The skull wheezed. It ground its teeth. It spoke syllables, not words, in a voice that was wholly alien.

That was the one true moment of terror I felt, the helpless horror of holding something *else* in my arms, which was not Sarah nor ever had been - some Devil come from Hell in this particular shape to torment me. Sarah was already gone, and I had done nothing, said nothing, made a fool of myself in this very last, crucial time, *wasted, wasted, wasted* -

The hundred million butterflies covered me, the benches, the obelisk, everything. And then, for an instant the shifting patterns of the wings formed some semblance of her face. I saw her again, and I heard her voice one last time.

'This was enough. You were with me. Thank you.'

'No,' I said. 'More -' I shook the skull. Dust and scraps of clothing fell from my arms. The butterflies swarmed, filling the air, settling again.

The skull moved. The jaw clicked up and down. Its voice was like a crow, shrieking.

'Alas, poor Yorick,' it said, and the jaw fell off and the rest crumbled like paper-thin wax.



I must have slept. I awoke to the sounds of children's voices. For an instant I was terrified that I would be discovered holding Sarah's skull, but my hands were empty, blue-black from the iridescent dust of butterfly scales.

Later, I went to see Frank Rodgers, who had helped our mutual friend Sam Gilmore through his own time of difficulty and strangeness. Those of us who have experienced such things have a way of finding one another. We form a network, sharing, remembering.

So I told him the story as if I were in a confessional, and he said, 'That was still her end, with the Yorick joke. It was her way of signing off. It was the sort of thing she would do, don't you think?'

I had maintained my composure with Frank until then; but I just broke down and wept, and he held me as a parent might a sobbing child.

'Just a joke? Just a *fucking* joke? Was that all it was?'

'Oh it was a lot more than that, but don't you think it was a nice touch to go out on a happy note, with a joke?'

'But we had so little time.'

'And it was very well spent.'

It was very hard for me to understand that, but I tried, and he helped me, and eventually, perhaps, I could.

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SHADOW SHADOW

RAND SOELLNER

Phosphorescent light from the computer display terminal bathed Meredith's face. Her blue eyes matched the electric blue dot at which she gazed; it moved through the green grid coordinates on her screen.

The van that housed Meredith Clancy and her instrumentation trundled along a pocked dirt road by an orange grove. She sat before the control cluster in the vehicle's rear, directing the four field operatives out in the patchy night fog. Orange dots on the screen represented these agents, which surrounded the blue dot, but a thousand feet separated the two colours in the real world.

John McMasters drove the truck. His palm felt clammy, though the air-conditioner strained to wring the Florida humidity from the cab. Ground fog from the nearby irrigation pond thickened, and rose to knee height, carpeting the grove. Hard bright stars pricked the black summer sky.

'Go to the north, Pete,' directed Meredith into her headset microphone.

'Turning now.' Static whispered as Pete's voice activated then deactivated the circuitry of his earpiece-microphone gear. Mounted on the barrel of his rifle, the jury-rigged S-sensor intensified its metallic beeping rhythm and volume as he veered north. Sally Ryan and Alex Kincaid triangulated on the truck's main scanner fix, homing in from the northeast and west while Jeff bracketed their quarry from the south.

Moving stealthily through the misty trees, the beast sensed the humans following it. It anticipated becoming the stalker instead of the stalked. It had been after The Other, the one who had made it what it was, but had to deal

with The Other's minions first. It shuddered, grunted, then climbed the large tree at the grove's edge.

Jiggling on the bumpy road, the van's headlights cast vibrating spears of light through the thickening silvery haze. Josh McMasters looked up for a second, located the fog light switch on the cab ceiling, and flicked it on. Just as the incandescent balls of light burned through the ground clouds, he saw a chuck hole a foot in diameter.

'Holy shit!' McMasters jerked the steering wheel to the left. But it was impossible. Before he could swerve out of the way, the left front tire slammed into the depression, and the vehicle lurched to a halt.

Josh's tanned face flew forward and smashed into the windshield. The glass fractured, but remained in place. Blood gushed from his nose, and stained the spider web of damaged safety glass, flowing into the broken lines. The Voyager's III's horn blared from the weight of his stomach on the wheel.

Equipment in the cargo bay was bolted to the body structure and chassis, and Meredith wore her seat belt. The jolt startled her, but otherwise she felt all right. She whipped off her restraint belt and hunched over to walk in the four and a half foot height of the interior. She hurried to the front seats.

'Good Lord, Josh!' she shrieked, as she pulled his lanky body back into his seat. The horn stopped. She feared he was dead. Blood ran down his face, soaked through his thick salt and pepper moustache, and began to enter his half-open mouth. She held the rear of the seat and simultaneously released the reclining pull on its side, gently leaning his body back. There. Now he was almost hori-

zontal. His blood began to clot. She could see his chest rise and fall once, twice.

'Good. He's alive,' she sighed, realizing that she had been holding her breath. Josh blinked and coughed. Blood from his mouth sprayed onto the cracked windshield, adding a fresh crimson watercolour coat to the burgundy splotch hardening there.

'You stupid jerk!' scolded Meredith. 'Why'd you remove the air bag?' This was more an accusation than a question. Josh had pulled out everything he had deemed unnecessary from the sleek, blue-green vehicle to allow room for the group's specialized devices. McMasters spluttered, brushed a hand through his tousled black hair, then whispered something under his breath. He always looked like he needed a haircut - rough around the edges.

'What? Are you all right?' she asked with concern in her face and voice. Lines creased her flawless white forehead. She did not bake herself at the beach anymore. She believed the skin cancer warnings. Several of her girlfriends in grad school had tanned themselves as brown as chocolate at Cocoa Beach. It had been a weekend ritual: lay on the beach, catch some z's, see if any hot guys were around. Meredith had grown weary of the meat rack beach scene, feeling degraded by the crudeness of the act of exposing her attractive body to the childish boys and the harsh sun, as if she were a piece of rump roast at a delicatessen. She had stopped before it was too late, but some of her friends' skin developed an artificial freckled appearance. By the time they were thirty, their mottled skin made them look forty.

Josh and Meredith had been dating over the last couple of months, and her growing affection for him could soon blossom into something much more important. She typically dodged emotional entanglements, preferring to use her time for more intellectual pursuits. During high school, she had applied herself to earn the grades necessary to obtain a full scholarship to the University of Florida's College of Electrical Engineering. She had specialized in computer science and electronics in graduate school. One of a few women in the country to hold both a Master's and a Phd in electrical engineering, she also had a sub-specialty in organic chemistry.

NASA had recruited her, promising a responsible position before she received her doctorate. The upcoming US/Soviet Mars mission was equipped with her electronically enhanced nutrient recycling system. She was among a handful of women to have been a crew member aboard the Space Shuttle.

Although there had been many offers of companionship from her associates in the male-dominated profession she had chosen, she usually demurred. Meredith's success was the result of her talent, and she wanted no potentially damaging aspersions cast upon her by an ill-considered affair. But she was maturing, and wanted more dependable things in her life now. After five years in the space programme, she dropped out. She had enjoyed an extended sabbatical, trying to find out what she wanted out of life.

She had become bored with the leisure



time, and on a whim, joined XenoTech as chief of their Special Forces eXperimental team, or SFX. Company personnel nicknamed the group Special Effects. Now twenty-nine, she watched the big 3-0 looming ahead like a brick wall in the midnight back alley of her mind. She was trying to muster the fortitude to jump to the top of this mental barrier and peer into the shadows on the other side. She wanted to be prepared for what was to come. She hated not knowing. 'Orderliness removes chaos,' professor Schaefer, a college instructor, had always counselled her. She had taken this advice to heart. It had become her motto.

Romantic relationships always became messy. That is when she ended them. Or before, if she could read the tell-tale signs. Josh was different. Both intelligent and physically appealing to her, he seldom dwelled on boring or petty matters as had the other men in her past. He could be downright childish at times, though - too fun-loving. Maybe that was part of his appeal for her; he offered a free-wheeling outlet from her tight, workaholic schedule.

'Nag, Nag,' wheezed Josh, as he smiled weakly. He looked up at her through heavy-lidded eyes. Meredith's shoulder-length blonde hair absorbed some blood off Jeff's right cheek as she wrapped her arms around his head and hugged him. She silently rocked his cradled head as if he were a crying infant she was trying to comfort.



Sally Ryan's rifle barrel scanner beeped. She hadn't heard from the controller, Meredith, for about five minutes. She figured there was radio interference, or that everything was proceeding as planned, and nothing need be said.

Sally's long auburn hair graced the rear of her neck in a Swedish braid, as she wanted nothing to interfere with her peripheral vision. Her coffee coloured eyes were black in the darkness.

She half-walked, half-slid down a short, steep slope covered with sand, thistles and small rocks that led to the northeast side of the citrus grove. She gave thanks for the rubber-cleated hunting boots mandated by XenoTech during expeditions.



Pete Sundstrum and Jeff Croppe reached the grove's southern boundary, and began a wary reconnaissance among the trees. Soon Alex approached from the west, entering the dark place.



Sally bumped into a sooty smudge pot. It rattled. The tightly-knit fruit trees absorbed most of the sound, but it unnerved her just the same, because her position had been revealed. The pleasant citrus scent of the grove made her think of orange cookies fresh from the oven - something she had never tasted, but longed to, each time she smelled a grove's perfume.

Due to the physical exertion of the chase, she breathed rapidly. A clammy

sweat clung uncomfortably to her. The churning fog's humidity would not allow her perspiration to evaporate. She pinched the nylon fabric of her XenoTech jumpsuit at the chest, and fanned it in and out three times, vainly attempting to create a cooling air flow. A three-inch white stripe ran diagonally from her left front shoulder down to her right waist. 'XenoTech' was spelled in this band as a negative, like 'Police' in the white stripe of a squad car.

Raising the rifle to her shoulder, she squinted through the infra red night-vision scope. A greenish-black nightscape greeted her eyes. The caseless ammo Heckler & Koch rifle possessed the latest technological attachments, including laser siting, digital distance read-out, and Meredith Clancy's S-Sensor. Sweeping the weapon sideways, she surveyed the dark territory. Distance in dim red decimal metres rambled across the bottom of the framed display. Although mundane in the daytime, the grove became a place of sinister shadows with obscuring veils of limbs at night.

Two beady yellow eyes.

Sally stopped, swung the rifle back to the left. A rat stood on its hind legs and twitched its ear in her direction. It knew it had unwelcome company. It dropped to all fours and scurried into the weeds with a soft rustle. The sound was so small that Sally would never have noticed it if it had not been linked to the moving rodent she spied through the scope.

She continued her scan.

Another rustle.

More rats?

A narrow leaf lazily see-sawed down through the air from the live oak above her near the grove's edge. Sally watched the dark sliver fall to the sandy soil by her feet.

The night was windless.

She stooped and picked up the leaf. It was green, and this was midsummer. What had made it fall?

Another rustle. Louder.

Sally snapped her head straight up from her squatting position just in time to see the dark form falling onto her from the tree. Her mouth opened, filling her lungs with one last jet of air, but she did not have time to scream.



Sally Ryan's gasp had temporarily activated her headset microphone. Alex Kincaid stopped in his tracks. He wore his platinum-blond hair in a mohawk. He loved Saturday night wrestling - he looked the part, could have been The Hulk's brother - and aped his favourite gladiator. 'What was that? Sally . . . Sally . . . Hey! What's going on?'

No response.

'That's all we need, another solar flare to mess up communications,' Kincaid held the end of the stiff wire that projected down from the headset on the right side of his face. The wire stopped just one inch from his mouth. He tapped the tiny microphone three times blew-on it, then called Sally again.

Dead silence.



During Alex's pause, Pete Sundstrum and Jeff Croppe had followed the vectors indicated by their incessantly beeping S-sensors. They were in their late forties, and used to working as a team.

They had met in VietNam, back in 68, and had jointly conducted over a hundred reconnaissance missions. They knew how to operate in enemy territory, sensing each other's location, moving through the trees as one being, seemingly connected by thought waves. While in the Service, their CO, Lt Carlson, had called them the 'ESP Boys'. He admired their teamwork, and uncanny sensitivities in the steamy jungles of the third world. They had both been in their teens when they enlisted.

'Truth, Justice and the American Way,' their college-bound high school friends had taunted them, but they had not over-intellectualized the situation. The United States was their country, involved in a war, undeclared or otherwise, and they felt it was their duty to lend their support.

Pete's long-haired younger brother, Mike, was one of the lucky hometown boys who went to college on a student deferral. Pete and his brother had several violent arguments about warmongers and faggot hippies before Pete left for Utapo Air Force Base in Thailand. Only recent had both matured enough to face their former differences of opinion with a calm historical retrospective.

Both had been right. Both had been wrong. They realized that each of them had to do what was right for himself. The zeal of youth had created the need for every issue to be either black or white. They had finally decided that in reality, the world was an ever-shifting pattern of hazy gray shadows, with only an occasional obvious right and wrong. Wife beaters. Drug pushers. Torturers. Easy decisions here; very wrong, very bad things. But how about . . .

Pete tripped over a huddled mass on the ground. He realized that his S-sensor had increased its tempo during the last minute. He had absentmindedly followed its signal, allowing himself to be led to this spot. The huddled mass was the torn body of Sally Ryan. Definitely dead.

'Damn. I was going to ask her out,' was his first thought, before agonizing sorrow could possess him. He felt selfish and guilty.

His S-sensor beeped manically. Pete span around, knowing that he and his partner were in danger. He saw Jeff Croppe's shadowed form approaching about seventy feet away along the nearest row of orange trees. His boots were soundless on the sands, twigs, and leaves. Even in this tense moment, Pete admired his comrade's stealth.

As Pete motioned for Jeff to halt, debris exploded upward from the ground between them. Underneath the dead leaves, a bulky form bolted toward Pete with the ferocity of a grizzly bear. It stank of death.

Despite his military training and natural abilities, Pete Sundrum could not turn his weapon quickly enough to fire. Jeff was poised though, his assault rifle ready for action.

The still night air shattered as his rifle coughed loudly five times. Blazing

orange flames stroboscopically rocketed from the black muzzle. Pete heard the dull wump-wump-wump as Jeff's rounds hit home into the creature, but the shadowy beast surged forward and crashed into him.

Pete's scream was short and fierce, the death cry of a warrior destined to die in battle. The piercing sound shook Jeff's eardrum; he tore off his headset. While considering his options with haste, Crope decided that though he lusted for vengeance, he would have a better opportunity under different circumstances. He ran.

From the west, Alex Kincaid came running toward the scene of carnage, confused and concerned by the rifle shots and the violent sounds storming through his headset. He froze when he saw the dark massive form bent over a dismembered human. Kincaid fired eight times while hurriedly backing through the grove rows.

Alex turned and ran full tilt through branches that poked his face and ribs. Ripe oranges tore from the trees and bounced on the ground behind him. The ominous beast thumped after him, breaking down trees and squashing oranges.



Meredith felt better, now that Josh McMasters had fully regained consciousness, and was talking. She gave him a peck on his bruised cheek, then returned to her console. As she glanced at the dots on the monitor, 'What the Hell?' was all she had time to say before Josh saw Alex coming back to the van.

Flying back to the van.

Josh watched with horrified fascination from his driver's seat as Kincaid's square-jawed face broke through the already fractured windshield in front of him. Josh stared into the dead brown eyes of his friend and associate, field agent Alex Kincaid.

Torn sheets of safety glass plastered Josh's lap. Something had propelled Kincaid with enormous force from a hundred feet away, hurtling him through the air like a rocket. Heavy footfalls shook the hard-packed sand around the van.

Without further goading, McMasters turned the key and tried to start the engine.

Couldn't.

Tried again. Meredith screamed incoherently as the grisly surprise rammed into their windshield. The engine started. Josh revved it twice, and jammed the transmission into drive. The back of the vehicle elevated slightly. The Voyager did not move, although Josh floored the gas pedal, and the engine whined.

'Something's pulled the rear wheels up!' reasoned Meredith, as she regained her composure. She hunched over and hurried past the beeping equipment to the back doors.

Josh let the accelerator up half-way, and yelled 'No!' just as Meredith kicked the doors apart. Meredith saw a furry dark chest five feet wide towering past the top of the van. Grabbing a .44 Israeli Eagle automatic pistol from a recess in her console, she emptied its 18-round clip into the beast holding the truck. An animalistic howl of pain soared over the

top of the van, vibrating the metal with its intensity. The back of the van fell, tires sprayed dirt and gravel as they bit the road's surface.

Josh gasped as the right front door flew open. Jeff Crope jumped into the passenger seat.

'What the hell was ...' began Josh.

'Damned if I know,' replied Jeff, 'Oh no, not Alex, too!' Alex Kincaid's dead eyes vacantly gawked at the two men as Josh McMasters negotiated the bumpy road out of the orange grove. Angry shrieks echoed behind them, and the ground shook with the running steps of something large.

'Although mundane in the daytime, the grove became a place of sinister shadows with obscuring veils of limbs at night'

Josh floored the gas pedal. The Voyager lunged ahead on the washboard path, vibrating their eye sockets. The truck hit a dip, and Alex's body fell. The Voyager whisked over him with a disturbing bump.

'Oh God!' Meredith shivered.

No time to stop. Not unless you wanted to join him.

Meredith thought back over the last few hours, struggling to make sense of the mystery. XenoTech's CEO, Raymond Pussar, had personally called, waking her out of a deep sleep at 1 am.

'Are you in bed, my dear?' the lecherous Pussar had asked.

'Mmmm, what?'

'What aren't you wearing, sweet thing?'

'What? Who ...'

'Just kidding. This is Pussar. I need you down at XenoTech. We've got a problem.'

That had been this morning. Morning - that was a laugh. It still felt like Friday night to her, and the sun wasn't due up for another two hours. As Chief of Special Forces, one of her duties was site security. And something had broken into the base and killed two security guards. Ten shots had been fired. No clues, except for the glowing green goo on a galvanized steel fence post, which had been forced outward from the grounds into the world.

The stuff was radioactive, but also possessed organic properties. Believing it to be lubricant from a machine that had been driven by the culprits, Meredith had rigged a device to detect the substance. She called it her Stuff-sensor, but the SFX team quickly dubbed it the S-sensor. That made their equipment sound more romantic and technical to outsiders, which was part of the atmosphere of mystery XenoTech fostered to convince others to pay their staggering fees.

As men had been killed, the SFX team took the armed Defence Van,

DV for short, to track the intruder. CEO Raymond Pussar refused to call the Orange County Police. The SFX team protested, but Paunchy Pussar (as Meredith called him) said that XenoTech would 'take care of its own problems'. Meredith thought he was holding something back, something maybe the Research and Development guys didn't want becoming public knowledge. Well, that kind of espionage was common with a billion-dollar company like XenoTech.

The corporation operated two nuclear power plants on the St John's River, and handled hazardous waste for the University of Central Florida, and several other companies in the area. Once the stuff left their properties, they did not know what happened to it.

The thing was, Raymond Pussar's reddish-brown rodent eyes were always watching the quarterly report, always wanting to show a good profit, or an indecent profit, if possible. This made him Zeus in the minds of the Board of Directors, formed the basis of his yearly salary increases, and expanded his bonuses. Pussar ignored the EPA demands, and only shut off the illegal reactor coolant outflow water to Little Pond whenever they came snooping around. He used the pond as a cheap heat sink and a dump. The hazardous chemicals that XenoTech illegally stored in its labyrinthine basements had been corroding their containers for years. Pussar had installed a large overflow drain that led down to Little Pond.

The pond used to be a place of nature, a place of birds and bees and bears. Now eldritch mists of acidic toxins veiled the water hole. It had become a place of burns and festering wounds and monsters. Green gas bubbled up through a greasy miasma that used to be water. Unpleasant things wriggled in the shallows of the murky soup. Neighbourhood boys no longer used this as their good old swimming hole.



The two Florida black bears had drunk at this pond often. Five years ago, the water had become bitter. They had mated. The she-bear had one cub, if you could call it that. It came from her womb shrieking. It grew quickly, feeding on the strange little creatures oozing through the diseased mud of Little Pond.

Pussar called the subterranean vault housing the dangerous chemicals the Science Foundation Lab Sector. SFLS, or 'Syphilis'. He thought the acronym clever.

He had felt a pressure in his head lately, an insistent groping, like a hand inside his skull sifting through the entwined tubes of his gray matter. He had sensed a presence. The presence had grown unbearably strong on Friday at midnight, when he had finally gone home. He could finish the yearly report on Monday. He wiped his perspiring bald patch with his snot-encrusted yellowed handkerchief. He was an efficiency expert, and only washed things when white became black.

Something chased his mind through the streets as he drove down highway 50, over to the Interstate, and up to Heathrow, the posh subdivision for the nouveau rich. Could it be guilt? No.



Never. Must just be a whopper of a headache. Yeah. That's it. He took four extra-strength Tylenol and went to bed. As his head touched the pillow, the phone rang. His bloodshot eyes snapped open. The red phone. Trouble at XenoTech.

Meredith had dutifully assembled her crew, and had tracked the intruder for seven miles through east Orange Country's wilderness and farmlands, keeping to paved streets when possible, heading cross-country when required. It seemed to be headed north, towards the elegant subdivisions. Now she was getting the hell out of there, back to XenoTech. Time to call the Game and Fish Commission, or the National Guard, or Ghostbusters. She could call them if she wanted to - Universal studios had been in operation since 1990, down in south Orange County. The beeping of the S-sensor in the back of the van faded, then stopped.

A half-hour later at XenoTech, she stood in front of Raymond Pussar's desk. His red face huffed and puffed at her from his side of the African burlwood slab. Nothing cluttered the desk's slick surface. Nothing cluttered anybody's desk at XenoTech. Corporate policy - it looked more businesslike to Pussar, and by God, if he had to pay his employees for a day's work, he sure as hell was going to squeeze a day's worth from them. He didn't want any distractions like husband, wives, sons and daughters cluttering the minds of the people with the now uncluttered desks. Business, with a capital 'B'. With a vengeance.

Pussar was usually saccharine sweet to Meredith, vainly trying to get into her shapely pants. The concepts of courtship, growing affection, establishing trust, sharing interests and laughing together never entered his businesslike mind. The bottom line. Her bottom.

Now he had another problem, but he usually dodged these, delegating blame to his employees. A suitable whipping girl sat before him - he verbally lashed out at Meredith.

'What d'y' mean you couldn't arrest the things?'

'Arrest? Let's see you put the cuffs on Godzilla.'

'God . . .' Meredith wasn't sure if he was repeating what she'd just said, or was starting to swear. He continued with ' . . . what are you talking about?'

'Like I've been trying to tell you. This isn't a man, or machine, or any animal that I've ever seen before - it's a thing.'

'A thing,' Pussar keep repeating what she said, as if the instant reply would make the information clearer to him.

Meredith concluded, 'A big thing.'

The stale stink of Pussar's cigarette smoke lingered in the air. The chain-smoking fat man did not care that he polluted the air others breathed. His jade ashtray overflowed with the debris of his disgusting habit. Way back in high school, Tubby Pussar thought smoking made him look sophisticated - 60s era James Bond and all that. In reality, it made him even more unappetizing to would-be girl-friends. Not only was he obese and vulgar, he also stank like a burning garbage dump. The cheerleaders, not known for their compassion, had made jokes - 'Marylyn, if you don't get this back flip right, we're gonna make

you French kiss Tubby. You'll get tobacco juice all over your face, and smoke in your hair.'

Suddenly Pussar clenched his eyes, and grabbed both sides of his round head. He had disconnected half the lights in the building as a cost-cutting measure, and the solitary fluorescent fixture over his desk reflected in the perspiration on his bald scalp.

'Are you all right Mr Pussar?'

'Mmmgh. There's something in my head.'

'What?'

'Er - I've got a headache . . . Yes, that's it, just a headache . . . Something's coming . . .'

'What was that Sir?'

'Uh?' mumbled Pussar as he rubbed his temples.



Harsh lights in the mottled balcony of the convenience store reflected off its almond-shaped four-inch eyes. Moths whirled around the store's fluorescent glare, like Icarus flying to his doom.

Light hurts. Man's light. Not the natural light of sun during day. Got to stop the man-light. But the sound. Sound is worse. Like big biting bugs in weeds around the pond. Worse. Bugs sound to mate. This sound - just noise.

Three noisy teenage boys shoved through the glass and aluminum doors of the store with their lime-flavoured Big Swigs, and hopped into the 85 Camaro convertible. It had seen better days. Old rap music blared out its open interior. The mind-numbing droid music's overbearing bass had long ago fried the speakers. The robotic distorted sounds were unintelligible. The dark shape rushed out from behind the dumpster, desperate to silence the racket.

Two enormous paws clapped onto Tommy Sheldon's shukin' and jivin' acne-cratered face as Peewee stomped on the accelerator. Tommy remained motionless as the car's threadbare tires laid what little rubber they had left on the back road to Chuluota. From the front seat, neither Booby nor Peewee noticed their backseat friend vacating the vehicle.

A mighty twist of forearms, a snap, and Tommy flew through the air and into the battered green dumpster at the side of the store.

The store. The lights . . . Strange purple almond eyes in the stinking dumpster darkness. *Stink of people, rot of their throw away civilization. Thrown away into the wilderness to poison the world. My world.*

Wendy had to drop out of high school when she was seventeen. She still was. Six more months to go before the emancipating, magical age of eighteen. God, almost eighteen. It had seemed a lifetime away only two years ago when she had begun dating Brad.

'No, daddy, he's a nice boy, really. And stop calling me Carrot-top. I know you like my red hair, but that's a kid's name.'

'But I want to see him. I love him, and he loves me.'

'I'm sleeping over at Sherry's tonight Mom.'

'Yeah, all right.'

'Going to the movies - don't wait up.'

'Uh-huh.'

'I don't care what you want, daddy, this is what I want. You better listen to me for once.'

'Where have I been? No, I was there. The attendance office computer's on the fritz again, it happens to all the kids.'

'No. I won't stop seeing him, I don't care what you do to me.'

'You'd better listen to me this time Daddy, I'm going to have Brad's baby!'

'No. It's too late.'

Wendy regretted leaving her chums in school, but was working full time now, often pulling two shifts at the 24-Hour Sooper-Mart. Her emerald green eyes were more often bloodshot than not. She blinked, squeezing Tears Naturele into them as she tipped back her pale freckled face. She and Brad were trying to save enough money to rent an apartment of their own when the baby came. Money. That's a lot of what being adult meant, no matter what the school counselor had said about 'human service occupations'.

All a landlord wants to talk about is rent plus a damage deposit. That's more money than she'd seen in her entire life, much less on a regular monthly basis. And it didn't stop there, oh no! How about food? Maybe a couple hundred bucks a month if they scrimped and never ate out. No more Friday night pizza. The car - Brad's old Bug always needed repairs, and the junkyards were running out of parts that hadn't been made for over ten years. Even though Brad was a good mechanic, one day they would be reduced to riding the bus, sitting next to fat old ladies that smelled like mothballs - those elderly people always seemed to be chewing an imaginary cud - didn't their dentures fit? Damn - the aisles in the buses were usually speckled with wads of fresh gum - she and Brad would have to scrub it from the soles of their shoes. Shoes! Man, she really wanted a new pair of sneakers, to hell with the Reeboks, to hell with fashion, we're talking about basic things now, and Payless Shoes for eight bucks were just fine. Only thing was, she only made five dollars an hour, and Uncle Sam snatched about a third. Maybe she could buy them one shoe at a time . . .

So this is what Daddy has been trying to tell me for these past couple of years! Life ain't free - so make damn sure you've got a solid foundation for earning a living. Better to take four to six years learning how to earn, than starting too early and dooming yourself to lifelong poverty. Lots of pretty pregnant girls in the world. But what skills have they evidenced other than the ability to procreate? At least the hookers downtown got paid for that, and took more thorough precautions than she had. But she was in love, although she and Brad had been arguing more than loving lately: he wanted mag wheels, she wanted food on the table, and a savings account for the baby.

Maybe, someday she would take an equivalency exam, study during her nightly shifts here in the store, or while with the baby. Then she could apply at the community college, maybe take some art courses. Her elementary and high school fine arts instructors had thought highly of her abilities. Daddy said she should try to get a scholarship.

Mom thought so to, and told her to do something about it everyday. But she was tired of her parent's lectures, tired of...

Click, click, click.

Fingernails on glass.

'Hello?' It sounded like someone had tapped on the big glass windows at the front of the store. Had those noisy kids from Winter Park High come back to hassle her some more, trying to play grab ass again? Well, she still had her little tear gas canister, and wasn't afraid to use it. Mr Whitly, the store manager, had told her to be safe, rather than sorry, especially after the sun went down. That's when the slime slunk out looking for places like theirs to knock over so they could buy more freeze, the latest designer drug that had transplanted both crack and ice.

Click, click, click.

With a frown, she put down her romance novel, and drained her coke can. It pumped her full of the caffeine she needed to get through the graveyard shift.

Click, click, click.

With a swing of her widening hips, she brushed around the cashier's counter and walked to the big glass windows.

Nothing to the left.

Nothing to the...

Plate glass splintered.

Two huge furry arms grabbed Wendy's red hair, yanked her off her feet, jerking her through the tinkling shards.

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Pussar's headache had momentarily left. He lost track of what he had been talking about, and merely recognized that gorgeous Meredith sat across the desk from him.

'Now then, honey,' Pussar continued, as if they had been amiably socializing, 'I'd like us to get to know each other better.'

'Sir?'

Pussar ponderously rose, walked around the desk and behind her chair. He placed his doughy hands on her shoulders. She could feel his clammy palms through the thin fabric of her SFX T-shirt. She had not taken time to dress for the office, as this was an emergency operation. He let his fingers slip down the front of her shoulder, not really at the top of her chest, but darned close. She stiffened in her seat.

'Mr Pussar, I can't imagine why we would want to do that.'

'Oh - I'd like to discuss my plans for the SFX team. You know - mix some business with pleasure.'

More like monkey business, Meredith thought, while replying: 'That all then? You want to talk business?'

'Well, let's see what pops up. It's sort of a business date I have in mind.'

'And where would we go on this business date?'

'I usually bring my dates to my place for a bite to eat, but not many of them can fit my hot dog into their mouth. I have a nice selection of tasty nuts, too.'

Ha ha ha. Fuck you, she thought, but said: 'Sir I don't think...'

Pussar could not contain his desire any longer. All the months he had been watching her, all the delicious thoughts he had ruminated upon; he slid his puffy

hands down, like two fat grub worms, and squeezed Meredith's breasts, although he would have called them tits, boobs, or hooters. He huffed his sour breath - the rotting remains of his 8pm scampi, heavy on the garlic - onto the back of her slender neck. Meredith reacted as though his mouth was a blowtorch spitting a hellish blue flame. She shot up from the chair, which turned and fell to the blood-red carpet. She could still feel the ghost of his nervous, moist hands on her bosom.

Startled by her sudden action, Pussar stumbled over the chair and crashed to

'Something cracked, sparked, and fireworks flared on the other side of the complex'

the floor. He could see dust bunnies under his desk, dancing in the flow of air from the air-conditioning vent across the room. He made a mental note to fire the cleaning crew. Time to hire people who knew what they were doing - like Service Masters.

A red rage boiled up from the bottom of Meredith Clancy's tennis shoes, heated her naked legs, drove up through her loins, stomach, chest, made the veins on her neck stand out, flushed her face. Her eyes opened wide, and she jabbed at the air in front of Pussar with her rigid forearm and pointed right index finger.

'Listen you sonofabitch - I'm Chief of XenoTech's Special Forces experimental Team, and nothing else. Not your honey, not your sweetie or your baby! If you ever again so much as look at me cross-eyed I'll kick your goddamn nuts so far a squirrel in Maine will thank you for the donation, however small it may be.'

Pussar looked up at her, lying on his side on the floor during her tirade. He slid his lecherous eyes, like Mazola oil, over her long smooth legs.

Pussar smiled. 'I love it when you talk dirty.' He grabbed for her right ankle, but she danced back three paces on her tiptoes. When Pussar had pawed her breasts earlier, she realized that she had not taken the time to put on a bra, and her full chest bounced whenever she moved. Pussar leered at her jiggling bosom, and actually drooled. The spittle oozed down the left corner of his mouth, dropped six inches, and hung there.

She turned and looked at the door, but he was in the way. He followed her gaze, slinging the saliva tendril around his chin. He didn't notice or care. Animal needs. She read in his mad eyes that he understood her intentions of escape, and he smiled like a Florida alligator cornering a rabbit. He grunted like a bear, got to his knees - Meredith filed through a list of karate moves in her mind - then Pussar groaned and clutched at his head.

◆◆◆◆

Jeff Croppe's hazel eyes twitched to the S-sensor in the back of the van.

He sat on the open rear end of the Voyager, sipping a Diet Pepsi. Meredith had forgotten to turn off the equipment in her haste to answer the CEO's angry summons.

'Now why would her detector start beeping again? We must be miles from that thing.' He leaned in to inspect the monitoring equipment.

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'Coming...' Pussar moaned, pulling at the few remaining wisps of grey hair littering the sides of his head.

'Lie down,' commanded Meredith, as she pushed him back with one of her sneaker-clad feet. The dirt on its sole left a tire tread pattern on the front of Pussar's yellowed shirt. She pulled the miniature walkie-talkie from her pocket, switched it on, and adjusted the squelch. Static hissed. At least most of the fluorescent lights were off, that cut down the interference.

'Bob? This is Meredith in Mr Pussar's office. Send up a first-aid tech. He's got... a headache.'

'Meredith?' Josh's voice cut in on the frequency.

'Josh?'

'Yeah. Look, you need to get down to the parking lot right away. I just got back from the infirmary myself, and Jeff says that your damn Stuff-sensor has been going nuts for about five minutes.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's on.'

'Oh. I guess I forgot to turn it off.'

'No. That's not what I mean. It is not only on, it's, here, listen.'

'I'll be right down.' She passed the medic in the shiny corporate corridor on the way to the elevator. 'Oh, Sam. You better take the Old Man down to the infirmary on the first floor. He's got a whale of a headache, and should be lying down - not that I care that much though.'

'Okay Meredith...' the stainless steel elevator doors slid shut on his words.

Meredith shoved open the tall mirror glass lobby doors and sprinted to the van in the large parking lot. Lights atop 20 foot tall bronze posts cast yellowish pools upon the fog-shrouded black sea of asphalt. She heard the S-sensor beeping as she neared the Voyager. White adhesive tape covered Josh's nose. The jaundiced light from a sodium-vapour parking lot lamp sparkled on an exposed edge of an aluminum splint that ran from the tip of his nose to between his eyes. Jeff Croppe's brush-cut sandy hair bristled. He held his rifle waist level while gazing through the chain link fence into the surrounding trees. His red laser site rippled across palmettos and Queen Ann's lace. The weed's pleasant bouquet scented the night air.

Josh snapped to his feet from the open van rear when he saw Meredith. 'Like I said, your S-sensor is misbehaving.'

'Ain't misbehavin', it's...'

'My parents danced to that tune y'know.'

'Swell. You're cracking jokes while King Kong returns.'

'You mean Universal let him out of his cage? Man, that was one scary ride. I thought he was gonna eat me.'

'Are you done?' Meredith scowled at him. 'Did you understand what I said?'



'What?' He was all smiles.
'The part about coming back.'
'It's coming back here?'

The cicadas stopped their incessant scratching.

'Of course! Why do you think the . . .'

Something crackled, sparked, and fireworks flared on the other side of the complex, over by the power generators. The yellow glare of the parking lot lights flickered, dimmed, died.

'It's here,' breathed Meredith huskily.

'Good,' grinned Jeff as he spun around, 'pay back time.'

The SFX Team jumped into the DV. The engine roared to life under Jeff's eager foot. Josh and Meredith were scarcely in their seats before the van lunged forward. Jeff snapped on the headlights. Their white quartz-halogen blaze cut across the gloomy lot like a sword.



Raymond Pussar jerked up to a sitting position on the infirmary cot. This was definitely not his thousand-dollar California King posturepedic mattress. Clinical lighting above him glowed dimly. The cool wet washcloth fell from his perspiring forehead into his lap.

The glass block wall that separated the recovery room and the technician's outer office distorted Pussar's gloomy image.

An article in Sam's *Ebony* magazine absorbed the medic's interest.

'It's coming!' Pussar suddenly shrieked. 'I didn't mean to do it! I didn't know what would happen!'

Sam dropped the magazines, and darted through the open recovery room door.

'N-n-no!' bawled Pussar. He twisted his face with his hands, threw his legs over the side of the cot to the floor, and rose to his feet.

'Sir! You need to rest,' counselled Sam, as he gently pushed at Pussar's chest, trying to restrain him.

Madness raged in Pussar's wild eyes as he shoved Sam into the glass block wall. Sam slumped to the floor. Pussar shambled into the building's main corridor.

'Got to hide, it's coming for me!' He rushed through the ten foot wide hall, bouncing off one side to the other, on his way to the service stair that lead down to the utility tunnels.



'God. It's here. Here!' yelled Meredith. Jeff slammed on the brakes, and the Voyager screeched to a halt, swerving on the fog-drenched paving by the service entrance.

'What's that?' Josh asked, looking into the shadowy oleander bushes near the glass entry doors. Something moved in the shrubbery, black on black. They jumped from the van into the rising ocean of fog.

'Where?' asked Jeff, as he swivelled his rifle back and forth, its laser a crimson fourth of July sparkler in the darkness.

Meredith gaped at him, then at the shadows. 'Good Grief. Right over there.' She pointed. 'Can't you feel it?' The air densified, seemed oppressive.

'This is spooky,' Josh watched with wide eyes, whispering.

Jeff approached the bushes, probing the gloom. The steady beep from the back of the van distracted him, but also assured him that it was near. He felt the malice then, felt alien eyes burning into him, felt the mortal danger. The hairs rose on the nape of his neck.

Just as he began backing away, the foliage exploded in his face, leaves and limbs shredding. He fell backwards, his rifle flew from his hands, clattering to the pavement beneath the misty sea. The dark shape crashed through the tempered glass doors, spraying thousands of silicon pebbles onto the blue vinyl Pirelli flooring in the service corridor. The lumbering form disappeared down the hall.

Josh ran to Jeff's side and put one knee on the asphalt. He felt for a pulse on Jeff's neck.

'Most ladies doing that expect a kiss from me,' responded Jeff. Fog rolled over his body. 'I'm still alive and kickin', so don't try any of that CPR crap. I know you've just been dying for the chance to lay a big wet one on me.'

'I'll spare us that indignity,' Josh smiled at his friend.

'Course you can give me some of that artificial respiration any time you want, honey,' Jeff smiled and looked through heavy-lidded eyes at Meredith. She didn't mind occasional innuendoes from friends that were just joking around.

'Gimme a second.' Jeff propped himself up on his right elbow. He struggled for breath, steam escaping his mouth, mixing with the growing mist. After a few seconds, he tried to get up. Josh caught his right arm, Meredith his left. They hauled him to his feet.

'Sure you don't want to lie down for awhile?' asked Meredith.

'Nah.' At first Jeff had rubber sea legs, but gradually the muscles straightened. Meredith and Josh felt him regain his equilibrium, and slowly removed their hands from his armpits.

'You gonna be okay?' Worry lined Meredith's forehead.

'Yah. Sure.' Jeff took a deep breath, then nodded. 'I owe that thing for Alex, Pete and Sally.' He looked around, saw the red glow of his rifle under the damp haze hovering over XenoTech, picked it up, then marched to the splintered service doors.

Meredith and Josh dashed back to the van, shoved .44 semi-automatic pistols into their waistbands — Meredith was glad a belt held-up her shorts — and hefted their rifles. They dashed through the ruined doors, slipped on the shattered glass, remained upright, then caught up with Jeff in the gloomy hall. Amber emergency lights glowed dimly at the intersection ahead. Silver fog curled over the aluminum threshold and into the building.

Josh became thoughtful at the first intersection.

'Meredith, you go to the command station. Keep track of the visitor for us.'

'No way, old Bob's got that station tonight, and I'm seeing this thing through with you.'

'But . . .'

'No buts, butthead! I'm Chief of Special Forces, and you do what I say, not vice versa.'

'Yeas ma'am!' he mimicked a southern servant.

'Cut the crap you two,' said Jeff, 'I've got a score to settle. By the glass fragments, it looks like the beast went this way.'

They stalked down the hill as Meredith snapped on her walkie-talkie. 'Bob.' The receiver hissed for a moment.

'Yeah?'

'This is Meredith. We're tracking the intruder that invaded the grounds and killed your friends Herb and Andrew, along with several other staff members.'

'What can I do?' Bob's gravelly voice cracked with surprise. Herb, Bob and Andrew used to play poker on Wednesdays at Bob's place. They wouldn't be doing that anymore.

'Switch on the motion detectors in the building. Keep us advised of the location of the damn thing.'

'Thing?'

'The intruder.'

'Roger. Hold on . . . Okay. The monitors are on. I got one blip in the north service tunnel, one in the stair connected to it on that side, and three in the service entry cross corridor . . .'

'That's Josh, Jeff and me.'

'Take a left.'

The SFX team jogged through the corridor, but hesitated at the steel fire door at the stair. What waited on the other side?

'Bob. Can you tell what level the intruder is on?'

'Well, that depends. Is it the blip in the tunnel, or in the stair tower?'

'Stair . . . it crashed in just ahead of us. The stair door must have automatically shut after it.'

Static crackled over the walkie-talkie. 'Can't tell the height. You know that Pussar cut back on your design drawings for the new security system. Only one sensor per space.'

'Damn that skinflint . . .'

'Pardon?'

'Sorry Bob.'

Josh pressed his ear to the door.

Nothing.

Jeff took two steps back and levelled his rifle at the blank red door. Meredith sighed with exasperation, pushed the door's lever handle down, and threw it open as Josh yelled 'No!'

Jeff shot a burst into the top landing, his muzzle throwing lightning six feet. The sound echoed in the enamel painted block hallway, bullets ricocheted in the concrete stair tower.

Nothing there.



The dot matrix printer clicked over the tractor-fed paper as the ink ribbon mournfully sang its song. Bob watched the blips, and the printer automatically logged the movement from one sensor to the next for the security file. The blip in the tower moved into the north service tunnel just as Meredith's group entered the shaft. That made two blips in the tunnels. The first had just entered a connecting spoke tunnel.

'Meredith?'

'Yes Bob.' Her voice resounded in the stairwell.

'I think I see a pattern developing.'

'What's that?'

'The first blip turned into the north spoke tunnel, and the second blip is following it in the northern ring tunnel.'

'So?'

'Well, the tunnels all combine to form a large octagon under the whole complex. All the utilities are fed from it, like the central chilled water system . . .'

'Right, right, I know Bob. What's the point?'

'Like I was about to say, It looks like the second blip is chasing the first.'

'Who's the first?'

'Don't know.'

'Who's on first?' wisecracked Josh.

'What's that?' asked Bob.

'Nothing. Just the peanut gallery. What's your idea?' Meredith stopped to listen.

'Why don't you split up and each take a different tunnel?' They all converge in the centre at the SFLS.'

'God - Syphilis, the Science Foundation Lab Sector. That's where Pussar stores that illegal waste,' commented Josh.

'Yeah. Well, that's my idea,' concluded Bob.

'And a good one, too,' said Meredith. 'Okay. Josh, you go back up the stairs, run to the south end of the complex, and enter the service tunnel system over there. Then work your way back towards the core.'

'I'm not leaving you way over . . .'

'Look. Jeff's just getting his wind back. You're elected.'

'So what are you gonna do?'

'I'm going to the west stair. Jeff, you continue through the north tunnel. See you both at the core.' They split and ran to their assigned locations.

Meredith puffed into her walkie-talkie as she ran through the dark halls: 'Bob, do you have anybody up there you can send to the east service stair?'

'Ed's available.'

'Great. Tell him, he has two minutes to grab a rifle and get his ass over there.'

'That's a little fast.'

'Tell him he's fired if he's not in the east tunnel one hundred seconds from now.'

'Yes ma'am. He'll be there.'

'Brief him on the situation . . .'

Meredith's breath grew short as she talked while running. The west stair door was . . . there! She kicked the door and ran down the steps into the west tunnel, her steps a rapid staccato resounding from the cast concrete walls. Galvanized steel bar grates acted as floors for all the service tunnels. Below this flowed a lower sub-service drainage level.

'Meredith?'

'Yes, Bob?' Meredith walked now, but still drew great mouthfuls of the dank tunnel air into her dry mouth.

'I think I know who the first blip is.'

'Who?'

'Pussar.'

'What the hell?'

'He messed up Sam pretty bad in the infirmary. Sam says he thinks the guy's gone crazy or something, ran outta there bellowing 'It's after me!'

'Curiouser and curiouser,' mused Meredith.

Snowy-haired Ed arrived at the east tunnel in ninety seconds. He checked his watch, leaned against the concrete wall and drew deep breaths through his dentured smile. He snapped his walkie talkie on, knowing his friend Bob in the

command centre could see his blip on the main monitor.

'I hear somebody wheezing. That you Ed?' asked Bob.

'Mmmhh . . .'

'Good. You made good time. You can forget about jogging later today, your sprint is good for a week of exercise, unless you popped an artery.'

'Don't joke about that . . .' gasped Ed as he walked toward the east corridor's intersection with the cross tunnel that led to the SFLS core.

From the west, Meredith found her connector, and galloped towards the core. Josh came from the south, Jeff from the north.

'Corrosive chemicals sat in their containers, slowly eating away at the metal, gradually poisoning Little Pond'

Bob's tired eyes witnessed a nearly symmetrical pattern of blips on the twenty-four inch monitor. The large blue octagon of the utility tunnel ringed the screen, with four spokes oriented in the cardinal directions, linking the SFLS core to the outer loop. Four equally spaced yellow blips moved down the spokes towards the core. In the north spoke tunnel, two additional blips neared the core. Bob watched as the original dot entered the core - that was probably Pussar. His chaser blip was about half-way down the spoke corridor. The dot behind the intruder was Jeff - he was getting near.

Bob flicked a switch. 'Jeff. This is Bob. It looks like you are only a hundred feet behind the intruder. Do you see anything?'

'Negative.'

'You're almost on top of it!'

'Nothing here.' Jeff passed a steel ladder that led into the lower level draining system.

'Good Lord, man, you should be able to smell its breath - you're on it!'

Jeff stopped. Listened. Thought he heard something gurgle. Looked up and down the corridor.

Nothing.

His walkie-talkie went dead. 'Damn. I forgot to replace the batteries.'

'Bob, what's the situation?' asked Meredith, as she walked briskly through the dimly lit tunnel.

'You're coming from the west, Josh from the south, and Ed from the east. You are all about eighty feet from the SFLS core. Don't you see it?'

'Yeah.' A red glow leaked through the six foot round opening ahead.

'Bob, you forgot Jeff.'

'I'm not sure about him.'

'What are you talking about?'

'He hasn't answered my communication for the last minute, and I lost him at about the time his blip touched the intruder's blip. Don't lose hope, both of those dots are still moving towards the core, one slightly ahead of the other.'

'Guys. This is Meredith. Ready your weapons. Be prepared to spray the core, if necessary.'

In the east spoke tunnel, Ed Teller stiffened his grip on the old .38 revolver. He hadn't time to get the rifle Meredith had recommended. He clicked open a catch, spun the cylinder, stopped it, and inserted a sixth round into the one chamber he usually left empty - the one that sat under the hammer.

While a sergeant with the Orlando Police Department fifteen years ago, he and his rookie partner, Julio Rodriguez, had been called to intercept a rapist. They chased the guy through the back alleys of the strip joints on south Orange Blossom Trail, climbing over fences, dodging boxes and dumpsters. Julio slammed into a wall, and his weapon discharged, tearing a nasty hole in his thigh. Better to have one less round than wounding yourself - if you kept your pistol holstered. Now that his gun was out, he planned on keeping it out, and wanted all the fire power he could muster. He focused his rheumy eyes behind wire rimmed spectacles, and scratched at the grey stubble on his pale, gaunt cheeks.

'OK,' Josh thumbed his rifle's safety off, checked the chamber, slapped the base of the clip to ensure that it had engaged.

Ed, Josh and Meredith jumped into the core simultaneously. Their eyes raked the room in a split second. Their weapon swung towards the only target, ready to fire.

'No! For God's sake!' screamed Pussar. He sat on the ground with his arms defensively raised over his head. Sweat soaked his clothing. Rivers of it ran down his face.

'Stop!' commanded Meredith to the armed men, as she moved the red dot of her laser sight off his forehead.

'Where's Jeff?' asked Josh. Something scuffled in the north tunnel.

'We're not sure. The intruder may have gotten him.' Meredith looked at Pussar.

The CEO's eyes widened as he saw a dark shape moving toward him from the north. He was the only one near the centre of the room, the only one who could see it shambling, silhouetted by the dim emergency lights behind it.

'No . . . Its coming! It's right there!' he yelled, pointing at the north intersection. 'Get out of my mind!' he grabbed his head, and rolled on the metal grated floor.

The illegal overflow drain softly gurgled under him. The corrosive chemicals sat in their containers behind him, slowly eating away at the metal, gradually poisoning Little Pond, and this little piece of the world. Josh noticed that more than chemical toxic waste was stashed here. 'Spent Reactor Rods' had been stenciled onto some of the containers. 'My God,' he thought, 'There's too many of them, and they are much too close together - the critical mass . . .'

'Watch the north,' Meredith instructed. Josh's red laser sight dot joined hers, burning into the north opening. Ed's hand was becoming arthritic due to the tightness of his grasp, but his aim also focused on the north tunnel.

The scuffling grew louder.

Their grips on their weapons grew tighter.



A shadow hunkered into the room from the thing in the north tunnel. A red overhead light wrapped in a wire cage dimly glowed. Phantoms lurked in all the corners. Meredith and Josh's laser lights silently buzzed around each other on the north tunnel wall like two fire-flies mating. Yeah, thought Josh, that would be nice - maybe later on.

A shape burst into the room. Ed fired two shots instinctively. In the hard space, the bullets roared like bombs. Lead ricocheted off the concrete walls, narrowly missing Josh.

'Stop!' commanded Meredith for the second time in the last few minutes, 'It's Jeff!'

Jeff had thrown himself to the floor, rolled, and risen to one knee with his rifle aimed at Ed. It's a good thing you haven't practised lately, old man.'

'Sorry, I thought ...'

'Yeah, I know.'

Static hissed on Meredith's walkie-talkie.

'Meredith! You all right? What's happening?'

'Yes Bob. Jeff just joined us.'

'Oh, good. I had hoped that was him that just hopped into the core.'

'Yah. We're fine. We've got Pussar here too ...'

'Just one thing troubles me, Meredith.'

'What?'

'How did Jeff pass the intruder and not see it, and more importantly, where is it now?' 'You tell me, Mr Blip.'

'Oh, yeah - well, my monitor shows you folks in the SFLS core, and the blip that must be the intruder approaching your space from the north tunnel.'

'Impossible,' said Jeff, 'I just came down that tunnel, there was nothing.'

'I suppose I could have a malfunction, but this equipment indicates a dot approaching you from the north. It's almost there.'

'All right, group, let's do it again,' ordered Meredith. They refocused their attention and aim on the north opening.

Meredith's walkie-talkie hissed.

'For cryin' out loud, don't you see or hear anything?' pleaded Bob.

'Nothing,' reported Meredith, 'but we're listening.'

'Listening, hell,' Bob's voice rose an octave, and increased in speed. 'It's there! I tell you, it's there! It just entered the core!'

Pussar jumped up in a nervous sweat, and snatched Ed's .38. He felt something. The presence. He fired two shots into the vacant north opening. Steely blue smoke rose in the chamber, bullets whizzed around like angry bees, and finally found a home in the sides of two toxic waste cans. Acidic fumes tinged the air as environmental death poured from the holes, through the grate floor, and into the overflow drain to Little Pond.

Meredith took a step towards him, trying to contain the madman. 'Mr Pussar, there's nothing ...'

A dark furry body burst through the floor grates, toppling Pussar and Meredith. Her rifle clanked to the floor, out of reach. The beast stood twelve feet tall and five feet wide, and had evidently been using the drainage area as a crawl space. Huge violet eyes set at an angle burned into Pussar. Exposed portions of the genetically warped bear's skull glowed luminescently green. Its mis-

shapen body moved oddly. Six-inch-long yellow claws sprouted from a score of black humanoid fingers attached to its four furry arms. These razor-edged talons attacked Paunchy Pussar, slicing his rotund body into ragged fillets.

Things happened quickly. Jagged pieces of action flew before Meredith's eyes, like stop-action flashes of a strobe light in a nightclub. Red dots from Josh and Jeff swung through the air, found fur. Two rifles hammered large calibre slugs into mutant meat. Shrieks of pain, red human blood from a torn throat, green sap from a perforated monster's hide, spurts of liquid death from punctured cans. Deafening roar from thundering rifles. A raging beast. Meredith scuttling backwards like a crab. Goodbye rifle.

With Pussar's thick neck securely attached to its clamped jaws, the beast lurched to the side, knocking over twenty barrels of the noxious chemicals, and six cases of old reactor rods. Ed, Jeff and Josh clambered into the south tunnel. Josh reached down under Meredith's armpits, jerking her up after them just as the evil fluid in the core bubbled up through the floor grate and began dissolving Pussar's body. The dying beast lay next to him, its teeth firmly embedded in his throat.

The reactor rods began trading atomic particles in the soup.

Meredith cringed as Pussar's face melted, exposing his skull. She thought: 'corporate techno-America and the grim reaper.'

'Let's go!' yelled Josh, tugging her right elbow. Old Ed led the group, his chronological proximity to death making him all the more aware of how precious little time he had left on Earth. Jeff let loose one last hail of bullets into the room. He wanted to be absolutely certain that everything responsible for his friends' death was also dead. Justice.

Josh ordered 'Haul ass!' and Ed, Josh, Meredith and Jeff noisily clanked over the grate flooring in the south spoke tunnel, on their way to the closest exit, the south stair.

Radioactive and toxic substances reacted together to form an unpredictable goop that no mad scientist would ever dream of mixing. The glop frothed into the north, west, east, and south utility tunnels.

The reactor rods sizzled like Alka-Seltzer tablets.

The SFX Team slid to a halt at the south stair wall. Josh tugged on the red door.

It wouldn't open.

'Jesus! It's locked. Must have happened when I came through from the other side.'

They all breathed and sweated heavily.

'Bob. It's Meredith. This goddamn door's stuck, and we've got to get out of here. Where's the closest emergency access ladder?'

'Face the main loop. Turn left. Go 40 feet, and climb the right wall.'

'Got it. We're moving. Come to think of it, you better move too, and everyone else.'

'What?'

'Evacuate!'

'Are you sure, Pussar ...'

'He's dead, and you will be too, if you don't get the hell out of here, now! Get

off the grounds!'

They arrived at the ladder just in time for Old Ed to clutch his chest and moan. This old ticker was meant to jog for five minutes on peaceful Sunday mornings in a well-landscaped trailer park, not sprint all night long in toxic waste tunnels.'

'Don't give me that crap,' scowled Jeff, 'you'll outlast us all. Now get up the ladder!'

'But I almost shot you.'

'Just be damn glad you didn't - then I'd really be mad.'

'Beauty before age,' said Meredith. She climbed six rungs. 'Grab onto my ass, Ed.' She wriggled seductively.

Josh leered. 'Even I don't get offers like that!'

Ed's eyes perked up. 'Well, maybe I can hold on just a bit longer.' The wiry codger reached up and hooked his fingers over Meredith's belt. She worked out daily, pumping iron, practicing Tan Suo-Do karate, and jogging. While retaining her feminine figure, much of it had been transformed into muscle. A man would be hard pressed to best her in a fight. Josh and Jeff rose beneath Ed, using their knees as elevators for his feet, while Meredith pulled him from above.

The reactor rods sparked and popped.

An ominous shudder rumbled through the tunnel below the climbing SFX team. The remaining security guards and emergency personnel screeched out of the parking lot, crashing through the closed chain link gates.

The reactor rods fried, subatomic particles worked their magic, and a searing white ball of energy formed, whirling in the SFLS core. Plasma shot through the utility tunnels.

'The lid's rusted shut.' From below, Meredith pushed with her bent neck and shoulders on the manhole. 'This is risky, but we're dead if we go back.' She pulled her .44 and shot at the rim six times. Each time a slug slammed into the metal, it sounded like the mythical railroad man, John Henry, driving a giant spike into a solid piece of track. The people felt like they were targets in a macabre shooting gallery. After the second shot, they were temporarily deafened by the exploding gunpowder fireworks and blacksmiths' anvil hammering. They coughed on cordite smoke. She rammed the lid and it popped up. She scrambled onto the grass, with Ed hanging onto the belt above her rump. Josh and Jeff hopped out too.

'Stay down,' cautioned Meredith. They crawled military fashion through the milkweeds as fast as they could. Thousands of tiny white seeds flew from the plants, mixing with the fog, determined to spread vegetation, even on this harsh piece of ground.

Seconds later, white flame roared up through the access hatch. Three blinding explosions rocked the main building. Its ruthlessly utilitarian architectural lines fragmented in an incandescent ball of fire that rocked the ground under the SFX Team and turned night into day for fifteen seconds.

While lying on the grass, Josh tapped Ed on his shoulder. 'Say Ed. I think you can let go of Meredith's buns now.'



FICTION FILE 36

PAULINE FISK



Legend, folklore and a sense of place combined with strong characterization are the hallmarks of Pauline Fisk's new novel, as Andy Oldfield found out.

Like many writers, Pauline Fisk has written from an early age. Originally it was 'largely for myself. When I started at about nine, it was what I wanted to do. I had a book of short stories published in my early twenties - 1972 or something like that. Then I had a huge child-raising gap and started again about five years ago.'

Her book of short stories were fantasies for children, and so too is her latest novel *Midnight Blue*. Does writing for children have a special appeal? 'Not really, I don't quite know why I did children's stories then, because that's so long ago I can't remember what I was thinking about. But coming back to writing after such a long gap I suppose that writing about children is the easiest thing to do because I'm surrounded by them. But I've also done radio plays, which were for adults - I quite like the idea of having a go at everything. Also, I think that if you get an idea for a story, it suggests an age . . . ' *Midnight Blue*, although a children's book is not a childish story. It's complex and the problems its heroine faces are not easily solved. 'Well, it had to interest me and I've got a pretty low boredom threshold,' says Fisk. 'The characters develop with the story and I revise, revise and revise again, building up from what I've got already.'

'In most of the things that I've written, I've been led by a particular place, something that's set me off and the characters have grown as the story has.' Local folklore interests Fisk and it finds its way into the story. 'Edric and Godda are legendary figures from Shropshire folklore, very much along the lines of King Arthur. Edric and Godda

are supposed to lie beneath the stones and whenever England is in danger they come out and gallop across the hilltops as a warning. I came across their story a few years ago while digging out local folk stories, and it seemed really appropriate to the story that was evolving into *Midnight Blue*. They weren't fundamental to the story, they just crept in and became important although I eventually decided not to bring them even more into the story; they would rather take it over because they're so important and such strong characters. They're there to help Bonnie, but they don't take away her personal responsibility.'

Another central character in the story is a mysterious, wraith-like creature. Was he taken from local folklore too? 'The shadow boy actually grew out of a technical problem in the story. To launch a smoke-filled hot air balloon, you need an enormous number of people. I didn't want to have a whole crowd of people in on the secret of how to get to the other land. I just wanted to have one or two people so I devised the shadow boy, who like a flicker of flame, could be seen to be many people at the same time. Initially, he was just a means of getting Bonnie launched, but then he went on the adventure with her, and as I worked my way through the story I developed him from being a very shadowy thing to a full-blooded human boy and I felt he became human as I got to know him in the working of the story.'

After getting back into the creative flow, Fisk is now working on other projects and looking to the future. 'I'm just finishing another novel at the moment, it's for older children, teenagers, and it's not a fantasy. Although I've some ideas for the next novel and that may well be fantasy. I'm also finishing some work on a children's animated TV series with Gerry Anderson who did *Thunderbirds*, Rick Wakeman, and the fantasy artist Rodney Matthews. We're working on a pilot for the BBC. Before I started I didn't think that I'd be too interested in that sort of thing, but I was so taken with the artwork that I just had to get involved in it.'

The morning sun worked its alchemy on the Florida sky, painting the patchy cumulus clouds mauve, peach, gold, then finally white. Southern Pines created a jagged horizon across the duck pond in front of Meredith and Josh's new country estate.

She had been up since 6.30am, developing details for the new methane gas trash reclamation energy plant. The EPA and the Department of Energy had awarded the planning contract to Meredith and Josh's new company, Organic Design Group. She called the project Phoenix, as it was to rise on the ashes of the destroyed XenoTech facility. The EPA had removed the radioactive material.

She prophesied that there would be a Phoenix 2, 3, 4, and so on, in other parts of the country and the world, rising from the ashes of a wasteful society that only realized the damage it had done when faced with its own suicidal destruction. Growing philosophical, she thought that perhaps she could do something to push back the shadows that threatened to shroud the Earth - shadows of technologies not fully understood by the immature species presently in control of the planet.

Josh rolled out of bed, pulled on a pair of jeans over his bare rump, and poured himself and Meredith cups of coffee. The red percolator grumbled to itself on the butcher-block counter in the kitchen. Through the studio's open windows, a gentle breeze scented with jasmine wafted through the house, blending with the delicious aroma of coffee.

Ah. They were supposed to be working. Better dress the part. He grabbed a novelty tie that looked like a fish, and wrapped it around his bare neck in a double windsor knot. It dangled over his naked chest. 'Quite the businessman,' he thought to himself with a smirk.

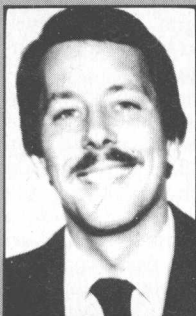
He walked over to Meredith, and set the white porcelain cups down beside her drafting desk. Grey steam rose from their rims. Josh nuzzled her neck. She smelled good - like perfume and shampoo and woman. She kept working, which mildly irritated him.

'Darling, before we get married, I want to tell you about the affairs I've had in the past.' Good. That made her drop her pencil.

'That's really not necessary Josh. Don't you remember? You unburdened your soul and told me all about that last week.'

'Yes, I know - but that was last week.'

She spun around in her mauve ergonomic swivel chair, and gently sank her teeth into his lower lip. He held his arms out in a gesture of 'I give up,' and she slid into a kiss.



RAND SOELLNER has been writing horror, science fiction and fantasy since 1970. Founder of OZ Writers, he works with a group of Southeastern United States authors. His first novel *Valley Of The Shadow* is being considered by New York publishers. Rand Soellner is 40, and a licensed architect practicing in America.

She was tense, irritable, agitated. Where was he? He'd been predictable as day giving way to night; as regular as her period; as reliable as Big Ben.

The newspapers should be screaming the death of a blonde . . . like her; short, but full-figured . . . like her; plain, dour, though not ugly . . . like her; a loner — independent — though not by choice . . . like her.

The papers had been strangely silent, biting their tongues in the hope the Rosary Killer had moved on or, better yet, had himself met some gruesome end.

Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! — they were all wrong. Dead wrong: the newspapers, the police and the goddamn shrink, each with a different theory. She and only she knew him . . . like a twin . . . like a lover — knew him as no other.

He had struck — a week before. Every fibre of her body, so finally attuned to him, told her so. He'd kept his prey close for a week. Two days ago he'd tired of her — dispatched her with extreme prejudice, as they say. He'd dumped her in a very public place, thumbing his nose at the helpless authorities. Had done it and was even now looking at photos he'd taken to relive the experience. High as a kite before he killed her, he'd try to recapture the ecstasy he'd experienced. He'd be overcome, though, by despair that would plunge him to the lowest depths of depression. Desperate to rekindle the flame he'd stalk, hunt and capture yet again.

Her high? A high akin to orgasm among lovers, wouldn't be experienced until the body was discovered. With discovery her bond would be confirmed . . . her psychic linkage to this man who acted out what she could only fantasize.

Sixteen-year-old Lori Moss paced her room, like a felon granted parole waiting those final hours before release. Her radio was tuned to the all-news station — waiting for verification.

She could feel his presence, though he was miles away. Feel him as if they shared the same bed, though he was unaware of her existence. She felt him caressing her body; felt him enter her; felt him explode within her. Yes! Yes! Yes! Melanie what's-her-name was no more.

Lori fell into a fitful sleep and dreamt of his eyes exploring every inch of her body. One day, one day she would be his. He would do with her as he pleased and she'd beg for more. And, when he was done with her — when he entered her pitiful existence — she'd achieve a oneness with him such as no lovers ever could.

In her dream she saw her lover: sensitive eyes hidden behind glasses . . . like her; neither handsome nor repulsive, just another face in the crowd . . . like her; placid, reserved, painfully shy on the outside — a simmering volcano within. . . like her. She saw him carrying the girl. Bringing her someplace to taunt the police. To a place the girl called her own. Books, she saw books. A classroom? No.

Lori awoke with a start. **THE LIBRARY.** He left her at the library. Already she felt the rush — a needle piercing her skin; the drug searing her vein. How could she have doubted him?

THE ULTIMATE GROUPIE

BY BARRIE HOFFMAN

Doubted her instincts. He'd left her in the library on Saturday. The girl wouldn't be found until this morning. The library was closed on Sunday.

Lori made her way to the library and waited across the street in the park. Saw the matronly librarian open the doors. Saw her enter. Heard her scream. Sirens from afar. She had to get a look before the police arrived. Had to see Melanie what's-her-name for herself to strengthen her bond with him.

Others heard the librarian's scream. Curiosity drew them to the library. Lori joined them. Saw the teenager seated at the main desk — rosary beads wrapped tightly around her neck; cigarette burns dotting her naked breasts; a Bible in her hands. Everything orchestrated to bring recrimination not at him, but onto the helpless authorities for allowing the carnage to continue. Lori dimly heard the others.

'I'm going to be sick,' one said.

'The animal. If I ever get my hands on him . . .'

'Rosary beads. A bible. Mocking us. Mocking our Lord.'

'Where are the goddamn cops?'

'Fat lot of good they'll do.'

Lori slipped from the gawking crowd, her body a tingle, her mind focused on him. She was achieving that rare communion with him that only seeing the body triggered. She felt his anguish, his revulsion, his pain . . . and it turned her on. She knew, too, that though he was unaware of her she had journeyed yet closer to him. Not only had she known he had killed the girl, for the first time she knew where he had left her. Next time it would be her. Next time she would anticipate his stalking. Next time she would be waiting for him. Next time it would be HER, and she'd experience the ultimate high.

She'd first felt his presence six months before. Her stepfather had been on top of her, emptying his seed into her. Humiliated, she had retreated deep within herself — as far away as possible from the vile creature impaling her. Through a deep fog she saw her lover . . . the brother she'd never had . . . her saviour.

She saw him toying with Lila what's-her-name, a 16-year-old who had disappeared five days before. Saw Lila trussed up on a bed while he scrawled a message on her body with cigarettes. 'WHORE.' He'd cut her tongue out, so all she could emit was a silent scream that echoed into emptiness.

Just as her stepfather climaxed within her, Lori saw this stranger wrapping rosary beads around Lila's neck. Tighter. Tighter still. Saw the girl's eyes bulge in disbelief. Felt the life leave the girl's body. She knew then HE would rescue HER. Knew she must find him to offer

herself . . . to escape the hell her life had become.

She'd been an accident . . . an indiscretion . . . a mistake, emerging unwanted and unloved eight years after her sister Donna.

Virtually ignored by her mother, Donna had doted on her when she was young.

'Don't cry, Lori. I'll find your Teddy.'

'What shall we dress you in today?'

'Such a good girl. My little baby.'

A doll — a living doll — that's what she'd been to Donna.

Ignored, too, by her father who drank himself into an early grave when Lori was six.

Dumped upon at eight by Donna, then 16, who took out her frustrations on the only one available.

'No, I don't have time to help you with your homework. It's time for you to fend for yourself.'

'I didn't mean to hit you, but I can't have you hanging around me all day with your fool questions.'

'Don't give me that pout. Time you picked up some of the slack around here. You'll do the chores I tell you or so help me I'll . . .'

Abandoned by Donna a year later after Donna had been repeatedly raped by their stepfather, Donna had fled without so much as a goodbye to Lori. He turned his attentions to her three years later, but she'd been too frightened to bolt.

She trusted no one for all had turned on her. She'd become withdrawn — one of those kids who blended into the background at school. Teachers couldn't recall her name much less what she'd been like a year after she'd left their class.

An accident . . . a mistake . . . a NONENTITY. She simply didn't exist except for others' pleasure and abuse. Alcohol, drugs and suicide would have been her only solace if it weren't for HIM.

Lori saw him with Lila and was jealous. It could be her . . . should be her . . . WOULD be her. She knew it, even if he didn't.

She knew he had suffered as she had. Suffered at the hands of a domineering mother or abusive father. Maybe a girlfriend had turned on him. Yes, that was it. His woman betrayed him and he punished her again and again.

The day after Lori saw him in the fog Lila had been found on the steps of the post office — the last place she'd been before her abduction. The news quickly spread throughout school. Though the same age, Lila had repeated ninth grade, while Lori was now in tenth. Lori didn't know the girl and from what others said neither did her classmates. Lori heard some of them speaking to

reporters.

'She kept to herself.'

'Yeah, didn't have any friends. No, didn't want any friends.'

'Her twin sister died in sixth grade. She never got over it.'

So alike. So very much alike, Lori thought.

Lori had visited the crime scene after school. Though the body was gone Lori saw the girl as she had appeared the night before in the fog. She was able, then, to tune into the killer as if he were standing there. Her man. It was a one-way mirror, she knew. She could feel him, read his thoughts. He didn't know she existed. Not yet. A pity. But, he was searching for HER, whether he knew it or not. Wouldn't be content until he found HER.

Over the next six months five other girls were lured by the Rosary Killer, as he was dubbed by the press. Each victim could have been Lori's twin. Plain Janes. Acne riddled . . . late developing teens who hadn't yet developed the alluring curves and seductiveness that had boys panting for their attention. Flowing blonde hair was all that set them apart from total drabness. Lori laughed when she recalled reading how a number of parents had forced their daughters to cut their hair. One had even put a bowl over her daughter's head and hacked at the golden fleece. Then dyed it black for good measure.

Enough remained, though, for the crafty predator. Her sisters; her look-alikes. Loners that they were he found them, made them his, and rid himself of them when he found them lacking.

With each abduction and subsequent killing her psychic link with him grew stronger. Poor tortured soul, she thought. Here she was right under his nose and all he got were bland imitations. Sloppy seconds, as the more vulgar boys would say. SHE was the real thing; she could end his torment; she could set him free from the demons that plagued him. How betrayed he must have felt when he discovered his catch of the month couldn't meet his expectations. Hence the anger; the mutilation; the degradation; the thumbing his nose at the powers that denied him what he sought. Then the despair, self-loathing and self-pity that drove him to hunt yet again . . . to hunt for HER.

She was so close. She could smell him . . . feel him . . . taste him. This was her time. Must be her time. She felt him losing his grip - disappointment piled upon disappointment preying on his mind. She knew the contempt he felt for himself was suffocating him. It was close to pushing him over the edge where he'd make that one mistake that would mean his capture. A capture he'd welcome. A capture she'd dread. She must get to him now or forever risk losing him.

She saw him cruising through a mist, but couldn't penetrate the haze. Where goddammit, where are you looking? Downtown? A supermarket? Movie theatres, as they let out? NO! NO! NO!

A bitch in heat, she sought her mate with a passion. She looked through her scrapbook of his trophies, touching the faces of her sisters as they stared back at her. Even her stepfather, horny as ever, sensed her mood - sensed some danger - and kept his distance . . . for

the moment.

Lori was frantic as she sensed him already to pounce . . . to snatch another victim. It had to be HER. Where dammit, where! In a frenzy she tore at the newsclippings - her nails talons ripping at Lila, Melanie, Desiree, Phyllis and Vicki. With each slash a seam was torn in the fabric of the fog that enveloped him. She saw just a glimpse at first - neon lights. It was almost within her grasp. Slash . . . a theatre; part of a larger structure.

Slash . . . the Gap. Slash . . .

Waldenbooks.

Slash . . .

Sam Goody's. The MALL. He was at the Mall! Cruising, stalking, hunting . . . for HER.

And he found her. Lori browsed through the Mall, alone - waiting. Hours passed, but she could sense his presence. A shake at McDonalds - seated far away from raucous teenagers. She knew he waited for the crowd to thin. She glanced at books, records and jewellery with sightless eyes. She kept her distance from others. Waited. Nine o'clock; closing time. The Mall emptied. She dawdled - allowed the stragglers time to leave and made her way to the parking lot.

'Excuse me. is this your wallet?'

It was HIM. Slick move, she thought. Steal her wallet and earn her trust with its return.

'You dropped it as you were leaving.'

She took it. All the money was there.

'I don't know how to thank you,' she said. Oh yes I do, she thought. 'Here,' she offered him a ten dollar bill to show her gratitude.

'No, I couldn't,' he said politely. He seemed to hesitate for a moment before adding. 'But, if you're not in a rush you can buy me a pizza. Giorgio's is just a few blocks away. We could take my car and I'll drop you back here after.'

How could she say no, even if she wanted. He'd returned her wallet. And, he was so harmless looking. He was a small man - her height, 5ft 6in; about 25, yet with a receding hairline and glasses that made him look like an absent-minded professor. She could barely discern the predatory look in his eyes hidden behind the glasses. She could feel his stare only because she was looking. Looking into him, not just taking him in. Sure, she'd go get pizza with him. Wouldn't anyone?

In his car they drove past Giorgio's. She knew he was waiting for her protest . . . her rage . . . the realization of her plight to dawn. She knew he waited for her to beg . . . to grovel . . . to plead. She only smiled.

'I know who you are. I'm the one . . . the one you've been looking for.'

She could see he was disconcerted. This was not how she was supposed to react. She knew he was thinking, what did she mean 'I'm the one you've been looking for?' She felt his cold stare wither as he fought for control. Yes, he needed to be in control. She hoped she hadn't come on too strong. Hoped he wouldn't panic and dump her. No, he wouldn't. His need was too great.

This close to him she could read his mind. Lauren . . . Lauren had made a fool of him once. Never again, she heard him say, though he remained silent.

Never again.

He turned onto a backroad, pulled over, stopped and produced a knife. He put it to her throat. It felt so good to be in control, she knew he was thinking. Yes, she thought, the cold steel felt good to her, too.

'And, who am I,' he said smugly.

'My lover. My saviour.'

'No bitch, your executioner. Your worst nightmare.'

'My dream come true.'

She could sense him recoil. Didn't she understand? Did he have to spell it out to wipe that smile off her face?

'I'm the Rosary Killer,' he smiled.

'Yes, I know. I've been waiting for you.'

'Listen, bitch. I'm gonna rape you . . .'

'Yes,' she interrupted. 'And burn me with cigarettes. Cut out my tongue so I can't scream. And, when you're tired of me you'll kill me.'

'Is that what you want?'

'I want to liberate you, as you've rescued me. I want to end your torment. Do with me what you must. You won't have to do it again. I'm here to free you from your past. I'm your cure . . . your salvation.' She gently moved his hand from her throat and kissed him on the cheek. 'Come one, let's get on with it.'

'You're sick.' It was all he said. All he could say.

He put the knife away and drove her to his house on the outskirts of town.

Once in his room he gave vent to his frustrations. He ripped off her clothes, raped her once, twice and then again - not for the sex, she sensed, but to exert control. He wanted her to crack, wanted to penetrate her cool facade.

She cried . . . tears of joy. She ached, but the pain was exquisite. She was terrified . . . that she almost lost him.

Though he was done she wanted more. Spent, he got off of her to leave her alone with her terrors of what was to come.

'Don't stop. Don't leave me, please. I want it all. I want it now.'

'You're one sick bitch. You make me seem sane.' She saw him toying with the rosary beads in his hands. Knew he was debating whether to kill her now.

'Tell me about her.'

'Who?' he asked sullenly.

You know damn well who I'm talking about, she thought. 'Lauren,' she said.

'How do you know . . .'

'You called me Lauren when you raped me.'

'I didn't,' he said, but she had planted the seed of doubt.

'Tell me. You'll feel better.'

He did. 'I loved her, treated her good. I thought she loved me. Even bought her a ring. She laughed in my face when I showed it to her. Told me she had gone out with me only to make her boyfriend jealous. The next day I saw her with him. Never again. No woman will tell me what to do, EVER. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'Should I kill you now?'

'If you want to.'

He thought for a moment. 'No, I've got a better idea. I'm going to keep you around. You can keep house, cook, clean and be here when I want a piece of ass. But, so much as burp when I ask for silence and you're history.' He waited, she knew, for her to crumble. She didn't.

'I told you I'm yours. Totally, com-

pletely, irrevocably. And, she was. She became the ultimate groupie — a willing slave to his every whim. She cooked. She cleaned. She doted on him like a newly wed. Obeyed his every command, like a faithful dog. Was there when he needed a vessel for sexual gratification. There, too, when he needed a punching bag. She had never been happier.

He had never been more miserable. A month later he went out hunting. Not from the need that had tugged at him since Lauren deserted him for another, but to escape a new and more horrible imprisonment.

He returned with a terrified young girl. While Lori watched he abused and tortured the teenager, then wrung the life from her with the rosary beads.

Lori beamed. Lori approved . . . shouted encouragement like a damned cheerleader. Even guided his hand when he draped the beads around the girls' neck.

Three weeks later he left again. He returned with another blonde. Another mutilation followed. But, his heart wasn't in it. The high he'd experienced had dissipated . . . since Lori had entered his life. He didn't want to admit it, but in Lori he had what he had sought: someone who wanted him, needed him and without question obeyed his every command. If he asked she'd torture the pitiful creatures he brought home. If he asked she'd kill them herself . . . a smile on her face as she did. It nauseated him. He saw Lauren, for the first time, for what she was and it repulsed him. Just as Lori did now.

He had to leave . . . and never return. He couldn't live with what he'd done in this house . . . what he had done because of Lauren. The desire to hurt, punish and kill was gone — forever. If he left now maybe he could start anew. He couldn't tell Lori.

He knew she'd badger him to take her along. Knew taking her would destroy him. He made for the door.

'Off again?'

'Yeah. The itch has returned and it's got to be scratched.' He turned to leave, hesitated. 'Look, I may be gone for a while . . .'

'Don't worry. I'll be waiting.'

'Right. Always waiting. Mine to command.'

'Yours to command.'

'Stay put, then. Like I said I may be a while.'

And he left.

Lori waited. Days, weeks, months passed. Still she waited. She was his and she wouldn't do anything unless he told her.

'Stay put,' he'd said. Stay put she would.

She was the ultimate groupie.

BARRY HOFFMAN from Springfield, Pennsylvania is the editor/publisher of *Gauntlet*, which he describes as the only general interest magazine on censorship. A junior high school teacher, he began *Gauntlet* after a play he wrote for his school was heavily censored. His short stories have been published in numerous anthologies.

FICTION FILE 37

PENELOPE LUCAS

There may be no short cuts to ecstasy but, as FEAR's John Gilbert discovered from Penelope Lucas, the ancient powers of the shaman — to fly, to shift shape and to talk with spirits — appeals to a growing number of modern, fast-living, urbanites.

I' was having tea one Saturday afternoon, looking through some books, and one of them sent me into a trance,' says Penelope Lucas of the experience that started her writing her first novel, *Wilderness Moon*, a fantastical saga of ancient shamans which has just been published in hardback by Bantam. 'I was looking at one book which had a picture of the third eye on the cover. The image hit me in my third eye (which, it is claimed, is used to view supernatural events) and I fell back. I couldn't understand what was happening. I was thinking in English but apparently the words were coming out in some form of Slavonic language that my friends couldn't understand. I was in a cave with a bear skin on my head and I was banging a drum. There were people dancing around and I was singing.'

The incident occurred 14 years ago and since then Lucas has been studying the shamanistic tradition, trying to understand that first vision. 'The whole thing lasted five minutes. It could have been either a past life experience or some sort of delayed DTs,' she laughs. But seriously, 'Maybe aeons ago I was a shaman, but that was then and this is now. Maybe I failed to achieve something in a past life and I'm being given another chance. I must not let that memory alter what is happening here.'

Her book is a fascinating fantasy which postulates the genesis of shamanism, but, even after all those years of research, Lucas has not found a clear cut definition of this much misunderstood area. 'I think it's about realizing the connectedness of everything, an extension of Schumacher's belief that when one butterfly dies it alters the world.'

The 80s saw a rebirth of interest in the occult, and in particular in shamanism. The west coast of America is becoming a haven for people on a mostly healthy quest for esoteric knowledge but Lucas is worried that people might not be ready to know. 'I'm worried about people who say that shamanism's a bit of shadow dancing and smoking herbs, and that's how to do it. There's a difference between sacred and secret, and I'm a little frightened that people are being given information for which they are not ready. It's like a child of five asking where babies come from and being given the



Karma Sutra. There are no short cuts to ecstasy.'

Lucas, however, seems to have tapped the creative power of shamanism. She wrote the first draft of *Wilderness Moon* in just a few weeks and describes the work as an almost mystical process. 'The book came out of a writing weekend where we were given a subject and asked to develop a story around it. The idea was to take a time anywhere in the distant past but the story must include a betrayal.'

'I was given the whole of history and couldn't come up with anything. So I plugged in the typewriter — I needed to be plugged in — and imagined a huge shot of light coming from above, through my head and into the centre of the earth. Then I closed my eyes, started to type, and the story just flowed through me.'

Lucas wrote the book without reference or research and only at the end did she realize that many of the place names she had used closely corresponded to real geographical locations in Russia. 'It was as if I had been tapping into somebody else's story.'

The book also appears to have worked another, quite radical, miracle. 'I had multiple sclerosis for years, but since I've started to write its virtually gone away.'

That's one good reason to continue her career as a novelist, first with a sequel to *Wilderness Moon* which 'I've half finished,' and then 'without sounding too pretentious, I've got a couple of serious books that I really would like to see out.' Judging by the miraculous publishing history of *Wilderness Moon*, she should have no problems.

It was something I just couldn't stand. There I'd be, keeping my nose clean, on my way to the silicon factory, shoving through crowded streets and suddenly . . . a face full of stinking brains and a mouth spitting skull fragments. An unnerving experience, and incredibly messy. Imagine it, one second the jittery guy in front is trying to catch his sour breath, and the next, a crack, a definite split, hey presto, the top of his greasy head explodes. Made me nervous as hell and twice as hot under the collar, because I'd screwed up enough to have a Tracercharge implanted.

Tracercharge! Christ, the very name threatened to cause a leakage of food-stuffs from my least favourite orifice. Habitual criminal, that was the tag. Caught and convicted on a sum total of three poxy charges. That was enough to put me under the surgeon's laser scalpel. The crimes? Shit, I still blush. My first bust was for illicit production and distribution of a particularly potent, alcohol-boosted carrot spirit. They'd never have caught me if I hadn't been on all fours, bollock-naked and barking at the moon outside a therapy brothel after a bout of serious self-indulgence. It took six days for the police counsellor to convince me I wasn't an alsatian. I was nailed a second time for trying to put my fist through the crazily blinking screen of an auto-bank. Dumb-shit machine wouldn't acknowledge my print. It kept insisting I was a certain Mr K Watmough, and if, perchance, I wasn't, then I was obviously wearing his hand. The hover-patrol cruised along as I was punching away like a boxer with programmed gloves. Technology vandal class A was the verdict. Bull! The only things I managed to break were my fingers. I seriously began to doubt my luck after the third charge - jay-walking on a major autoroute aggravated by failure to comply with the road safety Fluorescent Socks Act. I tried to tell the publiptrowler my turboscoot had blown a circuit and I was simply making for the nearest computerage. Listen? My arse he did. A man with the intelligence of a blancmange.

So, that was that. I knew what was coming. I'd been warned by the court psychoanalyst, by a drooling judge, by a rusting robot and, at the group sessions, by a supercilious, vocally assisted dolphin. It was only a thirty-minute operation thanks to the advancements in brain surgery and doctors with specially miniaturized hands. Central Tracking installed a check-in console at my flatlet, specifically geared for my pinkie prints. The fifth generation photocellular automatic indicator situated deep in the parietal lobe, primed and hyped by a symbiotic pseudo beta wave from the console, when activated by check-in, pulsed out my whereabouts to a Central Tracking station. If the genetically correlated bleeps were not received at the pre-arranged times, a chemically coded message would home in on its genetic partner inside my brain, detonating a hormonally assisted nuclear cluster-charge moulded to the parietal indicator. Basically, my fucking head would blow up! There was another check-in console allocated to me at my designated place of work. The check-in process was repeated every hour, partly because the tracing

HENRY B WAXFOLLY'S EXPLODING HEAD

BY
STRATFORD A KIRBY

message faded echo-like without the symbiotic effect of the pseudo beta wave, and partly because the authorities dearly loved bugging the shit out of you.

My life was made unbearable - I had to sleep in shifts, limit my journeys, time my shopping trips, only screw at home and worst of all, against every natural instinct, climb aboard the wagon. Carrot spirit was famed for its debilitating effect on the memory and I could have found myself happily barking at the moon, only to be found, one missed check-in later, face down in a gooey puddle of grey Henry mush.

After enduring six months of this, my psychosis was coming along nicely. I was haunted by dreams of escape.

I tried to relax, tried to formulate a solid plan of action, but the depressing confines of my two-room flatlet destroyed my concentration. I thought a little smellervision might be soothing. The film reached a critical point where the lovers were swapping spit in a sunflower field, when suddenly my nostrils were assaulted by the reek of game-show sweat. I retched, leapt out of the inflatable recliner and made the finger signals for channel changing. After eight channels worth of nasal rape - dog diarrhoea, genital lesions, advanced synthetic cookery, cologne for celibates - I blanked the bastard! When I flopped into the recliner, it wheezed, farted, deflated and I was trapped, enfolded in plastic and panicking. I broke free after sixteen minutes, accompanied by the sound of trifle being spooned. The suction tore my Bermuda shorts off. I never found them again.

Give me strength! I had to think of a way out of this. How could I concentrate when I was surrounded by another thing I couldn't frigging well stand? The flatlet was crammed with a myriad of labour

saving devices. Yes, the technological advances had made everyday science cheap. Yes, the cheap everyday science was inventive. Yes, I'd be buggedger if I could get the crap to work! I was forever tripping over bleeping, blipping, squeaking, squawking junk. Even the wall-trap for incinerating waste refused to do anything but regurgitate singed debris. I attempted to brew up and the coffee simulator decided rich roast was pale green and tasted of water chestnuts. My muscle relaxer-pads overcharged and gave me a jolt big enough to make my hair fizz and my eyes bulge. The dictionary screen thought badgers were a breed of tap dancing ivy. The amount of occasions I'd tried to get these things rectified! But manufacturers wouldn't repair, it was cheaper to replace. Eventually I'd been ordered to quit complaining, it was a crime against economic stimulation.

My head was really burning. My eyes felt hot when tears trickled, I had the ridiculous notion they were melting.

Oh no! Oh God! Was I late? Had I been sabotaged by my own preoccupations? I stumbled into the sleep-in. My console was fastened neatly beside a body-moulded lilo. I was sweating fit to dehydrate. I ordered myself to slow down. To check the time. The four watches on my left wrist displayed a message that began to calm me. After studying the five on my right, the process was completed. Okay, so I was paranoid about time. It did happen to be a matter of life and extremely untidy death.

The pain in my head gradually dissipated but there were still no smiles making a nest of my face. So I had a reasonably comfortable existence, so I had plenty to eat, so I had all my own teeth, I was still sentenced to a life of repetition, tortured by the clock and victimized by fear.

When the microwave glued my pizza to the plate, I knew it was time for action. I began to think clearly and reasoned that if a surgeon had unzipped my pumpkin and slotted the Tracercharge in, then another could rip it out. The problems were obvious; only one hour from check-in to get onto the operating table, get sliced, get on my feet and get lost. And money, I'd need a sackful of stripes. Naturally I was paid a salary at the silicon factory. Without stripes I wouldn't have been able to purchase consumer items and that was a crime against economic stimulation. But I would have had to save until I was two hundred and eighty seven, and even if I'd enrolled in an aerobics class, I doubted I'd live that long. The answer had to be theft. But, tied to the consoles as I was, I'd need help.

A name sprang to mind as I untangled my feet from a pile of inedible, edible underwear - Sally Slipdisch. We went back a long way and he owed me. Sally was into every scam the city had to offer. Determined, excited and bilious, I dialled his number on the facephone that very night.

'Oh, it's you . . .' Sally was grotesquely huge. His blubber filled the screen, he was decked out like a rainbow and not short of a few pots of gold.

'Calm down, Sally, I hate it when you get all emotional.'

'Yes, okay, so it's good to see you've

still got your head together, Waxy. Now cut the proverbial crap and tell me what you're after.'

'I need to see you.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm into sex with fat men! Why is what we'll talk about when I see you.'

His face oozed into thoughtful folds as he considered what he had to lose . . . obviously nothing.

'When?'

'As soon as possible, tomorrow night.'

'Now, Waxy, you sure you'll be in?'

'Ha-ha. You're just as funny as always, which is not fucking funny at all!'

'Easy, Waxy, don't get in a sweat. Good old Sally will try and be there, and you can call me telepathic, but I bet I know what's on your mind.'

He dialled out. I was quivering. After six long months I'd set the ball in motion. Let it roll, let it roll. But could I trust Sally? I thought there'd been something treachery, something sickly sweet about his voice. Balls to it! I decided I was just being paranoid.

The shock-alarm on my wrist sent an electric sting into my nerves. I lay there gasping until I realized that today was the first day of the rest of my life. The purifying chamber malfunctioned and steam cleaned my testicles, but even that painful mishap couldn't dampen my spirits; after a good cry and a frenzied tantrum, I felt fine. I wet shaved, distrusting the breast developing side effects of facial depilatory cream, and dressed in a purple blouson, slitted shirt, orange Bermudas and black air pumps. Before leaving for work I did check-in. I was sure I could feel the bastards homing it on me. One hour to get to the factory, or my dandruff would taste of hamburger.

My lovely little door with the security device that called intruders nasty names opened onto a two-way air lift. I stepped into the downward channel and floated gracefully to earth. A day with promises; I even got a good look up the skirt of the girl descending above me. The street was hot, busy, predictable. Citizens were scurrying like so many white mice in a laboratory cage. Overhead cable cars compelled by the invisible will of electromagnetism congested the air between cone shaped towers of chameleon plastic and multi-faceted crystal. The twelve lane city route was chaotic, as usual. Numerous compression buggies had sighed their last and solar-drives stood motionless, excommunicated from sun worship, a trail of shimmering tiles in their wake. The more recent models, those less than a month old, wormed their way through the colourful clutter.

I marched down Bizboz Avenue, shouldering crowds and ignoring the constant buzz of sellermen held aloft by agriculturally enlarged, muscle-motivated sycamore seeds. I cursed when I was hit on the head by one of the free gifts they showered the populace with. I arrived at the cable car embarkation platform. About thirty citizens were queuing, tapping their watches and mopping frustrated brows. Our cable swayed into view. The platform jittered, juddered, and took us up. The cable was a crush. I had my nose pressed into an old woman's wig. The fibres made me sneeze and her hair-piece flew across the car-

riage. She tried to retrieve it but got her bald head stuck under someone's armpit.

'Find day for bowling,' I observed.

I took in the view. Ideal homes were stacked like Leggo, every brick a different colour, every design an architectural endeavour. Banking centres that resembled ludicrous pink anvils hovered above repulsion fields. Sky-parks catered for the recreational needs of share-work, each with its own gravity so joggers could do a marathon standing on their heads. Good-buy department stores the size of city states stretched away to the horizon, scientific labs perched upon the supporting exo-skeletons. Zeppelins drifted, adverts alive on the three dimensional screens slung below. There was no smoke, no litter, no pollution, no grass. And Central Tracking was a jet pyramid, massive, featureless, ominous.

Suddenly the cable car lurched, dipped and stopped. A woman moaned. An old man howled. A baby giggled. A hyper-ventilating idiot slapped his forehead. I studied my watches, chewed my lips, curled my toes. The temperature in the cable car rose alarmingly. An executive oozing out of his silver hot pants demanded an explanation from no one in particular.

'Let go of my head,' screamed the bald woman.

The masochist with the face-slapping problem was dribbling. A string of saliva stretched to his ample midriff. I didn't like the look of it - the situation, I mean. I'd seen this type of build up before and I'd bet my bottom stripe his head was about to . . . yuk! My face was splashed with brain tissue, grey matter, blood and skin. A kid yelled and unluckily caught the eyeball in her mouth. With the next intake of breath, she swallowed. I was wiping off the thinking meat, plucking bone shards from my ear. The guy had lost the top half of his head. The string of saliva was still hanging from his slack mouth. He couldn't fall because of the press of bodies. A dark stain spread over his crotch. His hand gripped the elbow of the person in front. Somebody puked, it splashed down the shirt of a pressure-seller, who gagged, put a hand to his mouth, threw up and sprayed the whole interior of the cable car bile green. Jesus! I hate commuting.

Thankfully, the electromagnetic station attendants got their act together and we started to slide forward. I cleaned regurgitated carrots from a watch face: Tracercharges put a whole new meaning to running behind schedule. I was more determined than ever to keep my brain in its bony case. I made it to the silicon factory with eleven minutes to spare.

I was back in my flatlet. It hadn't been what you'd call a rewarding day. What would you call it? Utterly, totally, immeasurably, unconditionally, unequivocally, frighteningly fucking boring! That seemed to fit the bill. I never wanted to see a conveyor loaded with silicon penis extensions again. The only bright spot had been staring at the girl hanging from the opposite vertical shock-hammock. Her breasts were large and her overalls small, a provocative mixture. I'd smiled at her. She'd smiled at me. It had been a heavy smiling situation.

I tried to amuse myself as I waited for

Sally by doing bad things like trying to mend the apple peeler I'd bought the previous week. Futile but wonderfully time consuming. I knew that if Sally didn't arrive pretty soon, I'd definitely be two sandwiches short of a picnic.

Finally, at 23:46, my doorbell gurgled. Sally Slipdisch's eclipsing frame looked preposterous bobbing in thin air.

'Move aside, Waxy, I can't get the hang of these things and I'm likely to go floating right off into space.' He came inside. 'My my, what a complete and utter dung heap.'

'Good to see you too, Sally.'

He smirked a fat smirk. 'So then, I'm a busy man, let's get down to business. You didn't frag me over here for human companionship.'

'Whether you'd qualify for that is debatable . . .' I pulled a couple of air-recliners off the wall rack, attached the nozzle to inflate, bounced one over to Sally and took a seat myself. 'Basically, Sally . . .' I paused, the sight of obese men squeezed into small spaces always destroyed my concentration. 'Basically, I need your help.'

'Help, now that's an interesting word.'

'Yeah, you must have heard of it, it's what people shout when they're drowning, or, Sally, when they've got a Tracercharge. I've got to get it out!'

'How surprising, pass me a knife.'

'You should have been on the stage. Come to that, you're big enough to be one. Let's not piss around. You know the difficulties. I can't organize this on my own. I'm tied to the clock. But you've got connections and I think you should use a few to help an old associate, namely me.'

'Why can't you ask for something simple, like the meaning of life? You're talking a surgeon, you're talking stripes and lots of them.'

I got the feeling that Sally was playing with me. It was as if he was reading from a well-thumbed script. 'I know what I'm talking about! Don't try and tell me you haven't got a bent laser-knife on your books. Get me one, and the details of a hit with rich pickings. You'll get a good percentage, of course.'

'Waxy, my old cuddlybum,' Sally's voice flowed like lubricant. 'Why should I help you?'

'Why should you! I don't believe I'm hearing this. After all I've done for you. Remember the time I gave mouth to mouth after you knocked back a sample of unstable carrot spirit?'

'And just whose sample was it?'

'Okay, but you're alive aren't you. What about that psycho cybernetic wrestler after your goolies because you never paid him for taking a fall in the finals? If I hadn't have turned the hose and rusted his shiny bits . . .'

'Well . . . I owe you that.'

'Right Sally, fine, why don't you think about all the weekends I looked after your pet hamsters when you were away on business?'

I'd got him. His features melted like latex underpants in the sun. God, he loved those hamsters.

He told me he couldn't promise anything, but if he did manage to set it up, he wanted a sixty-forty split from the heist.

'You despicable old grasping no-dicked lard bucket - seventy-thirty.'

'Waxy, picture the scene, cable break



down, or you trip and knock yourself unconscious, running late, extreme fear, seconds ticking away, desperate . . . then, boom-splat, and that's you all over. Sixty-forty!

Reluctantly, I agreed. What else could I do? We shook, his hand a blubbery mitten. We chatted briefly about the old days; fast girls, slick cons, rough brawls and hamsters. It took eleven minutes to heave him out of the recliner and I sprained my wrist in the process. He wheezed he'd be in touch and I gasped to make it soon.

The days dragged, waiting for a dial, for a visit. I saw many heads explode. I saw near decapitated corpses jerking on blood-stained sidewalks. I saw scalps go skimming like frisbees and I saw cranial craters steaming like puddings. It was all enough to make you feel kind of vulnerable.

I thought about the Tracercharges themselves. What if they were faulty? Did that account for the increase in popping pates? There was something odd about the whole situation. Surely there couldn't be such a large number of habituals. With such fatal consequences for missing check-in, how come so many people were doing just that? Dying in the queues outside of delicatessens, dying in the Productivity Parades, dying when their cars broke down, dying when their hover-packs malfunctioned and whirled them like dervishes, dying when the cable was late. I sensed there could be some kind of link. Then I got tired of trying to make sense of things and lured the ample maiden from the factory back to my flatlet. It was all a bit of an anticlimax. Another habitual; we only had fourteen minutes and twenty-three seconds. Her breasts were implants done on the cheap and the scarring was to the erotic what acne is to the aesthetic. My multi-functional, fully programmed, ejaculating dildo went on the blink and electrocuted her labia. I got a headache.

I couldn't have coped with much more. I'd definitely have gone ga-ga, started enjoying instant meals and taken to fornicating with fur fabric slippers. But I was saved these horrors, eight days later, when Sally Slipdish paid another call.

He didn't sit. I didn't sit still. He stared down at me. I stared up at his belly. He verbally toyed with me for a while, then divulged the oh-so-essential information. I was to hit the assistant financier for the Disposable Furniture Corporation, a man by the name of Satchel Yupstiren. Sally assured me he had approximately eight million stripes secreted in his floor safe. He relished briefing me, licking his lips like he would over a rootburger. He had me memorize the addresses of Yupstiren and the surgeon, gave me a pair of Solar-man's overalls, an expansion bag and a powerful blaster. The schedule was excruciatingly tight. Masquerading as a repair man, I was to take a sky-taxi to Yupstirens, a ten minute journey. I had fifteen minutes to carry out the heist, another fourteen to get me to the surgery and twenty-one minutes left for the operation. Afterwards, when Central Tracking were flashing I hadn't done check-in, it would be too late. They'd try transferring tracking systems to airport and shuttle-out badge scan, but it would

be futile. I'd be in space before they could run a positive on computer reliability. The surgeon's fee was to be two million — he had amazingly tiny hands.

'And don't try and cross me!' Even his threats were overweight. 'The solar system's not big enough.'

'I wouldn't dream of it. So, when's the raid, Sally? And has Yupstiren got any family to worry about?'

'No family and he never leaves the house before nine.'

'So we could be talking tomorrow?'

'We could indeed. All you have to watch out for is his muscle-shield, dim but dangerous.'

'Sally, I could kiss you if not for your disgusting physical appearance.'

For the first time in my life I was grateful.

I didn't return to bed after the seven a.m. shock. I did check-in and got myself ready. Nothing to pack except my Western Citizen Badge. All my clothes were designed to disintegrate in five weeks, and even my electric toothbrush was over-zealous and had recently dislodged a canine. Take it all, I thought. Take the fucks ups, take the throw-aways, take the tedium, take the Tracercharges, take the economic boom, take the new vehicles every month, take exports, imports and the quasi-religion that goes with them, take the mother-in-law's head exploding over Sunday dinner, take it all because Henry B Waxfolly's taking off! Then I remembered the forthcoming robbery and got the runs.

I was poised like a sprinter, expansion bag gripped, blaster inside. I'd booked the taxi, everything was set. The alarms sounded eight. My insides felt septic. I did check-in and pelted to the door. I had to beat that hated clock one last time. I wrenched the door open, stepped out into air. Such a horribly slow, feather-like descent. Upon landing, I snatched a time check . . . one minute thirty-eight seconds gone, and not a taxi in sight! It was enough to give you wrinkles. I was tapped on the shoulder. 'Hey, pal, taxi?'

'Fuck off, I'm waiting for a taxi! Shit yes!'

'You see I'm picking up a Solar-man and you know, the overalls, I kind of thought . . .'

'Yes, taxi, taxi! Move it or I'll eat your face!'

'Yeah, they said it was kinda urgent.'

I displayed great self-control throughout the journey, the cabby didn't mind a bit — me chewing on his upholstery. I was one minute forty-eight seconds behind my schedule when he landed in Yupstiren's scorched drive. The cabby had been directed to wait, so I ran to the facephone beneath the neon address sculpture without another word. This wasn't a gamble. A Solar-man was always needed, any type of refit man was always needed. I dialled in. The face staring into mine startled me, not because it had appeared so suddenly but because it was horrifying ugly. The muscle-shield.

I forced a chummy, bet-you're-glad-to-see-me, grin.

'Solar-man — efficiency control punched through that you were experiencing some malfunctioning.'

'Hey, that's right . . . Mr Yupstiren's bidet was ice cold yesterday. Gave me

hell about it. I'll open up.'

He cut the connection and I marched briskly up the drive. What a joint, a neo-Georgian mini-mansion caught in its own gravity trap and completely inverted. As I approached the doorway, the path flipped over and so did I — disconcerting. The hired heavy was waiting to meet me and he was as unspeakably vile in real life as on the screen. Then there was only a smile between us. Out came the blaster.

'Back off or you're dogfood!' I fairly snarled. 'Take me to Yupstiren now!'

'He hates to be disturbed when he's choosing his face for the day.'

'Disturb him or die, it's up to you.'

He turned, led me through the hallway. When we reached an ornate door, I told him not to knock but to walk right in. Though sorely grieved, he did as ordered.

'Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think I heard you knock, did I Slabcock?'

I jabbed Slabcock into the room, stepped out from behind him and covered them both.

'Yupstiren, show me the floor safe and hurry or I'll butcher you horribly!'

The face he'd been applying slipped away. It was an Expressional, an ultra sheer polyurethane muscle adaptor that moulded the face into whatever expression the day's mood required; this one had been authoritarian.

Yupstiren's hand was shaking as he pulled aside a deep pile rug. 'Slabcock, aren't you going to do anything?' He whined.

'Errr.' Slabcock's brow came down like a raincloud. 'Sure.'

This was not a clever man. He lunged. I shrieked, shot wildly and blew his nose off. He staggered and groped at the smouldering crater where his hooter used to be.

'Open that safe now,' I growled, definitely feeling a headache coming on.

Yupstiren put his print to the floor and a panel slid away. I tossed him the expansion bag and he filled it with lots of lovely pink stripes. I waved him to bring it over. As I took the bag, my knee drove into his solar plexus; he folded and I caught him with the butt of the blaster on the cluster of nerves at the base of his neck. Slabcock was searching for his nose. Just as he found it — glued firmly to the smellervision — I spun him around and whipped the blaster across his jaw. He went down like a very ugly, concussed man.

Without checking my watches, I dashed through the house, caught my breath at the door and walked smartly down again.

'Everything okay, pal?' The cabby cheerfully inquired.

'Can't you rest your teeth and shift it!'

'So you're still in a hurry, I get you, pal!'

I was pancaked into my seat as we took off. Every heart-beat was a pulse closer to death. I was beyond normal fear, I was . . . abnormal. My head felt like it was ripping apart. I knew the Tracercharge was counting down, ready to blow all my aspirations away. Three minutes forty-one behind schedule. Jesus! had all that nasal amputation been for nothing? The cabby drove like a maniac. I looked like one. My thoughts kept colliding and going ouch.

'Here we are, pal, safe and sound.' He asked for his fare, this wonderful man who'd brought my lifespan up to nineteen minutes and forty-two seconds.

'Take it! I love you! My mother also loves you!'

I was bounding away when I heard him shout, 'I love you too, pal. I love all lunatics!'

Consoles glimmered everywhere. Signs flashed, No Credit and, Will You Please Wait. Financier land. Dome-shaped buildings spun ponderously on underground tracks that played tinkle tunes like music boxes. I hurtled into a raspberry and cream dollop of architecture, skidded to a halt through a pool of congealing brains at a service chute and stabbed the panel for the floor of the illicit surgery. I stepped in and was caught by the pull of a powerful magnet that worked on the trace elements in the body. I was swooshed up 776 floors before you can say, I'm going to puke, and gently eased into a featureless corridor. My legs were made of spaghetti, my mind a silly wet sob, but I managed to wobble and blubber my way to the office. I slammed my fist on the buzzer, the door clicked and I gibbered into the surgery.

'You're late,' said the yellow-smocked, orange-haired, tiny handed, extremely ancient doctor as he swung from a therapy trapeze.

'Quick, quick, you've got to get it out before I explode!' He landed nimbly, took my arm with his infantile hand and led me through a confusion of chrome and outdated magazines to a cranium-depilatory hood. A second later I was as bald as an astronaut's helmet. He guided me to a formica tea trolley and told me to lie over it.

'We'll have the little bugger whipped out in a tick, no cause for alarm.'

He placed a rubber gardening hose in my left ear that discharged a cloud of vaporized morphine concentrate. I thought about exploding heads, about Tracercharges, headaches, life lived by the clock, consumer responsibility.

I thought about . . .

When I came to, I'd absolutely no idea where I was. Then, no doubt responding to deeply ingrained habit, I lifted my wrist, gazed at the watches and four words blinded my mind's eye: you have missed check-in! I felt my head. It was in severe need of a wig and there was a puckered burn scar, but it was still there, where it had always been, where I was used to it being, where I wanted it to remain - on the end of my neck. Zap, pow, etc. I remembered it all.

'Ah-ha, back to the land of the living, I see. I had to use an ephedrine enema.'

'Was it that bad, a heavy coma situation?'

'No, not really, it's just that I think enemas are simply wonderful.'

'Yeah . . . anyway, the Tracercharge? It's actually out? The thing is actually fucking out?'

'My good fellow, it was never in.'

'What?'

'I said, my good fellow . . .'

'Shit! I heard you. What do you mean, it was never in?'

I parted the skull, opened your brain, rummaged around the parietal, and . . . He shrugged dramatically.

'No way! I've been on check-in for over six months! I've been sweating blood. I've been . . . I've been - you doddering old spastic-handed streak of babies piss, you're bullshitting me!'

'If I was, as you put it, bullshitting you, you would, in point of fact, be very dead now. No, my theory is Central Tracking bungled the initial operation and somehow forgot to put one in.'

'Don't be so monumentally stupid! How can you forget to put a Tracercharge into someone's head when the whole point of the operation is to put a Tracercharge into someone's head?'

'Admittedly it does seem rather . . . lax.'

'Lax!' The surgeon appeared so confident. His attitude reminded me of something. Yes, Sally reading from that well-thumbed script. This was a set-up, it had to be. But how? I felt as sick as a sword swallower. It was not a situation you liked to be in when you had just undergone major brain surgery. I sat up and punched the surgeon in the eye. He fell like dry sticks.

'Good Lord, you punched me in the eyes!'

'Look, pig's breath, I want some answers. What the fuck is this? Talk, or by God I'll take the laser-knife to your sexual apparatus!' I played a hunch. 'Am I the first habitual you've operated on who didn't have a Tracercharge?'

'No . . . errr . . . no, not exactly.'

'Well how many didn't?'

'Sort of . . . kind of . . . all of them.'

'Sally, you jellified rip-off artist!' I stood over the stricken doctor. 'So there aren't any Tracercharges, there never were. In that case, explain to me the exploding heads?'

'I can't. And I guess the government can't either. But if you think about it, they've been very clever. Scientists couldn't discover a cause for the phenomena, so the government must have utilized it as a way to control criminal activity. An habitual won't risk questioning the existence of a Tracercharge, better to play safe and have your movements restricted by the life preserving consoles. And Mr Waxfolly, my eye really does hurt.'

I couldn't take it all in. It was crazy. Wouldn't the word spread that Tracercharges didn't exist? But I suppose that people had to believe in failure to check-in being the cause of the deaths - better to believe that than to accept that heads were exploding for no apparent reason whatsoever.

'Ummm . . .' The surgeon was waving a miniature hand at me. 'Would this be a bad time to mention my fee?'

I leaned over and punched him in the other eye. Both he and Sally could go and fuck themselves. And what about me? I was still guilty of robbing one extremely influential man, add to that my knowledge of the conspiracy, and it became obvious that the police would be mightily trigger-happy.

I walked to the screen and dialled. 'Deepsnozzle's Taxis, yes, I want a booking immediately. Fine, MacDonald's Space-out. Yeah, that's right.'

The most harrowing part of my journey into space was having to do it bald. I was pretty much out of it as I sighed and paid for departure to Spoodledip, a colony planet, turn left at

Alpha Centuri. I chose it because it had the silliest name. My Western Citizen Badge cleared and owing to the fact that there was a shortage of emigrants eager to become Spoodledipians, there was only a five-hour delay. I passed the cauliflower sensor without triggering the alarm. Something in the atmosphere of Spoodledip metamorphoses caulis; they become telepathic and fuddle the minds of colonists with unbelievably tedious vegetable thoughts.

Once on board and strapped in, I realized how dog-tired I was. Too tired to ponder the mystery of exploding heads. I missed the mid-flight meal and continued to doze throughout my journey to the stars.

That was all four and a half years ago. Christ, time flies when your eyes aren't on it. I'm a naturalized Spoodledipian now and have spent many a Spoodley turquoise day trying to solve the riddle of the exploding heads, trying to make all those vague connections connect. The only solution I'm happy with is so fantastic, I wonder if I'm still in complete possession of my faculties. You see, since I've been living in the Splaslid coastal colony of Spoodledip, I've never seen a single head explode. I eat food that used to squeal, bellchatter, drone or sminkle. I live in a simple, inflatable hut on walkie-stilts where the fertilizer flows free and the grass grows high. I live where it is a crime to throw anything away unless it has been patched dozens of times. Where productivity means what you've got to eat and not what you've got to sell. Where mistakes are human, not manufactured and recurring with precision timing. Where the act of sex is therapy, not discussing the act of it. Where the only measurement of time is the dual sun's passage through the sky. Where the alcohol I produce makes you laugh, not bark to forget.

Okay, it can be a pain in the arse; for instance, when flapbellies swoop down and guzzle your garden furniture, but I'm Henry B Waxfolly, alive and thriving. I'm learning not to rush, not to panic, not to worship a god that ticks. I talk too much, chase women, own the local bar, sit down a lot and am even learning to play the needlebin. Of course the money helped and the thought of life without it is a touch disturbing. Equally disturbing is the thought that Sally will one day catch up with me but . . . what the hell.

Finally, I haven't had a headache for four and a half years and I disposed of the last of my watches weeks ago. Do you know, I reckon Earth is extremely bad for the blood pressure.



STRATFORD A KIRBY was born in 1964 but started writing much later. *Playing For The Audience* in issue 19 was his first story for **FEAR**. His latest story was inspired by a harrowing incident with a food processor. Following said incident, he no longer uses domestic appliances as agricultural implements, instead he is currently engaged in a study of the world's ugliest deep-sea fish.

FEAR FORUM

We welcome your letters, honest. Rush your news, views and abuse to FEAR FORUM, NEWSFIELD, LUDLOW, SHROPSHIRE SY8 1JW.

DODGY DEALING

Dear FEAR

On looking through issue 25, I came across the article titled 'In My Opinion: Piracy Can Be Good' and can see a debate coming up similar to the one on censorship. Well, I would just like to air a couple of my opinions on the subject.

If piracy is the only way so-called true genre fans/collectors/etc. can get a chance to see/own something that under normal circumstances is forbidden, then I believe they are possibly doing the right thing. That is, if it is just for personal collection or use, and not exploited in the

wrong manner. I see no harm in true fans or collectors trading goods if such material is kept within that group. It's when certain other parties are involved as a way of making a quick buck out of the proceedings that I draw the line: for example, the man in the street being sold some dodgy stuff. Yes it's a debatable subject and where do you draw the line? Who are the true fans/collectors? Who are the dodgy dealers? It's hard to say. Each in his/her own way are doing things they believe to be the right things.

I, for one, class myself as a true genre fan. I go to the cinema to see genre films. I also collect many genre-related items, from comic books to videos, and these things are mine. If I come across rare items and they are affordable then I will purchase them.

If a video looks like the real thing, and at one time or another has been available and then withdrawn for some reason, I don't find any harm if some time later this video turns up again and goes the rounds in the right

places, not doing harm to anyone. One point my father once brought up is that if it's illegal to pirate video tapes or whatever, then how come all the right equipment is produced and is available for everyone to buy and use?

Finally, concerning John Gilbert's review of the video *Creepshow*, he made a slight error. The film does have five segments plus the wrap around story - so that could make six in all (*That's what I said!* - JG). The main five segments are: Father's Day, The Lonesome Death Of Jody Verrill, The Crate (which was omitted, and featured Adrienne Barbeau, Hal Holbrook and Fritz Weaver), Something To Tide You Over, and They're Creeping Up On You.

Thank you for listening.
Howard T Pell, Keighley, West Yorkshire

LOWERING THE TEMPERATURE

Dear FEAR

The Black Arts issue was brilliant. After reading it, I felt chilled enough to express a few opinions in your pages.

After watching such films as *American Werewolf In London*, and *Zombies: Day Of The Dead* as well as oldies like *Night Of The Demon* and *The Devil Rides Out*, I have compiled a small library on horror, and have started a novel myself. It would be interesting to hear from famous horror novelists, how they started, if they struggled to get that first book published!

Too many films and novels today are repetitive or half-copied rip-offs. I sadly found some time back that the book *Death Dream* by Graham Masterton reflected the ideas which form the basis for my own novel! I think the problem may be to do with reference material. When I'm researching for original and interesting ideas, the books I've come across explain historical records and opinions, but they don't dig that bit deeper into 'censored' subjects. Whatever happened to the dark and heavily bound volumes that your great aunt would pass on to you, or could be found on the restricted shelves of libraries?

What I hope to see more of, in FEAR and in books and on film, is the creation of that thrilling, cold atmosphere. So much better than the 'can't watch anymore... going to be sick' response brought about too often these days.

Colin Hopson, Dudley

Dear FEAR

I'm just writing to reply to Jason Prince's letter in issue 26 about the identity of the metal band featured in *Hardware*.

The band is called Gwar and if you waited until the end of the film you'd have seen that they were credited under the 'thanks' list. However, the music playing was not Gwar.

Their current album is called *Scumdogs Of The Universe*. They are a thrash metal band and extremely entertaining.

PS. I too enjoyed *Hardware*.
P Lewis, Wolverhampton

JOHN GILBERT FAN CLUB

Dear FEAR

A few responses to your publication, which, after a month or two of heated correspondence with your subscriptions department, I now receive regularly.

Firstly, I feel duty bound to point out a gaff in February's issue. The half-baked horror with the Senior Service fronting the Bob Keen interview is nothing to do with *Nightbreed* (*No one said it was!* - *Letters Ed*), but our own songstress Kate Bush in preparation for the 'Experiment IV' video. This is yet another example of FEAR's lap dog attitude to Mr Barker, whose name is invariably present on every page of your magazine (*Shome exaggeration surely* - *Letters Ed*). Much as I enjoy CB's work, I suggest you give your editor some Rennie's so that he stops repeating (*Pardon - Letters Ed*) himself.

Keep the skulls. I for one only read a review if it is credited with less than three skulls (especially if penned by John Gilbert). I have learned to my cost that a high ranker is not at all reliable. I rented *Relentless* for my sins and was not greeted by a tense and probing psycho thriller, but an extended episode of Starsky and Hutch - without the 70s sex appeal.

My main criticism of your product is the predictable selection of contributors. John Gilbert, I think, is an intelligent and witty man (*This is John's mum writing isn't it?* - *Letters Ed*) and I'm loathe to suggest that his kingdom (sprawling as it is) be diminished. Though I'm pleased to see that his photo has been removed from the last issue - one must remember that children can quite easily get hold of FEAR and be mentally scarred for life by such images (*Yes, this must be John's mum* - *Letters Ed*).

I assume Oliver Frey is either kept in a cellar and fed only in return for illustrations, or he's dirt cheap. It would be nice to see something a bit different every now and then.

Well, I think I've offended just about everyone I wanted to. Keep up the good work.

DOES YOUR life lack surprise and excitement?

DO YOU look over your shoulder and see nothing but your own shadow?

**ARE YOUR dreams peaceful and uninterrupted?
IS THE tedium driving you crazy?**

FEAR NOT

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Please contact your wholesaler or COMAG for any further information.

PS. How about a slot for readers to write appreciations of their all-time fave films or books? (*Why not? Bung them to FEAR FORUM - Letters Ed.*) I think having a religious fan's views on the masterpieces of the genre would be entertaining to say the least.

Stephen Player, Chester

CASTING VOTES

Dear FEAR

I must say how much I have been enjoying FEAR recently. All articles and interviews have been first rate.

However, I have one request. Please commission another short story from the writer Mark Chadbourn who was voted best new writer in your magazine's awards last year. His story had a great effect on my life: I have tried to find other work by him, but to no avail. Has he written anything else? A novel perhaps?

A new story please, Mark...
G Butterfield, Croydon

OVERKILL

Dear FEAR

Forgive my belated response, but as promised I've solicited a few reactions to FEAR magazine from friends and acquaintances and without exception, all were impressed. All reactions were positive, ranging from an immediate and psychotic love of the publication, to the quiet and knowing silence seen on the faces of those glancing through the family album and reliving treasured memories.

I'm sure the magazine would do well here, though it would have a hard time keeping up with the real life horrors being perpetrated in these United States. But what would art be without real life? We've got an interesting series of murders occurring here in New York City, in which young girls are being killed, but no one is quite sure how they're being done in and they're yet to nab the culprit.

I'm aware forensic medicine is over-rated and that police medical examiners screw up a lot of times, so I'm not too surprised they can't pinpoint the girls' cause of death. The closest they've come is to say the victims have somehow been asphyxiated. *Somehow*. Jesus.

And how's this? New York's murder rate is one of the world's highest. No secret there. Two thousand announced murders last year. People find this to be a frightening statistic and rightly so. But the figure's inaccurate. It's way off. The true total is 4,000 or more and you'll never read it anywhere. Bad for business, not to mention political careers and tourism.

As a federal narcotics agent told me, many so-called accidents are really concealed murders.

Other victims are never found. They are buried secretly or the corpse destroyed. Then there are the murders in black and Hispanic ghettos, murders that are never reported because cops are reluctant to go into those neighbourhoods. I figure the same is true in all countries, to some extent. In other words, there are more victims of foul play lying about than we know of.

But since when do civic authorities feel compelled to tell the truth? By the by, in addition to *Poe Must Die*, I've written one other occult novel, *Book Of Shadows*. It didn't exactly set the world of literature on fire but I liked it and thought the book worked. It is approximately 14-years-old and is probably out of print. I love it and so did the handful of people who read it. I think Hamlyn published it in England.

Anyway it was nice talking to you when I was in London and I look forward to reading the interview. Good luck with the magazine and keep up the good work.
Marc Olden, New York, USA

INVERTED SNOBBERY

Dear FEAR

I am sick and tired of people like Peter Kitchin of Lancaster complaining that he keeps reading short stories from "big name" authors like James Herbert. Without people like James Herbert the genre and magazines like FEAR would not exist. Herbert is Britain's most successful horror writer. His books always go to the number one spots in the bestseller lists and this is a reflection of the enormous following that he has, and a credit to his superb writing skills. Far from being yesterday's hack, each book he does gets better and better. As far as I know, he has never written a story for FEAR, apart from an excerpt from *Creed*.

The trouble with the British, and particularly plonkers like Peter Kitchin, is that they seem to be unable to praise success. Being a supporter of the underdog has some Christian merits but not to the detriment of one of our finest writers.

Steven Carter, Feltham, Middlesex

We should also not forget that the profits from bestsellers often go toward the publication of lesser known, less commercial, writers. Good on yer Jim and Steve.

TASMANIAN DEVIL

Dear FEAR

Firstly, much praise for this brilliant magazine. We have nothing like it in Australia, let alone in Tasmania. Anyone ever heard of Tasmania? No? It's not hard to overlook. And no, it's not Tanzania! The Americans seem to have a little trouble with that.

If you have a world map, find Australia. Got it? Now, underneath (that's South), there's a small triangular island called Tasmania. Where the Tasmanian Devils come from. Okay. now you know where I am.

I had no idea there were so many horror freaks out there. This means I'm not alone...

Hi to Glen Ridley and Jonathan Youers, I sincerely turn green for you both. Jonathan for having chased up Big Steve King, and Glen because... he has a word processor. Glen, my writing tends to smack slightly of the Kingish also, but I keep having to remind myself that I was writing that stuff before I discovered King, and that's why I liked his stuff...

I'm such a 'rabid' (sorry) King fan that I have nothing left to do but start a King Fan Club over here (short of tripping around Maine and trying to inconspicuously bump into Big Steve in Bangor, that is).

I want to thank FEAR and the crew and the readers for broadening my small Taswegian mind, and showing me just how weird you people really are (Just kidding). And Mr Frey, your artwork is brilliant, beyond comparison (and my vocabulary).

Hi to you all and best of wishes (especially y'all Stephen King fans!)

Kate, Tasmania, Australia

WRITER'S REVENGE

Dear FEAR,

I was very upset to read your review of my novel, *Spirit Level*, in the February edition of your magazine. You are, of course, entitled to your opinion although your comments were not at all constructive, but I must inform you that it differs considerably from readers who have taken the time to write to me with their comments.

I have never stated that *Spirit*

Level is a horror story, it is a fantasy ghost story about a man trying to overcome his own weaknesses and to find God. For the record I have not read *The Talisman*, but I hope your readers enjoy my books as much as they did King and Straub's work. Would you have complained that *A Christmas Carol*, also a ghost story by the author's definition, did not frighten you?

You also comment on my 'bland' style of writing, but again, I have had reports to the contrary. There seem to be many people whose ideas of the story conflict savagely with your own, but I believe that a not-at-all-known-writer does not stand a chance of getting a good review from you when the competition includes like Dean Koontz, who writes for the criteria which you prefer to review. I am sorry that your voice is heard by more people than those of my readers. As for the length of my book, let us not forget that Stephen King's first book, *Carrie*, was also 'a slim volume'. Even so, we cannot all write a bestseller with our first novel.

As you seem to know so much about this field, perhaps you might offer advice to me as to how you would like me to write my next story?


Jon Mackley, Watford, Herts

John Gilbert replies: Of course we pay great attention to the brand names of the genre but I can also prove that FEAR makes no distinction between well known and little known writers as far as quality is concerned. Our fiction pages and interviews bear that out. I am glad that your friends enjoyed your novel. The fact remains that I do not judge Spirit Level to be particularly well written or innovative. It could, however, be a signpost to better things, but you have done nothing to prove that my opinion is wrong. I'm waiting. Put up or shut up!

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FEAR REVIEWS

Excellent


Very good


Good


Fair


Poor


BOOKS

ANGRY CANDY

Harlan Ellison
 Publisher Houghton Mifflin
 Format HB, \$18.95

 *Angry Candy* is about Death. Not Death as a bit player who wanders onto the stage and momentarily screws up in the second act, but Death the cold and malicious Oscar winner, the capricious campaigner at whose style and verve we marvel, receiving his every impromptu master stroke with a flushed and fevered round of applause . . . while we secretly breathe a sigh of relief that, at least on this visit to the theatre, he has been more concerned with his performance than with us.

The styles of these 17 stories run the full range of Ellison's repertoire, from the delicate and sensitive 'Paladin Of The Lost Hour' through the zany and flamboyant mini-epic 'The Region Between' to the achingly depressing but strangely optimistic 'The Function Of Dream Sleep'.

Here be humans, failed and frail, hopeful and world-weary, each hell-bent on their inevitable date with eternity. But they are all merely supporting characters – supporting because, make no mistake: this is Death's book. There's an old coot in whose hands rests the fate of the world, in the shape of an ancient timepiece containing one magical hour; a smelly, but animal-wise New York bag lady who witnesses a killing; a succubus-like she-beast who grows tired of the chase; a man who needs to erase the memory of his wife's passing, and a man who's willing to take it on . . . for a fee; a long-dead aunt whose raucous laughter lives on, trapped on the laugh tracks of a thousand bad TV shows; and a man who carries with him all the anguish of the world and bears a mouth in his side which acts as a doorway for his soul.

Ellison rails at the human lot. He raves at the unfairness of death, the futility and inevitability of grief, the gut-wrenching sickness of loss. And yet, he does it with style, and with panache. And, while he doesn't tame the reaper, he exposes him for what he is and shows us mortals a cautious path to acceptance and, with it, sanity.

Pete Crowther



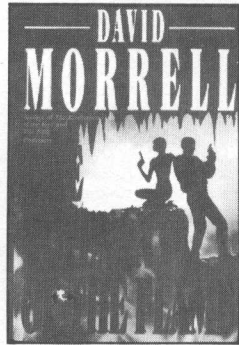
THE COVENANT OF THE FLAME

David Morrell
 Publisher Headline
 Format HB, £14.95



In part, the true inheritor of Ian Fleming's mantle, and oh so much more. His thrillers are bestsellers but cannot be smeared with the anaemic panache of most such books, which usually throw away the baby but keep the water. There's no such problem here, though, as Morrell's *The Covenant Of The Flame* is as well

rounded and full of action as *First Blood*, *The Brotherhood Of The Rose* and *The*



Fifth Profession.

A series of seemingly unrelated incidents happen around the world. The widow of a rainforest champion receives the head of her husband's worst enemy as a present. The head of an oil company that spilled gallons of crude into the Coral Sea is poisoned, and an engineer who is responsible for a toxic gas disaster is buried under several tons of powdered ammonia.

STONE AGE REVOLUTIONARY

VISION OF THE HUNTER

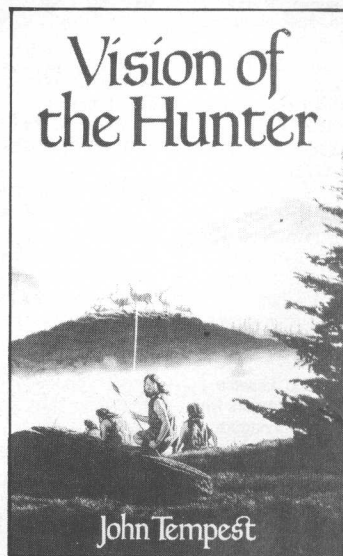
John Tempest
 Publisher Futura
 Format PB, £3.99



The writer of historical-based fantasy has a huge research database available, i.e. the multi-faceted richness of all human cultures, histories, legends and mythologies. Sadly, much of this has been ignored and second-hand Celtic myths tend to have been bootlegged onto trilogies about singing elves, dark warlords and clichéd quests. Fortunately, John Tempest has eschewed formula fantasy, thrown his research net wider than most of his contemporaries and come up with a Stone Age fantasy that is most definitely worth reading.

The story concerns that pivotal stage in the evolution of human society when hunter-gatherers stop depending on the migratory habits of their prey and instead begin to domesticate and gather into flocks the animals upon which they depend for food. It represents a dramatic revolution in consciousness, and as with any revolution the birth pangs are not necessarily straightforward or easy.

The prophet of this particular revolution, Finn, is an outsider. Marked out of the ordinary (literally – he has a tattoo on his forearm) on account of being an orphan. Living on the margins of tribal society, Finn has to be more resourceful than most and his prowess as a hunter and forest-knower serves him well. However, his vision of tame reindeer and gathering them together so that they follow the tribe rather than season-inspired instincts does not go down well with his tribe – for the most part they think he's mad. Even when the reindeer



herds decrease in number and the tribe faces starvation, the majority are more inclined to go for a mass slaughter so that they can survive in the short-term with full bellies. But a visionary has to follow his visions . . . they might lead to even greater visions and revolutions.

Vision Of The Hunter tells its tale convincingly, warmly and movingly, demonstrating that fantasy can be just as much a literature of ideas as can science fiction.

Andy Oldfield



HORROR

The Black Fedora
 In Darkness Waiting
 Night Plague
 Stitch
 The Transition Of Titus Crow



SCIENCE FICTION

Grass
 Polar City Blues
 Sexual Chemistry
 The State Of The Art



FANTASY

Angry Candy
 Devil Take The Hindmost
 King Arthur And His Knights
 Midnight Blue
 Strands Of Starlight
 Vision Of The Hunter



THRILLER

The Covenant Of The Flame
 A Cry Of Shadows
 The Power
 Puppetmaster

NON-FICTION

Atlas Of Magical Britain
 Hollywood Gothic



These various plot strands are pulled together by industrial journalist Tess Drake who, together with a smart NYPD Lieutenant, discovers that the deaths are being perpetrated by a ruthless group of environmental mercenaries who believe that they should exact a revenge for human pollution which the planet cannot directly invoke. This group is further linked with a 13th century religious conspiracy, a hallmark of many Morrell novels, and the full corrupt power of which is not realized until the spiralling, tight-knit climax, in which the various plot strands tie together.

Hot blooded and unwavering in its exploitation of contemporary world concerns, *The Covenant Of The Flame* is bound to be snatched by Hollywood — so read it in hardcover. It is a bestseller in all the right senses of the term.

John Gilbert

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NIGHT PLAGUE

Graham Masterton
Publisher Tor
Format PB, \$4.50



More than a year ago we published an extract from a work in progress by Graham Masterton — the issue with the dog boys on the front cover. It was well accepted but Graham suspected that it would not appear in print until this year. The reason? The second of the *Night Warriors* books, *Death Dream*, had not had its UK release.

Death Dream has just appeared from Sphere, and I suspect that it will take another year before the third in the series arrives on the shelves of British book sellers. Until then, the Americans have a monopoly on this British author, a state of affairs which is outrageous — although you can probably pick up a copy at one of the many specialist book stores around the country.

Night Plague is a stand alone novel, though it is helpful to know the motivations set out in the first two books. *The Night Warriors* — from whom, I suspect, the Dream Warriors of Elm Street are culled — protect the dream-life of the world from invasion by other, usually evil, beings. Until now, the Warriors have been pitted against demons of the astral plane who have been able to manifest in the real world, but in *Night Plague* it is a Satan-worshipping witch, Isabel Gowdie, who has returned for revenge against Masterton's gallants.

Three hundred years ago, Gowdie was trapped by the Dream Warriors who were then able to contain and negate her evil powers. She has escaped her prison and intends to infect the dreamscape with an insidious plague which will poison human thought and lead to ethereal madness in the land of the living. The Night Warriors, led by Stanley, prepare to finish the confrontation with the witch started by their ancestors three centuries ago, but even they are not immune from Gowdie's powers and end up fighting a more ferocious battle than they encountered with the two demonic entities in *Night Warriors* and *Death Dream*.

More lively than the first two books, *Night Plague* continues a remarkably innovative, and thoroughly chilling, look at our dream lives. It shows that Masterton is one of our major horror talents, and further illustrates that American publishers appear to have a greater respect for British writers than



SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND LAWN-MOWERS

GRASS

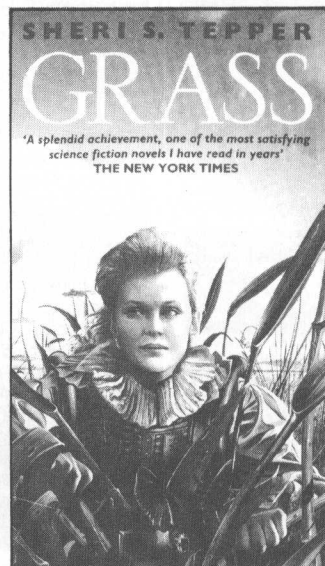
Sheri S Tepper
Publisher Corgi
Format PB, £4.99



The story line of *Grass* is straightforward enough. *Grass* is a planet that has survived a plague which has all but wiped out humanity elsewhere. The rulers of Earth naturally want to find out why, and so Marjorie Westriding-Yrarier is sent on a quest which culminates like all good quests in much wider accomplishments than its original brief — self-knowledge emerges along with the answers to more specific questions.

Sheri Tepper is right at the top of my list of favourite writers. Her hallmarks are engrossing characterization, intriguing plot and intelligent themes — a consummate storyteller, in other words.

However, I have to admit to not enjoying *Grass* as much as the rest of her work. It is a well written book and it's difficult to pin-point specific instances where plot and characterization fall down, but it's a book that you have to work hard to get into. There's a quality to it not unlike that of the film version of *Dune* — a ponderousness and slowness that can distance you from what's going on. But that's no reason not to give it a whirl. As with



so many things in life, perseverance can bring its own rewards.

Andy Oldfield



some of their UK counterparts.

John Gilbert

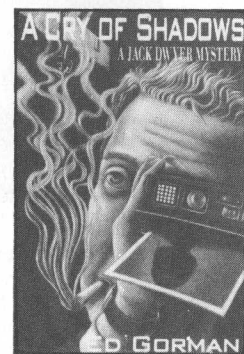


A CRY OF SHADOWS

Ed Gorman
Publisher St Martin's Press
Format HB, \$14.95



Ed Gorman, co-editor of *Stalkers*, editor of the anthology *Westeryear* and of the magazine *Mystery Scene*, is also the author of this slight and unassuming mystery novel with a kick like a mule and a heart as big as the Salvation Army.



A Cry Of Shadows features Gorman's flawed but delightful private eye, the thorough but soft-hearted Jack Dwyer, in a bizarre murder investigation where the corpse turns out to be the man who hired him. Doggedly unravelling the past of Richard Coburn, Dwyer splits his time between the chic Avanti restaurant and its nearby

neighbour, St Marks shelter for homeless men. In the course of his investigation, he rubs shoulders with the élite and the downtrodden, finally arriving at an answer that is as sad as it is shocking.

The thinking, caring and fair-minded Jack Dwyer could almost be another incarnation of John D MacDonald's Travis McGee, although on the evidence of *A Cry Of Shadows*, Gorman has set his own very personal and individual high standard for the hard-boiled genre.

Pete Crowther



HOLLYWOOD GOTHIC

David J Skal
Publisher WW Norton
Format HB, \$39.95

Everyone likes to assume they are an expert on *Dracula*.

Then the question arises, are they an expert on the Bram Stoker novel? The original London stage play? The unauthorized silent German production *Nosferatu*? How about the Spanish-language version that was filmed simultaneously with the classic 1931 Universal production starring Bela Lugosi? The truth is, few of us have any real idea of how Bram Stoker came to write his 1897 masterpiece which was originally titled *The Un-dead*.

But David J Skal, author of *Scavengers* and *Antibodies*, goes further than any traditional scholar would in finding out just about everything there is to know regarding what his account subtitles: *The Tangled Web Of Dracula From Novel To Stage To Screen*. In a well-researched book which clearly took years to compile, Skal presents a

fascinating overview which looks at *Dracula* from the perspective of what the book became after publication: one of the hottest and most endearing literary properties in history.

Beginning with an intimate look into the creative hodgepodge which eventually became *Dracula*, Skal's narrative really picks up when examining the unending attempts by Stoker's impoverished widow to retain legal copyright over the numerous stage productions and then, most importantly, the illegal film version in 1922 by FW Murnau (probably the first time in history this sort of legal action was ever undertaken).

By concentrating on the various personalities who brought *Dracula* first to the London stage, then to Broadway, and finally to the sound stages of Hollywood, author Skal presents a comprehensive portrait full of insight into what it meant to exploit a commercial property to the fullest, even over half a century ago. He was also able to interview two of the survivors of that period: Raymond Huntley, who played the Count on the London stage, and Lupita Tovar, who starred in the Spanish version shot at night after the English-speaking cast of the 1931 *Dracula* had gone home.

Of course, *Hollywood Gothic* also sympathetically examines the tragic career of actor Bela Lugosi. Not only did he practically give his services away to Universal Studios for a chance to repeat his stage role (getting only \$500 a week for a seven week shooting schedule), but because of his decision not to learn to speak English properly, quickly found himself typecast in lower and lower quality horror melodramas.


Written with a pleasant leaning toward the dramatic, David Skal presents one of the most informative

and entertaining studies of the classic *Dracula* ever attempted. With over 200 rare photographs, *Hollywood Gothic* is a must-have for movie buffs and any serious fan of the *Dracula* phenomenon. **Stanley Wiater**



STITCH

Mark Morris
Publisher Piatkus
Format HB, £13.95

 *Stitch*, Mark Morris's second published novel, shows a writer completely at peace with himself and the genre in which he operates, a pleasant surprise given the author's relatively tender years and the ultimately flawed success of his first book, *Toady*.

But Morris learns fast, and where *Toady* tried to become all things to all men, neatly emasculating itself within the final 150 pages — a failing not uncommon with debuts — *Stitch* maintains an exactness of morbidity and grossly unpleasant vision to become that increasingly rare thing in horror fiction: in short, it's gripping, well-told and scary.

In the acting profession it takes, so they say, a brave man to attempt to appear with children or animals. So, too, there are similar things for writers to avoid. One is don't mix genres — *Toady* and Raymond Feist's *Faerie Tale* or good examples of what happens if you do — and the other is make sure your cast of characters is small enough to be manageable. Stephen King has emphatically cocked his considerable snoot at this latter piece of advice, effectively blending complete townships (as well as working laterally to include bygone generations) into his mixture of mayhem. But few others have found the same levels of success. Well, now there's Mark Morris.

Stitch opens with fledgling novelist and full-time student Dan Latcher meeting the grossly unpleasant Peregrine *Stitch*. In turn *Stitch* invites Latcher around to his flat, a visit which is to have dire consequences for the young writer who, having been assured that *Stitch* will make him 'a fisher of men', immediately locks himself away and produces — at breakneck speed — a story of horrific vision.

Enter 25-year-old mature student Ian Raven, who reads anything from Stephen King to Maeve Binchy (!), the introspective and homesick Annie O'Donnell and the vivacious Steph Peele, and a return appearance from Neil Gardner, the older brother from *Toady*. Steph and Annie discover that they're room-mates, Ian falls for Annie, Neil falls for Steph.

Days later, Latcher re-emerges as the Svengali-like guru leader of *The Crack*, advertised around the campus as a kind of music appreciation club, to which disparate elements of the university fraternity are drawn. But *The Crack* is much more than a few simple card tricks. Annie and Steph attend the inaugural gathering and, within only hours, the meeting has a profound effect on all those who were present. In Annie's case this effect proves to be short lived, possibly, she surmises after a conversation with another unaffected girl, by virtue of the fact that the two of them were on their period at the time. Steph, meanwhile, becomes stranger and more objectionable by the minute, eventually leaving the flat for parts unknown. At around the same time the enigmatic Latcher also goes to ground,

and just when Ian and Neil want to ask him a few questions.

Enter Economics lecturer and long-time mummy's boy Howard Duffy, whose relationship with his mother is about to take a nasty turn; the misogynistic history teacher Jayne Trent, who will soon discover the true wonder of procreation; the macho Stu, who gets a case of the clap you just wouldn't believe; and university bigwig Paul Carmichael, who starts the ball rolling — and how! — by discovering one of the students eating something not very nice out of the campus bins. Enter also, in flashback, the hapless Mally, a young boy who is subjected to a horrifying sexual encounter with some older boys and who, ashamed and terrified of his father finding out, begins a course of almost divine retribution... a course which begins with perhaps the unkindest cut of all.

Stitch is a big, blusteringly red-faced glowering novel of neo-religious cults, bizarre sex and rarely plumbed levels of almost impenetrable blackness. In turn it's mad as hell but yet strangely possessed of bountiful levels of humaneness... the essence of true horror — and if you don't believe me, go re-read *Frankenstein!*

Mark Morris reckons he's still got a long way to go yet (watch out for the in-depth interview next issue) and the really scary thing about that is he may be right! God only knows what we've got to come. I sure wouldn't want to swap dreams with him! Five skulls... and pass the condoms!

Pete Crowther



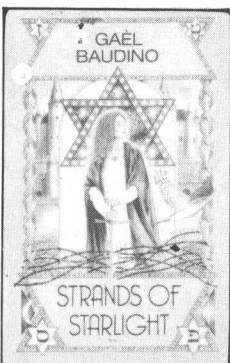
STRANDS OF STARLIGHT

Gaël Baudino
Publisher Orbit
Format PB, £7.99



In 14th century Europe, being accused of being a witch could prove to be a bit of a bitch, often fatally so — especially when it was the Inquisition making with the accusations.

Miriam's gift, of healing, is something of a liability in such times. And in the city Hyprux, she's tortured by Aloysius Cranby — a bishop with an eye to becoming pope. It's not even as if she has any control over her gift, when she comes across someone in pain she has to heal them.



Escaping from the city she is befriended by a midwife, Mika, and makes her way to the Free Towns where elves, witches and the clergy are purported to coexist peacefully and respectfully. But, on the way she heals a mortally injured man who repays her by knocking her senseless and raping her. Her body is healed by Varden, an elf in

LIGHT YEARS AHEAD

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PETER STRAUB

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Brian Lumley *The Transition of Titus Crow*

Brian Lumley is reckoned by many to be Britain's answer to Stephen King. This sequel to *The Borrowers Beneath* brilliantly marries SF with horror to tell the tale of Titus Crow's epic journey beyond space and time — beyond the limits of terror itself.

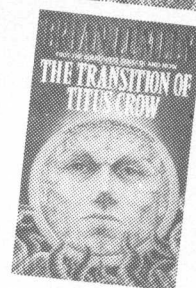
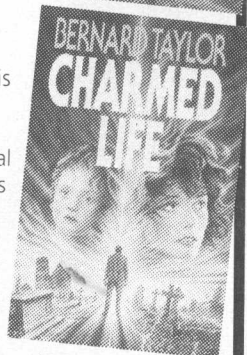
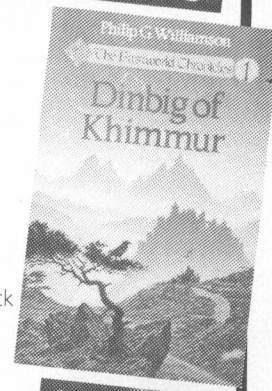
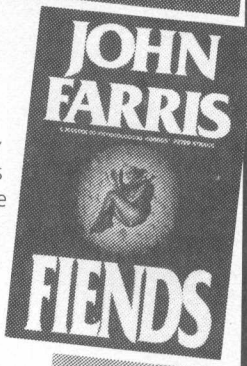
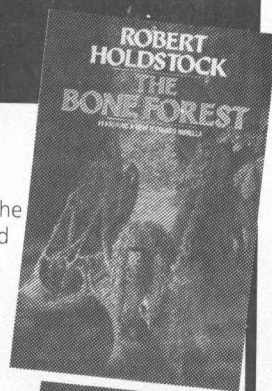
£3.50 paperback

The Shape of Reading to Come



GraftonBooks

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Saint Brigid, but the mental pain runs deeper and she vows vengeance on her despoiler. The force of that vow is not diminished any when the rapist turns up in Saint Brigid, nearly rapes a young girl and almost kills Varden. Miriam heals both of the injured, thereby winning the gratitude of the elves. In return she asks to be magically transformed to become stronger, bigger, a fighter.

The Free Towns, however, are a target of Bishop Cranby, a tool to help him achieve the papacy. And one day, he rides into Saint Brigid heralding change and terror. The army that follows is led by the rapist and a soul-purging battle is on, a battle for personal integrity as well as a way of life.

Full of poignancy, this is one of those noble fantasies that uses the interface between this world and the other to engage and focus our own humanity and mortality.

Andy Oldfield

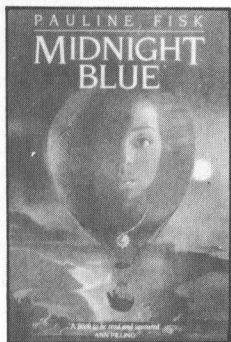


MIDNIGHT BLUE

Pauline Fisk
Publisher Lion
Format HB, £7.95



Burdened by uncertainty, tormented by psychological pain, and stifled by interference from others – a pretty daunting list of constraints, and probably more universally applicable than is good for a society's collective health. It's definitely more than is good for a young girl's well-being. Bonnie finds her life utterly inhibited by forces outside her control. Even her sympathetic mother can't help, because she's as much under the influence of the wonderfully named and totally reprehensible Grandbag as Bonnie is.



But Bonnie has her share of fortune. On her travels about the neighbourhood she comes across a strange garden where a man who gazes at the sky and keeps a strange diary is building a balloon to take him to the land beyond the sky. On the night the launch is due, Bonnie comes along and with the help of a mysterious shadow boy finds herself making the voyage. It's a potent and appealing image – to lift off into the blue and shed the weights that have been dragging you down.

At first, it seems that Bonnie does indeed win release. The place she finds herself transported to is a rural idyll and she's taken in by a warm, close-knit family. But, of course, she still has lingering sadness – she's left her mother behind, for instance. And slowly it seems that old problems seep through into her new life and threaten her and the new family. Problems like Grandmother Marvell, an evil simulacrum of Grandbag, who appears to thrive on cruelty and whose magic mirrors can suck the life out of a living thing and leave it an empty husk of its

former self.

Bonnie seeks help from her new family, from the shadow boy who followed her into this place and from the mysterious guardians of the hill, Edric and Godda, who are reputed to ensure the safety of those who live on their hill. But, as ever, the buck finally comes to rest with the individual. And eventually Bonnie is willing to pay the highest price to get rid of Grandmother Marvell and protect her new-found family.

You might not be able to run away from problems, not even by moving to different worlds. But it's fascinating to watch that realization dawning on a young girl already wise beyond her years. By turns uplifting and incredibly sad, *Midnight Blue* engages a whole gamut of emotions without ever resorting to sentimentality.

Andy Oldfield

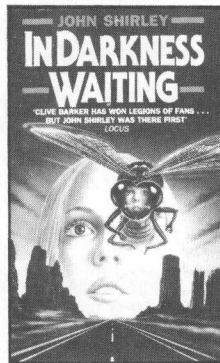


IN DARKNESS WAITING

John Shirley
Publisher Grafton
Format PB, £3.99



As one of the original and most prolific cyberpunks John Shirley has covered a lot of ground in his career, ranging from the epic cyberpunk tome *Eclipse* to the Varleyesque *A Splendid Chaos* to all-out horror in this 1988 tale. Unfortunately *In Darkness Waiting* doesn't show off Shirley at the top of his form.



To begin with it affects a contemporary Southern Gothic wherein the prototypical young male hero Perry accompanies his psychotherapist aunt visiting a small town household menaced by a psychotic daughter. As Perry strikes up the inevitable friendship with a beautiful local girl, the initially unseen daughter creates a fine sense of menace. This effective opening soon dissipates however. Shirley's determination to avoid clichés is part of the problem, with standard Southern characters such as the fat sheriff being turned on their head – the sheriff is an ardent advocate of Indian civil rights for example. This dispelling of stereotypical villains destroys the Gothic atmosphere, with Shirley instead turning to cop-psychology to underpin increasingly violent actions with some kind of SF justification.

Unfortunately the science never gets off the ground. The basic theory of mankind possessing a gene for suppressing empathy in a tight spot isn't too bad, but this isn't gory enough. Instead it's elaborated with the gene somehow fostering a Gray Pilot, a baby-faced insect which takes over under the flesh. Once the host dies it leaves via the eyesocket – a dramatic enough concept for splattering blood around, but

inherently unbelievable. If this syndrome really does occur throughout the world the dramatic terminal phase would surely have become known! This pseudo-science lingers on for most of the middle of the book before finally Shirley throws in the towel and we're back with Satan, Beelzebub and the rest of the mob.

Shirley's awkwardness with the horror genre is illustrated in other ways, for example the inevitable tussle with the hoary plot problem of 'if things are so bad why don't we just run?' Shirley answers the problem by simply striking Perry dumb on the subject until it's too late; 'His mouth magically unglued when he talked about anything but the Gray Pilots'. Nevertheless Shirley provides a fair amount of gore, with 'corkscrews of flesh' and the familiar device of having new characters wander on to be murdered – showing how the plague is spreading (and allowing all sorts of dramatic murders, including some murderous sex which is either a joke or just sick). It's all a bit clinical though, and the climactic horror scene is a montage of shocking images which seems more of a sketch than anything else. Indeed with an Indian chief called Sunwalker and a feline reprise of the 'Gremlin-in-the-microwave' one suspects Shirley's tongue is firmly in his cheek toward the end.

Writers have to earn a living of course, and *Darkness* can't be dismissed as pure hackwork. Unlike many working in the horror genre Shirley's determination to resist clichés and his struggling (however unsuccessful) with such interesting issues as empathy suppression indicate he didn't set out to exploit his readership. A blood-drenched tale hinting at genuine psychological disturbances through symbolic monsters was probably the intention. Sadly this brave ambition only makes the failure that much more awkward. Some people might find the gore, humour and interesting ideas worth a look though, even if as a novel it finally fails to gel.

Stuart Wynne



KING ARTHUR AND HIS KNIGHTS

Deirdre Headon (illustrations Julek Heller)
Publisher Dragon's World
Format HB, £18.95



The stories of King Arthur are at once familiar and remote. Although much mined by modern fantasy writers, the richness and depth of the original tales tend to be relatively unknown. John Boorman's *Excalibur* apart, most contemporary retellings of the legends are simplifications and glosses which owe more to Disney's *Sword In The Stone* than to Celtic and pre-Celtic myth.

What Heller and Headon have managed in *King Arthur And His Knights* is to utilize a number of sources (traditional cycles, Malory's *Mort D'Arthur*, de Troyes' *Arturian Romances*, von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*, Tennyson's *Idylls Of The Kings*) to create a comprehensive single volume which narrates the stories in an accessible but authentic voice which maps out the necessary context. The character of Merlin, for instance, incorporates all manner of elements of the Druidic shamanism which he embodies.

Julek Heller's artwork is evocative,

and subtly done. Eschewing airbrush and fantasy/myth clichés, he uses line drawings, sketches and paintings (50 colour, 80 line drawings) which echo the



ancient magic of the saga. The illustrations combined with the unobtrusive style of Deirdre Headon's text, give an end result which is quietly powerful and a required source book for anyone interested in understanding this famous part of English culture. If you found yourself terminally puzzled by *Excalibur* buy this book and fill in the details.

Andy Oldfield

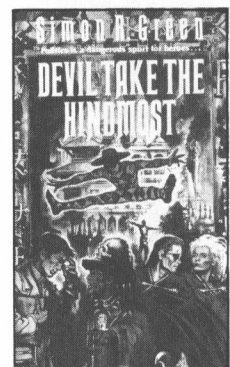


DEVIL TAKE THE HINDMOST

Simon R Green
Publisher Headline Feature
Format PB, £3.50



Hawk and Fisher are captains of the guard in the entertainingly corrupt city of Haven. This is the second instalment of their adventures, the first, being the fetchingly titled *No Haven For The Guilty*.




This time round election fever is sweeping the grimy, bloodstained streets of Haven, and Hawk and Fisher have been given the unenviable task of being bodyguards to the Reform candidate James Adamant. And boy, does he need some protection. Bloodthirsty mercenaries and maniacal sorcerers employing their skills at the behest of utterly evil Conservative politicians are powerfully grim opponents – especially when they start playing dirty and ignoring what few rules seem to exist to govern election behaviour.

Throw in a selection of assorted demons, a dead but still active magician who's going insane, a gorgeous legendary mercenary with a weakness for setting things on fire, a couple of devoted wives, bent officials, cocaine, and some truly appalling puns and one-liners and you've got all the necessary ingredients for an entertaining couple of hours of good, solid fun. And that's what *Devil Takes The Hindmost* is – I'd

PRETERNATURAL PARABLES

STATE OF THE ART

Iain M Banks
 Publisher Orbit
 Format HB, £12.95

 Banks's first short story collection is a multi-genre marvel which shows that it is possible to write good SF and fantasy within a limited wordage. Not that the word 'short' bothers this author, the main feature in the book being a long 90-page novella called 'State Of The Art'.

That said, some of the shorts are little more than vignettes which highlight inadequacies in the human condition. Take the first story, 'Road Of Skulls', which professes to tell the story of a cart journey along a road made of bone. For the reader, the trip is made interminable by the folk who travel on the wagon and talk about nothing of consequence, but Banks turns the whole story around by telling us that the travellers will never reach their destination, despite their apparently world-wide view of their situation and cannot see that the mule who is pulling the cart is more intelligent than them. At first sight, this slow-moving parable is, in fact, going nowhere. But, those with the intelligence to see should be able to spot the message.

'A Gift From The Culture' is a more rounded story with no less of a message. Wrobik is given a special gun which is triggered by a genetic fingerprint, and told to shoot down a spaceship carrying some VIPs. At first he agrees — he has huge debts and values his life — but soon he has second thoughts and tries to escape. The finale sees him accepting his fate, destroying the ship, and learning that you cannot avoid some situations — particularly those of your own making.

'Odd Attachments' is probably the weirdest of the stories, proving that even plants can have love lives, while 'Descendant' questions the nature of intelligence, sanity and madness. 'Cleaning Up' uses sledgehammer humour to show that one per-

son's rubbish can prove to be another's gold, especially when it is composed of alien artefacts.

The next story, 'Piece', is chillingly contemporary. A father writes to his son about life, the universe and everything, but the form of the missive, revealed at the end of the story will have you quivering like flesh-coloured silicone.

'State Of The Art' is an over-long piece which reintroduces many of the characters and concepts from Banks's Culture novels — *The Player Of Games* and *Use Of Weapons*. Largely about one man's desire to leave his roots in the Culture for new vistas, it argues that no matter how much he wants to leave his old life and home behind he will always take his Culture with him. Transpose that to contemporary racial groups and you have a wonderful parable for our age.

And finally, 'Scratch' is an almost indecipherable throwback to RD Laing's *The Politics Of Experience/Bird Of Paradise* — a pretentious bunch of cut-up posy existential smegma. Nuff said . . .

Although he has ostensibly created a collection of SF and fantasy fiction, Iain Banks has cast himself in the role of Aesop the Contemporary, with fantastic tales that have real meaning to ordinary people. My only reservation is that he has cast these fictions with too high an intellect and hidden their meanings too well, but then, Banks is Banks, a individualist who knows his audience better than anyone.

John Gilbert



man of many styles usually gives it.

John Gilbert



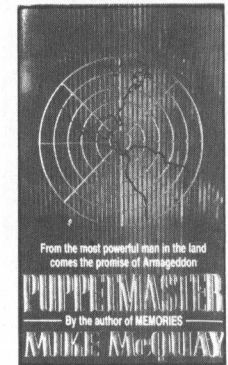
PUPPETMASTER

Mike McQuay
 Publisher Headline Feature
 Format PB, £4.99



As the cover takes pains to point out, Mike McQuay is the author of *Memories* — one of the most impressive time travelling stories around. Despite starting off in the manner of umpteen routine thrillers, plot and characterization gained unstoppable momentum to provide an entertaining, and thought provoking experience.

The Nexus was McQuay's next novel, not quite as good but still a top-notch treatment of a psychic in modern times and far superior to *Black Rainbow* — the recent movie which covered similar ground. Unfortunately for his third novel McQuay has jettisoned the science fiction for Washington DC politics.



As the capital of the world's sole superpower DC should be the perfect setting for a thriller, yet I personally can't think of many. In part, this must be due to its complexity, both institutional and political. Setting the scene for a plot takes a lot of effort, yet any realistic plot must fear being overshadowed by the extraordinary reality of Iran-Contra, Watergate et al. It's a huge subject to tackle and sadly McQuay never really comes to grips with it.

The basic plot of *Puppetmaster* concerns the intensive lobbying of an organization serving arms manufacturers. The apparent end of the Cold War and a massive financial deficit has led to inevitable pressure to cut arms spending. So far, so true. Moreover one half of the *Puppetmaster's* effort to preserve high arms spending is the sparking of a war with a third world nation. Caribbea is a thinly disguised Nicaragua, but there are obvious echoes of the impact of Iraq on the 'peace dividend'. However neither this, nor the sexual entrapment which forms the second half of the plan, is convincingly handled. A couple of nuclear bombs let off to provoke an all-out war is simply too 007 — where's Spectre? — and the scene where the opposing armies link-up to find them is cringe-inducing.

Similarly a bevy of the 'most beautiful women in the world' remain stubbornly two-dimensional. Of course sexual entrapment does occur in DC, but banging half the chiefs of staff in their offices lacks conviction. Moreover McQuay is too coy to deal with the sexual aspects other than glancingly, he's not interested in the gritty emotional details needed for credibility. But the worst aspect is possibly Colonel

recommend it to anyone whose palate's been jaded by stuff that's too serious by half.

Andy Oldfield



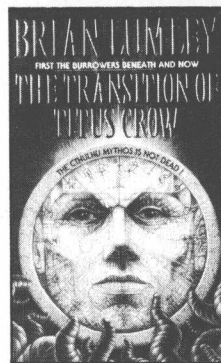
THE TRANSITION OF TITUS CROW

Brian Lumley
 Publisher Grafton
 Format PB, £3.50



Those of your who have read *The Burrowers Beneath* will be familiar with Titus Crow, Brian Lumley's psychic detective who is often at odds with the monstrous creatures of HP Lovecraft's Cthulhu cycle.

Ten years ago Crow and his side-kick Henri de Marigny survived the onslaught of the evil Burrowers and escaped the ravages of Ithaqua the Wind-Walker by entering a grandfather clock-shaped time machine. De Marigny fell from the



machine and coincidentally back to the present where he tells his story to Professor Winsgate Peaslee, head of the Wilmarth Foundation for psychical research and defence against the minions of Cthulhu.

The book continues apace with a similar diaristic form as Crow returns from his time and space travels with some incredible stories. He has seen the beginning and end of time, visited

alien planets on which a robotic intelligence recreated his shattered body after a fatal accident, and confronts the monstrous Yog-Sothoth within its huge inter-dimensional prison. There are, however, compensations — his dalliance with the beautiful Tiana of Elysia for one — and, now that he's back on terra firma he wants to return to his inter-dimensional travels, this time taking de Marigny with him.

Told in the first person first by de Marigny and then by Crow, *The Transition Of Titus Crow* is a wonderful Cthulhu pastiche of which the masters Lovecraft and Derleth would have been proud. Energetic and imaginative Lumley's latest — which was, incidentally written some time ago — confronts the mysteries of Cthulhu face on, in a way that Lovecraft would, perhaps, never have attempted. Lovecraft was, after all, renowned for rarely describing his horrors whereas Lumley describes the creatures first mentioned in Lovecraft's texts as if he himself has stared them out, eye to eye. And yet it doesn't matter. Perhaps in this day and age we expect more, and this

Merchant, a retired intelligence chief who's called on to single-handedly save the world. In such a murky world of sexual and political double-dealing Merchant is unbelievably clean cut, and when he gets pulled into some action man stunts it all gets a bit much. Merchant's vulnerable wife, bitterly resentful of his lack of emotional or sexual contact with her, is a good detail but it's Merchant who needs flaws. Surely after all his time in the government he's done some questionable things?

Stuart Wynne



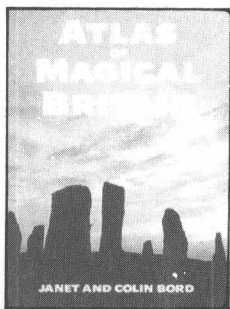
ATLAS OF MAGICAL BRITAIN

Janet and Colin Bord
 Publisher Sidgwick & Jackson
 Format HB, £16.95

As unemployment soars, investment in industry plummets and interest rates remain intolerably high, it's reassuring to be reminded that Britain has a magical past. Janet and Colin Bord manage that task admirably with this book which is superbly illustrated with evocative, high quality photographs.

The country is split into regions, and within each region notable sites of legend and folkloric interest are highlighted. A brief rundown on each site's magical associations — whether they be to do with fabled treasure, buried kingdoms, witchcraft, monsters or whatever — is given, plus details of how to reach the place by path or road. Inset in each region's entry is a calendar of events celebrated locally.

The whole book is comprehensively gazetteered and includes a glossary of



terms which may or may not be unfamiliar. There are over 600 sites listed and more than 100 illustrations.

The details given for each site are enough to whet anyone's appetite and serve as a starting point for further investigation. It's fascinating to read about the places you may have lived in or visited as well as those you'd like to go and see. *Atlas Of Magical Britain* is a must for the reference section of your bookshelves — and it's reasonably priced as well.

Andy Oldfield



THE BLACK FEDORA

Guy N Smith
 Publisher Sphere
 Format PB, £3.99

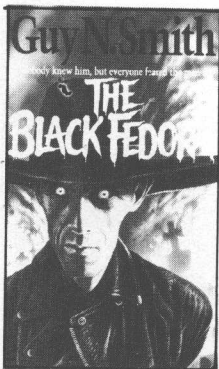


For his return to the field of horror fiction, the prolific Guy N Smith chose Lichfield, Staffordshire, upon which to wreak havoc. This place is important for two reasons of which Smith fans — and Charlie Grant — should be aware. One, it lies only a little way from Guy's home

in Shropshire, and two, The Black Fedora won second prize in the Lichfield literary Competition.

So, it must be good. Well, I'll have to qualify that superlative statement, but, for style, characterization, and action, it is one of his best novels. The storyline is, indeed, convoluted. Lichfield, a cathedral city, is about to celebrate its history with the recreation of a historic Cromwellian battle. At the same time, a peace convoy is on the way and planning to wreck the event in a most spectacular way, and the Bishop has received a missive proclaiming that the Antichrist is about to come calling.

In the midst of all this intrigue appears the man in the black fedora, a mysterious figure whose motives are not known until the end of the novel. Unfortunately, while he is an interesting plot device during most of the book his unmasking at the end is a brutal



disappointment, as is the way in which the disparate strands of the story come undone at the end. There is no doubt that fans of Guy N Smith will enjoy this long overdue new novel — I did — but I

feel that it has not broken him out of the genre area which has seen some of his greatest successes — *Crabs*, *The Sucking Pit*, and the *Sabat* series. His style is certainly changing, with books such as *Fiend*, *Mania* and *The Camp* looking inward at character rather than outward at physical peril, but he has not shifted far enough to rank, in terms of sales, with the likes of Herbert, King and Barker. And it's such a shame. He is obviously a very talented writer

John Gilbert



THE POWER

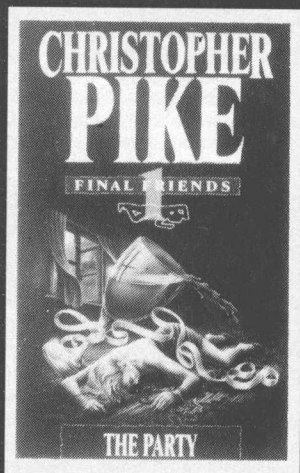
James Mills
 Publisher Headline
 Format HB, £14.95



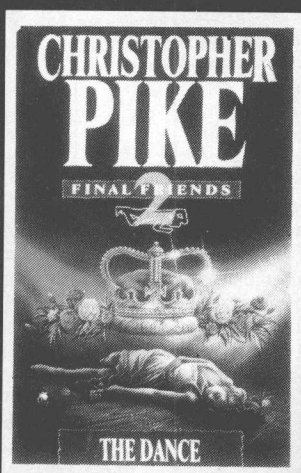
Mills mixes hi-tech weaponry with paranormal mind power in an uncomfortable and quite unforgettable cold war novel that should have the world's leaders trembling in their power houses.

According to the author's carefully researched storyline, each side in the cold war has been developing psychic weapons, but the Russians have been able to unleash occult forces which can control the launch of nuclear warheads, damage the health of politicians and subjugate the minds of an entire country. Worried by this state of affairs — and probably mindful of the disgrace done to America when the Russians launched the first man into space — the US government launches an investigation, headed by Washington scientist Jack Hammond.

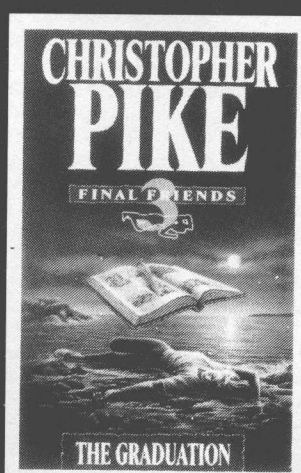
Events take an intriguing turn when Hammond's Russian opposite number, Darya Timoshek, appears to want to



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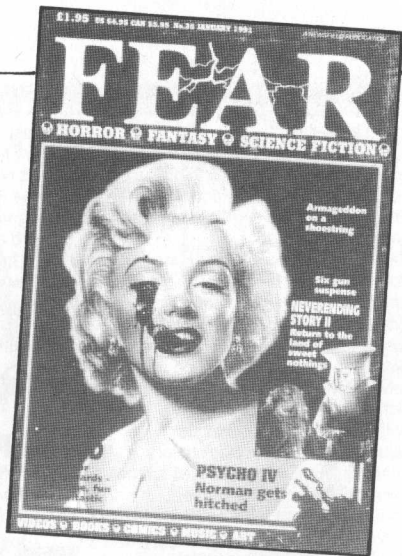
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defect and offers to tell the Americans about the psychic weapons system called Operation Spectrum in return for asylum. Jack is naturally suspicious, but Darya has her own powers of seduction and he is lulled into believing her authenticity. She soon becomes involved in the American research problem, gains access to many important pieces of classified information and then, mole that she is, flees back to Russia and her and Communist bosses. Jack follows her discovers the sickening and dangerous occult experiments.

As fiction, James Mills' latest novel is a brilliant techno-adventure, atmospheric political thriller, and unnerving horror story. I draw back from describing it as science fiction because the publishers claim that Mills, as a journalist, has uncovered evidence that the superpowers are playing with supernatural powers. Whatever the truth, the author of such classic thrillers as *The Underground Empire* and *Panic In Needle Park*, has scored once again.
John Gilbert

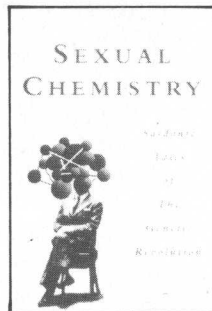


SEXUAL CHEMISTRY: SARDONIC TALES OF THE GENETIC REVOLUTION

Brian Stableford
 Publisher **Simon and Schuster**
 Format **HB, £13.99**



Besides biological, environmental and evolutionary implications, genetic engineering also promises revolutions in political thought and societal forms, so who better to write about it than someone with degrees in biology and sociology – someone like Brian Stableford, in fact.



Sexual Chemistry is a collection of stories, all displaying the Stableford wit (he claims that they're sarcastic because human experience is fundamentally ironic), which address the big question: by taking our evolution in our own hands and drastically altering our own nature and that of the planet's other life forms, will we end up with a new Golden Age or apocalyptic catastrophe?

Stableford is ultimately optimistic, but also at pains to point out that his stories can't show us the future in which we will consign our children, but they can interrogate us as to what our expectations of that future are and in so doing challenge the logic of our answer.

Six of these stories have previously appeared in *Interzone* ('And He Not Busy Being Born', 'Sexual Chemistry', 'The Magic Bullet', 'The Growth Of The House Of Usher', 'The Invertebrate Man' and 'The Fury That Hell Withheld') and each of those won acclaim when they were first printed – quite right too. They

are intelligent and challenging stories which should appeal to a wider audience than only science fiction fans.
Andy Oldfield



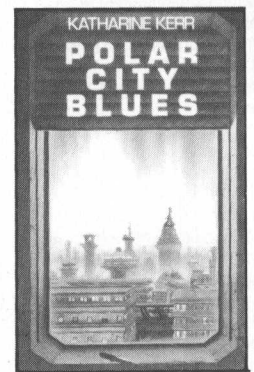
POLAR CITY BLUES

Katherine Kerr
 Publisher **Grafton**
 Format **HB, £13.99 PB £7.99**



The title is suggestive of the opening chapter of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* — Chiba City Blues — and the hype duly promises a blend of cyberpunk and noir thriller. Unfortunately rather than some brooding, cutting-edge departure we get a weary tale which threatens to choke the reader on the dust of 50s SF.

Apparently an acclaimed fantasy writer Katherine Kerr gets off to a bad start in SF with an author's note which explains the dialect is based on



Californian English as that's where most of the planet's inhabitants come from. Fair enough. However since this future dialect would be incomprehensible to contemporary readers it's very much watered down for publication; in fact, it's a little thinner than the actual speech you can hear in Los Angeles . . . today.

It's an ominous start when the author takes such a pointless detour, but the whole novel is like that. Far from being an information packed near-future dystopia of standard cyberpunk fashion, *Polar* is set in a distant future where remote solar systems have been colonized and aliens are living quite happily with humans. It's sort of like the canteen scene in *Star Wars*, it's sort of like fantasy.

The plot uses that sadly familiar device of a serial killer bumping people off one by one at points convenient to keeping up narrative tension.

Unfortunately the first murder victim is a member of a delegation from one of the two superpower alien races which dominate known space. Possibly a spy, his death places the human investigators in a tight spot. Call in Mulligan, a world weary victim in classical noir fashion who suffers from the common prejudice inflicted upon psychics. As Mulligan investigates the murders, the murderer begins to investigate him. Of course.

Polar uses a future setting and props, but like numerous SF movies has little interest in the rigours of establishing a truly different culture. It's modern day California tweaked. The lack of invention is quite startling and the whole story groans under the weight of archaic SF machinations. Fans of Kerr's fantasy work could well love this, but for myself I found it difficult to believe this had really been published in 1991.

Stuart Wynne




IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

CINEMA



THE GODFATHER PART III

Starring Al Pacino, Andy Garcia, Diane Keaton, Talia Shire
Director Francis Ford Coppola
Distributor UIP
Cert 18

 Of course, it's terrific. Did we really expect anything less? No, the surprise is Garcia. So good in *Internal Affairs*, but his performance here, as Vincent Mancini, bastard son of Sonny Corleone, nephew of Michael, is a revelation indeed. Opposite Pacino, he's incandescent; a volatile concoction of wild bravado, youthful swagger and inherent violence. Together, they're as lethal as they come.

It's 1979 and Michael Corleone (Pacino, superb as ever) is a respectable businessman, honoured by the Catholic Church, contending to make legitimate his Family's investments. No longer relying on the casinos and gambling dens of yesteryear, business interests are catered for by property, bonds and Wall Street. But for The Family he has sacrificed *his* family. Now sixtysomething, his diabetes reaching debilitating proportions, his ex-wife Kay (Keaton) married to a judge, his son and daughter alienated, reconciliation, rehabilitation and spiritual redemption are Michael's utmost concerns.

Against this fundamentally personal backdrop Mario Puzo and Coppola weave an at times confusing web of deceit, death and intrigue utilizing the sinister circumstances that surrounded the death of Pope John Paul I, as Michael finds his take over of a European conglomerate foiled by a Vatican

conspiracy. Forced by a bloody coup to re-enter the arena, he seeks a successor — his own son having eschewed Family life for a career as an opera singer — finding him in Vincent who has a liking for his daughter, Mary.

Visually and thematically, this oozes a richness that is astonishing: Coppola's sense of scope, his use of photography, music and editing are as audacious as ever. The film is charged with delicious incidents — Michael's confession to an archbishop ('It's been 30 years, I'd use up too much of your time. I'm beyond redemption') and Vincent's clinical disposal of his would-be assassins are just two of a multitude — but its core is the growth of Garcia from hoodlum to heir apparent, groomed by surrogate (god)father Pacino in the ways of business — 'Don't ever let anyone know what you are thinking.'

There are problems: the nepotistic adoption of Coppola's own daughter Sofia in the pivotal role as Mary (as replacement for Winona Ryder) is adequate, no more — her coupling with Garcia an embarrassment, devoid of any of any chemistry, sexual or otherwise; while Hamilton, filling in for Robert Duvall, is negligible. But these deficiencies aside, the climatic half-hour set in a Sicilian opera house is a dazzling *tour de force* that is as riveting as it is breathtaking.

With Garcia claiming the Don's mantle at the film's end, the path is clear for part four. Whether Coppola chooses to make it is another story (especially given the film's failing at the US box office). See this at your earliest convenience. Unmissable.

Mark Salisbury



FILM AND VIDEO



HORROR

Bad Taste
The Exorcist III
Fly II
Halloween 5
Howling II
Mirror Mirror
The Rocky Horror Picture Show
Schizo



SCIENCE FICTION

Blake's 7
V



THRILLER

Exterminator 2
Fear
The Godfather Part III
War Party

FEAR

Starring Ally Sheedy, Lauren Hutton, Michael O'Keefe
Director Rockne S O'Bannon
Distributor Vestron
Cert 18






The success or failure of this film depends upon an interesting but not original idea (it was used to some extent in Dean Koontz's *The Vision*), rather than cinematic largess. Ally Sheedy stars as Cayce Bridges, a young psychometrist who can see through the eyes of murderers by holding something that they have touched or owned. Cayce writes about the cases she has solved in the form of novels and, as a result, has become very famous.

She begins to regret her good fortune as one vicious psychopath goads her into a game of hide and seek. He kills for the sheer pleasure of it, and writes 'Fear Me' in his victims' blood at the kill sites. Cayce begins to fear that he might also be psychic and is feeding off the fear generated by his victims. He also wants her to feel that terror, to know that she appreciates his work before he kills her.

The idea is strong and has been expanded into a reasonably effective script with some effective tensions, black humour, and a reasonable, though not brilliant denouement. But, the film fails because O'Bannon's direction is not strong enough. He is on the first rung of the directoral ladder, and this script needs a Hitchcock or De Palma at the wheel.

O'Bannon obviously wanted to make this script but writer/directors are rare because, in a normal film environment, one feeds off the other and the script is changed into a thing worthy of the screen. This process was stifled in *Fear* because O'Bannon could not see the errors in his writing ways. No doubt his abilities as a director will grow but it is a shame that such a script should be sacrificed in the name of ambition.

John Gilbert

   **half**

FEAR April 1991 67



**BUY
VIDEO**

HOWLING II

Starring Christopher Lee, Annie McEnroe, Reb Brown, Marsha A Hunt, Sybil Danning
Director Phillip Mora
Distributor The Video Collection
Cert 18, 86 mins, £9.99



The supposedly sultry Sybil Danning spends most of the time licking her furry body in this appalling sequel to the Joe Dante/Gary Brandner werewolf movie (see our Brandner interview in this issue).

Karen White, the investigative reporter from the first movie appears to be dead but occult investigator Stefan (Lee) tells her brother Ben (Brown) and her fellow reporter Jenny (McEnroe), that Karen is a werewolf and could rise from her coffin if he doesn't stick a titanium dagger through her heart. Initially, Ben does not believe Stefan and goes to stop him spiking sis. Coincidentally, the werewolves are gathering to release their new initiate from her deathly bonds and Ben soon comes face to face with the furry fiends.

Back at Stefan's Gothic-garbed pad, the occult investigator tells Ben and Jenny that the werewolves, led by the evil wolf-sorceress Stirba, are about to rise up and enslave humanity. They travel to the centre of wolfdom, a small town in Transylvania, where, after much bloodletting, Stirba goes up in flames in the arms of her brother who is, you've guessed it, none other than Stefan.

The thin storyline and ludicrously cheap special effects make this sequel a pathetic attempt at exploitation. The end credits sequence sums up Phillip Mora's real reason for employing Sybil Danning — one piece of film of her ripping off a cloak and exposing her boobs is cut together with other sequences from the film and used at least 20 times to tie in with the beat of the music. Buy this utter pap at your peril.

John Gilbert



BAD TASTE

Starring Pete O'Herne, Peter Jackson, Mike Minnett, Terry Potter, Doug Wren
Director Peter Jackson
Distributor Simitar
Cert 18, 86 mins, £9.99



Another pile of sheep droppings — this time from New Zealand — but they're of the highest quality, the sort of stuff you could use as manure, and one that I last year described as 'The most talked about film in a long while'. I must have been under the influence.

The storyline is shrink-wrapped for easy disposal, but the antics of the Alien Investigation and Defence Service make up for any deficiencies in that department. AIDS goes into action when the evil Lord Crumm, intergalactic baddie, purveyor of fast food in human form, and connoisseur of puke has landed on earth to gather human ingredients for his repulsive recipes. The guys from AIDS don't like this idea at all and go about the task of trashing the mutants from outer space in a variety of



TROUBLE ON THE RESERVATION

WAR PARTY

Starring Kevin Dillon, Billy Wirth, M Emmet Walsh
Director Franc Roddam
Distributor Hemdale
Cert 18



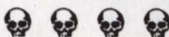
Kevin Costner's brilliant American frontier picture *Dances With Wolves* has probably stolen some of *War Party's* thunder but, none the less, this low budget, is a stimulating, movie.

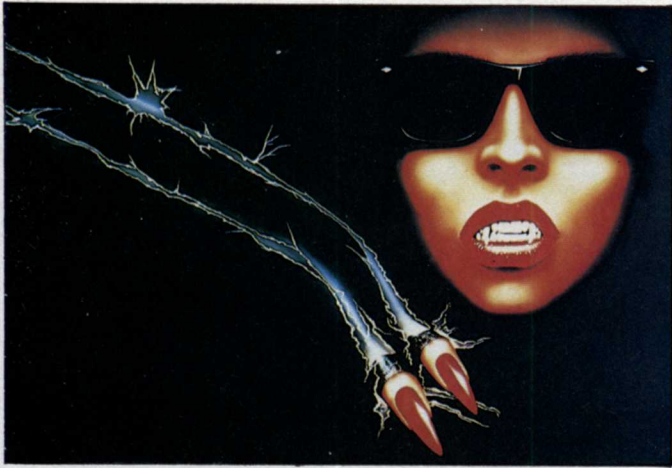
Binger is a small American town, important only because of the Indian massacre that happened almost a century ago. The white folk control the town government, but the Indians have a council which oversees their reservation. They mediate between the different groups in society, and not always successfully. However, they all agree that Binger needs a financial boost and decide to stage a reconstruction of the fight between the cavalry and Indians, with fake bullets and rubber tomahawks.

The Indian young folk, including Sonny (Wirth), Skitty (Dillon), Warren (Sampson), and Lewis (Montoya) are roped into these rather ghoulish festivities, and for a time it seems as if the big battle might do some good. But one of Sonny's friends is involved in a brawl with a good ol' boy who decides to get his own back with real bullets during the mock fight. Sonny retorts with a tomahawk stolen from the local museum and then goes on the run with his friends. Some hot-headed whites go after the boys, intent on killing them as brutally as possible.

Every step of the way, the boys are blamed for the escalating violence and white vigilantes are seen as heroes. The finale is both shocking and upsetting as the remaining Indian boys decide to follow the medicine man's code of honour rather than surrender to injustice. This is the sort of film that truly makes you ashamed to be white and one that should be seen by as wide an audience as possible.

John Gilbert





■ Stylized werewolf from the cover art of *Howling II*

disgusting ways.

Horror fans who are not fans of the outrageous, the camp, the downright camp and utterly futile will not enjoy this piece of borderline entertainment, but, if you're willing to enter into the spirit of things and describe it as good unwholesome entertainment, then you'll be in the right mindset to pick this up and slot it into your VCR. Be careful, though. Television signals end up in space, and you never know who, or what, else will be watching.

John Gilbert

half

BLAKE'S 7: CASSETTES 3&4

Starring: Gareth Thomas, Sally Knyvette, Paul Darrow, Michael Keating, David Jackson, Jan Chappell

Directors Michael E Briant, Vere Lorrimer, Pennant Roberts, Douglas Camfield

Distributor BBC

Cert PG, £9.99, 102/103 mins



One of the best things about the video age is that nostalgia now comes neatly packaged in easy to handle 20x12cm boxes. The

downside is that when you come to watch something that you've not seen for a decade or so the collision between reality and memory can put you off nostalgia for good.

On the surface, that's what should happen with these latest *Blake's 7* videos - the special effects are dated (but then again they were when they were originally screened), the dialogue is as close to sparkling as the Earth is to Betelgeuse, and the acting is firmly in the style of the Woodentop School. But the overall effect is pleasing, and had me rushing to dig out my space suit with the tasteful flares and anti-gravity platform boots. Predating the superficial sophistication of the *Star Wars* age of visual fireworks and glossily glib FX, the crew of the *Liberator* are also mercifully untouched by the corresponding character bland-out which characterizes contemporary SF spectacles. The thing that *Blake's 7* always had going for it, was that the central characters were warm, affable and humanly engaging - they still are.

On each of these cassettes you get two complete episodes from the programme's first TV series. 'The Web', on cassette three, is a classic of genetically-engineered dudes in shiny suits with dialogue problems battling with genetically-engineered squeaky-voiced monsters in ill-fitting latex suits which look as though they're suffering terminal fungal infection. And in the

background lurks a foetal alien in a jam jar who has trapped the *Liberator* in order to extort some power crystals to enable it to wipe out the monsters it has created. Blake, being a sentimental sort of hero, gets dewy-eyed about the little monsters: can he rescue his ship and crew without being party to genocide?

'Seek-Locate-Destroy', also on cassette three, is a more prosaic, down to earth (or down to some planet which looks extremely Earth-like) story. Blake and Co. transport themselves down to a Federation communications centre to steal a gizmo that will enable them to intercept and decode all of the Federation's broadcasts. But Cally is injured and taken prisoner by the renegade Space Commander Travis who promptly uses her as live bait to trap the ever-loyal Blake.

'Mission To Destiny' kicks off on cassette four. A circling space ship is investigated by the stalwarts from the *Liberator*. Knock-out gas is circulating in the mystery ship's ventilation system, the pilot is dead, and when the crew are revived other murders start to happen. Avon and Cally take the lead, and piece together the clues in an episode from a cosmic Cluedo game.

Cassette four finishes with the strongest story and a haunting atmosphere, 'Duel'. Travis has outsmarted Blake and is poised to destroy the *Liberator* and her crew. In desperation, Blake sets *Liberator* on a collision course with Travis. But the planet they're orbiting has a strange past. It's a planet of ghosts, victims of a millennium of war, and two weird spectral ladies The Keeper and The Guardian intervene in the battle. In the seconds before the spaceships collide, time is frozen while Blake, Jenna, Travis and a mutoid Commander are whisked away to the planet's surface to settle their differences in a way that doesn't involve the lives of the crews. Will Travis learn about the sanctity of life, honour and friendship, or will he and Blake settle for trying to batter each other to messy deaths in a primitive forest?

Never less than watchable, this cult blast from the past is probably a better bet for a few hours TV diversion than

■ It's all done in the best possible taste

most of the dross that is scheduled for our screens. Why not become a vicarious inter-galactic freedom fighter and join the *Liberator's* crew for an hour or four?

Andy Oldfield



BLAKE'S 7: CASSETTE 5

Starring Gareth Thomas, Sally Knyvette, Paul Darrow, Michael Keating, David Jackson, Jan Chappell, Stephen Greif, Jacqueline Pearce

Director Michael E Briant
Cert PG, 105 mins, £9.99



Space the final frontier, these are the voyages of the starship *Liberator*, it's mission to wander aimlessly around and throw the crew into dangerous situations. Yes here are two more episodes of the cult 1970s TV show 'Project Avalon' and 'Breakdown'.

In 'Project Avalon' the crew of the *Liberator* arrive at a cold and forbidding planet to pick up a woman called Avalon who is the local resistance leader. Blake and Jenna teleport planetside but little do they realize that the evil Travis has set a trap for them. Federation scientists have developed a virus that kills all life in seconds but leaves buildings etc. unharmed, and Travis wants to use it to capture the *Liberator*. Blake rescues Avalon from the local Federation base, but he realizes the escape was made too easy.

In 'Breakdown' an implant in Gan's brain that is supposed to limit aggressive behaviour malfunctions and he systematically tries to kill everyone else. Immediate neuro-surgery is needed, but the nearest doctor is on XK 72, a neutral Space Research Station. Will they help a wanted criminal? Personally I couldn't care less whether they do or not. I really liked *Blake's 7* when it was first shown, though Blake was a pain in the arse and I was rather pleased when he was killed off. What made it so good was the typical BBC cheapo special effects, every expense was spared and most of the props looked as if they were rejects from Blue Peter squeeze bottle and sticky backed-plastic experiments. What turned me against these particular episodes were the weak scripts, most of the time you are laughing at the props too much to notice the plots, but here they are glaringly bad. Which is a shame because the rest of the series is excellent.

Mark Caswell



EXTERMINATOR 2

Starring Robert Ginty, Deborah Geffner, Frankie Faison, Mario Van Peebles

Director Mark Buntzman
Distributor The Video Collection
Cert 18, 84 mins, £9.99



Joe Eastland is back, but who gives a shit. If you were unlucky enough to see the

original piece of exploitative crud, you'll know that this guy dresses up in a welder's mask and goes around torching the bad guys who this time include X: a muscular, athletic, black gang leader who has two aims in life - to score a big drugs deal, though he doesn't know the difference between coke and heroin,



and to kill the exterminator who has been interfering with his members in a very fiery way.

The movie crams just about every sleaze into its short tawdry life-cycle: drugs, the suggestion of rape, erotic dancing, sex, and plenty of violence. But, for authenticity, even Cagney and Lacey score extra points. At one point during the movie X shouts 'where are my drugs'? I mean, does this guy know what he's buying? The last time I heard an American gang leader use the word 'drugs' or 'police' was during a school play in the late 60s. It's perfect for sleazos who have no taste for atmosphere, but respectable FEAR fans should leave it on the shelf at Woolworths.

John Gilbert

HALLOWEEN 5: THE REVENGE OF MICHAEL MYERS

Starring Donald Pleasence, Danielle Harris, Ellie Cornell, Beau Starr, Wendy Kaplan, Tamara Glynn
Director Dominique Othenin-Girard
Distributor Capital
Cert 18, 97 mins, £9.99



A female director treads the darkened streets of Haddonfield but that's the only unusual aspect of this latest chapter in the increasingly ludicrous saga of unshakable serial killer Michael Myers.

The finale of *Halloween 4: The Return Of Michael Myers*, which has a simultaneous sell-through launch this month, had the masked maniac falling into a mine shaft and, perhaps, dying of his wounds. Well, as 4 was a success, it isn't surprising that the writing team, which includes the lady director, found a method of escape and a means of recuperation. He falls into a river, drifts to and takes refuge in an old barn. A year later he kills the farmer and continues his seek and destroy mission for his niece, Jamie (Harris), who is staying in a clinic after running amok with a carving knife.

We discover why she committed her crime when Dr Loomis (Pleasence) finds a psychic link between Michael and Jamie. She receives impressions of his surroundings and, more distressingly, of his seemingly senseless crimes. First, he murders Jamie's half-sister Rachel (Cornell) and then attempts to kill her friend, Tina (Kaplan).

As the attacks gather momentum, Loomis tries to force Jamie into helping him track down Michael. But, she is in a state of chronic shock, and it is only when Tina is threatened by her uncle yet again that she runs away from the clinic with the idea of confronting him on her own.

The finale is a capably-handled suspense piece, set at the original Myer's homestead where Loomis and Jamie try to spring a trap on the mass murderer. It goes without saying that their plans do not work out and the body count rises yet again.

It is a pity that producer Moustapha Akkad continues to spit on the grave of John Carpenter's original masterpiece with far inferior sequels. A well directed ending does not make a movie, and this film is just too weak to hold even a fan's attention through the one hour and 37 minute running time. Donald Pleasence told me last year that he did not want to do another *Halloween*. Let's hope that the producers respect this talented and



■ Extermination's too good for these bad dudes

experienced actor's wishes.
 John Gilbert



V

Starring Marc Singer, Jane Badler, Robert Englund, Faye Grant, Richard Herd
Director Kenneth Johnson
Distributor Warner Home Video
Cert 15, 89 mins, £9.99



This is a collection of the first V series and it starts with a vast fleet of aliens arriving on Earth begging for help. They claim to come in peace from a planet orbiting Sirius that is in serious ecological trouble. They offer knowledge of their advanced technology in exchange for certain chemicals to help their dying planet. Humankind stupidly agrees and the visitors set up their technicians in chemical plants, meanwhile people are disappearing from their homes without trace. This comes to the attention of Mike Donovan, a TV cameraman who along with a group of resistance fighters discovers the truth. The visitors are in fact a race of ruthless lizard creatures who plan to turn our world into a desert by pinching all the water.

The disappearances are occurring for

■ V: water-stealing aliens on the loose

two reasons. The first is to brainwash people to become informers, the second is more sinister... the lizards need food. This sets the scene for a 'spectacular' (he says sarcastically) ending with the resistance fighters discovering a natural bacteria that kills the reptilian rascals.

I've always preferred the second series; despite the good special effects the acting here is on the whole pretty naff. My favourite character is Diana, the scheming lizard lady who is such a perfect bitch. Some of the situations are also too far fetched: Donovan and co being able to wander around various top security bases as if they owned them, for example. But the most laughable thing is the resistance fighters being able to kill the aliens with one shot, while their adversaries couldn't hit a proverbial barn door at point blank range. Youngsters may find this more entertaining than adults, but some of the scenes aren't really for toddlers.

Mark Caswell



FLY II

Starring Eric Stoltz, Daphne Zunice, Lee Richardson, Harley Cross
Director Chris Walas
Distributor CBS-Fox
Cert 18, 96 mins, £9.99



Lurid special effects and schmaltzy emotion replace the brilliant rites of passage man to monster drama created in the original

movie by director David Cronenberg with stars Jeff Goldblum and Geena Davis.

The opening, in which the now deceased Goldblum's girl-friend gives birth to a son, Martin, in spectacularly gory fashion is promising, if a little predictable, but soon we're moving away from the intriguing script possibilities of a child who grows at an accelerated pace and will in all likelihood turn into a monster, to a throwaway splatterfest romance.

Martin is manipulated by unscrupulous research corporation boss Bartok (Richardson) who wants to see if the boy will turn into a creature which can be used for military purpose or other financial gain. He tells his researchers to treat the son of fly as his own son rather than a laboratory animal, but he still has no reservations about allowing him to be stuck with needles, his mind experimented with, or even allowing Martin's only friend, a dog, to be used to test the telepods - the teleportation devices with which Jeff Goldblum had a fatal encounter in the Cronenberg movie.

As Martin grows he develops an interest in the telepods and women. One woman in particular, a Bartok employee called Beth (Zunice), takes his fancy and it is she who helps him to crack the puzzle of the Telepods, get through his metamorphosis into the fly creature and, at the end, defeat Bartok with poetic justice.

As a horror film, *Fly II* is a solid product, with good cast performances and strong direction - even the technological improbabilities and errors are allowable in the context of this story - but, the movie as a whole is disappointing. The storyline is not complex enough, the characters lack the emotional depth which Cronenberg gave his in *The Fly* and the ending - in which Martin changes Bartok into a mutant and then stows him away in the bowels of a corporate dungeon - is just unbelievable and totally out of character.

Fly II is an adequate example of the horror genre, but if you want to watch a movie that epitomizes what the genre should be about, go for *The Fly*. And, if you've already seen it, no problem: rewind the tape and go again!

John Gilbert





THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW

Starring **Tim Curry**, **Richard O'Brien**, **Susan Sarandon**, **Barry Bostwick**, **Little Nell**
 Director **Jim Sharman**
 Distributor **CBS Fox**
 Cert 15, 95mins, £12.99



It seemed like just another summer's night when Brad Majors (*asshole!*) and Janet Weiss (*Veiss!*) left their friends' wedding to meet Dr Everett Scott, the tutor and friend who first introduced the young lovers. A freak storm and a burst tyre lead them to take refuge in a forbidding mansion. Treated to a 'folk dancing'

display by Riff Raff (a handyman), Magenta (a domestic), Columbia (a groupie) and an equally bizarre collection of guests, Brad and Janet are soon greeted by their unlikely host, Dr Frank-N-Furter (*enchanted*).

Frank is an alien from the planet Transsexual, in the Transylvania galaxy, an eccentric scientist with a variable and voracious sexual appetite. His latest passion is his new creation, Rocky, a naive muscular man, 'with blond hair and a tan'. But Frank's beloved Rocky doesn't behave quite how his outspoken creator intended.

If you haven't heard of the comedy musical this movie is a translation of, where have you been for the past 20 years? Obviously not Transsexual. *The Rocky Horror Show* is a prime example of popular theatre, second only to the rash of pantomimes that arrive every December. To say Rocky Horror has a

■ Delectable **Tim Curry**

cult following is an insult to the production's appeal; it's more of an institution. Ninety per cent of the characters should be institutionalized – you'd be hard-pushed to find a wilder bunch of weirdos. The king, or rather, *queen* of them all is, of course, Frank-N-Furter, played with great energy, charisma and high camp by Tim Curry. The screen presence of the character is tremendous and he all but takes over the movie; it really is his adventure.

There are some brilliant songs, written, as was the play, by Richard O'Brien, who also puts in a commendable performance as Riff Raff. As well as 'The Time Warp', Rocky Horror's classic 'dance' number, there's the equally well-loved 'Sweet Transvestite' (Curry's *tour de force*) and a host of other memorable songs, most of them up-tempo rock(y) 'n' roll numbers.

Towards the end of the picture show, the songs are progressively ballad-like and thoughtful, and this is reflected in the story itself: it becomes sentimental rather than wild and outrageous. Happily, this doesn't stop *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* from being a fantastic movie, the same as the reduction of pace hasn't stopped the stage version from being a classic musical. Murder, sexual deviation, cannibalism, human experimentation and overtly sexual songs aren't the safest things to base a story around... But isn't it *nice!*

Warren Lapworth



RENTAL VIDEO

■ How would you like to try cleaning this mirror?

MIRROR MIRROR

Starring **Rainbow Harvest**, **Karen Black**, **Kristin Dattilo**, **Ricky Paul Goldin**
 Director **Marina Sargenti**
 Distributor **SGE Home Video**
 Cert 18, 100 mins



Moving house is supposed to be almost as traumatic as being bereaved. When Megan (Harvest) moves from LA she finds her new school pretty traumatic: her brand of Gothic punk chic causes much amusement among the kids. However, Megan is sort of adopted by Nikki (Dattilo) an earnest young American student who's running for school

president against the buxom and vitriolic Charleen Kane.

Adolescent angst, an unwanted move, and a fraught time at school conspire to screw up Megan's pretty young head. However, she finds solace in a mirror that appears to have been inadvertently left behind by the previous occupiers. The trouble is that this is not your ordinary bedroom mirror, it's the sort of mirror that comes with a not-so tame demon included, a mirror which bleeds occasionally and gives awful powers to unfortunates who come under its influence. It's also a mirror that doesn't take too kindly to having dogs cock their legs up against it (the film starts off with two lovable doggies, each in turn empties its bladder unwisely and doesn't live to tell the tale). It's a mirror

■ An ancient case of Schizo acne



which can grant wishes and bestow powers.

For Megan, the mirror seems an answer to her problems. Able to cause pain at a distance, stop hearts and play havoc with the plumbing, she feels in control of her life and destiny, she can bend others to her will and dispose of her enemies courtesy of the demonic looking glass. Oh, if only things were that easy. But as the body count runs higher, Megan begins to wonder whether she really does control the mirror, poor old Nikki just wonders what the hell's going on.

There are obvious borrowings from the likes of *Carrie*, but there's only so many ways of shooting girlies-in-the-shower shots and these echoes don't really detract from the film's overall effect. Aside from more than competent acting from the cast, what makes this film work is a hefty dose of adept direction and intelligent editing. The tension builds nicely throughout to a satisfyingly well-worked finale. In fact, the tension is a more effective adrenalin raiser than the special effects; which are in themselves about average. Deserving of special praise is Jimmy Lifton's heartbeat and scream inspired soundtrack, it's unobtrusively efficient.

Andy Oldfield



SCHIZO

Starring Lisa Aliff, Aron Eisenberg, Christopher McDonald, James Purcell

Director Manny Coto

Distributor Medusa Pictures

Cert 18, 84 mins



Chris Hayden (Eisenberg) thinks that he has got over the murder of his archaeologist father and the rest of his family, but years after he gets the opportunity to excavate the ancient monastery where he alone survived a night of blood and terror, and that's where all the trouble starts.

As the dig progresses, several of Hayden's team suffer grisly deaths after meeting with a pasty-faced young boy who wanders the tomb like a rogue spirit. Hayden begins to have hallucinations about the boy and eventually ends up regressing to his own childhood and 'playing' with his new friend: dragging team members into the grips of ancient torture devices which were once owned by a sadistic boy prince and, until now, have lain dormant below the monastery.

We soon learn that, surprise, surprise, the little boy is in fact the ancient prince – and boy is he ancient. Trapped within his tomb by supernatural by-laws, he has become lonely and wants to draw more victims to his fiendish devices. Hayden represents his only link with the outside world, his only way of getting more friends/victims. But, in the end, the evil prince is foiled as Hayden learns that death is sometimes better than friendship, even if it comes in the most gory fashion imaginable.

Taking nearly two years to reach the British video market, *Schizo* at first promises to be a shocking thriller with gore and action to boot, but eventually degenerates into a sequence of sadistic kills loosely bound together with a great deal of wandering-down-spooky-ill-lit-corridor sequences during which nothing happens. And finally, no wonder the incredibly evil prince is so lonely. He's so boring!

John Gilbert



■ George C Scott is driven blatty by demonic abuses of the law of gravity

SHEARS, SHOCKS AND SERMONS

THE EXORCIST III

Starring George C Scott, Ed Flanders, Brad Dourif, Jason Miller, Nicol Williamson, Nancy Fish

Director William Peter Blatty

Distributor CBS-Fox

Cert 18, 105 mins



Following the major disappointment of *Exorcist II: The Heretic*, Blatty has a lot of selling to do on this, the third outing in this controversial series.

Based on the book *Legion*, the best-selling sequel to *The Exorcist*, the film thankfully retains the meat of the story and in places adds even more of Blatty's humour and theological debate without destroying the tone or pace of the thriller element.

George C Scott is convincing as the irascible police Lt Kinderman who 15 years ago captured the Gemini killer. The killer's modus operandi was faked for the press so that any nutcases who admitted to the crime could be quickly cleared. But now, more bodies are turning up and they exhibit the correct markings of the Gemini. What's more, they have all been drugged before death in order that they can see the terrible things that are being done to them.

Blatty steers well clear of blood and gore, preferring to use suggestion to get his point across: there's no sight of the bodies let alone the gratuitous violence used by the Gemini during the killings. Instead, we are treated to the neatly

arranged jars of blood which have been drained from the body of a priest at the hospital, and the medical power-shears that can be used to cut off a human head during an autopsy and is well used by the killer.

Kinderman is further disturbed when he hears that an inmate at the local psychiatric hospital claims to be the psychopath who died all those years ago in the electric chair. A visit to Patient X has Kinderman even more confused. The man in the cell at first appears to be his old friend Father Damien Karras, who has apparently survived his fall down the stairs in the original movie. As Kinderman tries to question Karras, the priest's face changes and he takes on the visage of the Gemini Killer (played to perfection by Brad Dourif). The killer inhabits Karras courtesy of the demon that used to inhabit Regan MacNeil. Through a pact with this eternal deity he can continue his work by killing those responsible for the fiend's defeat in *Exorcist I*.

The confrontation at the end of this sequel is somewhat sudden when compared to the original movie, but the myriad of ideas and the relative strength of the script when weighed against other films of its ilk make it highly watchable. No more sequels please Mr Blatty, but this movie's a must for followers of *The Exorcist* myths.

John Gilbert



MACABRE MUSIC



BRAZILIAN METAL

John Gilbert, a keen Samba fan and devoted fan of Brazil nuts, clears up a few misconceptions with Brazilian band, Sepultura.

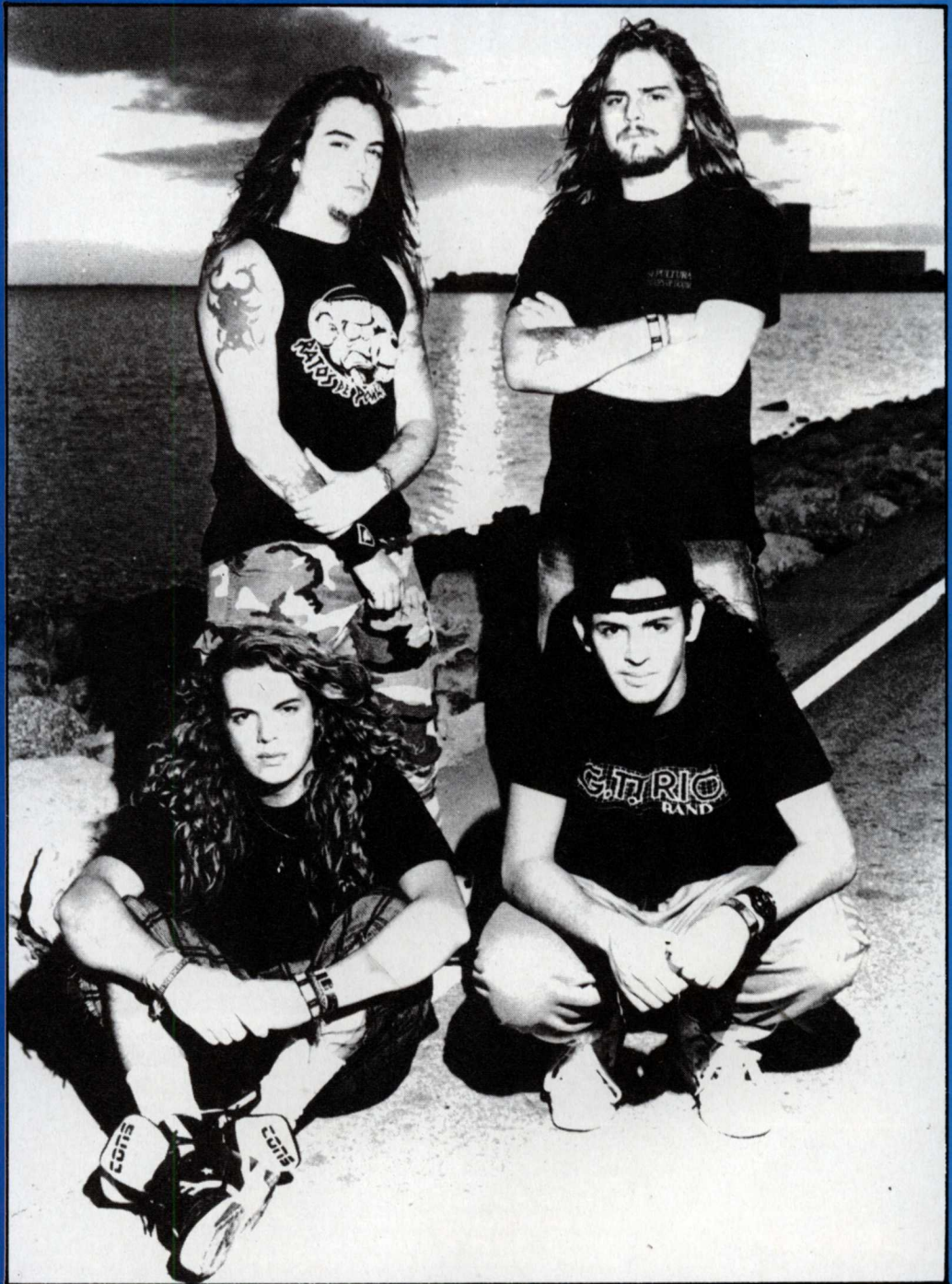
Speed metal from the jungles of Brazil? It sounds unlikely, but the lads from rapidly rising cult group Sepultura — Max Cavalera, Andreas Kisser, Paulo Jr, and Igor — have proved that the Western stereotypes surrounding that somewhat impoverished country are anything but true. As lead singer, Max, told me on a recent visit to London, their relatively smooth rise to the top was obviously just mean to be. 'We formed in Brazil but never thought we would make one album. But, after we put a couple of albums out, there started to be an underground buzz about the band. Nobody thought that such a thing would come out of the land of the Samba.'

Although Sepultura are firmly entrenched in the speed/thrash metal genre, the band have widely varying tastes in music. Max says, 'I like to listen to different kinds of music, but I'm mainly interested by the underground stuff.'

He also believes that there is a wide diversity of styles within rock which maybe isn't seen by the somewhat jaded pundits in the States and Europe, but is very evident to a band which comes from the backwaters of Brazil. On that score, Max does not mince words: 'There's nothing much happening on the scene in Britain: it's too much like it was in the 60s and 70s, and there are very few great bands like Black Sabbath and Motorhead.'

On the other hand, despite the proliferation of American rock bands, Max believes that the camp, glam rock prevalent in that country is 'a joke. Everyone behaves like New Kids On The Block. It's done to sell to girls and has nothing to do with music. We take the music very seriously and I think the glam attitude sucks.'

As to Sepultura's music, the Brazilian band often reflects its native land's political and ecological concerns. 'We're obviously here to enjoy ourselves, but we also have a little bit of a political message in our lyrics. It's something nobody here (in Britain) gets to say. We can write about



the reality of what happens in a country like Brazil.'

Their slick, threatening, wicked, inescapable, sound certainly seems to be connecting to the rock populace and the dividends for this band who prove

that even small voices can be heard amid the roar of the international rock mobsters will be huge this year. 'We've got an album coming out this month called *Arise* (on the Road Racer label), and then, hopefully, we'll

be touring with Slayer in Europe during April. After that, we may go to America and do another tour there.'

Sounds like a headlining year from a band who literally appeared from nowhere.



SABBAT

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Distributed by BMG



BIG AND LOUD

John Gilbert unplugs his earphones, switches his tape machine to record and makes with the questions.



Switching from one well known band to another can be risky, but Chris McLaughlin, Yorkshire-based lead singer and guitarist of Loud, had no doubts. 'I used to play with New Model Army but I knew that I had to fulfill what was going on in my head and I couldn't do it where I was. Loud was a culmination of all sorts of songs and ideas. 'We were very lucky. It was a daunting prospect when I formed Loud. I had no one to help me gather people. You've got to get people who want to work with you; management, agencies, etc. You've gotta be good if you want a record company to pick you up.'

Loud was born in September 1989 when Chris left NMA. They played a debut gig at London's Marquee in October 1989, signed with China Records in January 1990 and recorded their first album, produced by Killing Joke's Jaz Coleman. It is very different from the NMA format and looks at inner conflict, angst and abuse, rather than the increasingly tatty political messages of many other rock bands. 'We're song writers. Our songs are put in a very powerful format, and this album is a result of the band being together for six months.'

The meanings of, and controversial statements within, song lyrics are important to Chris and his crew, as are their abilities as musicians, but he also realizes the need to have the right kind of image, though that does not necessarily mean going as far as some glam rock bands. 'There are bands that do dress up as women and sound good, but we just like to dress individually and comfortably. I think an intelligent person can look beyond the image; I'm not anti-image but I don't want to fit into any preconceived area.'

The general image of rock appears to be heavily American-oriented, but Chris feels that the situation is about to change. 'Over the past five years, Americans have dominated the industry due to the fact that there haven't been many British bands coming through, and that's the fault of the British buying public. The British like to sound and be like the Americans. A lot of companies have been moulding bands into the American scene, but I think its on the way out. It's the 1990s and people are soon going to want something new.'

But what is that 'something new' that will make people take notice? Chris has no easy answer, but knows how he will get his message across to an increasingly apathetic public. 'What's always made people sit up and listen is other people sitting up and listening. It's a snowball effect. The press and Radio One play does a lot and so does word of mouth. My point of view is that its our job to make people sit up and listen in our writing and performing.'

Loud has just completed major tours with cult bands Killing Joke and Fields of the Nephilim, and ex-Duran Duran guitarist Andy Taylor who remixed their single 'Explosive'. They were the support act on those, but, as some rock critics have already commented, they are headline material. 'We're about to go into a little headline tour and then we're going to have a deserved rest. I'll be writing more songs, and then we'll be back on the road in April or May. In the summer we'll be at some festivals and recording our next album and in the autumn we'll be in Europe.' It's a fraught schedule for a band that is now big as well as Loud.

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STAMPEDE

Kronus
Label Phonag Records

Really, Kronus were doing this sort of thing a long time before the likes of Iron Maiden and Saxon, and *Stampepe* is the band's brand new offering for 91. If you were a fan of the NWOBHM then this is for you with its scorchin' rhythm guitar section, spandex vocal approach, and the steamhammer drums 'n' bass. Never heavy enough to be thrash and too slow to be commercial, Kronus fall on middle ground with a sound all of their own - metal for muthas.

Evo (Warfare)



LIVE GIG REPORT

Venue Newcastle Riverside Club
Loud

Killing Joke



Tonight the Riverside is heaving, there are bodies everywhere and the fire laws have obviously been aborted. The heat is unbearable, sweat drips from the walls and ceilings - the atmosphere for a rock concert is perfect.

Support band Loud take to the stage, or what's left of it, and play several tracks taken from their debut LP *D Generation*. I caught Loud at Newcastle's Mayfair last year when

they supported Andy Taylor. Then, I thought that they were superb, but tonight the songs, although tight, seem to drag: I look forward to seeing Loud in the headline position.

Headliners Killing Joke need no introduction, and tonight their intense live show threatens to blow the Riverside into oblivion. Most of the material is taken from their new LP *Extremities* and pumped up with old classics like 'Wardance'.

Joke vocalist Jaz Coleman looks like an insane Jack Nicholson and delivers with a compassion so over the top that you expect him to explode at any moment. Guitarist Geordie and rhythm section Raven and Martin (ex-Pil) play with such power that the PA at one point hits distortion. Encores include the band's 85 hit 'A Love Like Blood' and

an old classic 'Phyced'. It was, in all, a first class showing.
Evo (Warfare)

LIVE AT READING

Gillan



Samson



Label Raw Fruit Records

Raw Fruit continues to release classic rock concerts from the vaults of the Radio One *In Concert* series.

Both these LPs were recorded at the classic Reading Rocks. Former Deep Purple man Ian Gillan with his own band runs through his greatest well known singles of the time (79/80) and adds a Purple cover for good measure.

The Samson LP of the same name should do well because it features Bruce Dickinson, who went on to front Iron Maiden. Although, in my opinion, Samson are, and were, an acquired taste - I'm not a fan of the Dickinson vocal with its clichéd scream. That said, I am a fan of the guitar playing of Paul Samson and on this LP it's really first class he's a British guitar hero, and I do believe Samson are still making records.

Evo (Warfare)

HOWLIN' YOWLIN' SCREAMIN' MESS

Gargleblud

Label Apt Records

Imagine your local fun fair, and in a dark corner stands the ghost train with its hugely painted front flash. And inside, who knows what demons are on the loose?

Indeed, this debut from Gargleblud is the kind of thing to which you might catch Klaus Kinski as Nosferatu tapping his foot. It's a mish-mash of heavy metal Goth/coffin rock which at times reminds me of the Rocky Horror panto that the Damned made famous circa 1979 (the songs are heavy and messy, but I think that's planned). The sound is quite infectious and, given better production values, the follow up should melt bodies.

Evo (Warfare)



DARKMAN



EDWARD SCISSORHANDS



Composer Danny Elfman
Label MCA

While Danny Elfman is currently the maestro of Hollywood sound, as far as I'm concerned, he seems to have stumbled with *Darkman*.

Although the central themes within the Main Title, Love Theme, and Double Durante are strong, certain points contain core snippets from his other, admittedly brilliant scores. *The Batman* theme has been modestly reworked using many of the same instrumentals, the carnival variations from *Nightbreed* and *Beetlejuice* crop up in the quirky 'Darkman dance'

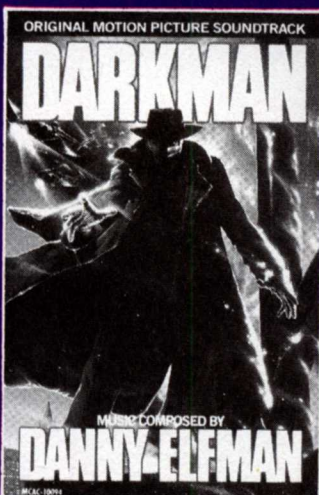
sequence'.

This type of repetition is something of which Elfman should beware, but I suspect that to a certain extent he is continuing to play a game which he began in *Nightbreed* - taking a few of his most well known pieces and throwing a few subtle chords in his new score. Unfortunately, but that hasn't stopped me investing in the CD of this symphonious work.

Far removed from the adventurous pounding of *Darkman*, *Edward Scissorhands* is one of the most beautiful, emotive and complex musical scores I have ever heard. I listened to the CD a week before seeing the movie - as I did with *ET* and Lloyd Webber's *Phantom Of The Opera* - and could immediately feel the emotional intensity that would enhance Tim Burton's visuals within the first few tracks.

The soundtrack, like the film, starts with a Gothic sweetness - choirs singing and bells ringing - and, as Edward is initially exploited and then reviled - through through no fault of his own - sinks with him into loneliness and despair before rising into an emotional crescendo at the end. It's fabulous, really uplifting music, and if you don't buy another movie soundtrack this year ensure that you own a copy of what is destined to be another Elfman Classic.

John Gilbert



MISERY

Composer Marc Shaiman
Label Atlantic City

Movie soundtracks usually achieve one of two aims. In blockbusters, such as *Total Recall*, *Flatliners* (which, buy the way has not been released) and *Batman*, they provide vibrant, often hummable, anthems which the audience should remember long after their memory for the film's images has been muted. Then there are the functional soundtracks, such as *Misery*, which provide background and atmosphere, occasionally slip under the skin of the viewer in moments of tension, but fight for breath when separated from the celluloid.

Stephen King movies such as *Pet Semetary*, *Christine* and even *Salem's Lot* have their memorable moments but, despite it's icy

shadowscape of sound, Marc Shaiman's *Misery* soundtrack fails to satisfy. But, it works quite competently with the picture.

John Gilbert



HARDCORE HOLOCAUST

Various

Label Raw Fruit Records

A compilation of Radio One John Peel sessions featuring all hardcore bands, this LP is fine if you like the genre, but the music, to me, is the

equivalent of low budget splatter movies.

I like extreme mayhem, but with this compilation there isn't the slightest melody line present. However, I'm more concerned that the likes of Napalm Death believe that there is a concept behind their mayhem (I won't insult the word 'music'). I much prefer to listen to my Black and Decker drill than *Hardcore Holocaust* - at least I can build a shelf or cupboards to its scream. Hardcore music insults its listeners just as much as the likes of Jason. Both audiences are being exploited to the full.

Evo (Warfare)



HARD 'N' HEAVY VOLUME 10

Distributor Virgin Music Video
Cert 18, 90 mins, £9.99

From the pale, hairy and bandy legs of AC/DC's classic 'Who Made Who' with a futuristic video featuring a cast of thousands of cardboard cut-out schoolboy guitar heroes. Through footage of Donnington's Monsters Of Rock to up-to-the-minute music from GWAR (who were seen if not heard on the SF film *Hardware*) in a report on metal indie label Metal Blade. This rock and metal video magazine is nothing if not comprehensive.

There are interviews with Suicidal Tendencies, who claim, in so many words, that their music, far from being strident and self-indulgently aggressive, is a cathartic reflection of social reality. Living Colour on revolution, stagnation and recession. Stryper on Bibles and inspiration.

Janes Addiction

Janes Addiction on something pretty damned weird. Extreme on sex. Beating the meat with Vixen on heat... Megadeth even go half-way toward satisfying their detractors by jumping out of an aeroplane at 12,500 feet, however, critics should note that they do use parachutes.

Between features and music are short animated sections such as 'New Kids On The Chopping Block' where a well known marketing phenomenon meet a circular saw in a head severing confrontation.

Hard 'n' Heavy set the original pace for rock video mags and on the basis of their latest offering are not about to surrender the advantage to newcomers to the scene. Good value and entertaining.

Andy Oldfield



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GRAPHIC DE

GRAPHIC DETAIL
It's the April issue of **FEAR**, which means Warren Lapworth's in high spirits as he celebrates **Graphic Detail's** first birthday (and its coverage of 111 comics/graphic novels) with the critical appraisal of yet *more* comics and graphic novels . . .

. . . But not as many and varied titles as I'd like, seeing as February's cold snap and snow flurries delayed the arrival of many comics (on top of shipping problems caused by the Gulf war). To help take my mind off this irritation, I got hold of the first issue of DC's four-part humour limited series, *Angel And The Ape* (50p).

Angel O'Day is much like any other private investigator, aside

from her impressive hand-to-hand combat skills, well-developed chest and her business partner, Sam Simeon — a large, talking gorilla. The odd couple's odd lives get stranger when Angel's super-powered sister arrives, and announces she wants to become Sam's girlfriend; then, while visiting a bank, Sam momentarily becomes human — while the people around him are apes.

While *Angel And The Ape* didn't actually make me laugh, I did appreciate the irony and dry wit scattered throughout this first issue. My favourite scene was Angel and her sister chatting over lunch: friends or relatives discussing the pros and cons of a potential partner happens all the time in movies and TV soaps, and the concept develops a perverse, amusing twist when said partner is a gifted ape.

Artwork is accurate, well composed and fun, inked by Keith Wilson and pencilled by Phil Foglio, who also wrote the series. I didn't do cartwheels but Foglio cheered me a little and interested me enough to wonder what Angel and Sam will do next.

THREADBARE

Trident's latest comic, *Strand* (£1.25), is dubbed 'a radical new horror series' — by Trident Comics themselves, of course; no unbiased person could truthfully call its terribly derivative fiction radical.

Strand is a four-section anthology that takes its name from the opening multi-part story, which involves an immortal, witchcraft and a series of killings in *The Strand* (naturally). John Kaiine tries to be mysterious and mature with his story, but only succeeds because of Gary Caldwell's disjointed, minimalist but attractive artwork.

Strand's other continuing story is *Tulpa*, which again has visuals which appeal, in a naïve sort of way. It shows little promise as a whole, however, as a teenage

party and a black magic spell book trigger spooky goings-on.

Issue one's one-shot stories, *Where Angels Fear To Tread* and *Under The Bed* (completely unconnected, I should add) are weak psychological views on death and decay — and are as forgettable as the entire comic.

DIVINE RESURRECTION

DC have revived an old super team and tweaked their characters (i.e. they've dusted them off — see *Marvel Age 98*) for an eight-issue limited series, *Challengers Of The Unknown* (£1). In the world the comic presents, the Challengers — four skilled but ageing humans — take a comfy back seat to the super-powered heroes. But their renown and the legacy of their deeds has led to the development of Challengerville, a tourist town which sells Challenger merchandising and conducts tours around the mountain where they live, and has supported the circulation of a newspaper, *Tattletale*.

But peaceful Challengerville is shaken up when a 'friendly tourist' plants a bomb in the Challengers' mountain home. The heroes survive the explosion but the town below suffers great damage. With reluctance, the Challengers spring into action, and their first adventure in more than a decade.

The editorial at the back of *Challengers Of The Unknown* waxes lyrical over Tim Sale's art, Lord knows why. Granted, I've seen worse, but his illustrations are simplistic and his inking strokes are much too broad.

Jeph Loeb's script saves the day, in fine form. It's far from the usual DC superhero stuff, and action sequences are kept to a minimum (though this may be because it's the first issue), so it's not designed for cheap thrills. But it's not dull; the mixture of superheroes living in a real world while their fictitious adventures are printed in a newspaper is strange and stimulating. Is it meant to be a serious view on the absurdities of comics, a parody, or will the Challengers end up battling foes as crass as those in *Tattletale*? And who is the man with nonsensical, rhythmical thoughts, who planted the bomb? It's impossible to tell at this stage but I'll be collecting the rest of the series to find out.

MARVEL MASTERWORKS

Marvel's prestige hardback reprints of their early comics — the *Marvel Masterworks* series — are obviously being well received by the comics-buying public, as they're being released

CHALLENGERS



TAIL

increasingly regularly.

Tales Of Suspense issues 59 to 81 (November 1964 to September 1966) are reproduced in *Marvel Masterworks 14* (£17.50) – half of them, anyway, as Iron Man featured in that comic and this is a Captain America *Masterworks*.

The star-spangled hero's arch-enemy, The Red Skull, appears in several of the stories, his origin given in one of them, and there are tales from Cap's past, fighting Nazi's in World War II with his young sidekick, Bucky.

Battling mobs, androids, Nazis and super-villains, Cap's adventures in this hardback are fun but inconsequential, and Jack Kirby's art is really showing its age. It makes a very welcome change to see The Red Skull's origin (Cap's is included in this reprint) but *Marvel Masterworks* is unlikely to appeal to anyone but ardent Captain America fans.

Volume 15 reprints the first five issues of the original *Silver Surfer* series. The first story relates the glittering boarder's origin and his imprisonment on Earth by his creator, Galactus, while the remaining four match the Surfer against Mephisto, Thor, The Stranger and aliens – though none of them manage to stop him from complaining about being stuck on this heartless planet. Although the examples presented in this volume are more than 22-years-old, John Buscema's artwork is as brilliant today as it was then, aided by a capable crew of inkers and colourists of the time. The accuracy and style of the visuals aren't quite matched by Stan Lee's scripts, but the storytelling is still more mature than many comic books, particularly for the time; the Surfer's musings make him something of a cosmic-powered predecessor to Moore's Swamp Thing. *Marvel Masterworks 15* is a must for fans of the Silver Surfer and those who favour mysterious alien beings.

Although not part of the *Masterworks* series, *Marvel Comics #1* is another high quality reprint from the past – 1939, to be precise. This is the comic that launched Marvel's name and includes the origin of the original Human Torch, a misunderstood, spontaneously-combusting android. The Sub-Mariner's past is touched upon in his first adventure and the retold Ka-Zar story relates the Tarzan-like hero's eventful beginnings. The remaining two strips from *Marvel Comics #1*, *The Angel* and *Masked Raider* are unremarkable pulp tales.

Art and plot are crude throughout this comic, unsurprising considering its age. *The Sub-Mariner* is the only exception, with its distinctive shading and soothing graphics,

SILVER SURFER

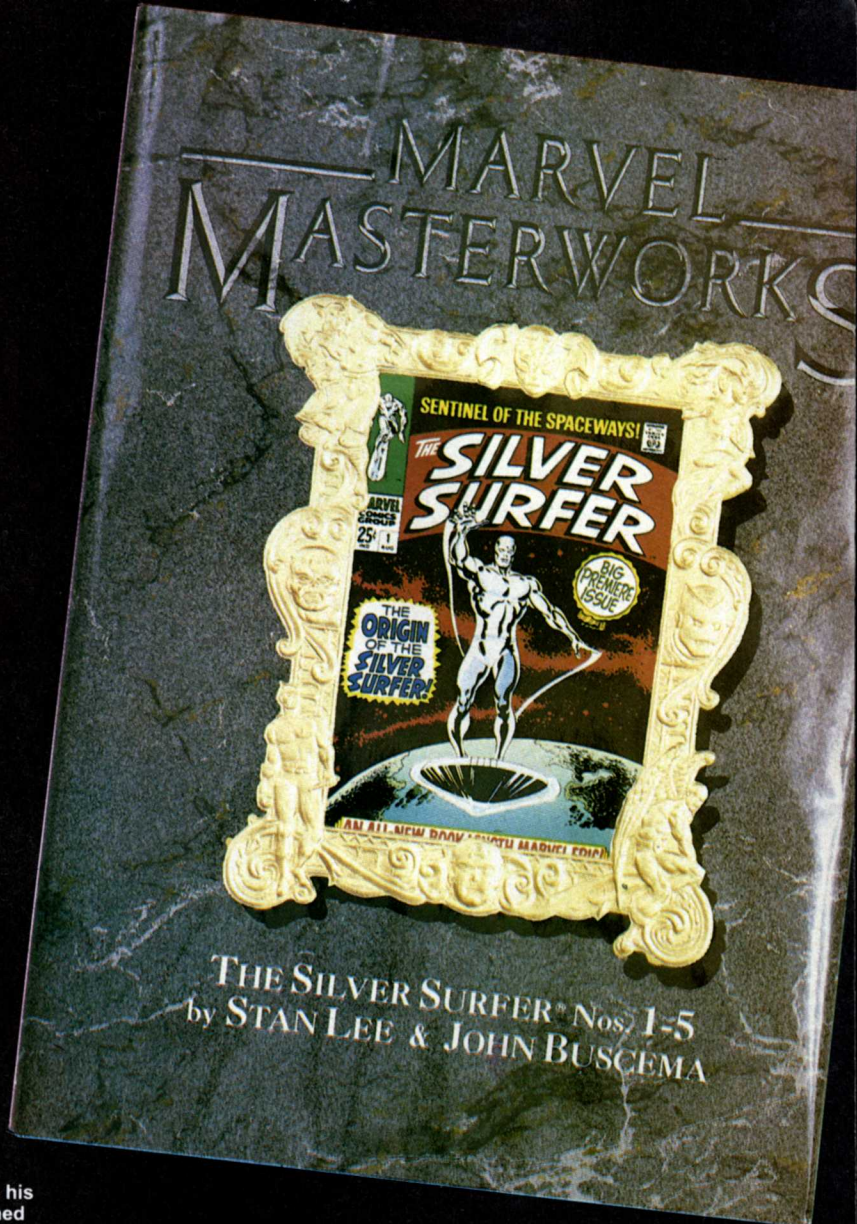
so it's only fitting that today, more than 50 years on, he has his own comic series. As it spawned the largest comic book company in the world, *Marvel Comics #1* is a major piece of genre history, so at £8.95 the reprint's well worth picking up – unless you fancy paying \$82,000 for an original copy!

MOLECULE MAGAZINE

The Justice League's sleekest hero doesn't look quite so respectable by the end of his 50th issue. At the beginning of the latest *Captain Atom* (DC, 80p), Alec Rois, aka The Ghost, has gathered an army including two brainwashed hostages – Jeff and Babylon – of the Justice League. This ever-strengthening menace can't be left unchallenged, especially as more and more of his recruits are supposed to be on the good guys' side!

Captain Atom and some of his JL colleagues decide to tackle the problem at source and go to The Ghost's base, a huge underground cavern (or is it the centre of a dormant volcano?). But Atom's mind is on other things, namely his proposed marriage to Sans Souci, a convicted super-villainess better known for her incendiary exploits as *Plastique*.

Captain Atom 50 is twice the size of a normal issue, but not twice as good. Anniversary issues of comics seem to be in a real decline, these days; *Swamp*



Thing 100 was pathetic, and (in the last issue of *FEAR*) *Suicide Squad 50* and the 'special' 50 years issue of *Captain America* weren't much better.

The anniversary *Captain Atom* is off to a bad start with Rafael Kayanan handling the artistic chores: some of it is passable but his people often look like tailors' dummies, with even worse hair styles, and Romeo Tanghal's wimpy inking doesn't help (where's Adams and Workman when you need 'em?).

The story's basic, clichéd superhero stuff, not bad but unexciting – the previous issue was much better, giving up punch-ups and megalomaniac villains to concentrate on the legal plight of *Plastique*. Hmmm, issue 50 of *The Flash* is coming up any week now...

FIVE INTO FOUR WILL GO

The Fantastic Four keep on trucking, still showing the younger team titles how to entertain the punters. Stan Lee's famous super-powered humans have now reached their 350th issue (uh-oh), and are celebrating with a double-sized anniversary edition (oh dear).

For those who don't know (yep, all three of you), the Fantastic Four are Reed Richards, also

known as Mr Fantastic, Susan Richards/Invisible Woman, Johnny Storm/the Human Torch and Ben Grimm. Ben used to be the ugly, craggy, orange Thing, but during a battle a happy accident made him human again.

For some time now, there's been a fifth member, Sharon Ventura/Ms Marvel but this hasn't affected the team's identity (the Fantastic Five hasn't got quite the same ring to it). However, it's certainly affected her: she hadn't been with the team long when she became rocky and ugly, a female Thing, an unsightly identity which has caused her near-continuous distress. So when a cloaked man offers to return her to normality she's only too willing to accept, even to the point of ignoring the fact that this 'kind' person is Doctor Doom, the Fantastic Four's most feared and devious enemy.

At last! An anniversary issue worth buying! This isn't a great surprise as the *Fantastic Four* has been on peak form ever since Walter Simonson started writing it. The opening scene reveals something highly unexpected about Doctor Doom – you'll have to read the comic to find out what it is – and from there on in it's a fun, action-packed, comic melodrama all the way.

Simonson also pencils the



FEAR

Fantastic Four but up until now I haven't been keen on his art, his figures are too simplistic and angular. But issue 350 is quite pleasing to the eye, mainly because of Brad Vancata's subtle but effective colouring.

The *Fantastic Four* are a classic comic book creation and, with someone like Walter Simonson at the helm, always provides plenty of good, clean escapism; try the 350th issue for size.

ROCKY XXIV?

I never picked up an issue of *Epic Illustrated*, but judging by the main characters in its latest off-shoot, I wish I had. *The New Adventures Of Cholly And Flytrap* (Epic, £3.50) is set in America (I think) in the near future, but although it has advanced technology, its attitudes and lifestyles are outdated – it's like Wild West cyberpunk.

Cholly is a trigger-happy traveller who always wears a checked windcheater, flying goggles and helmet. Flytrap is his huge oriental friend and 'business' partner who, in book one of this three-part series, is kidnapped by Hobbs, a seedy entrepreneur. Already handy with his fists, he's trained by a robot to become a prize fighter and defeat Stanley Yablowski, the world heavyweight champion of several years.

While *Flytrap* gets closer to a shot at the title, book two focuses on Cholly's search for his friend and, more particularly, the highly dubious dealings of Emiel Luvitz, Yablowski's manager. The world

created by Arthur Suydam — he both writes and illustrates *Cholly And Flytrap* — is a bizarre, cynical and intriguing one. It's hard to tell what the political and exact technological state is, but it hardly matters as the story revolves around hoodlums, gang bosses and boxing, and flows along at a healthy pace.

Suydam's artwork is great, faces, expressions and bodies distorted for humour and just plain weirdness. His inking is light but expressive, and his colours are considerate and atmospheric.

Although the second half of book one was a touch dull, *The New Adventures Of Cholly And Flytrap* is a quirky, involving look at mobs and boxing, and when I get my hands on the last part I'm sure I'll be rooting for *Flytrap* to whup Yablowski.

UPDATES . . .

Trident Comics have pulled off a good deal — they have the rights to publish Dark Horse's 20th Century Fox comics, and have just launched the *Aliens* monthly anthology title. Issue one reprints the first episode from *Aliens* (second series), *Predator* and the *Aliens vs Predator* prologue from *Dark Horse Presents 36*, at A4 size. At £1.50, this highly entertaining trio is great value for money . . . Marvel's *Weird War III* has been available for several weeks now, otherwise I'd certainly give it a full review, as it

features one of my favourite super teams, *Excalibur*. Although they seem to be home, elements of the Nazi world they visited during their dimension-skipping cross-time Caper remain — Hitler lives and Xavier, the founder of the X-Men (or in this case, Reichsmen), challenges his leadership. Artwork is bold and nicely inked and coloured, but some panel layouts are bland and/or contrived. The story never fully develops and soon tails off, but at £4.95 it's a snip for *Excalibur* fans . . . Plotted by Richard Curtis, Grant Morrison and Neil Gaiman, the *Comic Relief* comic features many writers, even more artists and countless characters, including Batman, the Hulk, Roger Mellié, Dan Dare, Dennis the Menace, Wolverine, the Ninja Turtles, Superman, Judge Dredd and Spider-Man. They're wrapped up in a strange modern-day Blackadder story, hosted by Lenny Henry, Griff Rhys Jones and Jonathan Ross. All profits go to Comic Relief charities so you've no excuse not to buy this historic comics collaboration. Get a copy or I'll tear up your *Sandman* collection . . . *Hearts And Minds* is set in the Vietnam war, and shown from the viewpoints of two soldiers, Jim Brett, an American, and Duan Le, a native. It tries but fails to show the horrors of war, and it soon becomes obvious that the story will culminate in a confrontation between the opposing soldiers. Still, it's clearly drawn, mildly entertaining and inexpensive, so it's a reasonable impulse-buy . . .

● MISERY

comes to town. We have a terrifying treat for all fans of director Rob Reiner, scriptwriter William Goldman, and novelist Stephen King.

● HARVEY BERNARD,

producer of the *Omen* films, talks about *Omen IV*.

● MOVIE-MAKER

kicks off an important six-part series in which we examine, in depth, the roles of those involved in the off-set film-making processes: electricians, wardrobe, stuntman, stills photographer, set designer, animators, publicists. We've chosen people at the top of their respective crafts who are involved in the major movies of the moment. All will be revealed next month.

● WILLIAM GIBSON,

co-creator of cyberpunk, shares his disappointment with *Aliens III* and sheds *Virtual Light* on his new novel.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

First exclusive in depth coverage of *Aliens III*, David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*, Isaac Asimov, Clive Barker's *The Mummy*, Stephen Lawhead, John Carpenter's *Creature From the Black Lagoon*, Robert Silverberg, Stephen King's *The Dark Half*, Arthur C Clarke, Robert Holdstock . . . AND as usual, in every issue our comprehensive guide to film, video, books, music, television . . .

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CHOLLY AND FLYTRAP

