

The
Complete
CHEAP
TRUTH

The Complete Cheap Truth

Edited by Vincent Omniaveritas

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Introduction

Cheap Truth was an uncopyrighted samizdat SF newsletter edited and largely written by Bruce Sterling as “Vincent Omniaveritas”, and published from Austin, Texas. The eighteen issues appeared from 1983 to 1986. [Cheap Truth 17](#), allegedly the last, is datelined November 1986; the one-off Theodore Sturgeon tribute listed here as [Cheap Truth \[unnumbered\]](#) is neither numbered nor dated but seems to have preceded #17.

The Sturgeon tribute’s credit to Brian Aldiss is a rare exception to the *Cheap Truth* rule that contributors, except in the letter column, must be pseudonymous or anonymous. Besides the editor, those whose names were concealed include Lew Shiner under the subtle pseudonym “Sue Denim” (*passim*); Brian Aldiss, whose verse “[SF: A Rhapsody](#)” appeared anonymously in *Cheap Truth* 6; and Charles Platt, who wrote “[Pilgrimage to Node Zero](#)” for *Cheap Truth* 16 with the anagrammatic byline Seth L. Lapcart. Clip-art graphics credited to “Todd Refinery” are mostly omitted from this ebook, but see “[SF: A Rhapsody](#)” for an example.

Production of the ebook version was eased by the efforts of “Zombie Vincent Omniaveritas”, who in November 2005 posted the content of *Cheap Truth* at cheap-truth.blogspot.com (as “monthly” instalments spuriously dated January 1990 to June 1991), omitting some brief editorial snippets and slogans-of-the-issue which are here restored. Typos have also been silently corrected. A few subheadings such as “The World’s Greatest Comic Magazine” in issue 4 don’t appear in the printed original but were introduced either by Zombie Vincent or during transcription for the early online SMOF-BBS bulletin board edition. Zombie Vincent also left out the two letter columns in *Cheap Truth* 9 and 15, so the ebook compiler had to do some work after all.

Thanks to Bruce Sterling for sending me *Cheap Truth* back in the day, and to Joe Siclari of Fanac.org for posting scans of the complete run.

David Langford, June 2019

Cheap Truth 1

Hi. You want to know the truth. We want to tell it to you. Let's try to keep the *economics* between us to a minimum, okay? Right, let's do it.

Quest for Decay

As American SF lies in a reptilian torpor, its small, squishy cousin, Fantasy, creeps gecko-like across the bookstands. Dreaming of dragon-hood, Fantasy has puffed itself up with air like a Mojave chuckwalla. SF's collapse has formed a vacuum that forces Fantasy into a painful and explosive bloat.

Short stories, crippled with the bends, expand into whole hideous trilogies as hollow as nickel gumballs. Even poor Stephen Donaldson, who struggles to atone for his literary crimes with wet hippy sincerity, has been forced to re-xerox his Tolkien pastiches and doubly insult the public. As Robert E. Howard spins in his grave, the Chryslers of publishing attach rotors to his head and feet and use him to power the presses.

But the editors have eaten sour grapes and the writers' teeth are on edge. Fantasy, for too long the vapid playground of McCaffreyite unicorn-cuddlers and insect-eating SCA freaks, has some new and dangerous borderlands. Suddenly, perhaps out of sheer frustration, fantasy has movement and color again. It is the squirming movement of corruption and the bright sheen of decay.

Some Examples

Niff the Lean by Michael Shea. DAW, \$2.95. Jack Vance's acolyte, author of the apprentice work *Quest for Simbilis*, Shea has suddenly and fearsomely come into his own. This astonishing work shows a furious imaginative concentration that is impressive and even appalling. The legitimate heir of Vance, Leiber, and Clark Ashton Smith, Shea rips aside the polite, smirking ironies of these polished writers and shows us a crawling, boiling vision of the demonic. He is a Fender Stratocaster to Vance's Stradivarius.

For those familiar with Vance's work, the effect is odd and disquieting, like seeing a favorite uncle stumble in, blasted on bad acid and mumbling

cosmic obscenities. There are supernatural horrors here that make Cthulhu and his boys look as tame as pinstriped bankers. Hell itself, its denizens and environs, are captured with a revolting nicety of detail and expression that makes you wonder for the author's sanity.

Shea is doing for the outworn tradition of heroic fantasy what Swinburne did for the tradition of romantic poetry: namely, piling it up in a heap and setting it on fire. And, like Swinburne, he does it with so much insight that he renders the tradition obsolete. Heroic fantasy is already moribund; Shea's book is, strictly speaking, a work of decadence, even of necromancy. This is an important, even crucial book, with the lurid brilliance and craftsmanlike discipline of a Bosch canvas. Not to be missed.

Red As Blood by Tanith Lee. DAW, \$2.50. The morbid smirk of the stereotyped fantasy damsel on the Michael Whelan cover of this book personifies fantasy's new decadence. Lee's talent has always threatened to overwhelm the narrow limits of her innumerable cape-and-thick-ankles bodice-busters, and this time she has the bit between her teeth and takes off for parts unknown.

She has returned to fantasy's roots – the 4/4 beat of Grimm's fairy tales – and ripped it up in a way that Ramones fans might find eerily familiar. This is a very punk book – all red and black – and it has some of the end-of-the-world energy of a '77 Pistols gig. These stories are *twisted* – tales of bloodlust, sexual frustration, schoolgirl nastiness, world-devouring ennui, and a detailed obsession with Satanism that truly makes one wonder.

Casual readers may find some of these stories dense and opaque. Lee's prose has a cryptic, involuted quality, which creates the impression that she is hinting at matters too blasphemous to speak of openly. It's a peculiar style, alternately annoying and frightening.

Some of this apparent awkwardness is the result of a refusal to compromise. It is the sign of an artist struggling to explain her visions in what amounts to a private dialect. Even the failures are a left-handed tribute to her integrity. She is uniquely gifted.

If you are the kind of fan who wants to have a dragon for a friend and loves small furry animals, stay away from this book, because you might die from it.

Lyonesse by Jack Vance. Berkley, \$6.95. This latest effort has all the qualities Vance devotees cherish: vivid clarity in description, clever, colorful

protagonists, fully realized societies complete with Vance's trademark footnotes, and headlong, exciting plotting that has footloose freedom without becoming slipshod.

It's true that Vance has only one voice: a carefully crafted, mock-archaic one. Vance characters, from wizards to galactic effectuators, always speak with the same sense of antiquated, polite calculation. In *Lyonesse*, a pair of housecats are given the power of speech, and when they immediately pipe up with a uniquely Vancian courteous peevishness the effective is irresistibly (and deliberately) hilarious. It's a voice that has served Vance well, and has even been borrowed wholesale by Michael Shea without becoming tiresome.

Vance's works have always had a veiled darker side; they are replete with wine-sipping perverts whose sidelong glances and polite insinuations hint at unspeakable vices. Vance is a writer of rare perception; although he created many of the parameters of modern fantasy, he is clearly aware of their exhaustion. His answer, like Shea's, is to turn up the amps.

Thus we have a female character whose suffering innocence almost reminds one of deSade's Justine. There is a definite, quiet cruelty in this book that is presented with an alarming sense of relish. Characters are blinded, tortured, branded, bugged, thrown into wells and left to die. Women and children especially are singled out for torment; one long section is a Tanith Lee-esque black fairy tale, and its peculiar viciousness is cynically funny. At last Vance even turns on the reader, for the book's ending is a cruel joke. It hints at books to follow, but since Vance's languorous attitude toward sequels is legendary, his audience is probably doomed to a long session on the tenterhooks.

The Floating Gods by M. John Harrison. Timescape, \$2.50. This book is called *In Viriconium* in Britain, but was stupidly retitled for American release, presumably because Timescape believes we are boneheads. It's the third book in a sword-and-sorcery trilogy that includes *The Pastel City* and *A Storm of Wings*.

It's clear that a different but allied form of decadence has struck *Across the Water*. Its trademark is not perversion, but exhaustion. *Pastel City* rejoiced in such sprightly characters as Tomb, "the nastiest dwarf that ever hacked the hands off a priest", whose rotten malevolence was a welcome relief from Harrison's sometimes stifling meditations on spiritual decline.

Floating Gods has no such characters. It is set in a city smothered under a nebulous Plague Zone. Possibly Harrison has spent too much time in

Brixton. Despair seems to have been printed across his eyeballs in letters of fire. *The Floating Gods* is a relentless exercise in total, stifling futility; it is one long, gray, debilitating dream.

Harrison's extraordinary talent merely crams the reader's head more firmly into the bucket. It is impossible to read this book without considering suicide. It is painful to read; painful even to think about. Let's hope to God something happens soon to cheer him up.

Cheap Truth Top Ten

These new editions are readily available at your local smokestack-industry chainstore bookstand. You could do a lot worse.

1. *Software* Rudy Rucker. Ace, 2.25. Pyrotechnic work by deranged math professor. The hottest thing going in contemporary SF.
2. *Universe 10* Terry Carr, ed. Zebra, 2.50. Fine anthology reduced to utter penury. Should be bought for the good of the genre.
3. *Past Master* R.A. Lafferty. Ace, 2.50. Classic Lafferty. His most decipherable SF novel.
4. *The Left Hand of Darkness* Ursula K. LeGuin. Brilliant LeGuin from her pre-didactic era. Has modern intro with words like "semiotic" and "positivist".
5. *The Iron Dream* Norman Spinrad. Timescape, 2.95. Biting parody of fascistic SF power fantasies. Genuinely bizarre.
6. *The Monster of the Prophecy* Clark Ashton Smith. Timescape, 2.50. Curious archaeological relic from the Golden Age. Outrageous, clotted prose.
7. *The King in Yellow* Robert W. Chambers. Ace, 2.50. What fantasy was like before its prostitution.
8. *A World Out of Time* Larry Niven. Del Rey, 2.50. Heartening indication that Niven may escape total artistic collapse.
9. *Creatures of Light and Darkness* Roger Zelazny. Avon, 2.25. Self-indulgent pastiche of his best work. Flashes of brilliance. Beats being smothered in amber.
10. *Escape from New York* Mike McQuay. Bantam, 2.50. Surprisingly decent novelization. Makes more sense than the movie.

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pirates, start your engines!

“SERVING SF THROUGH SAMIZDAT”

Cheap Truth 2

Editorial: “Dirt Cheap Literary Criticism With the Honesty of Complete Desperation”

Public Shudders at “Best of the Year”

It can't be the editors' fault. Can it? Terry Carr has as much taste as any editor in the field has ever had. Donald Wollheim may be a tough old shark, a snuff-snorting roué of the ancien regime, but he Knows What People Like.

How to explain, then, the painful dullness of these two collections? (*The 1983 World's Best SF*, Donald A. Wollheim, Ed., DAW, \$2.95; *The Best Science Fiction of the Year #12*, Terry Carr, ed., Timescape, \$3.95.) Is SF suffering from intellectual exhaustion? Perhaps it takes itself too seriously and has lost the careless vigor it had when it was mere pop crap. One might easily conclude this after perusing the vapid “Letter From the Clearys”, the pompous and bloodless “Sur”, or the Abbess-phone-home fakery of “Souls”. But even these clumps of parasitic literary mistletoe have more to recommend them than the clunky obsolescence of James White's “The Scourge” or Timothy Zahn's laughable “Pawn's Gambit”.

Consider how good Frederik Pohl's “Farmer On the Dole” looks in this company. This story is predicated on the waggish Pohl-Kornbluth satires of thirty years ago. In those days “Farmer On the Dole” would have ranked as a shoulder-shrugging mild amusement. Nowadays, however, surrounded by stories that lie gasping and wall-eyed with anemia, a story that has enough strength left to execute a rickety buck-and-wing and toss a pie or two *deserves acclaim*.

Wollheim's collection is the dopier of the two, burdened by aberrations like Timothy Robert Sullivan's negligible “The Comedians”, and “Written in Water”, one of Tanith Lee's most opaque efforts. The collection closes well with Rudy Rucker's lively Pac-Man parody, but the mind boggles at this choice, since it's probably the worst thing Rucker ever wrote. One winces to think of the impression this must make on Rucker's potential fans, who will almost certainly conclude that his work consists of juvenile *ka-chow ka-chow* incoherency.

Carr's collection has more on the ball, including Disch's claustrophobically brilliant "Understanding Human Behavior" and Silverberg's competent "Pope of the Chimps". The silly plot of Connie Willis' "Firewatch" does not prevent her from making her point with force and grace. And Gregory Benford's strange parable of modern industrial society, "Relativistic Effects", demands respect and earns it. It is, however, rather dull.

Hope for the future lies with newer writers. Bill Johnson's first story, "Meet Me At Apogee", shows unusual stylistic grace for a hard-SF devotee, and he seems to have grasped the fact that the Future Will Be Different. Bruce McAllister does not know how to plot, but this can be forgiven him, since his is clearly a visionary chomping at the bit. McAllister needs to forget his pretensions and cut loose.

Bruce Sterling contributes a slick piece of entomological SF. The odd popularity of this work, with its intense Stapledonian pessimism, probably shows that readers have missed his point.

But the best comes last: William Gibson's incredible "Burning Chrome". *This* is the shape for science fiction in the 1980s: fast-moving, sharply extrapolated, technologically literate, and as brilliant and coherent as a laser. Gibson's focused and powerful attack is our best chance yet to awaken a genre that has been half-asleep since the early 1970s.

And until SF does reform itself, re-think itself, and re-establish itself as a moving cultural force instead of a backwater anachronism, even the cleverest editors will find their efforts useless. They cannot produce meritorious fiction after the fact; nor can they stitch silk purses from the ears of sows, no matter how fat the sows are or how long they have been munching the same acorns under the same tree. SF must stop recycling the same half-baked traditions about the nature of the human future. And its most formally gifted authors must escape their servant's mentality and learn to stop aping their former masters in the literary mainstream. Until that happens, SF will continue sliding through obsolescence toward outright necrophilia.

Raging Diatribe from Our New York Correspondent

Our New York correspondent, one of a globe-spanning network of *Cheap Truth* shills and xerox pirates, sends us these pertinent comments:

“At the Forbidden Planet SF Convention (New York, July 2-3-4 1983), Jack Chalker remarked that before he became well known, no one reviewed him, whereas now, he’s reviewed everywhere – unfavorably. He claims this is because fan critics are failed writers, which makes them jealous of Chalker’s success. I’m tired of the ‘jealous critics’ line that hacks like Chalker trot out to justify their awful work and their giant egos. The fact is that, so long as a mediocre writer remains obscure, critics see that there is a certain degree of justice, and they feel no comment needs to be made. But if that writer’s trashy, derivative, ungrammatical, garbled prose, and second-hand, second-rate ideas start selling widely, critics feel a justifiable sense of outrage. They vent this outrage in their reviews. Jealousy has nothing to do with it.

“The success of *Battlefield Earth* is easily explained (one million Scientology readers can’t be wrong – or right) but *2010* and *Foundation’s Edge* are more baffling. Bearing in mind hardcover prices and the juvenile readership... how many copies of these incredibly dull books were bought by parents as presents for their children? Market research would be illuminating. And how many young readers were disappointed? For that matter, how many people who buy SF novels actually *finish* them? How many mediocre, unoriginal, boring books will a reader tolerate, and still keep buying, in hope of finding one to stimulate his imagination? At what point do readers become disgusted and give up? Any other industry would have researched such factors long ago. The cost would quickly be recovered in increased efficiency and responsiveness to real market patterns.”

“Best of the Year” Reprise: Europe Reels

The morbid state of American SF might lead one to expect – even to hope – that the narcotized Amerikaners would be blindsided by an older and wiser literary tradition from the Continent. Judging by this (*Terra SF II – The Year’s Best European SF*, Richard D. Nolane, ed., DAW \$2.95), it is not to be. Frankly, there are *Soviets* who can write better than this.

Three of twelve stories can be exempted from the pillory, especially Francis Carsac’s “The Last Atlantean”. Its misleadingly maudlin title is the work of the translator, one “Joe F. Randolph”. In this collection, Mr. Randolph tackles German, French, Danish, Spanish, and Italian. Can such a polymath exist? Is the wooden prose of this collection perhaps his fault? One

might hope so, but the underlying structure of these stories leads one to believe otherwise. They range from flabby Howard pastiches to wet leftist polemics, as dull as Pournelle without even his saving grace of overt violence. And are pickings so slim in Europe that the editor *must* include one of his own stories?

Cheap Truth Top Ten

This list, by guest grump Sue Denim, is all recent stuff (within the last year, at least) and should be fairly easy to find.

- *Best of Charles Beaumont* – Known for his *Twilight Zone* work, his short fiction is brilliant, literate, and has a vast range of styles and moods. Bantam.
- *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* by Philip K. Dick – the Master’s last book, a change of pace in tone and style but still brilliant and haunting. Timescape.
- *The Man Who Had No Idea* by Thomas M. Disch – Bizarre and highly literate collection that fairly shimmers with wit. Bantam.
- *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban – The made-up language is a pain in the ass, but the extra work is worth it. Grim but deeply moving post-apocalypse. Washington Square.
- *The Unreasoning Mask* by Philip José Farmer – Wildly inventive, and if not in a stylistic league with Disch or Hoban, at least Farmer is coherent and readable here (as opposed to, say, the last couple of Riverworld books). Berkley.
- *Courtship Rite* by Donald Kingsbury – Earth’s descendants reduced to near savagery on an alien world – but wait. This is the real thing, intricately designed and fiercely imagined. Timescape.
- *The War Hound and the World’s Pain* by Michael Moorcock. His best in years, carefully crafted, full of surprises and convoluted characters. Timescape.
- *The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death* by Daniel M. Pinkwater – You’ll have to look in the “Young Adult” section for this one, but do it anyway. Brilliant satire by a genuine mad genius. Signet.
- *The Golden Space* by Pamela Sargent – Fixup of several stories, with filler material, but it really does work as a novel. Immortals and their

genetically altered children raise serious issues. Strong characters. Timescape.

- *A Rose for Armageddon* by Hilbert Schenck – This guy is weird and doesn't seem to know how books are supposed to be written, which is a real relief sometimes. Once this one gets rolling (and it does take its time) you won't want to stop. Timescape.

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Cheap Truth 3

Editorial

It has come to our attention that unscrupulous black marketeers have been retailing copies of *Cheap Truth* at astronomical prices, some going as high as twelve to thirteen cents. The situation is especially bad in Eastern Bloc countries, where the *Cheap Truth* distribution network has been penetrated by KGB and Bulgarian *agents provocateurs*, who take advantage of desperate shortages of SF criticism to hike the underground price from one American cigarette to as high as two or even three.

We suggest therefore that readers who cannot get pirated copies (or who cannot access the samizdata On-Line edition on SMOF-BBS, 512-836-7663*) write directly to the *Cheap Truth* offices, sending a dollar, or the equivalent in local postage, with their address and *nom de guerre*. New issues will be forthcoming.

* Parenthetical note added for online edition: it's not in the printed original.
[Ed.]

On a more serious note, we suggest a \$25 subscription to *Samizdat Bulletin*, c/o Ms. Olga Stacevich, P.O. Box 6128, San Mateo, California 94403.

Barrington Bayley Retrospective

Justice must be done for Barrington J. Bayley. His manifest virtues cry out for vindication. Bayley has been neglected too long. Despite his steady production, he is best known in America, when known at all, for his ten-year-old work in *New Worlds*.

The legacy of those days (*The Knights of the Limits*, Barrington Bayley, Fontana-Collins, 95p.) makes astonishing reading. It reminds one that the power of British New Wave was not due to its decalcifying treatment of sex or the fact that much of its readership was stoned. Those ephemera blew away with the hash fumes over Ladbroke Grove. What is left is sheer visionary intensity, which Bayley has always had and displays today even

more vigorously.

“The Ur-Plant” is Bayley’s latest story, in *Interzone*, which is *New Worlds*’ successor in British SF’s valiant struggle for Arts Council grants. Bayley’s story stands out in this somewhat precious magazine like a cactus among balloons.

Bayley writes science fiction with the natural fluency of a man who can’t help it. He has the ineffable, unfakeable genius of a true SF visionary: of Wells, Stapledon, and Ballard; of Bester, Dick, and Farmer.

Small things do not content this man. He is tooling along in second gear if he does not blow your mind ten times in eighteen pages. He is at home re-inventing the nature of space-time, stretching the limits of consciousness, reassembling reality. He leaps past the jugular and deep into the frontal lobes.

Bayley is the Zen master of modern space opera. He has the wild power of E.E. Smith, without Smith’s pathetic illiteracy or gross provincialism. The magazines of the ’30s might have been titled to describe Bayley’s work: Amazing, Startling, Fantastic, Weird. This tie to traditionalism may explain why his novels have been published by DAW: *The Pillars of Eternity*, *The Fall of Chronopolis*, *The Grand Wheel*, *Star Winds*, *The Garments of Caean*, *Collision Course*.

Yet Bayley’s elemental energy, his mastery of the sense of wonder, cannot be denied. His work is the very antithesis of tired hackdom. To invent an entire self-consistent cosmology and physics for a \$2.50 DAW paperback (*The Zen Gun*, 1983) is one of those noble acts of selfless altruism that keep SF alive. There seems no limit to the man’s inventiveness, his pyrotechnic bursts of fresh ideas. To these natural gifts, enough to sustain a dozen lesser writers, he adds an intense dedication to craft that gives his best work its eerie sense of dark complexity. To read a work like “The Cabinet of Oliver Naylor” is to be simultaneously enlightened and bewildered, to receive a Zen knock on the head; it is the literary equivalent of psilocybin. It is, in fact, why science fiction was invented.

It was not a historical accident that science fiction first entered mass consciousness in a welter of garish colors and howling verbal excess. SF is the enemy of normality, the antidote to bored sophistication and know-it-all over-refinement. If SF, in outgrowing its native vulgarity, also loses its ability to stun, it will have sold its birthright for a mess of pottage. At this point SF can commit any literary crime but boredom; any crime, that is, except the one that is now killing the mainstream. In all respects, Barrington

Bayley's hands are clean.

Interview with the Martyr

We got hold of H.P. Lovecraft. Never mind how. There are things in the Cross Plains Dairy Queen that are best left unspoken. At any rate we had the gentleman in the *Cheap Truth* offices in late March, 1983 – some 46 years after his death. Lovecraft was dressed in a cruddy-looking black wrinkled suit with a skinny tie and celluloid collar. His nose was sunburned. He looked rather pasty and gaunt – we had called him up from about 1935, when his diet of graham crackers and canned spaghetti was definitely beginning to kill him.

CT: Mr. Lovecraft – may we call you Eich-Pi-El? – this is a great pleasure. Please, just toss the cat out of the chair, there, and have a seat.

HPL: I wouldn't dream of disturbing puss. He's a fine, swart beast, isn't he? (Spectrally) The cat is cousin to the Sphynx, but remembers secrets she has long forgotten.

CT: Far out. Can I get you anything? A beer, maybe?

HPL: Liquor has never passed my lips.

CT: Some coffee?

HPL: That would be splendid. With five sugars, please. (sips) Very good. This costs five cents a cup, you know. Quite a sum when you're living on seventeen cents a day. I made quite a science out of poverty, in my last days. But I was never a – businessman. You can't make a businessman out of a corpse.

CT: Please, have all you like. The *Cheap Truth* publishing empire covers the globe. That's one of the reasons we called you up, Eich-Pi-El. You are, after all, the paragon – the very archetype of the starving science fiction writer. Were you aware that your premature death would set the model for an entire lifestyle?

HPL: Actually, no. I died with the firm conviction that my work would be completely eclipsed, swept out with the rest of the illiterate pulp trash. I knew what was good, you see. I read Proust, Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser. I knew what was good, and what was cheap garbage.

CT: And yet you died in pursuit of your art.

HPL: (shrugs) At that point it really didn't matter much. I had reached the culmination of my philosophy – what I called psychological self-annihilation. I saw things from a cosmic perspective. The tragedy of one

atom – even if it was myself – was simply irrelevant.

CT: Destroy desire and you destroy unhappiness, is that it?

HPL: Exactly.

CT: But that's Buddhism. Classic Buddhist enlightenment, in fact. All that ascetic discipline of yours –

HPL: (bristles) What? The spineless fatalism of the Hindu? I'm the scion of blue-eyed Nordic conquerors.

CT: (uncomfortably) OK, that's cool. Is it true that you and Clark Ashton Smith used to call Hugo Gernsback "Hugo the Rat"?

HPL: Yes. But we never hated him as much as we despised that crawling horror, Farnsworth Wright. He starved us, cheated us. He rejected my best work. He made his magazine into a pigsty for cheap scribblers. My stories appeared cheek by jowl with truss ads. Was it any wonder that I began to write letters instead? (Begins to talk faster and faster) At first dozens, then hundreds, and at last a steady stream of them – that instead of publishing I wrote everything in longhand? Each time, for an audience of one. A writer *must* speak, even if he has to pay for the privilege in postage and starvation.

CT: I understand perfectly, Mr. Lovecraft. May I say that I've always admired you? I suppose that your fiction *was* mostly garbage, but you are more than that – you're an avatar, a symbol. I wonder how many young writers have found courage in your example. "After all, what's the worst thing that can happen to me if I write SF? At worst, I'll simply die a slow, miserable death by inches like H.P. Lovecraft." You never compromised – you stayed shabby-genteel to the end, and died without ever doing one single practical thing. Your rejection of the world was total. It was the act of a saint.

HPL: Are you Jewish?

CT: (startled) No. Thanks for coming, Mr. Lovecraft.

HPL: You have a funny swarthy look about you. I can tell you're a dago of some kind. "Omniaveritas" – what kind of name is that? Not Anglo-Saxon. Let me see the shape of your head – (He suddenly fades away. He is, after all, dead.)

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Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. NOT COPYRIGHTED.
"Nothing Better To Do"

Cheap Truth 4

Editorial. This issue heads for the fringes of SF with nonfiction books, comics, and, perhaps least central of all, the plans of publishers. Future issues will include reviews of periodicals in “Squirming Mags” and a semiotic analysis of science fiction in rock videos. If this is the first *Cheap Truth* you have seen, ask the nice man in the trenchcoat to give you some xeroxes. *Cheap Truth* 809-C West 12th St Austin, Texas 78701. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, Graphics. “The Truth Cannot Be Copyrighted”

Reptile News

Mr. Augean Stapledon, a third-eyed tuatara of the first water, offers us the following Reptile News:

I started with the intention of writing something about Isaac Asimov’s *Robots of Dawn*. And then I thought, why do you want to do that? That old hack isn’t the problem. Just another guy resurrecting the decaying flesh of ideas, plots, and characters dead thirty years now, pumping in a little ’80s topicality (lame sex), and grabbing himself a whole bunch of money and a chrome rocket. What the hell? You give a guy a license to steal, you’ve got to expect him to use it.

But who gave him the license? That’s better, more to the point.

First, though, look further. An endless stream of Dune books, leper books, Riverworld books, 2010-and-counting books, Majipoor books, magic blue horse books.... help me, Jesus, I can’t do it by myself.

It can’t be the books. Most are unreadable, some merely boring, and a few achieve the exalted status of a well-prepared cheeseburger.

SF used to be solely the province of the visionary and/or deranged. Its writers could count on, at best, a living wage – along with, of course, the warm admiration of thousands of the isomorphically visionary/deranged, for whatever it was worth. This was not a good thing. Philip Dick ate pet food; others committed suicide, said the hell with it, or lived lives of constant despair. Name your poison. But the crazed were allowed to flourish in their own peculiar way, and the results were, now and then, amazing.

So by all means bring SF onto center stage and give it a shot at the Big Time: New York Times Best Seller Lists, mighty advances, fancy covers, seven-piece supermarket dump bins.

But don't take a razor to the hamstrings and then say, "Go on, get out there, buddy, and run with the best." Don't, in short, isolate the Dune-leper-magic blue horse &c. books as quintessential SF and ignore everything else. But this is, of course, precisely what mainstream corporate publishing does.

Meanwhile, back at Waldenbooks, they're honing the SF section – you know, stripping it down to the *essentials* ... and Waldenbooks are spreading exponentially, in more disgusting fashion than any monster SF ever dreamed up, while the publishers are reading the writing on the shopping center walls – which says nothing about being weighed in the balance and found wanting – and following along.

There was a hint at the end of *Robots of Dawn* that Asimov might tie the ROBOT books and the FOUNDATION books together. Imagine that. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, my ass. Why bother?

Cheap Truth Top Ten (Nonfiction special)

This issue's expanded Top Ten extols works of visionary nonfiction, along with lighter pieces to stanch the flow of blood from nose and ears.

- *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* by J.D. Bernal. In the 1920s this visionary English scientist, his mind inflamed by what he conceived to be the imminent triumph of World Socialism, reinvented the nature of the human future. To read this book is to marvel over what science fiction might have been if Hugo Gernsback had not misled the genre. A work of staggering daring, utterly lacking in comfortable bullshit.
- *Disturbing the Universe* by Freeman Dyson. The great physicist-visionary of the Orion Project explores the implications of man's role in the cosmos and the simple warmth of human life. A sad, wise, hopeful book.
- *The Third Wave* by Alvin Toffler. Former Marxist Toffler had his paradigms set early; he aims to be the Marx of the twenty-first century, only this time it'll be done right. A brilliant conceptual framework for seeing emergent order in the confusion of our times, deliberately pop-oriented and slanted as a polemic for action. Echoes of his rhetoric are

- already apparent in many politicians' sudden romance with high-tech industry. Must-reading for anyone whose head is not in a bucket.
- *The Nine Nations of North America* by Joel Garreau. Fascinating social analysis of the geographical subcultures of the continent. Floods the mind with insight. If you ever wondered why Californians are crazy, this is the book for you.
 - *The New Solar System*, Beatty, O'Leary, and Chaikin, eds. Mind-expanding compendium of the discoveries garnered from unmanned planetary exploration. Consigns whole reams of musty space opera to the ash-heap.
 - *Infinity and the Mind* by Rudy Rucker. Mathematically rigorous treatment of the ultimate in mind-stretching concepts, drawn from the warped pen of the transrealist Seer of Lynchburg. Like being hit in the head by a bowling ball.
 - *New Earths* by James Oberge. NASA technician Oberge tackles terraforming in this series of technical studies prefaced by SF vignettes. With his two other books, *Red Star in Orbit* and *Mission to Mars*, Oberge has established himself as a cornucopia of cribbable data for SF writers. Worth its weight in reaction mass.
 - *A House in Space* by Henry S.F. Cooper, Jr. The definitive book on Skylab, the real lowdown on what it's like to live in freefall. A treasure-house of weird sidelights and bizarre detail. Refreshingly free of paramilitary NASA tripe.
 - *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* by Michael Weldon. A monument of bizarrist cinematic trash. The reader's preconceptions crumble under a blizzard of the worthless and deranged. Seems to include every sleazoid SF flick ever inflicted on the world, along with countless teens-on-drugs flicks, beach movies, and ax-butcher epics. Unbelievably thorough and convulsively hilarious. Deserves a place of honor on the reference shelf of every cultural mutant.
 - *Dream Makers Volume II* by Charles Platt. More painful frankness from Platt, who has a genius for showing up others' eccentricities as if he himself were sane. Low-key, utterly convincing demonstrations of the manifold nature of psychic damage. In its portraits of the competition, this is perhaps one of the most cheering books that a would-be science fiction writer could possibly possess. For those already damaged beyond all hope, it provides irresistible frissons of warm camaraderie.

Meticulous journalism with an eye for the absurd.

The World's Greatest Comic Magazine

Man-about-graphics Bolt Upright lends us the benefit of his expertise:

My father used to buy me comic books. The reward for enduring a monthly scalping at the hands of the ex-Nazis who ran the local barbershop – Heinz and Willy, the barbers of Belsen. It wasn't a fair trade. Dad got a son with a burr, and I got the world's greatest comic magazine; and more. I mean, yeah, OK, astronauts are astronauts if you're a kid and have a hero jones, but here's what I really needed: this guy Reed Richards, a mad scientist in the worst way, takes his girlfriend (Tuesday Weld in *my* movie version), her kid brother, and a possibly deranged test pilot for a joyride in an experimental rocket. Not only do they get away with it, they end up with these incredible super powers.

Ben Grimm's incessant whining used to really chap my ass. Who was he kidding? I would have gladly taken lumpy orange skin, cartoon mouse hand and foot digit allotment, and who-knows-what-kind of genitalia for the ability to crush cheap essential scenery like papier-mache.

And, not to neglect the world's second greatest comic magazine, I watched spiders constantly for that tell-tale glow of radioactivity.

When I was a child, I read comic books as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things, and bought the first six issues of *American Flagg!*, the world's greatest comic magazine.

Steranko's *Nick Fury, Agent of Shield* was the first comic that made me see the form as form, and the artist as auteur; *Mr. A*, written and drawn by Steve Ditko, as bizarre and didactic as anything could possibly be, suggested nonetheless that fairly sophisticated ideological material might work in the comic book format; and more recently, the Frank Miller *Daredevil* series with its fine balance of strong scripting, excellent art, well-developed characters, and the staples of entertainment, sex and violence, set a new high standard in the field.

The field, represented by Howard Chaykin and First Comics, responded immediately, and with such an amazing product that, after having read and re-read – (when was the last time you wanted to re-read a comic book?) – the first three issues of *American Flagg!*, I had the peculiar feeling that this was the first real comic book I had ever owned. There are terrific characters (the

protagonist is an ex-vidporn star), impeccable art (every issue has a suitable for framing, right-in-your-goddamn-face cover), a multi-layered, conspiracy-ridden, paranoid, balls-out story line, got politics if you want it, lettering you won't believe (by Ken Bruzenak), and whatever sex and violence you require, but never tawdry or gratuitous.

In addition to all that stuff, *American Flagg!* is science fiction of a caliber that is almost impossible to find in comics and pretty scarce anywhere else. Yeah, there's hardware. Plenty of hardware. There's an adventure guy and his adventure girls, even talking animals with mechanical hands, but here's my point: good SF is a literature of ideas. The best science fiction builds a place for them to live. It's hard to imagine a denser, more intricate, cohesive creation that the world Chaykin constructs and populates in *American Flagg!*. I used to ask myself, as the simplest way of judging a fictional creation, a future-world particularly, "*Could* it happen? Is this projected future reasonable?" I was on the wrong track. The question is, "*Does* it happen?" In *American Flagg!*, it happens.

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Editorial: “Exploring a 21st Century Pop Ideology”

Mom Said It Was Okay

Guest grump Sue Denim vents her spleen on the crop of '83:

This year's Nebula Ballot looked like a list of stuff that Mom and Dad said it was okay to read. Mom and Dad really liked Connie Willis' "Firewatch" last year; it's about this student that gets all self-righteous and rebellious and everything, but it turned out Father knows best after all.

This year Mom and Dad really like *Startide Rising* by David Brin and Greg Benford's *Against Infinity*. *Startide Rising* especially; I mean, this is the kind of writing that Mom and Dad grew up on, full of "Golly's" and blushes and grins. And aren't those dolphins cute? They talk in poetry that sounds like it came right out of *Reader's Digest*. They'd rather hear that somebody "muttered an oath" or came out with some made-up word like "Ifni!" than be told that they really said "shit" or "shove it up your ass, motherfucker."

No sex, of course, or maybe just a noise in the night in somebody else's tent. And it has a nice moral, too – something Mom and Dad have always known, though it hasn't always seemed that way these last couple of decades – that *we* are better than *they* are, and that's enough to pull us out of any trouble, particularly when *they* are slimy alien scum.

The Benford book is scary in spots – this Ganymede place they're trying to fix up seems almost *real* in places, and this terraforming isn't anything like the way Uncle Frank went about fixing up his cabin by the lake. But everything's okay, because the hero, Manuel (isn't that a *foreign* name?) is everything they would want a son of theirs to be: a perfect neutered little adult. He doesn't curse or masturbate or even *think* about girls.

As for that weird alien artifact, well, if we can't understand it, we can always try and kill it. That seems like a good level-headed approach.

Mom and Dad like Kim Stanley Robinson's "Black Air" for novelette. It's so nice to read a straightforward historical story, like that Frank G. Slaughter used to write, and it's just too bad he had to tack on that fantasy mumbo jumbo at the end just so he could sell it. But then that nice Joanna

Russ did the same thing last year with “Souls”, and isn’t it nice that she’s not mad any more and writing unpleasant books like *The Female Man*?

Mom and Dad are looking forward to the 1984 Nebulas, because they’re sure that nice Mr. Robinson is going to be up for their favorite book so far this year, *The Wild Shore*. They like to see the *old* stories, and what could be more comfortable and familiar than living on the farm after they drop the Big One? Nope, nothing scary here. The hero tried to tell Mom and Dad that he’s not a virgin, but they know better. He never seems that interested in sex anyway.

Mostly they like the ending, where Henry discovers that he is a *Writer*. It seems to agonize him terribly to write, but he is just so wonderfully sensitive. And Mom and Dad love the moral of the book, which is just like that Judy Garland movie: “There’s no place like home.”

Maybe the people who vote for the Nebulas are still afraid of their Moms and Dads; maybe they’re not Moms and Dads themselves. That would explain why they don’t vote for books with real ideas and real sex and real language in them.

And yes, Mom and Dad, there were still books like that being written, even in 1983. John Calvin Batchelor wrote one called *The Birth of the People’s Republic of Antarctica* that was not only real SF but real literature, at one and the same time. Rudy Rucker’s *The Sex Sphere* is witty and stylish and takes on sexual stereotyping with breathtaking candor. Even Paul Preuss, whose *Broken Symmetries* tries hard to be a soap opera and a spy story, still makes big league points about the way politicians use scientists and people use each other.

These people are going to keep writing this sort of book no matter how many Nebulas Brin and Robinson and their ilk manage to rack up. Watch out, Mom and Dad. They’re out to get you.

SF and Rock Videos

While other media have made fantastic leaps in power and distribution, publishing remains a smokestack industry. Now word processors and videotex media have arrived: rude intrusions into the ivied halls of literary culture.

These new technologies are pantingly ready to lay rude hands on the liliated flesh of literature, and the resulting indecencies are extremely

promising opportunities for SF. Straight literature has never taken technology seriously, and as a result it has lobotomized itself. As it flounders in an increasingly senile search for its audience, its vigorous bastard child, science fiction, might conceivably lead this technological revolution and make itself the dominant mode of literary expression in the 21st century. We owe it to ourselves to try.

We can learn from another successful synthesis of art and technology: 20th century pop music.

There has been a long alliance between SF and pop music, from the jazz of the '40s and '50s through to today's hi-tech rock. These despised genres have fermented happily together over several decades, borrowing one another's audiences and terminologies. ("New Wave" for one: a term drawn from SF and applied to rock through the mutual tradition of fanzines.)

Now, through the new art form of rock videos, we are confronted with a blazingly vigorous new medium that exploits a host of new technologies to dazzling effect. Consider the list: electric guitars, synthesizers, recording technology, video cameras, satellite transmission, cable, and television, all dedicated to the noble effort to blow the minds of today's youth. Is it any wonder that parents clamor for grotesque "lock-boxes" to keep their kids from mainlining MTV twelve hours a day? These are the same archetypal parents who have been tossing out boxes of comics and rocket-ship books for the past 50 years, for identical motives.

Recently we have been treated to the appalling spectacle of SF figures allying themselves with the forces of reaction. "Kids don't read any more," they whine. The kids are down the street popping quarters into video games instead of publishers' pockets; they're home watching MTV. What should writers and publishers learn from this?

A sense of shame. Why aren't kids lined up eight deep for the latest issue of *Isaac Asimov's*? Why isn't *Analog* doled out from locked crates by frowning members of the PTA? Because they are *dull*. Worse than dull; they're reactionary, clinging to literary-culture values while a cybernetic tsunami converts our times into a post-industrial Information Age.

It is little wonder that rock videos, like Napoleon, have pulled SF's crown from the gutter and placed it on their own heads. Movement, excitement, color, reckless visionary drive: you will find these in abundance in the work of video directors raised from birth on SF. Consequently they are producing not only excellent SF but SF often better than that in the written

media.

Consider a work like Culture Club's *Karma Chameleon*, an irresistible alternate history where 19th century blacks and whites frolic together under the benevolent aegis of transvestite Rastafarianism. As social statement, this blows away the pallid efforts of modern SF's white-bread legions of feminists and libertarians.

Has there ever been an adolescent power fantasy to compare with Billy Idol's *Dancing with Myself*, where the apotheosis of vicious teenage angst capers under the flaming eyes of Oktobriana, lust-goddess of the Soviet pornographic underground? Or a fantasy pastorate with the vividness of *Safety Dance* by Men Without Hats, with its subtly monstrous combination of 18th century gypsy merriment and the ominous whine of banks of synthesizers?

Already rock videos have seized the imagination of SF's golden-age audience of 14-year-olds. SF is missing out on this action for very real and cogent reasons. The problem is not the purported illiteracy of today's decadent youth, but their sheer lack of interest in a genre sleepwalking its way into the middle-aged pipe-and-slippers comfort of the *New York Times* Bestseller List.

The graying of SF has left it with a cadre of established writers who are rightfully reaping the harvest of years of dedication. But we must not be misled into thinking this a sign of robust health. It is to a great extent the result of a cultural power vacuum created by the abject collapse of straight literature. Unless SF acts now to recapture its sparkle, we may expect a crippling long-term drain of future writers. Today's young visionaries will ignore SF's inbred tail-chasing for the wide-open spaces of video.

This is a challenge akin to those of other smokestack industries: a crying need to re-think, re-tool, and adapt to the modern era. SF has one critical advantage: it is still a pop industry which is close to its audience. It is not yet wheezing in the iron lung of English departments or begging for government Medicare through arts grants.

SF has always preached the inevitability of change. Physician, heal thyself.

Cheap Truth. 809-C West 12th Street, Austin, Texas 78701. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. NOT COPYRIGHTED. "All Power to the Imagination"

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Editorial. * *radical, hard sf* | seeing signs that something new is imminent – | new fiction from the bounty of new technology | the perspectives opened up by contemporary science | fight back, using guerrilla tactics | New information systems | fashion | that new science fiction for the electronic age

* A collage of typeset phrases from the editorial of *Interzone 8* (Summer 1984), which called for "radical, hard sf" submissions; plus reproduced logos acknowledging that issue's subsidies from the UK Arts Council, Yorkshire Arts and Greater London Arts Association. [Ed.]

Ice Cracks Up with '83 Best of the Year

The Year's Best Science Fiction First Annual Collection, Gardner Dozois, ed., Bluejay, \$9.95.

With this volume, Bluejay Books has delivered a stinging duellist's slap to the slack jowls of the anthology market. Bluejay's daring must be roundly applauded and they've come through with a real bug-crusher in this 575-page colossus.

Veteran editor Gardner Dozois blithely ignores the stock list of Neb and Hugo nominees to give us work of genuine merit from the most esoteric of markets. The man's masochistic dedication to the genre – he reads SF in truly industrial quantity – has never been more in evidence. His opening *Summation* repays close reading for its quick-witted ideology and sagacious grasp of industry dynamics.

The book is remarkable for its lack of clunkers. Even the worst stories here can be read with a straight face. The best can stand with anything written in the past ten years. More importantly, they show an earnest effort by '80s writers to scrap old formulas and speak in a modern vocabulary.

Greg Bear serves as the exemplar. His two stories included here have won dual Nebulas, itself a very promising sign. As co-editor of the SFWA Forum, the man was in the heart of the beast, and his daring attempts to transcend his own limits are therefore doubly praiseworthy.

His bizarre *Omni* story of '82, "Petra", showed something odd stirring in the Bear attic. With "Hardfought" and "Blood Music", the man has thrown

restraint to the winds.

“Hardfought” may be thick with jargon and laden with annoying attempts at verse. But it burns with genuine visionary intensity and its Stapledonian daring arouses real wonder. This is what SF is about.

“Blood Music” has a ludicrous plot and has filed the serial numbers from Sturgeon’s “Microcosmic God”. But Bear knows what to borrow, and the ending goes for broke. Bear’s reckless energy has made him a writer to watch – and to emulate.

Efforts by more established writers show the effect of a real thaw. Silverberg’s “Multiples” is one of his best in years: smooth, devastatingly plausible, a brilliant idea handled with great skill. Tanith Lee is at her unique best with “Nunc Dimittis”, a dark fantasy that shimmers with necro-eroticism. R.A. Lafferty spryly tramples convention with a story from his splendid small-press collection, “Golden Gate”. Lafferty has always been a cult figure. He will still be a cult figure a hundred years from now.

Particularly heartening are the efforts of the “’80s Generation”, listed by Dozois as Bear, Cadigan, Gibson, Kelly, Kennedy, Kessel, Murphy, Robinson, Shiner, Sterling, Swanwick, and Willis – surely one of the oddest groupings ever. Seven have stories here – the rest figure prominently in the Honorable Mentions.

If these heirs-designate were dropped into a strong magnetic field, Gibson, Shiner, Sterling, Cadigan and Bear would immediately drift to one pole. Swanwick, Robinson, Kessel, Kelly, Murphy and Willis would take the other.

Leigh Kennedy goes her own goddamn way. Her story, “Her Furry Face”, demonstrates Kennedy’s unique style: low-key, determined prose combined with an unflinching and peculiar vision. Reading Leigh Kennedy is like having your housecat show up with a small dead pterodactyl in its jaws.

Pat Cadigan’s “Nearly Departed” is a psi story, not overly burdened with technological literacy. But its tough-minded lack of sentiment keeps reader interest up.

Bruce Sterling’s “Cicada Queen” shows this ambitious writer manfully wrestling with this complex Mechanist/Shaper future society. It should have been a novel, and apparently will be.

No review could be complete without a mention of Jack Dann’s “Blind Shemmy”. This story is so sharp-edged that it ought to be read with forceps.

Altogether, Dozois’ collection is excellent, both for what it is and for

what it promises. Its Summation and thorough list of Honorable Mentions are worth the price in themselves. Winter is over – prepare for spring cleaning.

SF: A Rhapsody. After Swift

All Human Beings would be Rich,
So many scratch where all must itch;
Though few will ever find a Cure
Except through *Crime* or *Luck*; and your
Best chance for Wealth is to inherit.
For those who have no skill or merit
A Writer's Life holds most attraction –
Requiring neither Mind nor Action.
The hack chews shreds of Literacy
To nourish those less read than he
(Thus we define Democracy).
If even this prove uninviting,
There's always Science Fiction writing;
Or baser still, if this he scorns,
He'll churn out stuff on *Unicorns*,
Assured there is no Magazine,
Can spot the difference between
A future possibility
And rankest ancient Phantasy.

The SF Field! O, sore disgrace!
Where Dunces fight for bottom Place,
All forced to exercise their Spleen,
They're in such odious Comp'ny seen,
Where every mental Deviation
Is praised as true Imagination.
If on Parnassus' top you sit,
You rarely bite, are often bit:
Conversely, in Parnassus' ditch,
There's nothing but to *boast* and *bitch*
As brother turns on savage brother
(e'en while they plagiarize each other)

As, writhing in low eminence,
They cannot make their Tales make sense.

Their failures clog the lists of DAW,
Del Rey, Ace Books, Avon, and Tor,
Where copywriters gild their sins
With “Greater Tolkiens”, “New LeGuins”,
“Beats Arthur Clarke”, “Equal to Niven”
– As if that awful thought were Heaven! –
Or “Starrier Wars”... And Sturgeon there,
Here Budrys, “Masterpiece” declare,
“Not to be missed...” Such feeble lies
Support a feebler enterprise
Of Royalties at 4%
Which scarcely serve to pay the rent
– Or keep a Mistress in a Tent! –
Yet still these hacks are over-paid!

Such fools will never make the grade.
They have no Style, no Spark, no Topic.
Their very Pains are *Microscopic*.
Although they holler for attention
In Fanzine, *Locus*, and Convention,
With Asinine Insistence –
The World knows not of their Existence,
The World hears not their Lamentation,
And holds SF in... Detestation....



*The Muse of Dirty Laundry; The Muse of Flaming Rhetoric;
The Muse of Bigger Royalties.*

Cheap Truth. 809-C West 12th Street, Austin, Texas USA 78701. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. NOT COPYRIGHTED. Our special thanks this issue to Thomas C. Squire, C.B.E., Lecturer in Future Culture at the University of Texas at Austin. “Worthless But Not Valueless”

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Editorial. Magazines have an immediacy and recklessness unmatched by any other SF medium. Cheap, disposable, instantly gratifying, SF magazines are the thin edge of the genre's cultural wedge. And non-fiction magazines can help the SF writer and reader escape genre stereotypes and come to grips with the real social and technical issues of the human future. Welcome, then, to this special issue of *Cheap Truth*, with the first installment of a new review section, "Squirring Mags".

State of the Field

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. \$17.50/yr. This splendid periodical, reputedly edited on Ed Ferman's kitchen table, shows the long-standing primacy of small-scale craftsmanship in the SF genre. Its standards are high, its overhead low, its distribution excellent. The genre offers no better arena for young writers. The pay is modest to the point of penury, but a well-placed *F&SF* story can attract more attention than a novel.

F&SF is sometimes troubled by fantasies of a peculiarly matronly and suburban air. But *F&SF* is unafraid of relatively harsh language and radical concepts; and these often come to the rescue just as the reader is begging for insulin. A lively Books column struggles manfully for credibility and standards, and the Science column, though burdened by the increasing flakiness of Isaac Asimov, serves as a useful ideological anchor. *F&SF*'s layout combines dignity and elegance. The covers excel, and the cartoons are funny. And at \$6.50 the long-advertised *F&SF* T-shirts are a real bargain. They come in a vivid punk red and look great with the sleeves ripped out.

Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 1933, Marion, Ohio 43305. \$19.50/yr. Hard-working editrix Shawna McCarthy now luxuriates in the well-deserved ambience of her first Hugo. With Herculean effort, she has diverted a river of new writers through the Augean stables of *IASFM*; and while there is still plenty of crap around, it no longer actually chokes the doorways. It is now possible to buy and read *Asimov's* and find as many as three decent stories in a single issue.

IASFM has always suffered from faanitis; it often cringingly genuflects to Neanderthal fan-letters. It also suffers from Dr. Asimov's own prolixity, for his prolificacy has now reached the terminal stage and he can write any amount of anything about nothing. *IASFM* still does not take its audience seriously, but at least it has stopped actively insulting it, and things are looking up.

Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact, P.O. Box 1936, Marion Ohio 43306. \$12/yr. *Analog* suffers from advanced hardening of the arteries; it has become old, dull, and drivelling. In an era of unparalleled sociotechnical ferment, *Analog* exudes the stale, mummylike odor of attitudes preserved too long. *Analog's* brain and heart are in canopic jars somewhere, while its contributors' word-processors spit out copy on automatic pilot. It is a situation screaming for reform. *Analog* no longer permits itself to be read.

Amazing Science Fiction Stories, P.O. Box 72089-BL, Chicago, Ill 60609 \$9/yr. The venerable *Amazing* declines precipitously under the smug and tactless editorship of George Scithers. In late years it has steadily lost money, circulation, and influence, and it is currently surrounded by rumors of collapse. Only a complete change in editorial outlook, plus a sudden resurgence of intensity and quality throughout the genre, could save it now.

Interzone, 370 Avocado Street, Apt. 1, Costa Mesa CA 92627 \$10/yr. This British SF quarterly is rife with puzzling self-contradiction. It has the finest editorial ideology in the English-speaking world, bound cheek-by-jowl with stories often riddled with conceit and void of substance. Yet *Interzone* sustains hope with unpredictable bursts of appalling brilliance and a consistent improvement in design and layout. It is the only truly experimental SF magazine in the Anglophone market. Its ingenuously sincere editorial cadre have done what they can; *Interzone's* problems are symptomatic of much larger difficulties within the genre itself. *Interzone's* success depends on a general reform, which *Interzone* is bravely attempting to lead. It offers readers a unique sense of openness and risk. It truly deserves support.

The Last Wave, P.O. Box 3206, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. \$8/yr. This sad and awful effort, self-billed as "The Last Best Hope of Speculative Fiction", demonstrates with ghastly clarity the utter artistic bankruptcy of the '60s idiom. Its antiquarian writers hit unerringly on the worst of both worlds, combining the intellectual sluggishness of coda sci-fi with the self-satisfied pretension of would-be literateurs. *The Last Wave* is dead in the water.

Omni, P.O. Box 5700, Bergenfield, N.J. 07621 \$24/yr. This anomalous publication, the virginal daughter of Bob Guccione's porn empire, takes the prize for peculiarity. Though its rates are the best in the business, its stories are often ignored. Genre readers resent paying \$2.50 for one or two stories; while *Omni's* "Boy Eats Own Foot" approach to science coverage makes its reportage highly suspect. *Omni's* fiction is often excellent, but its power-mad art department has earned an unpleasant notoriety. Stories are trimmed to fit like styrofoam, occasionally without authorial consultation; sometimes, incredibly, lines are even *added*. Stories often bristle with non sequiturs and over-edited jumpiness. *Omni's* oppressive policies and slender output of fiction conspire to keep it out of the first rank.

The Tech-Head's Workshop

Science (Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science) 1515 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington DC 20005 \$56/yr. No one actually *reads* all of each weekly issue of *Science*. Research articles and papers are presented baldly, in painfully specialized vocabularies meant to preserve intellectual turf rather than to enlighten the layman. But close attention to the Letters, News and Comment, Editorials, and above all the astonishing and wonderful *advertisements* brings a wealth of insight to the patient reader. *Science* is the tribal tom-tom of the nation's scientific/technical culture, a bizarre and very human world full of odd, passionate feuds and byzantine power-structures. It is a world worth knowing, and *Science*, though sometimes as oblique as *Pravda*, shows it like no other.

Science 85 (same address, \$18/yr.) This layman's magazine is the sister publication of *Science*. Its news coverage is authoritative and excellent, with fine graphics. But it often displays an irritating arrogance and condescension, and its annoyingly up-scale ads reek of East Coast yuppiedom. Genial essays and awful poetry sometimes fail to disguise its essential nature as an organ of propaganda.

High Technology, P.O. Box 358, Arlington, MA 02174 \$21/yr. This peculiar and wonderful publication is the handmaiden of yet another subculture, that of the corporate investor and industrial entrepreneur. These hard-bitten souls are impatient with academic obfuscation, which means that *High Tech's* articles are miracles of clarity. You'll find no gushing cosmic

gosh-wowism here; just cool analyses and cash-on-the-barrelhead pragmatism. Ominous articles on high-tech weaponry take a prominent place, putting the American military-industrial complex into refreshingly stark relief. Strident editorials, unique advertisements, international scope, and relentless practicality make *HT* an invaluable and fascinating document.

Scientific American, P.O. Box 5919, New York N.Y. 10164 \$24/yr. For generations, Americans have read *Scientific American* with a vague, gnawing sense of duty, in the earnest hope of intellectual betterment. And for generations this magazine has narcotized them with its cluttered prose and useless graphics. It's pretentious and dull and we deserve better.

American Scientist, P.O. Box 2889, Clinton, Ohio 52735 \$24/yr. This is the house journal of Sigma Xi, "The Scientific Research Society". Sigma Xi seems to be a clubber, more personal group than the AAAS, and its articles are by members, who attempt to make the significance of their own work clear in relatively straightforward language. The intended audience is fellow scientists of different disciplines, rather than potential rivals for priority or funding. This distinguishes *AM-SCI* essays from *Science* papers, which are clearly intended to baffle outsiders, indoctrinate colleagues in in-group terminology, and stake irrefutable claims to particular sub-sub-disciplines. *American Scientist* is consequently much easier to read. It's a professional journal, however, not a popularizing work, which means that it comes with the marvelous specialized advertising that so often provokes the layman's sense of wonder.

New Scientist, 200 Meacham Avenue, Elmont, N.Y. 11003 \$95/yr. This intriguing British weekly has a deliberately activist point of view, replete with wry comments on swaggering Yankees, Third World exploitation, and lavishly funded military boondoggles. *New Scientist* is seen as somewhat left-of-center by American standards. (With the American federal budget showing a 65% increase in "defense-related" R&D, a certain chumminess with the right-wing has become a bread-and-butter fact of life for battalions of Yank scientists.)

This is only a smattering of the smorgasbord of journals, many of them newly founded, which exist to feed the technical curiosity of the new post-industrial readership. And these are for generalists. The explosion of specialized technical journals has given the world a new phenomenon: "information pollution." This is hazardous territory, best dealt with by computer. Theorists warn us that information is losing its value: it is *attention*

to information that must be rationed and conserved.

Technological literacy is crucial, but by no means *enough*. With *New Scientist*, we find ourselves edging onto the slippery slope of Social and Political Issues. These journals, too, bizarre, outrageous, sometimes blackly humorous, deserve a segment of our overloaded attention. We will grapple with this topic in the second installment of “Squirring Mags”.

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“It is better to *do* something than to *be* someone”

Cheap Truth 8

Editorial. Call the Black Box at 300 baud, (512) 835-9742.

Cheap Truth stalwart Sue Denim sharpens her lance and charges the windmill:

Real Sf Fans Don't Read Priest

There's a saying: "*Real* programmers don't eat quiche... they eat Twinkies and Szechuan food." This kind of junk-food mentality is true of your typical SF fan, too. Your *real* SF fan doesn't read Priest. He doesn't read Dick or Ballard, either. He reads David Brin and Larry Niven and Anne McCaffrey. Junk food for the brain.

And what's more, he's proud of it. He holds his head high so the light will catch his coke-bottle glasses, hoists his basketball gut, and, with the odor of Twinkies on his breath, tells you, "I'm *special*. It takes a special kind of person to appreciate this stuff."

And the hell of it is, every so often something that really *is* special comes along in a junk-food wrapper. Like a granola bar, or maybe chicken *cordon bleu* on a bun – it looks like junk food, tastes like junk food, but it's actually got real nutrition in it. This year we're lucky – we've had a couple of rich, vitamin-packed granola bars already, and at least one of them is being scarfed down by junk-food addicts everywhere.

Certainly they like the taste of *Neuromancer* (by William Gibson, an Ace Special, \$2.95 (Gollancz L 8.95)). I mean, this is high-tech enough to satisfy the most acned sixteen-year-old hacker whose only sex life is getting his modem on-line with an X-rated bulletin board. Never mind that it shows you how the future may very well *be*, never mind the political issues, this guy knows what it's like the be plugged *in*, man.

But that's okay. Literature, the really good stuff, has a way of changing your thinking whether you want it to or not.

But let's talk about our other granola bar for a minute. You see, the problem with this kind of literature is it's got a short shelf life. A book that comes out in September might as well have a little printed squib on the back that says "Best if enjoyed before November 1", like you see on bags of

Twinkies, because in no time at all it's going to be gone.

You may already have trouble finding *The Digging Leviathan* (by James P. Blaylock, Ace, \$2.95). You probably passed it by the first time because you weren't interested in some Edgar Rice Burroughs pastiche, or because it looked like a kid's book. I suppose it *is* a kid's book, at least in the sense that Jim, the main protag, is only 15 – but then Daniel Pinkwater's *Lizard Music* is a kid's book, and you shouldn't miss that one either.

What makes this book special is its integrity. Blaylock refused to humiliate his characters for the sake of a cheap laugh, quite an achievement when those characters are a bunch of lunatic pseudo-scientists trying to get to Pellucidar. This isn't Burroughs' junk-food Pellucidar with the dinosaurs and all, though – this is the “real thing”, the hollow earth written about by countless other nutcases over the years.

These people get so real that it's scary. We see them at their Newtonian Society meetings and in the backyard workshop where they are training mice to be amphibians. But we also see Jim's father William raging in paranoia at a neighbor's dog, even, in one of the book's most brilliant scenes, at a tube of toothpaste.

Blaylock's best trick, though, is the way he draws you in so deeply. When William looks in the mirror, the readers see their own faces.

When you finish this book, give it to somebody who likes Twinkies – but don't tell them it's good for them. You don't want to scare them off.

Clarke: A Social Study

Arthur C. Clarke's latest book is *1984: Spring*, a nonfiction collection of essays, articles and speeches of varying consequentiality. Many are simply filler, the genial time-marking of a dean of letters. The flyleaf lists fifty-four Clarke books, and anyone familiar with them will find that little has changed. Clarke's personal credo was set many decades ago.

Some critics have been less than kind to Clarke and his thinking. “A two-dimensional space-jockey rationalist, a libration away from mysticism” was Bob Black's memorable phrase. But Clarke's millennial scientism peculiarly fits the spirit of the age. And if the dizzy 1980s fit Clarke as well, then it is partly his own doing. To a great extent he has *created* the brand of visionary technolatry that is our era's broadest streak of optimism.

His visions – “prophecies” is not too strong a word – have been spread

across the planet in twenty million books in thirty languages. The movie 2001, alone, set Clarchetypes into the backbrains of millions. Astronauts joined NASA because of Clarke's books. *Cosmonauts* read him. His influence on mass culture ranks with that of H.G. Wells, and has possibly surpassed it.

Clarke is a political and social activist. The originator of the communications satellite. The winner of the UNESCO Kalinga Prize. The Chancellor of Moratuwa University in his adopted home, Sri Lanka. The man behind the revolutionary suggestion that the United Nations create its own spy satellite system. (The instant rejection of this notion by both superpowers strikingly confirms its essential soundness.)

And then there is Clarke the media celebrity. Host of a television series. Consider the recent *Omni* commercial, in which Clarke, on a deserted beach, presides over mystic door-frames opening onto star-speckled cosmic vistas. This is his folk-mystique in its purest form: Clarke as pop icon, the horn-rimmed Gandalf of the spaceways.

Clarke might seem to be a multifaceted, divided man, but this is illusion. Clarke is whole; it is our culture that is divided.

More than any other SF writer, Clarke truly lives in the interzone between science and literature. His career has been a deliberate struggle to make this no-man's-land a place worth living and working in. And he has made both sides respect him on his own terms.

When all is said and done, the social role he has created may be his most important legacy. Few will ever fill it, for few have his gifts or intellectual stature. But those who do will find their way smoothed by the precedent he has set.

Clarke's success was no accident. He pursued fame quite deliberately, with a set ambition he has followed for years.

Clarke has always portrayed his decision to live in Sri Lanka as a dreamer's romantic gesture. But one wonders. It made him a large frog in a small pond, giving him a scope and influence he could never have had in a larger, industrial nation. It removed him from the centers of publishing, with their subtly destructive practicalities. It allowed him to pursue both his hobbies, and his muse, without distractions. And it erased his parochiality, giving him the global view that is one of his most attractive attributes.

Such hardheaded ambition may seem out of character for this gentle and donnish man. But the evidence is there. Consider *The Sands of Mars*, written

in 1957. It is utterly dated now – all except for the role of its protagonist, Martin Gibson.

Gibson is an internationally famous British SF writer of an extrapolated 1990s. He has the sort of bestseller status and critical attention that must have seemed pure fantasy to Clarke's fellow SF scribes of the '50s. Gibson writes "novels of space travel" and popular science journalism. He begins as almost a figure of fun: fussy, overimaginative, constantly teased by arrogant know-it-all technicians. But as the book develops, Gibson's role becomes crucial: the role of the man in the middle, the irreplaceable interpreter, between powerful but mute scientists and an equally powerful but ignorant lay public.

The book ends with Gibson's mystic vision of his own future: political power, a role of leadership in a new world. "For the first time, Gibson knew what lay at the end of the road on which he had now set his feet. One day, perhaps, it would be his duty, and his privilege, to take over.... It might have been sheer self-deception, or it might have been the first consciousness of his own still hidden powers – but whichever it was, he meant to know."

It was Clarke's autobiography – in the extrapolative mode.

As an artist, Clarke may have little to teach the gifted hot-shots who are his successors. But those who chafe at the confines of our ghetto – those who know that SF is more important to our world than it has ever been allowed to be – have a lot to learn from the canny old Sage of Ceylon.

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"Get Nineties!"

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Editorial. Ghettos are insular places. The antics of ghetto elders or sinister youth gangs may assume absurd importance to a degraded and indigent populace. In their wretched haste to eke out a living, they may forget that the outside world exists.

This is modern SF's predicament. Extrapolations, that once held some intellectual validity, have now become distorted folk tales, passed down through generations. SF's vision of the future has become a Punch and Judy show, ritualized, predictable, and fit only for children.

This is not due to latter-day decadence. It is the result of a profound terror of the future and what it holds, a fin-de-millenaire obsession with apocalypse. Reader and author alike wrap themselves in escapist nonsense, quilted up from rags and tatters of jingoist imperial Americana or the comfortable minutiae of technical obsession.

Yet this represents a profound abdication of SF's role in society. It is as if the scouts of a panic-stricken army had retreated to an obscure corner of camp.

Attempts to actually go out and survey the territory are dismissed out of hand: too difficult, too dangerous, too depressing. Too much hard work. It's easier to exploit the panic: either by adding to it with the latest gray dystopia, or by preying on the terror of a demoralized readership by offering cathartic power fantasies.

To survive and revitalize itself, SF must find new visions of the human future. Never mind that 40-year-old crap about atomic armageddon. If we can't see any farther than that, then we will have added to the apathy and fatalism that are the allies of destruction.

Think of it as an act of self-preservation. In the case of any profound disruption of society, our snug little ghetto will be the first to go. It's up to us to look for ways out. If not us, who?

As a first step in this daunting and worthy task, *Cheap Truth* offers the following guideposts in the wilderness.

Squirring Mags: Second Installment Social and Political Issues

Afkar Inquiry, 55 Banner Street, London EC1Y 8PX. Single issues US\$2.50, UK80p. Perhaps the first order of business is to destroy our preconceptions and few magazines could be better fitted for that than *Afkar*. Imagine an English-language magazine by radical fundamentalist Islamic *futurists*. Essays on Koranic epistemology alternate with analyses of Alvin Toffler and solar-age, small-is-beautiful manifestos. The upshot is little short of staggering: defiant, militant, self-contradictory, blazing with dangerous energies. Those who think of the Muslim Resurgence as a vaguely comic medieval anomaly should read this post-haste. *Afkar* is a mix of mosques and monorails, AK-47s and Arab satellites, a propaganda organ for a new intelligentsia, who fancy themselves the avant-garde for an OPEC-financed global Islamic rebirth. Their writers are smart, fluent, furiously angry, and fanatically determined to build a future “neither East nor West”. They mean business.

South, The Magazine of the Third World, Suite 319, 230 Park Avenue, NYNY 10169, US\$28/yr.; also 13th Floor, New Zealand House, 80 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4TS. The US media ignore Third Worlders unless they’re either starving, or shooting Americans. Yet the curves of demographics and economic growth prove that the developing nations will wield an ever-growing influence in years to come. This is an excellent magazine, authoritative, well-written, with superior graphics. It covers Third World politics, finance, technology, and the arts, always with mind-opening perspectives. It is neither militant nor Marxist, yet doesn’t cater to comfortable Yankee prejudice. Highly recommended.

World Press Review, Box 915, Farmingdale, NY 11737, \$19.95/yr. *WPR* is a summary of “news and views from the foreign press”, most of them devoted to nervous assessments of what the rest of the world thinks of the US. “Moscow Beat” and “Asia/Pacific Beat” are especially intriguing. Its interest in economic issues gives it a forecaster’s outlook useful to investors, speculators – and extrapolators.

Whole Earth Review, 27 Gate Five Road, Sausalito, CA 94965, US\$18/yr. This periodical, formerly *CoEvolution Quarterly*, has gone through a marvelous sea-change. From tired old ’60s tech hippies they have now become shiny new ’80s hip techies, a much more palatable breed. They have published *The Whole Earth Software Catalog*, possibly the best book ever written for the layman about the promise and peril of personal computers. Even the earnest, dirt-stained, denim CQ was always good for a

shot of uplift and optimism; now, equipped with red-hot com technology, they are like hardened jungle guerrillas suddenly armed with Stealth bombers. These Green, eco-decentralist cadres may have underestimated the opposition in their struggle to create a sustainable, humanized society. But they suddenly have a big new chunk of loose change and a new constituency revolted by recent callous excesses against the environment. Exciting things are going to come from this magazine, and though their utopian schemes will almost certainly fail they will have a strong role in shaping the future.

The Planetary Report (journal of The Planetary Society) 110 S. Euclid Avenue, Pasadena CA 91101 (available with membership). A very interesting ideological struggle is taking shape within this slim little propaganda mag. The Planetary Society is Carl Sagan's pressure group for space exploration. The civilian scientific intelligentsia behind this publication are apparently nauseated by military ambitions in space. They have opened their membership to Soviet space scientists, thereby gaining in their last issue an incredible coup of previously unreleased Venusian surface photos. With the recent "nuclear winter" flap, Sagan and his ideological allies have gone to the barricades against what they perceive as crypto-Christian jingoistic Neanderthals in high office. Rarely do scientists speak out with this kind of media savvy, and they appear to have struck a chord. These people are not to be underestimated, despite their painful habit of talking down to their audience and their occasional excesses in mystic scientism (of the "Our DNA Must Reach The Stars" variety). And if their privately financed radiotelescope Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence, by some cosmic mischance, should happen to deliver, well, all bets are off.

• • •

We now yield the floor to a worthy comrade in the globe-spanning network of *Cheap Truth* shills. Leaping from ambush behind the smoking office xerox, it's that two-fisted voice of reason, Your Friendly Editor, Mark Theroux.

Gripe Time

You people out there think that all science fiction editors do is talk on the phone, go to lunch, and attend conventions. Not so. Large amounts of time are spent coddling and placating writers who want to know "when are you going to run my stuff", "do you think anyone will like it?", "I'm stuck in the

middle....” etc. (You know who you are.)

That’s okay, it’s what we’re here for. What editors hate is ungratefulness. Take for example the author with whom I spend hours of office time going over a ms that had potential. I felt sorry for the writer because he was only in town for a few days. I liked the story and it was a slow day.

The rewrite didn’t work and I rejected the story. Never got a thanks. Next time I heard of that writer he’s making a big public stink.

Or how about the writer who asked for, *begged* for editorial comments on his ms. I wrote a three-page editorial letter, single-spaced, made suggestions, and what did I get back? A two-page personally and professionally insulting harangue criticising my solicited comments.

Another time, I asked someone for a change in the beginning of a story. The author said sure. I got back the ms with the same beginning but with a different ending (worse than the original). I’m convinced that some writers cannot hear what editors say (and you know who *you* are, too.)

Or how about the writers whose prose cannot be *touched* without permission. Don’t change a comma, period, colon or misspelling – or else!

I don’t care how long you’ve been writing or how famous you are, you can’t be objective about your own work. Stephen King is a prime example. Yeah, he’s successful, but boy, does he need an editor. Someone who can spot the inconsistencies, the repetition, the lapses of logic in plot or characterization. Editors aren’t trying to destroy your words, your thoughts, or your reputations, you paranoid idiots. They’re trying their damndest to make a good piece of work better, a potentially great story or novel live up to that potential. That’s what a good editor can do. Really, we’re on your side.

Cheap Truth Electronic Letter Column

(512) UFO-SMOF 500/1200 baud

Title: HOWDY VINCE | From: Chuck | Date: 01-26-85

Re [CT 9](#). Trust you will not open your newsletter to further petty whining from self-styled taste arbiters miffed at “uppity writers.” True, “Friendly Editor,” we “difficult writers” know who we are... but do you really know who *you* are, “trying your damndest” to “make our work better”? How many writers are failed editors? Few, or none. But how many editors are failed writers?

Editors, with a few rare exceptions, are mediocre intellects hoping to achieve second-hand glory from discovering and interfering with creative talent that they lack and envy. Their regular paycheck fosters more loyalty to job tenure than to literature. Thus much great work, and almost all innovation, is blocked rather than enhanced; and an editor of this ilk is not intellectually qualified to comprehend the issues raised in *Cheap Truth*, let alone comment on them. Kindly reserve your organ for intellectual idealism, not middlebrow carpings demanding more “respect” from the exploited.

Best wishes from your buddy, CHUCK

Title: LANGUAGE | From: anonymous | Date: 01-29-85

It’s all very well to be vitriolic, critical, and hit below the belt, I like the controversy. But *really!*

Reading Mr. O’s zine brought to mind the quaint prose babbled by the self-styled beatniks of the ’50s in smoke-filled basements-cum-cafes. We’re supposed to think this multisyllable nonsense is the height of Avant-Garde. Are the big words there to make us think it carries more weight than otherwise? Does Mr. Omniaveritas really *talk* like that?

Title: [CT#5](#) | From: Glen Cox | Date: 02-05-85

Vincent, We at Warner Brothers would like to thank you for the wonderful review of MTV in your fanzine *Cheap Truth*. More people like you are needed to explain the surrealism of the underlying metaphors of such great videos as *Karma Chameleon* and *Dancing with Myself*. Please try to get a Tuesday night free next month so you can be the next Guest VJ. We want you to explain the Marxism behind every one of Duran Duran’s videos to date.

Sincerely yours, Glen (for Empty V)

Title: LETTER BY U.S. MAIL | From: Pat Cadigan | Date: 02-09-85

Dear V.O. of C.T.,

Yeah, when you’re running a magazine without staples, you have to make up in substance what you lack in overhead.

I applaud your motives. Good luck and I hope you can avoid being seduced by clubbiness, being “famous”, and believing too much in the hype; taking one’s self more seriously than the work; stuff like that. Beware of the fact that all movements, no matter how benign, tend to breed storm troopers. Above all, to thine own self be true and it follows as the night the day... well, you know.

I am not a cyberhead and have only a dim idea what all that stuff is about (in my case “cyberpunk” should read “more punk than cyber”).

Life is funny. Don't forget to laugh. Frankie says “Relax”, and all that.
Cheers, PAT CADIGAN

Title: MTV? HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA | From: Denis Loubet |
Date: 02-09-85

Oh, surrre, Vincent, the 12- and 14-year-old Heavy-Metal mainliners all get the subtle socio-political commentary and daring, visionary, SF influence from such gems of the genre as the oceanically apocalyptic *Karma Chameleon*. The Ozzy Osbourn crowd gasps, not in glee at Ozzy's vocal virtuosity, heavens no, they crave the delicate shadings of Ozzy's techno-rapport with new wave mainstream science fiction.

Oh boy, I can use big words too.

Sorry, Mr. V, all I see on MTV is the use of video special effects, some good, some bad, to add flash to the audio portion. A lot of effects are out-of-place in the videos, and annoying trends are rampant.

For instance, it seems that *every* future world is covered in busted machines, with rejects from *The Road Warrior* wandering around preying on each other for spare parts to eat. Some are – get this visionary touch – tied to windmills, or locked in cages. A lot of times, these downtrodden new-wave clotheshorses are freed from mindless drudgery by the hero of the piece. (This conveniently being the lead vocalist. Always!) Boy! I just love all these fresh ideas, don't you?

Come on, Vincent, you can't be serious.

Title: REPLY TO DENIS | From: Vincent Omniaveritas | Date: 02-12-85

Hey Denis? How's this for serious?

Last year *Analog* lost 12 percent of its circulation.

Asimov's lost 25 percent of its readership and dropped to its lowest circulation ever.

Amazing is read by less than 11,000 people, probably the smallest figure ever for a professional SF magazine. If it drops below 10,000, SFWA's own rules will have to officially reclassify it as a fanzine!

And MTV is the number one cable channel on the continent.

What's the reason, Denis? Two very serious reasons, man. First, these mags have been so damned dull that they lack even the pop glitter of some of MTV's worst. And the second reason is the arrogant complacency of editors,

writers, and certain fans who will remain nameless.

Title: LETTER RE CT 3 | From: Patrick Nielsen Hayden | Date: 02-14-85

[Editor's note: Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden publish the print fanzine *Izzard*, at 75 Fairview #2B, New York, NY 10040, at \$2/issue or 3 for \$5.]

Dear Mr. O:

New *Izzard* coming out real soon now, you bet; otherwise, swamped at the sleek mills of New York publishing biz.

Which reminds me to pass on a bit of egoboo from one of my co-editors at Chelsea House Books, one S.T. Joshi, the closest person extant to a successor to August Derleth (he's published several zillion words of HPLcrit, a couple of weighty bibliographies, and is currently editing the definitive version of Lovecraft's fictional output for Arkham House, going back to the original manuscripts). Reading [the Lovecraft interview](#), he smiled, chuckled, snorted, rolled around on the floor a few times, and solemnly informed me it was "very true-to-life". There you go.

Pavoot, PATRICK NIELSEN HAYDEN

Title: Re CT 5 | From: Denis Loubet | Date: 02-16-85

I just finished reading [CT#5](#). What utter rubbish! "Oh dear, oh my, I do so hate the books my Mom and Pop read," Sue Denim whines. "Those dolphins are so cute," she smirks. Well, damnit, I read *Startide Rising* and liked it a lot. All the aspects she found objectionable failed to keep me from enjoying the book. A "good" book does not *require* explicit sex scenes. They tend to distract one from the story line, besides creating a weak spot in the binding. A "good" book should not require what some might consider foul language. And what the hell is wrong with the "humans'll win 'cause we're better" plotline? It *is* about the oldest line in SF, I'll admit, but still viable. And reasonable, given the universe Brin has created. It's satisfying to read.

On to other pastures. Have you considered the idea that maybe the kids watch MTV because it's *easy*? You don't have to have any imagination. You needn't have an IQ over two digits. You don't even have to know how to read. Have you considered the idea that it might be the dying educational system that's responsible for the lagging sales? These kids *can't read*! What the hell are they going to do with a copy of *analog*? Stroke it? Christ, if you wrote SF to appeal to *that* audience, it would have to be in less than three letter words at first grade level. That ain't *any* kind of SF!

I pray that some good might come of it all. Maybe the kids'll pick up on the odd high-tech/spaceflight slant of MTV. Whether this will push them towards an education, or merely instill the desire for a better digital-audio ghetto-blasters I don't know. But I have an uneasy feeling...

Is that what you're looking for?

Title: SUE DENIM PICKS UP THE GAUNTLET | From: Sue Denim | Date: 02-17-85

Glad somebody noticed that I am *not* Vince. The opinions of the reviewers in CT belong to those reviewers alone (this is truer than I meant, unfortunately).

Denis and Information Monster both get the creepy-crawlies when people in their SF novels talk like real people or behave like real people. I realize that the combined sexual experience of most of you would amount to less running time than the average TV sitcom, but us folks in the real world get laid as a basic part of our existence. It's *important* to us.

This relates to the subject of David Brin as follows: Yes, we can learn a lot about a relationship by listening to the participants talk. *If* it's a genuine relationship. The ones in *Startide Rising* are phony, childish, and unbelievable. Also, if we're going to hear them talk, then let's by god *hear* them. Don't tell me somebody "muttered an oath". That's the writer stepping in and saying, "Cover your ears, children, you shouldn't hear this." Personally I prefer to make that sort of judgement for myself.

Also you can learn a hell of a lot about characters from watching them fuck. Provided they have the apparatus (which Brin's characters didn't seem to) and aren't just smooth plastic, like Barbie and Ken.

Vince has his ideas about good SF and I have mine. What I like, besides good writing and fresh ideas, are believable characters. By this I don't mean the bronzed supermen of *Startide Rising*, but characters who live in the kind of illogical, antagonistic world that I live in. Philip Dick comes immediately to mind, so does J.G. Ballard, so does Kate Wilhelm. I also (gasp) read a lot of stuff that *isn't* SF – Robert Stone, Jayne Anne Phillips, Thomas McGuane, stuff that wouldn't do you guys any harm to try.

I also like MTV. Not because it makes such a great appeal to the intellect (as all you Piers "Robot" Anthony fans keep pointing out) but because the best videos work *visually*, which is the point. It's the last bastion of surrealism, and who cares whether a 13-year-old in parachute pants "understands" it the way all us ivory-tower intellectuals do? It's a living

medium, people watch it, and without that minimum any art form is going to die. And remember Sturgeon's Law, for Christ's sake, 95% of everything is crap, and for every piece of shit Def Leppard video there's a lousy SF novel or a lousy mainstream novel, for that matter. Don't attack an entire medium for its worst examples, but look at what the potentials are and what the creative people are doing with them.

Finally, don't sneer at people whose vocabularies are better than your own. Words are the basic tools of this medium, and if yours aren't very good, maybe you should try to get them sharpened. Love and kisses, SUE (Ms. Denim, to you)

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"Bored with the Apocalypse"

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How the Other Half Reads

The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years by Chingis Aitmatov, translator John French, Indiana University Press, 1983.

People in the Soviet Union still have a nineteenth-century allegiance to the printed word. Authors are major public figures. Poets recite to packed soccer stadiums. Classic works of Russian literature are available, and their lack of Marxist ballast makes them seem vividly energetic and relevant. In the Soviet Union you can be a “literary intellectual”, and no one will grin and ask what you *really* do. You can get a license for it, and join the Writer’s Union, and the State will pay you a salary.

Chingis Aitmatov, a Kirghiz national born in 1928, is a highly prominent, established Soviet literateur. He’s been a member of the Supreme Soviet, a winner of the Lenin Prize for literature, a Hero of Socialist Labor, an editor of *Novy Mir*, an official correspondent for *Pravda*. His Marxist-Leninist credentials are impeccable.

And he is wildly popular. He is considered one of the most gifted authors of the post-Stalinist generation, not only by Party hacks but by the “liberal” intelligentsia. When a writer like Aitmatov turns to science fiction, it behooves us to take notice.

The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years, published in 1980 to vast acclaim, is a remarkable, revealing piece of work. We should make it clear at once that it is terrible science fiction. Aitmatov has not escaped the condescension typical of mainstream writers who dabble in the field. In fact the SF element has been grafted into the narrative for ideological reasons, which is remarkable in itself.

The predominant movement in Brezhnev-era Soviet fiction was the “village novel”, simple small-scale narratives of rural life, drenched with pre-Revolutionary nostalgia. Through this device it was possible to dodge the crippling load of Marxist relevance demanded of State writers. In the early ’80s, literary ideologues decided that enough was enough and demanded that Soviet writers to produce large works on a “global scope”. Aitmatov has used wide-screen SF techniques to combine the popular “village” narrative with

the new requirements.

Strangely, although its traditional SF elements are abominable – ludicrous blue-haired aliens, moons and planets whizzing by at the speed of light – Aitmatov's novel does have a genuine SF feel. For it is about technology and its impact on human life.

The hero is a Kazakh Central Asian railroad worker. He lives in a godforsaken steppe railway junction with a handful of sturdy peasants. For decades he and his friend have tended the snorting machines, living a harsh, isolated life, not without dignity, but without much decadent fun. The book opens with the friend's death.

The Kazakh hero stubbornly decides to give his friend a traditional Kazakh Moslem burial, a rite worthy of a "true steppe cavalier". But technical progress has invaded everything. He has given his life to the railroad. A large rocket-complex has been built across the steppe, and its great rumbling launches light the sky. What is left to our hero? What is the meaning of his tribal traditions and memories? Has he thrown away his life, or does it all mean something, was the sacrifice worth it? These issues are handled with great skill and deep ambiguity.

At the same time, a large and somewhat bogus SF counterplot rumbles along in parallel. The novel is set in the near future, in which aliens have been contacted, through Soviet-American cooperation in space.

Here is another remarkable aspect of the book: its utter lack of hostility toward the West. This space effort is administered in friendly unison by Yanks and Soviets, from an aircraft carrier in the Pacific. (This ship is in itself a powerful image of hope for the Soviet audience. They have no aircraft carriers and see them as fearsome symbols of aggressive capitalism.)

These aliens are blissful, socially-advanced superbeings of vaguely Marxist derivation. They are of vast power and supernal wisdom. Are we to join them, or stick mulishly to our human heritage and its faults?

This question roughly parallels the first theme. Aitmatov attempts to give the events in the remote railway junction a cosmic resonance. If he fails, it's because his SF concepts are essentially ridiculous. And because, in the last analysis, his book has the painful, disjointed feel of a work designed by committee.

Yet it remains engrossing. Its flinching view of delicate political issues, such as the Stalinist purges, has a hot-potato daring. Its allusions are subtle and its scenes memorable. And there's no red-flag-waving, sunset-riding

agitprop trash here; but hard issues faced down by a brave man who is in too deep to back out.

This book was written in a metaphorical straitjacket, and it shows it. Yet this much must be admitted: Aitmatov's book speaks to us in the West with force and relevance. Would our glittery, escapist tripe translate half so well?

• • •

Cheap Truth radical Sue Denim seizes the Dean's Office and issues her list of demands:

Son of Kent State

The 1985 Nebula Awards will be handed out on May 4, fifteen years to the day from the shootings at Kent State University in Ohio.

Once again the armed might of conservatism faces the radical vision of a new generation, this time across the distance of a ballot. The voices of repression range from the senile babblings of Robert Heinlein to the California vapidness of Larry Niven to the moist-eyed urgency of Kim Stanley Robinson; arrayed against them are William Gibson, Lewis Shiner, and Jack Dann. Can they prevail?

Every year Heinlein cranks out another volume of brain-dead maunderings; every year the sycophants cry "Heinlein is back!"; every year they lie. Even if *Job* (Del Rey, \$16.95) were a good book, or even a readable book, which I assure you it is not, why would anyone want to give this man a Nebula award? Plenty do, and it's for the same reason they gave Henry Fonda an Oscar for a movie as wretched as *On Golden Pond* – because he was no longer dangerous.

Larry Niven *is* dangerous, but in a socially approved way – much like, for instance, an armed National Guardsman at a student riot. "War would be a hopeful sign..." he muses in his latest perfunctory effort, *The Integral Trees* (Del Rey, \$3.50). It's touted as "his best since *Ringworld!*" by Heinlein fans everywhere. Even if it were, and it certainly isn't as good as *Ringworld*, is that qualification enough for a Nebula? Should we encourage this sort of thoughtless, derivative work?

As for Kim Stanley Robinson, his overwrought, reactionary, and anti-visionary *Wild Shore* (Ace, \$2.95) has already been dissected by these hands (*Cheap Truth* 5). Suffice to say that Robinson's relative youth has nothing to do with his literary politics – keep in mind that the Guardsmen that pulled the

triggers at Kent State were no older than their victims.

But things are not as grim as they might sound. For once, the radicals are not outnumbered – they match the villains man to man. (And men, you may have noticed, they all are. Where are the visionary women? Why don't we have novels this year from Leigh Kennedy or Pat Cadigan or Pat Murphy? Ask Ron Busch. Ask Terry Carr. Ask everyone you see.)

You've already heard about Gibson's *Neuromancer* (Ace, \$2.95), and if you've got any sense you've already read it. This book had half again as many recommendations as its closest competitor to get on the preliminary Nebula ballot, and its brilliant depiction of a credible future has appealed to the sense of wonder in even the most hardened of intellects.

Yet it is also a victory that the other two novels made it on the ballot at all. Shiner's *Frontera* (Baen, \$2.95) comes with conscious literary intent (allusions to Lowry, Dick, and Conrad) and decent, stylish prose; its flaws – a couple of characters left hanging, a technological holy grail that is too powerful for the plot – are forgivable in a first novel.

Dann's *Man Who Melted* (Bluejay, \$14.95) took years to find a publisher willing to print it, and no wonder. The raw alienness of his future, with its eerie religions, baffling technologies, and sensual onslaughts, is not for the timid; it's the sort of book a lot of people would rather shoot than listen to.

And these are not the only victories. For once, there is no Connie Willis on the ballot. Bruce Sterling has a story up, Michael Swanwick has two, and Lucius Shepard three; two of the short stories, Shepard's "Salvador" and Zebrowski's "Eichmann Variations" are blatantly offensive and full of dangerously free thought.

Political oppression breeds revolution. For every Heinlein that smites a Gibson, thousands more will rise in his place. The SF revolution is crying out for literacy, imagination, and humanity; it needs only a victory in the Nebulas to shatter the giant's terracotta feet. Up against the wall, Heinlein!

Cheap Truth 809-C West 12th Street, Austin, Texas USA 78701. NOT COPYRIGHTED. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. "The More Things Stay The Same, The More They Change"

Cheap Truth 11

SF Writer Eats Own Foot to Survive!

Sci-fi writer Russell M. Griffin, after a succession of poorly-marketed novels, each from a less successful publisher than the one before it, last week devoured his own foot in order to stay alive. Griffin was unavailable for comment, but our sources conjectured, “How else is the poor b*st*rd supposed to live? Not on the piece-of-sh*t advances these people pay!”

What brought Griffin to this end? Inquiring minds want to know.

The seeds are visible in his first novel, *The Makeshift God* (Dell, 1979). Obviously some sort of effete intellectual snob, Griffin packs an otherwise well-written and fast-paced space adventure with all sorts of literary references and dead languages.

It is in *Century's End* (Bantam 1981), however, that Griffin begins to blatantly show his true colors. Not only does he mock organized religion, flying saucers (!), and politicians, he has a whole sci-fi novel with no time machines, space ships, or aliens. What's the point?

The Blind Men and the Elephant (Timescape, 1982) isn't even set in the future, for cripe's sake, and not only are there no aliens and no spaceships, the origin of the story's Elephant Man is so disgusting we dare not print it in a family newsmagazine!

The Time Servers (Avon, 1985) starts off promisingly enough, set in an embassy on an alien planet, a situation we are told resembles the “Retief” stories by fellow sci-fi-er Keith Laumer. But in the end Griffin resorts to sly accusations about the Vietnam War, and we know no one wants to hear about Vietnam any more.

These reasons all seemed sufficient to explain Griffin's lack of popularity. Still, because inquiring minds like yours want to know, we contacted Prominent Literary Critic Sue Denim and asked her opinion on Griffin's work.

“I think the guy's a genius, but for G*d's sake don't quote me. Obviously the guy has f*ck*d up big somewhere to get his stuff buried like this. I mean, he should be getting hardcover deals and high five-figure advances and every

award in the field.

“Take *Century’s End*. Please. Apparently nobody noticed that this was the first really visionary book about the coming millennium. It’s going to be crazy, and Griffin is the only writer I know of (other than maybe Jim Blaylock or Phil Dick – and Dick wasn’t as funny) who is good enough at both humor and pathos to really bring the craziness of it to life. In the next 15 years we’re going to see pale imitations of this book make the best seller list. You’ll see.

“*The Blind Men and the Elephant* is cripplingly funny, the characters are so vivid and so fully realized that you forget you met them in a book, Griffin seems a complete expert in every field he even touches on, and the moral issues he raises are always complex and important. The book is about the news media, but more about taking responsibility for your actions – the Elephant Man being a living symbol of Consequences.

“You almost feel guilty about laughing at *The Time Servers* because it’s so brutal, but when you find out who the Depazians really are, when the whole Vietnam parallel starts taking shape, you just want to laugh and cry and jump up and down all at the same time.

“But obviously I’m not supposed to talk about this, or somebody else would already have been singing Griffin’s praises. He’s that good. So forget I even said anything, okay? And if you print a word of this I’ll sue your *ss off.”

The Time Servers is still available in a lot of bookstores, but the rest of Griffin’s books are of course out of print. Sci-fi, as we all know, is meant to be cheap, lightweight, and disposable – rather like a butane lighter – and is not meant to appeal to Prominent Literary Critics. Inquiring minds don’t need them.

***Cheap Truth* Raymond Chandler Interview**

It was late March, 1985, two years since our *Cheap Truth* Lovecraft interview (see [CT3](#)). Once again we used the unspeakable necromancy of the Cross Plains Dairy Queen.

Arriving from 1957, Raymond Chandler appeared in the *Cheap Truth* offices as a small, silver-haired gentleman with a round, dignified face and round tortoiseshell glasses. He wore an ivory linen suit, a striped bow-tie, exquisite two-tone shoes and long yellow cotton gloves.

RC: (flopping onto couch) I've always been a horizontal thinker.
(Frowns at television) What the hell is that?

CT: It's MTV.

RC: You have a blabb-off? (Seizes remote control.) I had one of these before they were even on the market. (Kills the sound.) Modern Americans. Jesus. Clustered around TVs like flies on garbage.

CT: Thanks for coming by, Mr. Chandler.

RC: Call me Ray, I hate snobbery.

CT: Fine, Ray. How about some hot tea?

RC: (irritably) A Ballantine's on the rocks. (sips) No doubt you want to know how a fellow like me got into this stinking mess.

CT: Actually, I –

RC: I began as a businessman. Worked for an oil company. That gave me a grasp of real life – not like those lace-pantied fakers for the slicks. And I *worked* at my writing. Other pulp writers used buckets of whitewash, I used a camel's-hair brush.

CT: How'd you reconcile that with the lousy pay scales of *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective* magazines?

RC: I wrote film scripts for Tinseltown, too.

CT: And how did that work out?

RC: It was agony! You had no artistic control. Publishers are sick kittens compared to the moguls. And the agents! Jesus! (Grimaces.) Take my rewrite for *The Blue Dahlia*. They were shooting from my script as I wrote it. Had to write it drunk. The only way I could do it in time. I wrote around the clock and had two nurses and a doctor giving me vitamin shots.

CT: Why'd you let them put you through all that, Ray?

RC: A man has to eat! (Shrugs) Besides, there was the gardener, the cook... seaside house in La Jolla... eighteen pairs of shoes... It adds up!

CT: Let's talk about your books, Ray. The mainstream is always tough on genre writers.

RC: Sure. Till you're a success. Then it's worse. You're halfway through a Marlowe story, cracking wise from the corner of your mouth, and along comes W.H. Auden and tells you you're writing "serious studies of a criminal milieu". Then you freeze up, and it takes two or three gimlets to thaw you out again. And there's the mystery hacks, envious pipsqueaks knifing your back. Or the goddamn *Saturday Review of Literature* – a bunch of out-at-elbows professors mewling at everyone who has the brain and guts

to make a dime!

CT: You were a critics' darling.

RC: In Britain, maybe. The British know good writing. To them I was a major American author – not just a mystery writer. And the British have a code of honor. The women make you say “please” five times before you can sleep with them.

CT: You don't say....

RC: I love the way they talk. A writer has to know how to listen to dialogue, dammit! Nobody listens now – except to these damn squawkboxes. (Stares gloomily at silent video) Look at that twist capering. They put whores on television these days? No wonder the West is going to hell.

CT: Uh, yeah. Now, Ray, about your treatment of women –

RC: But a man does his best. I know I did. I took a cheap, shoddy, and utterly lost kind of writing, and made it into something that intellectuals claw each other about.

CT: Right! There's your real legacy, Ray. The promise that genre writing, done from the heart, can break its own limits and really last. There's a camaraderie among pop writers. We science fiction writers should –

RC: You *what*? (laughs wildly) I read that sci-fi crap once! “I cocked the timejector in secondary and waded through the bright blue manda grass. My breath froze into pink pretzels....” (dabs at tears of laughter) You call that *writing*? Jesus Christ –

(Chandler falls silent and winks out with a crackle of static. God bless the remote control!)

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“Where Mutation Is the Norm”

Cheap Truth 12

Award-winning writer, critic, and *Cheap Truth* scribe Candace Berragus, who remembers the 1950s personally, turns the skeptical eye of experience upon her chosen target:

Punk Postures

Now that *Neuromancer* has garnered so many accolades, maybe it's time to sit back and see just what heights have been climbed. The book has, yeah, *style* – that gritty fascination with surfaces signalled by the opening line, “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.” Wonderful! TV as symbol for numbed reflexes, anomie, pollution, savage commercialism. And that slick style carries us forward on a garbage-reeking tide for... about a hundred pages.

Gibson, like Ballard, concentrates on surfaces as a way of getting at essences. All those brand names, Braun coffee makers, quilted consoles, obsessive attention to what everyone wears, glistening green ice cities...

But then you become uncomfortably aware that Gibson doesn't actually *know* much about computers beyond brand names, and you are enmeshed in a standard pulp plot. The last third drags terribly, suspense hissing out like a puncture in a bald tire. (Indeed, all the guff about penetrating computer defenses depicted as a field of sensations – this has become an instant freeze-dried cliché, a far cry from the actual experience and complexities of machine intelligence. Pretty, but not convincing.)

The tough characters never gain depth. The protagonist's inability to change, or even to shake his drug habit, creates a feeling of immobile futility. The promised confrontation of the artificial intelligences occurs virtually offstage, and we get no sense of their alienness.

Is this “punk SF” as Ellen Datlow keeps calling it? There are uncomfortable resemblances between the punk rock style of the '80s and the duckass ambience of the '50s, to be sure ... a sense of postures struck for rebellion, but without any emotional foundation deeper than distaste. Other than adolescent rebellion, soon to be quenched by the ebbing of hormones, there seems little left to all this.

There is little true anger in *Neuromancer* or in punk rock. The rest is posturing, and finally rings hollow. Even *Neuromancer*'s last sentence, "He never saw Molly again.", echoes the older tough-guy postures of Chandler, whose first novel, *The Big Sleep*, concludes, "All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again." Uh-huh. Gimmie a sim-stim, Fred. And double on the ennui.

If SF is to give us new lands, it will have to try harder than this. *Neuromancer* has little thought in it – surely the shabby old corporate-run future, with Japanese electro-dominance, can't be counted as a new idea? – but much attention to the cosmetics of a time only slightly beyond our own.

So – punk *what*? Actually, what do the purported punk SF writers have in common? Stylish Gibson, antic frazzled Sterling, the pure-hearted and liberal Robinson, hot-eyed Shirley – all over 30, perhaps, but what else? I see no commonality of vision. Vague similarities – bedazzled by technology, fond of street-savvy brutality, some preference for ravaged landscapes – also link them with a horde of other SF writers.

But to become a movement demands some generational agreement, a narrative thrust... and something new. Only our habit of roping writers into eras makes us unite them. *Neuromancer*'s dominance of this rather weak year for novels does not herald a revolution or a revelation.

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Undeterred by allegations of critical overkill, *Cheap Truth* hastens to laud:

This Year's Model

Blood Music by Greg Bear, Arbor House, 1985, \$14.95.

It is sometimes claimed that the future of SF lies on its experimentalist fringes; in "magic realism", "postindustrial fiction", or in a metaphorical SF hybridizing with mainstream. With his latest novel, Greg Bear has dealt this theory a serious wound.

To date, Bear has seemed a rather conventional, establishment SF figure, cheerily paying his SFWA dues and writing for, horror, *Analog*. He is the only "cyberpunk" writer to show no trace of punk attitudes; if anything, he seems stuffily right-wing, suspicious of "Naderites" and inclined to give good ol' nukes the benefit of the doubt. You will search the Bear opus in vain for a chrome stud or coke-corroded razorblade. You are more likely to find stiff-necked Poul Andersonian lib-futurists struggling manfully amidst a sea of

Luddite liberal ignorami.

Yet, in a triumph of the human spirit that makes one glow, Bear has shattered the limits of formula and is delivering truly superior fiction. *Blood Music* in its award-winning short form was a fine, visionary piece; as a novel, it's staggering.

From the first chapter, one senses Bear's transition from journeyman to master. The coda elements are gone, replaced by a cool-eyed analysis of motive and character that builds with the graceful solidity of a Gothic arch. Bear's characters talk, act, and look like actual human beings. Especially praiseworthy is the deft way he captures their occasional realistic bursts of pettiness, craziness and stupidity. The book abounds with daring touches gracefully achieved, with nuts and bolts research brilliantly integrated into the narrative flow.

From this solid beginning, *Blood Music* slowly accelerates into a pyrotechnic climax of pure visionary transcendence. New extrapolations emerge one after another, with steadily increasing speed and impact, until at last they are bursting into the narrative like runaway Mack trucks. The effect is explosively mind-boggling. There are loose ends, but it would be more accurate to describe them as whizzing chunks of shrapnel. The prose ranges from the workmanlike to the numinous. There are occasional lapses into stream-of-consciousness, free verse, and obscurantist "alienspeak", a Bear mannerism that one regrets. But the lyrical description of a jet flight over the transformed remnants of Chicago is a classic evocation of mystery and wonder; its intensity renders it unforgettable. It is hard to imagine any writer doing it better.

Bear's career illustrates one of the central struggles of the genre: visionary anarchy versus literary discipline. As is common with writers of great imaginative gifts, Bear's early works are sometimes byzantine, piling ideas, plot twists, and erratic bursts of inspired prose into vast untidy heaps. Bear's success and his growing importance as a writer are due to his increasing integration of vision and literary skill. This has been achieved by sheer hard work, by a painstaking, serious-minded, long-term effort, the mark of a committed craftsman.

Bear's daring has paid off. He has transcended the limits of the hard SF tradition and written an exciting, accessible, modern novel. It's a fine book for SF neophytes, free of clannish inbred mustiness or gratuitous playing to the faan gallery. It is elegant in the best sense, without excess moving parts,

expositive lumps, and preachy apologies. *Blood Music* is one of the first definitive novels of the 1980s.

Cheap Truth 809-C West 12th Street Austin, Texas 78701 USA. NOT COPYRIGHTED. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. “Smugglers in the Marketplace of Ideas”

Cheap Truth 13

Editorial. SF notions dominate the current Geneva arms talks. In this issue, *Cheap Truth* responds to the zeitgeist.

Pop Agitprop

Since its unlikely birth, SF has been a trash medium, its appeal restricted to a subcultural faithful. But that appeal is widening and is being culturally legitimized. With the advent of the Strategic Defense Initiative, the elements, themes, and modes of thought native to science fiction have become central to worldwide political debate.

One SF splinter group has shown a laudable quickness in grasping SF's new political potential. Unlike traditional SF "movements" this group of writers is not marked by literary innovation but by its radical ideology. For purposes of discussion we will refer to them as the "Pournelle Disciples".

This group has a number of strengths. The first is their solid publishing base in Tor and Baen Books. A second is their claim to tradition, especially the gung-ho technolatriy that has marked genre SF since the days of Gernsback. Another crucial advantage is their ideological solidarity, which gives them the sort of shock-troop discipline that Lenin installed in the Bolsheviks. In this case, their Lenin is the redoubtable ex-Marxist Jerry Pournelle, who wears multiple hats as writer, editor, theorist, and political organizer.

Pournelle's importance to this movement is demonstrated by a reading of his recent editorial effort, *Far Frontier Volume III* (Fall 1985), published by Baen Books. The surprisingly dull stories in this book pale miserably in comparison to Pournelle's numerous bursts of naked political agitprop. These are in every way more intellectually challenging and emotionally disturbing than the fiction.

The gem of this collection is Vernor Vinge's "The Ungoverned", a sequel to his commercially successful novel *The Peace War*. In this ideologically correct effort, radical Libertarians defend their realm from an authoritarian army. Thanks to their innate cultural superiority and a series of fraudulent plot Maguffins, they send the baddies packing with a minimum of

personal suffering and a maximum of enemy dead.

This piece is worth closer study for its standard Disciple elements. First, and very characteristically, it is post-apocalyptic, conveniently destroying modern society so that a lunatic-fringe ideology can be installed as if by magic. Convenient bits and pieces of high-tech are paraded in a flurry of buzzwords. Vinge avoids extrapolating their effects on society, because society is in shambles.

Pournelle's promotion of the moral obligation to keep and bear arms is well known. Vinge carries this libertarian love of armament to amazing lengths. In his scenario, private citizens own, not merely automatic rifles, but chemical weapons and neutron warheads, thus carrying the libertarian argument to a kind of logical *reductio ad nauseam*.

The other stories are much worse. David Drake, a Disciple stalwart who specializes in military tales of a purported "gut-wrenching hyperrealism", contributes a silly and utterly negligible short-short about dimensional gates opening in a suburban kitchen. Despite its merciful brevity, it is still unable to make any coherent point. Rivka Jacobs' interminable "Morning on Venus" spoils a vaguely interesting opening with pompous meandering. By making the hero an historian, Jacobs avoids the painful necessity of extrapolating a coherent future, indulging instead in a confusing mishmash of historical sermonizing. Alexander Jablovkov contributes a flabby fantasy pastiche, which imitates Niven as slavishly as one can without understanding him. All three of these stories feature much gratuitous offscreen sex, assuring the readership of the authors' with-it frankness without the stick necessity of actually talking about fucking.

John Dalmas contributes a decent male-adventure Western. Unfortunately this story pretends to be SF. It is set on yet another colonial planet lapsed into barbarism, a fictional convention that allows SF writers to espouse reactionary social values without a blush of shame.

Dean Ing's recent novel for Tor, *Wild Country*, takes a similar tack. This book, the last in a post-apocalypse trilogy, is a meandering series of shoot-'em-ups. Its hero is an assassin. The villain is a gay heroin-smuggler, as if an America devastated by nukes did not have enough problems. Ing's hasty depiction of future society is grossly inconsistent; ravaged and desperate when the plot requires desperadoes, yet rigidly organized when Ing suddenly remembers the existence of computers.

The book is a Western, set in a West Texas conveniently returned to the

robust frontier values of Judge Roy Bean. Men hold their land, with lasers if possible, while women raise corn and keep the home fires burning. Ing struggles valiantly with Texas dialect: “‘Late, schmate,’ growled the aging veterinarian, whose rough cattleman’s lingo masked an excellent education.”

The book is speckled with maps, diagrams, and lectures on the Second Amendment, which, one learns, “absolutely and positively, guarantees citizens their right to keep and bear arms.”

Like his fellows, Ing treasures this amendment, the last remnant of the American policy that he is willing to respect. There isn’t much mention of, say, voting, or separation of powers. Power resides in the barrel of a gun, preferably the largest and shiniest possible.

Janet and Chris Morris, who wrote *The 40-Minute War* for Baen, are down on terrorists. The politics of this book are dominated by adulation of the state of Israel, where every sabra carries a righteous submachinegun. The heroes are counterterrorist CIA assassins, whose purported fluent grasp of Arabic only fuels a xenophobic hatred of Moslem culture. They tactfully refer to their murderous work as “greasing rag-heads”.

The female protag is a hard-as-nails liberated journalist: “Shit, the world is ending, and you’re Ms.-ing me? I’m a Miss, not a Ms., whatever that is.”

The prose is often clumsy, dominated by run-on sentences and misplaced clauses: “To most Foreign Service officers, even in the Mediterranean, word came earlier than it did to Marc Beck, who was babysitting a convention of genetic engineers with astronomical security clearances being held at a private estate on the Red Sea when an aide slipped him a note.” This was not an oversight: it’s the book’s third sentence.

Janet Morris is not a gifted prose stylist, but she means business. The most potent political treatise of the Disciples is a work of nonfiction by Morris, David Drake, and Congressman Newt Gingrich, the ultrarightist Golden Boy of the born-again contingent. This book, *Window of Opportunity*, presents the straight gospel of Pournelle’s private pressure group, the Citizen’s Advisory Council on National Space Policy. It advocates “an effective American monopoly of space”, in which laissez-faire capitalists fill orbits with “the Hiltons and Marriotts of the solar system”. These space cities will be manned by Christian space-settlers, whose stern faith gives them the backbone for the frontier life. “The rise of high-tech preachers on cable television is accelerating the re-emergence of religion as a legitimate vehicle for explaining the world. Presently there will be religious software for home

computers and a host of modern high-tech efforts to spread a new, electronic gospel....”

With this treatise the gloves are off, and the Disciples come full-circle. This combination of 19th-century values and visionary technolatrology is a potent one which, though easy to mock, is easier to underestimate.

SF has power now, and it is our responsibility to see to what uses that power is put. Pournelle, as usual, has put it best, in his argument for the Strategic Defense Initiative. Peace, Prosperity, and Freedom are his watchwords. Peace: as an orbiting Pax Americana over a world requiring American tutelage. Prosperity: for high-tech asteroid-barons, who will watch the disastrous crumbling of communist society from the safety of orbit. Freedom – from any necessity of change or accommodation to other cultures.

Naive space enthusiasts believe that humanity will climb into the cosmos on a Pentagon payroll. Many dislike the idea, but feel that an allegiance with the military is a small price to pay for a life of bliss in an orbiting O’Neill colony. The psychological appeal these colonies hold for us in SF is not hard to grasp. An O’Neill colony will be an airtight little world, of technically educated white Americans gazing raptly at the stars. A world soaring far above the heads of threatening mundanes. A world that is fandom’s objective correlative.

SF has always been publicly identified with space flight. There is no shame in that, but if SDI’s backers become the predominant political spokesmen for SF, we will be associated from now on with X-ray lasers. Whether we like it or not.

In the final analysis, it does not matter that they write badly or that their ideas are lunatic. That has never stopped any of us.

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Cheap Truth 14

Editorial by Todd Refinery. Regular *CT* editor V. Omniaveritas is currently out of touch in Haiti, where he is pelting the Tonton Macoute with concrete blocks. And longtime *CT* contributor Sue Denim has our passports ready for a romantic tour of her own.

Cheap Truth Tours Central America with Sue Denim

The current chaos in Central America is the result of foreign meddling, greed, laziness, guilt, and misplaced idealism. That's a lot of factors, but then, Central America is a hell of a mess.

So is this year's Nebula ballot.

What happened? Take an area – say, Central America, or the SFWA – that has traditionally been governed by enlightened self-interest. Sweeten the pot by making this area suddenly very valuable – either politically or monetarily – and the adjective “enlightened” tends to disappear.

For example. Say you're an over-the-hill SF writer or politician, like Anastasio Somoza. You're going to do anything you can to keep your power – beg, plead, humiliate yourself, take help from anybody, even the U.S., just to get those votes. If you're an up-and-coming politician, you're going to curry favor as widely as you can (one reviewer recommended over 125 stories in one category alone, bloating the ballot like a drowned corpse).

But enough generalities. Climb into our Mi-24 Hind gunship and let's have a look at the countryside.

First stop: Costa Rica. Here is a fairly stable democracy – conservative, predictable, with a comparatively high standard of living that's the result of guilt – American guilt over the country's former banana republic status. How like this year's novels: Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, which expands predictably his earlier brilliant (and award winning) short story. *Dinner at Deviant's Palace* by Tim Powers, on the ballot for everyone who really liked his *Anubis Gates* and forgot to vote for it before Powers joined SFWA. *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card. (How many people voted for this because it has all the ritual trappings of military SF, complete with cadet school and blowing up

alien ships real good?) David Brin's two-dimensional *Postman*. Malzberg's *Remaking of Sigmund Freud*. (Surely we should give him a Nebula for something. He's always telling us what an unsung genius he is.)

Even the good stuff here in Costa Rica is tainted with guilt and predictability. Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* is first-class futurism. But in many ways it's the book he was expected to write, the logical culmination of his popular "Shaper/Mechanist" stories. Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia Winter* is by no means the strongest element of the trilogy (and why the hell isn't the trilogy on here as a single item, *Helliconia?*), but it's too late now to recognise the first two books.

A few hundred miles north is El Salvador, Costa Rica gone wrong. Here democracy is enforced at gunpoint, and inspiration is in jail. It is the dictatorship of the novella. Here Generalissimo Silverberg rakes in the big bucks with his predictable "Sailing to Byzantium". On his right hand sits the former firebrand James Tiptree, Jr., now apparently suffering from a Heinlein-ish senility and turning out gushing '40s space opera like "The Only Neat Thing To Do". Kate Wilhelm turns in a limp nod to Castaneda with "The Gorgon Field" (it's too hot to work hard here in El Salvador). Kim Stanley Robinson, the American attaché, is eager and earnest in his walking shorts and knapsack, but his "Green Mars" is marooned in the '70s. There is some nice landscape – Roger Zelazny presides over a scenic province called "24 Views of Mount Fuji" – but it has no life or heart.

Then there are the "desaparecidos", like Norman Spinrad's "World War Last", which you won't see on the ballot. They have simply ceased to exist, for being too noisy, too unorthodox, asking too many hard questions.

But wait! What's that up in the hills? It's Bruce Sterling's "Green Days in Brunei", the single most visionary and exciting piece of fiction on the ballot, armed to the teeth and about to blow this fatuous and complacent government off the map! We'd better head back to the gunship and be on our way.

Welcome to Nicaragua, home of the dream gone sour. Liberals around the world feel compelled to continue to praise the Sandinista revolution, even though its armies have regressed to the same terror tactics as the Guardia they replaced. Just as the "younger writers" (all of them at least in their thirties) continue to admire the bloodless, self-conscious work of Michael Bishop ("Gift from the Graylanders"), Lucius Shepard ("The Jaguar Hunter") or Harlan Ellison ("Paladin of the Lost Hour"). William Gibson and Michael

Swanwick, like the Sandanistas' Commander Zero, seem terribly uncomfortable in this regime, managing only a heartless, pro-forma video-game exercise, "Dogfight". The chameleon-like Scott Card here offers "The Fringe", a competent and very politically correct tale of a handicapped schoolteacher. George Martin's "Portraits of His Children" is an insufferable bit of pretended self-criticism that looks like it was written to please a State Committee of Mandatory Literary Values. (Your tour guide is unable, at press time, to comment on S.C. Sykes' "Rockabye Baby" due to her inability to read *Analog* in recent years.)

It's time to get away from these poetic revolutionaries who are taking themselves all so seriously. Let's copter off to polluted, overcrowded, corrupt, and exciting Mexico City for a night on the town.

Did somebody say crowded? Eight nominees. But anything goes in Mexico City. Howard Waldrop, rather than gamble on actually winning a Nebula, got greedy and decided to leave both his stories, "Flying Saucer Rock and Roll" and "Heirs of the Perisphere", on the ballot. They're two of his best, full of fun and pathos and great characters, and after all, greed is the name of the game here in Mexico.

You see all kinds here. There's "Paper Dragons", the year's single best short story, a delicate construction of paranoia, innuendo, and crisp language. There's Nancy Kress' populist fantasy, "Out of All Them Bright Stars", organizing among the peasants. There are the local favorite sons like Dozois, Dann, and Swanwick, who can make the ballot with "Gods of Mars" no matter how poor a story it is, or William F. Wu, whose mundane "Hong's Bluff" is swept up in the popular imagination after the brutal editorial murder of his earlier story, "Wild Garlic". There's Haldeman's perfunctory "More Than the Sum of His Parts" and John Crowley's willfully obscure "Snow". So many of them! And what's that rumbling from the membership? The hotel is starting to collapse!

What's the answer to this glut of egos? More rules? Should Reagan send ground troops to Nicaragua? Obviously not. Power will come from the people, eventually. There will be a backlash from this year's Nebulas, mark my words. Innocents will doubtless suffer, empires will crumble. In the end, the dust will settle and the Nebula will either be restored to its former value or it will become a joke award, like the Hugo. In the meantime, as we stumble, sweaty and exhausted, back into the helicopter, let's dwell on the many new friends we made on our journey.

AND NOW for that popular feature, “Ask Sue”:

Dear Sue: You’re not going to do another of your bitter, tasteless, near-libelous, irrelevantly political Nebula diatribes this year, are you? (Signed) Hopeful.

Dear Hopeful: Sorry.

Dear Sue: Why is the Hugo a joke award? (Signed) H. Gernsback.

Dear Mr. Gernsback: A couple of hundred people (at best) do the nominating for an award which thousands vote, with no give-and-take or feedback among the nominators. At least the Nebula process allows a means to regularly display the titles of recommended works (the Nebula Awards Report) and includes a jury which often compensates for oversights.

Dear Sue: So what’s your answer? (Signed) Wise Guy.

Dear Guy: Fewer rules instead of more. Hands off diplomacy. One short fiction category (say 30,000 words and under), one long. We’ve got enough awards already. Maybe even a public service campaign to remind both authors and publishers that it’s only an award, not life and death.

Dear Sue: So what did you think was missing on the Nebula ballot? (Signed) Stupid Question.

Dear Stupid: NOVEL: *Timeservers* by Russell M. Griffin (reviewed in [CT11](#), a Phil Dick Award nominee); *The Glass Hammer* by K.W. Jeter; *Eon* by Greg Bear (just to show that I’m not prejudiced against hard SF and that I still know how to have a good time).

NOVELLA: “World War Last” by Norman Spinrad.

NOVELET: “Tensor of Desire” by Wayne Wightman (a dizzy, headlong rush of a story, with teeth and genitals); “Storming the Cosmos” by Rucker and Sterling; “Solstice” by James Patrick Kelly (a known BOFFO proves he can wear mirrorshades with the best of them); “Dead Run” by Greg Bear (Bear has an amazing ability to think like a computer nerd but write like a guy on the street when he has to); “All My Darling Daughters” by Connie Willis (yes, you heard me, *Connie Willis*. How come all her so-called friends drop her when she gets really nasty, like in this story?).

SHORT STORY: “Klein’s Machine” by Andrew Weiner (weird and literary at the same time); “You Never Asked My Name” by Brian Aldiss (in this category because the Nebulas don’t have one for polemics).

Keep those post cards and letters coming in.

Hugs and Kisses – Sue.

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Cheap Truth 15

Editorial. Science fiction today is in a rare state of ferment. This happy situation has been created only with great effort and must now be prolonged and intensified.

In this issue, guest agitatrix Hunilla de Cholo addresses her fellow Eighties writers, with a moving lecture on pluralistic Postmodern solidarity. We at *Cheap Truth* echo her sentiments. We also regard much of her literary analysis as rank deviationist heresy. All the better – honest controversy sheds light on truth. And in the meantime, we can use the heat to bring SF to a boil. We are pleased to offer her this podium.

Report on the Sophomore Class Dress Code by Hunilla De Cholo

One of the regrettable legacies of the modernist movement has been the idea that perpetual revolution is necessary to “progress” in the arts and in the school dress code. Progress in the arts? In the dress code? Who, as we say, is kidding whom? A little reading and a little thought will make clear to even the slowest of the kids in class that the concept of natural and inevitable progress, mutated offspring of the Industrial Revolution, Marxist economic theory and muscular Christian ideas of “self-improvement”, is a chimera. As some froggy wit once said, the more things change, the more crap you get on television.

Until recently Science Fiction High School, being the sandbox for *slow learners* that it has been for most of its history in America, has been relatively immune to such high-born notions. Sure, we had successive “revolutions” as Gernsback, Campbell, Gold and Boucher, Moorcock/Ellison/Knight, brought on his own version of the One True SF. But what did these vast and earthshaking changes bring forth: the *same old stuff*, redux.

“Bullshit!” I hear from the noisy contingent in the middle rows of the classroom, the kids who wear leather and those funny sunglasses because they would like to think it makes them look tough like real punks. The real punks are guys who fall asleep in the back of the classroom; they can hardly read, let alone write. They’re the ones who get “D’s” in shop class. In gym

they punch out these kids with the glasses for being wimps.

“Bullshit!” scream these honor students who run off their little fanzines and invent clever names for themselves like “Cyberpunks” or “Neuromantics” or, you should try not to laugh too hard, “the Movement”. “Science fiction is about *ideas. New ideas.*” “Say goodbye to your old stale futures!” “Take the ideas out of SF and it’s not SF.” “We are the pure quill, the daring, clear-sighted cutting edge that’s writing about the *future, not the past.*”

Sure, kids. We all want to think we’re the first to discover sex and dissolution and good writing. The truth is that the wonderful new *ideas* that we’re always trumpeting as the justification for SF High School’s revolutionary edge over boring Mainstream Central High are available three for a quarter in your local pop science magazine; even better, try *Parade*, right after the “Personality Profiles” and before the cartoon about the dog. What we call a revolutionary idea in SF is usually something like Del Rey’s “Helen O’Loy” or Godwin’s “The Cold Equations” or Gibson’s “Burning Chrome”. “What a novel idea – instead of having the robot be an emotionless machine, make it neurotically emotional, like a real woman, only better! Have it be *the perfect woman!*!” “What a neat idea – instead of having the stowaway be a criminal, make it a young girl! And have the spaceship pilot throw her out the airlock instead of saving her, to prove that *the universe is indifferent to people!!!*” “Wow! – instead of having the computer expert be a nerd, make him a glamorous, existential criminal! He acts like Humphrey Bogart and loses the girl in the end! Not only that, he *plugs in instead of using a keyboard!!!*”

Old Mainstream High has nothing to compare with it, right? When in fact the only innovation these SF stories provide consists precisely in their adaptation of *style* and *tone* from outside the genre. Del Rey grafts the bathetic style of women’s magazine fiction onto an SF plot and the fans eat it up because they’re used to a diet of E.E. Smith and Harry Bates. They’ve never seen it before, it’s a *stunning new idea*. Godwin borrows some third-rate existentialism (maybe, totally unaware of his derivativeness, he invents it himself!), spices it with a little “Invictus”, writes in the same bathetic style Del Rey used twenty years earlier, and *voila*, another entry in the SF HALL OF FAME. Too bad Steven Crane did it better, did it *right*, in “The Open Boat”. We haven’t read that, and besides, the SF version has a *stunning new idea* – it happens in a spaceship!

Gibson borrows a style and milieu from Raymond Chandler or James M. Cain (and a pretty good style it is, too – at least Gibson has some taste), pushes up the volume about fifty percent, has the caper involve computer information instead of cash, makes the break-in occur in “cyberspace” instead of a bank vault, and generates an entire new movement in science fiction. *Stunning new ideas* you’re going to be reading from the camp followers for the next three years.

The only thing we have to offer new, kids, is our individual selves. The most revolutionary act we can perform, as writers, is to cross genres, graft idioms from other kinds of work onto the SF subject matter. *Style is content*. Gibson gives us something new – a new style. Not because he invented it, but because he had the wit to see that an old style could be adapted to our traditional material. More power to him.

Yeah, we can talk about the future. But what we say about the future always, *always*, says more about the present in which we are writing, about our own psyches. Ask Mr. Rucker about it in his Transrealism class and he’ll explain it to you. Del Rey, all unconscious, tells us everything we need to know about male attitudes toward women in the 1930s. Godwin thinks he’s talking about the nature of the universe and gives us instead sentimentalized right-wing political philosophy. Gibson tells us something about being deracinated in the Reaganite 80s, an era of dominance by corporate values and bland political conservatism. And we all have Sony compact-disk players and Braun coffee makers.

Yes, Michael Swanwick? The “Humanist” writers? No, the so-called “Humanist” writers are no different, only a little more obvious. They sit in the front of the class and wear nice clothes and are worried about their grades. They want to please teacher, so some of them have gone through a regrettable phase of imitation. “Yes, teacher,” says earnest Johnny Kessel, “I read the assignment – *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville. I can write like him – see, here’s a story about a whale.” Please, boy, don’t be so obvious! Go sit with Billy Gibson for a while. That’s right. Jimmy Kelly is already over there making friends.

That’s enough for today. Thank God school vacation is almost here. Let’s spend a little less time at the library this summer, kids, and a little more time playing baseball. By all means, start a club. But let’s not have a repeat of last summer’s nastiness. There’s room for everybody on the team. Dress whatever way you like.

Cheap Truth Top Ten

This latest edition of the *Cheap Truth* recommended list concentrates on the fractious antics of the sophomore class – especially the noisy contingent.

The “Funny Title Trilogy”:

- *Frontera* by Lewis Shiner (Baen \$2.95; Sphere £2.25) Gives the surface of Mars the unpleasant realism of the area downwind of Kiev.
- *Schismatrix* by Bruce Sterling (Ace \$2.95; Penguin £2.50) Boils down the three-percent beer of space opera into a jolting postmodern whiskey.
- *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (Ace \$2.95; Gollancz £8.95) Fusion-powered icebreaker. Attacked for “flaws” its attackers wish they had.
- *Eclipse* by John Shirley. (Bluejay \$8.95) Demented 21st century epic of gutter-level weirdness and paranoid radical politics. In eighteen months the stands will be full of stuff along these lines.
- *Homunculus* by James Blaylock (Ace \$2.95) Latest effort in the Blaylock/Powers subgenre of West Coast Victoriana. Has the glitter of *Anubis Gates* with funnier characters and a better plot.
- *The Secret of Life* by Rudy Rucker (Bluejay \$14.95) The doyen of Transrealism carries his doctrine to the ultimate in this crypto-autobiography. Features bizarre alternating spasms of existential gloom and manic farce.
- *Freedom Beach* by James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel (Bluejay \$8.95) Lively and inventive fix-up by the Glimmer Twins of Humanism. Annoying metafictional noodling does not exceed the limits of tolerance.
- *Blood Music* by Greg Bear (Ace \$2.95; Gollancz £9.95) Now in U.S. paperback. The ne plus ultra of modern radical hard SF.
- *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*, Gardner Dozois, ed. (\$19.50/yr.) This periodical has made such a quantum leap in quality that it is now impossible to understand American SF in the Eighties without a subscription. The current hotbed of Postmodern innovation, since Jan 86 it has serialized Gibson’s *Count Zero* and published the best stories to date by Cadigan, Kelly, Shiner, and Shepard. Currently featuring odd rumbles of militant pacifism – an unexpected and interestingly ominous development.

Cheap Truth Letters Column

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Letters mangled at editor's discretion

Title: LETTER FROM STEVE PERRY | Date: 12-03-85 | Time: 11:12

Dear VO:

I have decided that you need a form for criticism of your various scandalous articles. Your readers would certainly appreciate it, and it would be so much easier, since a simple form would likely cover virtually all gripes, No, no, don't thank me. I like to think I'm doing my part to further Truth. Especially since it's cheap. Best, Steve

To the scurrilous publication *Cheap Truth*

Attn: Lying Editor

Dear Vile Scumbag Asshole:

How dare you insult AUTHOR'S NAME in your slimy, disgusting, despicable, libelous yellow-journalism excuse for a fanzine? AUTHOR'S NAME is a great artist, a (MAN or WOMAN) of consummate skill and God Given talent, and to even mention (HIS or HER) name in your filthy, miserable, bedbug-ridden publication is presumptuous beyond belief!

To presume to criticize AUTHOR'S NAME or (HIS or HER) work, BOOK OR STORY TITLE, merely exposes your stupidity! Compared to you, a moron is an intellectual giant! You don't know nothing!

Long after you are forgotten and rotting in the cold, heartless ground, AUTHOR'S NAME will be remembered as one of the finest writers ever in the APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE. Why don't you stick to writing about things you know, like all that cyberpunk crapola you skinheads like so much!

Sincerely yours

PSEUDONYM

(SF writer Steve Perry lives in Oregon.)

Title: LETTER FROM DAVID DRAKE | Date: 12-28-85 | Time: 14:00

Dear VO,

I don't think there's anything like the solidarity you assume among the folks you discuss in [CT #13](#). Certainly not on SDI, where the opinions I've heard range from, convinced, to preferring the money to be spent on SDI – which won't work but won't kill anybody even if it does – rather than, say, Midgetmen.

For what it's worth, my only contact with Jerry Pournelle has been his fiction and half a dozen phone calls over ten years or so. He did me a major favor with his intro to my first book – but that was worked out between him and Jim Baen. DAVID DRAKE

(David Drake is the author of Hammer's Slammers and other military SF tales.)

Title: LETTER FROM RICHARD KADREY | Date: 02-05-86 | Time: 10:48

Dear V.O.:

In the first copy of *Cheap Truth* I ever saw there was a mention of *Afkar Inquiry* magazine. I copied the magazine's address and when I was in London last year I tracked them down.

They have a small office in a rundown cluster of warehouses, print shops and fish markets in northeast London. The receptionist was dressed in a gray chador and seemed genuinely shocked that a fairly honky-looking American was interested in *Afkar*. After I convinced that that I wasn't some anti-Islamic carnivore wacko, they were very friendly and gave me half-a-dozen copies of the magazine.

I also found out that they have a US address now:

P.O. Box 966 Corona Elmhurst

New York, NY 111373

Subscriptions are \$25 a year.

Best, RICHARD KADREY

(Richard Kadrey is a San Francisco graphic artist and writer.)

Title: Politically correct rebellion | From: ORSON CARD | Date: 03-13-86 | Time: 00:16

I think every group should have a place where everybody says “Right on” or “golly yes” or “fer shure” or “fucking A” when they make politically correct statements. This is the fucking A group, and it sure beats hell out of

Far Frontiers, which is certainly the “Yes SIR” group.

Still, Sue Denim’s outrageousness is tempered by an inability to recognize when acceptably “rebellious” writers are in fact writing very traditional stuff. Like “Green Days in Brunei”. A first-rate novella, and far and away the best one this year. But it stood out because of excellence, not innovation. It was one of the most traditional of stories. A save-the-world adventure epic, for pete’s sake. Robinson was taking far more risks with *Green Mars*. But when you belong to a community that praises novelty as an absolute virtue (it may be shit, but it’s *new* shit), then just about the only thing you can do with a traditional story that you *like* is to pretend that it is also innovative.

It was wonderful indeed to read Sue Denim’s barbarically clever reviews. I look forward to future entries. Now if CT could also reach beyond the group of people who utter instant approval...

Title: Letter from Joseph Nicholas | Date: 04-01-86 | Time: 01:42

...Regarding the comments in *Cheap Truth* 14 about this year’s Nebula nominations. Particularly a sentence in Sue Denim’s closing paragraph: “In the end, the dust will settle and the Nebula will either be restored to its former value of it will become a joke award, like the Hugo.”

Take a deep breath and prepare yourself for the bad news: which is that here in the UK, amongst those who have any interest in science fiction beyond the simple bookstand consumption of it, the Nebula is already regarded as a joke award.

Did you ever read Chris Priest’s piece about the SFWA and the Nebula, “Outside the Whale”, published in Bruce Gillespie’s *Science Fiction Chronicle*? It merely confirms what most people already suspected about the Nebula Awards – mainly that they’re wide open to favoritism and abuse, impossible to vote on in an informed, unpressurised way, and corrupt from beginning to end.

Sue’s fulminations over the debasement of the Nebula are, essentially, pointless. The debasement took place many years ago, the Award no longer has any meaning, and attempts to save it now are simply a waste of time.

I might add that I found the comparison of this year’s Nebula nominees with certain Central American countries both tasteless and offensive. The idea that something as trivial and as irrelevant as a science fiction novel can be matched against the choice between life and death which governs political and economic activity in Central America is simply grotesque. JOSEPH

NICHOLAS

(Joseph Nicholas is part of the editorial cadre of the tricontinental leftist fanzine, Fuck the Tories.)

Title: Poem from Wm. Atheling II | Date: 05-16-86 | Time: 16:25

An Overdose of Tact
by William Atheling II

Spinrad has quit the SFWA
Because his novel pulled no nomination.
We're all shook up to think he feels this way:
We should have spoken out. Commiseration,
Nebulaless Norman, on your blindness –
We all kept quiet about it out of kindness...

Title: Another Letter from Orson Scott Card | Date: 05-16-86 | Time: 16:32

Dear Vince,

Thanks for *Cheap Truth* 15. An essay reaching toward an accurate perspective on the cyberpunk-humanist in-group, but still retreating from a recognition that it's all one group, which is managing to persuade an alarming number of people that they represent, somehow, not just one, but *both* major trends in science fiction, when instead they represent, together, the last gasp of the New Wave of the Sixties.

I dare say John Kessel has less to learn from William Gibson than both of them could profitably learn from, say, John Hersey, William Goldman, James Clavell, Robert Graves, or Mary Renault. But that's also implied by the "sophomore class" motif in the essay – the real world is still a few years away for the group in question. Best, ORSON SCOTT CARD

Title: Last gasp? | From: JOHNNY MNEMONIC | Date: 05-16-86 | Time: 18:30

If any branch of SF reads as if it were on its "last gasp", it's the utility-prose techohackwork currently produced by Pournelle, Anderson, Sheffield, and the like. Read Gardner Dozois's Best-Of-The-Year collections, then read *Footfall*, or a recent Dominic Flandry novel, or current issues of *Analog*. Then tell me again what schools of SF are in their "last gasp".

(Console cowboy Johnny Mnemonic is a frequent SMOF-BBS contributor.)

Title: Letter from Walter Jon Williams | Date: 05-19-86 | Time: 15:43

...I quite enjoyed Ms. Hunilla's screed in *Cheap Truth* 15. I even agreed with it, as far as it goes. But I wonder what she would have said about a few of the mainstream classics she seems so fond of. I can just hear her on *Hamlet*:

"Here's Willy the Shake with another epic – a plot 'borrowed' from Saxo Grammaticus (at least he steals from obscure sources so as not to be too obvious), told in Kit Marlowe's pentameter, with a lot of metaphysical speculation out of Francis Bacon.

"Some say this is New Wave. I think it's just a downer, a trashy soap opera playing at nihilism, incest, and despair. Willy should keep writing histories. At least that way you know where he's getting his plots."

Shit. Anyone can play those kind of games, with any writer. Who cares?

It's a measure of how regressive SF literary culture has been that everyone thinks that this cross-genre stuff is what's exciting. SF literary techniques have always been 40 years behind the times – in the Sixties, techniques developed by Dos Passos or Joyce were introduced into SF and were supposed to be revolutionary; now roman noir from the Forties is supposed to be the thing.

The noir stance isn't what's exciting about Gibson: what's exciting about him is the concrete database of the future he presents in his prose. Not even the "ideas" – which have been around for at least twenty years – but the visualization he gives them. The way he makes them work. That's what's best about cyberpunk, the way it can make all this stuff breathe. ...Adios,
WALTER JON WILLIAMS

Title: Letter from Hunilla de Cholo | Date: 05-28-86 | Time: 00:22

(Ms. de Cholo, forwarded remarks on SMOF-BBS via US MAIL, replies)

Mr. Walter Jon Williams has a very good point: of course all works could be analyzed to show how they use ideas and techniques from previous literature – what I was attempting to do was make a point to the polemicists who seem to think they are inventing literature on the spot.

But Mr. Williams makes me realise that I committed the cardinal sin of not saying precisely what I meant. You may ascribe this to my having spent the last ten years in the arid convent on Mount Agonia.

My foot slipped in that poetic sentence "The most revolutionary act we can perform... is to cross genres, graft idioms from other work onto the SF

subject matter.” WRONG. We can certainly do more that steal from the past or our betters. We can also RAISE UP by attention to craft and, yes, the coherence and novelty of our ideas.

This involves the recognition that characterization, plotting and style are not simply “techniques” that we add to something that already exists – the “ideas” – the way a skilled chef adds seasoning to a stew. They are as fundamental as ideas. Any literature that thinks that character, story and style are secondary is doomed to strike a very low average of achievement.

But from the punk establishment I hear no rational accounting for different approaches, or tempering of the claim that ideas are paramount; even when such trivial analysis as I have provided demonstrates that, at least, new ideas are hard to come by.

Instead we hear vapid manifestos about the brilliant novelty of these so-called new works, when any critical attention will soon drastically reduce the quotient of novelty in the work, and often will show that novelty to be not novel at all.

I must confess that I do not know what Mr. Williams means when he says: “What’s exciting about <Gibson> is the concrete database of the future which he presents in his prose.” Concrete database? In the convent we never learned to judge writing according to “concrete databases”. Ascribe this to the failings of a Catholic education, but not having that method in my critical arsenal I do not find Gibson’s work, good as it is, to be any fundamental advance in the craft of fiction.

Yawning, of course, is a problem. However, different people may find themselves yawning at different times. My nephew Huey took me to see a film entitled *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* which contained a thirty-minute chase scene. In fact the entire film seemed to be one chase after another.

I am assured that this film was very exciting, yet poor Huey was at pains to wake me when the credits rolled at the end. You will have to take my word for it, then, when I say that some of us, astonishingly enough, have begun yawning at “high-tech razor’s edge technopunk”.

We find that no surplus of concrete databases can overcome plot, style, and characterization that fail to rise above 1940s film noir cliché. This is why I agree with Mr. Williams that the proof of the SF culture’s regressive nature is that it will get excited about literary techniques that are old hat outside the genre.

I confess also to being unable to figure out where Mr. Orson Scott Card finds a “retreat from a recognition that <the cyberpunks and humanists> are all one group” when this was precisely the point of my essay. Please read again, Mr. Card, with your assumptions turned off.

John Hersey, William Goldman, James Clavell, Robert Graves, and Mary Renault? Every writer is entitled to his own pantheon. Sincerely,
HUNILLA DE CHOLO

Title: Letter from Kim Chee | Date: 05-22-86 | Time: 14:36

(*Kim Chee describes himself as “a soldier south of Seoul”.*)

Dear Vince:

Thanks for *Cheap Truth* 15. I was interested by the Top Ten list, and have now gotten around to reading almost everything on it.

I don’t think anything more needs to be said about *Neuromancer* after a year of hype and reaction. But I know I want to read *Count Zero*.

Schismatrix has also been out a while, though thoughts of it still echo. Its flaws stem from its disjointed fixup feel, though the book’s episodic forward-jumping certainly gives a broad Stapledonian air, as intended. The end is quite moving, though not quite satisfying.

I just read *Frontera* this week – getting hold of a specific paperback SF original in Korea is not easy. In the beginning I was bored by all the characters having so many secrets; I was wondering when the action would start, but then it hits like a tsunami. The energy and outward drive of the book is lovely: send me to Barnard’s Star, man, and color me gone. The weary cursing of the astronauts is nice, too. Shiner puts the “shit” and “fuck” in SF and makes them count.

Eclipse took me awhile to get into – I’m half through it now, and start to like it a lot when the action starts. We Koreans are maybe too impatient with political analysis, and like *show* more than *tell*. The Rickenharp part at the rockclub is very nice and real-seeming, also all the fads Shirley talks of, such as “minimonos”. I wonder what he is like on stage, he is so worried that his audience hates him – or that they don’t.

I haven’t seen *Homunculus* yet, but I did think that Blaylock’s last book, the one about the hollow Earth, was unreadable, in somewhat the same way as Tim Powers’ books: too many characters not making enough sense, who cares.

Rucker’s *Secret of Life* is not like other science fiction on the *Cheap Truth* list. It made me laugh and fall down, but some of my friends in Korea

wish Rucker would do more real SF like in the past. I hope he does not go crazy like Phil Dick.

I thought the second fixup half of *Blood Music* dragged badly... it's clear there that Bear is just racking his brain for some new effect to finish with, like all those chapters of that girl climbing the World Trade Center for... nothing. I found Bear's ideas about information theory unconvincing as well, and his depiction of the germs' personalities was not so hot. If they are so smart, why do they act like tiny Libyans?

Still, the first half of *Blood Music* really is good, the scene in the kitchen with roots growing out of people is very soothing to contemplate. I think maybe there's a temptation for a zine like *Cheap Truth* to overpraise Bear because he is commercially successful.

Freedom Beach was okay, but way too arted up, and with big holes in the plot. Fixups are just never that good because, what I think, one really doesn't know the end of the book when one starts writing the first. For a unified book, one needs the opportunity to go back and sculpt the thing into a pretty maze. The reason one can't predict a book's end is that, when writing a novel, a human is functioning at the limit of his or her abilities.

When a computer functions at its limits, there is no way to predict its output. This is a formally established result about "incompressible computations". There is no shortcut to predicting the output, faster than actually simulating through all the intermediate stages. So a fixup, with start cut off from end, is laboring under false impressions from the beginning.

Overall, the *Cheap Truth* list is very encouraging. SF seems like more fun now than ever before. It is funny to see uptight letters in *Cheap Truth* against the word "punk", and older writers worrying about being left out, their castles suddenly empty. Keep smashing walls, Vince, even the ones you just built, and don't forget Korean SF. Best, KIM CHEE

Cheap Truth 809-C West 12th Street Austin, Texas 78701. (512)-UFO-SMOF, 300/1200 baud. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. NOT COPYRIGHTED. "When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro"

Cheap Truth 16

Editorial. How stands the Empire? In this special issue, we publish the first results of our mystic quest for truth and Vimto. First, a guest writer presents a very typically British threnody on the state of culture here on Airstrip One.

Fault-Line Skirmishing by Phaedrus

We're too damn polite we British. Culturally, we are a mixed bag – everything from the most rabid Scots and Welsh Nationalists to the Little Englanders. And yet the country is not shuddering with murmurs of revolt or even reverberating to the roars of mass demonstrations outside 10 Downing Street. And this despite 4 million unemployed. Why? Politeness has a lot to do with it, but fear and insecurity have played their dramaturgical parts – helped along by Our Leaderene and her cohorts – to the extent that the populace is being cut apart by cultural fragmentation.

And so it is with British science fiction. British SF writers find a certain bleak joy in their isolation, in writing in a vacuum, and we display little sense of direct involvement in the exploration of ideas. We are certainly less gregarious and confident than our American counterparts, whose works consistently occupy prime places in, for example, *Interzone*.

British writers are not lacking in talent or perception; but unfortunately they are too well endowed with apathy, and let things bumble along pretty much as they have done. They perceive politics and commercialism as fearful and distasteful. These perceptions are perhaps laudable, coming from the older, liberal, literary traditions in British SF that retain critical perceptions that might otherwise vanish. But the times they are a-changing, and not for the better, and apathy and complacency are hampering those who would combat depredations from the politicians and the market vampires.

There is a lack of vital organisation, so serious that the British culture-at-large experiences British SF as some hideous TV porridge of *Dr. Who*, *Blake's Seven*, *Space: 1999* and Gerry Anderson, baked up with a whole load of cardboard sets and topped with a squirting of Essence of Clarke.

Because the printed word is being supplanted by TV, we are sliding into

some seriously deep shit. Serious? Why yes. As a medium, TV is utterly different from print: there it sits, in the corner:

BLINK!advertBLINK!idiocyBLINK!dreckBLINK!drossBLINK!BLINK!BLINK!

Discontinuity is the norm in TV viewing; the acceptance of contradictory thinking, the unified advertising, the debasement of everything – especially political discourse – to the level of quiz-panel games. This is television. By its very nature it trivialises the information it disseminates. In presenting a polished version of the “facts”, it conceals the grounds for criticism. This superficiality is filtering out into the British macroculture of which SF is a part.

Our more immediate problem is to prevent British SF from degenerating into a marketer’s playpen. What I offer up for argument is this:

An organisation called “Science Fiction Writers of Great Britain”.

Yes! – you heard me: SFWGB, dammit! We need an organisation to cater specifically to the needs of science fiction and fantasy writers, run by writers for writers in the speculative field. The needs of these writers cannot be met by the BSFA, the Cassandra Workshop, the Writers Guild of Great Britain, or the Society of Authors. Only through a gathering of skills, such as SFWGB, can we properly identify our problems through criticism, create workable solutions, and even (who knows) effectively take an initiative.

Uncompromising criticism with integrity. It is not a safe stance to adopt, for it is the fault-line that cuts right across our society. The problems of the genre are not unique to SF. Modern Britain appears to be breeding a youth that is unemployed, unimaginative, and hopeless, with minds contaminated by stereotypes and wish-fulfillment slammed in by unchallenged television advertising.

The big answers lie in the political arena. No amount of ducking and evading will make this reality vanish, because experience has shown us that we can’t write our fictional way out of a cultural crisis.

So do something! We’d better start cultivating a sense of urgency, because the Great British Culture Death is approaching critical mass. If we don’t organise *now* we’ll be cut to pieces by the shrapnel.

Cheap Truth Top Ten (with helpful quotes from locals)

- *Trillion Year Spree* by Brian Aldiss “assisted by” David Wingrove (Gollancz £15) Authors tremble for their reps as “Britain’s oldest Young Turk” prepares to unleash this massive new version of his 1973 SF litcrit classic. Described as “completely revised”, “brutally frank”, and “bang up to date”, this hefty opus is an essential accoutrement for the serious, globally-minded critic or fan. Without doubt, *Spree* will once again prove the unquestioned superiority of Britain as a source of intelligent, informed criticism and provocative, well-formulated literary analysis. Most of it will be about Americans.
- *The Unconquered Country* by Geoff Ryman (Allen & Unwin £9.95) Slightly expanded version of the instantly classic *Interzone* novella, a shocking, brutally depressing SF tragedy that directly confronts the reader with high-voltage visionary excess. “I wept aloud!” “Really great illustrations!” “The best thing *Interzone* ever published!” “Most of the new stuff is padding.”
- *Mythago Wood* by Robert Holdstock (Gollancz £8.95) Archetypal fantasy concerning a tiny patch of ancient English forest where the mystical soul of Britain, or at least a lot of deeply portentous literary/mythic symbols, seem to reside. Involved, damp, very insular, vaguely creepy. “Where it’s at in Britain today!” “A marvel!” “Brilliantly written and perceptive!” Britons adore this book.
- *The Bridge* by Iain Banks. (Macmillan £9.95) The third novel by the wunderkind Scottish author of the amazing *Wasp Factory* and cryptic *Walking on Glass*. The subterranean fantasy influences of this vividly imaginative and cheerfully sadistic writer have come directly to the fore in *The Bridge*, but don’t tell his publishers. “The most compulsive and original writer working today!” “Obviously possessed of twisted genius!” “Wow!”
- *Escape Plans* by Gwyneth Jones (Orion £3.50) Bizarre effort by shocktrooper of Britain’s radical feminist SF contingent, a literary clique which possesses admirable discipline, long-term plans, and a well-developed and pitiless sociopolitical ideology. “Lesbian tripe that chokes the reader to death with jargon!” “Part of the revolutionary struggle to wrest possibilities from limitations!” Genuinely twisted, *Escape Plans* features spaceships that are not allowed to go anywhere and scrabbly desperate social uprisings. Impressive energy level and imaginative concentration make Gwyneth Jones a writer to watch.

- *Songbirds of Pain* by Garry Kilworth (Gollancz £8.95) Collection by highly regarded short story writer. Exotic settings, baroque, obsessive prose. “Exceptionally good.” “Best I’ve read in years.” “I believe in science fiction as a serious literature,” declared the author in his intro, a declaration that would be more convincing if it didn’t have to be made at all.
- *Books of Blood* v. 1-6 by Clive Barker (Sphere). This fervid and fertile six-volume collection of horror shorts has the clammy intimacy of a blowjob from the dead. “The future of horror.” “Blows out the genre’s amps.” Heartening proof that a British writer of talent and determination can rise suddenly from obscurity to completely paralyze a transatlantic readership.
- *Ghastly Beyond Belief* by Kim Newman and Neil Gaiman (Arrow £2.50). A much-needed dose of comic relief, this book collects a long series of horrible excesses and solecisms in written SF and sci-fi films. Convulsively funny, it must be read to be disbelieved. None of your “dry British humor” guff here – you’ll wince, you’ll scream, you’ll beg for a chance to breathe. “The ultimate toilet book!”

Pilgrimage to Node Zero by Seth L. Lapcart

The Old Polemicist paused for a moment in the scant shade of a utility pole and wiped sweat from the plastic headband of his gimmie cap as he watched an emaciated grackle wandering around, pecking listlessly at the baked brown earth of a nearby backyard. For some reason, he felt a poignant affinity with the pathetic bird.

“Your problem,” said the Younger Polemicist, unaware of his companion’s glum preoccupation, “is that you are not *culturally online*.”

“Jargon,” complained the Old Polemicist, roused briefly from his torpor. “I have come two thousand miles in search of enlightenment, and all I get is empty jargon.”

“It only sounds empty to you because you are so totally *out of touch*. Or, to rephrase it in a dated idiom that you might be better able to relate to, *unhip*.”

They climbed quaint wooden stairs to the Younger Polemicist’s aerie, from whence, it was rumored, all postmodern radical science-fiction ideology

emanated. “I detested jargon just as much in the 1960s as I do now,” the Old Polemicist complained, threading his way between tottering book cases into the shadowy recesses of Node Zero (as the simple wooden cabin was known in the cybernetic argot that the Younger Polemicist and his fellow-travelers found so apt). Brushing aside back issues of *Science 86* and *Soviet Life*, the Old Polemicist slumped onto the couch.

The Younger Polemicist put on a tape of Handel played by a Japanese *koto* orchestra, knowing that his visitor would be unable to cope with anything more modern. “Let’s face it, you don’t even read *Asimov’s* magazine. You hadn’t heard of the Humanist Faction, till I told you about it. You probably even *like* some of their stuff.” He sneered contemptuously. “Deeply meaningful mood pieces evoking insight into the human condition – that’s what your ‘new wave’ was all about back in ’68, wasn’t it?”

“Well, to some extent. But –”

“Read this.” The Younger Polemicist handed him a copy of the April 1986 *Asimov’s*, open at “Down and Out in the Year 2000” by Kim Stanley Robinson.

The Old Polemicist struggled to focus his bleary eyes in the shuttered dimness. Already, in the same issue, he had attempted “R&R” by Lucius Shepard only to disgrace himself by dozing off during the early pages, baffled and bored by the implausible mix of mysticism, drugs, and futuristic warfare.

“Actually I rather like this one,” he said a while later, upon finishing Robinson’s grim depiction of street Blacks hustling spare change from high-tech yuppies of tomorrow. “It has verisimilitude.”

“That’s not the point.” The Younger Polemicist seized the magazine and flipped back to page 73. “Look at this description of the holo-TV program that the panhandlers are watching.”

The Old Polemicist re-read the relevant paragraphs:

“Who the fuck is this?” said Ramon.

Johnnie said, “That be Sam Spade, the greatest computer spy in the world.... Watch out now, Sam about to go plug his brain in to try and find out who he is.”

“And then he gonna be told of some stolen *wetware* he got to find.”

“I got some wetwear myself, only I call it a shirt.”

There was more, and it was suddenly obvious: the show which the characters were mocking was a direct parody of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Robinson's story was not a story at all. It was a *rebuttal*, debunking the glitz of techno-fetishistic escapist fiction. No wonder the Younger Polemicist saw things in terms of factions. There *were* two factions now – a whole literary context that the Old Polemicist hadn't even known about. "I'm not just offline," he admitted sadly, "I'm unplugged."

"Your shame is admirable, and too seldom seen." The Younger Polemicist dumped more *Asimov's* issues on his disciple's arthritic knees. "Better get busy." He turned back to his computer and logged onto some distant samizdatabse. Flickering green symbols danced across the CRT in response to staccato bursts from his fingers at the keyboard.

The Old Polemicist paged through the magazines in the manner of one doing dutiful penance. Norman Spinrad's "The Neuromantics" seemed to offer help, as an overview; yet it was an overview through binoculars, surveying the subject in a wistful attempt to get closer to it. Despite ugly modern idiom ("informed his intellectuality" and so on) it had a dated air, and Spinrad underlined his own lack of authority by inadvertently using the word "perhaps" three separate times in two short concluding paragraphs.

"A User's Guide to the Postmoderns" by Michael Swanwick seemed more comprehensive. Swanwick's gross ignorance of history was disconcerting (he credited Delany, Disch, Lafferty, Spinrad, and Zelazny with "ushering in" the 1960s "new wave," while omitting Moorcock, who invented it, and Ellison, who imported it); but might ignorance of the past imply a viewpoint aligned with the present? Alas, no: the article divided writers into arbitrary, incestuous cliques invested with bogus drama via silly phrases such as "they engaged in a frenzy of inference swapping" or "Sides had been chosen, names dropped, and the battle could commence." Swanwick, who had once cowritten a hard-core cyberpunk story with William Gibson, sounded like a housewife narrating gossip about new neighbors who'd moved in next door. The caricatures were less than enlightening.

Where, then, could the Old Polemicist find truth?

Asimov's was the new marketplace for postmoderns, and Dozois, its editor, had invented the term "cyberpunk"; so the magazine's editorials should offer guidance, much like Moorcock's or Campbell's in bygone eras. But Dozois wasn't allowed to write the editorials. *Asimov* did that; and it

looked as if he hadn't read the stories in his own magazine. He seemed more in his element answering the laughably lamebrained letters from readers whose middlebrow complacency implied that they didn't read the stories either. An odd (and precarious) situation indeed.

These idle musings were interrupted by a sudden call to action. "Hey, we have to make it down to the copy center before 5:30 to Xerox the agitprop." The Younger Polemicist logged off, grabbed a battered file folder stuffed with anonymous diatribes against the status-quo, and slipped into his plastic Korean sandals.

The Old Polemicist dutifully accompanied his guru back out into the hear. "I gather David Brin doesn't actually believe there is any such thing as a new movement," he remarked hesitantly as the Younger Polemicist nursed his rust-riddled Volkswagen along Main Street, frugally seeking a parking meter with free time left on it.

"There's a trenchant quote from Comrade Shirley about that." The Younger Polemicist parked his car and plucked from his folder a transcript of the Science Fiction Research Association's 1986 conference panel on cyberpunk literature. "Listen: 'You don't want to believe there is a movement, because it frightens you – because you think you're not competent to handle the new idiom of it.'" He gave the Old Polemicist a meaning look, then entered the copy center and commenced operating a self-service Xerox machine with obsessive intensity.

"It seems to me," the Old Polemicist suggested, "that Shirley's quote implies *he's* not frightened by cyberpunk, so he *is* competent to handle the idiom of it."

"So?"

"Well, forgive my hubris, O master, but if John Shirley can handle it, shouldn't I be able to?"

The Younger Polemicist waved an admonishing finger. "Not until you get *culturally online*."

They drove back to Node Zero. The Younger Polemicist urged his aged disciple back up the wooden steps. "Come on, we have important work to do."

"You're *sure* it's important?" the Old Polemicist asked a little later, as he folded leaflets to be disseminated through the network of ideological activists spanning the globe from Haiti to Vladivostok.

"Important?" The Younger Polemicist paused in his envelope-stuffing.

“This is the first new movement in science fiction in twenty years. Its best-known member has won every major award. It is the only literature with an online, informed world-view. And you question its importance?”

“Well, maybe not.”

“Good. When you finish folding those leaflets, we have a couple hundred stamps to lick. And after you finish reading those *Asimov*’s, there’s three years worth of *Omni*.”

“All right.” The Old Polemicist nodded dutifully.

Before getting back to work, he stole a momentary glance through the venetian blind that half-obscured the window. Down in the yard, the ragged old grackle was still there, feebly but persistently pecking, pecking at the unyielding soil, under the merciless sun.

Cheap Truth London

Editing: Vincent Omniaveritas

Graphics: privatised by Tory regime and sold to a Yank multinational.

NOT COPYRIGHTED. “Granted, it’s not *really* science fiction, but –”

SFWA

The Central Committee, to meet at the end of the week, will take up ideological issues in order to seize the high ground in the realm of ideas and overcome resistance from party cadres and conservative opponents of the economic changes, according to diplomats here.

Cheap Truth 17

The Last Cheap Truth "Node Zero" Demolished! Omniaveritas Shot!

(Austin, Texas November 1986) "Node Zero", the global info-nexus of the *Cheap Truth* publishing empire, has been reduced to smoldering wreckage in a poorly-realized action-sequence right out of the worst tradition of macho adventure fiction.

A dead Hollywood stunt-dummy, with several burst squibs of chicken-blood attached to its head and torso, was discovered by hard-boiled investigators. The body has been identified as that of *Cheap Truth* editor Vincent Omniaveritas.

Credit for the attack was immediately claimed in phone-calls to a fictional news service where guys wear snap-brim hats that say "press" and have teletypes that go clackaclackaclacka. We are reprinting the statements in their entirety.

(Version 1)

"This is the voice of the Skiffy Defense Initiative. On November 26, 1986, our armed counterterrorist strike force received authorization from the National Security Council, or guys who looked and acted just like them, to surround the *Cheap Truth* terrorist cell and neutralize them by any means necessary.

"A leak in the Marxist publication *Rolling Stone* allowed us at last to establish irrefutable proof of linkage between *Cheap Truth's* activities and the blustering madman known as the 'Qaddafi of Technosleaze'. At the modest cost of half a billion dollars, an attack was launched in a healthy condition of total press secrecy.

"Off-duty Dorsai mercenaries, freshly flown in from contra training camps in Honduras, opened ground fire with 9mm folding-stick Uzi submachine guns, silenced Ingram Mac-10s, and Heckler-and-Koch MP5 automatic sidearms, meanwhile shouting a challenge and requesting all inside to identify themselves. They were met with savage return-fire from Czech-

made Skorpion automatic pistols and cheap, cruddy, but witheringly effective Soviet-supplied AK-47 automatic rifles.

“To our surprise we found that the supposedly ‘simple wooden cabin’ known as Node Zero had been armored in Kevlar and crammed with dozens of Cuban construction workers. Rescuer casualties mounted, and it became necessary to call in an airstrike.

“Blueprints of the Stealth bomber then strafed the terrorist fortress, followed by blistering orbital fire from X-ray lasers, particle beams, and magnetic rail-guns. This caused the enemies, with all their bad ideas, to vaporize without a trace and should have been done a long time ago.”

(Version 2)

“Hello? Am I on the air? Well this is Professor – woops, this is the voice of the Humanist Peace and Justice Coalition, uh, calling... Well, as everybody knows, we Humanists been putting up with a lot of guff from these cyberpunks, who’ve been swiping our Nebulas and ridiculing our angst. Then we heard rumors that they’d just called good old Robinson a ‘no-talent hippydippy arch-wimp’. The time had come for a final showdown.

“So we took Connie’s, uh, Comrade Tanya’s, writing grant, and bought Amtrak tickets for everybody. We met in Austin and had some Campari-and-sodas downtown, then marched on their den of iniquity. And we stood in the alley downstairs and yelled challenges, until the *Cheap Truth* staff finally heard us over their blaring heavy-metal punk drivel. Then Vince and Sue came out, and stood on the porch upstairs, and yelled abuse, and threatened to grab Nancy and Connie and Karen Joy and dip their braids in the inkwell. And that was followed by a barrage of spitwads and legal-sized paper airplanes with paperclips in the noses that really stung.

“So we had to get tough! First we gave ’em the introduction to *Planet on the Table*, where Stan has the long talk with James Joyce. We could hear ’em vomiting inside, but they fired back with hard-tech expositive lumps from Toffler and Ilya Prigogine. So we hit ’em with both barrels: a chunk of self-reflexive metafiction and some third-hand magic realism.

“They reeled back howling and we rushed upstairs to the door, only to find it barricaded with J.G. Ballard re-issues... That was the last straw, because we know Ballard officially belongs to us... Our blood was up, and we swarmed into the place, yelling the sacred name of LeGuin and lashing out

right and left with our shepherd's crooks...

“Then suddenly Vince slipped on the slick footing of a copy of *Omni* and crashed into his massive bank of computers... Big zaps of electricity jumped out of all this Frankenstein equipment which literateurs were not meant to know, and given all the paper, the whole place went up as fast as Shepard's reputation... Sue Denim sneaked out by disguising herself as a progressive feminist writer, and the last thing we heard was Vince screaming, ‘I meant Spider Robinson, you assholes.’”

(Version 3)

SFAW Grievance Committee Report

“When rumors reached us of Mr. Omniaveritas' death, we reacted with grave concern. He had, after all, been semiprofessionally published in *Interzone*, and could be broadly regarded as one of us, even though his name and address never showed in the Directory and we never got cent one of dues out of him. So we despatched a crack investigative team of myopic geeks and pudgy women in satin to clarify the situation. If foul play was discovered, we were perfectly prepared to threaten to sic Harlan's lawyer on any publisher involved.

“Our team travelled to the stated address of the *Cheat Truth* headquarters, 908 West 12th Street in Austin. We were annoyed, and more than a little angry, to discover that 908 is the address of ‘House Park Bar-B-Que’, a working-class Texas eatery that has been in continuous operation since 1943. It was full of rude mundanes in baseball hats and overalls who looked us over and laughed aloud.

“The SFAW have been made the butts of a calculated publicity stunt. We may now assure the membership that there is no such publication as *Cheat Truth* and definitely no such person as ‘Omniaveritas’. There is no ‘movement’ of ‘radical hard SF’ writers threatening to ‘reinvent science fiction from an eighties perspective’. It was only hype and everyone can relax.

“However, the joke is on the hoaxsters. Although there is no such thing as an actual cyberbunk ‘ideology’, the term itself has become a viable subgeneric marketing category. Our sources in publishing assure us that the use of the term ‘cyberbunk’ in cover blurbs guarantees a modest, but solid sales increase, which may well be useful to younger, less established writers.

“A SFAW member in good standing has prepared a helpful beginners’ manual, ‘Cyberbunk: What It Means, How To Write It’, which will include a glossary of useful subgenre jargon, such as ‘wetware’, ‘retrofit’, ‘download’, and ‘biohazard’. Other chapters will analyze typical cyberbunk plot structures, including tips on how to have the antihero lose the girl in the end without being too downbeat. Younger SFAW members should consult their agents as to whether they too can profit by joining this flashy, but flimsy bandwagon.”

Interview with Vincent Omniaveritas

Saddened by the death of this fabled gangster of Eighties SF criticism, we decided to re-visit the Cross Plains Dairy Queen ([CT3](#), [CT11](#)) and contact his spirit for a post-mortem interview.

To our surprise we found Omniaveritas, apparently very much alive, sipping a Dr. Pepper with his wife, sometime *CT* graphic artist Sherry LaPuerta. Omniaveritas wore his usual “Captain Harlock – Space Pirate” T-shirt, a black leather bomber jacket, jeans, and Chinese kung fu shoes. Ms. LaPuerta wore a maternity jumper and mirrorshades.

CT: Vince! Heard you were dead.

VO: (grunts) Not a scratch on me. *CT*, though, is definitely history.

CT: How come?

VO: (with a heavy sigh) A lot of reasons, really... First, Sherry and I have a kid on the way.... Yeah, thanks, we’re thrilled about it too.... I have a book to do... And we bought a house. I had to change addresses, so it’s a proper time to put an honorable end to this phase of operations. We don’t want the next 12th Street tenants to be deluged, and possibly mentally harmed, by *CT*’s twisted mail.

CT: Why on earth stop now? When the stuff you’ve been touting is really taking off?

VO: That’s the very reason. I mean, when *Cheap Truth* was mentioned in *Rolling Stone* I knew the end was near. For *CT* to be cultural currency for those clapped-out yuppie breadheads... Jesus, what’s next? The *Wall Street Journal*?

CT: But wasn’t publicity the point?

VO: The whole point of *Cheap Truth* was that anyone can do it. All you need is something to say, and a xerox. You don’t need a clique or a bankroll

or PR flacks. But now I've got crap like that, so I've changed. *CT* was a garage-band effort and looked it, deliberately. But I'm not a garage-band guy now. I've taught myself how to play, I got my own label and recording studio, I'm even big in Japan. I could lie about it, and pretend I was still really street-level, but it would be bogus. It would betray the whole ethos of the thing. Truth plus lies always equals lies.

Besides, a lot of the original freedom is gone. People know who I am, and they get all hot and bothered by personalities, instead of ideas and issues. *CT* can no longer claim the "honesty of complete desperation". That first fine flower of red-hot hysteria is simply gone.

CT: You sound bitter about it.

VO: Fuck no, man, the thing did exactly what I wanted it to. It was a successful experiment and had a big pay-off for all concerned. But it has limits. It's too small to get into the really heavy issues, at length. And it's okay as a straight propaganda broadside, but it's not much use as a forum for balanced discussion.

The work has to come first. The publicity can handle itself now. It's already a fucking juggernaut, so I don't see much point in getting out to push. I got better things to do.

CT: So you're saying you've cut a successful niche for yourself, is that it?

VO: The skiffy establishment, such as it is, still doesn't have the foggiest idea what we're up to. They think we're a bunch of PR hustlers, an inch deep, all candy-flake and chrome. They read *CT* and think, "gosh, what a hip publicity stunt, this year's model, they can't mean it, though." (Pauses, then bursts into sinister laughter)

CT: What about your readers, though?

VO: If they miss what *CT* offers, let 'em start their own zines. It's easy! Personally, I'm going to read Steve Brown's *SF Eye* (at Box 3105, Washington, DC 20010, \$7/yr [\$12 overseas]). Brown's a hip guy and will have some good people working with him, including me if truth be told, though I'll be cleaned up, wearing a shirt and tie, and using another name. I have high hopes for this mag, because it's got room and inclination to tackle the real problems of the field. And I'll be reading Scott Card's *Short for M* (at 546 Lindley Road, Greensboro NC 27410, \$10/yr.) Card has no taste at all, he gets all damp-eyed over the most laughably inadequate pulp kitsch, but he's usually good for a hoot... It's good to know there's some Neanderthal

out there who has the c-word people figured for effete literateurs.... But for now I'm hanging up my shoes. I did what I wanted and I'm quitting while I'm ahead. Could be *The Compleat Cheap Truth* will appear as a retrospective, with a copyright and everything. Oh, and everyone should buy the new Arbor House collection, *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (\$16.95). It's a solid memento of the scene and has the best single summary of Movement ideology.

Someday I may try another zine. But *CT*'s too big now and people lean on it too much. I wanted to point at the mountaintop, I don't want to be the mountain myself.

CT: I guess I see... Any final words?

VO: I hereby declare the revolution over. Long live the provisional government.

CT: Same old Vince... Goodbye all.

The Last Cheap Truth. Austin, Texas, USA. The Late Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd "Need a Job" Refinery, graphics. Not copyrighted. "Don't mourn, organize."

Cheap Truth [unnumbered]

Sturgeon: Mercury Plus X Brian Aldiss

Sturgeon? The name was magnetic. There it was, perpetually cropping up attached to the stories I most admired. Sturgeon: quite an ordinary Anglo-American word among exotics like A.E. van Vogt, Isaac Asimov, Heinlein, Simak, and Kuttner. Yet – spikey, finny, *odd*. And it was not his original name. Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon was born Edward Hamilton Waldo. To the usual boring undeserving parents. That was on Staten Island, the year the first World War ended.

So there were two of him, as there are of many a good writer. A bright side, a dark side – much like our old SF image of Mercury, remember, so much more interesting than banal reality. He had a mercurial temperament.

The bright side was the side everyone loved. There was something so damned nice, charming, open, empathic, and *elusive* about Ted that women flocked to him. Men too. Maybe he was at the mercy of his own fey sexuality. If so, he was quizzical about it, as about everything. One of his more cutesy titles put it admirably: “If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?” Not if it was Sturgeon, said a too-witty friend.

He played his guitar. He sang. He shone. He spoke of his philosophy of love.

Ted honestly brought people happiness. If he was funny, it was a genuine humor which sprang from seeing the world aslant. A true SF talent. Everyone recognized his strange quality – “faunlike”, some nut dubbed it; faunlike he certainly looked. Inexplicable, really.

Unsympathetic stepfather, unsatisfactory adolescence. Funny jobs, and “Ether Breather” out in *Astounding* in 1939. So to an even funnier job, science fiction writer. It’s flirting with disaster.

I could not believe those early stories: curious subject matter, bizarre resolutions, glowing style. And about sexuality. You could hardly believe your luck when one of Ted’s stories went singing through your head.

“It”, with Cartier illustrations, in *Unknown*. Terrifying. “Derm Fool”. Madness. The magnificent “Microcosmic God”, read and re-read.

“Killdozer”, appearing after a long silence. There were to be other silences. “Baby is Three”: again the sense of utter incredibility with complete conviction, zinging across a reader’s synapses. By a miracle, the blown-up version, *More Than Human*, was no disappointment either. This was Sturgeon’s caviar dish. Better even than *Venus Plus X*, with its outré sexuality in a hermaphrodite utopia.

As for those silences. Something sank Sturgeon. His amazing early success, his popularity with fans and stardom at conventions – they told against the writer. Success is a vampire. In the midst of life we are in definite trouble. They say Sturgeon was the first author in the field ever to sign a six-book contract. A six-book contract was a rare mark of distinction, like being crucified. A mark of extinction. Ted was no stakhanovite and the deal did for him; he was reduced to writing a novelization of a schlock TV series, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, to fulfill his norms.

At one time, he was reduced further to writing TV pilot scripts for Hollywood. He lived in motels or trailers, between marriages, between lives. Those who read *The Dreaming Jewels* or *Venus Plus X* or the story collections forget that writing is secretly a heavy load, an endless battle against the disappointments which come from within as well as without – and reputation a heavier load. Ted was fighting his way back to the light when night came on.

About Ted’s dark side.

Well, he wrote that memorable novel, *Some of Your Blood*, about this crazy psychotic who goes for drinking menstrual discharge. Actually, it does not taste as bad as Ted made out. That was his bid to escape the inescapable adulation.

One small human thing he did. He and I, with James Gunn, were conducting the writers’ workshop at the Conference of the Fantastic at Boca Raton, Florida. This was perhaps three years ago.

Our would-be writers circulated their effusions around the table for everyone’s comment. One would-be was a plump, pallid, unhappy lady. Her story was a fantasy about a guy who tried three times to commit suicide, only to be blocked each time by a green monster from Hell who wanted him to keep on suffering. Sounds promising, but the treatment was hopeless.

Dumb comments around the table. I grew impatient with their unreality. When the story reached me, I asked the lady right out, “Have you ever tried to commit suicide?”

Unexpected response. She stared at me in shock. Then she burst into a hailstorm of tears, collapsing onto the table... “Three times,” she cried. Everyone looked fit to faint.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” I said. “I’ve tried it too.”

“So have I,” said Sturgeon calmly.

He needn’t have come in like that. He just did it bravely, unostentatiously, to support me, to support her, to support everyone. And I would guess there was a lot of misery and disappointment in Ted’s life, for all the affection he generated. Yet he remained kind, loving, giving. (The lady is improving by the way. We’re still in touch. That’s another story.)

If that does not strike you as a positive story, I’m sorry. I’m not knocking suicide, either. Everyone should try it at least once.

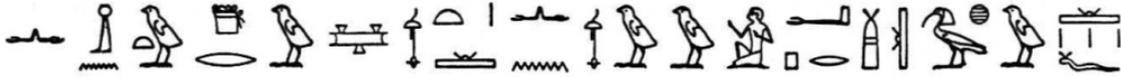
Ted was a real guy, not an idol, an effigy, as some try to paint him. He was brilliant, so he suffered. I know beyond doubt that he would be pleased to see me set down some of the bad times he had. He was not one to edit things out. Otherwise he would have been a less powerful writer.

There are troves of lovely Sturgeon tales (as in the collection labelled *E Pluribus Unicorn*), like “Bianca’s Hands”, which a new generation would delight in. He wrote well, if sometimes over-lushly. In many ways, Ted was the direct opposite of the big technophile names of his generation, Doc Smith, Poul Anderson, Robert Heinlein, et al. His gaze was more closely fixed on people. For that we honor him, and still honor him. Good for him that he never ended up in that prick’s junkyard where they pay you a million dollars advance for some crud that no sane man wants to read.

Ted died early in May [1985] in Oregon, of pneumonia and other complications. Now he consorts with Sophocles, Dick, and the author of the *Kama Sutra*. He had returned from a holiday in Hawaii, taken in the hopes he might recover his health there. That holiday, incidentally, was paid for by another SF writer – one who often gets publicity for the wrong things. Thank God, there are still some good guys left. We are also duly grateful for the one just departed.

Brian Aldiss

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No limit may be set to art, neither is there any craftsman that is fully master of his craft.

The End

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