

REVIEWS

GOLD THE MAN by Joseph Green.
published by Pan at 30p.
Reviewed by Belladonna.

I hardly ever read Science Fiction- it isn't really "My scene". But this was sent me to review. It reached me on a morning when I was lying in bed with 'flu, and the cover showed an anatomised brain in throbbing psychedelic colours, with little people running about inside it - just the way my head was feeling at that moment. I closed my eyes...

Later I went back to the book and was surprised to find myself gripped by it against my will- it is such an imaginative exercise in "Just supposing"...What would happenif...

What would happen if a three-hundred foot giant from another solar system landed upon "our" moon-base and some terribly clever scientists constructed a control-cell inside that giant's brain, where one terribly clever scientist (who was a super-brain) and another, (who was -guess!- a woman) could take up quarters indefinitely and control the giant, returning him, eventually to his planet....

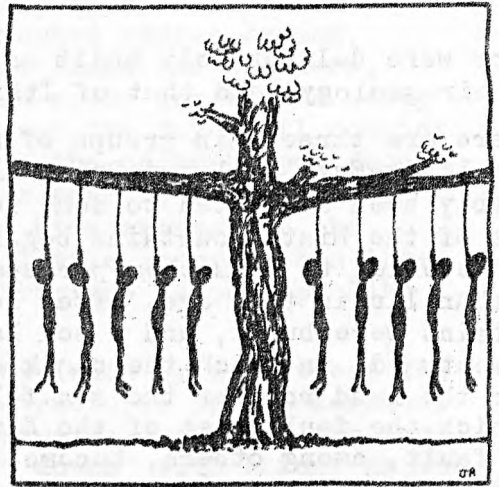
And so on. The possibilities are explored with a lively curiosity which ranges all the way from the genes of our principal character to the conscious intelligences embodied in cosmic clouds which are bombarding the giant's home sun and forcing his people to contemplate taking over the earth. The author is interested in everything, including, it would seem the destination of every drop of blood or other bodily fluid. He describes everything, including a great deal of sex in quite clinical and antiseptic detail - I suppose we have to get used to this. The frequent flash-backs to Gold's previous sexual adventures (in detail) seem to me, however, unnecessary and rather in the nature of "padding"; however, highly spiced padding. The story could carry itself without them, though it would be shorter.

We are given a good cliff-hanging climax -I just had to know how the baby would get born in such very peculiar circumstances! -- and a reasonable "catastrophe"- the intelligences in the cosmic clouds are amenable to reason after all. But no hope is held out for the miserable degenerate earthlings (known as the technots- the have-nots of the technical age)described in the earlier chapters. I fear the author forgot them.

Good of its kind, as far as I can judge its kind - but a long way from Tolkien.

STAG-BOY by William Rayner.
Published by Collins.
Reviewed by Susan Adler.

I read this book almost by accident - It had an interesting cover so I picked it up and took it home. While I was reading it, I was so deeply immersed that I didn't hear when people talked to me - something that hasn't happened to me for a long time, and although it only took me two hours to read it, at the end of it, I felt that I didn't want to read anything else for a while, so that I could



The Fenny family tree

retain its memory a little longer.

It appears from the cover notes that William Rayner has written several adult novels, but that this is his first book for young people. The hero of the book is fifteen-year-old Jim, who is small, dark, intense, imaginative and asthmatic - the proto-type for many children's book heroes, perhaps because the type of child who reads a lot of books isn't likely to be very athletic, and is likely to be imaginative. And, sure enough, here comes the rival, seventeen year old Edward, tall, fair, physically fit and confident.

Edward is courting Mary, who was Jim's childhood companion, before his father's death drove Jim and his mother away from Exmoor to the smog of Wolverhampton. Jim has now returned to Exmoor for a holiday, and finds himself competing with Edward. It should also be mentioned that Jim is interested in the barrows and microliths of the area and is "filled...with enthusiasm for these ancient tribesmen, his distant ancestors, men with the same blood as had come down to him, men who had built and worked and hunted and fought across the wilderness of the moor and worshipped their gods in the stone circle." When he finds an ancient helmet with stag's antlers and places it on his head, Things Start Happening.

The book is only 160 pages short, and in this time it is impossible for Rayner to fully develop his characters, so all three remain "types" with the possible exception of Mary, whose struggle between the wish to be a social success and go and Live in London, (with glorious vistas of New York on the Horizon) and the ties she has with the countryside (which is mirrored in her struggle to choose between Edward and Jim) struck answering chords in me. However even this aspect is by no means fully developed-I believe it is only mentioned twice.

Another interesting aspect is Rayner's rejection of money as a value; Jim has to be careful of his clothes while Edward treats his casually. But then Edward's clothes "had cost only money in a house where there was plenty of money. They hadn't meant Edward's mother setting off in the dark on winter's mornings to swab down bar room floors..." Jim looks with contempt upon Mary's father who has converted good barley land into a more profitable caravan site. And he hates him for keeping battery hens. He is described as a "money-grabbing rogue who was afraid incase his profitable campers from Wolverhampton should be put out. A man who settled rows of caravans and tents on good barley land. A man who tormented animals as a trade. A man who would shut away any breathing soul into a battery cage for profit. The sort of man who, because his imagination was withered at the root would snugly lay waste the earth and debase its creatures, robbing them of the nobility that nature had planted in them all, either because he failed to see it, or because he set it at no account when set against profit." and later "To deny nature - that was the worst sin, the sin against life, the sin against the Old Ones, the unforgivable sin". Finally we learn that all he can do with his profit is buy the "wrong things", so in a sense the book is a plea for a return to nature.

Although the two boys are opposite types, I have already mentioned that Mary is torn between them. Yet it is she who, in the end, resolves the problem of the book in a gentle feminine way. Perhaps Rayner is saying that women, although less intense than men finally possess some important quality that men do not. I don't know whether this is the case, its just a tentative suggestion.

One final point; this is intended to be a children's book, as is clear from its "semi-developed psychological" characters, which are not quite Tolkien's "types". Yet I think it should be very enjoyable to adults in a similar way to Alan Garner's "Weirdstone of Brisingamen" and "Moon of Gomrath". I am sure there are many aspects of it children would not understand, for instance there are distinct sexual undertones to it, but would I, at the age of, say 13 (I assume this is the age group it's aimed at) have noticed them?

Perhaps in this review I have dwelt too long upon the undevelopedness of the characters which inevitably springs from its being written for children - I hope this does not deter you from reading it. It is certainly a very happy relief from the turgid Moorcock I've been wading through recently.

THE TOMBS OF ATUAN by Ursula Le Guin.

published by Gollancz. £1.25.

Reviewed by Jessica Kemball-Cook (Luthien Tinuviel)

One of the most important fantasy publications this year, 'The Tombs of Atuan' is a sequel to 'The Wizard of Earthsea', which was the best children's fantasy since Alan Garner's books, and even more original. The first book told how Sparrowhawk learned how to master his magic powers at a school for wizards, but could not control his human weakness, and in that tale we travelled over the whole archipelago of the Fantasy world of Earthsea, a world of hundreds of little islands.

As 'The Wizard of Earthsea' is a book about the balance of external and internal forces, so is this one, but in contrast 'The Tombs of Atuan' is more inward looking in its handling of one of Le Guin's basic motifs, the conflict of Light and Dark. This conflict has its battle ground in Middle-earth as well - I shall remind you, from many possible quotations of Haldir's words in Lorien; "Whereas light perceives the very heart of darkness, its own secret has not been discovered, not yet." In the "Tombs" there is far more concentration on the self-imprisonment of the main character, the girl, Tenar, which is mirrored by the claustrophobic horror of the Tombs of which she is the guardian.

At the age of six, Tenar is taken from her family, and doomed to be chief priestess of the dark tombs and the terrifying labyrinth beneath, and to serve the nameless gods. This part is very reminiscent of Lovecraft's weird city and his Old Ones, and almost as frightening. Tenar's life is narrow, caged, and everything is prescribed by ancient ritual until she meets Ged-Sparrowhawk, The Wizard of Earthsea. Readers of the earlier book will remember the two old people Ged found stranded on an island, and the half-circle of the broken ring they gave him. This was one half of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, which holds a mighty Rune of Rower, and to make use of the Rune, Ged seeks the other half of the Ring in the Tombs. Tenar finds him wandering and, by right should doom him to death for desecrating the shrine of the gods. Ged makes her see she has a choice.

The master touch of Le Guin is ever-present: descriptions of weird riter and sacred dancing; the intolerance of the other priestesses; the dark oppressive labyrinth which Tenar learns to follow by touch alone. There's a message too - about the weight of freedom: "It is not easy, it is not a gift given, but a choice made, and the choice may be a hard one. The road goes upward towards the light; but the laden traveller may never reach the end of it."

The final volume in the Earthsea trilogy "The Farthest Shore" has now been published by Gollancz at £1.60. In it Ged travels to the Land of the dead, and we hear more about Le Guin's dragons dancing on the goldenwind....