Short Reviews by Carolyn Cushman

Charles Ashton, **Billy's Drift** (Walker UK 0-7445-2486-5, £8.99, 287pp, hc) November 1994. Cover by Wendy Hoile.

This is one of the best young-adult novels I've read in quite a while, but classifying it is beyond me. On one level, it's a teenage problem novel about young love. It's also a mystery of crime and abduction and amnesia. There are horror elements, some definitely supernatural. Oddly, what it isn't is a dog story, though that's what the basic plot is about: a boy named Billy and his dog Drift. But from the start, Drift has a strange gleam in his eye, and things get progressively stranger. Drift dies; Billy is hurt in a suspicious accident, and is left with amnesia that only his new girlfriend Theresa can pierce. The actual dark fantasy, involving otherworlds, ghosts, and strange powers, is very subtle until the climactic chapter, and even then has a certain "it's all in his head" potential because of the amnesia. Three points of view are provided, though all actually come from Theresa, who years later feels moved to write Billy's story, and shares her manuscript – and pages of her old diary – with a mutual friend, along with her letters giving an adult look back at the events. This mixed point of view works very nicely, adding complexity while giving a particular depth to some of the characterizations. The semi-rural setting has more solidity than most, as well. The whole is real and involving; the only problem is that the novel ends before Theresa goes back to find out what's happened to Billy over the last ten years – and I really wanted to know.

Charles Ashton, **The Shining Bridge** (Walker UK 0-7445-2461-X, £4.99, 238pp, tp) October 1993. Cover by Wayne Anderson.

This book first appeared in 1993, the third book of a young-adult fantasy trilogy I don't recall seeing before. Nevertheless, it serves to establish Ashton's interest in otherworlds, and the ways they might influence the real world. Where the fantasy is subtle in **Billy's Drift**, it's overt here, even pervasive. In our world, Trina is perturbed because her memories and those of her parents (who may be splitting up) don't match. In particular, her parents have no recollection of Trina's sister Kitty, who died in a plane crash. Meanwhile, Kitty is off in a fantasy world, where she and her companions defeated a powerful dragon (presumably in the previous novels, **Jet Smoke and Dragon Fire** and **Into the Spiral**). Somehow, the imprisonment of the dragon left our world with all the dragon's poison, leading to riots and terrorism, with none of the compensating magic. Now the two girls, and their magic-wielding friend Sparrow, must somehow build a bridge of dragon bones between the two worlds. None of them know what they're doing; they just follow the instructions of the mysterious adults who consistently give incomprehensible advice and explanation. There are unexplained shapechanges and unreliable doorways between worlds – this is contemporary fantasy without rules, but far more evocative of the old tales of faery than magic realism. It's also told well enough that the wonders outweigh the annoyingly inexplicable, and the result is a lot of fun.

Brett Davis, **The Faery Convention** (Baen 0-671-87656-2, $5.99, 281pp, pb) April 1995. Cover by Larry Elmore.

The packaging suggests rampant silliness, but this is largely a political thriller set in an alternate USA where the faeries came out of the closet – er, woods – back in the '60s. Though originally welcomed as full citizens, the supernaturals were forbidden to work magic, an instinctive part of their nature. (The parallel to gays in the military today is pretty obvious.) The convention of the title is supposed to bring them legal protection and a reservation where they can work magic freely. But some forces want to stop the reservation, others want to use it for their own purposes, and it's up to a half-elf Senate investigator to keep murder, blackmail, and power plays from escalating into riots and genocide. There's a sprinkling of humor, lots of supernatural species, a surfeit of political squabling, and plenty of action, but as a thriller the novel's a trifle slow, and beyond the initial premise the fantasy elements aren't particularly interesting. (I also found the "happy" ending a bit disturbing.) A mixed-breed that doesn't quite satisfy, but has its moments.

Jack Finney, **From Time to Time** (Simon & Schuster 0-671-89884-1, $23.00, 304pp, hc) February 1995. Cover by Honi Werner.

Finney's classic time-travel novel **Time and Again** came out 25 years ago. Now, he finally returns with a sequel, and it's a great read that sucks you right in. It lacks the originality that made the first novel so special; the idea of thinking yourself into the past is no longer new, and the bulk of this novel is taken up with the dangers of trying to change history. Nor is it absolutely necessary to have read the previous book, as much of the background is skillfully interwoven in the early chapters. What makes this sequel interesting is the interwoven time periods, and Finney's amazing ability to recreate the trivial details of the past – in this case New York in 1912, as Simon tries to keep WWI from happening. Echoing the first novel, there's even a bit of almost-romance, as Simon meets a charming young lady, lively enough to make him at least consider being unfaithful to his wife back in 1887. Such repetitive plot elements lend a slight sense of being trapped in a series of infinite reruns, but it's a show worth watching more than once.

Eve L. Forward, **Villains by Necessity** (Tor 0-312-85789-6, $24.95, 445pp, hc) March 1995. Cover by Darrell K. Sweet.

Good and Evil duke it out once again in this amusing fantasy, but for once we're not rooting for the good guys. The forces of Light and Good threaten to take over the world, and it's up to the last thief and assassin to stop them and make the world safe for evildoers. It takes the last druid to unite them and get things moving – as in Dungeons and Dragons, the druids of this world believe it's necessary to keep a balance between good and evil, so in this case it's the druid's *duty* to be bad. Add an evil sorceress, a black knight, and a centaur spy, and you have a silly, but entertaining, romp. The evil characters are awfully likeable, but that's all part of the fun. Good ends up looking pretty unpleasant in comparison, maybe too unpleasant to be truly good. The philosophy may be dumb, but the concept is cute. It's hard to imagine what villains will do in the usual heroic situations, making for some fun plot twists in what is otherwise a standard gaming-style quest fantasy.

Morgan Llywelyn & Michael Scott, **Silverhand** (Baen 0-671-87652-X, $22.00, 417pp, hc) April 1995. Cover by Gary Ruddell.

This collaboration between Llywelyn and Celtic scholar Michael Scott is very close to genre fantasy. It's even part of a series, book one of "The Arcana". In many ways it's very familiar, full of the elements of archetypal heroism and medieval fantasy. Caeled is a poor boy, orphaned by a magical disaster caused by his country's rulers, the sadistic, incestuous twins known as The Duet. He is also the subject of prophecy, becomes an apprentice mage, then is forced into the cold, cruel world to find some magic objects (left by an elder race) and save the world. His eventual companions include a woman of stone, a vampire, and a were-wolfhound. Fortunately, these aren't quite the usual vampires and weres, the pacing is fast, and the plot is filled with enough unusual twists to keep it lots of fun. Unfortunately, there's just enough illogical, mushy stuff to keep it slightly irritating. (Most annoying, the evil rulers use *selective breeding* to create super-soldiers in just the time it takes Caeled to grow up. I would have preferred unspecified magic at that point.) Such fuzzy thinking is typical of authors who think the genre is nifty, but don't really understand it; the result is a novel that's sincere, enthusiastic, colorful, and action-filled, but not entirely successful.

Andre Norton, **Mirror of Destiny** (Morrow AvoNova 0-688-13988-4, $22.00, 394pp, hc) March 1995. Cover by Matt Stawicki.

This is a basic apprentice mage story with some twists, and some of Norton's favorite themes: ecological destruction, cultural conflicts, and a hint of feminism. Twilla is an apprentice healer until she is conscripted as one of many brides for settlers in the Far Land, where strange things happen to unwed men. Twilla has healing knowledge and a magic mirror she is just learning to use, and with them manages to escape into the woods with her husband-to-be's blind brother. In the forest she finds hidden worlds of elf-like beings and dwarves, worlds threatened by men's greed for wood and ores. Twilla learns to master her mirror's magic in time to save the day, of course, but the mirror makes an interesting device the way she uses it. The characters are flat, the prose

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are the basic facts – but they can't convey the excellence of the writing presented here. "The Man Who Lost Red" takes place in a future Earth invaded and transformed by seemingly benevolent but mysterious aliens, who punish apparent criminals by "occluding" one small sensory element (the color red, the feel of wind) while erasing all memory of the person's "crime." Though it's hard to imagine how this would affect a commonplace thug, it works as intended on the protagonist, making for a subtle, powerful tale of humanity, transgression, and possible redemption.

"Scaring the Train", which makes its debut here, seems at first to be a mainstream story of two teenagers engaged in pranks which take a tragic, fatal turn – but then the uncanny creeps in, along with a strange sense of inevitability, and things get very scary indeed. The reader will remember this one, the next time a train tunnel fills with that first faint breath of wind...

–Faren Miller

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fiction, with 14 stories originally published between 1987-94. In many ways this is classically hard SF, and Sheffield shows a fondness for a number of SF forms – the puzzle ("Deep Safari"), the silly/series story ("Fifteen-Love on the Dead Man's Chest"), the short-short-with-kicker ("Millenium", "That Strain Again . . ."). He also practices one of the primal arts of SF: the practice of taking an idea from another writer's story and rethinking its assumptions and logic, or just giving it a half-turn to produce a new item altogether. In "Humanity Test", for example, he tells us that he set out to rework the logic of Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" – though its dramatic form and initial situation read like a descendant of Heinlein's "Jerry Was a Man". "Deep Safari" could be a remake of ***Fantastic Voyage*** with better science (in fact, better everything), specifically technology of the Adestis game also used in the author's own **The Mind Pool** (reviewed in October 1993).

I don't think it's just my humanist background that makes me find the strongest stories to be the least like conventional hard SF. Perhaps significantly, perhaps not, they all deal somehow with the past. The dying biological illustrator of "The Feynman Saltation" draws what he sees as he mentally sinks into the geological past without benefit of time machine or other traditional enabling device. (In fact, the possibility that brain surgery is responsible reminds me of arch-fantasist and anti-science romantic Arthur Machen – see "The Great God Pan".) "The Fifteenth Station of the Cross" uses a time machine to transport the historical Jesus, but it also appears by its end to invoke the supernatural-miraculous in a fairly significant way. The Nebula-winning "Georgia on My Mind" concerns Charles Babbage's difference engine, with the possibility of some aliens off on the horizon less interesting than the story of the nineteenth-century couple who brought it to New Zealand. And "Beyond the Golden Road" isn't SF at all, but a well-turned, rather de Campian historical tale of love and mathematics.

Sheffield's brief afterwords offer some background on the intellectual and professional origins of the stories, along with glimpses of more personal connections. However, even these don't tell me what to make of a number of repeated motifs: grave or terminal illness (seven stories), or the plot-starter that pairs a protagonist working (often reluctantly or under some sort of compulsion) for an extremely rich and powerful person (five stories; also **Proteus in the Underworld**). Mortality, power and greed and resentment, frustrated love ("Trapalanda" and "The Bee's Kiss"), all operating in a physical universe whose workings provide an endless stream of wonders – I think it's the sense that there are forces other than science and technology at work in these stories that makes Sheffield so interesting to me, and guarantees that I want to look at anything of his that comes my way.

–Russell Letson

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ful novelist with **Love Bite**, a romantic police procedural about vampirism. Obviously that covers at least three popular bets. **Love Bite** has appeared in two editions. The Warner mass paperback boasts a classy Mel Odum minimalist cover showing fanged lips and a blood-red rose. The ambitious new Canadian publisher, Transylvania Press, has created a signed and numbered limited edition hardback with a spiffy cover by Alan M. Clark showing Gottlieb's female protagonist putting on lipstick in front of the mirror. In the mirror we see lipstick tube and the lips outlined in pigment; nothing more.

There seem to be a fair number of police/vampire contemporary novels. **Love Bite** is a good example of its breed. The tone is set nicely by the dedication: "For the man I loved, for inspiring me to murder." L.A. homicide detective Jace Levy has a host of problems. In the foreground is the series of brutal slayings in which the brutal Bowie knife wounds increasingly appear to be a clever means of hiding the actual fang-proportioned holes from which a succession of male victims were exsanguinated. But Jace has some background problems that are increasingly giving him fits. For one thing, there's the fatal genetic disease that seems to be kicking in and threatening his life. For another, there's the increasingly difficult boundary between personal concern and attraction, and professionalism, with Liz Robinson, his cop partner.

There's no mystery about the murders for the reader. We are quickly introduced to Risha, also known as Rusty, a comparatively newly minted vampire. She's only been drinking blood for a couple of decades or so. She was turned into a creature of the night by one Gregor, a lonely sort, centuries old, now apparently dead by his own actions. Alone and also lonely, Risha goes from man to man, kills them, and keeps company only with Elliott, the efficient and all-too-loyal "renfield" who'd cared for Gregor. Risha figures maybe it's time now to see about recruiting a real, on-going, primary relationship with a guy who's willing to commit for eternity. After all, it's the '90s. So what does she do? Some vampiric powers are simply not extraordinary. Risha starts putting provocative ads in southern California singles publications.

Obviously our characters are on a collision course.

Gottlieb's storytelling style is smooth and painless, something like her vampire's bite. Occasionally her choice of character names drove me crazy. Gottlieb apparently derived considerable pleasure from "Tuckerisms," named for writer Bob Tucker. The game is making up composite names, drawing those names from real life; in this case, the world of SF. It's acutely distracting for anyone who's any kind of participant in the field, though I have to admit to considerable amusement at seeing certain names linked with certain horrific fates in the narrative.

The therapeutic aspect aside, the novel also suffers a bit from a touch of Hollywooditis. The plot and the characters just hum along perhaps a bit too smoothly. This book could well be a movie of the week; I wouldn't be surprised if it became one, or even something higher-budgeted. The entertainment index is certainly high enough. There are a few surprises, and Elliott makes a fine supporting character.

Surprisingly, the vampires themselves are a bit muddy in terms of the author working out the ground rules. Gottlieb opts for a more traditional approach than many other contemporary novelists who simply view bloodsuckers as another variant species sharing the Earth with us humans. While the author's vampires can't shape-shift, neither can they be seen in mirrors. There seems to be no explanation given, nor any particular purpose served other than to create some nice visual images. And I think Gottlieb runs into a little biological problem with vampire lovers. Risha has a great time in the sack with a couple of human paramours. But it's made clear that once a guy's been vampirised, his heart will beat only about twice an hour. Probably pretty poor blood pressure. An active conventional sex life could suffer... This book doesn't mention penile implants for male vampires, but there is a companion novel in the works. So we'll see what the author works out to solve this apparent roadblock to active physical passion.

Those little quibbles aside, **Love Bite** goes down smoothly like a good Scotch. Clearly Sherry Gottlieb learned a lot while she was selling other people's books.

–Edward Bryant

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over-formal and convoluted, but these magical worlds have some real wonders, enough to keep the plot from being totally predictable. Overall, a pleasant fantasy for the less-demanding reader.

Michael Scott Rohan, **The Lord of Middle Air** (Gollancz 0-575-05780-7, £15.99, 253pp, hc) December 1994. Cover by Ian Miller.

This is a well-woven fantasy, not Celtic precisely, but medieval Scottish. The central figure is the young Sir Walter Scot of the 13th century, whose cousin is Michael Scot, the sorcerer of historical fame. When an evil sorcerer causes border raids to escalate to virtual war against the Scots, Michael leads Walter into a faerie land where the boy can get what he needs to defeat his enemy. Walter spends some time enthralled by a faery queen, ancient ghosts of the past are raised, and echoes of Macbeth surround the death of the evil sorcerer; such classic elements of fantasy, and echoes of history, fill the novel with color and excitement. At the same time, characters are a trifle flat and, well, fairy tale-ish – but the sense of magic and wonder more than compensates, with an authentic medieval flavor that's rare and tasty.

Fred Saberhagen, **Merlin's Bones** (Tor 0-312-85563-X, $22.95, 384pp, hc) April 1995. Cover by Tim Jacobus.

Arthurian legend gets a new face in this fantasy novel, which appears to be part of a new series. Arthur himself is comatose in an ambulance throughout, as the plot jumps back and forth in time. Dr. Elaine Brusen is a near-future scientist working on a device called a hypostator, which recreates images of far places, and with the help of magic opens doorways in time. (She is also, it turns out, the Lady of Shalott *and* the Elaine who is to be the mother of Galahad.) The Fisher King, Morgan le Fay, and Modred are all in competition, seeking the fabled magic of Merlin's bones, and they believe Elaine is the key, each in turn invading her laboratory during one dark and stormy night. Meanwhile, back in the distant past, we see a troupe of travelling players who stumble over Merlin's resting place, and become caught up in a plot to build (or re-build) Camelot. There are irksome switches in narrative voice to go with the spaghetti-tangle timeline and plot, and much is left hanging in the end. Saberhagen plays some interesting variations on Arthurian themes, but they are good ideas poorly told.

–Carolyn Cushman