Staring into the eyes of those
who commit science fiction

*Colourfields: Writing About Writing About Science Fiction*, Paul Kincaid (Briardene Books)

*Ultrazone*, Mark Terrill & Francis Poole (Verse Chorus Press)

Nope, that isn't a typo, this is a book about other writing which takes science fiction as its subject; a critical survey of other books about science fiction. If that sounds too niche then I urge you to put your concerns aside and enjoy the contents, which are a gathering up of short, individual reviews and essays, as ripe for dipping into as consuming from the book's start to its finish.

Kincaid lays out his stall in his Foreword, stating that (in his opinion) 'The job of a literary critic is simply to be a reader.' And that reader will most likely have a different response to any book than any other reader; so Kincaid's is a personal, albeit informed, take. He notes that he does 'not suppose. that you can draw a single, coherent view of science fiction' from this book, partly because 'Science fiction is, as much as anything, what we bring to our reading (or viewing, or listening, or role-playing, or whatever).'

There is, however, little in *Colourfields* that many will dispute under the umbrella term of science fiction. There is a short diversion to discuss 'The great comic book scare and how it changed America', and some – me included – might question the inclusion of Peter Ackroyd and Alasdair Gray in the final section of the book, 'Authors', but mostly it is mainstream sci-fi writing that is considered, albeit sometimes though the lenses of Marxism, Colonialism or 'Prehistoric fiction' which the books being reviewed utilise. In fact, my main complaint about the book is that there is so little experimental science fiction discussed; only M. John Harrison receives consideration on his own. J.G. Ballard gets a couple of brief mentions, as does China Mieville (who is also here as an editor of an anthology of 'Marxism and Science Fiction) but where are the cyberpunk novels, William Burroughs' crazed cut-up nightmares such as *Nova Express*, Frank Herbert's *Dune* trilogy, or the interlocked and intersecting worlds of Michael Moorcock's Multiverse? To me these authors are key ones.

But we can hardly blame Kincaid for what is in or not in the books he reviews. The first section considers various 'Histories', opening with a very personal take on Brian Aldiss, then moving on to discussions of Adam Roberts' definitive *The History of Science Fiction*, *The Routledge Concise History*..., *The Cambridge History*... and *The Big Book of Science Fiction*. Then we step back to Edwardian times to read about *Political Future Fiction* then swiftly move forward to consider *Modernism and Science Fiction*. Kincaid is at his best here, summarising, paraphrasing, refuting some arguments and suggesting other possibilities, all in a very clearheaded and reasonable manner. I find him less convincing in his own essay on 'The New Elizabethans', where he links post-war society and the Cold War with the novels of John Wyndham and Arthur C. Clarke. The causes and effects he posits seems rather tenuous.

The 'Histories' section finishes with discussions of books about comics, 'The Golden Age of Science Fiction' (a debatable sub-title for a book that includes Ron Hubbard alongside Campbell, Asimov and Heinlein) and a history of sci-fi magazines. Then we move on to the second section where books which consider 'Topics' are the focus of Kincaid's attention. This is a wide-ranging, thought-provoking and entertaining selection, with topics such as *Science Fiction Criticism*, *Genre Fiction*, *The Science of Fiction and the Fiction of Science* (which is also about 'storytelling and the Gnostic Imagination') proving to be standout reviews, along with a piece about Samuel Delaney's 'Notes on the Language of Science Fiction'.

Rather confusingly, Kincaid ends 'Topics' with an essay 'What Does Not Exist' that reiterates his point that no single history of science fiction exists and, under the guise of reviewing *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction*, revisits some of the other books in part 1 and some of the topics of part 2.

Part 3 is all about 'Authors', where Kincaid says he wants 'to come right up close, close enough to stare into the eyes of those who commit science fiction', to engage with 'their tics and quivers and evasions'. What this means in practice are short reviews or biographical and bibliographical summaries and overviews. The trouble is that I am really not interested in most of the authors here: Margaret Atwood, Peter Ackroyd (whose non-fiction is much better than his pastiche fiction), John Brunner, Thomas M. Disch, Alasdair Gray, Bob Shaw & James White and Cordwainer Smith can, as far as I am concerned, be put to one side; and Kincaid does nothing to persuade me to reconsider. The piece on Joanna Russ is interesting (although Kincaid finds her work more important than likeable) and the three reviews of books about H.G. Wells are some of the best writing in *Colourfields*.

My favourites, however, are the two essays about M. John Harrison, particularly the essay on his Kefahuchi Tract trilogy where Kincaid declares (quite rightly in my opinion) that the trilogy 'is the most significant work of science fiction to have appeared so far this century', although I might want Paul McAuley's pair of Jackaroo novels alongside them. And the personal response to Harrison's anti-memoir is appropriately diffuse and impressionistic, a review of sorts that also participates in what Kincaid sees as 'a book about writing that tells us only to ignore any advice about writing. It is a book about the fantastic that despises the fantastic. It is a book that reveals by misdirection, by allusion, but read it right and it will tell you everything you need to know.'

I can't say *Colourfields* told me everything I wanted or needed to know, but it's a good read, although it's clear my idea of science fiction strays further into slipstream and experiment and less into mainstream fiction than Kincaid's does. I do, however, wish there was a bibliography as well as an index, especially as there are brief mentions of many books, some of which – Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, for one – deserve essays of their own. I don't normally read, let alone review ebooks, so I don't know if this is the usual way of digital books, but hyperlinks from the index to the page, rather than page numbers, are bloody annoying.

I expected to enjoy Mark Terrill & Francis Poole's collaborative novel *Ultrazone* way more than I did. Its groovy cover and the notion of the restless ghost of William Burroughs roaming Tangiers and trying to stop the Ugly Spirit, made me think the book would be right up my street, as did effusive praise from Alan Moore, Jim Jarmusch and Kevin Ring of *Beat Scene*. I was expecting delirious, dark comedy, exploded language, scenes and experiences fading in and out of themselves but the writing is actually straightforward, rather dull, prose. We may be in a surreal world where ghosts in limbo, witches and sorcerers frequent graveyards and hold lengthy discussions in an attempt to stop the word virus take over the world, but it reads as conversations in the corner shop.

There's a weird disjunct here between content and form, story and style. Yes, the fictional Burroughs here cackles his way around Tangiers, helped by his old chums Paul Bowles, Brion Gysin and Brian Jones and a questionable taxi driver; and yes, there is a cat, Burroughs favourite animal, too. And monkeys. And a magic carpet. But it's hard to read the book as the 'slapstick horror-fantasy romp' Alan Moore describes it as. I found it a bit of a struggle to finish, truth be told. The danger of the lost manuscript's word virus never seemed a threat, whilst the graveyard scenes, the warren of Tangiers are conjured well enough but not in a particularly vivid or original way. The whole thing seems flat and one-dimensional, lacking Burroughs' startling ability to subvert and reinvent language through crazed 'routines', mutant characters, strange addictions, collage and sexuality. I will be sticking to the Interzone and not the Ultrazone myself.

Rupert Loydell

(1350 words)