

New and Notable

"Millennium" by John Varley (Berkley, \$6.95). John Varley has set out deliberately to measure himself against some of the best writers and most famous books in science fiction. Time-travel stories have been written by, among others, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, Arthur Clarke and Isaac Asimov. Acknowledged masterpieces of the genre include H.G. Wells' "The Time Machine," Michael Moorcock's "Behold the Man" and Jack Finney's "Time and Again."

Varley's "Millennium" is an ambitious novel that, for the most part, achieves just what its creator seems to have intended. The plot involves a (sometimes) beautiful agent from Earth's Last Days, an alcoholic field investigator for the National Transportation Board, and a romance that stretches across eons. The last humans, physically and spiritually exhausted by centuries of chemical, biological and nuclear war, have devised a scheme to rebuild human society on a virgin planet elsewhere in the universe and have constructed a spaceship to get there. Too debilitated for space travel themselves, they have been kidnapping healthy people from the past.

Unfortunately, Murphy's Law — anything that can go wrong, will go wrong — applies even to a society as advanced as this. What happens when the 20th Century mind comes up against time travel, laser guns, androids and the like is not something you're going to find out from me.

The primary flaw of this book is that the voices of its two narrators are practically indistinguishable. In fact, all of the characters speak alike, which is too bad, because most of them — especially the tough-talking cookie from the Last Days — are cleverly drawn. Varley keeps the action moving at a starship pace and explains even his most far-fetched notions plausibly.

Though it is science fiction, "Millennium" is skillfully done and should appeal to anyone looking for an adventure yarn to while away a hot, lazy summer afternoon.

"The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience" by Walter H. Capps (Beacon, \$6.95). Anyone concerned that we may be sliding mindlessly into a net of hopeless political and military entanglements in Central America should examine this book-length essay, by University of California religion professor Walter Capps. The "Armageddon mentality" that he says characterized the war faction during the Vietnam period has become the reigning ideology of the present administration and its right-wing supporters.

"A primary characteristic of the Armageddon mentality," he says, "is the eagerness to divide the world into sharp contrasts: right vs. wrong, truth vs. error . . . light vs. dark . . . in the most rigorous fashion possible. The mechanism that enforces this way of thought is the fusion of the contrast between American and anti-American with a revised Manichaean mythology about the fundamental and pervasive conflict between God and the Devil." Politically this translates into policies of national assertion that fly in the face of our perceived ideals.

In contrast a large number of Americans, including, one supposes, many of those disturbed about the course of events in El Salvador and Nicaragua, perceive an underlying harmony to the universe which leads them to pursue an "inward-looking politics of compassionate reform."

For most of the post-World War II period, the advocates of these incompatible agendas "have been at such severe odds that it has been as if there were two United States of America, competing with each other for supremacy and the allegiance of the citizenry . . . The trauma of Vietnam was the projection of this fundamental quarrel onto the battlefield; what became most visible during the war was American in conflict with American — the dark night within the nation's soul. The war remains unfinished because the quarrel has not been resolved."

Capps tries to sort through this conflict, to find a healing middle ground between "Utopian aspirations" and "cataclysmic expectations." He quotes approvingly a passage from Morris Dickstein's "Gates of Eden": "In Vietnam we lost not only a war and a subcontinent; we also lost our pervasive confidence that American arms and American aims were linked somehow to justice and morality, not merely to the quest for power. America was defeated militarily, but the 'idea' of America, the cherished myth of America, received an even more shattering blow."

Capps concludes that the restoration of a compelling idea of America can only follow the healing of the American conscience.

"The Fine Art of Literary Mayhem" by Myrick Land (Lexikos, 703 Market St., San Francisco, Calif. 94103, \$8.95). Myrick Land recounts famous literary squabbles, from Dr. Johnson's abuse of his reluctant patron the Earl of Chesterfield to Norman Mailer's self-aggrandizing "evaluations" of his contemporaries in "Advertisements for Myself."

Heavyweight bouts between bickering scribes include William Makepeace Thackeray vs. Charles Dickens, H.G. Wells vs. Henry James, Bernard DeVoto vs. Sinclair Lewis, William F. Buckley Jr. vs. Gore Vidal, and Ernest Hemingway vs. Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein and others. Myrick repeats his gossip entertainingly. The volume has been lovingly designed and printed, though an occasional typo does interrupt the flow.

"Killer Flies" by Mark Kendall (Signet, \$2.25) and "Murder on Location" by George Kennedy (Avon, \$2.95). Here are two attempts by first novelists to bring new life to old forms. Morality tales about creepy-crawlies gone berserk, usually to punish human greed, hubris or imbecility, have been a main staple of both science fiction and the Gothic thriller. Coming in the wake of giant lizards, rampaging love-struck apes, and infestations of frogs, dogs, rats, wasps, snakes, bees and even vegetables, you might think there'd be little left to say that's new.

You'd be right. Kendall contributes little more than some nicely tuned moments of gore: "Almost in slow motion its bloated body burst outward. Bits of glistening black tissue rained to the ground followed by a great gout of internal fluids." Yecch. Strictly for aficionados.

"Murder on Location" isn't much less silly, but it's more fun. Actor George Kennedy has cast himself in the lead of this murder mystery shot against the background of a feature film production on location in Mexico. Kennedy has the tough-guy lingo down pat, but "pat" also pretty well sums up the level of the plot, characterization and insight. The cast is terrific, though: Dean Martin, Glenn Ford, Raquel Welch, Genevieve Bujold, Mariette Hartley and Yul Brynner. Even at its most pixillated, Hollywood would have trouble with a line-up like that.