Goulart wins, Zelazny loses in latest releases

I don't know how many of you have been around this summer to catch the endless flow of drivel coming in. The only good news has been that Perry Rhodan has been having “production difficulties” and will only be publishing one volume a month rather than the two or three per month previously released.

To counter this, it is now practically impossible to get any paperback for less than $1.25.

But this is beside the point. There have been a few books worth talking about.

A Whiff of Madness by Ben Goulart (DAW, 156 pp, $1.25) is excellent. For Goulart, who evidently decided long ago that he would rather succeed in a small way than take a chance on anything bigger.

A Whiff of Madness is another of his stories set in the Bureaucum system, and, as usual, it’s overflowing with bodies, animal men, people doing peculiar things for no discernable reasons, and the obligatory, obligated, all tied together with a fair splash of adventure.

The story isn’t much of anything. Jack Summer, enterprising reporter for Mackave magazine, is sent to investigate rumors that King Waldo is really the Phantom of the Fog. His cover is another inquisition into whether a shaggy birdman actually the long-lost heir to the Starback fortune. You’ve read it all before, right? Well, there aren’t many Goulart novels worth reading for the plot, theme, characters, or moral/inner meaning.

But, for a refreshing whiff of madness, a Goulart book is now and then appropriately lightweight and amusing.

Bridge of Ashes by Roger Zelazny (Signet, 154 pp, $1.33) on the other hand, is rather disappointing. It’s not a bad book — a bad Zelazny book, a real rarity — but it’s depressingly ordinary. The worst thing that can be said about it is that it all seems to have been done before. It hasn’t, but with Zelazny’s special style of writing toned down to a pale drudgery, it reads that way.

As he usually does, Zelazny reveals the important facts sparingly. The book begins with a series of hallucinations; the narrator imagines meeting all sorts of people, all about to die. With an extensive knowledge of history, it is possible to identify them as historically important: Archimedes, da Vinci, Rousseau.

We are now a death more closely, that of a man speaking before the UN on a pollution control measure, whose metabolism is grossly accelerated just before his martyrdom by a dark man who arranged his assassination to ensure passage of the measure.

The dark man offers the speaker a chance to save himself, which he declines when it is revealed that we are just property, evolved to turn this planet into a highly foul environment.

In the final abrupt shift (all the above takes place in the first 20 pages), we begin following Dennis Graze, the child of two telepaths and himself sufficiently sensitive that he has retreated into creation to escape the myriad voices. His apparently abrupt recovery is actually the assumption of various personalities around him — first of ecologically-minded contemporaries, then, when he is taken to the moon, those of some of the historical figures seen previously.

Would you believe that when he finally develops his own personality, it turns out that he’s been set up for all this. every step of the way, by the dark man who is actually a renegade from the alien invaders?

The aliens have been steadily killing or discrediting any human sufficiently remarkable to threaten their group on the planet. The dark man has been impressing these personalities on Dennis’ mind in an attempt to convince them that mankind is too much a handful for them to control. I almost didn’t believe it of Zelazny, but he has been going up and down like a yo yo recently — the complex eastern religious symbolism in To the Earth is Butler, the entire adventure of a perpetual student in Doorways in the Sand, the fourth book in the Amber series (The Hand of Oberon) — so I that this was Zelazny and not someone ghosting for him.

The book is saved from being utterly awful only by Zelazny’s style, which has been diluted to an impossibly low level. Normally, his prose is rich, allusive, and very satisfying to read. He can hold your interest better than people who have been writing three times as long and technically better.

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