

## PICK OF THE PAPERBACKS

Roy Herbert

**T**HE *UFO Conspiracy* by Jenny Randles (Javelin, pp 224, £4.95) is the book for you if you can swallow the idea that the governments in the world are engaged in a cover-up of visits to this planet by aliens (an inefficient cover-up at that). Randles hints that we are possibly being manipulated in a sinister way by films such as *Close Encounters* and *ET*.

Agog, or perhaps not, you will encounter ETs yourself, such as the one who explained to a local cop in Boulder, Colorado, that his craft had landed to get some electricity from a grid line. The ET had catlike eyes, an ashen face and a slit for a mouth, and spoke in Hollywood medieval, telepathically. It is all here, from Mantell onwards. And, in spite of grammatical lapses and fevered writing (Mantell, who crashed while chasing a UFO, is said to have been "bound for a rendezvous with destiny"), it is a good read, for the credulous and incredulous alike.

● Two years ago, the MIT Press published *Ada*, by Dorothy Stein, a biography of the daughter of Lord Byron and Countess of Lovelace. Now the paperback edition (pp 208, £8.95) should widen its success. Stein shows, by diligently going back to the original papers, letters and records, and taking nothing on trust, that the accepted role of the countess as a brilliant mathematician, the compiler of the first computer program and the intellectual collaborator of the likes of Charles Babbage, is erroneous.

But this takes nothing away from *Ada* as a dramatic character, a personality astoundingly different from that of the conventional idea of a Victorian lady. Obsession, illness, drugs, affection, soul-searching—they are as rich here as in any novel by Dickens.

● Richard Ennals's *Star Wars: A Question of Initiative* (Wiley, pp 236, £7.50) is an essential training manual for those who must grapple with the issue, and for the onlookers whose fate is bound up with it. The state of advanced technology is such that the book includes everyone on this planet. It is hair-raising reading and demonstrates that most popular reports and treatment of the SDI and the superpowers' manoeuvrings on the question are superficial. Much more public understanding is needed of the realities that the science-fiction term "star wars" disguises.

● *The Darkness is Light Enough*, by Chris Ferris (Sphere Books, pp 405, £4.50) is in the form of extracts from a journal, a form that I usually find a deterrent. Not this time. It is gripping and painful. For four years, Ferris went walking through the countryside at night and gradually became part of the wildlife. She was

eventually accepted as a member of the community by foxes, barn owls and, in particular, by badgers. That seems to me a stupendous privilege.

Enchanting as the descriptions of her progress and the lives of the animals are, the horrors of what ruthless men will do to capture and torture them are sickening. Some men seriously injured the author when she confronted them in an attempt to defend her friends.

Ferris is not vengeful, however. Her book is an affecting tribute to the beauty and delight to be found with the wild inhabitants of a small area of England.

● "I wrote home to my wife, warning her to make sure that such a book did not fall into the hands of the children." The book? *The Bible*. The remark comes from Peter Medawar's *Memoir of a Thinking Radish*, his autobiography now published by Oxford Paperbacks (pp 209, £4.95). Medawar had allegedly been shocked by what Biblical characters did to each other when he first encountered them in a Gideon Bible in a hotel room. Medawar's humour, sense and above all, elegance of expression, informed all he did and wrote. This all-too-short book should be required reading in every school. What influence that could have on literary and educational standards!

This brings me to the subject of paperback prices. They seem, to me, to be approaching the outrageous, and are certainly baffling. A book of 176 pages, sent for review, can cost £8.50, one of 560 pages £9.95. A glance at the prices of those mentioned in this review will show the extraordinary variation. I cannot make head or tail of it, even allowing for the cost of illustrations and so on. □