Science Mingling with Fantasy

ITH such an intriguing title as "The Universe is a Green Dragon", readers can prepare themselves for something quite different from the run of the mill scientific exploration concerning the beginning of the universe.

This enquiry into how the universe with its numerous planets swirling in an infinite dimension of space and its countless galaxies of stars; not to mention major players such as the sun, moon and earth, all in harmonious motion came into being; is presented in the form of a classical dialogue. A conversation between Thomas (in honour of Thomas Berry, a leading light of the cosmological tradition which has its origins in Plato) and Youth (representing everyman — as we are the youngest creatures on planet Earth) takes place in which the former answers the latter's questions on the creation of the cosmos.

The result is an unfolding drama so charming in its simplicity and so exquisite in its stunning beauty that it reads like a fable. It is an absorbing tale leaving readers wishing for more. This is not to say that scientific data is neglected or hard facts brushed aside, for after all apart from the Biblical or Koranic version of the Creation, the cosmic story has been "unravelled" by many prominent scientists who have more often than not related it in terms of "protons", "neutrons" and jargon associated with the esoteric world of physics and astrophysics.

The author, a specialist in mathematical cosmology, is no stranger to scientific data. However (fortunately for his readers), he began his career as a cosmic storyteller in one of the most scenic places of the world, the Pacific Northwest where "forests, emerald rivers, scattered totem poles, and wondrous tales concerning the birth of the universe" exists. As the celebrated romantic poet, Wordsworth, proclaimed, "The child is father of the man" and this inherent reverence for nature and its awesome qualities permeates Swimme's narration. Thus, he relates: "To speak of the universe's origin is to bring to mind the great silent fire at the beginning of

BOOK REVIEW

The Universe is a Green Dragon: (A Cosmic Creation Story) Author: Brian Swimme Publisher: Bear & Co: Publishing: Sante Fe, New Mexico 171 pages

Reviewed by NANCY WONG

powers - hence the term.

"mother earth", which signifies

fecundity and nurturing capac-

ities. It is only on planet Earth

that we find continents, moun-

tain ranges, oceans and above

all, a liveable atmosphere to

nourish homo sapiens. In the

frantic search for more living

areas and the race to

"conquer" space, advanced na-

tions have spent billions in

space programmes trying to

locate another "habitable"

place, but all in vain. None of

the other known planets such

as Mars, Jupiter, Mercury, has

any life-supporting system in

look at such facts in a cold, de-

tached manner, Swimme re-

an intimate and highly relevant

manner: "We are the latest, the

most recent, the youngest ex-

travagance of this stupendously

creative Earth". He describes

(very poetically) how home

sapiens fit into the scheme of

things: "Think of what it would

be like if there were no hu-

mans on the planet: the

mountains and the primeval

fireball would be magnificent,

but the Earth would not feel

any of this. Can you see the

sadness of such a state? ... the

incompleteness? humans

can house the tremendous

beauty of Earth, of life, of the

universe. We can value it, feel

risk when He gave Adam and

Eve freedom of choice, Earth

did likewise when she placed

homo sapiens in the centre of

the universe; according to

Swimme. "She surpassed her-

self, shivering with joy at the

thought of housing a creature

through whom her depths, her

beauty, her majesty could be

cherished in a new intensity.

Imagine Earth's astonishment

to see us attempt to satisfy

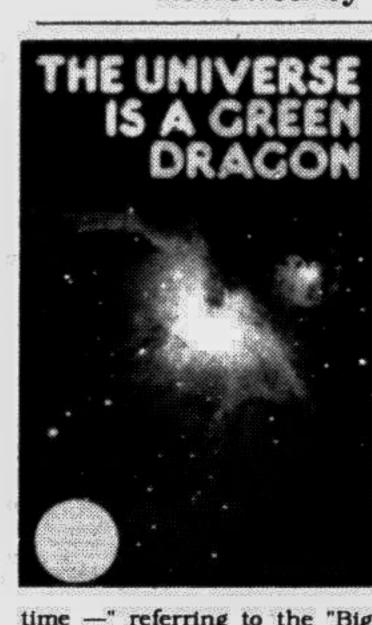
However, just as God took a

its grandeur".

lates them to human beings in

Unlike most scientists who

the way Earth has.



time —" referring to the "Big Bang" theory which was postulated by scientists as recently as a few decades ago. We are reminded of the amazing fact that "none of the great figures of human history were aware of this. Not Plato, or Aristotle or the Hebrew Prophets, or Confucius, or Thomas Aquinas, or Leibniz, or Newton, or any other world-maker. We are the first generation to live with an empirical view of the origin of the universe. We are the first humans to look into the night sky and see the birth of stars, the birth of galaxies, the birth of the cosmos as a whole."

To appreciate the magnitude of this ongoing process, we are told that the light generated by the huge fireball burned for a million years and the sparks from the very edges is reaching us only now, after travelling twenty billion years to get here".

Infinity has been described in cosmological terms and planet Earth is part of this vast universe: its place in the spheres unique. Why so? Because of its special creative

ourselves by transforming the Earth into throwaway tinsel, most of its noxious to all forms of life. Imagine the hilarity and pathology of a civilization devoted to stocking up this stuff, instead of plunging into the joy that has been prepared over illions of years". This is how mankind and its consumer socicty have repaid Mother Earth for her glorious time-consuming labour over aeons of time!

The relationship between homo sapiens and Earth is also explored in a concrete manner by comparing the latter to a corporation and the former to an accountant. For it can being no joy to the accountant if the corporation goes bankrupt! Man is in grave danger of achieving this state in his greedy and reckless exploitation of earth's resources and the pollution of her pristine

Seldom has the law of gravity been so clearly and en chantingly explained as in this book. Swimme gives it a new term - "allurement" to highlight the gravitational pull of earth. Just as we are inevitably drawn towards the object of our love, so are elements drawn to each other. He says: "Think of the entire cosmos, all one hundred billion galaxies rushing through space: At this cosmic scale, the basic dynamism of the universe is the attraction each galaxy has for every other galaxy."

What would happen if the galaxies "fall out of love"? 'To begin with, the galaxies would soar off in all directions, since they would no longer hold each other in the galactic dance. Individual stars would disperse as well, their atoms no longer attracting each other but wandering off in all directions, releasing core pressure and thereby shutting down fusion reactions. The stars would go dark".

For all who are in any way curious as to how the fundamentals regarding the existence of life came into being and the manner in which the "centre" holds, this book provides many answers and is particularly revealing to the layman's approach to science. Besides, the lyrical prose together with the suspense and mystery in the telling of the story makes it a joyous reading experience.

"Art Movement is Like a Pendulum"

by Fayza Haq

OVON Som, speaking on art at 'La Galerie' recently, talked about

how the common viewers often complained that they did not understand painting. He pointed out that in recognised history, even redoubtable characters like Plato questioned the value of art and condemned it as mere imitation. He stressed on the point that even today, if an youth wants to go into the field of painting and fine arts, he is often condemned and opposed by his family.

Sovon Som said that when a man creates a work of art like the Taj Mahal, he does not simply copy. Thus he said, "Man creates out of desire and imagination. Hence, when we are presented with a landscape, despite the limitation of the length and breadth of the canvas or cloth, we get a 3-D effect, which is an illusion. With the use of light, shade and perspective we create a 'similarity'. Yet there have been changes as early as the Renaissance painters who depicted horizon as a straight line. 'Art is a response from the creative human soul to the call of truth.' said Rabindranath Tagore.

While creating, the artist takes care of tone in terms of colours, highlights and darkness. Without that there is no joy. Meanwhile, texture relieves you from monotony. Thus the artist's lines, in reality, are static and yet we see movement in it," he added, "We do not see a picture with our eyes only but also with our minds. This is imaginative transfiguration of reality. In bringing in nature the artist does not copy nature. The Fauvists departed from conventional colours decades ago." Using a slide picture, Sovon Som explained how it is if the picture had been painted well, keeping in mind the departure from reality. He next showed

"Art is something lyrical,"

the artist and renowned critic

and teacher from Calcutta

stressed. "Within the confine-

ments of the canvas or paper

or even wood the artist builds

his home', leaving space for

pleasure and inner meaning.

Just as if a house planning is

confused in the same manner,

if the composition is not clear.

the meaning and beauty is

lost," Sovon Som continued.

the picture of a dancing girl from Ajanta and talked of how the line tones and colours and alphabets create texture, light and shade.

"Meanwhile," he continued, "artists have various styles so that Van Gogh, Picasso, Zainul Abedin and Qamrul Hassan can be identified by the grammar of their different texture and play of light and shade, apart from their repeated themes. 'All lines in art remind me of God, said Emperor Akbar. At the same time, let us not forget that the fire, wheel and line-words were the greatest creations. The artist brings out the charm and delicacy from the innermost recesses of his mind in his work, as Qamrul Hassan once put it. Even when the lines and colours are abstract, as in the case of Jackson Pollock, we learn of

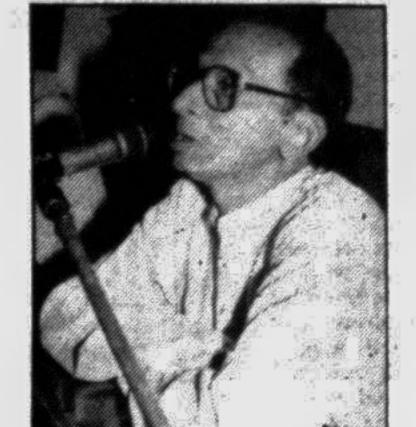
the reality of life." "There is no end to perfection and painters, poets and song-writers are constantly in quest of the Utopian and the ideal," the critique-cum-artist concluded.

In his second lecture, on history of art, Sovon Som reminded his listeners that Fukuyamu had said that. "History is dead." Sovon Som contradicted this statement by saying," there is no limit to history and there never will be.

Sovon Som pointed out that there was a time when artists. painters and musicians were discouraged by their family members and, in the subcontinent, it was only in 1839 that Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore established art schools. This misconception of lack of utility of fine arts was a hang-up that has come down from the time of the Greeks.

"There are not enough efforts made to encourage fine arts academically. In the paper 'Ideal of the East', Kakuzo Dktaro said in 1902 that one must study Nature around one and be aware of one's cultural heritage. Similarly Rabindranath Tagore told Nanda Lal Basu that man must take pride in Nature, tradition and creativity. Imagination must supersede the reality. Although, no doubt, Nature around inspires man," Sovon Som continued.

"While man has reached the heights of civilization today, he cannot forget his past. We must continue from where our



Sovon Som

forefathers have left. This is not to say that man should always look to the past because param para in which I believe is like a stream of progress. To know the future, one must necessarily know the past, as reality, tradition and achievement go hand in hand," Sovon Som stressed. "In our colleges and univer-

sities, history is taught as a chronology of dynasties and rulers. The colourful life of the past is not always taught. Annals and chronicles are not enough - one must study the various aspects of past tradition. Leaving aside the temples, mosques, castles, forts and bridges, statues and artifacts should be studied - thus what the caveman created, and what the Greek vases are must be learnt and understood. Creations, constructions of all nature and progress must be understood. However, man must not only have dreams but put his knowledge into use. Thus we see that Da Vince was not only a painter but also a military engineer. One should not be afraid to question progress of art. Hence Massaccio had openly ridiculed society for the wrong things done in the name of society. History remains a mirror of our past civilization and in this manner, we learn. For instance, how Greco-Roman art was mixed with the existing one of the east in Gandhara arts," Sovon Som added

pendulum - some are ageless while some are age bound. While modern 'isms' are held in high esteem, let us not hesitate to look back," said Sovon Som, who has been the Dean of the Rabindra Bharati University for four terms, and is still being retained by the same edbeatingal histitution.

"Art movement is like a

World's Oldest Book Displayed in Egypt

The world's oldest bound book was found in 1984 by an Egyptian archaeologist 48 kms north-east of Oxyrhynchus, an ancient Greco-Roman city in Egypt. The 1,500-year-old version of The Book of Psalms is now restored and on display in Cairo's Coptic Museum. Gemini News Service reports on the delicate task of separating the 252 parchment pages which had stuck together.

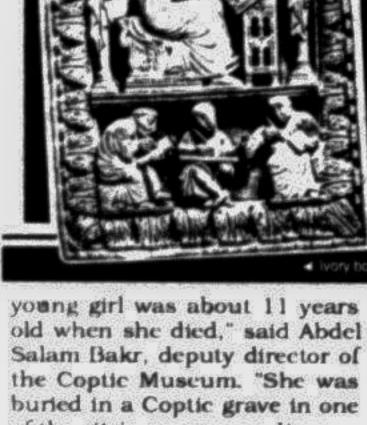
Neil Moorhouse writes from Cairo

IFTEEN centuries ago a grieving family slipped a book beneath the head of their deceased daughter. As Christians, no more precious a gift could they bestow on her than a copy of the Book of Psalms. That book, now restored.

has recently gone on display in Cairo's Coptic Museum. Dr Gawdat Gabra, director-general of the museum, says it is the oldest text in true book form. "These discoveries are very rare indeed," he says.

The book's restoration and study has proved to be a monumental task for Gabra and his associates ... He adds: "This has been the most gratifying piece of work in my life. I have written a number of books and articles, but this has affected me most personally."

An Egyptian archaeologist found the Psalter in 1984 about 136 kms south of Catro and 48 kms north-east of Oxyrhynchus, an ancient Greco-Roman city. According to Gabra, the finding of the book in the place where it was laid 1,500 years ago is exceptional. "Most biblical texts find their way to museums through antiquities dealers," he says, This discovery contributed to knowledge of the owner's and the book's history. "The



n China, books made of wood and bamboo leaves bound with cords. Indians use palm leaf. Egyptians and Romans use codex, bound handwritten leaves of vellum or parchment Paper invented in China Shahnama published in Persia

Printing invented in Europe Gutenberg's '42-line' Bible printed Pocket-size Latin classics printed in

Mechanical typesetting introduced Desktop publishing launched

of the city's poor areas. It was a tradition, stemming from pre-Christian times, to bury the deceased with holy books which they believed would provide protection."

It is likely the girl's family were pious believers. Evidence that the book was well read are the acid marks left by finger tips at the top of the books' pages. It is possible the father of the girl copied out the

The book now lies in a case within a case at the museum in

Terrorism

One of the paintings on display at the two week solo exhibition of

Monjurul Hai, in the premises of Teachers' Training College,

Dhaka, which concludes today May 21.

the Christian quarter of Mar Girgis, or Saint George, in Cairo. From his research, Gabra concluded that the book dates from the second half of the 4th Century. The number of Greek words in the text indicate the age of the book," he says. "Copts were pushing for greater use of their own language at this time and were trying to rid their language of Greek words." At that time, Egypt was under Greek occupation.

Remarkably, the individual words and letters of the text are legible. The text itself is written in the Oxyrhynchus dialect, once used by Copts in Middle Egypt. Only three other texts have been found using this dialect

As with many relics in Egypt, the layman finds it difficult to conceive of a book so old. The pages are about 17 by 15 centimetres in size and bound by polished wooden covers and a leather spine. The scribe used both brown and black ink to copy out the 151 psalms - one more than most bibles due to the addition of

the "Coptic" psalm.

Also found with the Psalter was a small bone ankh, symbol of the key of life, similar in appearance to cross, and a leather strap, both on show in the museum.

The book finally went on display in late 1992 following eight years of intense study and restoration work. Coptic texts require close and meticulous study because there is no spacing between individual words. Dr Gabra smiles with satisfaction: "I had to study each letter of the psalms as part of my work on the language. This was not easy but for the first time in my life I thought I understood them."

Egypt's dry climate contributed to the preservation of the book. Restoration still proved an awesome task for Nasry Iskander, general director of the Centre of Research and Conservation at the Antiquities Egyptian Organisation. He was responsible for separating the 252 parchment leaves which had stuck together.

Initially, the book had to be placed in special case in which humidity could be controlled. This replaced lost moisture so that the book's pages could be opened. Iskander said he had to work in "slow motion" because of the delicacy of the task. Using a special ivory instrument, he had to work to separate each page individu-

The discovery and restora tion of the Psalter is important because it will contribute to fields of theology, Coptology, paleography and the history of books.

Gabra especially hopes the book will contribute to the study of Coptology: "I am currently the only Coptologist in Egypt. The subject is only ever considered as a sub-faculty in relation to Byzantine or Islamic studies." Gabra is trying to encourage authorities in Egypt to open a special faculty devoted to Coptology.

NEIL MOORHOUSE is a British freelance journalist based in Cairo.

Cultural Implications

Continued from page 10 approach, as advocated by John Tusa, the former Managing Director of the BBC World Service, to international broadcasting as something above national politics, but I must be forgiven for thinking that core feelings and core in terests have a way of prevailing over even the most consciously held and righteous intellectual convictions, and, finally, in-

formation is power that limits or liberates, enslaves or cm powers, depending on the motives and methods of those who wield it.

The writer is a former Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University who has also served as Bangladesh Ambassador to Poland and later as Deputy Secretary General at Commonwealth Secretariat.

Anwar's "Intimate Bangladesh"

by Tanvir Mokammel

is always a treat to watch Anwar Hossain's photographic works, images that tell much more than they represent. Titled as "Intimate Bangladesh" Anwar's intimate exhibition took place at the lobby of Bangladesh National Museum from 13th to 24th April. One hundred and eleven entries of both colour, and black and white genres works taken over a period of last quarter of a century were on display. Anwar paid homage to our heritage of lensart by dedicating the exhibition to Amanul Haque, a media-shy but reverend photog-

A work by Seven Som

rapher of the land. For the images all different kinds of cameras were used, but mostly - Nikon, colour ones were generally shot in Fuji HR-100 negatives. In B/W pictures Anwar played splendidly with the nuances of light and shade. His sense of tonal contrast is simply superb. In the colour images, though it seems Anwar does not mind to play sometimes with the kaleidoscopic dimension of

Shadows Beware

colour transparency, yet the sheer charm of the pictures never get impeded by the exuberance of colour simply. A wallful of exquisitely beautiful images of rivers and boats are itself captivating. But that may not be something novel for a riverine country Bangladesh. But where lies Anwar's exceptionality is that he puts not only graphic and compositional charm to these images, but often brings in a philosophic dimension, a message', without being too

didactic about it. Some of the entries are marvel of the form itself - the form of composition, and of texture. For example, the entry titled "lifeline", apparently a simple picture, just shows on the foreground a green banana leaf, and on the background, an old worn out coconut leaf a brilliant textural juxtaposition. Similarly the entry titled "Maternity" where a hen with her chicken under a wickerbasket, with its composition

and light and shade effects, becomes an charming image. Maternity had the theme for another picture titled "Maternity Music." With a 'tabla' in the foreground and a, feminine figure almost in silhouette in the back with a child on her lap, imbued the image with a depth, as if of the cycle of life and birth. "Threatened childhood" is another picture where the paper-snake in the foreground and the child's feet nearby evoke such an ominous feeling. as we are aware, what awaits in the future destiny of so many of our children.

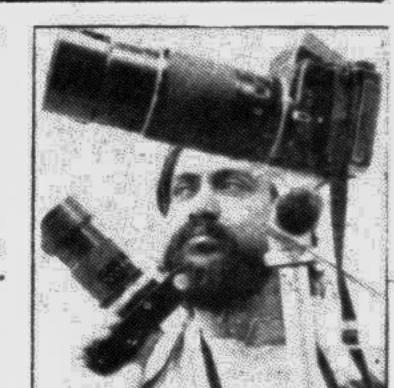
"Awaiting" is the eternal Bengal rural sight. A ferry-ghat, a country boat in far distant, and a hookah very prominent in the foreground brings in almost a Tagorian dimension to his particular picture.

Sometimes Anwar simply goes to close ups - extreme and big. "Monsoon cow" is just an extreme close up of a cow's rain-drenched skin, but the textural uniqueness of the image keeps the viewer for some time baffled, and then causes a smile when he realizes what it is all about.

Anwar not only plays with forms, he is an artist with deep social insight too. A rifle, a skull and a wicker-hat that Bengalee farmers wear, make a combination, which gives one the eerie feelings of the carnage of 1971, and Anwar rightly titles it as - "War of liberation". "Liberation" is another strikingly political picture where the word "Pakistan" of the headpiece of "The Dainik Pakistan" is crossed out and "Bangladesh" is imprinted instead; a bust figure of Sheikh Mujib is visible in the background and in foreground is a hand with a pistol - as if the whole bloodstained history of Bangladesh is told in a nutshell, in one single image.

What is great about Anwar's art that he transforms our everyday household banality - a broom, a bunch of keys, a pair of old sandals, and lungi or foam spilling over a boilingrice pot, all these small details of everyday Bengali domesticity - into artistic pieces. By adding new dimensions to these very familiar objects, he gives us a jolt, enforces us to stare at them second time and bestows new

meaning to these objects. Like any piece of good art, Anwar's images also have multi-layers. For the uninitiated beauty is there, for the art-for-art-saker - perfection,



Anwar Hossain and for the connoisseur - a

kind of philosophy, i.e. the ephemerality of life and the eternal permanence of the moments of beauty. Sometimes Anwar puts

irony into the captions of the pictures which adds an extra dimension to the images. For example. In the is titled "Migration", we see a hen on a ferry with its eyes closed. The receding bank of the river on the background and the very face of the hen reflects all the pangs and pathos of the tragedy called - migration. The irony of the one titled as "Daydreams" is much more telling, we see a poor farmer with a sickle in hand and a wicker-hat on, sleeping on the cement staircase of an urban building. Besides being a work of compositional beauty, the picture immediately brings up the tragedy of the distinction between urban and rural, and the sharp class distinction between rich and poor in contemporary Bangladesh.

Regarding caption, Anwar's witty use of literary allusions are sometimes very effective. For on entry his caption is "Shadows Beware", the famous phrase from Shakespeare's "Richard II", and the picture shows the encroaching shadow of a man. Part of his legs are visible, and, one foot ts chopped off! It gives such a dramatic feeling - almost epical in dimension.

While going through the black and white images of the "Intimate Bangladesh", I was wondering why there is not a black and white book on Bangladesh by Anwar as he has such an excellent one in colour "Journey through

Bangladesh"

"Intimate Bangladesh" adds another kudo to the illustrious career of Anwar Hossain. Credit goes much also to Gold Leaf (BTC) who ventured such an endeavour. Anwar's exhibi tion is rather a rare occasion in Dhaka artdom where deep in one's heart one realizes again the true essence of the ancient dictum, vita bravis, ars longa — life is transient, art is eternal.