

Economic Forces

Eventually, in a London threatened by terrorist groups like the Red Brigade, Black September and the Inner London Education Authority, Trevor Hoyle's **Vail** (Abacus, £3.99) casts away its sf trappings and becomes an all-out satire of contemporary Britain, rivalling TV's *Spitting Image* with its bad taste and hit-and-miss jokes. This is entertaining enough but something of a disappointment because the first part of the novel, in which the impoverished Vail heads for the capital along a nightmare version of the M6 in the hope of getting treatment for his dying daughter, has a real atmosphere of menace to counterpoint the black humour. Here there are service stations choked with starving masses, hostile gangs of pop star lookalikes who are surgically attached to their motorbikes, and terrorists lurking on the hard shoulder, while the likes of Jimmy Tarbuck and Bob Monkhouse glide safely by, secure in their polished limousines. And there's a hint of the desperation felt by those at the bottom of the pile who don't get to make TV satire shows but have to suffer in the real-life equivalent of such a Britain.

Northern Irish writer Ian McDonald's short story collection *Empire Dreams* has appeared in the US along with his first novel **Desolation Road** (now published in the UK by Bantam, £3.99) which illustrates more of his skill at the shorter form. Many chapters of the novel work nicely as self-contained vignettes (an elderly couple get lost in the infinite space of their own back garden; a baby growing in a jar is stolen and replaced by a mango), but the central plot, concerning the bloodthirsty struggles of various political and economic forces for control of the planet Mars, is rather dull and the vast cast of characters bewildering. Parts of the book will linger in the memory: an enchanted forest scattered with the wreckage of high-tech warfare; a man