

N O V E M B E R 1 9 6 0

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HOCUS is edited and published . . . . . by Mike Deckinger, 85 Locust Avenue, Millburn, New Jersey, U.S.A. Available for sporadic letters of comment, 5¢ an issue, contributions, and trades. This issue is being sent through the seventh NAPA mailing.

LES MOTS

I'm afraid that the grandiose scheme I announced last issue whereby I would faithfully get out an issue each month will have to be temporarily shelved. Small as it may seem, maintaining the schedule is harder than I imagined it would be, so this will revert to irregular again, and I have absolutely no idea what format it will be. At times I feel I want to put out a zine one way and at other times I have an entirely different plan.

This is also being run through the seventh NAPA mailing, along with 4 pages of mailing comments (though the non-NAPA members won't see them, naturally) plus a large censorable, detailed picture for Belle to practice her skill on. Other material will be Ed Gorman's book reviews, and the results of the Business Meeting at the Pitt-con, which was sent to me, and, I imagine, all the other fan-eds who were there. I can't say that I'm too pleased about the registration fee increase, I personally don't think it's needed. A con is not a fund-raising campaign, something put on in order to raise money for some fannish project. A con is for having fun basically, and I don't like to see the fees going up. It was proven earlier that \$3.00 is not needed, I can't see how much of an advantage the extra dollar will get.

On the other matters I'm less arguable. I wonder if there was any doubt about Seattle getting the site, they were just the only city bidding, that's all. I signed up for it with Wally Weber but I have no idea whether I'll actually make it or not. I'd like to get there naturally, but that all depends on how things turn out.

Usually I'm attracted by humor in books. In fact I like nothing better than reading a good humorous book. Now Max Schulman is regarded as one of the foremost humorous writers, as witness his slightly juvenile Dobie Gillis books, and his more sophisticated adult novel which was a very funny book, and a very dull film, but

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then Hollywood has a reputation for butchering original books into screenplays which bear little resemblance, so I'm not arguing about that. But how is it possible to find humor in situations which you know could never exist, and in addition, are so wild and improbable as to be utterly senseless?

I'm referring to Schulman's "Barefoot boy with Cheek" which I read on the bus going up to the con, and managed to struggle through about 3/4 of the book before throwing it down in disgust. This was humor allright, but the simplest, most unadulterated form of humor there could be: nonsense. The book told of a boy, with a wildly improbable name, who went to some incredible University and became involved in the silliest and most fantastic adventures ever imaginable.

True, there is some wit thrown in, Schulman does not totally ruin it, and once every 20 pages or so says something that is funny. But between then what you struggle through is incredible. You know there could never be a university like the one described, there could never be a student body and faculty like the incredible group there. Now character identification is a very important thing in any sort of book, in "Barefoot boy with Cheek" it's nonexistent. For a situation to be humorous and inspire laughter it must have some bearing on reality. The characters and situations described in the book are so far-fetched that they simply can not be associated with real things. Fantastic as some of the things may have been in Thorne Smith's books, he always made the characters as humanlike as possible, made them behave in a manner which is identifiable to real persons and real actions.

I found Schulman's book to be a great disappointment, and I'll even go as far as saying after reading it (or as much of it as I did read) I felt cheated somehow. I guess it really is difficult to write humor, even for humorists.

A few nights ago I was watching a new tv show called "The Flintstones" a cartoon series in the form of a caveman situation comedy which is described as an "adult cartoon series". I finally found out why it's "adult": it has canned laughter. Now canned laughter is bad enough in ridiculous shows like "My Little Margie" and "December Bride" where you know no one in his right mind would laugh at the things said there, but with "The Flintstones" it's incredible. Can anyone actually picture in his mind a dignified, sophisticated adult audience sitting in a theatre and going into hysterics over a cartoon? I certainly can't, and even though the series was planned as a parody of today's situations, I found it dull and useless. The animation was good, but the ideas were silly and unfunny, and the thought of an audience actually going wild over it was even worse. The makers of this show should know better than to spring an "adult" show like that on the average tv viewer. We just aren't ready for it yet. With luck we'll never be.



The following action was taken at the Pittcon Business Meeting, Sunday, September 4, 1960:

(1) Registration Fees: The registration fee for foreigners (meaning persons not living in North America) shall be \$1.00, but such foreigners shall be charged an additional \$2.00 upon attendance at the convention. The registration fee for North Americans shall remain at \$2.00, but an additional \$1.00 shall be charged upon attendance at the convention.

(2) Design of "Hugo Awards": The design of the annual "Hugo" awards shall be standardized as regards the rocket ship (but not necessarily the base), on the basis of the design by Ben Jason, introduced at the 1955 convention in Cleveland. Mr. Jason is thanked in his work for originating this design.

(3) Award Categories: The Chairman of the Pittcon is directed to appoint a special committee to consider recommendations for the standardization of the "Hugo" award categories. The committee will report at the next annual convention.

(NOTE: Membership of this committee will be announced later, after all members have accepted their appointments.)

(4) Vote for Awards: The actual vote for future "Hugo" awards, but not nominations for the awards, shall be restricted to paid members of the World Science Fiction Convention at which the awards will be made.

(NOTE: This motion is binding on the 1961 Convention. It was evidently the intent of the motion that "paid members" be considered those who have paid the \$2.00 advance registration fee--\$1.00 in the case of overseas members. Otherwise the vote could not take place, except at the convention itself, and it would be impossible for the awards to be prepared and engraved in time for the presentations.)

(5) Change in Convention Dates: A motion to appoint a special committee to recommend alternative times for the annual Convention other than the Labor Day weekend, was tabled until the 1961 Business meeting.

(6) Mail vote for Convention Site: A proposal to select the site of the World Science Fiction Convention by written ballot, in the same manner as the "hugo" awards but with the deadline for receipt of votes at midnight on the first day of the convention, was tabled without a motion.

(7) Convention Site: Seattle was unanimously chosen to be the site of the 1961 World Science Fiction Convention.

(Published at the request of the Pittcon Committee)



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FOCUS ON BOOKS  
by Ed Gorman

It was Mike's suggestion that I select only one or two books of the current flock to review, and go into them in some detail. And I suppose that if this column is to stand any chance of being liked, or at least, in this case, being read, it would be better that I do criticize only a few at a time.

This column I had my choice of several books, and I read almost ten sf novels. The most disappointing, which I won't go into, though, was The Vortex Blaster by Edward E. Smith. It is tritely written, extremely dull, and hard to get through in many parts, and in general, a failure. I've never gone in much for any of his pseudo space-patrol opus', and of those I've read, this is one of the worst.

So what remains are:

The Status Civilization by Robert Sheckly, Signet books, 127 pages, 35¢.

With the publication of Untouched by Human Hands, many felt that Sheckly could replace Bradbury. Their styles are similar in the sense that both borrowed heavily from the dead-an, modern school of writing, and Sheckly, it seemed, was a gifted practitioner of literate science fiction. His first collection excelled this hope.

I think it was P. Schuyler Miller who remarked about Sheckly's later stages as a writer, that he (Sheckly) had deserted the literary and satirical aspects of sf writing which had once garnished the field and seemed content to tell a story. This observation has been coming true for the past five years, and it comes to realization in this novel.

There are some things wrong with The Status Civilization, but not enough of them to deter from its smooth and workable plot, practiced and polished prose, and crisp and credible dialogue. These things are the saving factor of the book; but they are all standard Sheckly and no better nor worse than he has presented before.

Serialized as "Omega" in Amazing at the beginning of the summer, TSC is the old penal-planet story. Omega, the planet, is infested with crime, murder, and sundry other quirks of wrong-doing. The book's hero, Barrant, is not the usual bland and blind Sheckly protagonist, but just a typical man who finds himself deported to the planet, and must go about insuring his survival.

Needless to say, obstacles are shoved in his path many times. He fights everything from guards to robots to madmen and conquers them all. And half-way through the story, he begins the more normal plabs of getting back to Earth.

Here we meet The Black One, who has been hinted about so far in the book. The Black One, at first mention, seems the usual alien entity which sf writers use so often. Here though, through a story twist, the Black One turns out to be not an Ogre, but rather a group of prisoners who want to make it back to Earth.

Since I don't care to reveal the ending, I'll stop here. The rest follows the beginning, in remaining fast-paced. One even has the feeling that Sheckly was pulled down incident after incident from a magician's hat as he went along. For instance, in a loose, sum-



mary type style, Sheckly will ramble on, then suddenly jerk down an episode and detail it, and continue on. To me, this is annoying and hard to read.

The plot of this book was well thought-out and because of this, I can't understand why Sheckly's prose inferred that he was creating as he went along. It is strictly an adventure novel, therefore, and the few minor satirical barbs which we are treated to, while good, are minor. After religion, politics, advertising, and human nature in general, Sheckly devises such implements as "The Robot Confessor" whom you run to when you have erred, and "The Antidote Shop" which the hero operates. Perhaps the best, or at least most intriguing device is "The Victim's protective Society" which protects your rights, and not your life, if you are in jeopardy of losing it.

A bulk of this book suffers from one thing: stockness. Stock characters, settings, plot developments. For 35¢ this book is worthwhile, but also a disappointment, considering the obvious latent talent which Sheckly has.

Vulcan's Hammer by Philip K. Dick--The Skynappers by John Brunner, 139 and 117 pages respectively, Ace books, 35¢.

Again for 35¢, Ace offers us two readable and fairly interesting books, both of them similar in that they concern a giant brain machine which affects many lives in the world.

The Dick book is preferable to the other, but the Brunner side is still an interesting adventure book. This time, English hack Brunner offers us the old-man-thrown-into-the-future bit, and winds up with many, too many, implausibilities, as well as two opposing forces which coincide.

Ivan Wright, transported into the future, becomes a pawn of a vast galactic hook-up, and if my words are filled with cliches, then you know what to expect from the novel. Two opposing forces hope to get hold of Solver, the brain machine, and both go about it in odd, rather long about ways.

An expanded Future novelet, Dick's Vulcan's Hammer is twice the novel that The Skynappers is. It is more complex, logical, and closer to science fiction, and in it Dick paints a convincing and suspenseful picture of a future society which is controlled by a computer, Vulcan 3. The opening scene, gets you right into the story, and from then on, except for a few minor parts, you remain interested in the book.

The Unity organization described here is the typical totalitarianistic cult of a decadent future. The Guardians are a group in opposition who are determined to smash Vulcan 3, a metal tyrant using human life as a pawn.

The characters in Dick's novel, are sharp, well drawn, and even better than those created by Sheckly in The Status Civilization. Jason Dill for example, while appearing on the surface to be the stereo-typed, hard-boiled hero who leads a berserk movement, becomes, at the times of his death, a very real person, whom the reader is able to sympathize with. And the hero, or at least central figure, William Barris, is at least well motivated and depicted.



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The major downfall of the novel is the involved plotting in some areas of the book. Van Vogt can turn out a truly intricate sub-plotted story, but Dick isn't van Vogt, unfortunately. And in the end, when all the minor little details have been cleared up, the story breaks into something not unlike a masquerade party when everyone unmaskes to reveal their true identity. Such things aren't uncommon and happen often in many books, but in Vulcan's Hammer there is too much of it at the end, and some of the explanations seem false and contrived. Still the end result is readable.

--ed gorman

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