

SFCRITIC 6

DECEMBER 11 1967

Published by Andrew Porter, 24 East 82nd Street, NY 10028, in conjunction with SF Weekly. Hardcover and paperback books for review may be sent to the above address. December 11th, 1967. Doompublishation 292.

Doomsman, by Harlan Ellison b/w Telepower, by Lee Hoffman. Belmont Books, 1967; 50¢.

Doomsman is one of Harlan's earlier science fiction stories, written nearly ten years ago when Ellison was really cranking sf out, in the inimitable tradition established by Robert Silverberg and others. It's entertaining science fiction, at best, but certainly not representative of what Ellison is doing nowadays. If you want to be entertained for an hour or so, then this is what you want to read.

Telepower is Lee Hoffman's first published science fiction. This fan turned pro has previously been represented in the professional ranks by her westerns. Now, we have a chance to see her working at science fiction.

This is the best short novel I've read in a long time. Not since The Dragon Masters have I become so involved with a story, so sorry when it ended. With this novel, Lee Hoffman has established herself in my mind as a writer to be Watched.

With a few economical words, Lee builds a complete society; with the fine talent of an accomplished wordsmith she shades in the delicate nuances of character that make a book worth reading. She moves her characters so that they act like people, not just the author's puppets; and all these forces she balances in a carefully controlled manner. There's a lot more I could say about this book, but I'll simply tell you to watch this writer; she's going places.

Sweeney's Island, by John Christopher. Crest Books, 1967; 60¢.

John Christopher, noted for his varied contributions to end-of-the-world writing, has written here another Lord Of The Flies. It is a savage and fantastic tale, if we would believe the New York Times. But for science fiction readers, definitely old hat, and not really good at all.

The If Reader Of Science Fiction, edited by Frederik Pohl. Ace Books, 1967; 60¢.

It is well that this is the "reader," rather than the "best" of If. If this is all the magazine has to offer, then If is in a poorer way than I would have thought. For such a distinguished cast of writers, the contents of this book leave a decided bad taste in my mouth.

"When Time Was New" is a sticky-sweet example of why Robert Young is a third-rate SF writer -- a time-travel story that degenerates into sticky sentimentality, and would better have been left to moulder in the pages of If than appearing here. "Old Testament" by Jerome Bixby is another story in the being-from-space-who-founds-a-religion theme, cutely done by this writer who has produced such fine stories as "It's A Good Life." "The Silkie" by A.E. Van Vogt gave me the feeling that I'd come in at the middle of the story -- an assumption by the author that you have read the other stories in the series leaves gaping holes that Van Vogt failed to fill in. "Trick Or Treaty" by Keith Laumer is another Retief story; unless you've read them all, you're not going to enjoy one. Finally, "The Life Hater" by Fred Saberhagen is a vignette in the Berserker series, more of a punch-line than an effective story.

Pohl has made a mistake in selecting three series-stories for his collection. The series story, by definition, leaves gaping holes in the background that the author

fills in with subsequent stories. To have included three such stories here, with no word as to their origins, is a mistake that Pohl should have avoided.

The collection is almost balanced out by two whopping good yarns. "A better Mousetrap" by John Brunner and "The 64-Square Madhouse" by Fritz Lieber are definitely top-notch. John Brunner is the expert at quiet underplay, and Fritz Lieber provides a fascinating and intriguing exploration into the world of chess and chess players.

This is, on the whole, a lopsided collection. Brunner and Lieber contribute a large plus. The inclusion of the series stories, the Robert Young trivia, and -- what I believe to be a critical need for a volume of this type -- a lack of editorial introduction for each story, make this a marginal entry. Buy it if you wish; but I certainly can't recommend it.

Soldier, Ask Not, by Gordon R. Dickson. Dell Books, 1967; 60¢.

As the original novelette, this was hot stuff. As a full length book, it leave me cold. Endless repetition of "ah, if I had but known what was to happen..." coupled with endless verbiage on the battle between Good and Evil combine to make this a real loser. It is the type of book which can be put down in the middle of a chapter, and never picked up again. Dickson has written better.

The Invisibility Affair (Man From U.N.C.L.E. 11) by Thomas Stratton. Ace Books, 1967; 50¢.

There are people who like this sort of thing -- supposedly deft humor, funny intelligence agents, loads of implausible action, and all the rest that goes with the novelization of a funny TV series -- but I don't, I'm afraid. Gene De Weese and Robert Coulson (Thomas Stratton) have mixed up a large bag of intelligence capers and spread them across the pages. Their results are disappointing. Cardboard characters, unbelievably flippant conversation, and implausible action make this hard to qualify as a novel. As a TV series, perhaps; but as anything more, it is a failure.

Childhood's End; Reach For Tomorrow; Tales From The White Hart; Earthlight; Expedition To Earth; all by Arthur C. Clarke. Ballantine Books Boxed Set, 1967; \$2.60.

Arthur C. Clarke, to my way of thinking, is one of the true masters of science fiction. This boxed set includes five of his best works, including the brilliant Childhood's End and Earthlight, as well as several extraordinarily fine short stories. This set will make the ideal present for the holiday season; hours of reading pleasure by a brilliant writer.

The Nine Billion Names Of God, by Arthur C. Clarke. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967; \$4.95

These are among the best short stories of Arthur C. Clarke. Clarke does more for my jaded sense of wonder than a dozen other authors rolled into one. A superlative collection, by a master of the genre.

Nebula Award Stories Two, edited by Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison. Doubleday & Co., 1967; \$4.95.

This is a selection of the winners -- and a few of the losers -- of the Nebula Awards as presented in March, 1967. The winners are, perhaps, not the best stories presented here -- would Richard McKenna's "The Secret Place" have won, had McKenna been competing as a living author and not someone to be honored? One can only wonder.

On the whole, these are excellent stories, selected by the author's own hardest critics -- fellow authors. "Light Of Other Days" by Bob Shaw shines out as a bold example

of a new idea in a sea of what have become second-hand ideas retooled by successive waves of authors. A new idea, poorly handled, can easily be wasted. Shaw chooses his words with the care of a skilled writer, and produced one of the finest, most poignant stories of the year.

This volume contains other stories -- "The Last Castle" by Jack Vance, "Day Million" by Frederik Pohl, "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" by Philip K. Dick, "Call Him Lord" by Grodon K. Dickson, and others -- all of them good, quality stories, as befits the runner-up for the Nebula Award, plus a rather comprehensive attempt at a list of the best science fiction published in 1966. The listing is comprehensive and admirable; a grand gathering of what the editors consider the best, with a short description of each book. Although my idea of what is best would -- and does -- differ from their choices, it is a refreshing attempt to deal, within the field, with a listing heretofore only attempted by Judith Merril in her own anthologies.

This is a rewarding book; the Nebula Awards give a clear idea of what is happening within the science fiction field, as selected and voted on by the creative forces that make it what it is.

Thorns, by Robert Silverberg. Ballantine Books, 1967; 75¢.

Thorns is basically a story of pain -- the pain that millions of people do and will thrive on, the pain that Chalk, the villain, lives for, and the pain that keeps Lona Kelvin and Linner Burris, hero and heroine, alive. It's a hard story to comprehend -- most stories are easy to read; the words are set down, in front of the reader, and he picks them up and ingests them -- but to comprehend the meaning of the action, the meaning of the words on the page, this is something completely different.

What does Silverberg mean in this story? What relations -- what meaning in his own life -- is Silverberg translating into words? The novel is almost embarrassing, as if Robert Silverberg had taken some deeply personal happening in his own life and translated its philosophical meaning -- pain is instructive, whether for good or for bad -- and put it down in words for people to read and, perhaps, comprehend. Is this book like Childhood's End by Arthur C. Clarke, where Clarke expresses an idea, although he personally finds it repugnant? Or is it something Silverberg believes in, and has expressed as best he can?

The bare mechanics of Thorns are well done; the plot, the writing, the dialogue. The final scene is perhaps too forced, somewhat unreal, as though Silverberg has decided to end the book then and there, having said what needed saying. Taken as a total, this is a frighteningly good book -- and a definite contender for both the Hugo and Nebula Awards.

The Fury Out Of Time, by Lloyd Biggle, Jr. Berkley Books, 1967; 60¢.

Lloyd Biggle Jr. has written a fast and furious novel of adventure, juggling interplanetary exploits and time-travel with the ease of an accomplished writer. The Fury Out Of Time introduces us to Bowden Karvel, one-legged hero of the story. Karvel quickly becomes the center of the novel, as he wrestles with time-traveling Unidentified Objects and impossibly obtuse military men.

When the story becomes quite impossible to solve in this time, Biggle has his hero enter the time-traveling UO, and emerge in the distant future, where he quickly becomes involved with an evolved humanity closer to an alien race than to present-day mankind.

Biggle has tackled the theme of time-travel boldly, taking into consideration the not-uncomplex problems that such a story entails. His character, Bowden Karvel, is

altogether human; embittered, disillusioned, yet humanly enjoying the role forced on him, he remains human throughout the book.

The amount of traveling the story requires -- on the earth, through time, and back and forth from the earth to the moon -- is done competently. The pace the author sets is sustained; events follow closely, and the hero and characters are always believable. Never is the thread of the original story lost, never do movements become too confusing for the reader to follow them.

Lloyd Biggle, Jr., has drawn his characters realistically, and he fleshes out the major characters with skill. His aliens are well drawn, and the counterpoint of their alienness as it contrasts with Karvel's humanity is skillfully played up. The ending seems a bit too climactic to gell -- the hero, about to face sudden death, is saved by a one in a thousand chance -- but it is led up to smoothly; Karvel is clearly not the type to fail at what he does. This is a fine story; I recommend it highly.

Best Of Amazing, selected by Joseph Ross. Doubleday & Co., 1967; \$4.50.

From the blurb on the dustjacket to the last page, this is the worst anthology I've seen in many years. This supposed "best" of Amazing is one of the poorest anthologies compiled from one magazine. Joseph Ross, formerly managing editor of the Amazing reprint magazine (his name was recently dropped from the masthead for reasons unknown) selected some of the poorest stories ever published in the magazine.

The book starts out with "The Lost Machine," a short by John Beynon Harris which shows why that author's early stories best lie forgotten. "The Worm," by David H. Keller, is the story of a big worm boring up through the basement of a gristmill. It eats the hero. "The Runaway Skyscraper" wasn't even originally published in Amazing; it appeared there as a reprint from another magazine; yet it is included here in this book. "Anniversary" by Isaac Asimov is a trite tale, written 20 years after "Marooned Off Vesta" solely to satisfy the demands of the editor for a sequel. "Pilgrimage" by Nelson S. Bond was originally published as "The Priestess Who Rebelled," a hackneyed tale of post-Atomageddon savages.

Basically, this is a collection of tired, worn-out, or just plain inappropriate stories. The inclusion of the oft-anthologized "Marooned Off Vesta" and "The Metal Man," as well as the unspectacular "Try To Remember" and "Sunfire" contribute nothing to the content of the book. Don't bother to buy this collection, unless you want to put it on the shelf alongside your complete set of Shaver Mystery issues.

Books Received And Noted:

The Weapon From Beyond (Starwolf 1), by Edmond Hamilton. Ace Books, 1967; 50¢.

The Assassination Affair (Man From UNCLE 10), by J. Hunter Holly. Ace Books, 1967; 50¢.

Strange Prophecies That Came True, by Stewart Robb. Ace Books, 1967; 50¢.

We Have Lived Before, by Brad Steiger. Ace Books, 1967; 50¢.

What We Really Know About Flying Saucers, by Otto Binder. Gold Medal Books, 1967; 75¢.

Fate -- Stranger Than Fiction, by the editors of Fate Magazine. Paperback Library, 1967; 50¢.

The World Swappers, by John Brunner. Ace Books, 1967; 50¢ (reissue).

Forbidden Planet, by W. J. Stuart. Paperback Library, 1967; 50¢ (reissue).

Five Unearthly Visions, edited by Groff Conklin. Gold Medal Books, 1967; 50¢ (reissue).

The Flame Of Iridar, by Lin Carter b/w Peril Of The Starmen, by Kris Neville. Belmont Books, 1967; 50¢.

Beyond The Spectrum, by Thomas Martin. Paperback Library, 1967; 50¢ (reprint).