

Readercon I
A convention report by Evelyn C. Leeper
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About twelve years ago, Mark and I were involved in a science fiction discussion group. We were discussing Niven and Pournelle's *Inferno* and I made the comment that I thought the original was much better, to which someone replied, "Oh, you read the magazine version too?"

It was at that point that I first realized the need for Readercon.

Unfortunately, I had to wait twelve years for it, but Readercon finally materialized. Dedicated to the written word, Readercon I was held the weekend of June 26 through June 28 at the Brookline Holiday Inn in Brookline, Massachusetts. 330 people registered, with 280 of those actually attending. People came from as far away as California and Utah, though the majority were from the Boston area.

Hotel

The hotel was *still* under construction in spite of promises to the contrary. The main entrance to the garage was blocked off, and I had to ask at the desk to find out where the back entrance was. When I first said the entrance was blocked, the clerk at the desk said it wasn't unless it was "the convention people with all those books." This was my first indication that the hotel did not have the best attitude towards us. There was no bar, and the coffee shop was open for breakfast only. The service at breakfast was poor, as was the food. Next year's Readercon will (thank goodness!) be held elsewhere.

Hucksters' Room

The hucksters' room was entirely books! (Well, okay, there were a few cassettes of authors reading their works, and I did see a couple of tarot decks stuck under a book rack.) That's the good news. The bad news is that it was small--only eight dealers (or maybe seven--it was hard to tell where one ended and another began). Oddly enough, this is about the same number of book dealers that one finds at a much larger, general science fiction convention (like Lunacon), so I suppose one shouldn't complain. The quality was very high.

Programming

If you are the sort who does not attend program items at conventions, Readercon is not for you. There was little to do other than the program items. There was a main track and a mini-track, the latter consisting mostly of readings. We didn't arrive until Saturday morning--and had to drive through a pouring rainstorm to do that!--so I cannot describe the Friday night events.

The Legacy of Cyberpunk

The first panel was at 10:00 AM Saturday and was the SOCP (Semi-Obligatory Cyberpunk Panel). James Patrick Kelly led the panel, with Mark Ziesing and Martha Millard as the other members. It was generally granted that Bruce Sterling is the Secret Master of cyberpunk (particularly after his definition cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades*), although William Gibson has gotten far more attention. For example, Gibson was quoted on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* (June 26, 1987) in an article about liposuction (a form of cosmetic surgery) in which he "speculated that if cosmetic surgery becomes more widespread, 'we'll see a strange kind of pop-Darwinism take hold; we'll start seeing the same faces over and over, [conforming to] fashion, a kind of Barbie-doll effect'" (shades of Silverberg and Varley, who suggested this long ago, but were *not* interviewed by the *Wall Street Journal*). In spite of all the attention paid to this new sub-genre, however, no one is getting rich from it. In fact, the market may even be waning, as more and more readers decide that the novels themselves are "Barbie-doll" clones of each other. Cyberpunk has even reached the stage of self-satirization, with Marc Laidlaw's "Neutromancer" as an obvious example and Pat Cadigan's and Kelly's own satires more subtle ones (so subtle, in fact, that they are often not recognized as such). Little of the "pharmaceutical-quality stuff," to quote Kelly, is being written these days.

Ziesing presented the opinion that cyberpunk was a pre-meditated phenomenon, a connivance foisted upon the science fiction readership. It was pointed out that the characters in most cyberpunk stories are shallow, members of the under-class, and not the sort upon which a society could be based. Therefore, most cyberpunk stories give the reader a very limited perspective on the "cyberpunk" future. Cyberpunk was also described (I believe by Ziesing) as the "Bruce Springsteen [phenomenon] of science fiction," with flashy popular appeal and not totally without merit, but not the sub-genre to seek deep meaning within.

I skipped the 11:00 AM interview with Gene Wolfe to try to check in, but was told it was still too early. I must admit that although he is lauded as perhaps the best writer in the science fiction field today, Gene Wolfe is not my cup of tea. But as a speaker he is quite good, and I did catch the tail end of the interview.

"What I Read That's Terrific but Not Fantastic"

The noon panel was "What I Read That's Terrific but Not Fantastic"--in other words, non-science-fiction books that science fiction fans might enjoy. The panelists and audience mentioned a variety of books. Michael Swanwick recommended Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard* and Tete-Michel Kpomassie's *An African in Greenland*. He also said that since science fiction readers like "garish and brightly colored" literature, we might try Jerzy Kosinski's *Painted Bird* and *Steps*, though he emphasized that Kosinski certainly had more substantial merits as well. Steven Popkes described David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* as a half-failed masterpiece: a failure of style, but a brilliant vision and Samuel Delany's *Dahlgren* as the converse: the vision failed, but the style remains. Richard Bowker recommended Anthony Burgess, John Fowles, Vladimir Nabokov, John Cheever, and Graham Greene. Other recommendations included Donald Barthelme's *Sadness*, G.~K.~Chesterton's "Man Who Knew Too Much" stories, C.~S.~Forester's "Hornblower" books, George MacDonald Fraser's "Flashman" novels, Len Deighton's thrillers, the novels of Tony

Hillerman, and Robert Van Gulik's "Judge Dee" mysteries. Elissa Malcohn (I believe) suggested Read's *Flight to Canada*, a sort of odd book in which Lincoln's assassination is carried live on TV and slaves flee to Canada on jets, but it is supposedly not an alternate history. (Sorry, I didn't catch the author's first name and it's not listed in *Books in Print*.)

Shakespeare Signs for Next Three "Romeo and Juliets": Art vs. Economics

Craig Shaw Gardner moderated a panel which comprised him, Martha Millard, James Morrow, Melissa Scott, D.~Alexander Smith, and Terri Windling (editor of the Ace Books science fiction line). Not much new was said (at least I have no notes of startling revelations). I think everyone concedes at this point that series sell. They must--my latest stack of four review books includes the seventh "Robotech" book and another "Sector General" novel by James White.

Literature? Who? Us? Since When?

As an example of the seriousness with which the panelists took their responsibilities at this convention, Scott Edelman, who moderated this 1:00 PM panel, had prepared a hand-out of pertinent quotes from Robin Scott Wilson, Gene Wolfe, Kurt Vonnegut, and many others. Wolfe's quote is interesting in that it is the antithesis of Heinlein's advice to aspiring authors. Heinlein recommends that authors always send out what they write; nothing should sit in the desk. Wolfe says: "I don't think that for any reason except dire economic necessity a writer ought to send out material merely because it's salable. I think he hurts himself; he hurts the field; he hurts the publication in which the material appears. Mere salability is the ethics of a K-Mart. I think writing is an art, and without trying to be too pretentious, I think it ought to have a better set of ethics than an army/navy store."

The panel consisted of Edelman, Jeffrey A.~Carver, David G.~Hartwell, Arthur D.~Hlavaty, and Gene Wolfe. Hartwell started the discussion off by pointing out that in the year that Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*, the big best-seller was *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* by Fanny Fern. So much for best-sellerdom being a measure of lasting value. There was some discussion of "what is art?"--the reader is directed to C.~S.~Lewis's book *An Experiment in Criticism* for a better accounting than I can give of most of the arguments. Several panel members felt that clarity and vividness were important characteristics of "art." This led to the question of whether an author can ever be sure her/his reader will understand precisely what s/he is trying to say. Wolfe gave the example of the word "scan," which does *not* mean to examine cursorily, but rather to examine closely. Even if the author uses the correct word, will the reader recognize it? Wolfe had a particular distaste for the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, touting instead the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (Nice, but can everyone afford it?)

Hartwell gave the example of the opening paragraphs of Poul Anderson's *Queen of Air and Darkness* as something which considered "art." He also cited Hartwell's First Law of Horror: "I appreciate art wherever I find it, but I dislike having horror performed upon me to no purpose." As an example of the latter, he suggested Barry Malzberg's *Beyond Apollo*, although conceding that the picture of America's space program in it might be becoming more and more accurate.

Wolfe felt that the teaching of literature today in this country was, by and large, a racket. (I am slightly paraphrasing here, I believe.) The result, he said, was that the new generation of readers, or rather non-readers, being produced by the schools was unable to appreciate art or even to recognize it.

The Hero as Gene Wolfe

We skipped this panel--man does not live by bread alone, but a slice once in a while helps. And since I had not read many novels by Wolfe (and only one of the "Book of the New Sun" tetralogy) this seemed like the best time to grab lunch.

Out of Obscurity

Moderated by Craig Shaw Gardner with David G.~Hartwell, Ellen Kushner, and Mark Ziesing as members, this panel seemed to have the purpose of providing a "suggested reading list" of obscure science fiction and fantasy (even some horror was mentioned, though in general it still the forgotten child of the genre of the fantastic). The following books and authors were recommended (a brief description is included if one was given):

- | Robert Aickman's ghost stories
- | John Bellairs's fiction, both young adult books and such novels as *The Face in the Frost*
- | Ramsey Campbell's *Doll That Ate His Mother*
- | the novels of D.~G.~Compton, who could not make a living writing literary science fiction and now has a job condensing books for *Readers' Digest*
- | Peter Dickinson's young adult fiction
- | John Ferris's *All Heads Turn When the Hunt Goes By*
- | John M.~Ford's works, especially *The Dragon Waiting* (I hadn't realized this was obscure)
- | Russell Griffin's *Blind Men and the Elephant*
- | M.~John Harrison's *Storm of Wings* (described as "literary sword & sorcery")
- | Georgette Heyer's novels, which Ellen Kushner described as "Jane Austen with bubbles"
- | Crockett Johnson's "Barnaby" books
- | Gwyneth Jones's *Escape Plans* (written in some acronymic language which requires that you read the book twice to understand it--it sounds like the *Codex Seraphinius* to me) and *Divine Endurance*, about an immortal android cat wandering through southeast Asia ten thousand years in the future
- | David Langford's *Space Eater*
- | Richard Matheson's *Hell House* and other works
- | Christopher Priest's novels (mostly unavailable in this country)
- | Keith Roberts's works
- | Sarban's works, especially *The Sound of His Horn*
- | Hilbert Schenck's books, especially *Wave Rider* and "Steambird" (an alternate history story). (I would also recommend "The Geometry of Narrative.")
- | Jack Sharkey's *It's Magic, You Dope*
- | Robert Stallman's "Orphan" series (*The Orphan*, *The Captive*, and *The Beast*)
- | Ian Watson's novels (mostly unavailable in this country)
- | Charles Whitmore's *Winter's Daughter* (written in the style of a Norse saga)
- | Lawrence Yep's young adult fiction
- | "Love and Rockets" comics
- | *The Dream Dragons* (I didn't catch the author's name)

Now you can all run out and try to find these books!

Gene Wolfe's Guest of Honor Speech

Gene Wolfe began his speech by announcing that since this convention was dedicated to the written word, he had written his speech and would read it, rather than working from notes. He began by quoting Mark Twain: "The man who does not read good books is no better than the man who cannot." (I tried to find out where this quote came from. Bartlett's doesn't list it. I did find one that might be appropriate for Readercon in general: "A classic is something everybody wants to have

read and nobody wants to read.") He then spoke of having recently purchased an edition of Washington Irving's *The Alhambra* printed in 1890 and well-cared for since then (by its appearance), and discovering when he read it that only the first fifty pages or so had been split. Why did the previous owner read that far and then stop? Wolfe discounted the idea that he had no time to finish it--after all, there must have been a blizzard or an illness or *some* spare time--or that he lost interest--since it was an interesting part. Wolfe then took a look at how literacy developed as a result of people wanting to read first the *Bible*, and then later books such as *Pilgrim's Progress* and other moral tracts. "Pleasure reading" was not something there was time for; there were crops to be harvested, meals to be cooked, clothes to be washed. And Wolfe felt that the previous owner of *The Alhambra* must have still believed this and stopped because he was enjoying it too much.

All this is an interesting theory, but there are other possibilities. It's possible that the previous owner didn't find the particular passage as interesting as Wolfe. It's possible that he ran out of spare time for some period of time and then had lost interest in the book.

Wolfe ended with a plea to us to make reading acceptable again. He spoke of how people who read, at least those who read something other than the current best-seller, are regarded as odd somehow. Only by talking about books to other people could we ever make reading acceptable. He made it sound not unlike gays coming out of the closet, and I'm not convinced that the situation vis-a-vis reading is at that stage. Readercon may serve the purpose of allowing fans of literary science fiction to gather to discuss the written word, but that doesn't mean that the fans who don't attend Readercon are not fans of literary science fiction. Many of them are probably fans of a wide variety of science-fiction-related materials in several media and choose to attend conventions that cover all of them rather than focus on a specific one. Since much of what I read says that reading has not declined, has probably in fact increased over the past few years, I think that those who sing the jeremiad of illiteracy may be over-reacting. Wolfe cited statistics indicating between 15 and 20% functional illiteracy in this country--a frightening enough statistic--but then (after quoting Twain) started talking as if the vast majority were illiterate even if they could read, because they did not read "literature." I would make a distinction between one who cannot read "In case of fire break glass" and one who can read but chooses to read the latest "Garfield" book over *The Book of the New Sun*. In any era, the percentage of the population that read "great literature" was fairly small. That it still is should surprise no one.

You Can't Tell a Book by Its Cover (packaging and marketing f&sf)

Gary Farber moderated this panel, with J.~F.~Rivkin (A), J.~F.~Rivkin (B), Charles C.~Ryan, and Terri Windling as members. ("J.~F.~Rivkin" is the pseudonym of two women who chose to be called "J.~F.~Rivkin [A]" and "J.~F.~Rivkin [B]"). I found it extremely annoying, in that the publishers on the panel kept telling us that the cover art was really designed for the distributors' book buyers and not for the readers, that the quotes and blurbs were designed for the distributors' book buyers and not for the readers, and that, in general, the reader came last. Then, when someone from the audience said that what he had discovered was that the blurb "In the style of X" or "Not since Y has such a novel been written" usually meant that the novel was bad, the publishers got upset that he would reject a book because of the cover. They seem to have forgotten in their quest to get the books *into* the bookstores that they must also get them *out* again in the hands of readers and that they could not count forever on the readers' patience with whatever marketing tricks the publishers think they need. They also seemed to deny the correlation between the blurb and the lack of quality that this person claimed to have discovered. The attitude seems to be that the reader must do all the work and that the publisher has no responsibility for designing a book the reader wants to buy. With an attitude like that, publishers should not be surprised if sales are not all that they expect them to be.

Regarding quotes on covers, Windling explained that the quotes are most likely to come from other authors published by the same publisher. As for the authors who seem to laud half the books on the

rack, Windling said there was a name for them: "quote whores."

On the brighter side, there have been success stories in packaging. Ace bought Moorcock's "Elric" books and then was faced with the problem of how to market them to people (readers this time) who already had the novels. They solved this by using cover art dramatically different from the old Michael Whelan covers (in this case, pre-Raphaelite art by Robert Gould) which was so striking as to convince the Moorcock fans out there that they needed to buy this series just for the art. (Well, that was how it was described to us anyway.)

Kirk Poland Memorial Bad Prose Competition

Kirk Poland is the hack author in some science fiction novel whose name and author escape me at the moment. The competition worked like this: a section of bad prose from a published science fiction novel was read to the audience, ending in mid-sentence. Then four possible endings were read--one from each of the panelists (Geary Gravel, Craig Shaw Gardner, and Darrell Schweitzer) and the *real* ending. The audience then voted on which they thought was the real ending. Each author got a point for each member of the audience he fooled; the audience got a point for each vote for the correct ending. The authors "honored" in this competition included Homer Eon Flint and Austin Hall, E.~E.~Smith, John Norman, L.~Ron Hubbard, Stephen Donaldson, Robert Heinlein, and Lin Carter. The final score showed the audience winning, with Geary Gravel coming in second as the pro with the best chance to be a hack author. The only problem with this competition was that "[it] took so long to die. Long after his sword had cut through [its] cold flesh, the heads were sinking their tusks into his bootheels...." Sorry, I got carried away there. Actually that was the correct answer to the last excerpt in the competition and had been offered as a possible answer to all ten. By the next day, it had become the catch-phrase of the convention ("the problem with multi-book series is that they take so long to die...").

Meet the Pros Party/Reception for Mark Ziesing

These were originally scheduled as separate events, but the committee decided (wisely, I think) to combine them. The Con Suite, unfortunately, was rather small for this, since pretty much everyone wanted to attend and 280 people in one room, albeit a large one, is a bit tight. The food was good (cheese and raw vegetables as well as chips and nuts), and I did get a chance to talk to most of the other Usenetters who were there. Apparently there was someone else who was trying to meet me, but even in a convention as small as this one, we never managed to connect. Those of us who did gather talked about this year's Worldcon (and the difficulty of paying hotel deposits in pounds), next year's Worldcon (no one knows very much), the 1989 Worldcon (will we have a hotel?), and next year's Boskone (in Springfield, Massachusetts, no less).

Losing Money for Fun & Profit: Small Press How-to

I only caught the tail end of this and heard that *Whispers* is considered a success because it loses only \$500-\$1000 per issue. Donald M.~Grant, Phantasia Press, and others of that type are considered small "big-press" publishers rather than big "small-press" publishers. Scott Edelman once again had a hand-out, this one much briefer. I suppose how to lose money doesn't require much comment.

Out of Boundaries (great imaginative literature not marketed as f&sf)

Again, this was more a recommended reading list than a panel. Richard Bowker, Gary Farber, James Morrow, and Michael Swanwick did talk somewhat about science fiction novels being marketed as

mainstream, but more from the point of view of a science fiction author who crosses over (e.g., Kurt Vonnegut) than of a mainstream author who writes a science fiction novel (e.g., Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*). Morrow must have had a bad night; he claimed that most science fiction fans are kids who play Dungeons and Dragons (Dungeons and Dragons is a registered trademark owned by TSR, Inc.) masturbate, and are afraid to try anything new. As a result, he seemed to feel that serious novels published as science fiction would not find their audience. As a result, he was pleased that his own *This Is the Way the World Ends* was published "outside the genre." This was perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the negative aspect of Readercon--Snobcon.

The recommendations included several baseball-related alternate histories: Robert Coover's *Universal Baseball Association, Inc./Henry Waugh, Prop.~and W.~P.~Kinsella's Iowa Baseball Confederacy* and *Shoeless Joe*. (Coover has also written that great "Victorian" classic, *Spanking the Maid*. Oh, the marvelous things one can learn from *Books in Print*!) Latin American authors were well-represented with Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez mentioned several times, as well as Marcio Souza's *Order of the Day*.

Other cross-over novels which were recommended were:

- | Kingsley Amis's *Alteration* and *Green Man*
- | John Calvin Batchelor's *Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica*
- | Richard Bowker's *Replica* (authors plugging their own books seemed to be *de rigueur*)
- | Charles Bukowski's "No Way to Paradise" and "Six Inches" (the latter described as a story in which a woman shrinks a man down to six inches in height and then uses him in ways best not elaborated at such a panel)
- | John Collier's *His Monkey Wife* and other stories
- | Len Deighton's alternate history *SS-GB*
- | Peter Dickinson's novels (again)
- | Thomas Disch's *Getting into Death*
- | Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (it's not entirely clear to me why this was called science fiction)
- | John M.~Ford's *Dragon Waiting* (also mentioned in the obscure science fiction panel)
- | Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro*
- | Jeremy Levin's *Creator* (said to be much better than the film)
- | Bernard Malamud's *Natural*
- | Ted Mooney's *Easy Travel to Other Planets*
- | Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada*
- | Thomas Pynchon's novels
- | Philip Roth's *Great American Novel*
- | David Slavitt's *Outer Mongolian*
- | Nancy Willard's *Things Invisible to See*
- | Eugene Zamiatin's *We*
- | *Green Castle* (I didn't get the author's name and it's not in *Books in Print*)
- | *The Scent of New-Mown Hay* (again, I didn't get the author's name and it's not in *Books in Print*)

None of the panelists even mentioned Atwood's book (though when it was brought up in two panels on Saturday, each time the moderator said that this panel on Sunday would cover just such books), so when I got a chance to "testify" I mentioned it, as well as Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale*, Russell Hoban's *Pilgerman* and other novels, Knebel Fletcher's *Seven Days in May*, and the novels of Dennis Wheatley.

Alternate Histories We'd Like to See

This was the panel I was most looking forward to. After such anticipation, it was almost inevitable that I would be somewhat disappointed. My disappointment stemmed from two sources. One was the emphasis on how to bring about an alternate history--whether Germany could have marched through a different battlefield in World War I and how the various generals arranged their troops, or whether Philip Sydney might have become King of Poland (Melissa Scott mentioned this one)--without ever getting to what such an alternate history would look like. Darrell Schweitzer's idea of having a Roman Emperor convert to Judaism rather than Christianity and so form the Jewish Roman Empire showed more promise, but no one wanted to follow up on it. The other problem was the way the panel kept cutting off ideas from the audience, rather than following through on them. Okay, so maybe the question of what sort of alternate world would we have if air conditioning hadn't been invented (to take one example) may not be the most viscerally exciting, but to tell the proposer of this idea that it doesn't make any sense does seem a little abrupt, especially since when someone asked about rules for alternate histories, Steven Popkes replied, "Rules in an alternate history? That's like rules in a knife fight!" You can't have it both ways.

There was a brief summary of the two conflicting historical theories that need to be understood before one can deal with alternate histories: the Great-Man Theory versus the Tide-of-Events Theory. The former says that single individuals determine history--kill Napoleon and a very different present emerges. The latter says that individuals are like obstacles in a rushing river--they cause a brief change in the flow, but that soon is wiped out and the river continues on its course. Adding or removing a single boulder does not change the course of the river very far downstream; kill Napoleon and someone else appears to take his place. Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* might very well be considered the prime example of this, though there is another story than makes this point even more firmly. In that, someone goes back in time to prevent someone else from being shot in the head. Each time he tries, the "tide of events" overcomes his efforts. Finally, when he thinks he's covered everything, a meteorite comes crashing through a window, killing the victim and leaving a hole in his head that looks just like a bullet hole. (I wish I could remember the name or author of that story!)

There was some discussion of the more popular events to play with. Someone mentioned the Black Death. Robert Silverberg's *Gate of Worlds* postulates a world in which the Black Death killed 75% of Europe's population instead of 25-33%. Popkes mentioned a part of Poland that seemed to be spared the Black Death and could easily have become the basis for the Holy Polish Empire.

Darrell Schweitzer took the opportunity to plug his alternate history (not even written yet) in which an immortal Alexander the Great is involved in Aztec-occupied Spain in 1914. Apparently the Aztecs are trying to build a Quetzalcoatl zeppelin using ostrich feathers. This, according to Schweitzer, is applying the "silly factor" in alternate histories.

Somtow Suchartikul's "Aquilid" series was mentioned and there was some discussion of alternate histories based on changes to United States history, but on the whole this did not seem as fertile an area as European, Asian, or African histories. European history has been done often; the alternate histories I'd like to see would be based on changes in Asian or African history. What if the Chinese had been less isolationist? What if the Mahdi had succeeded in 1885? What if Islam had not been driven out of Spain? (All right, so the last is European also.)

At 1:00 PM we moved into the overflow room, where we broke up into a number of small groups, one discussing what would have happened if Josephus hadn't betrayed the Jewish uprising in 66 AD/CE, one discussing the battle plans of the Germans on the Russian Front in World War II, one discussing how the weather affected World War I. This was more what I was looking for, and I hope that attendance next year justifies having discussion groups in addition to panels.

In Search of the 'Literary' Hard SF Novel

Because of the overflow on the previous panel, by the time I would have gotten to this one it was almost done, so we went to lunch instead.

Academic Attention: Good, Bad, or Ugly?

Again, I would have been interested, but Readercon didn't have a lunch break, so we had to make do.

What Will We Write About Next?

We arrived after the panel started. Ellen Kushner was saying that as people had moved to the suburbs, there was a trend toward more pastoral settings for science fiction and fantasy. (Ah, yes, "tree science fiction." There was Anthony's *In the Shade of the Tree* and Knight's *Man in the Tree* and Niven's *Integral Trees* and Dick's *The [S]ap Gun*...that last one was Mark's idea--blame him.) Now, as people return to the cities, urban settings are showing up more and more. This was interesting as a counter-point to Mark's recent comments on the dearth of urban horror films. D.~Alexander Smith said he wanted to see more political-warning novels, which led to a heated discussion of "message books." (I think it was Samuel Goldwyn who said, "If you want to deliver a message, send a telegram.")

People also expected to see more books about world-wide plagues because of the recent awareness about AIDS. Scott Green expects an influx of ideas from the comic book field, and everyone expected more and more near-future novels marketed as non-science-fiction.

Exceptions to the Rule (f&sf excellence in other media)

This panel, more than any of the others, emphasized the "Snobcon" aspect of Readercon. When one of the panelists started out by saying there were two questions to be answered--was there excellent science fiction in media other than the written word, and why not?--I knew this was a kangaroo court. Most of the time was spent discussing how badly Hollywood adapts written science fiction to film (or television, for that matter). No one mentioned that when science fiction authors adapt films to the written word (i.e., write novelizations), they do equally poorly. If it's true, as one person claimed, that "Hollywood has no respect for the written word," it's also true that novelists have no respect for Hollywood.

Granting for the moment that science fiction novels (and shorter works) have not been adapted well into film, what does that have to do with the quality of Hollywood or with its ability to create good science fiction works? Film is *not* the written word; to measure it against the same yardstick is foolish. One could just as easily claim that the written word is inferior to music because no one has ever captured the feeling of a symphony in words. Every medium has its strengths and weaknesses--perhaps the worst aspect of Hollywood filmmaking is that it feels a need to translate the written word to the screen. There are scenes in *The Killing Fields*, for example, that are far more powerful visually than they could ever be in print. And no story has moved me in quite the same way as Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Does this mean the written word is inferior? Of course not. A hammer does a poor job of screwing in screws, and a screwdriver is equally poor at driving nails. Just as the carpenter must learn to choose the right tool, so must the artist. I'm not saying that an artist must master all fields, but an artist in one area should be willing to acknowledge the value of other areas also. Do plumbers insist on wiring their own houses, and electricians on installing their own plumbing?

What makes this attitude of the written word as Procrustean bed especially baffling is the acceptance of some visual media as "equal" to the written word. Readercon plans to have an art show at some time in the future, and other conventions, while decrying "the media fans," seem to accept paintings,

sculptures, and other static visual media as acceptable. Boskone, which is working very hard on cutting back on "media," has a list of qualifications for being allowed to join (you need to meet only one of them, not all) and one is that you have purchased something in the art show from one of the last three Boskones.

"Medium (pl. media): a mode of artistic expression or communication." Let's not forget that books are media as surely as films or music or costumes. To those who say, "Well, yes, there are good science fiction films, but most of what Hollywood turns out is terrible. Look at the schlock they pass off as science fiction!" I would remind them that Sturgeon's Law applies. For every Dino de Laurentiis there is a Terry Brooks; for every Gene Wolfe, there is a Nicholas Roeg.

After they had finished blasting film, the panelists then talked about all the wonderful comic books around and how there was so much that you could do in a comic that you couldn't do in the written word. The inconsistency of this struck them not at all.

Miscellaneous

The Program Book was small, but managed to contain the obligatory biographies and bibliographies. Its slimness was due more to fewer advertisements than to a major decrease in content over other program books. Also included was a copy of the Disclave 1987 Program Book--apparently WSFA had a surplus and since it included a short story by Gene Wolfe (their Guest of Honor also), they offered the extras to Readercon. It also contained an article on "Science Fiction and the History of British Films," perhaps inappropriate for Readercon, but interesting nonetheless.

Other "freebies" included the fourth issue of *Last Wave* ("The Last Best Hope of Speculative Fiction"--since I haven't had a chance to read it yet, I can't say if it's true or not) and an issue of *The Little Magazine*, a poetry magazine.

Summary

All in all, Readercon was like Classic Boskone--not Boskone of five years ago, but Boskone of fifteen years ago. It was small and friendly. There was no enormous assembly line of people at Gene Wolfe's autograph session--he had time to talk to the people who wanted his autograph, and they had time to talk to him. In fact, he was the most accessible and hard-working Guest of Honor I've seen in a long time; he was on five or six program items and could often be seen in the audience at others, unlike many Guests of Honor who give their speech, do their autograph session and seem to spend the rest of their time in their hotel room. There were no false fire alarms, no all-night gonzo parties in the elevator (there was only one elevator and it was sufficient), no bands of roving under-ages "fans" looking for free booze. It had its problems, true, but it was overall good enough that Mark and I have already joined for next year. It was an inspiration to go back and actually read science fiction. So what was the first book I read after Readercon? *Bimbos of the Death Sun*, that's what. But that's another story.

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