

Readercon II
Con report, suggestions, and general musings by Evelyn C. Leeper
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As I said last year:

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.

After Readercon I, we had to wait seventeen months for Readercon II, but it finally happened. (Note: we have to wait another seventeen months for Readercon III. An eighteen-month cycle might almost make sense, but a seventeen-month one?!) Dedicated to the written word, Readercon II was held the weekend of November 18 through November 20 at the Lowell Hilton in Lowell, Massachusetts. 350 people registered (up from 330 last year), with 300 of those actually attending (up from 280). Just as with Readercon I, people came from as far away as California and Utah, though the majority were from the Boston area.

Hotel and Function Space

The entire convention was on one floor, a definite plus. The main program room was at least half-empty most of the time and the Hucksters' Room overcrowded. Unfortunately, there isn't any easy way to reassign the rooms. The Green Room was attached to the Con Suite, and became basically an extension of that, and was at the opposite end of the hotel from the programming. The Staff Room was right next to the programming. Next year these will probably be swapped. The parking garage had an odd rate structure, with the rate per hour going *up* the longer you parked, rather than down. The hotel had coffee and muffins for sale at a kiosk Saturday and Sunday mornings. I didn't use the restaurants in the hotel, but others said the breakfast buffet looked mediocre. Restaurants in the area

were limited, though a multi-ethnic fast-food restaurant and a fairly decent Greek restaurant augmented the usual pizza/subs/burgers places (and a Brigham's--just like we used to have near Boskones in Boston).

The major drawback to Lowell is that it smells bad--at least the canal right next to the hotel does, and this was in *cold* weather. I would not want to plan a summer convention there, and this may be part of why the hotel supposedly is in financial difficulty.

The convention failed to provide attendees with a map of the hotel, instead relying on written descriptions of where the various rooms were. They need to provide a map. Also missing was a restaurant guide, though one was posted late Friday night. (Strangely, there *was* a map of downtown Lowell provided, so maybe the lack of restaurant descriptions was an oversight.)

Hucksters' Room

Again, the Hucksters' Room was entirely books. There were about twice as many dealers as last year (sixteen versus eight), with several selling affordable used paperbacks--reading copies rather than collectibles. However, there was no dealer selling *new* paperbacks, which my friends from the Amherst area wished for, science fiction/horror/fantasy not being a major commodity in the bookstores near them. (New horror novels are especially difficult to get for many people *except* at conventions.) Perhaps the Readercon committee can make a special effort to recruit a new paperback dealer for Readercon III.

One other disappointment was how early the Hucksters' Room closed on Sunday. Apparently we had to vacate the space by 5 PM, so the room closed by 3 PM, and even then many of the dealers had already left.

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. Again, this is the same as last year. This year we managed to arrive in time for the Friday night programming.

Maximum R&D: Rock 'n' Roll 'n' SF Friday, 6:30 PM

Okay, so I didn't actually attend this panel. But I have to ask how a convention dedicated to the written word, which specifically excludes "media SF" from its programming, can schedule a rock 'n' roll panel. (The answer that the two chairs are rock 'n' roll critics/writers will be considered by me an obvious, but insufficient, answer and only partial credit will be given.) (This was one of the two panels rescheduled--rather than make everything an hour late, they moved this one from 5:30 and shifted the 6:30 panel to the end of the programming.)

Caviar: A Ted Sturgeon Appreciation David G. Hartwell (moderator), Bernadette Bosky, Daniel P. Dern, Samuel R. Delany, Martha Soukup Saturday, 7:30 PM

Theodore Sturgeon was designated the "Past Master" for Readercon II and several program items were dedicated to him and his work. On this panel, this item, the panelists each spoke about what they felt distinguished Sturgeon. Delany said that Sturgeon physicalized emotions--that he wrote about emotions as objects rattling around inside people (someone's tears were "like something scratching the inside of his face"). David G. Hartwell liked Sturgeon's use of opening lines that grab you: "They found him under the grandstand, doing something awful." [*The Dreaming Jewels*].

Bernadette Bosky named "Thunder and Roses" as her favorite and one of the stories used in the science fiction course she taught. The panelists concurred that Sturgeon was "obsessed with technique." He recommended that one way to distinguish different characters' speech in a dialogue was to use different metric systems for them, rather than using "he said, she said" constructs. Another approach was to characterize by profession. This seemed to be to think about how, say, a policeman in Boston would talk, and seems a bit obvious. Unfortunately, I could stay for only half the panel because I had to work the Green Room.

Bookaholics Anonymous
Friday, 9:30 PM

I missed the first half of this because of Green Room work, but the discussion didn't seem to have covered any amazing ground. When I arrived they were in the midst of a debate regarding the advantages of hardbacks versus paperbacks (size, cost, durability). Everyone agreed they hated series and multi-part books: no big surprise and it's not clear what this has to do with bookaholism. No agreement was reached on what to do with old books. No one wanted to throw them out, but the sheer quantity of books produced in this country makes that inevitable. If you give them to the library book sale instead of throwing them out, and they don't sell, the library will throw them out (well, some libraries will anyway).

Other random observations made: Some people seem to be proud of never reading a book. There are people who buy books only for the cover art. (Of course, they probably think it's strange that anyone would buy a coverless book or a hardback book with the dust jacket.) And many people said they have the problem of being unable to sort their books without stopping to read them.

Semiotics and Deconstructionism: An Introductory Talk
Samuel R. Delany
Friday, 10:00 PM

I didn't go to this talk, but Mark did and had the following to say:

My first reaction to Samuel R. Delany's presentation was that it was incompetent as an introduction. Shockingly so. I will say very frankly that 95% of what Mr. Delany said was couched in jargon so obscure that nobody outside of his field could be expected to have any idea what he was talking about. There was no attempt to define any terms at all non-technically, even the terms of his title. Now there are any number of possible interpretations to what I saw. You can decide which is the most likely.

Delany, an acknowledged writer and a tenured professor at my alma mater--though he very frankly told a friend he would like to use it as a stepping stone to a professorship at Harvard--had no idea how to get his ideas across to a non-technical audience. I have heard scientists and mathematicians--people who unlike Delany are not in the craft of words--who have taken subjects I consider far more technical and subjects which have far more substance and made them understandable to laymen. The audience may not have gone away capable of carrying on the work, but they had left with a feel for what the work was. They went away with at least a few non-technical definitions, It is possible Delany is far inferior to these people when it comes to expressing himself.

That was my most charitable explanation, I am afraid, but I do not believe that explanation. At least one reason is that I was able to understand 5%--with some difficulty--but that it was phrased in so obscure a wording as to hide the meaning or make it more difficult to ferret out. Sorry, Mr. Delany, you should eschew some obfuscations. I think you were intentionally being obscure to convince the audience of the technicality of your subject and/or to lose intentionally those members who did not already know the subject matter.

(Note this is Mark's opinion, not mine, and people who wish to take issue with it should contact him.)

Meet the Pros(e) Party
Friday, 11:00 PM

I dropped in on this early on. It was at that time sparsely attended. In addition, the only refreshments available were from the cash bar--there were no soft drinks and no munchies. I (and many other) ended up going to the con suite instead and partying there. The con suite was well supplied throughout the weekend with soft drinks, juice, coffee, tea (including herbal tea), chips, fruit, vegetables, and cheese and was a popular gathering place without being too loud or unruly.

**See Dick Run, See Jane Reveal Depths of the Human Condition:
The Juvenile as Literature**

**Terri Windling (moderator), Paul Hazel, Barry B. Longyear,
Patricia A. McKillip, John Morressy, Delia Sherman**
Saturday, 10:00 AM

This panel would have done well to define its terms ahead of time. What is a juvenile novel? A young-adult (YA) novel? A children's book? (Note that children have books, not novels.) I was reading Campbell and Franz Werfel at fourteen--does that make them juvenile authors? (No, it makes me weird!) It wasn't even clear what defined a juvenile/YA/children's book. A teenage protagonist isn't sufficient (e.g., *The Red Magician* by Lisa Goldstein) or necessary (*The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien). Towards the end they seemed to settle on a three-part division. First came picture books designed to be read to children while they followed along. Then came simple books designed to help a child learn to read. Lastly, from about age eight, came books that assume a certain basic reading ability and start to concentrate more on characters, story, etc.

One thing the authors on the panel agreed on was that authors shouldn't write down to their audiences by using only short words and sentences (though obviously one can err in the other direction as well). Morressy claimed something he tried to do was to "learn how to say the big things in little words." It wasn't clear if he still thought this was a good idea. Windling talked about books meant to be read only by children as having a parallel in books meant to be read only by fans. (I have this feeling neither are great literature, but that's my personal prejudice. I enjoyed *Bimbos of the Death Sun* but it's a fun read rather than a great read.)

The obligatory list of recommendations followed (I have listed recommenders in parentheses after the titles):

- | *The Tricksters*, *The Catalogue of the Universe*, and *The Changeover*, all by Margaret Mahy (PK, DS);
- | *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Princess and Curdie*, all by George MacDonald (DS);
- | anything by Nancy Garden or Diana Wynne Jones (DS);
- | *The Forest of App* by Gloria R. Dank (DS);
- | *Kindergarten* by Peter Rushforth (TW);
- | *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (BL);
- | *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson (BL);
- | almost anything by L. Frank Baum (BL);
- | the Hornblower books of C. S. Forester (BL);
- | *Farmer in the Sky* by Robert A. Heinlein (BL);
- | *The Egypt Game* by Zilpha K. Snyder (BL);
- | *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien (JM);
- | the Narnia books by C. S. Lewis;
- | the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen (JM);
- | *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame (JM); and

1 *The Light in the Forest* by Conrad Richter (JM).

This panel suffered from the same problem many of the panels had (at all conventions, not just Readercon): authors pushing their own books. In this case, it was Longyear who kept recommending his own works. I wonder if it's possible for authors to be told that they can mention their latest/most relevant book when introducing themselves on a panel, but then have to refrain from talking about any other books. (I admit this wouldn't always work--see my comments below on the "Alternate Sexual Lifestyles in F & SF" panel.)

**Is Chip Delany the Woody Allen of SF?
(or, I Really Like Your Books...Especially the Earlier, Simpler Ones...)
David G. Hartwell (moderator), Paul DiFilippo, Arthur Hlavaty,
Stan Levanthal, Patrick Nielsen Hayden
Saturday, 11:00 AM**

The first thing this panel did was to decide that *Dahlgren* was the dividing point between the early Delany and the later Delany, though I would claim (and I think they might agree) that *Triton*, while coming after *Dahlgren* chronologically, more closely resembles the earlier Delany in its tighter structure and "standard" science fiction concepts. The later Delany was characterized by the panel as having a looser structure, or at any rate a less obvious structure, and less predictable concepts. (The structure of the earlier works are more like an exoskeleton that you can see; the later Delany has an endoskeleton hidden from view.) The later Delany also has a freer sexuality and (according to Levanthal), "sheds light on an increasingly dark culture." As far as freer sexuality goes, for example, *Dahlgren* was cited as the first book to give a more naturalistic view of sex--people sweat, get pinched, etc.

DiFilippo thought that a preference for the early Delany represented a resistance to change (which others paralleled to the "series mentality" that makes authors write book after book in the same series) and a nostalgia for the 1960s. Someone (Levanthal?) compared the reception given to *Dahlgren* to that given to Bob Dylan when he first used an electric guitar at the Newport Folk Festival. Hartwell felt that the path Delany took was the classical one; in earlier times poets started with lyric and pastoral poetry and advanced to epics (e.g., Milton). Nielsen Hayden thought that *Dahlgren* had been "selected" as a symbolic book to represent a whole trend in science fiction occurring about that time.

When it came to specific post-*Dahlgren* books, the panel tended to split on whether they loved them or hated them (well, no one would admit to hating a Delany book, but there were definitely some lukewarm comments). *Triton* seemed to be perceived as a basic piece of the feminist dialogue of the 1970s, along with Russ's *The Female Man* and LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*. *Tales of Neveryona* was disliked by some because of its pre-technological setting. Most wanted to reserve judgement on *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* until the second half of the diptych came out.

At the end Hartwell asked Delany, who was sitting in the audience, if he wished to comment. Delany's comment was that he had never read this author he was discussing, which I take to mean that since he is *inside* the author, he can't examine the author from the *outside*. It was an unusual discussion, though, since Delany and everyone else kept referring to Delany in the third person (Borges used to do this also).

**Elfland Über Alles: Hidden Racism (and other -isms) in Fantasy and SF
Ellen Kushner (moderator), Terry Bisson, Samuel R. Delany, Paul Park,
Darrell Schweitzer, Joan Slonczewski, Lawrence Watt-Evans
Saturday, 2:00 PM**

The panelists seemed to start out by agreeing that all science fiction futures used to be white Anglo-Saxon Protestant futures. I'm sure counter-examples could be found, but in general that was probably the case. They seem to think it's still the case, though I would certainly contend that the majority of

cyberpunk works seem to postulate a Japanese or Third-World future instead.

Past examples of blatant racism were mentioned, but Delany pointed out that he read the Conan books (one common example) without ever seeing the racism. Schweitzer wondered aloud what readers fifty years from now would find horrifying in our books ("What? They didn't let dogs vote?"). Everyone patted science fiction on the back that it had less racism than mainstream, or at least occasionally ran counter to the mainstream (the first interracial kiss on network television was on *Star Trek*). Of course, someone pointed out that while the stories might be supposedly integrated, everyone in them still talked and acted as if they had gone to Oxford--there were no real "ethnic" characters.

As for whether they consciously worked at eliminating racism in their works (whatever that means), the authors had different response. Park said that "you write what you write." Sherman said that "we write what we believe to be true." Delany said that racism or sexist characterizations are copies of what other authors do (they have to be or they wouldn't be stereotypes), so that if you try to write original characters, you will avoid the stereotypes. He also felt that censorship is bound to fail in its goals because it tries to guess what the objections will be. Watt-Evans gave the example of describing a black villain as having "kinky hair." The publishers objected, not to the race of the villain in general, but to the word "kinky." Every, including Delany, thought this was ridiculous. Slonczewski pointed out that you needed to know people of various types to write about them successfully.

The panel closed with a discussion of classism: why is the science fiction community, or more accurately (in my opinion), the fantasy community, so enamored with monarchies? There is a perceived thread that the lower classes are good ("the noble savage"), the upper classes are good ("noblesse oblige"), but the middle classes are evil (all the evil wizards are basically of the merchant class). One panelist suggested that this was the result of the authors, who come mostly from middle-class backgrounds, rebelling against their parents.

**Unfortunately Still Too Sensitive a Topic for a Silly Title:
Alternate Sexual Lifestyles in F & SF
Stan Levanthal (moderator), Samuel R. Delany, Ellen Kushner,
Laurie Mann, Delia Sherman
Saturday, 4:00 PM**

Levanthal introduced this panel with a long speech about how difficult it was to find books with gay themes or characters. (I will be using gay in its original sense, referring to both male and female homosexuality. We can argue till the cows--and bulls--come home about whether this is politically correct, but not in a con report.) While it is true, as he said, that the gay community is not entirely successfully informed about books published as science fiction that have gay themes and that the science fiction community is not entirely successfully informed about books published as gay books that have science fiction content, it's not evident to me that this represents a major failing on the part of the science fiction community as he seemed to imply. I mean, how many people in the science fiction community find out about mainstream novels with science fiction content? How many environmental groups hear about environmental science fiction? The problem is the fragmentation and overlap of groups, not the exclusion of groups. (One example of a science fiction novel published in the gay community was *Love in Relief* by Guy Hocquenghem).

Two other points irritated me. One was Levanthal's constant use of the pronoun "we," as referring to the gay and lesbian community. Now in most contexts this would be reasonable, but as the moderator he is under a certain obligation to reserve the word "we" for the panel unless he says otherwise, and not everyone on the panel was gay. After the first few times I found it grating--we (all of us in the room) had some interest in the problem or we wouldn't have been there, but Levanthal seemed to be drawing it as an "us-versus-them" situation, with the battle lines drawn along sexual orientation lines rather than those of social philosophy. A related irritation was that Levanthal seemed to be intent on taking the science fiction community to task for not doing whatever it was we should have been doing. Patrick Nielsen Hayden pointed out from the audience that science fiction has been one of the

openest fields, that there have been panels on homosexuality in science fiction for the last ten years, and that trying to paint this panel as a groundbreaker was a mistake.

The second irritation was that although the title was "Alternate Sexual Lifestyles in F & SF," the panelists (except for Mann) seemed to want to talk only about homosexuality (or perhaps bisexuality, if pressed). Any attempt by Mann or audience members to ask about any other aspect of sexuality was fairly quickly shunted aside and the discussion returned to homosexuality. What is disheartening about this is that I get the impression that the committee *wanted* a panel on homosexuality and was afraid to use the word. (Just my uninformed opinion, mind you.)

Now that I've bored everyone with my complaints, I can proceed to the rest of the subject. One question the panel thought worth examining--but didn't--was whether authors should be trying to write gay characters or trying to redefine the entire society (Varley being a good example of the latter).

Regarding censorship (de facto as well as de jure), Delany talked about a session with a book buyer from a major chain that someone recounted to him. Book covers were thrown onto the table and after about ten seconds, the buyer would say, "I'll take 10,000 of those" or "I'll take 12,000." When one of Delany's books came up, the buyer said, "I'll take 15,000," at which point someone else said, "I've read that; it has gay characters." The buyer then said, "Okay, better make that 7,000." It's not clear what to do about this, since the buyer can buy or not buy what s/he chooses. If enough people buy Delany or other authors such that the sales figures are high enough, the chains will buy the books. You don't believe me? If Asimov, McCaffrey, or Clarke wrote a book with gay characters, what do you think the chains would do?

One panelist mentioned that gay science fiction had been around for a long time, citing Ray Bradbury's "The Cold Wind and the Warm" as an early work from an unexpected source.

Naturally the K/S (Kirk/Spock) phenomenon was brought up. Discussed at length in Joanna Russ's "By Women, For Women, with Love" (in *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans, & Perverts*), this phenomenon was pointed to as "pseudo-gay." Delany, for example, said that Russ sent him five pounds of K/S material for his opinion (as a gay male) and none of it turned him on. This seemed to be the general consensus; one panelist described it by saying, "They're not gay, they just have sex together." (Kate disagrees with this assessment, but I think on this issue Delany's credentials are more substantial than hers.)

In response to someone's wondering why "straight" porno films (aimed at men, presumably) always have a lesbian scene, Delany observed two things. One, the "lesbians" in these scenes don't act like *any* lesbians he knows (this was met with general agreement from the audience, and two, "if you desire X, why shouldn't you desire 2 X more...especially if you rub them together."

A bibliography of gay science fiction does exist (though it is currently both outdated and out of print): *Uranian Worlds* by Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo, who along with Camilla Decarnin are the co-editors of the reasonably well-known anthology of gay science fiction, *Worlds Apart*).

No one got a chance to talk about one of the ways in which science fiction can handle this whole topic, namely, by changing it into a science fiction theme. George R. R. Martin, for instance, in the "Wild Cards" series runs a lot of obvious parallels between those who have been affected by the mutant alien virus and gays in our society--the struggle for equal rights, for acceptance, and so on. When he says, "My own creed is distressingly simple--I believe that jokers and aces and nats are all just men and women and ought to be treated as such. During my dark nights of the soul I wonder if I am the only one left who believes this," the substitution in the reader's mind of "gays and straights" for "jokers and aces and nats" is almost inevitable.

Dinner

For dinner, the con asked people to list their three favorite authors and then organized groups around the half-dozen most popular entitled "If you Like X, You'll Love Y." For some reason, there were no groups organized around Jorge Luis Borges or Olaf Stapledon (though one other person did list Borges), so Mark, Pete, Barbara, Kate, and I had our own dinner discussion: "Why Does No One Else Like the Authors I Like?" To those who like Stapledon, I would recommend John Brunner's *The Crucible of Time* and James Michener's *Hawaii* and *The Source*.

Samuel R. Delany: Questions & Answers
Saturday, 8:30 PM

I only heard bits and pieces of this from outside the hall. Sample question: "Comment on Philip K. Dick, Gene Wolfe, John Crowley." Answer: "Golly, gosh!"

Theodore Sturgeon's "Slow Sculpture": A Dramatic Reading
Anita Van
Saturday, 9:00 PM

I didn't attend this, but Mark did and reports that it was excellent. From his comments, I might suggest that Boskone may wish to approach Anita Van about doing a dramatic reading there.

The Third Kirk Poland Memorial Bad Science Fiction
and Fantasy Prose Competition
Saturday, 10:00 PM

I was working the Green Room during this by my own choice, but I am pleased (?) to report that they did pick a different author to make the butt of all the jokes this year. There was, on the whole, less negative programming at Readercon II than at Readercon I, making this slightly less obnoxious than previously. Geary Gravel won again, having also won the first and second competitions. This makes him either the "trashmaster of science fiction," or (as I prefer to think of it) as the "Rich Little of science fiction," able to imitate any author's style.

I must report that in the Con Suite during this time was a discussion of movies (gasp!), but I can't help but feel that a discussion of good movies is better than a discussion of bad prose.

Actually if Readercon wants to discuss bad prose, perhaps a "Three Most-Overrated Authors" panel or poll would be an interesting future event. This would be to discuss authors who generally are considered good authors but, in the panelists' opinions, are not. This might also be extended to include authors who sell well but are not very good. (I hesitate to suggest this for fear of encouraging more attacks on authors, but fools rush in....)

The Alternate History Tag Team Wrestling Match Planning Session
Eric Van (moderator), Evelyn C. Leeper, Jim Mann, Laurie Mann, others
Saturday, midnight

The idea was to come up with the rules for a game similar to the Kirk Poland Competition in which people had to come up with alternate timelines to connect given events. The latest of the hour meant that many of the participants were falling asleep, so all we came up with were some vague concepts which may get hammered out at Boskone. Besides, if I tell you the rules ahead of time, you'd have an unfair advantage!

Introducing "The New York Review of Science Fiction"
David G. Hartwell (moderator), Greg Cox, Samuel R. Delany,
Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Teresa Nielsen Hayden
Sunday, 10:00 AM

Given that Hartwell is the editor of *The New York Review of Science Fiction* (hereafter referred to as the *NYRSF*, even though several people call it "N Y Sci-Fi"), it was not surprising that this panel was not entirely impartial. Hartwell began by citing two other "serious" review magazines, Britain's *Foundation* and *The Australian Science Fiction Review*. However, in this country most magazines that carry reviews carry what Delany calls a "market review"--a review that tells the reader whether s/he wants to buy/read the book. (This is not always explicit; it may be inferred by the reader based on the plot summary. For example, the panelist mentioned earlier who dislikes books with pre-technological settings will know that he is not interested in a book described as "wonderful evocation of a pre-technological world." I personally would steer clear of any review that said, "This is a wonderful Celtic trilogy," and buy a book of which was said, "This is a run-of-the-mill Sherlock Holmes alternate history novel," but that's my personal bias.)

Anyway, Hartwell said the *NYRSF* would provide a critical analysis of novels and other works, rather than a market review (or a critique, which would fall on the other side of *NYRSF*'s content on the critical scale). He hopes that his audience will include editors, book buyers, and writers to get them to read critical reviews instead of market reviews. This, he feels, will bring them to understand that readers want serious science fiction.

Delany pointed out that, unlike mainstream novels, in which the publication date is timed to match the review dates, based on when advance review copies are sent out, science fiction reviews in general appear much after the book has hit the stands and so do not affect sales as much. Because of this, reviewers of science fiction can be more impartial, without feeling that they are taking the food from an author's mouth in doing it.

Delany also said that editors *want* a serious dialogue about science fiction. Hartwell says that Owen Locke (editor of Del Rey Books) doesn't read reviews at all. I have yet to resolve those two statements.

After the panel, I went to the Green Room to work and happened to come across an essay by Primo Levi in *The New York Times Book Review* (11/20/88) entitled "This Above All: Be Clear" in which he said: "So he who writes in the language of the heart can turn out to be indecipherable, and it is then right to ask oneself what was the purpose of his writing: in fact ... writing serves to communicate, transmit information or feelings from mind to mind, from place to place and from time to time. And who is not understood does not transmit anything, he cries in the wilderness." This struck me as particularly relevant, especially vis-a-vis Mark's comments on semiotics and deconstructionism.

How Does a Book Review Mean?
David G. Hartwell (moderator), Bernadette Bosky, Algis Budrys,
Janice M. Eisen, James Morrow
Sunday, noon

For some reason this ended up being a panel that recommended books to read (I have listed recommenders in parentheses after the titles):

- | *White Noise* by Don DeLillo (JM),
- | *The Thanatos Syndrome* by Walker Percy (JM),
- | *Terraplane* by Jack Womack (DGH),
- | *Arslan* by M. J. Engh (DGH, AB),
- | *Divine Endurance* by Gwyneth Jones (DGH),
- | *The Day the Martians Came* by Frederik Pohl (JE),
- | *Druid's Blood* by Esther Friesner (JE, AB),
- | *Drive-In* by Joe R. Lansdale (BB),
- | *The Serpent and the Rainbow* by Wade Davis (BB),
- | *Koko* by Peter Straub (AB),
- | *Wyvern* by A. A. Attanasio (AB), and

- | *Unquenchable Fire* by Rachel Pollack (DGH).

This out of the way, they got down to what a review should say/do. Contrary perhaps to the philosophy of the *NYRSF*, most panelists felt a review should tell you if you want to buy and read the book. The way to do this seems to be for the reviewer to tell what s/he liked and disliked about the book and let the reader draw her/his own conclusions. Delany expressed much the same opinion: Where and when did I get pleasure reading this book? Where and when did I not? Hartwell, still pushing his magazine somewhat, said a review should tell you what it will do to you to read the book. (How can the reviewer tell? What a book does to you is as much a function of you as of the book.) Morrow wanted the review to say what the author was trying to achieve and how well s/he did. Eisen and Bosky agreed with this, though this seems to be the classic intentional fallacy. (See the *Twilight Zone* episode in which Shakespeare comes forward to the present and takes a course in Shakespeare.)

As far as what they want in novels themselves, the panelists differed. Morrow wants "great lines"; novels should take at least two years to write. He should also consider Shakespeare--how long did he spend on *Hamlet*? Budrys wants technical and artistic coherence--I can agree with that.

As for books and magazines about books, the panelists recommended:

- | Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder*,
- | James Blish's *The Issue at Hand* and *More Issues at Hand* (and for that matter almost anything from Advent),
- | Neil Barron's *Anatomy of Wonder*,
- | E. F. Bleiler's *Guide to Supernatural Fiction*,
- | Algis Budrys's *Benchmarks*,
- | Samuel R. Delany's *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* and other works,
- | David G. Hartwell's *Age of Wonder*,
- | John Clute's *Strokes*,
- | Ursula K. LeGuin's *Language of the Night*,
- | Barry N. Malzberg's *Engines of the Night*,
- | Judith Merrill's "Best of" series (for the commentaries),
- | Peter Nicholls's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*,
- | David Pringle's *SF: The 100 Best Novels*,
- | Robert Silverberg's *Worlds of Wonder*,
- | *The Australian Science Fiction Review*,
- | *Extrapolation*,
- | *Foundation*,
- | *OtherRealms*,
- | *Science Fiction Studies*, and
- | *Thrust*.

By the time all this was done, there wasn't much time to touch on an issue raised earlier--the moral issues of reviewing. Do you give a book a bad review and maybe cut into an author's sales so that he can't support himself any more? How do you review a friend's book? Oh, well, maybe next convention.

You've Crossed the Reality Border: Anything to Declare?
Jeffrey A. Carver (moderator), Terry Bisson, Richard Bowker,
Barry B. Longyear, Patricia A. McKillip
Sunday, 2:00 PM

This panel discussed the differences between mainstream fiction and science fiction. They started with the true-or-false premise: "Mainstream writers who attempt to write science fiction usually fall flat on their faces and vice versa." Various examples of crossovers in either direction were given. Paul Theroux, Walker Percy, Margaret Atwood, and Thomas Pynchon

being some recent mainstream-to-science-fiction crossovers. Bowker was one type of science-fiction-to-mainstream crossover in that his *Replica* was not marketed as science fiction but as mainstream. Longyear was another type in that his latest novel, *Saint Mary Blue*, is a mainstream novel about drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

One problem facing mainstream authors who try to write science fiction is that ideas that they think are new and original are often old and well-worn in science fiction. See any of the many lists of ideas editors never want to see again (sample: "A spaceship crash-lands on a planet. There are only two survivors, a man and a woman. As they get out, he says to her, 'Well, what now, Eve?' and she says, 'I don't know, Adam; what do you think?'"). This sort of listing is becoming a semi-standard panel at science fiction conventions. Mainstream authors often don't realize that they have to do research to write a science fiction novel, just as they would to write a novel set in Tudor England (for example). This is what Hollywood often doesn't do, and that's why a lot of movies turn out the way they do.

When authors crossover they occasionally have to deal with editors, publishers, and readers who have certain expectations about what a book of theirs is supposed to be. Longyear, for example, had some problem selling *Saint Mary Blue* because everyone kept saying, "But it's not science fiction...it's not a Circusworld novel...it's not a 'Longyear' book!" As for using a pseudonym to get around this, the authors all felt that they were proud of their work and wanted their names to appear on it.

No consensus on the original question was reached, or at any rate none was expressed.

Hugo Gernsback, Chicken Farmer: If SF Had Never Been Ghettoized
Eric M. D. Van (moderator), Samuel R. Delany,
Scott E. Green, Darrell Schweitzer
Sunday, 4:00 PM

This, the final panel of the convention, was nominally devoted to the ghettoization of science fiction and how it came about, but got more into how "literature" came about.

Hugo Gernsback didn't follow the advice of writing what he knew about; his profession before becoming a science fiction author/editor was installing doorbells in nunneries. But he left this promising career to become an editor. However, he did not create science fiction. He changed it by introducing tech hobbyists to the field, similar to how at least some of the current cyberpunk genre is fed by computer hackers. The hobbyists wanted "nuts and bolts," not literary values, and Gernsback responded to this. After the Depression, realism began to dominate in "mainstream" literature and this serves to distance science fiction even further.

Gernsback did not invent the specialized pulp magazine either. The first genre pulp magazine was *Detective Story Magazine*. This was the result of the dime novels and general pulp magazines, which created a much larger reading audience than existed before. These in turn were created by the invention of cheap paper. Technology begets techno-fiction.

Literature, on the other hand, was "invented" around 1915, when the first professor of English literature at Oxford University said in his inaugural speech, "The purpose of literature now that religion has failed is not only [to inculcate literary values] but to heal the state." (I may have the bracketed part of that quote wrong, but that was the gist.) So Dickens et al became "literature" so that the lower classes could be taught the "proper" values. Much of pre-World War II literary criticism was based on this and was as a result (or cause, take your pick) WASP-based and somewhat racist. (All this information came, not surprisingly, from Delany, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts.)

Delany also pointed out that science fiction talks about the object, literature about the subject.

Thus, because fantasy is more subjective, it is "closer" to literature.

What struck me listening to all this was that this explains a lot of the differences between British and American science fiction. American science fiction tends toward the hard sciences because they are more universal, egalitarian, etc. Scientific laws know no class or privilege (as Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" drives home so well). British science fiction tends toward the soft sciences because they deal with classes and class barriers. As I say, this is my perception and anyone who wants to argue it can probably find lots of holes in it.

No one managed to ask (much less answer) the question of why mystery fiction is much more acceptable than science fiction. It even gets reviewed in the *The New York Times Book Review*.

An interesting phenomenon, and one which relates back to the previous panel on crossover authors, is that many books initially published and considered as mainstream have been preserved solely within the genre; George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* and Leonard Wolfe's *Limbo* were two examples mentioned, though I'm sure you can think of many others. It was predicted that in twenty years Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* would be such a book.

Terry Eagleton's book *Literary Theory* was recommended.

Other programming items that occurred without the benefit of my attendance were:

Valis: The Opera: A Presentation (by Tod Machover, the composer)
Sox Win Sixth Straight World Series: The Future of Boston
Writers of the Future Presentation (Q&A with Algis Budrys)
Persona (Character Creation) Workshop
The Notion of Lives on Paper: Self and Science Fiction 1929-1988
In the Future, Everyone Will Be Bohemian for Five Minutes
Six Judges in Search of an Award: Honoring the Small Press
Markets (talk by Scott E. Green)
Who Cares: Creating Sympathetic Characters
Writers' Workshops: Friend or Menace?
Writers' Workshop (led by Barry B. Longyear)
Lifestyles of the Poor and Obscure
Firing the Canon: The Public Perception of F and SF
Speculative Poetry (talk by Mark Rich)
Really Heart-Rending: The Horror Novel as Literature
Auction

The panel "The Oprah Winfrey Show: People Who Love People Who Read *Dahlgren* Too Much" was first rescheduled and then canceled entirely. No reason was given, but I suspect that Eric Van (the scheduled moderator) found himself over-extended with other convention responsibilities. Readercon may very well have grown to the point that the con chairs should not plan on moderating many panels or events. There were also many authors' readings.

Miscellaneous

The Program Books and schedules weren't there when registration opened, leading me to ask if this was Nolacon III, but they arrived within an hour and things ran smoothly (well, relatively) after that. The panel starting times tended to shift as the day went on (e.g., "Every panel will start ten minutes late."). There were no major program changes.

They had some difficulty finding my registration. Registration told me it was in the Green Room; the Green Room sent me back to Registration. The problem was apparently that I was a participant, but only for the Alternate History Tag Team Wrestling Match Planning Session, so my badge was not with the other participants' badges in the Green Room. This was fairly easily sorted out, though. The badges could use some improvement; the script chosen was hard-to-

read (it seems to have been designed assuming a laser printer but done with a dot matrix printer) and too small. Boskone 25 had ideal badges, readable across the room--other cons take note. On the plus side, Readercon badges had names but no numbers.

In writing about Nolacon, I described the newest phenomenon, "Beasties," or fans of *Beauty and the Beast*. I told how a friend went to a *Beauty and the Beast* party and when she introduced herself to a couple of the women there, one told her, "My tunnel name is Squirrel," and the other said, "My tunnel name is Water-Running-Through-Pipes" and how Mark later suggested that Kate could take the tunnel name "Small-Brown-Floating-Turd," but Kate decided not to. Well, two of the committee members read this and listed joke tunnel names in their biographies in the program book. Also, when Kate mentioned the tunnel names in the biographies to one of the committee members, they said, "Oh, you're the Kate!" I told Kate it could have been worse; they could have said, "Oh, you're the Small-Brown-Floating-Turd!"

Summary

Last year I said Readercon was like Classic Boskone, meaning Boskone of fifteen to twenty years ago. I'm starting to feel old: someone at Readercon II complained it was too small and needed to be more like the old Boskones. It turns out she meant the Boskones of ten years ago (attendance of about 2000). I think the Readercon committee would go into cardiac arrest if 2000 people signed up for Readercon III.

As Guest of Honor, Delany was accessible--on several panels and in the audience for many others. But he had no scheduled autograph session, and many fans hesitate to go up to an author in the middle of something else and ask for his/her autograph. I think all conventions should be sure to schedule an autograph session for the Guest of Honor as well as the usual panels and speeches.

There was one problem with a false fire alarm, though I think it was the result of someone accidentally disengaging the fire hose in the hallway.

Readercon has shown that it can deliver more than just one convention. Now if it can just get itself on an annual schedule instead of the somewhat erratic schedule it has now, then people will be better able to plan to attend future Readercons. Also, now that Readercon is growing I think the "inner circle" of planners has to work harder at delegating some tasks. I found that frequently when I asked about something it was always the same couple of names that were mentioned as the people in charge of it. Also, the Program Chair was moderating or running five different program items (20% of the main programming!). This may be part of the reason for the long gaps between Readercons. But, as I did last year, I again recommend Readercon as a convention for the *reader*.

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