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WHAT DOES THIS CONVENTION MEAN?

A speech

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by its guest of honor

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Free - take one

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WHAT DOES THIS CONVENTION MEAN?

"From the contemplation of any one isolated object or fact, a completely competent mind could envisage the entire Cosmos."

This thought, while of course not original with scientific-fiction authors, has been used by several of us. Neither was it original with Goethe, with Aristarchus, or with Diogenes. In fact, it was probably not original even with the almost mythologically ancient, anonymous sage of Thebes---or was it Chaldea?---whose glyphic writings seem to be its oldest known source. For, such is the cogency, the fundamental rightness of the thought, it must have been evaluated by the first real thinker of our human race.

That tremendous thought automatically became my opening paragraph for it would take a mind almost that able to comprehend adequately the significance of this convention. For it, and the as yet nameless something of which it is the outgrowth and the manifestation, have a profound and baffling motivation and connotation. Do you know why we are here today? Having thought about the matter superficially, if at all, you do not. However, I have studied it---studied it for weeks---and I cannot say that I am much the wiser.

This is, supposedly, a convention. I have attended dozens of conventions---for business, for work, and for play---but this one is unique. It is entirely different, in almost its every phase, from any other.

Conventions are, it is true, of many kinds. Those of the strictly scientific societies, such as the Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Chemical Society, or the American Association of Cereal Chemists, are strictly working ones. Morning sessions, afternoon sessions, evening and night sessions. Charts, slides, pictures. Years of intense, patient work crammed, jammed into each fifteen minute paper. Acrimonious discussions, in which the position of an atom, the state of one electron, are fought over as bitterly as the prime objective of a major battle. Hundreds of notebooks; hundreds of thousands of written words. An atmosphere of tension; the time for the annual banquet, and particularly that for the annual golf game, being given grudgingly and almost with a sneer.

I have attended Operative Miller's Conventions, Baker's Conventions, and the conventions of all sorts and sizes of comparable organizations. In these the objective seems to be about fifty-fifty business and pleasure. The delegates do some work and hear well-worked-out papers; but they do not make a life-and-death matter of it. Then there are conventions such as those of the American Legion---primarily for fun, with the business angle supplanted by a political one. There are conventions such as those of some of the fraternal organizations ---purely for fun, with no business or political objectives at all.

But this convention of ours does not fit into any of the above matrices. Scientists get paid for attending conventions---salary and expenses. Their employers know that money thus spent is well spent; that the association with hundreds of other keen minds will increase their usefulness enough to make the outlay pay dividends. But how many of us here today are on either salary or expense, except possibly as a part of a vacation? How many of our employers would consider our attendance at this meeting a sound financial investment? The editors of the professional magazines should be here on business---but I am tempted to wonder if those who are here are not paying at least a part of their own expenses.

Allied tradesmen---that is, firms who sell supplies to the industry or the group sponsoring a convention---send representatives to it as a matter of course. These persons are not only on salary and ex-

pense, but spend money freely in entertaining actual or prospective customers in various fashions. This is also good business---the money so spent is returned over and over in the profits upon the sales made then or subsequently. But how many allied tradesmen are here? And what would they be selling us as a group if they were here?

Nor are we here for fun. We will have a good time, certainly; but our real reason for being here---whatever it is---is at bottom a serious one.

We are here partially to renew old friendships and to form new ones, of course. We wish---we need---to have materialized in the flesh those personalities which we have known only as names upon the printed page or as signatures upon letters. This materialization, this personal contact, will enrich our lives and will be a never-ending source of enjoyment and gratification. But these reasons alone are insufficient. No fan, however rabid and hardy, would make the sacrifice inherent in a round trip of thousands of miles merely to enlarge his circle of acquaintances, however congenial they might be: nor would he do so for two days of pleasure. What, then, is the driving force behind, the fundamental reason for being, of this convention?

Any attempt to answer this question necessitates a more than superficial analytical study of scientific fiction itself. What is scientific fiction; basically, really? Many of my friends would phrase this question differently. They ask me, "Why is scientific fiction?" And it is exactly this difference in phrasing---or rather, the difference in mental attitude which results in this difference in phrasing---which differentiates the science-fiction fan from the devotees of any other type of literature.

Millions of people read detective fiction, both in magazines and in bound volumes, with enjoyment: but I have never heard of a convention of detective-story readers. Hundreds of thousands of persons read and enjoy Westerns; but do they convene? As far as I have been able to find out, they do not. Similarly, other groups, great and small, read other more-or-less-highly-specialized fiction, but nowhere is there displayed the peculiar, close-knit binding which unites the scientific-fiction fans of the world.

This indefinable characteristic began to manifest itself, I think, in the letters-to-the-editor which became our first "Discussions" column. Now in 1927 I do not believe that any other magazine of national importance featured a readers' department---at least, I do not remember any such, and I was an omnivorous reader long before that year. In 1940, however, the great majority of magazines, no matter how highbrow or of whatever eminence of circulation, have followed scientific-fiction's lead. I am very carefully refraining from saying that they did so deliberately to foster an esprit de corps which was ours from the beginning. If such was the intent, however, it failed, and must continue to fail, for we scientific-fictionists have been, are, and probably will remain a unique group. We have an indescribable something, a *je ne sais quoi* which no other reader group has now or ever has had.

Scientific fiction has been called a literature of escape. That, it seems to me, is the result of loose, muddy thinking---the taking of the easy way, the using of a catch-phrase instead of thinking this peculiarly difficult problem through to any sort of a logical conclusion. In a narrow and very superficial sense it is escape literature, of course. So is all literature, for that matter; for any literature worthy of the name must be potent enough to take the reader away from his own every-day life into a different one---which, in the last analysis, is what constitutes escape.

But even in the higher, more usual sense of escape---that of

whiling away an otherwise tedious time---scientific fiction is typical escape literature. While waiting for a train a man may buy a copy of Four-Gun Peto's Western Stories. He reads it partially, casually, and tosses it into the wastebasket when the train arrives. But does he buy a scientific magazine? In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he does not---if he did, the circulation of our magazines would be vastly larger than it is. The casual reader does not understand scientific fiction, does not have sufficient imagination or depth and breadth of vision to grasp it, and hence does not like it. On the other hand, the ordinary magazine has no real following in the sense in which we understand the term. Who ever heard of anyone advertising for a June 1926 copy of Four-Gun Peto's Western? What old-magazine dealers specialize in almost complete files of any of the usual types of magazine, pulps or slicks?

Nor is scientific fiction light literature, any more than it is escape literature. I can---and do---read the average novel through at one sitting; and wring it dry. Having done so, it is very seldom that I feel any need to re-read it, then or over. In scientific fiction, however, there have been a number of stories which simply cannot be mastered in one reading. They carry a subtlety of meaning, a perfection of style and language, a depth of philosophy, a wealth of imagery---they set up thirsts which only repeated re-readings can satisfy. Perhaps I am conceited, but it seems to me that any story which I have to read three or four times---either to plumb its depths or to revel cat-like in the sheer pleasure of doing so---is quite definitely n o t light reading!

No, the answer to our question lies profoundly deeper than any obvious one. Hence we must next define what we mean by "Scientific Fiction," for it is a truism of research that unless a problem can be stated clearly, it cannot be solved. Early in this study it became evident that in its usual meaning the name is too narrow, too limited by far. For when scientific fiction was exactly that---when the pendulum swung too far in reaction from the out-and-out pseudo-science which preceded it---it did not represent that which we are discussing here. Proof of this statement lies in the reading taste of our group as a whole---and a poll of this convention would show that practically every one here also reads and enjoys what we call "Fantasy."

It may be objected that I am taking undue liberties, that the fact that many of us read and enjoy fantasy, or The Saturday Evening Post, or Greek drama, or Sanskrit in the original, has nothing to do with the case. This objection will hold only if it can be shown that as many of us read and enjoy any other one definite type of literature as read and enjoy fantasy; and I have not been able to ascertain that any such condition exists or can exist.

I realize fully that I am treading controversial ground. Every fan knows that fantasy is not scientific fiction, and knows exactly the connotations and implications---in his own mind---of each term. Yet wherein lies the difference---wherein are they alike? To answer that question, let us compare briefly the best of each.

Both, fundamentally, deal with human character, particularly with the development of human character; both, primarily, are studies of the human soul. Stripped of such incidentalia and embellishments as ray-pistols and rocket ships, werewolves and zombies, the basic themes and motivations are the same. Both are highly imaginative, both have their real meanings more or less subtly hidden, more or less deeply buried beneath the superficially thrilling or gruesome narrative. Both require a keen mind, a broad cultural background, and a comprehensive as well as penetrant vision for a full perception of the philosophy

and inner meaning which has been written between the lines.

I have been able to find only one major phase in which the two literatures really differ. Scientifiction should not violate any known, definitely proven natural law, while fantasy may do so. This distinction, while a very real one, does not seem to me important enough to preclude some new, over-classification by virtue of which both these literatures could be made two species of one as yet unnamed genus.

What this difference amounts to in fact is merely the method of approach---the kind of springboard from which the author dives into his study. Thus, John W. Campbell's stories are built upon a rock-solid foundation of mathematical and physical theory. Upon that foundation is raised a framework fitted as exactly as the micrometrically precise gear train of a Hamilton watch. Incident follows incident logically, smoothly, convincingly. The result, while it has been criticized in some quarters as lacking in warmth, is a sheer delight to me---for there is plenty of real meaning in Campbell's stuff if the reader goes down deep enough to find it.

Upon the other hand, consider Merritt's "The Ship of Ishtar," which I consider one of the finest pieces of fantasy ever written---in cold fact, one of the really great books of all literature. In that story the author's premise---his springboard---is enough to make any scientist gasp for breath; yet, that premise granted, his developments are as logical as Campbell's own.

That the inclusion of both scientifiction and fantasy in one major branch is desirable is the first conclusion I reached in my attempt to understand our meeting here today. That it is logical has already been shown.

It may be objected, however, that the difference is real, basic; that it is proved so by the thousands of persons who read "Astounding" who do not read "Weird Tales," and vice versa. There is force to that argument---I have not been able to get around it quite satisfactorily in my own mind. To decide the point, one would probably have to canvass a representative sample---at least the square root in number---of the 80,000 or so persons who account for the combined circulations of the two magazines; a research which I could not do. However, I do not believe that such an exhaustive analysis is necessary for the purpose of this paper. For there are only perhaps a couple of thousand or so of us who have the peculiar mental attributes that make us real fans. Four thousand, say, and call the rest casual readers, or non-fans, or anything you please. The square root of that number---two hundred---will be a representative sample. This convention, then, actually represents the fans of the country as a mathematical fact as well as in our published statements. Is this proof sufficient?

It seems to me, then, that what brings us together and underlies this convention is a fundamental unity of mind. We are imaginative, but with a tempered, analytical imaginativeness which fairy-tales will not satisfy. We are critical---sometimes we have been called hyper-critical. We are fastidious. We have a mental grasp and scope which does not find sufficient substance in the stereotyped, the cut-and-dried. We feel intensely, and we are not always either diplomatic or backward in putting our feelings into words, and sometimes into actions.

The foregoing is submitted as a theory, not as a fact or as a law. Perhaps it is not even a theory, but only an hypothesis. It seems to me, however, to explain and to correlate several hitherto obscure points. It explains what has been pointed out with wonder from the first; that scientifiction fans form a group unparalleled in history in our close-knit, although informal organization, in our strong likes