A Theodore Sturgeon Special

Lan's Lantern 36

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Dedication

To Maia, as usual,
and
the late Theodore Sturgeon:
we will never see another
like him.

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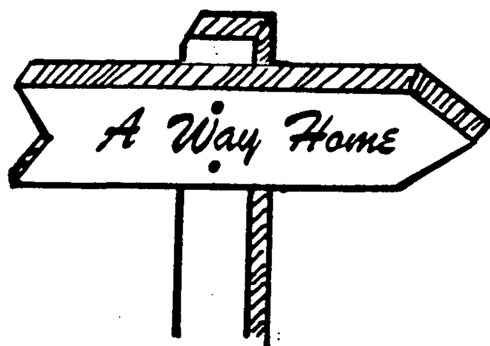
From the Editor



Recollections of Theodore Sturgeon

by Lan

My knowledge of Theodore Sturgeon is not from his books. Oh, I've read More Than Human and The Cosmic Rape and a dozen or so of his short stories. I was particularly intrigued by "It" and "Killdozer," and thought his collection in Caviar was outstanding. I enjoyed the TV movie version of "Killdozer" when it came out, though some others thought it was poorly done. (I enjoyed seeing Clint Walker in the lead role; I did not remember seeing him in anything since his role as Cheyenne Bodie, a TV western series in the mid-50s and early 60s.) I picked up a Caedmon record of him reading "Bianca's Hands" and another of his short stories. But I was fortunate enough to have met the man three times before he died.

My first encounter was when he was the Guest of Honor at CONCLAVE III. He was considered a deity among many members of the convention committee, and thus, in CONCALVE tradition, all people who worked the convention could have a "God" name printed on the back of their t-shirts. I recall only a few names that were used. My friend Suzi Stefl was the "Life-God" since she was in charge of lifeguarding the pool for the midnight swim; I was her assistant, and by the time we simplified my t-shirt tag, it came out as "AssGod".

Sturgeon of course was "The God". And he was a wonderful guest. The Fan Guest was the late Elizabeth Pearse, who at that CONCLAVE banquet was "elected" Pope. She commented that the honor was only fitting as Sturgeon was to her left and thus she was "sitting at the right hand of God."

The details of what was happening in my life at school at that time are now dim, but I remember needing to go to a convention. I was depressed and things were not going well, and deliberately drank too much on Friday night. But whatever Sturgeon said in his Speech at the banquet on Saturday night helped me immensely. His words helped me understand my problems better, and showed me a way of dealing with them.

In the pool that night I thanked him for what he did. He merely smiled and said that he was glad to have helped.

My next encounter was a peripheral one at MINICON. He was the guest, and I managed a short conversation with him between panels. He was his charming self, and his speech dealt with his personal philosophy of "asking the next question", symbolized by a "Q" with an arrow through it. (Several people mention this in the articles in this issue.)

The third meeting with him was the best and most important one to me. I was attending Jim Gunn's Science Fiction Teaching Seminar at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, and Ted was one of the guest lecturers. He had a lot of interesting conversations with the group and we learned about his writing styles and techniques.

In one particular session, he told us about a story he had written and given to his wife Jane Tannehill to read. Outside of the character designations in the first

few paragraphs, he had written no other indications as to who was talking. Yet, Jane was able to tell who was speaking. This was her (and our) first introduction to "poetic prose." Each character was assigned to speak in a specific poetic meter, which the subconscious picked up.

Because of his frequent bouts with writer's block, Ted had developed some techniques to overcome it. He helped several other writers with his methods, and explained a few of them to us. He told us of some of the writing seminars that he and his Lady Jane had conducted, which, I believe, included the Clarion workshops.

His references to Lady Jane permeated his lectures and talks with the group. It was quite apparent he missed her, but they could not afford to have her come out for the week. So a couple of the students who knew Ted and Jane quite well collected some money and flew her out to Lawrence. Ted and Lady Jane were both grateful, and Ted visibly perked up. Lady Jane said that when she received the call, she was in the middle of several projects, and she had a couple other commitments. She made a list of pros and cons about going out to the Seminars, and the number of items against making the trip was far longer than the number for it. But primary on the pro side was, "Because I want to!" So she came.

Lady Jane urged Ted to read a couple of his stories: "Pruzzi's Pot" and "The Grave Reader." They were marvelous. Ted didn't like to read aloud, mainly because he thought his gravelly voice was not suited to it. We thought that his voice was fine, and added a touch of the common man to the reading.

Ted talked about his philosophy of life and his idea of asking the next question. He was a person who thought that everyone had something good within them, that there was a core of gold no matter how rough the outer shell and layers were. Steve Pagel, one Ted's friends who was attending the seminar (and had arranged Lady Jane's flight out to Lawrence), was also an advocate of the same philosophy. And I saw him put it into practice.

Another student attending the seminars was from a very repressed background. He was very anti-women, worried about appearances, a religious fundamentalist, and close to being antisocial. Because of the braces he wore, he talked with his hand over his mouth so people didn't have to look at them. He thought that women should not write SF because it was a man's literature, and considered it one of the last bastions for the male. He was shocked to find out that C.L. Moore and C.J. Cherryh were female. This person also never played a game with someone else; he always played against himself--in pool, chess or checkers, he played both sides himself. His comments in class reeked of sexism, and when Jim Gunn mentioned the universal acceptance of the theory of evolution, he piped up and said that not everyone believed in it. (He also had little booklets which he left around for his classmates to read.)

Steve was one of the few of us who would talk to him. I talked to him, pointed out some of his errors in thinking, tried to change him, but I lost patience. Steve didn't. Steve continued to spend some time with him, and by the end of the three weeks, the guy was playing pool and chess with Steve. But even then, many of his ingrained beliefs remained unchanged. Steve felt he had not done enough, and when he talked to Ted about it, Ted was very understanding, and advised that Steve not become obsessed with changing his classmate. That he was able to expose a little of his gold was sufficient; maybe more exposure to the elements of reality would uncover his valuable core.

I admired both Steve and Ted for that lesson. And it showed me one of my own limitations.

Ted also supported some new writers. He mentioned Thea Alexander and her novel 2150 AD. It was through an encounter seminar that Thea held regularly that Steve met his favorite author Ted Sturgeon. Diane Duane's first novel, Door into Fire had just been published, and Ted was most enthusiastic about it, and her. When I mentioned this to her when I saw her at the Boston Worldcon, NOREASCON II, Diane laughed and told me that Ted was always saying nice things about her.

These memories are well fixed in my mind. I am glad to have met the man, and to have been a part of that week in Lawrence, Kansas. I'm sad that he's gone, but his writing is immortal. Perhaps you, when you discover how wonderful his stories are, will regret not having met him yourself. The stories will have to suffice, but they are a fitting legacy to Theodore Sturgeon. |*|

Dissecting Laughing Gas with a Scalpel: On the Art of Theodore Sturgeon

by Eric M. Heideman

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Theodore Sturgeon (1918-1985) made his debut as a science fiction and fantasy writer 50 years ago, in John W. Campbell's science fiction magazine, Astounding Stories, and his fantasy magazine, Unknown. Like the other members of that magical "class of '39" (Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Fritz Leiber, Alfred Bester, A.E. Van Vogt) Sturgeon is remembered with soft-focus fondness by many admirers of science fiction's "Golden Age." Beyond that, Sturgeon has always had his own, particularly ardent, admirers. In the '50s, Groff Conklin wrote, "certainly no living writer has quite Sturgeon's grasp on horror and hilarity, nor knows quite so many different people as well." In the '60s, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction published a special Theodore Sturgeon issue, in which James Blish called him "the finest conscious artist science fiction has had." In the '70s Samuel R. Delany wrote, "To the extent that the short story is an art, Sturgeon is the American short story writer."

But for all that, Theodore Sturgeon remains one of American literature's best-kept secrets. He is one of the most versitile prose stylists in the English language, and one of the most original and incisive--and loving--students the human psyche has had. But the general reading public doesn't even know his name.

This is partly because most of his work first appeared in SF magazines, and was later collected in books with "science fiction" on the spine. And, while certain other writers of humanistic, literary science fiction have gained general recognition by distancing themselves from the label, Sturgeon didn't. He produced a considerable amount outside of SF, and he lectured the field about its shortcomings like a sometimes exasperated parent; but he declined to badmouth his roots.

Still, other self-proclaimed SF writers have gained wide popularity and some critical recognition, probably because they had a genius for self-promotion that Sturgeon lacked. Mostly, though, I think that sturgeon's reputation, like Fritz Leiber's, has lagged behind his achievement because of his astonishing virtuosity. It's easy to get noticed for writing the same story 87 times. Sturgeon wrote dozens of different kinds of stories about remarkably different people. No two Sturgeon stories are quite the same. And that is partly why, although he has had many imitators, there is no one else like him.

In the '40s, Bradbury threw up his hands and wrote that analyzing Sturgeon's magic was like trying to "dissect laughing gass with a scalpel." Scalpel in hand, I'll try to describe some of the things that make Strugeon such a special writer.

He was born Edward Hamilton Waldo (a relative of Ralph Waldo Emerson) on Staten Island, New York, February 26, 1918. His parents divorced a few years later and he took his stepfather's surname, legally becoming Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon. (Librarians please note: Sturgeon is not a penname.) As a child he was "pretty," with knee pants and curly yellow locks, and he got beat up a lot. He put an end to that by working out until he became a champion gymnast. A college athletic scholarship awaited him, after which he intended to become an acrobat for the Barnum and Baily Circus. But an illness left him with a permanently enlarged heart, ending his gymnastic career.

Sturgeon left high school in 1935 (later remarking, "I didn't graduate--I was released"), and went to sea with the Merchant Marine. In 1937 he thought up a way to cheat the American Railway Express Agency of several hundred thousand dollars. Rather than attempt it and perhaps get

jailed for his trouble, he wrote a 1,500 word short-short story about it, and sold it to the McClure newspaper syndicate. Thrilled by his success, he eventually quit his job and for several months devoted full time to writing. Over the next two years he sold 40 mainstream short-shorts (as yet uncollected--and, apparently, unidentified) to the Milwaukee Journal and other papers for $5 a crack. His rent cost $7.50 a week and he ate off whatever, if anything, remained. In 1939 he sold the first of many stories to Campbell, and his present considerable, if insufficient, reputation began.

He became a gymnastics instructor, auto mechanic, political ghost writer, electronics repairman, woodworker, garbage collector, glass factory worker, door-to-door hosiery salesman, guitar player, and nudist; worked as a short-order cook, a bulldozer and power shovel operator in Puerto Rico, and a circus roustabout in Canada; managed a resort hotel in the West Indies, and a gas station and Army barracks and mess halls; did ad promotion for Time/Life, worked as a literary agent, wrote a stageplay and scripts for comic books, radio, films, and Star Trek and other television programs; lectured extensively, taught writing, and reviewed books (for Galaxy, the New York Times, and National Review) with a clarity and generosity of spirit worthy of the great eighteenth century critic, Samuel Johnson. He had five marriages and eight children.

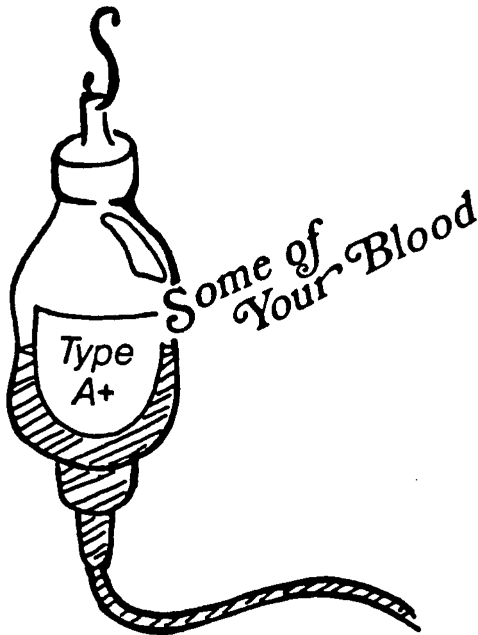
In both the range of things he did and the range of people he came to intimately know and understand, Sturgeon was surpassed by no writer of North American fiction, and I think matched only by Twain. Like Twain (and that other great Missouri cynic, Heinlein), Sturgeon is fascinated by the way things work. His stories are full of the minutely observed details of working life--how a taffy-pulling machine operates, how to run a power shovel--described with infectious enthusiasm. And, again as with Twain, Sturgeon's writing abounds in sensual detail. He pays close attention to how things feel, how they sound, smell and taste, but especially to how they look, and his loving, meticulously chosen details help to haul the reader right inside his story.

He wrote two screenplay novelizations, raised above average by his magic with language; a Western novel, The King and Four Queens, with a lively assortment of characters, most of them women; and an "Ellery Queen" mystery, The Player on the Other Side, in which the murderer gets typewritten instructions personally delivered by--but that would be telling. In the '50s, then-radio-later-public-television-host Jean Shepherd kept talking about I, Libertine by Frederick R. Ewing, a historical novel which Shephard called "the rage of the continent." To safeguard his reputation for Truth, Shepherd asked Sturgeon to write I, Libertine by "Frederick R. Ewing." Sturgeon raised it from an in-joke to an honest (but never lurid) examination of the politics of sex in eighteenth-century England. It's lively and fun and should have been reprinted a long time ago.

Some of Your Blood, a novel based on an actual psychiatric case history, is the fascinating and credible "autobiography" of a human vampire. The Cosmic Rape (recently republished under Sturgeon's own, better title, To Marry Medusa) is an ambitious, if ultimately unsatisfying, alien invasion novel. In it, Sturgeon attempts to show a worldmind composed of distinct individuals. His descriptions of the state of cosmic consciousness are not entirely convincing, and, by comparison with Sturgeon's best work, flat. But when he sticks to the individuals of which the group mind is composed (especially the irredeemable ne'er-do-well, Gurlick), the writing is often brilliant.

The Dreaming Jewels, Sturgeon's first novel, has structural problems, showing that he had not yet mastered novel-length construction. But the premise (aliens who live among us, undetected, because they are so truly alien) is engagingly strange, the human characters (most of the carnival freaks) are convincing and dimensional, and the writing is beautiful. Venus Plus X is a utopian novel about an androgynous society. It is probably the most disappointing of his SF novels, because in it he allows the message to overwhelm the story. Nevertheless, it remains interesting and historically important as the precursor to Ursula K. LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness (1969) and John Varley's androgyny stories of the '70s.

Each of the nine Sturgeon novels so far mentioned is written with craftsmanship and integrity. All of them are well worth reading. None of them (except, possibly,



Some of Your Blood) are first rate. Sturgeon was at his best in the shorter forms --short stories, novelettes, and novellas. There are two partial exceptions; More Than Human and Godbody were both published as novels, and both of them stand among his best work.

Godbody counts as a "partial" exception because it is about 48,000 words, on the border between a very long novella and a very short novel. Even at that length, flaws intrude: the ending is a letdown, a too-literal retelling of a very famous story. But Godbody's strengths are so great as to render its deficiencies almost irrelevant, like fly-specks on a Rolls Royce. The story concerns an unusual man, Godbody, who shows up on the outskirts of a small town and changes eight people's lives. Each of the four men and four women tells part of the story, from a unique viewpoint. As Heinlein writes in an introduction, "Godbody is written in multiple first person, a difficult narrative technique, believe me." Heinlein recommends an experiment: after you and a friend have read the book, one of you can read three lines out loud, after which the other can try to guess which character is speaking. He predicts that the listener will guess correctly each time, not because of

> "spelled-out eccentricities of speech or other flags to mark his characters... What Sturgeon does is subtle--each character has his own voice. How do you know at once who is calling on the telephone, if the caller is one familiar to you? By the caller's voice, of course."

Sturgeon's one completely satisfying novel is More Than Human. Here, better than anywhere else, Sturgeon used his natural strengths as a writer of short fiction in the construction of a book-length story. For More Than Human is composed of three interwoven novellas: "The Fabulous Idiot," "Baby Is Three," and "Morality." Sturgeon's most famous work, and one of the acknowledged world masterpieces of science fiction, More The Human concerns a group of outcast children led by a mentally retarded man, each of them with some exceptional ability, who function together as a greater-than-the-sum-of-the-parts entity, homo gestalt. The book is an example of that which it describes: composed of three good, and very different, parts, it somehow adds up to a great and seamless novel.

Sturgeon published over 150 short stories, novelettes and novellas. These run the gamut of categories, but the majority of them fit somewhere in imaginative fiction--science fiction, fantasy, and horror. He returned to science fiction throughout his life because he considered SF and poetry "the only two forms of literary expression which have no limits whatsoever."

He wrote about ghosts, mermaids, and a few angels; and unforgettable story about a muck-monster ("It," 1944, which he composed on the typewriter on his first honeymoon) menacing a farm family; a story about an entity ("Killdozer," 1944) which takes possession of a bulldozer and uses it to try to wipe out its human crew; and stories featuring space travel, alien invaders, and alien benefactors. But in Sturgeon's hands the traditional details of SF and fantasy are simply details. For his own definition of science fiction he looked not to technology, per se, but to scientia--Latin for knowledge. Science fiction, to him, was about the human quest for knowledge and about the effects that applied knowledge has on flesh-and-blood people. He wrote:

> The seekers of knowledge come first, the devisers follow. Intuition (a species of creativity) precedes theory, theory plus reason produces

hypothesis, hypothesis plus experiment produces hardware...the extrapolation of hardware into the future makes it easy to commit the error of a 1900 artist who drew a city scene if that distant year 1950. Among towering skyscrapers not unlike contemporary ones, he had powered aircraft moving. The aircraft were blimps, the power-train, ending in quite creditable propellors, began with a tethered horse galloping on a treadmill. The word for that (along with "ingenious" and "logical" and, considering the artist's difficulties, "credible" and "admirable") is "quaint."
"Galaxy Bookshelf," September 1974

The main speculative element in most of Sturgeon's best stories is speculative psychology: the clinical vampire in Some of Your Blood; Newell's two fully-formed personalities in "The Other Man" (1956); the bad way that Robin English ("Maturity," 1947) and MacLyle ("And Now the News," 1956) get into because of psychiatric interference in their lives. The most interesting part of "A Way of Thinking" (1953) is not the voodoo doll, but what Kelley does with it. In his lovingly irreverent essay in Berkley Showcase Three (which reads like a Sturgeon story--with Sturgeon as the main character) Paul Williams writes that,

> Sturgeon consistently sees things as though he were looking from the other side. He turns things around and inside out at the same time, without letting go of your hand. It's a neat trick if you can do it.

Sturgeon believed that there is more room in inner space than outer space.

Both in his teaching and through his own example, he worked tirelessly and effectively to make SF reach toward it's potential as a literary form that could say anything. And what about poetry? Rather than choose between the two wide-open forms of writing, Sturgeon found a way of combining them. He wrote in The Golden Helix (1980):

> I myself have committed a good deal of poetry, but I early found out, when John Campbell refused to pay me twenty-five cents a line for a poem I'd written, that the best way to get paid for it was to embody it in stories and I've done that ever since.

Take what is probably Sturgeon's most quoted passage, the opening paragraph from More Than Human:

> The idiot lived in a black and gray world, punctuated by the white lightning of hunger and the flickering of fear. His clothes were old and many-windowed. Here peeped a shinbone, sharp as a cold chisel, and there in the torn coat were ribs like the fingers of a fist. He was tall and flat. His eyes were calm and his face was dead.

That's up there with the opening of "House of Usher;" essays could be written about that paragraph. The prose is rhythmic, with alliteration ("fingers...fist") and stark color imagery ("black and gray world...white lightning"). The similies and metaphors are freshly visual ("many-windowed... sharp as a cold chisel"). And as Scholes and Rabkin point out in Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision, "The language is mostly simple in diction and syntax--simple like the idiot himself."

Faulkner was a boldly experimental stylist whose writing is often murky to the common reader. Hemingway wrote with great clearness, but at the expense of variety. He wrote inside the strait-jacket of "A Style," one way of putting words together, regardless of subject matter. Sturgeon moved beyond A Style to mastery of styles, but his prose almost always remains beautifully clear--as clear and elegant and keen-edged as diamond. Try this from "And Now the News:"

> In odd places around the room were clay sculptures, most mounted on pedestals made of sections of treetrunks large enough to stand firmly on their sawed ends. Some of the pedestals were peeled, some painted, and in some the bark texture or the bulges or clefts in the wood had been carried wight up into the model, and in others clay had been knived or pressed into the bark all the way down to the floor.

Almost every word of that does double-

duty. There are rhythms and alliterations adding unobtrusively to our reading pleasure, while he simultaneously tells us things about the room and suggests things about the nature of the room's inhabitant.

He was always trying to think of the precise meaning of every word he used, and of the uncountable shades of difference in musicality and meaning that come from placing words in different combinations. Sturgeon's language and cadence alter radically from story to story, and often within one story, to accommodate a change of scene or point of view. It's a trick, he kept insisting; you and I can learn to do it. He told Allan Brennert in a 1976 interview, "It's possible to write prose that seems to be printed, say, on silk, and then suddenly appears to be printed on burlap." He compared writing to that "slow sculpture," the bonsai tree. You can induce or force a bonsai to grow in certain ways, through the use of light, water, and soft copper wire, but "you can't change the direction in which a bough is growing, or you'll break it." So to a degree the tree will dictate to you how it will grow. Everything about bonsai, every twig, every leaf, is ultimately a compromise between the tree and the sculptor.

Likewise, you can write "metric prose" by:

> changing your meter as you change your mood, or having one character always speak in the same rhythm... it's an interesting thing to do, because you have to choose your words very carefully to fit into a particular cadence, and pick other words that mean the same, or almost the same, thing. But there's a reciprocity--they in turn dictate to you if another word is a much better one to use at this point, and then you have to go back and have the character <u>mean</u> something slightly different in order to fit.

He also told Brennert,

> I think that my search in all my writing life has been for the optimum human being. Everything that I've ever written has been about people who are not well, and get better, people who <u>are</u> well and get better, people who are better and help <u>other</u> people get better.

Writers as multi-faceted as Sturgeon should be nibbled with salt when they sum themselves up in two sentences. Some of his most memorable stories are about people who are unwell and don't get better, and about people who are well and are made unwell by well-meaning meddlers:

> MacLyLe began to cook.
>
> Watching him, the psychiatrist reflected suddenly that this wordless and withdrawn individual was a happy one, in his matrix; further, he had fulfilled all his obligations and responsibilities and was bothering no one.
>
> It was intolerable.
>
> It was intolerable because it was a violation of the prime directive of psychiatry--at least, of that school of psychiatry which he professed, and he was not going to confuse himself by consideration of other, less-tried theories--<u>It is the function of psychiatry to adjust the aberrant to society, and to restore or increase his usefulness to it</u>. To yield, to rationalize this man's behavior as balance, would be to fly in the face of science itself; for this particular psychiatry finds its most successful approaches in the scientific method, and it is unprofitable to debate whether or not it is or is not a science. To its practitioner it is, and that's that, it has to be. Operationally speaking, what has been found true, even statistically, must be Truth, and all other things, even Possible, kept the hell out of the tool box. No known Truth allowed a social entity to secede this way. And, for one, this fairly intelligent psychiatrist was not going to give this--this <u>suicide</u> his blessing.
>
> --"And Now the News"

Sturgeon is a romantic in the best sense--he wants the best for his characters, and believes passionately in their potential not just for growth, but for transcendence. At the Minnesota science fiction convention, MINICON (where he spoke in 1979, and I took notes), Sturgeon said:

> I've had a basic belief all my life that every human has a core of solid gold. With some it's so covered by

> rock and quicksand that it's not worth the time to mine for it. But inside everyone there's something that's pure gold even if someone seems very evil.

His stories start with a character or characters out of balance. If the story's logic dictates that the character will fail to find balance, or will be knocked off course be someone else, then Sturgeon is too honest to make it otherwise, and the ending is sad, often chilling. If the protagonist does find balance, the story ends happily, sometimes with an explosion of joy. He happy endings are so satisfying because they are not coy, escapist cheats, but triumphs of the spirit, hard and fairly won. His unhappy endings also satisfy because we can see the nobility even in his lost souls. That is, after all, what the Greeks called tragedy.

Perhaps the most distinctive trademark of this startlingly original writer is his way of imbuing his stories with raw human emotion. As he often remarked, "Most of what I write is written by the simple process of opening a vein and dripping it (all too slowly) into the typewriter." He can be wonderfully funny, suddenly inserting gags, puns, and splendid incongruities into the tensest story situations. He examines love in its myriad manifestations, including family ties, and hatred. As is also the case with Beatle songs, there is often a moment of recognition in some one Sturgeon story where a particular reader feels that Sturgeon has somehow gotten the goods on his own innermost fear, hatred, or longing, and diagrammed it with a depth of understanding, a disinterested charity, that she could not bring to it alone. (Yes, I'm one of those readers. No, I won't tell you which story.)

At MINICON he said that you write a splendid about collecting pheasant feathers that would tug the heart strings of a collector of pheasant feathers; but, "The incidence of people who collect pheasant feathers is very small." You need to write about the things people are experts at. "What are people experts at? They're experts at anger, grief, loss, loneliness. If you can write a story about loneliness you've got it." You need to make the reader feel "he's not writing to his characters, he's writing to me, if you can write about anger, and grief, and loss, and love, but especially loneliness...."

Sturgeon's people, like Dostoevski's, appear bland and (almost exceptionally) ordinary. As James Blish observed, you wouldn't pick them out of a crowd. But each of them has a secret, some "If they only knew...." Llewellyn, the mousy little clerk, wants more than anything else to have one, just one, secret sin; an unnamed woman who no one knows keeps sending the same bottled message out to sea; Tandy and Robin each have their invisible companions; Kelly has a way of thinking.

Sturgeon looks at our society's taboos --homosexuality in "The World Well Lost" (1953), incest in "If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?" (1955). Whenever he encounters a "Thou Shalt Not," he asks, "Why?" and finds that some, a very few, edicts are for the higher good of the human species; but most spring from blind prejudice, fear of the "green monkey" who looks or acts or thinks differently. Sturgeon's people are often, when we come to know them, quite strange; but familiar for all that, for he helps us recognize the "touch of strange" that makes every human unique and irreplaceable. Listen to Giles, the painter who can't paint, in the wonderful "To Here and the Easel" (1954):

> The only key to the complexity of living is to understand that this world contains two-and-a-half billion worlds, each built in a person's eyes and all different, and all susceptible to beauty and hungry for it.

But I see what Bradbury was driving at. When a writer's as good as Sturgeon is you can't break him into a box called THEME and a box called CHARACTERS and a PLOT box and one for STYLE without losing something. I can write that "Bright Segment" (1955) is about a lonely, inarticulate man who's never been needed, and who can't handle his one chance for happiness because he doesn't need anything from his partner, except to be needed. But that's a sentence. You need the story.

Some of his early stories are "merely" delightful entertainments, fun and fast-moving but thin on content. Some of his late ones are "merely" wise, full of ideas and insights, but thin on story. But in his best work, pacing and people, music and meaning all come together in one bur-

nished, greater whole. More Than Human, "Maturity," "Bright Segment," "Thunder and Roses," "Hurricane Trio," "To Here and the Easel," "A Way of Thinking," "A Crime for Llewellyn," "Killdozer!," "It," "Slow Sculpture," "The World Well Lost," "Tandy's Story," "And Now the News," "A Saucer of Loneliness," and Godbody are many things. But mostly what they are is great stories: some of the very finest stories in English or indeed in any language.

Enough with the scalpel. Read the stories.

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BOOKS and Selected Other Works
by Theodore Sturgeon

Without Sorcery (collection), 1948.
The Dreaming Jewels (SF novel; alternate title, The Synthetic Man), 1950.
More Than Human (SF novel), 1953.
E. Pluribus Unicorn (collection), 1953.
Caviar (collection), 1955.
A Way Home (collection), 1955.
I, Libertine (historical Novel; pen-name "Frederick R. Ewing"), 1956.
The King and Four Queens (Western novel), 1956.
The Cosmic Rape (SF novel; alternate title, To Marry Medusa), 1958.
A Touch of Strange (collection), 1958.
Aliens Four (collection), 1959.
Beyond (collection), 1960.
Venus Plus X (SF novel), 1960.
Not Without Sorcery (collection; partial contents of Without Sorcery), 1961.
Some of Your Blood (novel; psychological thriller), 1961.
Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea (screenplay novelization), 1961.
The Player on the Other Side (detective novel; pen-name "Ellery Queen"), 1963.
Sturgeon in Orbit (collection), 1964.
Starshine (collection), 1966.
The Rare Breed (Western screenplay novelization), 1966.
"Shore Leave" and "Amok Time" (Star Trek teleplays), 1967-1968.
Sturgeon Is Alive and Well (collection), 1971.
"Galaxy Bookshelf" (column), Galaxy Magazine, January/February 1972-March 1975.
The Worlds of Theodore Sturgeon (collection), 1972.
Sturgeon's West (Western fiction collection; with Don Ward), 1973.
"Science Fiction, Morals and Religion" (essay), in Science Fiction Today and Tomorrow (Reginald Bretnor, ed.), 1974.
"Future Writers in a Future World" (essay), in The Craft of Science Fiction (Reginald Bretnor, ed.), 1976.
The Fabulous Idiot; Baby Is Three; Morality (records; readings by Sturgeon), Caedmon, 1977-1980.
Visions and Venturers (collection), 1978.
The Stars Are the Styx (collection), 1979.
Maturity (small press collection, Scott Imes and Stuart Wells, eds.; includes bibliography), Rune Press, 1979.
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Godbody (novel), 1986.
A Touch of Sturgeon (British collection; David Pringle, ed.), Simon & Schuster, 1987.
To Marry Medusa (collection; title novel and "Killdozer!"), 1987.

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Allan Brennert, "A Conversation With Theodore Sturgeon," Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction, Volume 1, 1976, pages 18-19, 88-92.
Lahna Diskin, Theodore Sturgeon: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography. Boston; G. K. Hall, 1980.
Eric M. Heideman, "Sturgeon's Godbody Offers Nutrition Rather Than Bulk," Minneapolis Star and Tribune, April 20, 1986.
Dennis Lien, comp., "Works of Theodore Sturgeon," in Maturity (above).
Lucy Menger, Theodore Sturgeon. New York; Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1983.
Sam Moskowitz, "Theodore Sturgeon," in Seekers of Tomorrow: Masters of Modern Science Fiction. New York; Ballantine, 1967, pages 231-249.
Charles Platt, "Theodore Sturgeon" (interview), in The Dream Makers, Volume II, New York; Berkley, 1983, pages 167-176.
Norman Spinrad, "Sturgeon, Vonnegut, and Trout," in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, April, 1987, pages 179-191.
Paul Williams, "Theodore Sturgeon," in Berkley Showcase Three, New York; Berkley, 1983, pages 137-161.

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Sturgeon Without Ketchup

by Tom Digby

Once upon a time, long, long ago, I read a Sturgeon story titled "Maturity." I didn't like it. Back then I was at an age where science fiction was:

> ...and then the rocket landed and the door opened and the monster came out and the army started shooting at it but it ate the army all up, suffering from indigestion for days afterward due to sporadic small-arms fire from somewhere between its pancreas and appendix...

and this story wasn't that.

So I set it aside, and went on to other stories. But gradually I began to notice the subtleties, like the flavor of a fine steak that you never taste if the first thing you reach for is the ketchup. I slowly learned that science fiction was more than just roaring around through alien galaxies blowing up enemy stars right and left. Sometimes it was tiptoeing through the vastest, strangest space of all--a human mind.

True, I do still now and then enjoy zipping through distant galaxies, fending off the villain's Zorpo rays while stopping for lunch at a set of Golden Arches under a green-and-purple sun. But I also like to savor a fine steak, with just the slightest hint of charcoal to complement the flavor, and--No Ketchup.

So if all you're really interested in right now is whether the army ever manages to shoot its way out of the monster's stomach you might as well pass most Sturgeon stories by. But if you've learned to like your steak--or your Sturgeon--without ketchup, then his writing is for you.

Tom Digby
March, 1989 [*]

Theodore Sturgeon Is Alive in Valhalla

by John Thiel

I was staring at my collection of Sturgeon writing, at Sturgeon is Alive and Well which I had acquired from a rather countrified hard-cover book store and which was showing signs of being carted off from the usual distribution points (and thinking that the anthology was not), when I heard that Sturgeon had died. The title was now malapropos. "Well," thought I, "this book is now unbearable--the science fiction and fantasy field has lost one of its major writers."

For Sturgeon is one of the very best of the science fiction writers. His short stories have always been remarkable, his novelettes fine indeed, and as for novels, he has written some of the top ones, each an epoch in novel form.

His first novel, More than Human, about post-disaster people seeking one another out, and forming into a gestalt entity, was one of the stories that make disaster seem real to those not affected by them. Sturgeon was a master of the human mind and feelings, bringing a rare psychological insight into the writing of science fiction. Who can forget Lone's derelict degredation, Gerry's search for help from a psychiatrist, Bonny and Beanie's dual entityship and strangeness to humanity, and Baby's superhuman abilities, and the agony and compassion as they evolve through horror into people who are able to live with one another? And its insight--what to do in a disaster: realize that you are in one.

After more short stories and novelettes, Sturgeon was back with To Marry Medusa (as it was called in Galaxy; it was realized in book form as The Cosmic Medusa). This has extraterrestrial invaders who enter the consciousness of human be-

ings and try to unite them into an entity of many who think together. The Medusa is defeated by the expected and the unexpected, but something of it remains after its defeat. Meanwhile, Sturgeon shows suffering humanity from the alley-crawling bum to the isolated and neurotic violinist, researching misanthropy, segregation, and the deadly sins in a fashion that is human and clarifying.

So Sturgeon is one of those writers who live on after they have passed away, because his ideas live in books which continue to comment on the human condition and spirit. And we need not regard death as so utterly ghastly as is portrayed by the horror writers of which Sturgeon was frequently one, but from the general tendencies of which he departed with a rare gift of morality and insight of the relation of the realms of horror with the general human condition. He's in an afterworld now which is suitable to him, a Valhalla of the spirit such as is imagined by fantasy writers--he went where he wanted to go.

His own creations are there, as well as Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, Jirel of Jiory, the Black Abbot of Puthuum, Conan, and all of the rest you know so well; even Shawn the Penman is there. And Alive? Alive while he is there? Sturgeon had spirit--and he has it still.

Yes, a very lively man has departed this sphere. He's got his jokes going on there now. And one person who occasionally visits him is Mack Reynolds, who listens to his jokes and then tells jokes of his own. Mack would never let any science fiction writer go, once he had started to read him, as he said; and he had started to read Sturgeon. Everybody who writes science fiction will visit Sturgeon there from time to time. For Sturgeon will never be forgotten--because he can't be.

"The Education of Drusilla Strange." "Mewhu's Jet." "Granny Won't Knit." Only a few of the titles of stories that haunted me as I pored over the science fiction anthologies as an eight-year-old in the Valparaiso, Indiana, Public Library. Sturgeon influenced my thinking quite a bit--made much of what it is today. I often point this out: The man had something to say about life--and it was valid.

Haven't you read one of the master writers of science fiction yet? Start with Sturgeon Is Alive and Well. It is the very best anthology he ever put together. And now that I think of it, the title is encouraging. I regard him as alive now. I think I can hear him. He seems to be telling me I missed a story of his in Comet.

Well, Ted--I can call you that now--I did not miss "The World Well Lost" in Palmer;s magazines, nor "The Skills of Xanadu." But I'm glad I have not read them all. I'll try to get the rest, They can console me when SF is bleak; they can even console me when it is not.

A best writer is a best writer.

John Thiel
April, 1989 [*]

A TRIBUTE TO THEODORE STURGEON

Theodore Sturgeon wrote weird and wonderful stuff that helped make the science fiction genre the constantly surprising and special art form that it is. He was loved by all who knew him, and perhaps was the most saintly of the SF writers. My favorite writing of his is the novella "And Now the News", which after many decades still holds up as a true classic of SF.

David Palter
March, 1986 [*]

An Afternoon with Theodore Sturgeon

by Janice Morningstar
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(adapted from an article orginally
written for APACORPS #5, 5/30/79)

Back in 1979, while I was a graduate student in psychology at the University of Michigan, I managed to wangle an invitation to a small luncheon with Theodore Sturgeon. I had only been in fandom for a few years at the time, primarily as a member of the U-M SF club, the Stilyagi Air Corps.

Since most of the fen I know would have given their propeller beanies to dine with Theodore Sturgeon, some of you may wonder how such a relative neo, who was not a BNF or a SMOF or even a faned, managed to arrange this when so many other obviously better-qualified candidates never even heard about it.

The answer is serendipity, otherwise known as Being In The Right Place At The Right Time (and in this case, Asking The Right Question, an activity of which Sturgeon himself would heartily approve, as you will see below). The previous fall, when I was coordinator (head TA) for an Introductory Psychology course, I had a psychology professor named Jim McConnell come and give a guest lecture. McConnell, in addition to being a fascinating person, was also a sometime science fiction writer, and had met Sturgeon when he was a Guest of Honor at CONCLAVE. He told me that Sturgeon had expressed an interest in coming back to U-M, and that Barbara Morris, a professor in the English department was working on it.

Now, in addition to coordinating Intro Psych, I had also infiltrated the Psychology department bureaucracy by getting myself appointed to a departmental committee. (I thought it'd look good on my resume.) Wonder of wonders, who turned up at one committee meeting but Barbara Morris, who was setting up a University-wide program to make U-M graduates literate (well, sort of) by requiring a writing course in every department. So, naturally, I asked her what the deal was with Sturgeon.

"He'll be here April Ninth. How would you like to have lunch with him?"

"Huh?"

"I said, how would you like to have lunch with Theodore Sturgeon?"

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, be at the U Club at 1 PM. The English department will pick up the tab."

After a few minutes, that soaked in, and I asked why _I_ was being invited to have lunch with Sturgeon. Apparently they wanted someone other than English majors to be there. So I summoned up every tiny scrap of my nonexistent _chutzpah_ (Harlan Ellison's comments to me at IGUANACON to the contrary--but that's another tale), and asked Ms. Morris if she would like an engineering student as well. She assented when she found out that I had in mind my boy friend Chip Morningstar.

"Chip Morningstar? Must be Gersh's son, eh? Sure, bring him along, but no more." Chip's father lived in Ann Arbor at the time and was well-known among the University academic and writing community. They were also blessed with a name distinctive enough to connect them immediately in a situation like this--and one that I took upon marrying Ship two years later.

So we showed up on the ninth, and found local SF writer Lloyd Biggle and U-M English professor Eric Rabkin there, and only one other student. Although more had been invited, there was an ice storm that day, making travel difficult. Unfortunately we did not talk much about SF; I got the impression that Barbara Morris didn't know much about it, and kept trying to steer the conversation in other directions. We did find out that a French film (for TV, I think) was being made of his short story, "Bright Segment," and that he was very pleased with its quality and fidelity. He did not think it would be distributed in the US, and I have not heard any more about it.

He surprised me by saying that he had had great difficulties with writer's block. By that time he had, however, learned to deal with it so successfully

that other members of the SF community would come to him for help when they were similarly afflicted. He said that the causes varied, but that he used basically the same approach for all of them. It was something akin to what we psychologists call "systematic desensitization"--namely, he would bring them back to writing one step at a time. First he would have them just sit at the typewriter, then put a piece of paper in, then just type gibberish, then something coherent, and finally get back to real story-type stuff, each step being taken as slowly as need be.

We also got into a discussion of depression and suicide, which particularly interested me as we had both been on the brink of the latter (in my case, during the summer of the previous year). We gained different sorts of insights, though. Although I can now understand the feeling of seriously wishing to terminate one's existence (which I could not comprehend at all before that previous summer), I do not see it as an adaptive response. Sturgeon argued that "people do what works", and the suicide will successfully get one out of an unpleasant situation and end one;s suffering quite efficiently, and maybe even more efficiently than any other alternative the person has. However, it still strikes me as throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Sturgeon also gave an abysmally-publicized lecture that afternoon. The topic was "Sexuality and Sensuality in the Future." He spent most of his time speculating on what the ideal marriage of the future would be like. He thought that a seven-person marriage would work out very well--four males, three females--for several reasons. One of the reasons that he gave is that Emily Post somehow determined that seven id the ideal number of people to have at a party, although trying to generalize from a party to a marriage seems like shaky business to me. Another is that any individual in such an arrangement (including any offspring) would have multiple sources of loving and emotional support, and access to the resources of several different individuals. (Jealousy would, of course, have to be an obsolete emotion.) The reason Sturgeon gave for the smaller numbers of females is their greater sexual capacity.

This idea struck me as pretty far afield, and judging from Sturgeon's response to the questions he received, not terribly well thought out. For one thing, what happens to all those excess females? Also, it's hard enough to find one other person you can get along with well enough to maintain a marriage; are we now supposed to believe that septads can be formed in which every person is full of love for, and gets along with, all of the other six? I am more than a bit skeptical. Finally, there is some contemporary precedent for Sturgeon's arrangement, one that was more common then than now--that is the commune. Studies of social interaction among communards show that some of the advantages Sturgeon mentions are indeed there--such as the multiple sources of support--but there are also some interesting problems. Aside from jealousy, the children sometimes have special problems in such situations, in that they must answer to several different "parents", who often place conflicting demands upon them.

Be that as it may, I came away from the day with the impression that Sturgeon's purpose, in putting forth the radical proposals he did, was not to make definitive statements about the human condition. Rather, I think his aim was to stimulate thought, controversy, and question-asking. Many of you who had the good fortune to interact with him probably heard his spiel about the personal symbol he adopted, a "Q→". This means: "Ask the next question", and the one after that, and keep asking, because when you stop questioning, you cease living.

Theodore Sturgeon constantly raised questions in his work, especially questions about the most basic feelings and relationships, and indeed, what it means to be human. That exploration of humanness was one of the things that made his writing great. I haven't always agreed with him--in fact, it's quite possible that the huge number and variety of ideas he raised obeyed his own Law--but I have always enjoyed his writing, and I have always come away thoughtful. And whatever the merits of his ideas, there is no doubt that he thought about humanity so much because he cared about it so much.

Janice Morningstar
February, 1990 [*]

Theodore Sturgeon, William Tenn, and Summer 1972

by Barry Childs-Helton

(Looking back at it, it's a world I scarcely recognize; it was hard to recognize the reality of it even then, through the haze of ideologies, slogans, policies, lies. Come to think of it, things haven't changed that much.)

More or less en route to graduate school, in vague hopes of playing the English Major Game until the academic job market could recover from the dissolution of the moon race (such naive expectations were not uncommon in a 23-year-old of that era), I arrived for the 1972 Stanford Summer Session with two main purposes in mind: to revamp my abominable French for the GSFLT, and to resharpen a literary acumen with a survey course in science fiction from a Professor Philip Klass. (Truth to tell, my taking the latter course was motivated more by industrial-grade hedonism, but the absence of some obliquely-professional rationale would have been gauche in an apprentice academic.)

As it turned out, Professor Klass was several different people in one ironic, compact, goateed frame. One of him (a.k.a. William Tenn) was author of an equally compact guerrilla-band of science fiction stories, dating mainly from 1940s pulps and postwar SF anthologies. One of him was an encyclopedic, paradoxical lecturer who had declared that "one half of me is an atheist, the other half believes fervently in everything"--and one was friend and colleague to most of the "Golden Age" SF pantheon--but not a single one of him was the anti-UFO curmudgeon of almost the same name. He taught a survey course in SF, using the then-new first volume of The Science Fiction Hall of Fame. His writing friends (most of whom had written for John W. Campbell) stunned the class by showing up to reminisce and kibitz: Curt Siodmak, Poul and Karen Anderson--and a fortyish man with greying short hair and beard, who eased into class sporting sandals, widewale cords, leather sporran, loose-fitting kaftan-style shirt, medallion pendant, and a slightly hoarse voice that fizzed with humor. This was the current rendition of Theodore Sturgeon--who told us he'd been diverted from a life of more obvious crime by becoming a writer.

Sturgeon had dropped out of school and run away to sea as a teenager. Broadly and vigorously self-educated since that time, he felt it had left him "with a pretty untrammelled head." While in the merchant marine, he had daydreamed about getting rich quick by pulling off the perfect robbery, had shaped his ideas into a story, and had found a publisher for it. The writing bug bit, took hold, and thereby deprived the underworld of an incisive and versatile imagination. (Who says SF has no redeeming social value? Maybe it all depends on what you're escaping from.)

Clearly, he was not one to literalize ideas reflexively, no matter whose they were. Though he admitted to keeping a radio on (tuned to a 24-hour news station) while writing, his main involvement was in the unfolding of each story itself. He reported having had the enviable experience of leaning over his typewriter while writing, anxious to see what was going to happen next. Quizzical and hip, he traded wisecracks, allusions, and groaners note-for-note with Professor Klass (no mean feat, as readers of "William Tenn" can attest).

Like Gerard in More Than Human, there was a powerfully-informed and knowingly-childlike aspect to Sturgeon's manner; you would envy his play, and probably dread being the object of his mischief. Many of his characters were, in some way, the odd-ones-out--the psychosocial walking wounded --seeking easement, vindication, acknowledgement, companionship or identity--in a reality that offered only the "done" thing, the correct platitude, the off-the-rack role. He often helped his protagonist find what they needed in the course of the story. Given his humane treatment of so many of them (I've always thought "The Claustrophile" depicted the perfect revenge of the quietly imaginative upon the loudly dull), you could easily imagine being a character of his; however the story

turned out, you would learn something deeply important--and frequently healing--about yourself and the reality that transcends you. You could trust a creator like that.

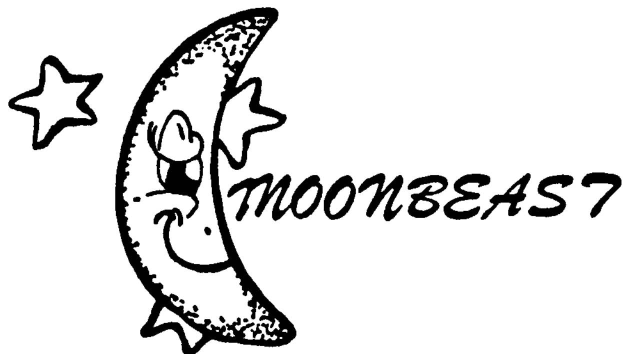
Perhaps some of his empathy for his creations stemmed from the amiable, human-scale practicality that so often accompanies the self educated. Even so, he seemed to delight in tossing about abstruse literary terms that only English professors were supposed to know--probably teasing his old friend who had actually "gone native" in Academia.

Professor Klass greatly admired Sturgeon's "Microcosmic God," which somewhat embarrassed Sturgeon (who thought its main characters stereotypical, the product of a then-inexperienced craft). Klass' point was that the advanced civilization of miniature creatures--the Neoterics--were collectively the "main character" anyway, and were a clear case of nobility in the face of any disaster their "gods" contrived to spur their development. Manipulated and exploited for their technical skill, the Neoterics became so powerful (in their religious quest to meet--and eventually protect--their god, the reclusive scientist who created them) that they eventually take over their own destiny--and perhaps that of humanity as well. Klass considered "Microcosmic God" to be "fable in the best sense of the word"; Sturgeon's transcendental irony scarcely needed much nuance of individual human characterization here. (Even so, his ability to inspire empathy for composite characters had developed much further by the time he created _Homo Gestlat_ for _More Than Human_.)

Sturgeon, it turned out, had been a great fan of (and contributor to) the legendary _Unknown_ pulp in the forties, so the old theme of demoniacal possession (given an extraterrestrial twist) seems to have been a natural for "Killdozer!" It may or may not have been coincidental that at about the same time, Carl Gustav Jung had advanced a theory to the effect that Nazi Germany had resulted from a "psychic plague" in which the archetype of Wotan had "possessed" an entire culture--resulting in a kind of techno-gothic juggernaut.

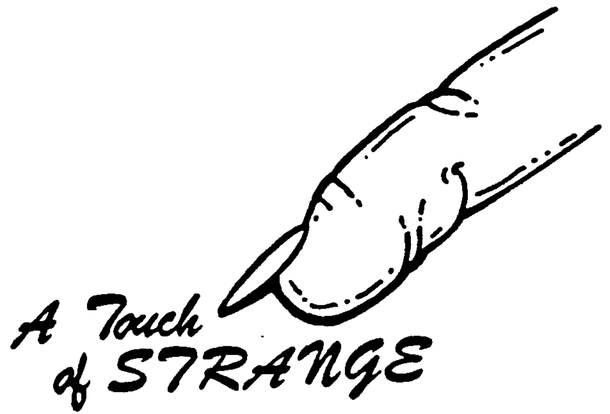
The parallels to the present were disturbing, if a little obvious; I remember an antiwar satiric spectacle, "An American Dreamer," staged outdoors on campus by the San Francisco Mime Troupe. They used a long butcher-paper picture-scroll to explain the new "smart battlefield" technology (a juggernaut possessed by electronics?) in a broad, comic-book style; totem-like papier-mache helmets identified the characters (the long-beaked, hawkish carrion-crow in the business suit seemed familiar), and bullroarers simulated jet sounds (in tribal culture, such instruments were used in rites of passage to portray the voice of the gods). Fable and myth went undisguised as current events, and vice-versa. In "times of transition" (and those times were certainly that), the need for a clear and unified mythic voice is greatest; in post-industrial times, such a voice is nearly impossible to attain using the old vocabulary of images.

Sturgeon and Klass agreed that science fiction was mythic in its scope and ambition--but since, as literature, it could only invite belief in a future (rather than compel belief in a past), its function as a vehicle for ideology was limited by its function as entertainment--even so, those very limits allowed it a certain license to practice social criticism. Klass' "The Liberation of Earth" (which portrayed our world laid waste by successive waves of smooth-talking alien superpowers) had been inspired by the Korean War, and had taken on a new relevance in the Vietnam years. (Say what you like about the Cold War and its agonized sideshows--it sure did seem to _clarify_ things in the glaring all-or-nothing light of potential apocalypse--and you could more or less depend on the familiar threat never to end. No one would have tried to market the 1990 that eventually came to pass as serious science fiction then. That's one more thing that doesn't change.)



We were assigned the task of writing a science fiction story (or an essay about science fiction) as a response to what we had read and heard during the course. Impressed with the subtle psychodynamics in "Baby Is Three," I attempted a piece in which several versions of the protagonist --all living in different years--could communicate with each other across time, and were collaborating on the construction of a private "resort universe." Ah, the naivete (not to say solipsism) of youth. Wouldn't trans-temporal communication homogenize (or otherwise destroy) the character's separate versions--even prevent anything from happening at all--and what would anyone want with a private reality anyway (quite aside from the minor detail that such a story was probably unwriteable by anyone except a Sturgeon or an Alfred Bester)? I did the safe thing--an essay instead.

Sturgeon and Klass had tempted us with a principle that governed the pulp-era metamorphosis of fans into writers: read SF until you find a story that makes you say, "Gawd--even I can write a better story that that!"--then write it. What could be simpler, right? Completely feasible--had not three or four decades of great science fiction already happened. A classmate, just down the hall in the Crothers Memorial dorm, said he could never actually write a science fiction story, even though he was a dedicated, lifelong fan of the genre, He had brought some 1500 volumes of SF with him (about half his collection) and had set up a small TV amongst the stacks of books, on which episodes of The Outer Limits played constantly from a buried videotape recorder (an expensive rarity then, indicative of a serious financial commitment to personal entertainment). He was so steeped in the literature that every time he began a story of his own, he could get no further than one paragraph before realizing the idea had been used before. Eventually he, too, contented himself with an essay, and went back to playing the prototype video space-war game that sat in the "coffee house" room at Tressider Union, across from the expresso machine. (Various classmates played it, using the twin joysticks to set up complex orbits around the "positive or negative sun" in thr center screen--often without destroying each other the way they were supposed to--geez, give 'em an inch, damn hippies. You can bet that little Commie egghead feature was modified before the game reached the bars.)



Science fiction, in all its forms, was hellacious fun. Fun to read and think about, hell to write. Sturgeon himself had been subject to bouts of severe writer's block--long "dry spells" from which the caring support of his fellow writers had helped deliver him. "William Tenn," whose short stories and single novel had already been through a uniform edition reprint, scarcely wrote SF anymore. Instead, he was turning his energies full-time to the task of helping some small segment of the populace (those college students whose imagination has survived their schooling--and, these days, Reaganomics) to understand the distinctive worldview of SF; a universe of ideas exerting field-effects on reality--in which possibilities must forever transcend categories--was as close as I could come to what SF really means (and really is), regardless of the medium. How else than through disciplined imagination could we participate in --and learn from-- the worlds beyond our time?

It was a summer of ideas rolling over at a fast boil. Several scientists from SETI gave a detailed presentation on defining the criteria for extraterrestrial intelligence, which the entire class attended with delight. Professor Klass conducted a panel with Sturgeon and the Andersons on the editorial reign of John W. Campbell (who had just died the previous year) and the emergence of Astounding/Analog as an enduring force in SF. Sturgeon wryly noted the puckish attempts of various writers to sneak sexual metaphors past Campbell's eagleeyed secretary, Kate Tarrant; the most famous referred deadpan to a tomcat as a "ball-bearing mousetrap." (You could joke about such things in 1972 --honest.)

Klass noted--with strongly mixed feelings about the contradictory impulses of progress and atavism rampant is science fiction itself--a blind spot in Campbell's opinions on the next evolutionary stage of mankind. Convinced of the validity of "homo superior" as a concept, Campbell was unable to acknowledge how close such an idea was to racist ideologies. (A year after Campbell's death, a certain Stanford history professor named Shockley was to demonstrate that dismal proximity, through pronouncements that seemed, once again, to saddle non-Caucasians with the stigma of congenital stupidity; projection springs eternal...)

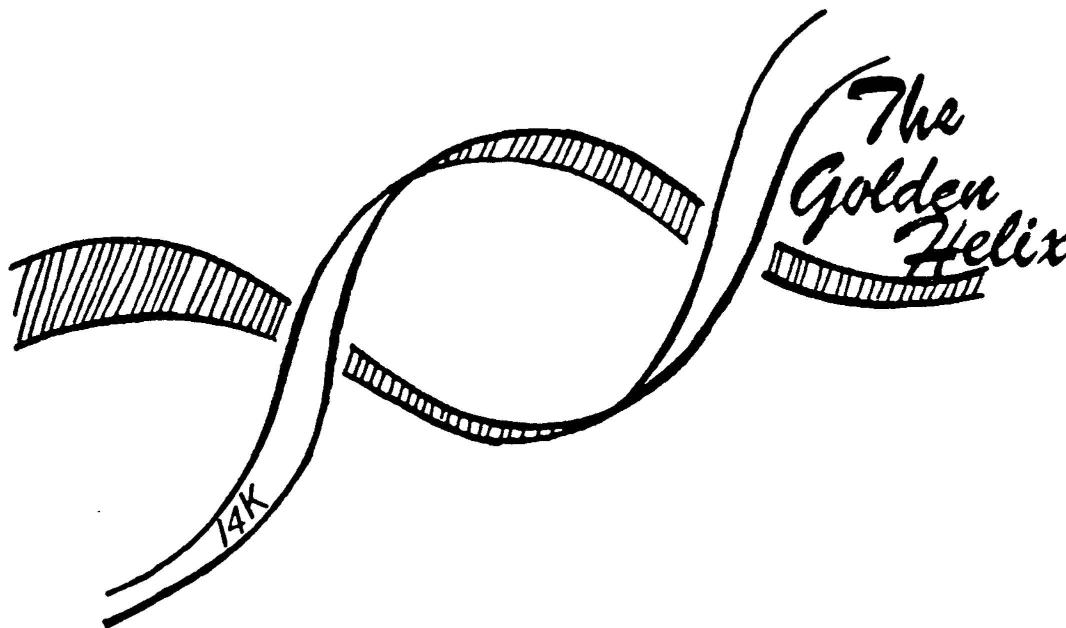
Free exchange of ideas, it seemed, sometimes meant donning an ideological gas mask--even in the presence of an admired independent mind. I was later to run across some early Sturgeon work that seemed shackled in sexism--though his first-person female protagonist was also an apparently genuine attempt on the part of a man to imagine the consciousness of a woman, in detail, as something different but validly human. (Even this flew in the face of the cultural attitudes of circa 1950, which pronounced the sexes virtually different species.) There is a certain relief in finding that even your heroes have lapses. You realize that flaws are survivable; it makes the growth of your own life, your own craft such as it is, much less improbable.

Individually and en masse, we are flawed but we survive. If SETI ever found our fellow questioners in space, what would they think of our collective inferiority complex? Would we still feel the same way, paying our new companions the resentful obeisance we reserve for those who spotlight our flaws by not sharing them? Or--worse--would we have learned to conceal our own arrogance from ourselves, under the facade of benign complacency, and elect to suffer the misguided "worship" of some species whose inferiority we condescend to ignore? (Noblesse oblige, after all.0 Perhaps "homo superior"--if it ever exists in a form we would recognize--will find the whole idea of itself irrelevant.

Or maybe--like the aliens in Sturgeon's "The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff," --it will settle into the quiet and endless business of waking up the universe (one little corner at a time) to some of the hapier and more humane potentials. Just for the hell of it. (Beats a lot of the alternatives, and you never run out of things to do.)

Meanwhile, sometime between past and future, amongst the long August shadows which always urge me to inflict sophomoric profundities upon my journals, there remain the brief mortal privileges of asking questions, making decisions, creating a little something--and enjoying the light while it lasts.

Barry Childs-Helton
November, 1990 *



My Mentors

Heinlein, Sturgeon and Bova

by Spider Robinson
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Broadcast by S.R. on CBC radio,
February, 1987

I have been influenced by three people so heavily that I consider each to be a "mentor", in the precise meaning of "one who teaches how to think". The second of them died within the past year, and the first is pushing 80; only the third is in shape to play handball. All three, however, are immortal.

I was born, physically, in 1948. But I was born as a thinking being in early 1954, at age 5, when a librarian whose name I do not know gave me the first book I ever read all by myself, with no pictures in it. It was called Rocketship Galileo, the first of the books written especially for young people by the already legendary Robert Anson Heinlein.

I don't think it's possible to overstate the influence that book had on my life and work. It was about three teenaged boys whose Uncle Don took them along on the first-ever flight to the Moon, where they found diehard Nazis plotting a Fourth Reich, and outsmarted them. I was entranced. When I had finished it I went back to the library and asked if they had any more by this guy. They took me to a section where all the books had the same sticker on the spine, showing a V-2 impaling an oxygen atom, and my life began. Valentine Michael Smith, the Man from Mars; Lazarus Long, the wise and ornery immortal; the nameless man who, thanks to a time machine and a sex-change, was noth of his own parents and his only child, a closed loop in time... When I had worked my way through all the Heinlein titles, enjoying them hugely, I tried some of the ones filed on either side...and while they weren't quite as good, they were all superior to anything else I could find in the building. (This was back when any SF novel which had been both published in hardcover and purchased by a library had to be terrific.)

It wasn't just the thrilling adventure, or even the far-out ideas--you could find those in comic books--but the meticulous care and thought with which the ideas were worked out and made plausible, related to the known facts of science. Almost incidentally, seemingly accidentally, Heinlein's SF taught me facts of science, and the love of science--taught me that in science could lie adventure and excitement and hope. I still remember my confusion and dismay at the way all my schoolteachers conspired to make science seem dry and dull and impenetrable. It was my first science teacher who told me flatly that manned spaceflight was nonsense. How many young minds did he ruin?

Three years ago I visited my cousin Clare at her office in New York. As we chatted, my eyes kept inexplicably slipping from her, irresistibly drawn to a shelf at the edge of my peripheral vision. Finally they focused, and I understood. Clare is the children's book editor at Scribner's. I began to explain my rude inattention, and she cut me off. "I know," she said, "the Heinlein juveniles; happens all the time." Sure enough, there they were, the building blocks of my reason, arrayed in the same order they'd had on the shelf of the Plainview Public Library, all those years ago.

That Clare understood my problem at once suggests just how much influence Heinlein has had on the world, since he began writing in 1939. You can't copyright ideas, only arrangements of words, but if you could copyright ideas, every SF writer in the world would owe Heinlein a bundle. There can't be more than a handful of SF stories published in the last forty years that do not show his influence one way or another. He opened up most of science fiction's frontiers, wrote a great many de-

finitive treatments of its classic themes, and in his pare time he helped design the spacesuit used by NASA, and invented the waterbed and the waldo (if you don't know what a waldo is, ask anyone who has to manipulate radioactives or other deadly substances).

But what I admire most about Heinlein is what he chose to teach me and other children in his famous SF juvenile novels: first, to make up my own mind, always; second, to think it through before making up my mind; and finally, to get as many facts as possible before thinking. Here are some brief quotes from his book Time Enough for Love, short extracts from the notebook of a 2,500-year-old man:

> God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent--it says so right here on the label. If you have a mind capable of believing all three of these divine attributes simultaneously, I have a wonderful bargain for you. No checks, please. Cash and in small bills.

and:

> If it can't be expressed in figures, it is not science; it is opinion.

and:

> Democracy is based on the assumption that a million men are wiser than one man. How's that again? I missed something.
>
> Autocracy is based on the assumption that one man is wiser than a million men. Let's play that over again, too. Who decides?

and:

> It's amazing how much mature widsom resembles being too tired.

and my own personal favorite:

> Writing is not necessarily something to be ashamed of--but do it in private, and wash your hands afterwards.

# # # # #

Just as Heinlein used love of adventure to teach me the love of reason and science, Theodore Sturgeon used love of words, the beauty that could be found in words and their thoughtful aesthetic arrangement, to teach me the love of...well, of love.

Not the kind of love found in Harlequin romances or bad movies, but the love which is the basis of courage, of hope, of simple human persistence. When I was sixteen, barely in time, I read a story of his called "A Saucer Full of Loneliness," and decided not to kill myself after all. Ten years later I read another Sturgeon called "Suicide" aloud to a friend of mine who had made five progressively more serious attempts at self destruction, and she did not make a sixth. (Should you know anyone who needs them, the former appears in the collection E Pluribus Unicorn, and the latter in Sturgeon Is Alive and Well.)

It has become something of a cliche to say that all of Ted's work was about love; he himself did not care for the description, perhaps because the word "love" begs too many questions. I know, because he told me once, that he accepted Robert Heinlein's limiting definition of love:

> The condition in which the welfare of another becomes essential to your own.

Ted wrote about that state, but about much more as well; about all the things which fuzzy-minded people confuse with love, but about much more than those things too. I think that if he must be distilled to some essential juice, it would perhaps be least inaccurate to say that he wrote about need, about all the different kinds of human need and the incredible things they drive us to, about new kinds of need that might come in the future and what they might make us do; about unsuspected needs we might have now and what previously in-explicable things about human nature they might account for.

Or maybe what Ted wrote about was goodness, human goodness, and how often it turns out to derive, paradoxically, from need. I envision a mental equation with which I think he would have agreed:
that

Need + Fear = Evil,

and that

Need + Courage = Goodness.

One of Ted's finest stories, included in the collection Beyond and in my own anthology The Best of All Possible Worlds, is actually called "Need." It introduces one of the most bizarre and memorable characters in the history of literature, a nasty saint named Gorwing. How can a surly rat-faced runt with a streak of cruelty, a broad stripe of selfishness and a total absence of compassion be a saint? Because of an unusual form of limited telepathy. Gorwing perceives other people's need, any sort of need, as an earsplitting roar inside his own skull, and does whatever is necessary to make the racket stop. Other people's pain hurts him, and so for utterly selfish reasons, he does things to saintly that even those few who understand why love him, and jump to do his bidding. Whenever possible Gorwing charges for his services, as high as the traffic will bear --because so many needs are expensive to fix, and so many folks can't pay--and he always drops people the moment their needs are met. Marvelous!

Ted's own worst need, I think, was to persuade me and others of the post-Hiroshima generation that there is a tomorrow, that there is a point to existence, a reason to keep struggling, that all of this comic confusion is going somewhere, progressing toward something--and although he believed in his heart that this something was literally unimaginable, he never stopped trying to imagine it, and with mere words to make it seem irresistibly beautiful. He persisted in trying to create a new code of survival for post-Theistic man,

> "a code," as he said, "which requires belief rather than obedience. It is called ethos...what it is is a reverence for your sources and your posterity, a study of the main current which created you, and in which you will create still a greater thing when the time comes, reverencing those who bore you and the ones who bore them, back and back to the first wild creature who was different because his heart leaped when he saw a star."

Let me quote the closing paragraphs of "The Man Who Lost the Sea," about a man who, as a boy, nearly died learning the lesson that you always spearfish with a buddy, even if you wanted the fish all to yourself--that "I" don't shoot a fish, "we" do. Now the seasound he seems to hear is really earphone-static from spilled uranium which is killing him:

> The sick man looks at the line of his own foorprints, which testify that he is alone, and at the wreckage below, which states that there is no way back, and at the white east and the mottled west and the paling flecklike satellite above. Surf sounds in his ears. He hears his pumps. He hears what is left of his breathing. The cold clamps down and folds him round past measuring, past all limit.
>
> Then he speaks, cries out: then with joy he takes his triumph at the other side of death, as one takes a great fish, as one completes a skilled and mighty task, rebalances at the end of some great and daring leap; and as he used to say "we shot a fish" he uses no "I":
>
> "God," he cries, dying on Mars, "God, we made it!"

When the Halifax science fiction convention, HALCON, asked me to be their Guest of Honor, I agreed on the condition that they fly Ted Sturgeon in to be the Toastmaster, for I had yearned to meet him. I will spare you the story of the horrid duel of puns which Ted and I waged across the port city of Halifax (and the starboard city of Dartmouth), but I must tell of the Two Kinds of Hug.

A fan approached him and asked if she could give him a hug; he agreed. "Ah," he said gently as they disengaged, "that was a letter A."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You hug me," he ordered, and I did. "Now that," he said, "was a number One."

A crowd had begun to form, as they so often did around Ted. He had various pairs of people hug, adjudging each hug as either a Letter A or a Number One.

At last we began to get it. Some of us hugged touching at the top, joined at the middle, and spread apart at the bottom,

like a capital letter A. Others, unafraid to rub bellies, hugged so as to form a number One. "There is really only one sense," Ted told us, "and that is the sense of touch; all the other senses are only other ways of touching. But if you can't touch with touch, you can't touch with much."

# # # # #

There came a time in my life when, for reasons too complicated to go into, I needed to make some money without working for it. Heinlein taught me how to think; Sturgeon taught me how to feel; but there was not much call for either of those skills. My schooling had taught me very little, and most of that was turning out to be false or worthless. My only assets were a vast collection of tattered SF paperbacks which I was unwilling to sell.

Suddenly I made the mental leap: perhaps I could write tattered SF paperbacks!

Well, the idea couldn't have been all bad: the first story I attempted sold, on first submission, to the highest paying market in SF, Analog Science Fact/Science Fiction. I quite my regular job and went freelance on the strength of that $300 cheque.

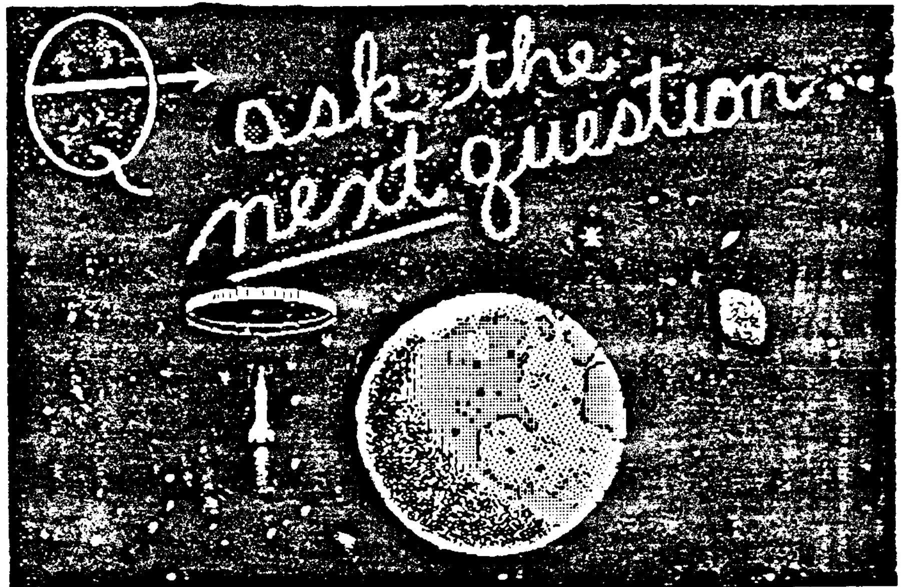
But everything I wrote after that bounced, not only at Analog but everywhere. A year after I went freelance I had a superb library of first-edition rejection slips, equalled only by my collection of Absolutely Final Notices from creditors.

What saved me from life as a civil servant, or some other form of welfare, was the fact that the editor of Analog at the time (and subsequently of Omni) was Ben Bova.

Many editors regard writers as regrettably unavoidable nuisances, and new writers as avoidable ones. The slushpile, as the heap of unsolicited manuscripts is called, is often seen as a source of comic relief for idle moments in the editorial day. But Ben always treated it as a treasure-trove. He read every manuscript that came in the door--and when he found new writers he felt displayed promise, he cultivated them carefully.

Ben cultivated me in several ways. The first, of course, was to send me a cheque. But with the cheque came a letter inviting me to lunch at my convenience. (This is not as altruistic as it seems: when an editor dines alone, he pays for it; when he dines with the newest and greenest of writers, the publisher pays.) Over lunch he answered hundreds of my beginner's questions: how to prepare my manuscripts more professionally, why I didn't need an agent until I was ready to try a novel, how to join the Science Fiction Writers of America so my manuscripts wouldn't land in the slushpile, what a science fiction convention was and how they could affect my income, what Heinlein and Sturgeon were like as people, the basics of plotting commercial fiction, hundreds of things I desperately yearned to know. I took pages of notes. He also stroked my ego, and demanded more stories.

So I went home and wrote more stories, and as I've said, Ben--and every other editor--bounced them all. But Ben didn't send rejection slips, he sent rejection



This is a startup screen I created for my Macintosh,
in honour of the immortal Theodore Sturgeon,
whose motto all his life was,
"ASK THE NEXT QUESTION."
This image
appears on the screen
every time I boot up my computer.
So long, Ted, and thanks for all the sturgeon!
(This document is public domain; you may reproduce it for free.)

-Spider
Robinson

letters. Brief ones, rarely more than two or three sentences explaining what specific errors made this story unpublishable ...but those few sentences amounted to a condensed correspondence course in writing commercial fiction. "You're writing too many stories at once here, Spider." Or, "I don't give a damn about your hero." Or, "Nothing happens here; no problems get solved, nobody learns anything." Things like that.

Most of these nuggets of wisdom horrified or infuriated me. Say, for example, that I had sweated blood for weeks, produced a 20,000 word masterpiece of adventure and irony, and gotten it back from Ben with the single sentence, "Cut it to 6,000 words." I would scream. Then I would examine my dwindling bank balance and try to cut the story at least a little. Then I'd call Ben.

"I can't cut 14,000 words, Ben, there isn't a spare word in there."

"I know," he would say. "They're all gems. But just as an exercise, pretend that someone is going to give you a dime for every word you cut."

I would thank him glumly and hang up, then ignore his advice and send the manuscript to his competitors. When they had all bounced it, with form rejection slips, I'd shelve it.

After a year of this, I was desperate, so I'd dig out the dusty manuscript, look at it mournfully and, just as an exercise, see how much flesh I could slice from my baby before I cut into its spine. Howls of pain! A few days later I would call him again. "Ben, remember that story about the malfunctioning time machine? I've got it down to 10,000 words, and there's just nothing else I can cut, and I've already cut some terrific stuff."

"I know," he'd say. "But just as an exercise, pretend that a large man is going to come around with a maul and break one limb for every thousand words above six."

Cursing the Bova clan root and branch, weeping with fury, I would amputate a few more of my child's appendages, and when I had it down to 6,000 words I'd dry my eyes and re-read it--

--and discover to my horror that it was now a much better story--

--and send it to Ben and get a cheque.

In addition to tutoring me, Ben made a point of introducing me to other writers, to artists and editors and other professionals, to influential fans. And when I had sold a half dozen stories, he sat me down at a convention and said, "It's time you started a novel and got an agent." Meanwhile, down the hall, a mutual friend was, at Ben's instigation, telling one of the best agents in the business that it was time he took on a few new clients--this guy Robinson, for instance. When I complained once that I couldn't think of any story ideas, Ben showed me an entire drawer full of ideas and invited me to help myself. On one memorable occasion, he returned a story I had submitted, saying, "This is too good for me to buy; Playboy will pay you three times as much as I can."

But of all the things Ben did for me, one in particular stands out in my mind. During the year of apprenticeship I mentioned earlier, during which I sold no stories, it eventually became necessary to get a job. Luck was with me; I found employment as a journalist, and so continued to avoid honest work. I spent a year as a Real Estate Editor for a Long Island newspaper: during the day I typed lies purporting to be the truth, while at night I tried to teach myself how to write truths purporting to be lies for Ben. The newspaper job was dull, dishonest and demeaning--and quite lucrative: I had never made so much money in my life. At the end of my year of trial, I still had only the one original story-sale under my belt...and then a horrid thing happened.

The publisher of the newspaper called me into his office and told me that he knew I was doing my job with half my attention--and doing it well; he was not complaining. But he offered to double my already high salary if I would give up this fiction nonsense and throw my full attention into the world of real estate, become an insider, socialize with realtors and join their clubs. Or, I could quit. He gave me a week to decide.

I called my friends for advice. But Ben was the only friend I had who was earning a good salary, in fact, the only one who was not on unemployment--and the only one who did not give me an immediate, kneejerk answer. The night before I had to give my decision, he called me back.

"I've been thinking all week about your problem," he said. "Spider, no one can pay you enough money to do what you don't want to do."

I thanked him and quit my job. A week later, I sold my second story (to another editor), and a few months after that I won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in science fiction, and by the end of the year I was selling regularly and had been nominated for my first Hugo Award. And because I had to live on a writer's income, I moved to the woods of Nova Scotia, where I met my wife Jeanne.

And so in a sense it could be said that I owe everything I have in the world to Ben Bova.

Mind you, nobody's perfect. It was Ben who encouraged me to put puns in my stories. He is himself an excellent and accomplished writer, and he once wrote about a robot policeman which he named "Brillo."

Metal fuzz...

# # # # #

These, then, are my three mentors: Robert Anson Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, and Ben Bova. All great writers, all great teachers. Generalizations are a nasty habit, but perhaps it would be least inaccurate to say that Robert taught me how to think, Ted taught me how to feel, and Ben taught me how to survive as a writer. I owe all three a debt I will never be able to repay.

--Spider Robinson
February, 1987|*|

Thank You, Mr. Sturgeon

by Laura D. Todd

I don't have any homey anecdotes about Theodore Sturgeon. I can't even boast of having met the man. But he has influenced my life, and I'd like to take this chance to offer a personal "thank you". I'm only sorry that he can't be here to read it himself.

Sturgeon's writing had a profound effect on me, back in my days of Darkest Adolescence. I was depressed, lonely, at odds with the world. I was such a misfit that even the "bad" kids rejected me. That summer my brother gave me my first science fiction book. For the rest of the summer, with nothing else to do, I borrowed SF from the library. Not knowing anything about the genre, I went mostly for anthologies and "best of the year" collections.

Among the welter of unfamiliar names in the field, Sturgeon's name soon came to stand out. He wrote stories about lonely people: idiot savants, stranded aliens, empaths who absorbed others' pain and died for it. Every story he wrote was marked by soul-searching sensitivity and humanity.

I wish I could quote you titles and plots, but all that was a long time ago, so I'll leave it to more knowledgeable fans to provide bibliographies. All I can recall now is the effect of those stories on me.

I then sought out his books: More than Human, about a collection of misfits and rejects whose love and interdependence for each other made them a superhuman gestalt. The Dreaming Jewels, about a child of extraordinary origin--orphan, victim, circus freak.

What was special about these books? I felt that Sturgeon was writing about me. And that meant I wasn't alone. That was a revelation, and an inspiration. And that was how I came to love SF and decided that someday I, too, would write SF novels.

All that was twenty years ago. A lot has happened since then. I've read a lot, learned about fandom, learned I wasn't the only "weirdo" around. And I've acquired the outward trappings of normality, but I've also done a lot of writing. I've never forgotten by debt to Theodore Sturgeon. I dream that someday my writing will do for someone else what Sturgeon's has done for me.

Thank you, Mr. Sturgeon.

Laura Todd
1988|*|

Theodore Sturgeon: An Anecdote

by Alexis A. Gilliland

I met Ted Sturgeon a few times at conventions, sharing a panel with him in Seattle, sitting next to him at a banquet at State College, Pennsylvania, but he was a very intense,very private person, and I can't say I ever got to know him. For some reason the conversation would always swing away from him, and at State College I wound up telling him about floor finish.

In 1985 I went to Melbourne for AUSSIECON II, and because they were short of authors (and because I had volunteered the information that I could chair panels) they put me in charge of the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Panel. Besides myself, the other panelists were Charles "Locus" Brown, Bob Silverberg, and two Aussies, one a rock musician, and one a plumpish, bespectacled young man named George, as I recall. George had set up the panel and originally been going to chair it until his nerves began to bother him.

I figured the thing to do was let the panel talk and keep out of the way, and Silverberg started off with a smooth, low-key recollection of a number of Sturgeon stories from thirty years back. Nothing startling, nothing sensational, but personal and therefore interesting. He was followed by Brown, who had known Sturgeon later and in a different place, giving a nice variation on the Silverberg. I made a few comments and turned the microphone over to George.

George started talking about one specific story, Some of Your Blood, the first science fiction story he'd ever read, shortly before he had been committed to an institution. It was an intensely personal statement from a perfect stranger, telling how the insight he'd gotten from that story was what had saved his sanity. He'd never met Sturgeon, but he spoke with intensity and passion about the man. It was a virtuoso performance from a totally unexpected source, and as different from what had gone before as a trumpet from violins. What was the insight? Go back and read the story.

The rest of the panel was a bit anticlimactic, but the audience was happy, and if Sturgeon's ghost was in attendance, I expect he was well satisfied.

Alexis A. Gilliland
--1987 [*]

Theodore Sturgeon: A Chronology

by Robert Sabella

1918 Born February 26, in New York City as Edward Hamilton Waldo

1937 Sells first of many non-science fiction stories to McClure's Syndicate

1939 First science fiction story "Ether Breathers" appears in September Astounding

1940 "It" published in April Unknown

1941 "Microcosmic God" appears in April Astounding

1944 "Killdozer" appears in November Astounding

1947 "Bianca's Hands" appears in May Argosy

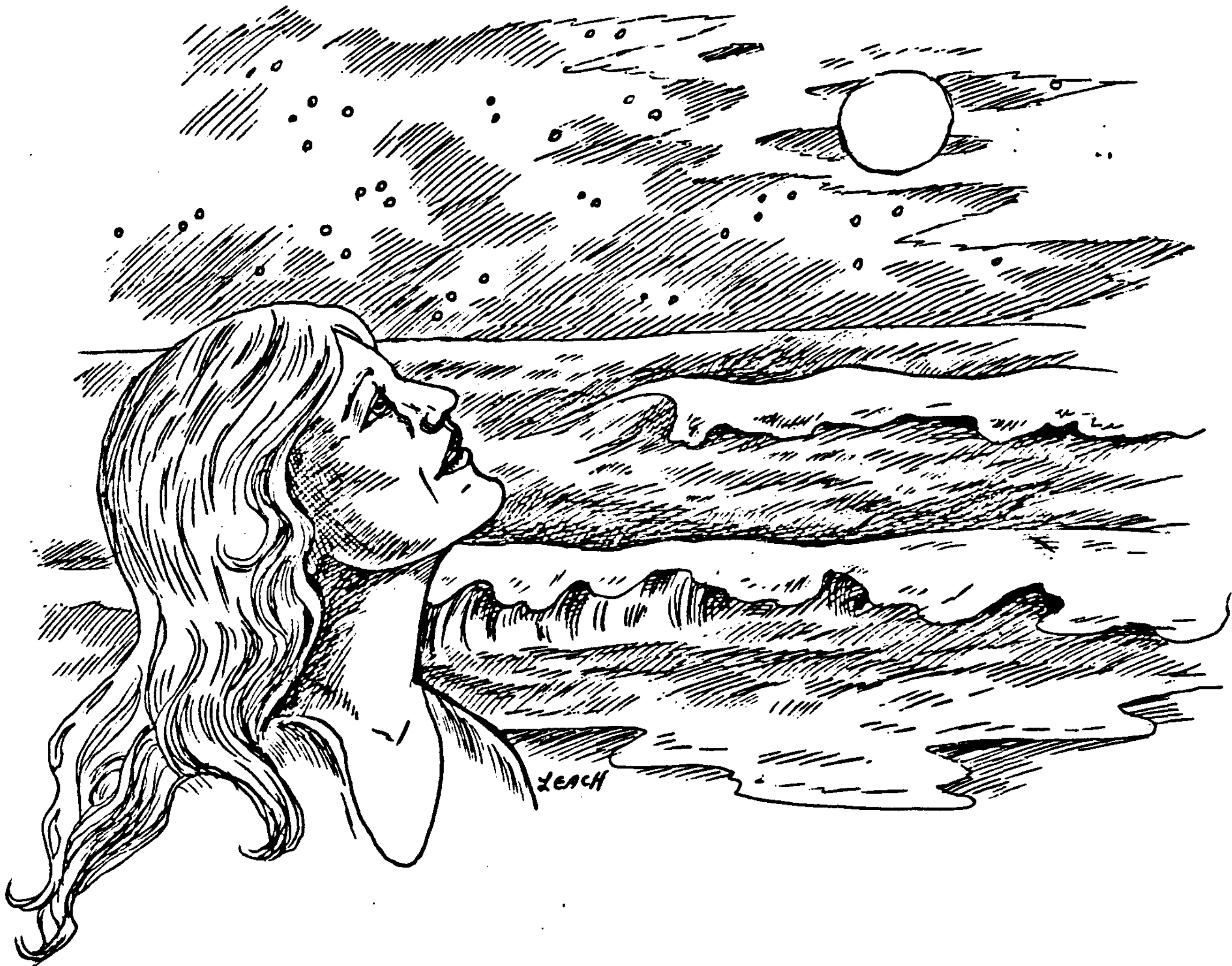
1953 More Than Human published, wins International Fantasy Award as Best Novel

1962 Guest of Honor at Chicago World Science Fiction Convention (CHICON 3)

1970 "Slow Sculpture" appears in February Galaxy, sweeps Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novelette

"Microcosmic God" selected by Science Fiction Writers of America as one of the five best science fiction short stories ever published

1985 Dies on May 8



Served with Love, Garnished with Style: The Fiction of Theodore Sturgeon

by Dennis K. Fischer

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Here's what they said about the man's writing:

Sturgeon is the most accomplished technician this field has produced, bar nobody, not even Bradbury; and part of the reason is that he never stops working at it. He tried writing about each character in a story in a different meter once--iambs for one, throchees for another--a trick, not viable, but it taught him something about rhythm in prose. He has cold-bloodedly studied the things that make people angry, afraid, pitying, embarrassed, worshipful, and mortared them into his stories.

Damon Knight, In Search of Wonder

The man has style.

The same quality of "voice" or "presence" that makes the most unevenly composed Sturgeon story compellingly readable, marks his personality with equally unmistakable (if no more definable) fascination.

Judith Merrill, Fantasy & Science Fiction

For some he was the unicorn in the garden; for others he was a profligate who'd had ten years as the best writer in the country, regardless of categorizations (even the categorization that condemned him to the ghetto); for young writers he was an icon; for old hands who'd lived through stages of his unruly life he was an unfulfilled promise.

Harlan Ellison, Locus

I could not believe those early stories: curious subject matter, bizarre resolutions, glowing style. And about sexuality. You could hardly believe your luck when one of Ted's stories went singing through your head.

Brian Aldiss, Cheap Truth

Sturgeon, after all, was only a science fiction writer. In the pantheon of modern fiction, where distinctions of subject had hardened into a critical mindset almost as arbitrary and complete as the Hindu caste system, that means Sturgeon occupied a place on the literary ladder one rung above writers of westerns and one rung below the writers of mysteries.

Onle a science fiction writer. But his often tender explorations of alien minds were as carefully worked out as Faulkner's exploration of the mind of Benjy, the idiot in The Sound and the Fury. Sturgeon's emphasis on psychology instead of blasters prepared the way for such modern masters of the genre as Robert Silverberg, Gregory Benford, John Varley, Kate Wilhelm. When science fiction made its crucial shift from pulp action to a careful consideration of what the future might hold for the emotions and the psyche as well as for the technotoybox, Sturgeon was in the van.

Stephen King, Washington Post Book World

Theodore Sturgeon is still probably the finest short story writer that the SF genre has produced, and arguably the finest American short story writer of the post World War II era, period.

Norman Spinrad, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine

Since his death in 1985, Sturgeon's fiction has begun to drift out of print and out of the consciousness of the current reader of fantasy and SF. While this is true of many of the other first-rate SF writers, Simak and Dick and Tiptree among them, if it happens to Sturgeon's work, then we begin to lose out highest standards of comparison as to what constitutes the best in the field. We cannot afford to neglect our home grown Chaucer without risking the loss of a whole renaissance happening and to come.

David G. Hartwell, New York Review of Science Fiction

Theodore Sturgeon was born Edward Waldo Hamilton on February 26, 1918, in Staton Island, New York, changing his name legally to Theodore Sturgeon after being adopted by a step-father. This act has created a bit of confusion when an information card to the Library of Congress accidentally listed "Theodore Sturgeon" as a pen name of Edward Waldo instead of accepting it as his real name, and Sturgeon himself feared that people looking for his books in libraries might often get misdirected.

He was proud of being related to Peter Waldo, the 15th century dissident priest who urged the Pope in Rome to go back to vows of poverty, rid himself of wealth and ostentation and go out among the people. This became known as the Waldensian Heresy, and Sturgeon was known in his life for going against conventional thinking and promulgating a few heresies himself.

A group of followers of this belief were known as Waldos, and Sturgeon believed that a group of them went to Haiti in 1640, an area already known as a refuge for runaway slaves, where the word Waldo became corrupted to Vaudois, which is the etymology of the word "voodoo". Sturgeon also claimed kinship with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Samuel Taylor Waldo. Ted was named after his father who slowly abandoned his family over a period of three years when Ted was between four and seven, causing his mother to hate the name and mistrust all men.

Sturgeon's mother was Canadian and came from a very religious Church of England family background. She intended Sturgeon to go into the church as well, but he claimed he had too close a connection with its inner workings to consider it. In fact, Sturgeon seems to have had mixed feelings about religion his entire life. He claims to have sent his children to church simply so that he could sleep in on Sunday mornings, and so when they grew up into their rebelious stage, it would give him something between them and him to rebel against. He also felt that mankind has a deep need to worship something, be it a god or science or sex of whatever. Some of his feelings he encapsulated in his last brilliant work Godbody, the germinating idea of which was that organized religion distorted both worship and sex, two of man's basic drives, in order to make a buck off it (setting up rules that men can't have sex until it has been okayed by the church to which they must bring offerings). In this deliciously heretical work, a new messiah comes to correct the ancient misinterpretation of the religious message.

Sturgeon's father married his mother, a headstrong woman who longed to leave her family, when she was only sixteen. It was a miserable marriage where he, who was in the paint business, wanted her to manage the house and entertain clients, neither of which she was very successful at, preferring to spend her time on art and music. She had two children before she was 18, Ted and his brother Peter. Yet, Sturgeon remembered his father as a kind, honest, generous man who was cheated out of his business because of his naivete by some by some people who were working for him. His seven-year battle with Parkinson's disease may have been a contributing factor in Sturgeon's own suicide, refusing to take medicine as he was dying of fibrosis which had led to pneumonia, passing away on May 8, 1985.

After the departure of his father, Sturgeon's mother worked as a publicity woman for a trade paper and kept the family going. Despite her negative attitude toward men, Sturgeon's stepfather won her over and married her when Ted was ten. Sturgeon described his stepfather as a brilliant man, conversant in seven languages, and a perfectionist. Discovering that Ted and his brother did not have the proper attitude toward school to be molded into Rhodes scholars, Sturgeon claims his stepfather lost interest in them both.

The Synthetic Man

Enriched bleached flour, water iron, amino acids,
polypeptides, mono- and d sulfates, fortified DNA
RNA, saturated and un fatty acids, tracer, inor-
ganic salts, multip neuron nets, vitamins - NOT
RESPONSIBL MALFUNCTION -- MECHANICAL,
ELECTRIC CTIONAL IN NATURE.

VENUS + X

Incredibly enough, Sturgeon was a high school drop-out, but he lived in a home surrounded by books, which his mother enjoyed reading to him when he was young. His own favorite reading was fantasy novels--H.G. Wells, Lord Dunsany, and the pre-Raphaelites--who offered him escape and poetic, cadenced language, and these influences made a profound impact on his fiction. His stepfather found him reading some science fiction pulps, pronounced them trash, and threw them away, with the result that Sturgeon rebelled and became a dedicated reader of same. One day Ted cam home from school and his stepfather informed him that there was a mess for him to clean up in his room. It seems his stepfather had found his stash of SF pulps and had torned them into postage stamp-sized pieces and spread them all over the room.

It seems not unlikely that such incidents led to Sturgeon's rebelling against authority, accepted wisdom, and the establishment. However, he harbored a respect for intelligence and made certain that he could support his concepts with reasons and examples. He remained passionately devoted to science fiction and fantasy throughout his life, frequently proclaiming, "Outside of poetry, there's no other field of literature which is absolutely without limit. You can go anywhere!"

Adolescence was a particularly painful period for Sturgeon, growing up as the original 98 pound weakling, extremely thin and picked on by bullies. His stepfather pressured him into skipping two and a half years of schooling, so that Ted entered high school at the age of 12. His stepfather promised him something he wanted very badly if he did well in summer school. Working as hard as he could, he fell just short of his stepfather's expectations, who announced that he intended to give the boy a bike but he was not going to get it now.

Sturgeon then became preoccupied with the idea of becoming a flyer or acrobat for the Barnum and Baily Circus, devoting one and a half strenuous years to becoming the captain of the gymnasts' team and earning the respect of his peers. Just as he had won a scholarship, he came down with acute rheumatic fever which put him on his back for a half a year and enlarged hi heart by 16%, ensuring that his dreams were over and that there would be no more gymnastics, ever.

The fever itself was caused by ignoring a cold that Sturgeon had contracted. Refusing to disappoint his strict parents, he dragged himself to school despite his illness, which after three days only made it worse. His parents left for Europe while the suicidal youngster stayed with his uncle in Canada, but gradually he worked himself back into shape a little bit at a time. Lying about his heart condition, he made the top one percent of applicants to the Pennsylvania Nautical School and became a cadet in the Merchant Marine Academy. Brought up to obey the rules, Sturgeon had a miserable time when the no hazing rule was broken on him right and left.

However, Sturgeon stuck it out and was able to get his seaman's papers at seventeen, and signed on in the Merchant Marines as an engine-room wiper. He travelled extensively up and down the coast and in Central America, and began to write himself to while away the time on shipboard.

Strange as it may seem to say, Strugeon credits contemplating a life of crime with starting his writing career. He had worked out a way to rob the American Express Company out of several hundred thousand dollars, even going so far as writing to the company to check his facts, but he didn't have the nerve to actually try it himself. Instead, he wrote it up as a story and sold it to the McClure newspaper syndicate for five dollars. Pleased with his success, he left the seaman's life and worked for the next seven months supplying the syndicate with one or two stories a week at five dollars a story.

Around this time someone showed him the very first issue of Unknown Worlds, the John W. Campbell-edited fantasy companion to Astounding. Sturgeon was bowled over by such stories as H. L. Gold's "The Trouble with Water" and Eric Frank Russell's Sinister Barrier. Trying his hand, he came up with a story entitled "Helix the Cat," which Campbell politely rejected and which was lost for years when it turned up in a trunk of papers forwarded to Sturgeon, who published it in Astounding: The John W.

Campbell Memorial Anthology edited by Harry Harrison.

Reading Strugeon's first submission to Campbell today, it's not hard to see why Campbell rejected it. The story centers around a scientist who captures a soul in some flexible glass. The story is unfocused and throws its ideas haphazardly together.

AGAINST FEAR AND STUPIDITY
--THE EARLY YEARS--

Sturgeon made his first sale to John W. Campbell with "The God in the Garden," in which he followed Campbell's advice (after the rejection of "Helix") that a story should show some change in the main character. The story was published in the November 1939, issue of Unknown and has only been reprinted in the Philip D. Strong anthology, The Other Worlds. More significant for many was Sturgeon's first science fiction story, "The Ether Breather," a comic tale of an alien life force that invades television, which appeared in Astounding. The alien distorts what appears on people's screens, lampoons commercials, embarrasses people, and loses three broadcasting companies their licenses. When told what havoc it has created, the alien simply withdraws.

The story was very popular and inspired a sequel, "Butyl and the Breather." Both stories were published together in Sturgeon's first collection, Not Without Sorcery, which appears in paperback as Without Sorcery without five of the stories and Ray Bradbury's original introduction. As it stands, Without Sorcery prints a significant sampling of Sturgeon's earliest work, including two of his best remembered tales, the genuinely horrifying "It" and the sly "Poker Face." "It" is about a mysterious, putrescent monster that walks out of the woods and attacks a family:

> It had no mercy, no laughter, no beauty. It had strength and great intelligence. And--perhaps it could not be destroyed. It crawled out of its mound in the wood and lay pulsing in the sunlight for a long moment. Patches of it shone wetly in the golden glow, parts of it were nubbed and flaked. And whose dead bones had given it the form of a man?

The story's style very effectively builds up a chilling atmosphere and Sturgeon commented that the story almost wrote itself. "It" along with another story rejected by Campbell and written on Sturgeon's honeymoon, "Bianca's Hands" are both shudder classics, a vein that Sturgeon didn't particularly care to mine.

"Poker Face" concerns Face, a man from 30,000 years in the future who has come back to seek out an antiquarian named Hark Vegas. Trapped in the past, Face blends in. The story is partially a warning against letting machines manipulate man according to inhuman logic. In the future that Face comes from, a mechanical city is the ultimate government. "It was not a democracy, for each individual was subjugated entirely to the city." The result is an orderly, sterile, and dull life for the city's inhabitants. (The story could possibly have served as an inspiration for Jack Williamson's classic "With Folded Hands...")

Sturgeon wasn't the typical science fiction writer of the time with an unquestioned belief in the goodness of science. Constantly in his early stories, he warns that scientific wonders stupidly applied could have serious consequences.

In a minor story like "Artnan Process," which includes a scientifically specious method of separating U-235 from U-238, Sturgeon included a section warning against the death of individuality, about a future of passive peace, submission and slavery:

> Some men knew it for what it was and did not care. Some cared, but could think of nothing to do about it. Some did something about it, and were quietly killed. Most of humanity did not bother about what happened. You were born and cared for. You grew up and were given a job. You were comfortable. Sometimes you were allowed to marry and have children, if it was all right with Mars. Married or single, there was room for everyone. When you were too old to be useful, you begged and were cared for by your fellows--that was easy, for everyone had so much. Then you died, and they dropped your carcass into the disintegrating furnaces. So what difference could it make whether or not man or Martian ran the show.
>
> When man owned the Earth, you were told, he made a mess of it. No one

> killed now, or stole or broke any law. It was better. No one thought very deeply or clearly; no one had ambition, pride, freedom.

All his life, Sturgeon fought against conformity, against the expectations of blending in and following the unthinking herd. Some criticized him as eccentric because he championed nudity or questioned the taboos on incest. He was aware of how men can be persuaded to do things that are not really in their best interests and sought to include warnings against such things, though his primary purpose remained entertainment.

His most popular story of the period was "Microcosmic God" (which appears in the collection Caviar and has been frequently anthologized). In fact, its popularity irked Sturgeon and the best he would say for it was that it came up with an almost plausible way of creating miracles. The premise is simple: a brilliant scientist creates life that lives at an accelerated rate. Eventually these creations evolve into a miniature human equivalent called "Neoterics" (the closeness in spelling to "neurotic" is quite intentional). The main character, the Microcosmic God of the title, subjects his creations to terrible calamities so that they will invent ways to get around the calamities, thinking up new inventions which he then markets and makes a fortune from them. The story is given scientific trappings to make this ultimate power fantasy seem possible rather than a piece of utter fantasy. So, while far from the best-written of Sturgeon's stories, it has long remained one of the most popular.

A consistent thread in Sturgeon's first period of work is that protagonists are often tripped up by their own intelligence or pride or lack of emotional involvement. "Microcosmic God" ends when Conànt, a banker who has been exploiting Kidder's inventions for profit, tries to use one of them to blackmail both Kidder and the U.S., while Kidder finds a way to shield himself. Kidder's behavior toward the Neoterics amply demonstrates his lack of compassion, and the story ends with a warning that one day the Neoterics will get even.

"It" and the protagonist of "Cellmate" are driven by their curiosity to tragic ends due to a lack of compassion. Likewise, the hero of "Deadly Ratio" discovers things he'd be better off not knowing, while the purely intellectual protagonist of "The Golden Egg" never discovers that what his lover wants from him is emotional involvement and instead interprets her actions as meaning that she can't abide his perfection and so counsels his replacement to "be a little stupid all the time and very stupid once in a while. But don't be perfect!" In "The Hag Seleen," a little girl almost inadvertently kills a scheming witch by turning her spell on its head. Over and over again Sturgeon warns that intellect must be wedded to compassion, to emotions, otherwise the self-absorbed are led astray.

After writing a couple dozen stories during 1939 and 1940, Sturgeon suddenly gave up writing for several years and took a trip to the tropics where he managed a hotel. He found that the warm, tropical climate of the West Indies was not conducive to sitting around the house concocting stories. Still only recently married and with a son to take care of, writing fell by the wayside until after World War II ended. By that time, Sturgeon was divorced, for which he blamed his own immaturity, but the blow left him an emotional zombie for a period of time. He moved in with Jerome Stanton and allowed Stanton to run his life for a time, and finally he went to see John Campbell again.

He broke out of his writer's block by writing "The Chromium Helmet" in Campbell's basement. The only story between it and "Medusa" was the justly famous "Killdozer!" a major novella for Astounding describing an alien presence taking over the operation of a bulldozer. (Sturgeon had learned how to operate heavy machinery when he accepted a job as a bulldozer operator in Puerto Rico during the War.) His days of writing fantasy farces like "Shottle Bop" (where a man learns how to be invisible to ghosts in their own dimension), "Brat" (the story of a changeling), and

"Cargo" (about fairy folk playing mischievous pranks on a tanker crew transporting them from war-torn Europe) were over.

In "Killdozer," Sturgeon experiments with alternating styles to tell the story, setting up "an organized electron-field possessing intelligence and mobility and a will to destroy, and little else" which takes over a powerful bulldozer and tries to kill the human inhabitants that share the island with it. The story is taut and suspenseful, with the protagonists Tom and Kelly carefully analyzing the impressive machine for any weakness as it implacably sets about ridding the island of all competing intelligences. The story is a powerful paen to the destructive power of machinery. (In 1974, the story was turned into an unfortunately poorly made-for-TV movie.)

Sturgeon knew he was undergoing a change in his writing. As he told David Hartwell in The New York Review of Science Fiction #7:

> I wrote "Killdozer" in nine days right in the middle of [his "entertainment"] period, in 1943. But the stories after that have all been with this preoccupation with the optimum man... They were about people who knew what they wanted and tried to get it, or who didn't know what they wanted, and the essence of the story was what it was that they were trying to get.

Sturgeon continued to inveigh against conformity and stupidity but he was bringing a more social bent to his writing. He intended "Memorial" to be a powerful indictment of the potential misuse of atomic energy, but the story proves too strident in tone. In it, he contrasts two scientists, Grenfell and Roway, who argue what it will take to frighten humanity away from nuclear conflict. Grenfell wants to build a memorial which will provide a horrible example of a nuclear war's consequences, a semi-eternal nuclear reaction housed in a pit while Roway argues that mankind will actually have to suffer through a nuclear war before it will learn. Roway betrays Grenfell who triggers the reaction and sets off the first atomic war, which inevitably leads to the creation of mutants who destroy mankind before dying out themselves.

Pessimism runs throughout Sturgeon's work, but the more hopeful "Thunder and Roses" proved a far better story, in fact one of Sturgeon's best, though often overlooked. "Thunder and Roses" postulates a United States where the U.S. has already lost a nuclear conflict and the survivors are barely hanging on. The protagonist, Pete, sits around bitterly thinking of revenge when he meets the singer Starr Anthim, who lets him know that the enemy miscalculated the amount of radiation and will itself suffer from its effects. If a retaliation is set off, in will ensure the end of mankind. Pete discovers the launching mechanism for some remaining missiles and eventually decides to destroy the mechanism so that the missiles may never be launched. Whatever mistakes have been made, mankind is worth saving, so he foregoes vengeance. As Sturgeon ends the story,

> "You'll have your chance," he said into the far future. "And by heaven, you'd better make good."

A final important story of Sturgeon's early period is "Maturity," another screed against conformity and stupidity. Sturgeon wasn't satisfied with the way the story turned out for its magazine appearance (Astounding, February 1947) and so used his first short story collection as an opportunity to revise the story heavily. (The subsequent reprints have all been of the superior, revised version of the story.) Sturgeon named a son Robin after Robin English, the protagonist of the story, describing his son as "the second rewrite."

The impetus for the story seems to have come from Sturgeon's having been told time and again that he wasn't being sufficiently practical and mature. Robin English is a creative genius who works on an associative level but who approaches the world in a childlike fashion. Dr. Peg Wenzell has fallen in love with Robin, but wants to change him, feeling that because of a chemical imbalance he is an overaged child. She persuades her colleague Mel Warfield to treat the young genius, and Mel agrees, assuming that English will be an even greater genius when he becomes more mature.

Indeed, initially Robin does become far more practical, and as a result wealthy. However, the change does not make him hap-

py and his creativity begins drying up as he becomes bored with everything around him. For Robin, maturity has meant that he has outgrown other people, perhaps the entire human race. He has had enough, and the story ends with the message, after Peg discovers that Robin became acromegalic and died, that "Enough is maturity--"

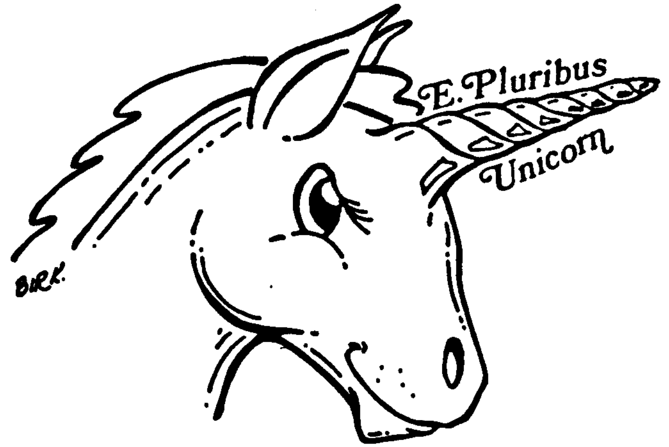
While well-intentioned, Peg and Mel tampered with Robin to their loss and his for no other reason than that he failed to conform to their expectations. Because they failed to understand him as a human being, they ended up inadvertantly destroying him. Also, in Robin, Sturgeon tried to follow Campbell's dictum of presenting him with a character that thinks "as well as a human being but not like a human being."

As the forties were drawing to a close, Sturgeon began to explore working in other markets, writing crime dramas and even westerns. In addition to his topic, the optimum man, he began exploring the ways of love and of synergy and syzygy. He promoted humanism and started breaking the taboos of the field as well as writing five novels, including the all-time classic More than Human.

OF LOVERS AND MISFITS

Despite the success of the 40s, the 50s were Sturgeon's "Golden Age," his most prolific period before a recurrent writer's block crippled his output, leaving him with unfulfilled contracts with many publishers and fewer and fewer markets to sell to. In the fifties, Sturgeon started tackling longer fiction, writing eight novels between 1950 and 1961: The Dreaming Jewels (1950), More Than Human (1953), I, Libertine (as Frederick R. Ewing, 1956), The King and Four Queens (western, movie story novelization, 1956), The Cosmic Rape (1958), Venus Plus X (1960), Some of Your Blood (1961), and Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea (movie novelization, 1961). In the fifties, Sturgeon also seriously set about the task of demolishing the taboos of the field.

Early American science fiction was very puritanical for quite some time. Famed SF writer Henry Kuttner tried including sex in stories under his own byline and the reaction was so negative that he became far better known by his pseudonyms than by the work under his own name. Philip Farmer



was practically the only other writer tackling sexual issues in works such as The Lovers (centering around an alien woman who must take a contraceptive) and the Freudian stories that make up Strange Relations.

"Unicorns loved only virgins,
Before Theodore Sturgeon's...."

ran a fannish couplet, referring to Sturgeon's classic fantasy, "Silken Swift," in which a loving unicorn rejects a cold-hearted virgon for a pure-hearted but sexually compromised woman. In "The Wages of Synergy," a chemical kills men during orgasm, a story equating love and death. "Affair with a Green Monkey" became famous in science fiction circles for dealing with sexual attitudes.

In this story, Frank Rhys represents the common man's closed-minded attitudes, with a fundamental hatred of "sick people, wrong people, different people," anyone who departs from what he considers to be what are the norms. Lool-yo is an alien emissary who has come to test humanity's psychosexual maturity, finding acceptance from Rhys's wife, but not Rhys, indicating that mankind has yet to fully mature. (This is made further explicit by the story's dirty joke ending in which it appears that mankind doesn't quite measure up, genitally speaking.)

But perhaps Sturgeon's most shocking story was "The World Well Lost," which made the theme of homosexuality an integral part of the story. The story begins by depicting a decadent Earth given over to sensual pleasures to make the coming hypocrisy even more ironic. To this hedonistic future Sturgeon brings two aliens, "featherless bipeds" who become nicknamed "the loverbirds," who are later revealed to be fugitives from the planet Dirbanu.

Earth desires good relations with Dirbanu and agrees to extradite the loverbirds back to their home planet under the guidance of "a most carefully screened crew." The crewmembers, Rootes and Grunty, are both men and are described as "primitives ...doers" rather than thinkers or feelers.

Grunty becomes terrified when he discovers that the loverbirds can read his thoughts and might discover his secret, so he resolves to kill them. When he approaches them, they communicate with him that they are both male and he elects to help him escape. Rootes approves of his actions, concluding that Grunty "got rid of 'em so's I wouldn't kill 'em and mess everything up?...Anything I can't stand, it's a fruit." They tell the Dirbanu that the loverbirds are dead, which pleases the Dirbanu who nonetheless refuse to open their planet to Earthlings.

Sturgeon provides a neat snap ending to the story in which Grunty muses on the inability of beings to rationally shoose the ones to love, revealing subtly and tastefully Grunty's homosexual yearnings toward his sleeping bunkmate. Grunty is considered a "deviant" by society and would be scorned if he were discovered, but he is also a person with intelligence and something valuable to contribute. This became a major theme for Sturgeon throughout the fifties.

What is particularly brilliant about Sturgeon's technique is that he doesn't preach and doesn't score his points didactically. As with his other misfits, he neither condemns nor defends aberrant behavior, the behavior simply being treated as something his protagonists do, and through compassionate characterization, Sturgeon makes the point for tolerance.

The flip side of tolerance is explored in a fascinating story called "Mr. Costello, Hero." Like many others. Sturgeon was disturbed by the growing presence and influence of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. One day when he was stuck for a story, H.L. Gold suggested that he simply write about a man waiting at a station for someone to arrive, and because his feelings were so strong, whatever he felt about strongly enough would come through in his story. Sturgeon took his advice to heart and wrote one of the most sharply-edged portraits of Joe McCarthy as was ever written in the generally timid fifties, a portrait that captured not only McCarthy's methods and mannerisms, but also sought out his motivations, where he was coming from, and what made him do what he did. It is this kind of character understanding that Sturgeon often sought and which makes his best characterizations so memorable. Sturgeon's Mr. Costello wants power, and to gain it, he knows he must pit one group against another. Then he uses fear on the part of the majority that they might be suspected of being a member of a hated minority to get the majority to do whatever Mr. Costello desires. While the story is told from the point-of-view of a sycophant who worships Mr. Costello, Sturgeon's ironic point is all too clear.

Another important story is "The Skills of Xanadu," in which a man named Bril discovers a wonderful planet full of highly talented people with unusual talents. Bril secretly plots the conquest of Xanadu and learns its secret--a belt that allows the wearer access to the skills of any member of the community. He takes this belt back to his own society, hoping to use its powers against the people of Xanadu, but as a result of its usage, his own society is changed as it gets greater access to "philosophy and logic and love; sympathy, empathy, forbearance, unity...membership in harmony with all life everywhere." Sturgeon puts forth the concept that technology which allows access to greater skills and knowledge can free mankind from social systems dependent on slavery or obedience, and would direct individuals to working in greater harmony with their species because wants and desires are no longer denied. It is a very optimistic look at the future; the belt could be a metaphor for computerbased informational technology, and that through it mankind could achieve true freedom.

More and more Sturgeon examined mankind's nature and behavior, trying to diagnose the root cause for man's ills and how he might improve his lot. He was constantly confronting mankind's cruelty and how it might be replaced by a new dictum--be kind. Often considered something of a misfit himself, Sturgeon spent more and more time pleading the case for misfits and extolling the ideas of increased intelligence, greater understanding, and basic brotherhood.

His first novel, The Dreaming Jewels (which has also been published under the title The Synthetic Man), is highly con-

cerned with cruelty and brutality. Sturgeon, reflecting on it years later, told me that he felt compelled to create father figures and destroy them as he worked out the feelings he had for his own father. The book provides a brilliant example of the hook paragraph, an opening paragraph which "hooks" the reader's interest and compels him to want to know more:

> The caught the kid doing something disgusting out under the bleachers at the high-school stadium, and he was sent home from grammar school across the street. He was eight years old then. He'd been doing it for years.

By the time you discover that the "disgusting" thing was eating ants, you are caught up in this elaborate fairy tale allegory about an abused child named Horty who runs away and joins a colorful group of carnival refugees. In the process of the tale, Horty will discover the difference between love and hate, human and humane, the group and self, and what it means to be different or deviant.

Norty grows up with the special ability of being able to regenerate lost tissue (e.g., the three fingers his father had amputated by slamming a closet door on Horty's hand). Horty can also assume any form he desires, and he uses this ability to foil his foster father's attempted seduction of a schoolmate of Horty's. Armand, the father, goes looking for him and comes across Pierre Monetre the Maneater, who owns the carnival that Horty once worked for disguised as a female midget named Kiddo.

Maneater also wants to get his paws on Horty because years before he caught a glimpse of the Dreaming Jewels, a crystalline life-form that cna make duplicates of living things. (All of Horty's close friends turn out to be living duplicates of this type.) Maneater wants to use the crystals to destroy mankind rather than to create new life-forms, and he suspects that Horty has the power to focus the energy of the crystals. Zena, Horty's female midget friend, knows Maneater's intentions and tries to shelter him from Maneater and his father. Their close relationship is the heart of this ambitious, interesting, and sadly somewhat malformed fable.

The books suffers a common weakness of fables in that it tends to have "types" rather than fully fleshed characters. Sturgeon does what he can to motivate Maneater's misanthropy, but mostly he is simply a force for evil in the novel, as is the blackmailing Armand. This lack of humanity on the part of the subsidiary characters, except for the well-drawn Zena, is a failing, as one of the major thrusts of the work is Zena "manufacturing" Horty into a human being. For him to reach his potential, she knows that she must raise his "estimates of himself as a human being." A key theme of the work is the loneliness felt by outsiders, of which Horty is a prime example. To save the human race, he must learn to put survival of the species and survival of the group above survival of self. To achieve these ends, Zena exposes him to what mankind as a species has produced--art and knowledge to give him a good understanding of human nature, although they admittedly find some of the material tainted with "a gallon of smug certitude, of bland assumption that humanity was the peak of creation."

Despite my reservations, The Dreaming Jewels is an interesting, beautifully written book, well worth exploring even if not wholly successful. However, Sturgeon was to evolve his storytelling techniques beyond these initial crudities just as he sets up an evolution for mankind in his second and greatest novel, More than Human. Winner of the International Fantasy Award, More Than Human has made several lists as one of the ten best science fiction novels ever written, an exquisitely rendered work that grew out of Sturgeon's classic novella "Baby Is Three" (Sturgeon hated it when people confused the title with the lyric "Baby Makes Three" from the song "My Blue Heaven").

Sturgeon fills the work with stark, telling images and prose, right from the opening, which describes the Idiot who "lived in a black and gray world, punctuated by the white lightning of hunger and the flickering of fear." As Damon Knight once remarked of the prose, it's all "violins and stained glass and velvet and little needles in your throat." Despite being divided into three very different novellas, the style is consistently textured and the theme of disparate individuals coming together to form a homo gestalt, a society where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, gives the book a unifying arc. This is one of science fic-

tion's few masterpieces and should be revered as such.

Lone is the "Fabulous Idiot" of the first part of the novel, a telepath with hypnotic powers who gathers five strange children together, each of whom seems to have a psionic power. There is Janie, who has the power of telekinesis; Bonnie and Beanie, twins who can teleport anywhere; Baby, a Mongoloid who works as a central processing unit; and Gerry, whose connection to the rest remains initially uncertain. But while Lone has brought the group together, he does not possess the mental powers to lead it.

"Baby Is Three" takes place ten years later, after Lone has been dead for some time. Gerry visits a psychiatrist to try and discover why he murdered Miss Kew, who was kind to him. Slowly he discovers that Miss Kew has let a young Gerry into her mind and their relationship was dissolving the link between him and the other children. United as one, the organization had Gerry murder her to protect itself. Gerry then demonstrates that he has the same hypnotic powers as Lone as he uses his powers to make the psychiatrist forget their interview. The section ends with Gerry looking forward to seeing what homo gestalt can do.

The last part, "Morality," examines what is still missing from the mixture. The main character here is Hip Barrows, who as a young man happened across an anti-gravity device that Lone had manufactured but let slip away. Janie comes across him, rescues him from jail, and tells him about the entity of which she is a part. She has Hip teach Gerry about morality and ethics. Hip makes the group finally complete, and the entity discovers for the first time that there are other entities like it around.

Once more the heroes are misfits, but this time Sturgeon makes them more believably human. He breaks down man into various components and demonstrates that these components must interact to function properly, and that man himself is not alone but must function with other entities. Crucial is what is at the head of the group. Lone, despite his kindness, was an idiot-savant. Gerry, in turn, was much brighter, but also a sadist who becomes easily bored and as a result regressed into childish viciousness. Hip is something of a stand-in for Sturgeon himself,

a brilliant, muscular boy who seems to have everything, including an autocratic father who insists that he become a doctor and who sees Hip as "useless" and the things Hip wants as "worthless." Hip learns how to assert himself and becomes the small, quiet voice of conscience for the group.

Central to the novel are the themes of loneliness and alienation as driving forces within mankind. All the characters to one degree or another experience loneliness. In "Baby Is Three," Gerry overlooks that now that his group has become a single entity; it is both unique and alone, especially after the death of Miss Kew. It is also important to learn that before you can love someone else, you must first learn to love yourself. The homo gestalt group must transcend the traditional barriers of racial bigotry, inadequate communication, emotional blocks, warped sexual attitudes and thereby achieve a satisfying but human communality. Sturgeon believes strongly in the group, but not at the expense of individuality, rather both drives must be balanced. Through his story, Sturgeon explores the advantages of mutual interdependence and the need for psychic integration within mankind. Incisively, he examines what it means to be human, and more than human. It is a grandiose theme grandly presented with unforgettable flair and style. This is truly an SF novel that will haunt you for the rest of your life.

One of Sturgeon's most unpleasant experiences was his attempt to transform More Than Human into a motion picture. He worked with the great Orson Welles, laboring for months on the project only to discover that Welles had continuously chipped away at the concepts until he had turned it into something entirely different. Sturgeon's initial high regard for the man turned to total disgust; he felt he had been caught up in a spell and was much relieved that the spell was broken and the film never made.

Remarkably enough, More Than Human was transformed or adapted into a film under another title, but this was done without having procured the rights. As a result, the adaptation was never released and has only received very limited showings. (Bill Warren did a report on it several years ago in the old Science Fiction Review, edited by Dick Geis.)

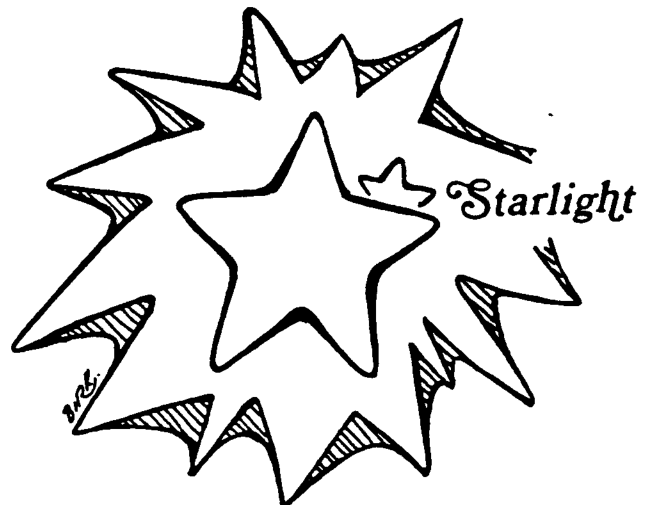
Sturgeon's next two novels were not science fiction. The King and Four Queens was a western based on a story by Margaret Fitt. (Sturgeon also produced a collection of western stories, published in an obscure volume entitled Sturgeon's West, collaborating on three tales with Don War.) I, Libertine was derived from a radio show by Jean Shepherd, a humorist (In God We Tru$t; Wanda Hickey's Golden Night of Memories, the film A Christmas Story) who kept making references on his show to a book which he called the rage of the continent and from which he liked to quote little epigrams. Shepherd had claimed that the book was written by Frederick R. Ewing, and soon radio audiences began demanding where they could get copies of the book. Smelling a quick buck, Shepard contacted Sturgeon to help him pound out a saucy tale of a rake involved with the legal system in Britain in the 18th century. (The book was only published once in hardcover and paperback with a very colorful Kelly Freas cover.)

Sturgeon was later to write a novelization of Irwin Allen's Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea and ghosted one of the better Ellery Queen novels, Player to the Other Side. However, he was thwarted at most of his attempts at mainstream fiction, occasionally having to give a story fantasy or science fictional elements in order to sell it, though he managed to publish "A Way Home," a story about the power of imagination, which contains neither science fiction nor fantasy, in the 1953 issue of Amazing Stories.

Sturgeon's next science fiction novel, The Cosmic Rape (also known as To Marry Medusa), is often unjustly underrated or overlooked. In a way, it is another example of joining, as Sturgeon took his "Medusa" novella and added some short stories centering around the same phenomenon to flesh it out to novel length, but I think these additional tales and viewpoints add quite a bit to the book. The Medusa is a hive mind composed of races from more than two galaxies who contacts a despicable human being named Danny Gurlick. The Medusa cannot understand why humanity does not have a hive mind like the other races it has absorbed and assumes that this must be some type of defensive maneuver. It goads Gurlick into discovering how human minds might be united, and then set up the machinations for this to take place.

The story is punctuated by dramatic vignettes about what happens to various characters as humanity is about to be transformed into a hive consciousness. This global consciousness begins to fight back, using its human components as expendable cannon fodder. However, Medusa has an alternate plan involving Gurlick impregnating a human woman with altered sperm. Gurlick rapes a homely and unloaved minor character. However, the tables are turned once more, returning man kind to individuality with a common purpose, gaining the boon of telepathy, and the Medusa hive itself is likewise dissolved.

Again and again, Sturgeon returns to the idea that to feel love, one must have self-knowledge. Many of the minor characters have driven themselves to extremes and are out of balance. They all feel lost and unloved, but when the separate parts of humanity come together, each individual part aids some other individual--retaining individuality while achieving unity. Mankind liberates itself from its old faults like pride, greed, and lust, and supplants these with a will to achieve, wonder, worship and have faith. Sturgeon's message is that every individual holds the seeds for beauty, love, purpose and altruistic action. Skillfully, he blends fiction with philosophy in a book which nonetheless lives up to its exploitative and garish title.



His other novels are Venus Plus X, Some of Your Blood, and the psothumously published Godbody. Each is a daring work. Venus Plus X explores sexual roles and attitudes. Herb Raile tries hard to see women as equal to men and is willing to chare in household duties and responsibilities, while other families are shown in contrasting, negative sexual attitudes. However, the main part of the narrative takes place in a utopia called Ledom (note what it spells backwards) where such attitudes cannot exist because everyone there is of the same sex. Charlie Johns, a young man from our culture, awakens in Ledom and slowly discovers how their land is different from ours, throwing in relief how sexual attitudes come to affect society, as well as an idealized religion that Sturgeon comes up with. Though more interesting than most utopian novels, it still functions more as a lecture than as a story, and the contemporary scenes positively creak with outdated attitudes, writing, and characterization.

Some of Your Blood, a borderline fantasy novel, is the case history of what turns out to be a menstrual vampire. What was shocking in 1961, however, even though sensitively handled seems rather blase' today and George Smith just isn't that interesting a character. More successful by far is Godbody, another attempt at a fable but one with real characters and which is ingeniously constructed.

Sturgeon believed that mankind had an innate need for worship, and that early priests prostituted this desire by requiring that all sex be first sanctified by the church, compelling people to come worship and pay tithes. What would happen, he wondered, if a Christ figure came down and told people "Love your neighbor" and meant it literally?

Like Jim Thompson's remarkable The Kill-Off, the point-of-view alters to a different character with each chapter of the story, and through the way each character tells their story, we can understand where that person is coming from and what is motivating them. Sturgeon contrasts repressed characters with liberated ones. The point of the story was not to extol promiscuity, something that Sturgeon has condemned in the past, but merely freedom from hang-ups, an ability to love fully and honestly without reservation. Though the book could have benefitted from a bit more final polish, it is still a fine tribute to Sturgeon's skill as a writer and carefully brings together many of his major themes on love and alienation.

Sturgeon branched out into other fields, writing book reviews for Venture, The National Review, Galaxy, and The New York Times Book Review. Many of these reviews should be collected together if only to show the variety he read; Sturgeon loved to extol the extraordinary. The reviews he gave were generally psoitive, but that is because he preferred not to waste his time on a bad book unless it was by a major writer who has shown he can do better. Instead, he concentrated on pointing out delightful tomes which readers may have otherwise missed.

He also tried his hand in the television field, writing two of the most beloved Star Trek episodes, "Amok Time," in which Spock experiences what it is like to go through a rut (Sturgeon was very proud of getting this past the network censors), and "Shore Leave," a planet where daydreams are brought to life with occasionally disastrous results. (One can see the genesis for "Amok Time" in his story "Never Underestimate" in which human males experience rutting. Sturgeon noted that because he was very cooperative with the staff at Star Trek, he was able to have the entire show re-edited in order to save what he felt was the best and most important line in the show, when Spock says to his fiancee, "After a time you may find that having is not so pleasing a thing, after all, as wanting. It is not logical, but it is often true.") His story "The Case and the Dreamer" was originally written as a television pilot which was never made.

Increasingly plagued by writer's block,

the stream of stories was reduced to a trickle, but many of them were highly regarded. "The Man Who Lost the Sea" and "When You Care, When You Love" were both Hugo nominees, and "The Man Who Learned Loving" was a Nebula nominee. Then in 1969 the block suddenly lifted and Sturgeon produced 11 stories in 11 weeks. These, along with 1954's "To Here and the Easel" were published in the collection Sturgeon Is Alive and Well.... While not all of the stories were distinguished, "Slow Sculpture" won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards and the high regard of all who read it.

Sturgeon published a couple of his best stories for Harlan Ellison, with whom he had collaborated on the story "Runesmith" (see Partners in Wonder): the titled "If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?" which studied irrational attitudes toward incest, and Sturgeon's final story, "Why Dolphins Don't Bite," for Ellison's excellent Medea collection. However, the one Sturgeon story which most brings back that wonderful man to me is "Dazed" (available in The Stars Are the Styx collection) because the dazed hero is so obviously Sturgeon himself and the story is chock-full of Sturgeon's thinking and opinions, which he had repeated throughout the years I had known him. The dazed man tries to speculate why good people can act stupid or act in self-defeating ways. He figures that something basic in the world must be out of balance. Eventually he learns to accept the basic rightness of All That Is, that evil is in the eye of the beholder, that good is balanced with evil, and in the permanence of good and evil there is constant change.

Sturgeon dedicated the last years of his life to the philosophy of "Go Ask the Next Question," which he symbolized as a Q with an arrow through it, thusly:

He said many of our problems stem from our failure to understand, to proceed to the next logical question, no matter where it takes us. We are too quick to judge only on partial evidence. To illustrate his point, he told an anecdote about a young man pushing an old lady to the ground. People react, how terrible for that punk to do that. But in going to the next question to see why, perhaps the young man had saved the old woman's life from a parked truck that didn't have its brake set and was rolling toward her. One little piece of information can make a big difference, but if we don't go to ask the next question, we never really learn it.

The best way to experience Sturgeon's writing is obviously to read it yourself. A story like "Yesterday Was Monday" is constantly surprising; even as he wrote it Sturgeon said he had no idea where he was going with it. (The story was eventually adapted into a New Twilight Zone episode with the great black actor Adolph Caesar.) "To Here and the Easel" is practically a prose poem on what it is to be an artist, a brilliant piece willed with stunning verbal pyrotechnics. "A Saucer of Loneliness" is heartbreakingly beautiful, a rich tapestry of words that captures what it is to be absolutely alone in the universe, and then to discover that you are not so alone after all. If you listen to the sound of his work being read aloud, you'll be aware of how much of it sings, images and action blending together in a pleasing flow, with sharp contrasts in word length or choice for added texture. There is a definite rhythm in Sturgeon's work that is missing from many other writers, and it easily becomes apparent why James Blish described him as "the finest conscious artist science fiction has ever had," no small praise from the writer of a complex story such as "Common Time."

Sadly, many of Sturgeon's short story collections are out of print and there are several Sturgeon stories which have yet to be collected. I'd love to someday bring these "lost" Sturgeon pieces together in book form, and perhaps someday Sturgeon's stature as a writer of stories--that is, good fiction about people, not just ideas --will be reassessed and the literary world will recognize we have lost a major artist. Still, when you can, seek out More Then Human, The Stars Are the Styx, The Golden Helix, E Pluribus Unicorn, A Touch of Strange, A Way Home, Godbody, Case and the Dreamer, Aliens 4, Beyond and others. I envy your first experience of their beauty.

Dennis K. Fischer
October, 1990 [*]

Tributes to Theodore Sturgeon

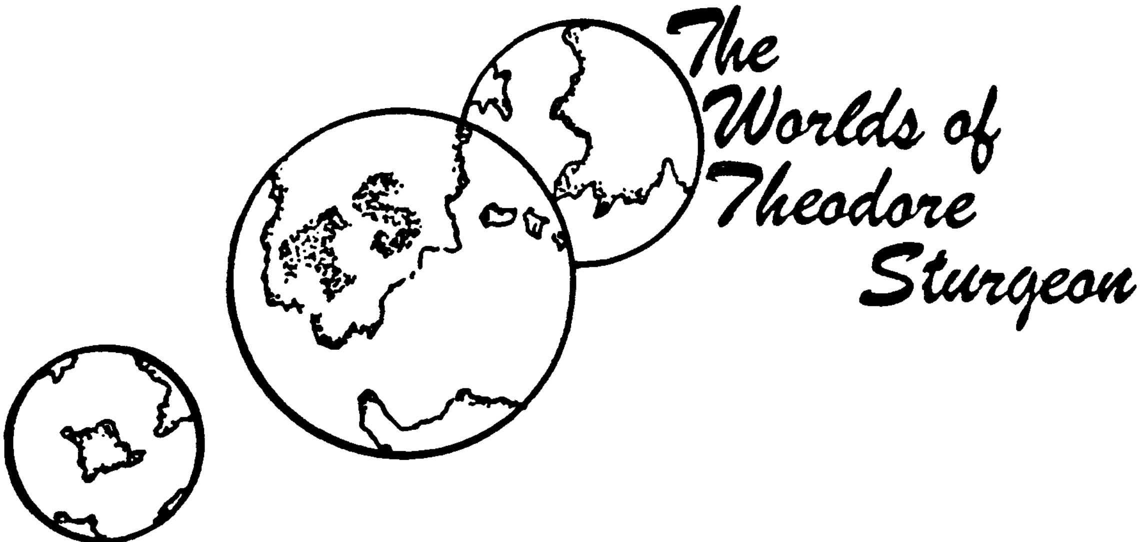
I haven't any scholarly comment to make about the subjects of your Special issues, escept to note that Ted Sturgeon was the nicest person I think I have ever met. At SUNCON in 1977, in the Blood Drive autograph line, I was thrilled to meet Robert Heinlein and to receive his autograph; but it was Sturgeon who delighted me by his fascination and excitement with my camera, the then-recent "instant developing" pictures of the Polaroid SX70. At that convention I was having authors sign their own photos; Sturgeon insisted on watching the photo develop, then asked most diffidently for a copy for himself--if it wasn't too expensive--and could his wife be in the picture? I, of course, didn't mind at all, and his thanks were profuse. Considering that I was feeling very shy about imposing on these authors with my request for photos and autographs, that little encounter really pleased me. Oh, he wasn't the only person to be fascinated with the camera, but his attention to one shy young fan was truly nice. Incidentally, Sturgeon was not the only person to ask for a copy, but he was the only one to hesitate due to the expense of the film!

Ruth M. Shields
July, 1990 |*|

I've read a few of Ted Sturgeon's books and stories, and generally back away after a while. This guy writes about grownup horrors and truths, and I'm not sure I'm ready to handle them all yet! He can also get very graphic, and I have a low threshold for horror/gore/etc. I appreciate his warmth, his humor, and capacity to share and suggest all sorts of things about his fellow humans. I look at the world differently after reading anything by Ted Sturgeon, which is certainly one of the reasons I read SF: to tinker with my perceptions, maybe even to learn something new about myself and others.

Years ago, I remember that he kept an audience mesmerized at a MINICON during a reading of two stories. One, "The Graveyard Reader", was about grave reading, and the other about a strange toilet, "Pruzzi's Pot." I remember each very well: his reading was riveting, and the subject matter was odd enough to wonder just what he'd say next!

Jeanne Mealy
1989 |*|



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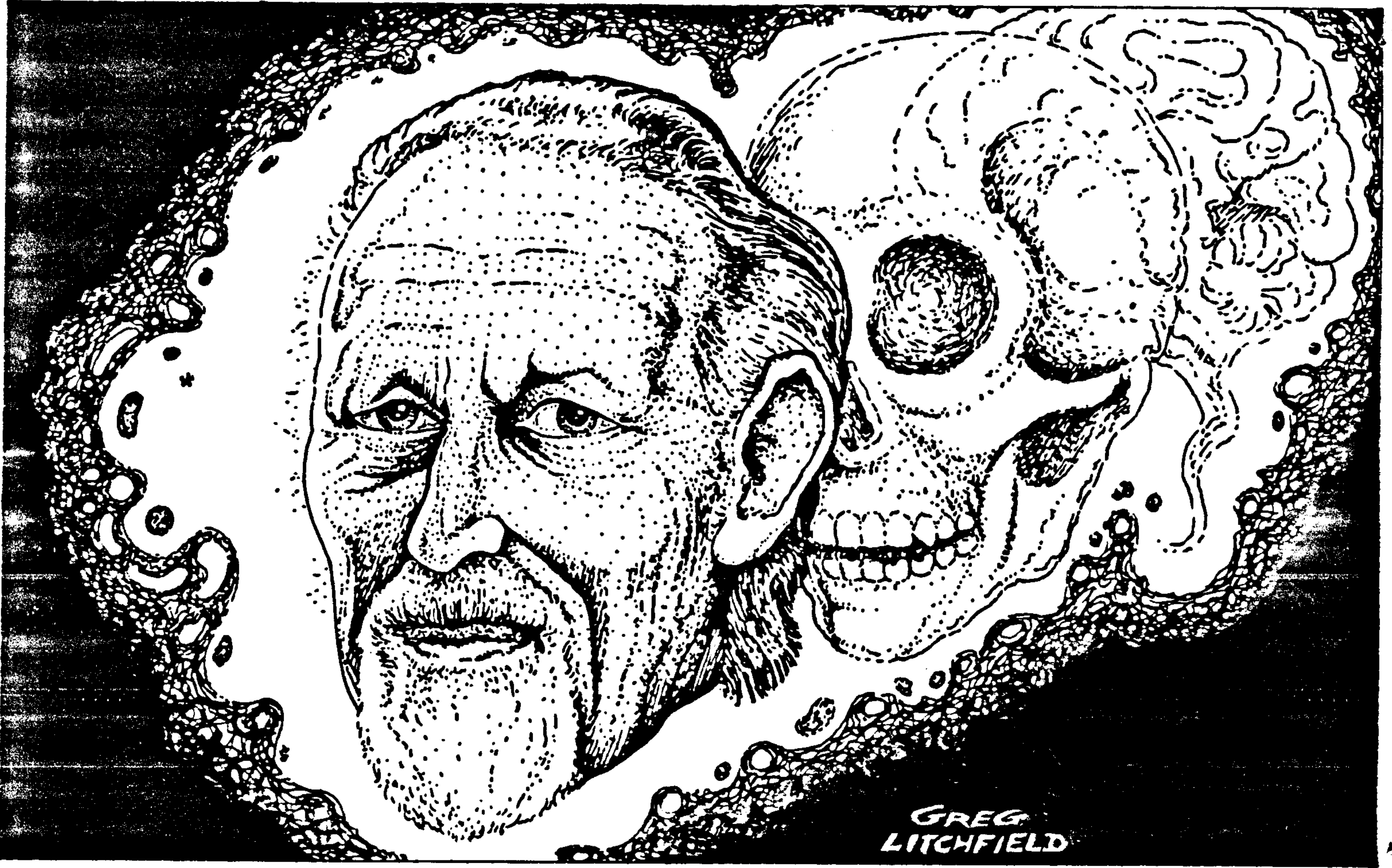
A Theodore Sturgeon Special



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