

Lines of Occurrence 4

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READING THE STUFF

It usually begins with Robert Heinlein or Andre Norton, but as I've mentioned here before, for me it began with Fredric Brown. MARTIANS, GO HOME was probably not the very first sf novel I read, but it's the one I remember as influencing me, with its combination of sex & smartass. Looking back, I find that I was never much one for reading about adventures. Battles, chases, and struggles were things that I just sort of accepted as the stuff they put in popular fiction, but what I was looking for was people, ideas, and laughs.

In any event, in my adolescence I mostly read short stories--Groff Conklin anthologies, rather than zines. One book I particularly remember was My Best Science Fiction Story, edited by Leo Margulies & Oscar J. Friend. It was marvelous stuff--rocket ships, wondrous inventions, and my particular favorite, Edmond Hamilton's "The Inn Outside the World," in which the great men of history contrive to meet in a timeless dimension, or somesuch. It was also shit, of course--standardized characters, tripe dialog, translations of mundane tales (the ~~Martin~~ Martian showing he was as good as anyone Lee, etc.). The Hamilton story wound up with a clumsier version of "It's not whether you win or lose..." (And yes, the great men were all great men, but like most people, I didn't notice that.)

I may not have read a whole lot of science fiction, but I accepted (as I still do) what might be called the science-fictional view of what constitutes a likely & desirable future. Later, Tim Leary would sum it up as SMILE: Space Migration, Increased Intelligence, a Life Extension. Some have called it a power trip, and perhaps it is for some, but for me it is potentially the Human Liberation Movement. It is the idea of setting us free from the constraints of being on a tiny little planet in the ass end of the galaxy, liberating as many of us as possible from having to earn our bread in the sweat of our brows, improving the powers of our minds so that we can think & communicate & love better, separating the sharing of sex from the reproduction of our kind to the benefit of both, and overcoming the final tyrant: death.

My father encouraged me in the reading of sf. He was born in the same country as Karel Capek, and he grew up reading Jules Verne, and no one had ever told him that sf was supposed to be shit. It wasn't until college that I started doing sizeable amounts of recreational reading, but when I did, one of the things I turned to was my father's library.

I did not read many of the garish red-&-blue Ace doubles, but I tried the somewhat seemlier Ballantine paperbacks, and the serials in GALAXY. And so, I became acquainted with Frederik Pohl, and his marvelously inventive futures; with Arthur C. Clarke, and the inspiring vision of CHILDHOOD'S END; and with the pyrotechnic short stories of Alfred Bester, notably the one that he then called "Starcomber," but is now again called "5,271,009."

My senior year in college, I ran with a pack of English majors. I did not condemn sf, but I merely had no time for it, as I attempted to relate to the likes of Pound and Eliot. The summer after graduation, I was still reading serious literature, but also occasionally dipping into sf. In particular, I sought out the "Year's Best" anthologies--Judith Merrill and the ones from F & SF--and there I discovered a powerful story called "All the Sounds of Fear." I resolved to get my hands on all the writings of its author (Harlan Ellison), a task which proved quite challenging even for one who haunted the second-hand bookstores as I did then.

That summer, too, I discovered Vonnegut, via CAT'S CRADLE. Since I had not been taught to see a wall between sf and real/serious/mainstream/mainline fiction, I merely noted without much thought that this could be thought of as a kind of semi-sf, like ON THE BEACH. (Except that CAT'S CRADLE was a whole lot of fun, and ON THE BEACH had bored my ass off.) I sought out his writings, too, finding on my father's shelves a paperback called UTOPIA 14, which turned out to be a dystopia, perhaps more like Huxley & Orwell than Pohl & Kornbluth. (All other editions of the book have been called PLAYER PIANO, in case you are wondering.)

Fall 1965: After more than a year in grad school, I was facing the fact that I would not simply move straight thru to a doctorate in Math & become a professor. And whilst I tried to figure out what I would do next, I was reading a variety of things. I had taken to ordering books from Blackwell's, in England, because over there, writers like Faulkner & Hemingway were published in mass-market paperbacks. Here one could only get them in quality paperbacks at the obscenely inflated price of \$1.95. One of the catalogs Blackwell's sent me included science fiction, and there was a book called THE DEMOLISHED MAN, by my old friend Alfred Bester.

I was ready to be changed, influenced, moved, shaken--and Bester was the man to do it. As I went through the motions of my last semester of graduate school, much more of my attention went to altering my consciousness with sf. There was, as I have mentioned elsewhere, STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND, and a variety of other Heinlein books, from DOUBLE STAR down to PODKAYNE OF MARS. There was Vonnegut's THE SIRENS OF TITAN, sf by any conceivable definition and magnificently inventive. There was Philip K. Dick's THE THREE STIGMATA OF PALMER ELDRITCH, which many have called the ultimate psychedelic-drug book. (I suspect that none who have said that have ever taken psychedelic drugs, but the book is an awesome experience in its own right.) There were fascinating short story collections by C. M. Kornbluth and Robert Sheckley, among others. There was Theodore Sturgeon's VENUS PLUS X, a book which reflects & inspires thought, and yet, like most Utopias is a fictional travelog rather than a story.

And there was Isaac Asimov. I had read his story, "The Last Question," and I share his high opinion of it. It is, in a way, the ultimate science fiction story. Now I finally read The Foundation Trilogy. I was fascinated by the idea of "psychohistory." (And I am now pissed off at the social scientists for taking over that word to describe studies of the long-term effects of Nixon's potty training.) It showed me the power a science of human behavior could have, and it also showed me the limitations. For it pointed out that no study can predict individuals better than the physical sciences can predict individual molecules (a concession BF Skinner refuses to make), and that one human "molecule" that fails to obey the rules can influence many others, as the Mule does. (Asimov fudged this point by making the Mule a "mutant" and thus a special case, possibly because to do otherwise would conflict with his liberal faith that masses of people, rather than great individuals, make history.)

Another thing I liked about the trilogy was its wish-fulfillment aspects. There is a stereotype that sf readers are puny, smart kids who get the crap beaten out of them by large, dumb kids. I must admit that the stereotype holds up in my case.

A somewhat imaginative puny smart person will gain symbolic revenge by writing fantasies of the Conan variety, in which he is transformed into someone even bigger & stronger than his tormentors, whereupon he beats the crap out of them. A more imaginative one will do what Asimov did, and will create a world where "violence is the last resort of the incompetent," and the smart people defeat the large dumb ones by sheer cleverness. (This is by no means entirely fantasy. Actually, violence is the first resort of the incompetent and the last resort of the competent. It does work at times, but nowhere near as many as your average general would think.)

ANALYTICAL INTUITIVE



SPLIT BRAIN RESEARCH?
WHO - ME?

((DIGRESSION ALERT: I feel I'd better say something about this wish-fulfillment business. Some critics, like Thomas M. Disch, hate sf because of its wish-fulfillment aspects. They feel that these keep it from being literature. But I feel that such things are irrelevant to literary merit, rather than contrary to it. By analogy, a book which does nothing but describe sexual acts in a positive, arousing way is of limited value; but the mere presence of such descriptions does not devalue a book. Likewise, books which are set in a future where human intelligence has brought us SMI LE can be either good or bad, and confining oneself to writing such books need not be a harmful restriction. Let me give you an example: One of my all-time favorite books is, I have just realized, excellent wish-fulfillment fantasy. In it, the puny smart people not only defeat the large stupid people, but take over the bodies of the latter, leaving them to puny sick bodies. And yet, this book has much literary merit: rounded characterization, brilliant and witty dialog, and a plot which, by skilled misdirection, leads up to both an expected ending and a surprise. The book in question is called CAMP CONCENTRATION.))

To return to our story: At this point, I embarked upon something of an adventure in consensus reality. I joined the War on Poverty and was shipped to San Francisco. There I found a variety of places which offered to alter my consciousness, of which the ones that are relevant here are the magnificent second-hand bookstores, like The Albatross and Macdonalds. (Are they still there?) There I caught up with the out-of-print work of Dick, Farmer, and Blish, among others.

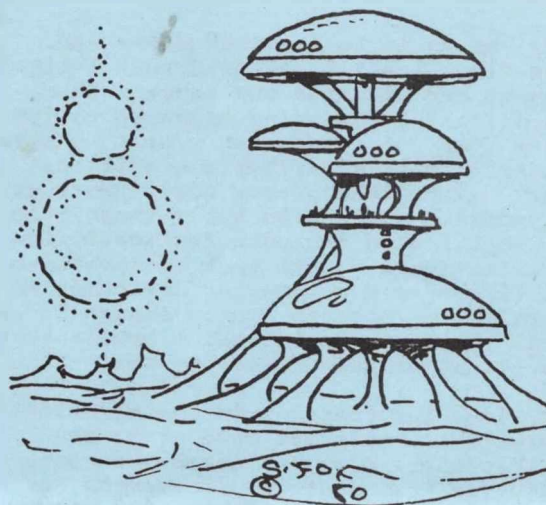
I did not, as I do not, confine myself to sf as my only fictional input. Two books which influenced me notably at this stage of my life were *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*, by Thomas Pynchon, and *THE HARRAD EXPERIMENT*, by Robert Rimmer. And yet, in a way, these were not entirely different from sf. *LOT 49* may have had no science fiction in it, but it awoke in me a desire for something to which fandom is the closest approximation I have yet found. And *HARRAD*, with its unbelievably good characters lecturing about wonders that we do not yet have in consensus reality, is closer to utopias from *LOOKING BACKWARD* to *VENUS PLUS X* than it is to most of what passes for mainstream fiction.

Occasionally, I would discover a new (to me) sf writer. I found John Brunner, and profoundly enjoyed *THE WHOLE MAN*, *BEDLAM PLANET*, and *THE LONG RESULT* (*STAND ON ZANZIBAR* was then just about to be published), while wading through a certain amount of plain old adventure fiction. ((To jump ahead of our story, the next year, Brunner would do an utterly delightful little book called *TIMESCOOP*, a bit of light-hearted fun which is rather different from his usual work. I'm mentioning it here because Dell plans to reprint it at about the time this zine will come out, and I urge you to give it a try.))

But I noticed a lot of new people had books on the stands, and I was looking for a way to sample these writers and see which I wanted to explore further. (I repeat that I had never gotten the prozine habit.) Lo, and behold, there was an opportunity. My old hero Ellison had put together a book with a whole bunch of different writers in it: *DANGEROUS VISIONS*. I took it out of the library, and discovered a new group of writers. I said hello to Larry Niven, John T. Sladek, R. A. Lafferty, Norman Spinrad, and Roger Zelazny, and vowed to read more of their work. That turned out to be an excellent idea. (I also vowed to avoid the writings of the authors of the book's 2 utter turkeys--"Flies" and "Aye, and Gomorrah," but fortunately, I broke that vow.)

Another interesting thing happened at the San Francisco Library. I discovered that there were books about sf. Oh, of course I'd read *NEW MAPS OF HELL*, which explained that sf could be respectable enough to be discussed openly in the Ivy League, so long as it stuck to responsible tasks like social satire, and didn't try to mess with sex or love, or anything like that.

Now I found most of the other books about contemporary sf: Sam Moskowitz's *SEEKERS OF TOMORROW*, Damon Knight's *IN SEARCH OF WONDER*, and the Advent symposia: *OF WORLDS BEYOND* and *THE SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL*. That was almost all that existed at that time (1968). Alexei Panshin's *HEINLEIN IN DIMENSION* was just about to be published; the library did not have *THE ISSUE AT HAND*; and the other 2 extant books--*A REQUIEM FOR ASTOUNDING* and *THE UNIVERSES OF E.E. SMITH*--I rightly or wrongly considered beneath even me. And that was all.



I wanted more. I wanted to argue with Knight, whose chapter on FNORD "Decadents" included about half of my favorite writers. I wished that there were magazines or something full of discussions of science fiction. *I still do!* Little did I suspect.

1968-9. While attempting to disguise myself as a normal person (junior high school teacher), I repeatedly escaped in my spare time to the worlds of sf. I discovered Alexei Panshin's delightful & underrated Anthony Vilkiers books. I entered the elegant worlds of the lovable old elitist, Cordwainer Smith. Following up on my *DANGEROUS VISIONS* discoveries, I had the pleasure of reading *MECHASM*, *FOURTH MANSIONS*, and *BUG JACK BARRON*. And I discovered some more writers.

Frank Herbert & I have a communications problem. He seems to be discussing interesting things, but somehow not in a manner that I am programmed to pick up. I found *UNDER PRESSURE* tedious & mundane, but *DESTINATION: VOID*, *THE EYES OF HEISENBERG*, and *THE SANTAROGA BARREER* all gave me that tantalized feeling.

Samuel R. Delany is a fascinatingly inconsistent writer. His skill in using the language ranges from the expertise of a master to the fumble-fingeredness of a Hugo Gernsback on downers. His early books had plots from *THRILLING WONDER STORIES*; his later ones go on and on, ending upon the receipt of some sign unperceived by his readers. And yet *BABEL-17*, *NOVA*, and *TRITON*, among others, are experiences not to be missed.

And I discovered Robert Silverberg shortly after he discovered himself--early in the 5-year period in which *TO OPEN THE SKY*, *HAWKSBILL STATION*, *THE TIME HOPPERS*, *THE MASKS OF TIME*, *ACROSS A BILLION YEARS*, *UP THE LINE*, *NIGHTWINGS*, *TO LIVE AGAIN*, *TOWER OF GLASS*, *DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH*, *SON OF MAN*, *A TIME OF CHANGES*, *THE WORLD INSIDE*, and *THE BOOK OF SKULLS* set an awesome & unapproached standard for combined quality and quantity.

That brings us up to about 10 years ago. At that time, I still believed that I liked good books and disliked bad books. The standards that I was using might be called Literary Plus. I considered myself to have some idea of what constituted traditional literary values (character, plot, prose style, etc.) and some ability to apply those standards. But I also included distinctively science-fictional values such as inventiveness. If a book was somewhat deficient in literary merit, but had a high enough "score" (on some imaginary scale that I could not begin to put numerical values on) that was OK.

But at times I suffered from the heretical suspicion that there was more to it than that, that there were nonliterary reasons that kept me from a strict program of liking good books and disliking bad books. For instance, why did I find all disaster novels, even by writers as good as Ballard and Disch, boring?

In 1971, I finally discovered a female writer that I liked--Suzette Haden Elgin. (Her first 3 books have just been reissued by Pocket Books in an omnibus volume called COMMUNIPATH WORLDS. I recommend it.) I think that's at least as much a statement about the sf field as it is about me. Shortly thereafter, I read Ursula Le Guin's THE LATHE OF HEAVEN, and since then I have found Marion Zimmer Bradley, Jody Scott, and Joan D. Vinge, among others, as well as learning The Truth About James Tiptree, jr.

There were others. Ron Goulart essentially writes the same book over & over again, but it's not a bad one, and he has enough incidental wit to make the trip enjoyable more often than not. There was David Gerrold, who started off with a couple of books--THE SPACE SKIMMERS and WHEN HARLIE WAS ONE--that combined charm with intellectual stimulation. There was George Alec Effinger, who started out burdened with an even greater potential and has not yet delivered on it. There was Barry Malzberg, who projected a profound comprehension of the paranoid viciousness of the Nixon years over a variety of imagined futures, but eventually came to the limits of that technique. There was Barrington J. Bayley, one of the few writers who could still appeal to my Sense of Wonder. There was Andrew J. Offutt, who wrote delightful satires like EVIL IS LIVE SPELLED BACKWARDS, MESSENGER OF ZHUVASTOU, and the bawdy THE GREAT 24-HOUR THING. Unfortunately, Offutt discovered a sizeable market for writings about thugs in fur jockstraps & has not written anything I enjoy in a long time. There was Felia Gotschalk, who has mastered a remarkable futuristic jargon. And so on.

IS A GIRL REALLY SAFE IN A FANZINE PUT OUT BY ARTHUR HLAVATY?



In 1975, I read a science fiction trilogy called ILLUMINATUS!. This, as I have mentioned before, changed my life in a variety of ways. It had 2 particular effects on my reading tastes.

One was that I soon realized that the book, with its anarchism, sexdope, altered consciousness, optional realities, etc., was so in tune with my own interests and my own thinking that there was no way I could tell if it was "really" a good book. It would have to be awful not to interest me.

The other thing was that the book's theory of perception implied a literary theory--that a "story" exists as an interaction between writer & reader, so that "a good story" was not something objectively definable, but at best something like "a story which has aqualities (some of these objectively definable" which will cause enjoyable interactions for some particular sort of reader."

As the lesson of ILLUMINATUS! sunk in, I began to understand a bit more about my reading tastes. For instance, I realized that my distaste for disaster novels was not so much the books themselves as a feeling on my own part that a reality in which humanity has been deprived of the safeties & comforts which human intelligence has brought us is not one that I particularly care to visit.

Another aspect of this understanding was that I came to terms with my dislike of ORBIT. I wrote about this in the very first DR. I had noticed 2 things about ORBIT: that people like Gene Wolfe, Kate Wilhelm, James Sallis, and Gardner Dozois seemed to be highly skilled writers, and that I did not like their stories. Now I understood why. Now I realized that my very dislike of their work came from one of its literary virtues--the ability to imply a great deal without actually saying anything. This sort of story makes demands on its readers; it demands careful attention to nuance, detail, and implication. To me, paying that sort of attention bears an unpleasant resemblance to work. But the important thing is that I no longer feel the need either to prove that such literary merit is really not literary merit or to confess to being a subliterate no-good shit who is too lazy to do the work.

The word "fan" has been defined as "someone who used to read science fiction and likes hanging out with other people who used to read science fiction." (I believe the definition was originated by Lee Gold.) Sometimes I feel that describes me.

And yet I have managed to continue reading sf since that fateful day (5/5/77) when I did the first DR. In fact, in at least one case, writing led me to reading. I wrote an essay on alternate realities in sf in which I said that I liked Brian Stableford's theories about alternate realities and his understanding of the kind of sf reality readers like me enjoy visiting. It occurred to me that he might use this knowledge in his fiction, and so I gave it a try. Sure enough, I enjoyed it.

And there were others. Another alternate reality I discovered was Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover. I really enjoyed Joe Haldeman's MINDBRIDGE, though I found it too short. (Perhaps because its structure was designed for large books like USA and STAND ON ZANZIBAR.) I liked MIDNIGHT AT THE WELL OF SOULS, by Jack Chalker, though I felt that diminishing returns set in with its sequels.

I also discovered John Varley & Spider Robinson, but I think I'll be talking about them in the next DR.



Now I feel my tastes changing again, or perhaps turning back to where they were before. Consider this list of writers: Brian W. Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, Alfred Bester, Robert Bloch, Fredric Brown, Terry Carr, Thomas M. Disch, George Alec Effinger, Harlan Ellison, Felix C. Gotschalk, James Gunn, Damon Knight, R. A. Lafferty, Stanislaw Lem, Barry Malzberg, George R.R. Martin, Larry Niven, Mack Reynolds, Joanna Russ, Eric Frank Russell, Cordwainer Smith, Norman Spinrad, Theodore Sturgeon, William Tenn, James Tiptree jr., Jean D. Vinge, and Roger Zelazny.

What these writers have in common is that all of them can plausibly be called much better at short stories than at the novel. There are a variety of reasons for this: Some have finely-honed literary skills which seem to be dissipated over the greater length of a novel; others have inventiveness, but lack the story-telling and structural abilities to sustain their story for 200 pages; still others may simply not have gotten around to writing a really good novel yet.

I tend to read single-author collections, rather than blundering about through unknown names in the prozines, and this year there have been some excellent ones: I've already reviewed Sturgeon's THE GOLDEN HELIX and Varley's THE BARBIE MURDERS here. Disch & Sladek have published greatest-hits collections. Zelazny's THE LAST DEFENDER OF CAMELOT and John Brunner's FOREIGN CONSTELLATIONS also are most pleasurable.

And so I continue to find pleasure in sf, and hope I will keep doing so.

FIVE BOOKS I MAY NOMINATE FOR HUGOS

6

bearfooted

Robert Silverberg, LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE (Harper, hc) The Master is back, taking one of the world's oldest stories and making it new.

Marion Zimmer Bradley, TWO TO CONQUER (DAW, hc) Reviewed in LO 2.

Justin Leiber, BEYOND REJECTION (Del Rey, pb) A fascinating look at the problems of mind transplants. Some hate the ending, but I don't.

Rudy Rucker, WHITE LIGHT (Ace, pb) The most interesting ideas of any sf book I've seen this year--adventures in different orders of infinity & other mathematical constructs. If the author's fictional skills were up to his imagination, this book would be awesome.

John Varley, WIZARD (Berkley, pb) The sequel to TITAN, with a third to come. Much more self-contained than your average second-of-a-trilogy.

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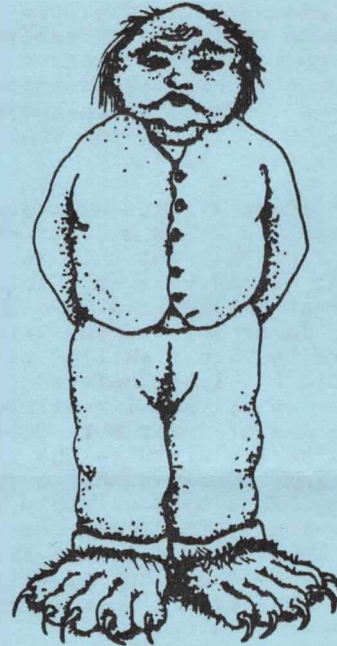
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lastwords

I WAS A TEENAGE FUGGHEAD FOR THE FBI, AND FOUND GOD

It happened at Autoclave last year. One of the entertainments was "Fannish Feud" --a version of the TV game show "Family Feud" in which the 2 teams had to guess the answers that a panel had given to certain questions of an sf or fannish nature. One of these was "Fandom's Famous Fuggheads."

It turned out that one of the also-rans was in the audience, and he was Not Amused. In fact, he threatened to sue the committee, the panel, and--I suspect--anyone who had laughed immoderately. He managed to make many of those involved feel uncomfortable and fearful, but it was generally agreed that the main result of his actions would be to insure that he would finish much higher next year.

This incident seems to me to indicate 2 things about the fannish custom of designating certain people as "fuggheads" and why it continues.

One is that "fuggheads" are by no means chosen at random. They usually have done something to earn the designation; moreover, many of them continue to behave in the manner that won them the title, either because they don't know any better, or because they have adapted the Loser Script which says, "The world will either ignore me or piss on me. Since stimulus hunger leads to

death or madness (a reasonable assumption), I will therefore do whatever I have to do to be pissed on."

But that's only half the story. The other half is that many of us need fuggheads. Every year, some fans participate in the Hogus, a tacky form of social condescension which stoops even to cursing children who are still in the womb. And once you have made the list, death--or at least gaffiation --will not release you. One fan (an apahack with dubious ethnic theories) showed up in the Fannish Feud even though he's been out of fandom at least as long as I've been in (3½ years).

We don't have to do this, and I suggest that we stop. While it is necessary to warn people of certain forms of behavior, we don't have to keep beating on the theme of "X is a fugghead."

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying we should become wonderful human beings & be nice to everyone. I am certainly not saying that we should adopt the loser script some fans have, that since we are the mundane world's rejects, we dassn't reject anyone.

I am saying that we are controlled by what we oppose. We are not free as long as we need "fuggheads" to be our scapegoats. Or as Dick Gregory said a long time ago, "This white guy's always saying, 'Nigger, nigger, nigger.' And I don't bother with that stuff. So who's the nigger?"