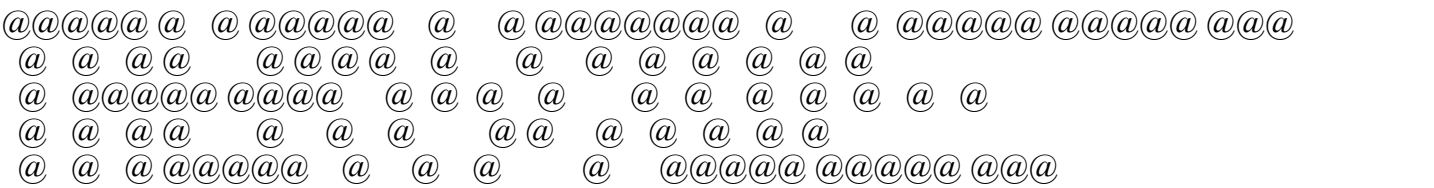

Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 07/15/94 -- Vol. 13, No. 3

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Middletown 1R-400C
Wednesdays at noon.

_D_A_T_E _T_O_P_I_C

07/16 Movie: THE MAN FROM PLANET X (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
07/23 Movie: THE THING (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
07/30 Movie: WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
08/03 Book: MOVING MARS by Greg Bear (Hugo Nominee)
08/09 Movie: THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL (Saturday night, 8PM, RSVP)
08/24 Book: VIRTUAL LIGHT by William Gibson (Hugo Nominee)

Outside events:
The Science Fiction Association of Bergen County meets on the second Saturday of every month in Upper Saddle River; call 201-933-2724 for details. The New Jersey Science Fiction Society meets on the third Saturday of every month in Belleville; call 201-432-5965 for details.

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1. We got more giant rings in the sky. I wrote several years ago about a ring that was found in the sky and reported by _S_c_i_e_n_c_e _N_e_w_s but could not be explained. If I remember right what was particularly odd about it is that as near as we could tell we were on the axis of symmetry of this giant ring. If the ring were a

giant wheel, its axle would go through the Earth. That sounds suspiciously like some sort of optical aberration. But it was kind of fun to toy with. I don't remember that phenomenon ever getting explained, though I suspect that it did and the explanation was just not reported. Perhaps the same principles apply to all

magazines that apply to tabloids. It could be that the exciting stuff gets the press and the explanations, which are less interesting, get shuffled off to the back pages or never printed at all. Besides, in science when you explain something weird as being your own mistake, you don't make a big thing of it. You just hope everyone forgets.

Anyway, there are rings in the news again. Some of you may remember that seven years ago there was a supernova. That is a star that for no readily apparent reason just explodes spewing light and matter all around. You can often see these things in the daytime sky after they go off. Well supernova 1987A occurred in 1987--I suspect the name was not a coincidence. Actually I doubt if there was a 1987B, but I don't know. Anyway astronomers have looked at the site of the explosion and what do they see but three huge rings. It looks a little like the big space station in 2001. It is three parallel rings with the one in the center maybe of half the diameter. There is a nice color picture in the May 28 _S_c_i_e_n_c_e _N_e_w_s. It comes with two explanations as to how the rings were formed. One is that the explosion might have been in the shape of an hour-glass. That explanation comes from Robert P. Kirshner of Harvard. Christopher Burrows of the Space Telescope Science Institute of Baltimore thinks the explosion may have been channeled into two jets by a nearby compact object, a neutron star or a black hole. A black hole would send a jet of matter in its direction, but as it rips apart the matter it would send a jet in the opposite direction also.

The fact that this phenomenon can be explained two different ways is my answer to the Fermi Paradox. That is the paradox that says if the probability for intelligence on a given planet is so high, why haven't we seen any signs of extra-terrestrial life. Well, like the two jets of matter in opposite directions, there could be directly opposite explanations as to why we have not seen sign of

extraterrestrial life, both occurring at the same time. Suppose that there is some huge unimaginable race out there who fill up their tank by finding some star about to supernova then sucking up a piece of that energy. The thing is that tapping a supernova leaves these telltale rings afterward. Maybe we are so smart we can come up with multiple explanations about what those rings are doing there and at the same time so stupid that we do not recognize what is happening. I can tell you the first sign of extraterrestrial intelligence probably will not be a flying saucer landing on the White House lawn, it is probably going to be something like some funny rings left around a supernova and we will have been both too stupid and too smart to recognize them for what they really are. Am I suggesting a change in how we do anything? No. I am just pointing out the irony. We may get so good at explaining things that we miss something essential.

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2. For those of you who are tracking such things we were in Latvia from May 13 to May 17 of this year. Yesterday in Riga, Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Birkavs announced his government's resignation in the wake of demands by farmers for more price supports and protection from imported food. So far no new government has been announced for Latvia and there have no reports of disasters yet from the other countries we visited. International specialists are closely watching those countries and tensely waiting for the inevitable.

Riga is a nice city, by the way.

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3. RHINEGOLD by Stephan Grundy (Bantam, ISBN 0-553-09545-5, April 1994, 721pp, US$23.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is a remarkable first novel, though I must admit at the start that my ability to judge its faithfulness to its sources is

limited. It is a retelling of the classic Germanic legend, but my knowledge of the legend is based almost entirely on Wagner's operatic interpretation--which was undoubtedly colored by his philosophy--and by Anna Russell's summary of Wagner's story which is, to say the least, eccentric. So all I can say regarding Grundy's faithfulness to the original legend is that knowing Wagner may be more hindrance than help.

But as a story in its own right, _R_h_i_n_e_g_o_l_d succeeds admirably. Though part takes place earlier, it is primarily set in the period when Rome was on the decline but Christianity was making inroads in Germany. It is full of the stuff of epics: battles, magic, forbidden loves, dragons, ancient gods, oaths, and marvels. Grundy eschews a "formal" style, the result being a very direct and realistic re-telling. (So direct and realistic, in fact, that I found reading a vivid description of a wolf attack during a somewhat bumpy plane flight was _n_o_t a good idea!) This style gives the reader a real feel for the geography of the area--a real sense of place, if you prefer. And it makes the story seem real and serious, something happening to real people with real feelings, rather than merely symbols.

Will you like this book? It's not like other fantasies that are popular, though I haven't read _M_i_s_t_s _o_f _A_v_a_l_o_n by Marion Zimmer Bradley, and suspect that there might be some level of similarity between the two. But _R_h_i_n_e_g_o_l_d is almost definitely darker and heavier, simply because it is so dark and heavy. It doesn't rely on gratuitous gore, but it does have its share of explicit violence when necessary. I have no idea what Grundy will do for an encore,

but this strikes me as a serious contender for a Hugo nomination next year.

(Note: At 700-plus pages, chances for a mass-market paperback seem slim--if that's not an oxymoron. Give it the "page 117" test and if you like what you read, spring for the hardback.)

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4. THE ASCENT OF WONDER: THE EVOLUTION OF HARD SF edited by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer (Tor, ISBN 0-312-85062-X, June 29, 1994, 992pp, US$35) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I will confess up front that I have not read this book cover to cover. In the interests of getting this review out in a timely manner, I compromised by reading the introductions and a sampling of the stories that I had not previously read. (I "fell off the book wagon" a couple of weekends ago and bought thirty books, so my reading schedule is in some disarray.)

In any case, I think that I can shed some light on two of the three questions people may be asking about this hefty (3-1/2-pound) tome:

What is it attempting to do?
Does it succeed?
Is it any good?

The first question--what is the purpose of this book?--is one I can't answer. The book is subtitled "The Evolution of Hard SF," but evolution implies a flow of time, a continuity (of cause and effect, perhaps), and the stories here are in what appears to be random order. They are not arranged chronologically or thematically, but are divided into "Part I," "Part II," and "Part III," with no clue as to what the parts represent. (The alternate ordering given in the back has at least some logic to it.) In keeping with this random order, Benford's introduction appears to be a series of one-liners about various hard science fiction stories, also in random order.

Hartwell claims on page 30 in his introduction that this is the first anthology to focus on all of hard science fiction. I would debate that: Healy & McComas's _F_a_m_o_u_s _S_c_i_e_n_c_e _F_i_c_t_i_o_n _S_t_o_r_i_e_s: _A_d_v_e_n_t_u_r_e_s _i_n _T_i_m_e _a_n_d _S_p_a_c_e did it in 1947. The blurb for the latter was "35 great stories of the world of atomic power, rockets, robots, time and space machines, etc." These are definitely "hard SF," but Hartwell and Cramer, with an additional four and a half decades to choose from, have not even stayed within the incredibly broad range of "hard SF" stories, but include stories based on anthropology, psychology, and other "soft" sciences. The result is that many well-known hard science fiction authors are missing, while there are _t_w_o stories by each of J. G. Ballard, Ursula

K. LeGuin, John M. Ford, and Hilbert Schenck. And why include Rudyard Kipling's "With the Night Mail"? In terms of the evolution of hard science fiction, it was a virtual dead end, inspiring little or none of what came after it. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" isn't hard science fiction. Jules Verne's "In the Year 2889" is minor, even according to Hartwell and Cramer, and seems to be here only because Verne was a major influence (through his novels). Poe is known as a major influence in the fields of horror and mystery; his inclusion here seems strained. I suppose part of the issue was what Hartwell and Cramer could get the rights to, but many of the classic hard science fiction stories that Healy and McComas collected are missing from this anthology. Of course, trying to include "everyone's who's anyone" appears to have been the downfall of _L_a_s_t _D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s _V_i_s_i_o_n_s, so one shouldn't be too hard on Hartwell and Cramer. At least this book has been published.

In the introductions as well, there is much room for debate. Hartwell, for example, says on page 39 that 1965 was the last year "Campbell's magazine" (_A_s_t_o_u_n_d_i_n_g/_A_n_a_l_o_g) won the Hugo as Best Professional Magazine, and attributes this to the rise of the New Wave. The fact is that the award was replaced in 1973 by Best Professional Editor and Ben Bova won it from 1973 to 1977--for editing _A_n_a_l_o_g. Gregory Benford on page 21 says _L_a_s_t _a_n_d _F_i_r_s_t _M_e_n was Olaf Stapledon's first work; it was his first _f_i_c_t_i_o_n work, but his _t_h_i_r_d published work.) And on page 43 it is claimed that "Nine Lives" is "perhaps [Le Guin's] most famous" story. Really? More than "The Word for World is Forest" or "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" or "Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight" (all but the first of which were nominated for Hugos, which "Nine Lives" was not, though it was nominated for a Nebula). And drawing a parallel between Marcel Proust and Bob Shaw's "slow glass" seems like a real reach. (Whether from an attempt to elevate science fiction or not, Cramer also quotes M. C. Escher, Poincare, and Leonardo da Vinci in her introduction.)

There were also a few minor annoyances. The editors seem to have decided that the correct abbreviation for science fiction is "sf"--and at the beginning of a sentence, "Sf." They repeatedly talk about the "affect" of a story (and, no, they don't mean "effect"). This may be correct English, but it is an uncommon usage that will cause many readers to think the editors don't know the difference between "affect" and "effect." And they use a sans serif font for the introductions that I find very hard to read.

Having said all that, I _ s_ t_ i_ l_ l recommend this book. Why? Well, you get sixty-seven stories which, while not all classics, or even all hard science fiction, certainly all have something to recommend them. Some are indeed classics (Arthur C. Clarke's "Star," James Blish's "Surface Tension," and Tom Godwin's "Cold Equations," for example). It's a sign of how far _ A_ n_ a_ l_ o_ g has fallen that it

recently published a pastiche of "The Cold Equations" in which was changed the one thing that made the Godwin story a classic.) Some are famous even if they aren't classics (in which category I would put the Kipling and Poe stories). Some are "merely" good stories by the important writers in the field of science fiction (hard, soft, gooey, or otherwise). With the three introductions, this works out to fifty cents a story. If you're a longtime science fiction fan, you may already have many of these stories, but if you're relatively new, this is a great book for discovering authors and stories and ideas that can lead to further exploration.

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5. A few weeks ago, Evelyn Leeper reviewed the Tor hardcover edition of Mike Resnick's _ W_ i_ l_ l _ t_ h_ e _ L_ a_ s_ t _ P_ e_ r_ s_ o_ n _ t_ o _ L_ e_ a_ v_ e _ t_ h_ e _ P_ l_ a_ n_ e_ t _ P_ l_ e_ a_ s_ e _ T_ u_ r_ n _ O_ f_ f _ t_ h_ e _ S_ u_ n? It has just been re-issued in a trade paperback edition by Orb, and this is as good an opportunity as any to tell people that Orb is Tor's trade paperback line for books they do _ n_ o_ t intend to issue in a mass-market edition. So if you see a book in an Orb edition, there's no point in waiting for the mass-market edition--there won't be one. (Just to clarify the terms: a mass-market paperback is about four inches by seven inches and costs about US$4-US$6 in the United States. A trade paperback is about seven inches by nine inches and costs about US$10-US$15 in the United States. In Britain both the books and the prices are a little larger.) [-ecl]

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Women want mediocre men, and men are working hard to become as mediocre as possible.
-- Margaret Mead