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WEINBAUM AND THE TWO WOMEN

NOTE: The original Weinbaum manuscript of "The Black Flame," which was reported missing, perhaps stolen, from the collection of Forrest J. Ackerman, still has not been recovered. Avon Books has reluctantly used the edited version -- created by Mort Weisinger in 1939 -- for a new paperback edition just issued.

"There are no secrets better kept than the secrets that everybody guesses."

-- Bernard Shaw

"I think you are a black flame blowing cold across the world," Hull tells her. "I think a demon drives you."

Surely some demon must have driven Stanley G. Weinbaum to create Margaret of Urbs, called the Black Flame. He was dying of cancer at the time, remember -- and knew it. Fame and fortune -- such as they existed in the depressed science fiction market of the thirties -- could have meant little to him. And neither "Dawn of Flame" (source of the opening lines), nor its sequel, "The Black Flame," won him either while he lived.

In the 20 years since the two were published together in a hard-cover edition by Fantasy Press, they have become almost forgotten. Now Avon Books has remedied this situation through its wise decision to issue paperback editions of both "The Black Flame" and "The New Adam," an experimental work written years earlier, yet vital to an understanding of the later book.

Weinbaum's two great passions were the queer animal and the ideal woman. The former has had far greater recognition, and impact, primarily because its appeal was more purely science-fictional. "A Martian Odyssey" was a science fiction landmark, and deservedly so. Yet the concern with woman was no less deep or significant to this first of truly "modern" science fiction writers.

Had he been alive to read the Feb. 1969 Fantasy and Science Fiction, Weinbaum would probably have appreciated Isaac Asimov's column, "Uncertain, Coy and Hard to Please."

Asimov took issue with the traditional master/slave roles for man and woman, and looked forward to growing equality between the sexes. "I can think of nothing that will dignify sex more than this change," he wrote. "It is much better to love an equal. And if that be so, why not hasten the day when we heterosexuals can have love at its best?"

Weinbaum's views, if not identical, were close to Asimov's. And the "Flame" novels can be interpreted as his own resolution of a conflict between two ideas of woman that had recurred in romantic and imaginative fiction for over a century. Let us follow this interpretation and see where it leads.

Apparently, this conflict first became evident in Sir Walter Scott's historical novels. At least, Delancey Ferguson, in the introduction to one edition of "Ivanhoe," credits Scott with introducing: "the rival heroines, one of them a brunette who displays a modicum of intelligence and courage; the other a helpless and sheltered blonde whom the hero marries."

This divergence of characterization between the Two Women was to recur again and again, and it deepened as time went on. From a passage in Anthony Boucher's "Rocket to the Morgue," a detective story set in the science fiction society of pre-World War II days, one can gather that it was reflected in many an early space opera.

One of Boucher's characters, Austin Carter, rhapsodizes to another, Terence Marshall, about the female lead in the latest epic of "Joe Henderson:"

"If I could meet a woman like that, a thousand interplanetary civilizations could smash, and much I'd care."

"The heroine of 'Time Tunnel?'" Marshall asked.

"Of course not....the villainess. The heroine is duller than dishwater. You see, one of the Henderson trademarks is the Two Women. They're the same two that run through all of Rider Haggard too. One represents virtue and is blonde and beautiful and good and dull. The other represents vice and is black and beautiful and evil and marvelous."

"Marshall" theorizes that "Henderson" must hate women, to be able to write only of "evil" ones effectively. And this is the usual explanation given for writers preoccupied with the Two Women. But is it the right one? What is a "good" woman -- or an "evil" one.

Victorian standards defined the "good" woman as the "helpless and sheltered" and "duller than dishwater" type. She was the popular "girl next door," until she got married. Then she stayed in the kitchen, except to have babies. And in spite of the "sexual revolution," this image of the "good" woman is still with us -- we see it in the "dumb blonde" starlet of Hollywood, in the Playmate of the Month, and in the stupid housewife of TV commercials who seemingly exists only to be rescued from dirty laundry by the Ajax knight.

And Victorian standards regarded as "evil" the woman who showed any sign of "intelligence and courage," or who asserted herself in any way. "Career woman" became a hiss-word, and the term "dominant woman" conjures up images of the "frigid" feminist, or the castrating "Jewish mother." No, it is woman's place to "play the fool," and the "girl next door" is she whom every man desires.

Or is she? Strange that Boucher's character should have shown no interest in risking "a thousand interplanetary civilizations" for the sake of the alleged heroine of "Time Tunnel!"

Was the portrayal of "good" women as "dull" and "evil" women as "marvelous" really a reflection of hatred for women? Or did it perhaps reflect a rejection of the Victorian image of woman; of the idea that it is "good" for a woman to be "helpless and sheltered" and "duller than dishwater," but "evil" for her to have "intelligence and courage" or to be "marvelous?"

Is there not more than meets the eye in a novel like A. Merritt's "Dwellers in the Mirage," wherein Leif Langdon, having forsaken the witch-woman Lur for the more conventional Evalie, feels his spirit revolt: "Ai! Lur -- witch woman. I see you still lying there, smiling with lips grown tender -- the wolf's head upon your breast! And Dwayanu still lives within me!"

The great secret is that man has been lying, not only to woman, but to himself. He does not desire the "girl next door" at all and never has. He yearns for the witch woman, the demon-mistress, whom he can love as an equal. It is not she who is evil, but the flase standards that have alienated man from woman. And she represents, not castration, but fulfillment. And here is where Weinbaum comes in.

"The New Adam," written by Weinbaum several years before his debut in Wonder Stories (and before his marriage in 1932), would seem at first to have nothing to do with "The Black Flame." It is a gloomy, Schopenhauerish story of a "superman" who has extra finger joints and a double brain (an anticipation of Gilbert Gosseyn?) and represents the type of writing that would have appealed to the New Thing -- had there been a New Thing in the thirties.

Edmond, the "superman," is doomed to be torn between the Two Women, but in a new guise. Here, they are Vanny, a sensual "girl-next-door" of ordinary intelligence, and Sarah, a fellow-mutant who alone can offer him intellectual companionship -- but who has about as much sexuality as a doormat.

Edmond is drawn to Vanny sexually and to Sarah intellectually in an irreconcilable conflict. Unable to keep up with the former's sexual demands, he complains:

"We are alien beings, Vanny and I. She is not mentally capable

of sustaining our intimacy, nor I physically. Ours is the meeting of the eagle and the doe, but the eagle's beak is too sharp for the doe's lips, and the doe's hindquarters somewhat too sturdy for the avian physique."

Interminable "intellectual" converse with Sarah cannot satisfy him either, however:

"If this is the measure of my race's capacity for enjoyment, then whatever their attainments of the intellect, they have much to learn from their simple human progenitors....Sarah has failed me now. There is no release anywhere for me."

Edmond eventually shoots himself in despair. It is just as well; neurotically self-pitying for all of being a "superman" who can harness cosmic rays as a new source of energy, he is hardly a memorable character.

But in one scene of "The New Adam," there is a surprising -- and significant -- hint of things to come.

Intent on seducing Vanny -- though almost by whim -- Edmond creates for her, Svengali-fashion, a vision of "the city of the future, its glory and its horror," through which he leads her on a hypnotic guided tour.

The city is Urbs. And in this dream vision, Edmond reveals himself as "the master, the overlord." To Vanny, he says, "You are Evanne, called the Black Flame."

Only a cynically-created dream vision for Edmond's seduction of an "inferior" woman. But the image must have been a powerful one in Weinbaum's mind, for it was the seed of the "Flame" novels.

Weinbaum's magazine stories that began to appear in 1934 showed a sharp change in mood from that gloominess of "The New Adam." Perhaps his marriage had something to do with this change. In any case, the "love interest" in his "Ham and Pat" series and other interplanetary adventures was quickly recognized as an advance over the Victorian standards that had previously dominated science fiction. It was an even greater advance over Weinbaum's earlier outlook.

The fact that Ham and Pat also ignored conventional sex roles did not call attention to itself; in their stories, the "love interest" was subordinate to the appeal of the travel tale, the "queer animal," and alien psychology and philosophy.

Then Weinbaum wrote "Dawn of Flame." It was rejected. He rewrote it as "The Black Flame." It was rejected again.

One editor from the thirties thinks Weinbaum had no particular artistic purpose in mind; that he just took a formula and "sexed it up" to please the editors.

What formula? What editors? Weinbaum never got a dime out of either of the "Flame" novels -- nor a dime's worth of recognition. Surely he must have had some other motivation, even if he failed to mention it or (hardly credible) did not fully realize it.

That motivation must have been a desire to create a new image of the ideal woman -- a synthesis of the elements that had seemed to be irreconcilable in "The New Adam."

There is a hint of this in the dialogue of "The Black Flame," when Margot tells Connor -- a twentieth century man who has survived electrocution to awaken in her era:

"What do I care for your primitive customs and prehistoric prejudices? Would you have the Black Flame be as shrinking and modest as little Evanie pretends to be?"

"I'd dislike you less if you were," says Connor.

"You don't dislike me," she replies. "You're merely afraid of me because I represent everything you hate in a woman -- and yet you can't hate me. Indeed, I rather think you love me."

Clearly, Weinbaum wanted to attack Victorian conventions about "femininity," to dispel the idea the equality of the sexes would be inimical to romance. To the contrary, he argued, abolition of unequal roles would enhance the love of man and woman.

The plots of both the "Flame" novels involve the griwung realization by a man -- against his "primitive customs and prehistoric prejudices" -- of his love for the demon-mistress, beside which the conventional appeal of the "girl next door" has "vanished like mist."

Certainly the Black Flame flaunts qualities considered by the Victorians to be "unfeminine." She possesses rare intelligence and courage; scorning domesticity, she would rather explore Mars in her Sky Rat. Yet she is not a domineering "Jewish mother" by any means; if anything, her need for the love of a man is deeper than that of the "girl next door." Her inner torment is born of frustrated longing for a man to whom she can give herself wholly. For she despises weak men, and can respond only to one whose strength of will equals her own. Though the antithesis of conventional "femininity," she is completely female.

The theme of the Two Women recurs in both "Dawn of Flame" and "The Black Flame" as Hull and Connor are offered the alternative of more conventional women in Vail and Evanie (Evanne had been the Black Flame in "The New Adam," but by 1935, the Flame's namesake was Weinbaum's wife, Margaret).

But here, the conventional women who hold supporting roles. The demon-mistress holds center stage. No longer is she a temptation to be avoided by the virtuous hero in his pursuit of the "girl next door," as in "Ivanhoe;" nor explained away as a symbol of what-evil-lurks-in-the-hearts-of-men, as in "Dwellers in the Mirage." She is the heroine in her own right, and she is presented as man's right choice.

To Connor, she is a "blinding light in his brain," as near the climax of "The Black Flame" he realizes she is his -- "the unearthly beauty of her, the wild untamed character, his to tame -- if he could. The Satanic spirit, the fiery soul, his for life."

Hull's choice in "Dawn of Flame," though unconsummated, is just as clear. He is left in the arms of Vail: for Margaret, knowing that the intellectual gulf between herself and the rustic mountaineer, and their conflicting ideals -- hers for the renascent civilization and empire of N'Orleans, his for the freedom of the rural mountainies -- doom their love, has sacrificed him.

But even after a parting scene as electrifying as any ever written in science fiction, Hull knows the truth, as does Margaret, and the reader -- and even Vail, who tries desperately to obscure it:

"I knew you lied to save me," she murmured. "I knew you never loved her."

And Hull, in whom there was no falsehood, drew her close to him and said nothing.

* * * * *

There are corollaries to the argument:

Kyra Zelas in "The Adaptive Ultimate" is a "girl-next-door" who has suddenly been transformed into a demon-mistress. But she is not prepared for this role. As Asimov noted in his F&SF article cited in the above essay, the conventional woman is reduced to wheedling and cajolery in her relations with men. It is Kyra's tragedy that this is all she knows -- but in the person of a superwoman, these conventional feminine wiles become a threat to the world. She knows only how to use sex as an avenue to power.

The Red Peri, in the story of the same name, was, of course, another version of the Black Flame. Weinbaum intended to make her the heroine of a whole series; had he lived to do so, she might now be as memorable as her brunette counterpart -- maybe even more so.

Whether or not it was Weinbaum's doing, equality of the sexes seems to have become a standard assumption of honest science fiction. Consider James Schmitz' work, for instance (and he has obviously been inspired by Weinbaum's exotic flora and fauna). But he is but one of many examples. In the "mainstream," by contrast, the "girl next door" still reigns supreme -- the only change from 100 years ago is that she is now supposed to have orgasms.

Maybe science fiction has been breaking a taboo all along -- and didn't realize it.

RENAISSANCE

a semi-official organ of the Second Foundation, is published quarterly by John J. Pierce at 275 McMane Avenue, Berkeley Heights, N.J., 07922. Renaissance believes that science fiction has traditionally and should continue to be based on romanticist principles of storytelling, the vision of science and the sense of wonder. We welcome articles, essays and commentaries by fans in agreement with our own general principles, and will publish them at our discretion. Other fanzines are welcome to republish material from Renaissance, so long as credit is given.

The Second Foundation is not an organization, but a movement, and is devoted to the same principles as Renaissance. Lester del Rey is First Speaker of the movement and John J. Pierce liaison officer.

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HUGO NOMINATIONS. 5

While the Second Foundation, as a movement, will make no official endorsements in this area, John J. Pierce, as editor of Renaissance, recommends the following:

NOVEL -- The Demon Breed, by James H. Schmitz

NOVELETTE -- The Sharing of Flesh, by Poul Anderson

PROZINE -- Analog

PRO ARTIST -- Jeff Jones

DRAMA -- No award

Again, these are only unofficial choices of the editor.

It should be noted -- this too, unofficially -- that the novella, as a category, seems of dubious value, a catch-all for novelettes slightly over 17,500 words, and novels slightly under 40,000. It was created last year mainly for "Riders of the Purple Wage."

APOLLO 10-AND THINGS TO COME

The forthcoming lunar mission of Apollo 10 brings to mind the final scene of H. G. Wells' 1935 movie, "Things to Come," in which scientist Cabal and skeptic Passworthy watch a similar departure:

CABAL: There! There they go! That faint gleam of light.

(pause)

PASSWORTHY: I feel -- what we have done is -- monstrous.

C: What they have done is magnificent.

P: Will they return?

C: Yes. And go again. And again -- until the landing can be made and the Moon is conquered. This is only a beginning.

P: And if they don't return -- my son and your daughter? What of that, Cabal?

C: (with a catch in his voice, but resolute) Then presently -- others will go.

P: My God! Is there never to be an age of happiness? Is there never to be rest?

C: Rest enough for the individual man. Too much of it and too soon, and we call it death. But for Man, no rest and no ending. He must go on -- conquest beyond conquest. This little planet and its winds and ways, and all the laws of mind and matter that restrain him. And when he has conquered all the deeps of space and all the mysteries of time, still he will be beginning.

P: But we are such little creatures. Poor humanity! So fragile, so weak.

C: Little animals, eh?

P: Little animals.

C: If we are no more than animals -- we much snatch at our little scraps of happiness and live and suffer and pass, mattering no more -- than all the other animals do -- or have done (he points out at the stars). Is it that -- or this? All the universe -- or nothingness. Which shall it be, Passworthy?

(the two men fade out against the starry background until only the stars remain)

C: Which shall it be, Passworthy, which shall it be?

1. '2001: THE GREAT DIVIDE

The most remarkable thing about the movie, "2001," has been its accuracy as a barometer of "traditionalist" and "New Thing" sympathies among members of the science fiction community.

The film was damned by Lester del Rey, Ted White and G. Harry Stine, but praised by Judith Merrill, Samuel Delany and Laurence Janifer. Ray Bradbury was rather critical, while Leon Stover managed the amazing feat of missing the real point while elaborating on the apparent one.

Strangest of all has been the attitude of Arthur C. Clarke, who wrote the novel of "2001," and allegedly collaborated with the producer, Stanley Kubrick, on the screenplay.

Clarke defended the movie at the 1968 Lunacon. Yet he is said to have later told Stine that he had completely lost control over it to Kubrick, and had little to do with its shaping.

What lies behind "2001?" Why are the "traditionalists" so much against it? Why are the "New Thing" advocates so much for it? And why is Clarke himself, perhaps, having second thoughts?

Those familiar with Clarke's fiction know that it comes in two varieties: the straight story of scientific extrapolation, such as "Earthlight;" and the neo-Stapledonian eschatological speculation, as exemplified in "Childhood's End."

Clarke's novel version of "2001" was a re-work of "Childhood's End:" Alien intelligences that have evolved to the level of pure mind intervene in Earthly history, first to raise primitive apes to manhood; then to raise man to superman -- all from benevolent motives. This is explained fully in the novel, and it's a grand vision, if you happen to like transcendentalism.

The movie parodies this vision -- subtly but viciously.

In the excellently-choreographed "Dawn of Man" sequence, man's apish ancestors in Africa four million years ago are visited by an alien slab, emanations of which somehow raise their intelligence (as White has noted, the book's details of the educational process are omitted).

But what does intelligence mean in the movie? one of the ape men is shown discovering the use of a bone weapon, as the opening chords of Richard Strauss' "Thus Spake Zarathustra" are played. The music calls Nietzsche to mind, as Stover realized.

Moments later, however, the sequence turns into a grim parody of Nietzsche. The only use shown on-screen for the bone weapon is in the murder of fellow ape-men. And it is only after the protagonist ape-man has committed murder that he tosses the bone into the air -- where it fades out to be replaced by a space satellite at the opening of the second sequence.

Intelligence leads only to murder, Kubrick tells us. And now man is exporting his murderous drives into space.

So opens the second sequence of "2001," a technological extravaganza covering a journey from Earth, with layover at an orbiting hotel, to the Moon -- all to the accompaniment of the "Blue Danube." True, the special effects are excellent, and Clarke must have had fun with them. But again they are a parody.

The displays are drawn out to banality -- a banality emphasized by the music. The dialogue makes daytime TV seem lively by comparison. Characterization is minimal; there is no real drama, and hardly any excitement. This is not incompetence, however, but deliberate banality. The vision of science is not expressed, but ridiculed.

Even the visit to the second alien slab that has been discovered on the Moon is made dull and pointless. And that is deliberate too: The wonders of science and the works of intelligence are absurd and meaningless -- to Kubrick.

The third sequence, involving the mission to Jupiter, carries Kubrick's theme further. The somber background music, the "squirrel cage" exercise scene, the banal broadcasts from Earth, the characterization of the two astronauts as what Bradbury called "Antonioni people" with no warmth or individuality, the later sound track of their raucous

labored breathing -- all these convey a sense of alienation and vague despair.

Here too, the banality is deliberate -- the unexplained madness of the computer, the idiotic behavior of the astronauts during the crisis and, finally, the almost nauseating scene in which one of them disconnects the computer's reasoning centers. Kubrick's nihilistic vision continues to manifest itself.

The "special effects" of the "Beyond the Infinite" sequence depict the universe as essentially senseless -- and perhaps malevolent. The "psychedelic" tunnels of light, the amorphous globs and cobwebs of color and the "solarized" panoramas of barren landscapes -- these have nothing to do with the story as Clarke conceived it.

Nor does the washed-out looking Louis XVI bedroom in which the astronaut finds himself, or the unexplained body-switching, or the last reappearance of the slab. But the final scene -- of the astronaut returned to Earth as a fetus -- may be the subtlest parody of all.

This scene -- played out to the same background music of "Thus Spake Zarathustra" as that in the "Dawn of Man" sequence -- implies that the astronaut has been reborn as superman. But has he been? The fetus is nearly expressionless. It could just as well be the astronaut reborn as an idiot -- or the astronaut sent back to Earth with his tail between his legs for daring to challenge the unknown.

Life called attention to the fact that none of the satellites, or any other works of man, are shown in the final scene. Can it be that the alien intelligences, far from being benevolent, have only been toying with man -- much as a child may stir up an anthill -- and that, having tired of their play, they have "cleansed" him from the universe?

Considering Kubrick's opinion of mankind, this interpretation is quite plausible. If it be so, his movie is a grotesque parody of Clarke -- not to mention Nietzsche and everything else it purports to represent. Perhaps this is why "traditionalists" reject "2001." Is this also why the "New Thing" applauds it?

2. THE NEBULAS...

The 1969 Nebula awards show little evidence of any definite trend, though they are perhaps less New-Wavish on the whole than last year's.

The winners were "Rite of Passage" by Alexei Panshin (novel), "Dragonrider" by Anne McCaffrey (novella), "Mother to the World" by Richard Wilson (novelette) and "The Planners" by Kate Wilhelm (short story). About 134 ballots were cast; these included, according to Sam Moskowitz, a considerable number of blank votes.

"Rite of Passage" is certainly a "traditionalist" novel, for all Mr. Panshin's being one of the "new critics." An interesting pastiche of Heinlein -- but we do not share the view that it is an "improvement" over its model. Still, some Second Foundationers are backing it for a Hugo, and we respect their views.

"Dragonrider" as a Nebula winner is especially refreshing to us; it's no-holds-barred science fantasy of the "old school," and Anne McCaffrey is on the Right Side, even if she doesn't realize it. It is said she will soon bring out another novel-length Pern saga. That will certainly be an award contender in 1970.

"Mother to the World" is basically New-Wavish in theme. It reflects a certain suspicion of intelligence, and takes a patronizing attitude towards the mentally retarded as being closer to God and to the real meaning of life and love.

"The Planners" is somewhat similar to the above, thematically, but more confused. Both works appeared in "Orbit 3," which, to a lesser extent, fulfilled the function "Dangerous Visions" did last year in providing "pipeline" award winners.

Nebula awards are aimed, in part, at influencing nominations for Hugoes. We urge Second Foundationers, however, to make their own honest appraisals of 1968 science fiction works, and nominate accordingly.

3. JOHN WYNDHAM, 1903-1969

Science fiction will sorely miss this Britisher of many literary incarnations, for he was one of the rare giants of the genre.

Wyndham had a rare facility for making stories of the fantastic into human-interest stories in the best sense, and for telling them in a deliciously low-key style that brought them home to the reader. Take the opening lines of "Day of the Triffids:" "When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere."

Perhaps his best novel was "The Midwich Cuckoos," a classic that gave the alien invasion story a startling new twist by having the invaders impregnate all the women in a small British village. The novel was made into one of the better science fiction movies, as "Village of the Damned" (by contrast, "Day of the Triffids" was mangled when it was brought to the screen).

Wyndham could be bitterly satirical, as in "Consider Her Ways," a parable on relations between the sexes that appeared both as one of three novelettes in a Ballantine anthology, and as a fairly-well done production on the Alfred Hitchcock program a few years later. He could also play jokes on the readers -- as when he took on "Lucas Parkes" as a "collaborator" for "The Outward Urge" (Wyndham's full name was John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris).

Like many British writers, Wyndham turned out disaster stories. But in contrast to those of later writers like Ballard and Disch, they were intelligently written: the protagonists set out to DO something about the situation instead of merely fighting each other or sitting down and moaning.

For Wyndham, while he knew we are living in a dangerous age, was fundamentally on the side of man and intelligence. This is shown in "The Wheel," a short story set after an atomic war when a fear-ridden society has banned the wheel to prevent the return of technology. An old man whose grandson has innocently built a toy wagon sacrifices himself to save the boy, and tells him:

"Now what you've got to understand is that the Wheel's not evil. Never mind what the scared men tell you. No discovery is good or evil until men make it that way....One day they'll start to use the Wheel again....When (that day) does come, don't you be one of the scared ones -- be one of the ones that's going to show 'em how to use it better than they did last time. It's not the Wheel -- it's the fear that's evil, Davie, remember that."

And let us remember John Wyndham, fondly.

4. STAR TREK PASSES

The demise of "Star Trek" will be a disappointment to a legion of Trekkies. But many of the more serious-minded science fiction fans will not miss the program.

In the three years since the pilot episode drew a standing ovation when previewed at the Tricon in Cleveland, the program had been almost completely emasculated; symptomatic of the decline were such atrocious episodes as "Spectre of the Gun." The most original story of the 1968-9 season, "The Mark of Gideon," was flawed, even though it handled the serious issue of the Catholic Church's stand on birth control masterfully. As for the rest of this season's episodes, they ranged from mediocre to horrible.

Not only were the episodes generally bad, but the carefully-built technical background was compromised. Many things that happened to the Enterprise and its crew were outright fantasy -- so confused that even A.E. Van Vogt of "Null-A" fame must have blushed. Characterization in the series became a mockery -- Captain Kirk and Officer Spock became mere parodies of themselves instead of living personalities. Most of the crew members were virtual non-entities.

It has been said that it is almost impossible to design an S.F. series that will appeal to a wide audience. Maybe so -- but note that lowering the standards of "Star Trek" didn't help its ratings any.

THE MAN IN THE MAZE

by Robert Silverberg
Avon V2262 * 75¢

JOE: You oughta read this new book by Silverberg.

BLOW: Oh, what's that?

JOE: It's called "The Man in the Maze," and it's all about this guy named Muller who lives in the middle of an intricate and deadly maze left by aliens on....

BLOW: Sure you're not talking about Algis Budrys' "Rogue Moon?"

JOE: Nah, this maze is bigger. Besides, it's not on the Moon -- it's in another solar system.

BLOW: That's nice. But what's Muller doing there?

JOE: He stinks.

BLOW: How's that again?

JOE: Aliens have operated on his brain so he broadcasts nasty emotions all the time.

BLOW: The ones who built the maze?

JOE: No, some other hunch he'd been sent to as an emissary.

BLOW: Gosh, what would they go and do that for?

JOE: Darned if I know. I don't think Silverberg does either -- but it doesn't matter; it's terrific symbolism.

BLOW: Eh?

JOE: Muller's a symbol of how rotten humanity is. Also, he's being punished by the Gods.

BLOW: I thought you said they were aliens.

JOE: Dammit, this is SYMBOLISM, I'm telling you. It doesn't matter.

BLOW: Well....what did this Muller do that was so rotten -- did he commit mass murder, rob widows and orphans?

JOE: Of course not. He did REALLY evil things. He loved space too much, and loved sex too much, and was entirely too overprideful, so the Gods had to strike him down. Hubris and all.

BLOW: Yeah, I heard they had a union shop. And Muller can't have his brain fixed either, I suppose.

JOE: Right. That's impossible. Silverberg says so right in the book. So nobody can stand being near Muller, and he runs off into this maze.

BLOW: And?

JOE: Some other rotten people led by Boardman go to bring him back.

BLOW: Honest?

JOE: They need him to be emissary to some aliens who are invading the Galaxy and enslaving human planets.

BLOW: The ones who operated on his brain?

JOE: No, and not the ones who built the maze, either; this is a third outfit.

BLOW: Gee, there sure are a lot of rotten entities in this book.

JOE: Almost like in "Thorns." Though, come to think of it, Silverberg may be slipping a little.

BLOW: How come?

JOE: There's this kid named Rawlins who takes pity on Muller and eventually plays square with him, so he goes off to meet those invading aliens out of love for mankind.

BLOW: That's the message? Muller loves mankind?

JOE: Yeah. Maybe even Silverberg does. Like I said, I think he may be slipping.

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

by Ursula LeGuin * Ace 47800 * 95¢

Miss LeGuin, one of the most promising distaff writers to break upon the science fiction scene since the heyday of Moore and Brackett, has taken on a challenging assignment: to create a world in which sex, as we know it, does not exist.

The inhabitants of Gethen, while perfectly human -- the LeGuin universe is made up of planets colonized by an all-but-forgotten Terran empire -- are all hermaphrodites. Such a difference from the norm must, of course, permeate the entire Gethenian culture -- and it is this culture that Genly Ai, envoy from the interstellar Ekumene, must understand in order to persuade the planet to join this union.

So far, so good. But what would a hermaphroditic culture really be like? There are, after all, wide variations between cultures here on Earth -- where heterosexuality is universal. Perhaps it would take both an expert sexologist and an anthropologist to even come close to imagining the essential features of such a culture.

Certainly, Gethen has its peculiarities. Technological change is far slower than we are used to. Raiding is common, but there has never been a full-scale war. Personal relationships place great emphasis on "shifgrethor" -- a principle reminiscent of oriental "face," although supposedly rooted in Gethenian sexual psychology and related to the intimations of mortality expressed in a Gethenian creation myth. The dating system is peculiar -- the present is always the Year One, with past and future dates given minus and plus signs. Groups of "mystics" are capable of "foretelling," literally -- but do so only convince their clients that questions about the future are foolish. And of the two kingdoms visited by Genly Ai, one is clannish, almost anarchic; the other bureaucratic and centralized.

Alien, yes. But alien for the reason given? Or could the same culture exist just as well on a heterosexual planet?

Structurally, the novel reminds one of Austin Tappan Wright's "Islandia." There too, a foreign envoy -- John Lang -- is thrust into an essentially alien culture, which unfolds slowly as he travels the countryside, and with which he much eventually come to terms. The two books share a similar atmosphere -- and this too, calls into question Miss LeGuin's premise -- for Islandia is, of course, quite Terran, however it may differ from what we are used to. Her narrative is interspersed with folk tales aimed at emphasizing her theme, after the manner of Fletcher Pratt in "The Well of the Unicorn." But still....

Then there is the relationship that grows between Genly Ai and Estraven, a prominent Gethenian who befriends his mission for reasons that become obvious as the story develops. Their story has moments of poignancy -- and it is tragic, as it has to be. Here is where the sex difference becomes important, and the "love story" becomes the heart of the book. Can Miss LeGuin be telling us that sex doesn't make that much difference to a culture -- but very much to individuals?

Read, and ponder.

SERVANTS OF THE WANKH

by Jack Vance * Ace 66900 * 50¢

You see them overflowing the book racks -- "Man from Aunt #23," "The Paranoiacs #3," "Tossed in Space #11." Yes, series books are pretty cruddy, even when they have a classic writer going for them -- Edmond Hamilton's "Starwolf" series, for instance, leaves very much to be desired.

So along comes Jack Vance and starts a series called "Planet of Adventure" -- and, by golly, it's GOOD! Why this brilliant exception? Ours not to question why; ours but to read and enjoy.

"Servants of the Wankh" is the second in the series (the first was "City of the Chasch" last year). Adam Reith, the hero of the series, is the sole survivor of the survey ship Explorator IV, which has been shot down over the planet Tschai. He has two main problems: find out who the culprits were, and find some way of getting back to Earth.

Easier said than done. For Tschai is one of the darndest planets you ever did see. For one thing, it's already got humans on it -- but a large proportion of them are enslaved by the three (yes, three -- count 'em) other alien races (Chasch, Dirdir and Wankh) on Tschai -- none of which is native to it (there are real natives, Pnumekin, but you don't see them too often, and perhaps it's just as well). They have their sub-groups, and most of them seem to be involved in some ancient interstellar war with each other. The (free) humans have a number of sub-cultures too.

Vance's creation has so many biological and cultural ramifications that it is simply impossible to summarize them in a review. Suffice it to say that the series has every bit of the appeal "Big Planet" did -- maybe more so.

One fault, perhaps: A promising affair that was developing at the end of "City of the Chasch" between Reith and Princess Ylin Ylan of Cath is abruptly ended, under rather gory circumstances. But this is the only change made by Vance in the traditions of Burroughs that isn't a change for the better.

Who are the Wankh? Well, they live south of Cath, and are very secretive, and have spaceships -- which is why Reith wants to pay a call on them after settling his affairs with Cath (and the satirical treatment Vance gives that culture is in itself worth the price of the book). They also have Wankhmen, who seem to be the equivalent of the Chasch's enslaved and duped Chaschmen -- but look out! Vance pitches some curve balls!

Grab this one, by all means. And keep an eye out for the next in the series.

MOVIE --

THE ILLUSTRATED MAN

Warner Brothers-Seven Arts
Produced by Howard Kreitsek
and Ted Mann. Directed by
Jack Smight. Screenplay by
Howard Kreitsek. Starring
Rod Steiger, Claire Bloom,
Robert Drivas, and others

Ray Bradbury's "The Illustrated Man" was a series of stories and vignettes, some macabre, some wondrous and some sentimental, seen by the narrator in the "skin illustrations" of the book's namesake.

Howard Kreitsek has bastardized the macabre element, suppressed the wonder and sentiment, and larded his movie with fashionably-dull dialogue and simple-minded attempts to be socially significant.

Like having Steiger (the Illustrated Man) and Drivas (the man who was the narrator of the book) take up time with a nude swim in a lake. It's got nothing to do with the Illustrated Man, nor with his illustrations, but it'll impress the people who think such things are "mature" fare. Yeah, and the old witch who gave Steiger those illustrations turns out to be young Claire Bloom, and he was looking for a lay in the first place, anyhow.

And while Steiger objects to Drivas calling them tattoos, that's all they are -- not El Greco miniatures, as Bradbury had them. Oh, and Kreitsek has Drivas try to bump off Steiger at the end, too. The whole sequence is stretched out interminably, though of course it was only a narrative hook in the book.

The stories?

Well, first Kreitsek takes "The Veldt," and somehow manages to make it a bore, even though he remains truer to Bradbury here than in the rest of the movie. Everything is somehow out of focus -- the acting is too unemotional (except during temper tantrums); dialogue is dull, and major distortions are made in the original (the parents never do decide to close up the house; medieval scenes are substituted for Rima when the children try to "reassure" them). Even the shock ending is strangely mishandled.

Then there's "The Long Rain." Kreitsek reverses the roles of the lieutenant and Simmons, making the former an unadulterated bastard who wants to get to the Sun Dome only because it has a whore waiting, while Simmons -- Bradbury's bastard -- becomes a sensitive, poetic type. So there is hardly any emotional release when the lieutenant is the one to reach the Sun Dome. And it's made into only a whorehouse, anyway. The wondrous element is perverted and destroyed.

Finally, in "The Last Night of the World," he converts Bradbury's vignette of a couple calmly and sentimentally awaiting the world's end into a nasty piece wherein a "forum" anticipating the end has ordered all the men to kill their children and Steiger does so despite Miss Bloom's remonstrances. Then it turns out the world doesn't end after all. Sentiment is destroyed.

Bradbury has his faults as a writer, but this narrow, boring, picture makes them look brilliant by comparison. How performers like Steiger and Miss Bloom got dragooned into it is a real mystery.

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