

# SCIENCE FICTION NEWS

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SIXTY YEARS OF AMAZING STORIES (Continued)

1931

Development had levelled off, and this year of Amazing does not look much different from 1930. It was a time when science fiction was clearly here to stay and the active competition of the Amazing and Wonder groups was beneficial in developing new writers who figured in both. There was some evidence of the third force Astounding. Hamilton, Cummings, Vincent, Leinster and Williamson had already sold considerable material there, a market that paid better and more promptly; names developed in Astounding were also to be seen here.

First appearing in March with Valley of the Titans, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach was to be a significant name. In later years he had a part in William L. Crawford's pioneering specialist press venture with the interesting low-budget magazine Marvel Tales and others; he originated Fantasy Press in 1947, perhaps the most notable of the group that led from magazine SF to established book publication and important for promotion of such authors as E. E. Smith, Williamson, Weinbaum and Campbell in that period. But he was first a creditable author.

Born in 1910 in rural Pennsylvania, his mother tongue Plattdeutsch, Eshbach like many of his generation was drawn to SF before it had been recognised. Among his early reading he remembers the dime novels that were near their end and authors like William Wallace Cook, then Burroughs: "I've never forgotten the fascination of my first reading of The Gods of Mars. I couldn't stop reading, though the strangeness of the

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Martian creatures and setting scared the daylights out of me," he recalls. "Another high point was the appearance of Conquest of the Moon Pool by A Merritt as an All-Story serial...after that experience, Merritt reigned supreme. All 'impossible' stories were compared with the master, and the others always came in a poor second." Then there were such as Garret Smith, Victor Rousseau, Homer Eon Flint, Francis Stevens, Murray Leinster -- "Never in my wildest dreams could I have visualised the day when I would publish some of their work in book form."-- and Science and Invention, then Amazing Stories. It was easy to progress to writing SF.

His stories do not amount to a large body of work and are too diverse to characterise readily. as to trend or theme. But while some are potboilers most are full of original or at least unusual thinking. Indeed as with many writers of the time the main fault is the multitude of new and revelatory concepts that jostle for the reader's attention and are not properly explored.

The Mad Scientist, stock character of the time, appears in several cases as threat to society and originator of the action. In The Valley of Titans (Mch) he operates as an air pirate from a dinosaur-infested enclave, and incidentally creates a community of ape-folk by evolutionary experiments. The introduction of an underground realm of pre-human energy beings and a god-like alien power to boot makes it all confusing. In A Voice from the Ether (May) he brings a deadly parasitic organism from subatomic size and destroys his world. In The Invisible Destroyer (Air Wonder Stories May 1930) the dissident genius undertaking to dictate to the world, evidently single-handed, is trying to prevent the peaceable establishment of a world state. His objections are logical and -- taken out of context and disregarding what we know now of how economic and ideological forces interact -- make good sense, and there is no attempt to refute them. ~~sf~~ Vibration, a popular all-embracing basis for marvels around 1930, here produces not only

novel weaponry but access to other coexistent worlds, and a higher civilisation thus found is induced to intervene.

In *The Light from Infinity* humanoids from a super-universe shrink down and attack Earth, foiled by an expedition that uses their size-changer to reach the super-world and retaliate. Needless to say the paradoxes are ignored. *The Kingdom of Thought* (Aug 1935) has the theme of time travel bringing together people of many eras with that of physically degenerate but intellectually potent superhumans of a remote future, evolved into good and evil races with irreconcilable differences. *The Meteor Miners* (Dec 1935) shows a future space-based industry in a rare anticipation of ordinary working life in another era. *The Outpost on Ceres* (Oct 1936) in which aliens threaten a refueling base, also deals with a future working environment, and is notable for its sensible treatment of a drug dependence problem.

Another 15 stories in the other magazines are outside our scope here but these are representative. Asked some forty years on for comments on his work he reported after rereading: "Most of my stories were as unfamiliar as if they were the efforts of a stranger. The reading was an interesting experience. Some of the stories made me cringe, they were so incredibly bad. Others were a surprise: they were better than I thought possible. Indeed, a few actually pleased me.

"In self-defence I believe I should say that in the 1930's a comparative handful of youthful pioneers were breaking new trails in fiction. Most of us were amateurs trying to learn our craft. A fairly new idea and a minimal ability to put thoughts into words sufficed to produce a sellable story. In short, we learned by doing, received the encouragement of publication for our efforts, and payment (such as it was) as frosting on a cake. Characters were one-dimensional and stereotyped, conversations were stilted, action usually

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was melodramatic, and literary style was either derivative or non-existent -- but there was that often referred to 'sense of wonder' born of youthful enthusiasm and uninhibited imagination."

Strong in content at the expense of form, Eshbach's work helped build up the range of visions and fancies that early science fiction displayed, though he was less successful in controlling and resolving them.

In April appeared Raymond Z. Gallun, Paul Ernst and in collaboration Nat Schachner and Arthur Leo Zagat. Ernst, established in Weird Tales and also active in the detective field, had already written for Astounding and had only two stories in Amazing. Hidden in Glass (Apr) is an example of the scientific detective story in which a crime is committed using some novel device, in this case by a form of invisibility. The Incredible Formula (June) is of more consequence. A method of reviving the newly dead as zombies for slave labor is not the most desirable of inventions, but no doubt if accomplished it would be used and with terrible consequences as Ernst shows.

Atomic Fire was Gallun's third published story following two in Science Wonder and Air Wonder in 1929. Its setting is some 10,000,000 years ahead when Aerth (Aerth? Aerth!) has dried up like Mars and like Mars has canals to carry water from the polar icecaps and the Sun is cooling. A Black Nebula cutting off its light is the problem, the title tells of the answer. Not a notable story. He wrote many that were a lot better through the 30's and later but became identified mainly with Astounding.

Schachner and Zagat likewise had had their first two stories in Wonder: This was their only collaboration in Amazing and Schachner alone had only one more story here, World Gone Mad in Oct 1935. The Menace from Andromeda was an amorphous form of life arriving as space-borne spores, threatening to consume us, suppressed with some difficulty.

P. Schuyler Miller also had had two stories in Wonder before making the Amazing scene with The Arrhenius Horror in May. An exotic crystalline life form arrives as particles falling from space "If life is energy, why should it not rest where it will?" SF was opening new vistas of what other worlds might produce that was not Earth over again. Through the Vibrations (May) and its sequel Cleon of Yzdral (July) have a world of abandoned automated cities, located on a different wavelength from Earth. There were a few more in Amazing, but once again Miller's fiction is scattered in various magazines and principally Astounding.

Miller's early work was then compared to the stories of A. Merritt, though to modern eyes there is little similarity. There is a tendency to a florid style, but story and character are closer to real life than to heroic myth, and there is a down-to-earth awareness of the natural world that gives a strongly visualised location. The sharp impressions of landscape, forest and mountain and living environment contrast with the romantically vague and perfunctory settings of many contemporaries.

He is now better remembered for his reviewing, covering most important books for some 23 years in Astounding and its successor Analog, a service of great value and influence.

Neil R. Jones arrived in July with The Jameson Satellite, and yet again he had already sold stories to Gernsback's opposition, two for Scientific Detective and one for Air Wonder. The Jameson Satellite however began a remarkable series.

Space flight as we have seen was often imagined as being achieved by private enterprise, the individual experimenter planning and building his vehicle like the Wright brothers working in their bicycle shop. The engineer Jameson is one such, but rather than setting off in life to conquer space he has his rocket used to give him burial in space, to orbit Earth forever.

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But after a brief interval of forty million years, thirty-five after the last men left Earth, a party of the spacefaring Zoromes interfere. To the Zoromes, bionic nonhumans, installing his revived brain in one of their robot bodies is no problem and for a further 21 stories he joins them in visiting numerous stars as 21MM392 (they have call signs like radio hams instead of names).

The Zoromes' wanderings are pleasure trips more than scientific expeditions, and one wonders how the economy of the home world Zor works at the high level of technology needed. But their encounters with many bizarre cultures are all great fun. To speed up the action they are immediately able to communicate with any intelligent species by telepathy, a concept so much used in the period by various writers that it amounted to a convention.

Besides the Zorome series Jones wrote a fair number of tales of the future for the other SF magazines. They were set in two future times for the most part, the 24th and 26th Century, and used a consistent imagined history. He was the earliest writer to use such a scheme. He claimed incidentally to have first used the word Astronaut in his first story *The Death's Head Meteor* (Air Wonder, Jan 1930).

Established names like Jack Williamson were still plugging away. Williamson led off the year with *The Prince of Space* first in the January issue. War in space as well as attack or invasion of Earth from space had been given plenty of attention already; piracy of the future however seems to have been limited to the atmosphere. *The Prince of Space* may be the first example of a true space pirate, boarding and looting commercial space vessels. His base is an ambitious space habitat, a mile-thick rotating cylinder with a city laid out around its interior; "built large of meteoric iron which we captured from a meteorite swarm -- making navigation safe and getting useful metal at the same

time." At the time of the story space traffic goes no further than the Moon but is quite extensive, and there is a Moon Patrol with at least nine fighting ships, though there seems to be no more than the one pirate organisation. Space fliers are known as Sunships since they are powered by the Sun -- getting around the awkward matter of fuel which other writers tended to gloss over -- and propulsion is by "positive rays", or ion jet.

Other devices appearing here include ray pistols and rocket torpedos; surprisingly heliographs are used for communication in space rather than radio. The main action soon shifts from hunting the pirates to grappling with the invading Martians who have decided to move in. "Scores of green tentacles, slender and writhing, grew from an insignificant body," Williamson describes; "Three lidless, purple eyes, staring, alien and malevolent, watched alertly from foot-long green stalks that rose above the body." And on closer inspection the tentacles have sharp-edge suction discs for slurping blood, and people are as edible as the native humanoids of Mars. So here we see the classic style of EIT invader that served so well in the 30's exhibiting all the usual signs. I'll give you one guess who wins.

Vincent, Breuer, Kline, Keller, Olsen, Verrill were more familiar names. And there was E. E. Smith, the biggest name in the field.

Smith had written only two novels, but they had made him a formidable presence. He had converted the interplanetary into the cosmic scene, and more importantly he had originated the theme of action and conflict in space and between worlds of advanced technology. Incidentally he had introduced such concepts as faster than light flight, force fields, tractor beams, radiation screens, automatic translation, In retrospect a more valuable contribution was his efforts to describe seriously non-terrestrial life and

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non-human intelligence, but this was yet to come.

Spacehounds of IPC (Jly-Sept) is unconnected with either Smith's Skylark or Lensman series and the action is confined to the solar system which makes it rather more credible. Yet there is a strong resemblance.

There is the commonly proposed future interplanetary setup with civilisation ending at the Asteroids and Earth-Mars traffic as much routine as transatlantic shipping in 1931. Abruptly comes trouble: raiders armed with un-heard-of weapons challenge a passenger vessel, slice it up like a gherkin and make off with the pieces in the direction of Jupiter. Most of what follows is seen as experienced by a brace of survivors escaping from the Jovians to land on Ganymede (quite too Earthlike even by the ideas of 1931, but Smith disregarded the low temperature so far from the Sun) and in the course of trying to escape to the inner system get as far afield as Saturn and make contact with other intelligent races.

There is serious thought behind the violent action. The imagined technology is ingenious. Three alien intelligent species are presented -- malign Hexans, alsof Vorkuls who serve as Deus ex Machina, and frigid fluorocarbon-based Titanians, perhaps the most interesting element in the story.-- as well as humanoids. If the principal characters appear a little too brave and virtuous the fault is not so much with Smith as with the conventions of the time.

(to be continued)

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