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No. 46

Not exactly news

-- that many books of SF interest published abroad do not appear on general sale in Australia. Nor that many others, indeed most of them, are grossly overpriced when they do show up.

Bookselling is admittedly a chancy business at the best of times, and in Australia a substantial markup over overseas published prices is traditional to cover losses and extra expenses. The fact remains that the Australian public pay far more than their British and American fellows for the same products.

Exchange rates vary. But for some time the US dollar has been worth something under A.70 cents. Making some allowance for freight and other odds and ends of added costs, an American hard covered book priced at a typical \$5.95 ought to sell here for about \$4.50, one would think. Well, it doesn't.

Since scientifictionists are generally acknowledged to be a group of above-average intelligence, the conclusion should be obvious.

Reviews

TIMESCOOP, by John Brunner. Sidgwick & Jackson. HC.

It is pleasant to have a well-bound hardback edition from an honorable publisher. Nice format. Op-art dustjacket. But what is this? Oh, horror! Here endeth the blurb: " (blah, blah) ... the power these creatures from the past would have over him -- the reign of terror about to begin." Shudder, shudder. To be serious, a reader choosing the book inspired by that piece of irrelevance will not enjoy it, while those who could quite easily be entertained by it would put it down and browse elsewhere. That can't be what the publisher aims at: his sales depend a great deal on word-of-mouth endorsement from reader to reader. End of message.

Your editor has a splendid sense of humor, because he knows how time travel tales cause my hackles to rise -- rise in fact by as much as the stories fall short of Wells' The Time Machine. They all do.

In Timescoop John Brunner naturally doesn't meet my impossible demand. His novel is a good romp and lots of people will like it. The idea owes something at least to Asimov's The Dead Past, but suppressing the real implications which would be horrifying and throw society into total chaos economically, socially and morally. In this not too cautionary tale Sparky, chatty computer of the giant corporation Freitas International, heads a cast of dozens and they come from time present (futuristically speaking) and time past. Yes, gentle reader, the "timescoop" machine is none other than one for duplicating in the flesh certain real people from the past, provided there is sufficient data about where they were at an exact moment, sort of co-ordinates for a four-dimensional map in space and time. The how and why of which doesn't matter in the least, and that's just as well for the story, because the ignored implication of such a technology is that it would have become possible to create human life at the flick of a switch, surely a lower-order problem than exactly duplicating individuals (think of Clarke's The City and the Stars). I do not see the need to go on. And I'm being unfair, asking for a level of adequacy which the book does not pretend to give.

The book is the vehicle for a few spoofs on big business rivalries and publicity campaigns, whitewash versus smear, ever topical in the world of politics. In our story the biggest promotional campaign of all time (!) is to be young Harold Freitas' use of Timescoop, his firm's big new discovery, to bring back to life a gaggle of his illustrious ancestors, aided and abetted by computer Sparky, who knows more than anybody and thank goodness has a fair old sense of fun.

The ancestors turn out to be more human in frailty than their legendary reputations suggest, and herein is the novel's saving grace. Granted that it's in fun, much of the characterisation is deft and not unfunny. Indeed, a humorous SF novel is always a find, much harder to sustain in the writing than a short story.

The quasi-historical flavor, too, isn't at all badly done. I can sum up by saying that Brunner's book is certainly redeemed from being merely silly, which its core material might have made it.

Worth giving to Mum or Dad for a birthday, and worthy of being put on public library shelves. In its best passages it's intelligent, racy and whimsical, like the set piece episode of the Grand Canyon reunion party, or the courtroom scene when the computer-judge, a mere hack, blows a fuse over an inescapable paradox. (Shades of Mack Reynolds!) Of course, it was Sparky who prepared the defence case.

-- W. S. Menary

(Well, SF surely must have arrived when it's something to keep Mum and Dad quiet. About that jacket blurb -- evidence is mounting all the time for a monstrous world-wide conspiracy to sabotage SF book sales with imbecilic blurbs. Publishers, act now before it's too late! Do a McCarthy on your blurb writers! Shifty eyes? Funny accents? Uncheckable backgrounds? Suspicious habits like reading Time and Readers' Digest? Or just give the job to someone more intelligent -- you must have them, probably down in the basement. -- G.S.)

Reviews

IN THE ENCLOSURE, by Barry N. Malzberg. Avon (15073). 5-190 p.
PB 95c.

Two of Malzberg's stories are included in Sphere's collection of the best SF shorts of 1971, edited by Harrison and Aldiss. Though I admired their cool economy of style, neither prepared me for the excellence of this 1973 novel.

Increased length allow the author to do full justice to his far-from-cosy talents: an uncomfortable insight into character, plus a disturbing disillusionment with social patterns. Malzberg is no writer for the complacent. But his spare taut prose is a joy to read.

SF written from the viewpoint of an alien isn't news. Nor is the diary format. Yet Malzberg manages to give his alien's private record of 28 months spent as captive on Earth immediacy and suspense. So much, I was compelled to finish it in one straight session.

Quir, and his alien companions in the Enclosure, are the prisoners of scientific officialdom. Programmed with advanced technological information, they have been sent from their home planet for the express purpose of increasing human knowledge. Whether they like it or not, they are powerless to hold back the things they know.

Malzberg's plot has been so trimmed of inessentials it's impossible to say more and not spoil it. The end is handled with special skill. It flicks one back to the beginning with a tart ironic twist. All I can do is urge you to read it.

Verdict: On no account to be missed.

-- Angus Gordon

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