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S C I E N C E F I C T I O N N E W S
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US INTELLECTUALS AND THEM COMMON PEOPLE

SF completists were close to plague numbers when SF was in its infancy and they had a fair chance of success. (For those people who came in just now, a completist is a collector with a consuming urge to own every significant item in his field: scratch that, to own everything in his field and anything incidental to it: variants, suppressed imprints, manuscripts, associational items, you name it) Naturally they have long been an endangered species.

But what gives the few surviving completists their characteristic morose disposition and tendency to bit is not just the sheer impossibility of getting anywhere close to their objective. It's more the constant irritation from such a lot of the worthless insults to SF they have to collect to keep in the running.

Bad news for anyone devoted enough to Australian SF to add to the collection anything printing the isolated story. It's a queer collection of miscellaneous stuff, largely nonfiction and apparently designed for low chronological as well as mental ages, titled Funny Peculiar, edited by Barbara Sleigh and published by the Wren firm. 176 p. HC and dated 1975. Your secretary finds that it includes two bone fide SF stories by recognised though not Australian names. There is Meteor by John Wyndham, said to be "adapted" (check with the original what that means, anyone who can be bothered; the author having died in 1969 had no defence); and The Odour of Thought by Robert Sheckley, or "Spreckley" as it's misspelled in the vacuous introduction.

Why do they do it?

NEW DIMENSIONS 5, ed. Robert Silverberg
Gollancz, 1976. 3-234 p. HC

The earlier issues of New Dimensions have struck this reviewer as presenting high-grade modern science fiction which avoids the traps of triviality and of "clever" writing with no story-line. Unfortunately, New Dimensions 5 does not follow this trend, and is the worst of the series so far.

In *Find the Lady*, by Nicholas Fisk, we have a portrait of an alien race which is quite convincing; in the same story the human protagonists are a pair of aging homosexuals who behave like effeminate caricatures of the type which mercifully disappeared from mainstream fiction twenty years ago. There are two possible explanations: either the couple are a dreadfully unfunny piece of satire, or Fisk is an alien and has not yet observed humanity very well.

A Solfy Drink, a Saffel Fragrance, by Marta Randall, reads like an exercise from a creative writing class. It postulates a sort of "universal translator" and the pseudoscientific explanation involves a misuse of the word code. The story is an examination of the difficulty of understanding alien poetry and the beauty which may still reside therein; one hopes that this interesting theme will be tackled again.

Several other stories are simply experiments which failed. *Achievements*, by David Wise, counts as an experiment which succeeds — it is a witty list of the achievements of one man and of mankind, the sort of achievements about which science fiction is written.

Another success is Jack Dann's *The Dybbuk Dolls*, portraying a legal-yet-seamy trade which reminds one of a walk through Soho. Barry Malzberg contributes *Report to Headquarters*, which — among other things — succeeds in conveying a feeling of alienness without the shortcomings of Fisk's story. And in *White Creatures*, Gregory Benford tells us something about old age.

Richard Lupoff's *Sail the Tide of Mourning* is a sequel to his *After the Dreamtime*. The earlier story, while very interesting, suffered because it purported to present the descendants of Australian Aborigines: but in fact Lupoff's characters were 19th Century American Negroes with their names changed, which made the story less effective for the Australian reader. The fault is less apparent in the present story, which is quite competent but lacks the invention of the original.

— Wal Wallis

SEARCH THE SKY, by Frederik Pohl and C.N.Kornbluth.
Bantam. 165 p. PB

They have a bright lad writing blurbs at Bantam. He's going to lose a lot of sales. "The Stunning Novel of Tomorrow's Space Messiah!" it says here. The cover picture isn't much help either.

No matter. This is a pretty good book. It's my personal choice as the best Pohl-Kornbluth collaboration, after *The Space Merchants* (or rather, after the serial version *Gravv Planet*, which is untidy but better than the abbreviated book). Nothing in it has dated since 1954. It falls into distinct episodes more neatly than any of their other books, giving a firmer structure and not really sacrificing continuity. The frantic hast with which these books were written — potboilers, let's face it, though written with conviction. — doesn't show through as many thin spots. It's a book with a lot to teach by example about writing. It doesn't spoil it for me to see skilful padding, explanations skipped smoothly over to keep the action moving, on the other hand a long piece of elaborate reasoning that proper revision would have trimmed ruthlessly down.

There's good thinking about the possibilities of interstellar flight. It hasn't penetrated with most of the writers still using it lazily just for

setting, but if man ever makes it to the stars and finds Earthlike planets to live on, it's not going to just more of the same old routine. Those distances in space and time are not going to be something like the oceans: every lightyear multiplies that kind of separation by a thousand million. Pohl and Kornbluth gave some passing thought to what isolation will mean if the limiting velocity is a real barrier — and also to what follows if it isn't. The book is built on a few simple consequences, plus some elementary genetics and some insights on society.

There's a fresh look at the time-honored theme of reversal of sex roles, written before the present women's movement but still pointed. Satirists have been kicking the idea around for generations but done little with it, and this version is one of the best if only for its brevity.

Racism gets a bludgeoning in another episode. And in another there is a neat demonstration of the distinction between form/substance in political systems, showing how an elaborately designed electoral scheme for ensuring fair play can let a totalitarian group take over and then keep it in power without any cheating needed. Maybe more Americans today than in 1954 understand that, maybe not. But this was written before a lot of things.

Finally, there's another look at the horrid possibility we saw in *The Marching Morons* and *The Little Black Bag*, the world of dimwits kept alive by a minority of fewer and fewer superiors. and then the framing problem resolved. Inconclusively, but believably.

Catch up on this one now, if you haven't read it before.

— G.S.

Reviews

GLADIATOR-AT-LAW by Frederik Pohl and C.M.Kornbluth.
Bantam. 171 p. PB

This was one of the times the collaboration didn't hit the mark. Well, I guess a bad Pohl and Kornbluth book is still ahead of the field.

"America's superviolent future, where barbarian outcasts are imprisoned in savage ghetto es, while an elite executive caste enjoys the sensual rewards of technology." Thus the blurb writer. That guy's so close to idiocy it amounts to genius. All half true and completely misleading.

This time the plot is involved, full of red herrings and skirmishes with side issues, and thoroughly unconvincing. It's about...well, juvenile delinquency (remember it?), the violence in entertainment issue (ditto), vertical integration, yellow-dog contracts, real estate developers...a deadpanned exposition of the bread-and-circuses theory of social control...brainwashing...corporate crime. It's a real kitchen sink affair, with irrelevant and half-formulated ideas thrust in forcibly to give complication in lieu of development.

Briefly, there's a setup where cheap but excellent massproduced modular houses are tied to job status, and a substantial cast of unemployed and unemployable surplus proletarians are given rations and free spectacles of organised sadism to keep them happy in their slums. It doesn't quite jell. There is some poorly worked out stuff with gutless adults and tough disciplined juveniles in this population, with the half-expressed thought that values like courage and duty and honor are natural to dead end kids' gangs and meaningless in civilised society.

The central concern, though, is in plots and counterplots to gain control of an inheritance. The indigestible layer of halfbaked details doesn't help it move. And the unresolved questions are more than are justifiable.

— G.S.

ROUND THIS BEND OR THAT

The PLANTS, by Kenneth McKenney. Bantam. 243 p. PB
DEMON SEED, by Dean R. Koontz. Bantam. 182 p. PB

Are we all mad? Well, there would really be no way to tell. But I defy anyone to take a look about him and assert that it's a world of sane people. Not all showing the same symptoms, but obviously having problems. The main theme is fear, not of the all too real dangers confronting everyone but of one private substitute horror or another.

In McKenney's book paranoia takes a break from human conspiracy and individual threats and gives us an attack on humanity by malevolent vegetables. Not exactly a new idea. Keller's silly *The Ivy War* and Hamilton's tongue-in-cheek *The Plant Revolt* both date from 1930. And there is no attempt to rationalise the simple idea of plants developing awareness and power of action, apart from some laughable mystical guff. But who knows? Perhaps there's a public for it out there.

Koontz touches a sensitive spot in this 1973 book, now reissued to coincide with a film version. Irrational fear and hatred of data processing, the old thinking machine idea, is very widespread. To a fair number of readers it probably seems quite emotionally valid that a computer might somehow grow into a living monster. Though it's a bit strong to have an automated house not only ravishing but impregnating a human captive. Are enough people really as scared of automation as that?

— G.S.

Reviews

The ZEITGEIST MACHINE, a New Anthology of Australian Science Fiction, ed. Damien Broderick. Angus & Robertson, 1977. 16-200 p. PB \$3.95

Both Science Fiction and Australia are used to abuse and misrepresentation and can endure far worse attacks than this admirably produced product of a Hong Kong printer. Nevertheless it is sad to think of uninformed people in backward regions picking it up and gaining the impression either that science fiction is generally like this worthless junk or that Australia can produce no better. Mind you, taking all the other evidence to date, the second proposition is a reasonable one.

Whoever wrote the back cover blurb looked up "Zeitgeist" and kindly quoted the direct translation, but he was either desperate or cunning enough to invent another meaning for it which makes quite a good point. True, one of the values of science fiction is that it gives insight into our own time by visualising a different world of the future. But be it noted, none of the stories in this book is able to do anything of the kind: in most of them no attempt is made to imagine another environment or culture in any detail (if at all), and where there is a picture it does not seem a relevant one.

There is a great deal of precious, self-indulgent, posturing prose. Wide-eyed moody overwriting with characteristic mannerisms -- present tense, no direct quotations -- disconnected snippets instead of logical pursuit of a thought, where the writer had no clear idea to begin with. Passages lumpy with foreign words and neologisms to cover up vague concepts. And there is often painful effort to sound Australian, with gratuitous references to our dull history, pathetic traditions or brutish customs, or to names that overseas readers would have heard of.

Don't look for much originality of thought: it's not missing altogether, but it's not very strong. Six of the eleven stories use the established background of science fiction -- some for detailed set-

ting, most for a vague suggestion of one. The others have no connection with science fiction and can only have met some private criteria. They include one of Dal Stivens' pieces of dialect neo-Munchhausen, which presumably amuse some readers. There is also a quite interesting item in its way, *The Inheritors*, by G. M. Glaskin, a stiff-upper-lipped extravaganza in which Australia's sheep abruptly turn carnivorous and gobble up the human population (nothing is said about other animals wild or tame).

This is not just something you might expect in a nut-house. It's a piece of allegory written as a safe way to express a subversive view. In many parts of Australia the sheep is a totem animal, and in political thinking of all colors it is held in superstitious awe, comparable to the cow in India. Nevertheless, some educated people suspect that history will judge the woolly monster to have been the continent's worst animal pest, eradicating the native environment completely wherever it has gone: not by its own deliberate action but by the destructive frenzy of its symbiote or parasite the grazer, sweeping away the existing vegetation adapted to soil and climate and replacing it with exotic grasses good for nothing but sheep, exterminating what native animals tried to compete, starting the degradation of forest and scrub and grassland to desert. And all for the temporary reward of a product doomed to be replaced by synthetics. Those who have studied British economic history will also remember the enclosure movement there and the quotation about the sheep eating up Britain which this reviewer cannot recall well enough to quote: look it up yourself.

But science fiction? By no means.

And the book as a whole? The kindest word is perhaps unfortunate.

.. G. S.

ABOUT INDEXES

ASFA members have now received Vol. 1 of the Index to British Science Fiction Magazines, 1934-1953. Vol. 3, Title Index, will not be ready till early in the new year. Vol. 2 will follow, out of order but that's the way it worked out.

If it is asked (as in fact several people have asked) whether the later British magazines will be covered, there can be no firm answer for the moment. Some of the information is on record, having been compiled years ago. But some of the magazines later than 1954 are covered in available indexes, and generally there seems less need for us to do it more thoroughly.

Meanwhile, other projects are active.

The index to short SF stories in books now has on file the contents of about 1100 books, locating about 8000 stories in various printings. It is still by no means complete, but most of the information is under control, and publication could be undertaken when other work is out of the way.

Since the modest list of book reviews from 1969 to 1972 was produced, we have continued tracing and recording reviews, taking the coverage back to 1960 -- and earlier for books originating before 1960 and republished since. Most of the important books in the science fiction tradition come within these limits. Most of the compilation has been done, and the remaining queries and gaps in the record are being tidied up.

Finally, there is the question of a new augmented edition of the Australian Science Fiction Index. This field should perhaps be our first responsibility as a national organisation. The 1925/1967 Index is close to sold out, so the new edition will be needed before very long, and the scope should be broadened this time.

The commencing date 1925 was taken to include Cox's *Out of the Silence*, which went through several editions and was once widely known as one of the few Australian SF books. It is not a good book, and its revival recently makes its grotesque racism the more

offensive. But there are a number of still earlier works with enough speculative content to qualify as primitive precursors of true science fiction.

The new edition will cover works by Australians printed abroad: there are numerous books published in London, a few in New York, and over 400 stories in the British and American SF magazines; there are also some translations into various languages.

Another part of the overall picture is the occasional appearance of science fiction stories, both locally written and imported, in Australian newspapers and magazines such as *Man*. Obviously it will be difficult to give anything like a full listing of these, but they should be recognised.

NORMA WILLIAMS, 1920-1977

We are sorry to hear that Norma Williams died accidentally on the 8th December, apparently being overcome by fumes as a fire destroyed her flat in Kempsey, NSW.

Norma Veronica Williams was born in Perth and lived in many parts of Australia. An independent individualist who never married and lived and worked to suit herself, Norma had a lifelong interest in science fiction, was active in the Sydney scene in the 1950's and wrote two stories for Authentic SF under the name Veronica Welwood.

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