

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS

Special issue no 74

Behind the Scene

... Graham Stone

A report on the Science Fiction Scene department in the Australian magazine Science-Fiction Monthly nos 12 to 18, 1956-7. Originally published in Kiwifan (Auckland) 1957.

by Graham Stone

When I originally wrote this article, Science Fiction Monthly was still a going concern, and therefore it dealt with the feature "The Science Fiction Scene" as if it would be running indefinitely, as indeed it was as far as I knew. But the magazine was discontinued from the 18th (February 1957) issue, so now I need not to tell you about what plans I have for the future but just what I did and why in the few months of the department's existence.

Sixteen pages is a fair amount, especially in a 112-page publication -- no other science fiction magazine has ever devoted so much of its space to reviews and commentary on the science fiction field in general. Being put in charge of such a feature was a responsibility and an opportunity of no mean order. It was a chance to do something useful for SF in a neglected field, and I mean that in more ways than one. For one thing, while plenty of magazines have had readers' departments and helped the more vocal fans carry on their various activities, and there has been a fair amount of factual matter, some of it very good, on science featured in some magazines -- Astounding and Galaxy have a particularly fine record -- and there have been book review departments, good and bad, as a regular thing for years, there has been very little attempt to fill in the background of the field for new readers, discuss themes and theories and provide miscellaneous information. Then, too, although we see current British science fiction in Australia, it does not have as extensive a circulation as you might think. Science Fiction Monthly, like at least some previous ventures in Australia, had a circulation several times that of any British magazine in Australia. Whether it reached more new readers I wouldn't want to guess, but it undoubtedly reached many more readers regularly. So, in short, it was an unusual opportunity.

Who read it, or rather, what kind of people read it? We don't know. What the management of the magazine thought, I hesitate to say. We can say for certain that comparatively few of them had previously read very much science fiction. There was a wonderful opening there for a definite editorial policy to develop a new market for genuine science fiction. Instead, the time-honoured Australian "near enough" system gave us a magazine without a trace of character and with a pretty poor level of writing and speculation. With the best intentions in the world, nobody can understand anything about a complex field like science fiction without taking an interest in it and making a study of it, and the Atlas organisation was no exception. In time, I think it would have been a lot better: but it wasn't given time. Between the fiction content of the magazine and the viewpoints expressed in the "Scene" there was a gulf which brought a number of comments, to which all I can say is that as far as the fiction was concerned, I was not consulted. Kind you, it could have been a lot worse. They made a fair attempt on the problem, and it is unlikely that anyone but a scientificionist will do better.

The object of the "Scene" was, briefly, to illuminate and interpret the science fiction field. I assumed that I was writing for people with a reasonable level of general intelligence, curiosity, mental flexibility and awareness of the changes the world is undergoing -- for if they didn't have these characteristics what would they be doing reading a science fiction magazine? -- otherwise a mixed group. I assumed that on the whole they had not read much SF until fairly recently. To say anything useful about the way the department was conducted we must go back a little. Not to the origins of science fiction (no adequate account has been written yet, and this is not the place to begin) but to my own experience of it.

When I was born (January 1926) the first issue of *Amazing Stories* must have been in the proof stage. I did not make its acquaintance for the best part of thirteen years, however, and by that time I had a certain amount of background for it. I didn't ever "become interested" in scientific ideas: it's a matter of a general attitude to life, you either have it or never will have it. Either you naturally ask "what next?" once you have a clear picture of how things stand, or you don't, never will, and won't understand when you're told. You might as well be dead in the latter case.

I don't remember for sure what I first read that you could call SF. I read what we called "comics" then; newspaper-sized affairs, some mostly pictures for very young children learning to read, others pages of infinitesimal type with one or two tiny illustrations, printed on dirty pink or green newsprint. No doubt there were stories there with an imaginative angle, but memory fails. Then there was another group of publications with no accepted name -- they sometimes called themselves "story papers" -- 32-page 8" x 12" weeklies aimed at older readers, from kindergarten up to the teens. These tended to have definite editorial policies and slants. A few like the *Gem* and *Magnet* specialised in that abysmal bottom of juvenile fiction, the school story: most of them ran a varied selection of adventure, sport, detective and historical fiction. I read those by the gross, particularly the *Champion* and *Triumph* which went in for lost worlds swarming with dinner-saucers, mad scientists threatening the world and the like. I looked out for such stories and tracked down missing instalments at a pretty early age. I missed the infamous *Scoops*, which was in this class but was also a genuine if primitive science fiction publication. The last one of the field I kept any interest in was the *Modern Boy*, which was well on the way there.

I must have been only seven when I read Wells' "The Invisible Man", a brilliant object lesson in developing a new idea and making it intelligible to an unprepared audience; and "The Food of the Gods" which goes further, showing a world transformed by a new factor. These two books that happened to be around started a search for more books with something to say, and in the next few years I discovered and read a fair amount of Verne, Haggard, Burroughs. Then there were stories in adult British magazines of the time, like *Pearson's* and *The Strand* -- a little known field for surprisingly good SF.

It was in 1935, I think, that the *Flash Gordon* strip started

running in various Australian newspapers. The Adelaide Mail produced a handout announcing it -- a broadsheet with a lot of sales talk and some scenes from the first few episodes. I was delighted at first. But I followed the series, as much irritated as thrilled by it, for years with occasional lapses. I went out of my way to see the film version, a crude and mediocre serial, a couple of years later. There were other imaginative flickers too -- Mystery Rider, Son of Kong (I missed King Kong until it was revived not so long ago), serials like Jungle Mystery and The Vanishing Shadow. I missed Things to Come by being on the move -- in Adelaide when it was showing in Sydney, and vice versa. It took me years to catch up with it at a revival.

Then there was Buck Rogers, in his nattily uniformed and muscle-bound glory. I missed the first of the semi-annual books, but No. 2 was just what I had been waiting for. By that time, though I didn't have a name for it, I knew what I wanted. Buck's 25th century of gadgets and interplanetary doings was most acceptable.

Well, that's how it went. Nobody made it easy for us then. The young fan today has a very different kind of experience. His world has changed radically in the last generation, and the changes were so commonly predicted in earlier science fiction that the field has gained a sort of precarious respectability through its notoriety. All about us we have abundant evidence that the people in the 'thirties who thought (if you could call it thinking) that things were going to stagger on as they were indefinitely were idiotically wrong; and the unpopular minority who could see plainly what was coming were merely seeing the obvious. Today atomic energy is one of the most important facts of our existence and space flight is imminent. In the 'thirties public opinion had scarcely heard of the atomic theory, and privately thought the world was probably flat.

Where today a lot of hums have got in on the act and we are inundated with corrupted science fiction, a generation ago the organized field of the magazines was so feeble that it took a lot of finding. I would have read Amazing, Wonder and Astounding at the time I was reading Buck Rogers if I had known they existed. I did not suspect, and I found them by accident in the end. How it happened was this: In 1937 I started hunting for imaginative books in earnest, and found plenty of them, including Beynon's "Planet Plane", the stupidly named hard covered edition of "The Space Machine" or "Stowaway to Mars". It was the obvious sequel to this novel, "Sleepers of Mars", which particularly interested me in issue No. 2 of Tales of Wonder whom I happened to see it. From there it was an obvious step to look for other issues, and to find the American magazines in the process.

I hope you don't mind my running on like this. Talking about oneself is always pleasant, isn't it? But I do want to get over the point that things have changed, science fiction not the least, since prewar days; so changed that if all you know about science fiction is the field of the middle 'fifties you are missing a great deal.

In fact, you are missing so much that you cannot be said to be well acquainted with science fiction as a whole. Modern magazine SF has suffered through its popularity because to make it more acceptable to the public its freedom of speculation has been severely limited. It had to be simplified to let newcomers understand it. As I indicated before, prewar fans read widely in the earlier speculative books fairly often, they were interested in SF in spite of opposition and they didn't mind a few difficulties. On the other hand, today a great part of the important background is pretty well known. You can learn all you want to know about space flight, for instance, from innumerable sources before you lock into SF for its consequences. That's good. But while it has been possible to dispense with much of the laborious discussions of the theories involved, the process has been extended to cut out discussion of matters far less well understood and less soundly based. A set of conventions has grown up, by which all kinds of possible future developments are assumed with the most casual description or none at all. This wasn't just to please the now reader, indeed it can hardly do that: it happened because SF had accumulated a huge following of people who had been reading it for long enough to know all the explanations by heart.

Some of these conventions have been badly abused. The theoretical possibility of movement faster than light is the outstanding example. It takes us back to the dark ages by the back door by making other solar systems accessible. Now it is unusual to see any attempt to work out the probable conditions on a postulated planet -- in many stories, Asimov's novels for instance, planets are treated like neighbouring towns, their different environments are blissfully ignored. It's not what we used to think of as science fiction. Yet it didn't start as pure fantasy: there were once arguments to justify many of these conventions, and in prewar SF we can see their origins.

Quite a few once familiar themes have vanished completely in modern science fiction. Often this is good. I wouldn't want to see the into-the-atom plot resurrected. But time travel, and geometrical fourth dimensions used to be common, for instance.

Well, in "Scene" I put a fair amount of emphasis on the historical angle because of this. I tried to show the continuity of the tradition to some extent. In particular, I kept up two lines of approach: in the regular "Twenty Years Ago" and elsewhere, I pointed out the changes that have taken place and how far some features have persisted through these changes -- while on the other hand I kept pointing out the topical interest of the important early writers.

It should be pointed out, though, that "Scene" included far more material on early SF than I would have preferred. There was a difficulty about material. I wrote as little of the department as possible, preferring to give space to other writers and have more people represented. But only a very few of the many Australian fans I am in touch with responded to my request for contributions. Several of them did write to discuss proposed articles, and in a few more issues no

doubt these would have gone in. Vol McEwenworth gave me some reviews and became the only Australian contributor actually appearing in the department. And where were the other five hundred?

One point needs mention. A lot of readers thought that more space should have been given to current affairs, with news about what was going on now and in the immediate future. Well, there was not much I could do along these lines because of the time lag between the preparation of the department and its publication. The interval was three months at best -- copy deadline was the last day of each month for the issue released about the beginning of the fourth month following. So there wasn't much scope for topical material. Incidentally, the copy for issues 19 and 20 had been sent in before the decision to end with No. 18 was made. Those issues would have included two more instalments of the "Creatures of Imagination" series and the beginning of a long article on the evolution of fictional spaceships by Arthur C. Clarke.

The general pattern of the department was worked out before it began, and followed fairly generally; the features "Twenty Years Ago" and "Scene on the Screen" to run regularly, and the rest of the space divided between reviews and special articles. The introductory piece in issue No. 12 was all the general introduction I proposed to write. Getting suitable material was a problem, though it was never a serious one to get enough in time. Though as I said before I was disappointed with the rate of local contributions, I knew that among the vast amount of non-professional writing on SF there was plenty that was good enough to use and still of interest. I leafed through many hundreds of publications in search of likely items, and contacted the writers and publishers wherever I could. I may as well state here that I always appended acknowledgments for anything that had been published before, even in some broken-down fan sheet with nothing else to recommend it in its short life; but about half the time, they didn't appear in the magazine. The printers, or more correctly the comps and proofreaders, left a lot to be desired. More silly mistakes went in than you could shake a stick at, particularly misspellings of names. I once referred to Buck Rogers reminiscently as a battle-scarred veteran. Not a very brilliant pun perhaps, but that's what I wrote; but it came through as the conventional battle-scarred kind. In No. 17, the block on p. 110 belongs on p. 101, while the block appearing there belongs with the obituary on Fletcher Pratt, since it illustrates "The City of the Living Dead".

Ferrest J. Ackerman of course contributed the film feature; but he did much more than that. He located and sent over dozens of articles, some of which went into the later issues -- Bob Olsen's "This is Science?", Glen Daniels' commentary on "Odd John", E. L. Ware's "Space Flight Soon?".

In the first issue of the department, I took the report of Arthur C. Clarke's visit to the Futurian Society of Sydney which I had already reduced from a half-hour tape for the old Futurian Society News and extracted the more interesting bits. Of the reviews, "V.E." you know, the others were from Inside a S.F. Advertiser and from Walter Gillings' fine Science-Fantasy review, in my opinion

the most useful fan publication there has been. The paragraphs about authors in the issue were an afterthought, one that was continued in most issues thereafter. It was always a last-minute job of hurrying for information, and the results were usually fragmentary. But better than nothing; it was an attempt to provide some badly needed personality for the magazine itself.

In No. 13 was the debunking article on "Uncharted Continents" -- it would be interesting to know who wrote it, I found it in an old fan-mag signed with a pen name too silly to perpetuate. Most of the reviews should have been acknowledged as from Inside S.F. Advertiser, that of "The War of the Worlds" from Sam Sackett's Fantastic Worlds. Incidentally, this review seemed to me particularly valuable in its approach to Wells' work for today. You don't have to be interested in historical SF to appreciate it, for it is still very much alive. Through many years people have gone on reading him, and his more popular books are rarely hard to buy in recent editions. Yet in the last few years I have been amazed to meet young fans who have never read even such basic books as "The War of the Worlds" and "The First Men in the Moon". It seems pretty silly to read current magazines in preference to these and claim to appreciate science fiction.

In No. 14 there were two short articles of general character, Carolyn Gaybard's on adventure SF and David Rifkin's on Martians. In the review department I looked over the SF Book Club record, and also reported on Yefremov's "Stories", an unusual item. I intended to write a series of articles on the science fiction movements in various other countries, but only that on Germany materialised in time. The next to be treated would have been Mexico

No. 15 was I thought the most successful so far. There was Fox's trenchant attack on the never-never trend in modern SF represented by the "humanoid" concept. Then there was a feature on Wells -- beginning with the 1899 interview in which he talked about his own ideas on his work, incidentally giving a very different angle from what he said in the 'thirties about it which is more familiar; the photo of the young Wells was a change from the familiar elderly gentleman; the contemporary illustration was appropriate to the atmosphere; then a straight review of "When the Sleeper Wakes", followed by Arthur L. Joquel's analysis of the revisions in the later version revealing the author's mind. There was the feature on German SF, and the Rev. Richardson's wistful piece on unknown animals. In place of the usual film column was Ackerman's report on last year's West Coast Conference -- the only time "fan" activity as such was reported on in the department; though No. 19 would have carried a write-up on the 1956 New York Convention and later issues plugs for this year's World Convention

In No. 16 a distinguished contributor appeared in Dr. Thomas S. Gardner; his "Does Science Rule the World?" was I thought a valuable piece, particularly as offsetting the vacuous optimism so common in SF.

No. 17 had the obituary articles on Fletcher Pratt. It was accidental that the interview with Edgar Rice Burroughs was in the same

issue, giving it too much emphasis on the past and on personalities.

No. 18 had perhaps the best contribution in the series, the late Bob Olsen's "This is Science?", which took a look at what time and popularity have done to science fiction in recent years. There is also a classic misprint on p. 102, col. 2, end of par. 1: "strong" for "wrong", a near-opposite that neatly garbles the sentence. On the next page there is another, three lines from the end: "no interest" should read "an interest". And on p. 112, fifth line, "Immoral" should read "immortal". Perhaps they did in on purpose. Then there was the first instalment of "Creatures of Imagination", a feature I thought had possibilities; the piece debunking the meteor-collision fallacy, "More Space, Less Head"; Ackerman and Tucker on films with different approach from the usual column. I thought this last issue of the department was on the whole the best.

Looking back on the "Scene", it is hard to say how much was accomplished. There was very little material I regret using, and I think that a lot of valuable information and discussion was presented. The rapid degeneration of the fiction content of the magazine coincidental with it was regrettable, however. The gap between the "Scene" and the appalling rubbish filling the preceding 96 pages was such that it is hard to imagine many people reading both. The faults Bob Olsen found obvious were amply illustrated in the same issue.

Perhaps the "Scene" was addressed to a more literate reader than it was destined to reach mainly. This is the difficulty with any such material in a magazine of large circulation and popular appeal, and there has to be a decision to aim high or low. I made the only decision I thought justifiable; I addressed the department to a person with not much knowledge of science fiction, of only moderate education and probably a teen-ager; I was not prepared to assume that he was an idiot.

And what now? Well, perhaps we shall have more attempts at an Australian science fiction magazine. In time perhaps even a satisfactory one. We probably shall not have such an altruistic project as "The Science Fiction Scene" again. My own efforts on behalf of science fiction go on, restricted to SCIENCE FICTION NEWS and less obtrusive activities. And there you have it. No matter what happens to speculative writing in the hands of entrepreneurs, study and appreciation continue. The field will survive all efforts to reduce it to the level of modern general fiction as long as it has a minority in its audience taking an informed interest in it.

AFTERWORD

Fifty years later, this article needs little interpretation. Evidently written about the end of 1956 with some other place in mind (I have no idea what) and the last paragraphs rounded off, its account of the recent venture is still fairly clear.

Atlas Publications of Melbourne lasted only a few years and produced miscellaneous popular reading, extending naturally enough to some imported science fiction. Their Science-Fiction Library novel series was a good idea wasted, using mediocre English work that had already been available in English paperback form. Science-Fiction Monthly used stories from various American SF magazines, usually having most of the content on one original issue. It began well with content from the slick Science Fiction Plus from Gernsback and Moskowitz, then drawing on Hamling's Imagination and the short-lived Cosmos. The last seven issues, of interest to us, were from Planet Stories and pretty bad.

Its overworked editor Michael Cannon did his best but had no background in the field. However, he was impressed by what I was doing in the first series of Science Fiction News enough to offer me sixteen pages an issue to fill with reviews and stuff. It wasn't easy. I selected a variety of work from fan sources but otherwise wrote much of it myself, working to a monthly deadline which wasn't easy. I was paid a "retainer" of fifteen pounds a month which of course was a lot more money then, I think it was about a week's pay.

The early draft of autobiography is just about as I would write it now. Though it is surprising that I didn't mention Edgar Rice Burroughs. The shopfront rental library from which I read (ugh) Planet Plane had some Wells, other odds and ends, and a shelf of Burroughs. At random I read The Gods of Mars, then in order the rest of the Mars series, a dozen so Tarzan books, the Inner World and Venus series and more. It was years before I found any more Burroughs to read. But you know, even then he wasn't quite right, I knew his extra colors in the Barsoomian spectrum were utter nonsense. Also just about what I would write now at greater length is the quick overview of what SF fifty years ago was about and how it had got that way. Today masses of wordage has been printed

about its history but its evolution is still as clear as mud.

I was working at a distance, with no idea what Cannon was doing with the magazine, and not seeing proofs. Those errors ... with more experience I say yes, they did do it on purpose. Typesetting is dull, monotonous work, and sometimes they put in deliberate errors to test the proofreaders. Nothing easier than to change *wrong* to *strong* and see if it was picked up. Referring to Wells' *The Time Machine*, I recalled how in his visit to a desolate scene under a reddened sun millions of years ahead, the time traveller "finds monstrous crabs taking an interest in him." So the typesetter made it "taking *no* interest". Writing of *The Blue Spot*, a little-developed short serial by Jack Williamson which few would have remembered in 1956, I was made to say "... the ultimate extension of the power-mad dictator: an immoral dictator spending millions of years at the job." Well, I would go along with the judgment that he was immoral. For one thing, he bred his wretched subjects into a number of distinct species for various tasks. But I wrote was *immortal*.

And yes, we did have more attempts at an Australian science fiction magazine, a fairly safe prediction. But it was not to be while the virtual embargo on most imported SF existed, when producing a local magazine made a lot of sense. The next try was *Vision of Tomorrow* in 1969 competing against everything else being published, plus other handicaps.

G.S.

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS

ISSN 0156-6342

no. 74 2009

(the number 74 was inadvertently missed and is now used to fill the gap in sequence)