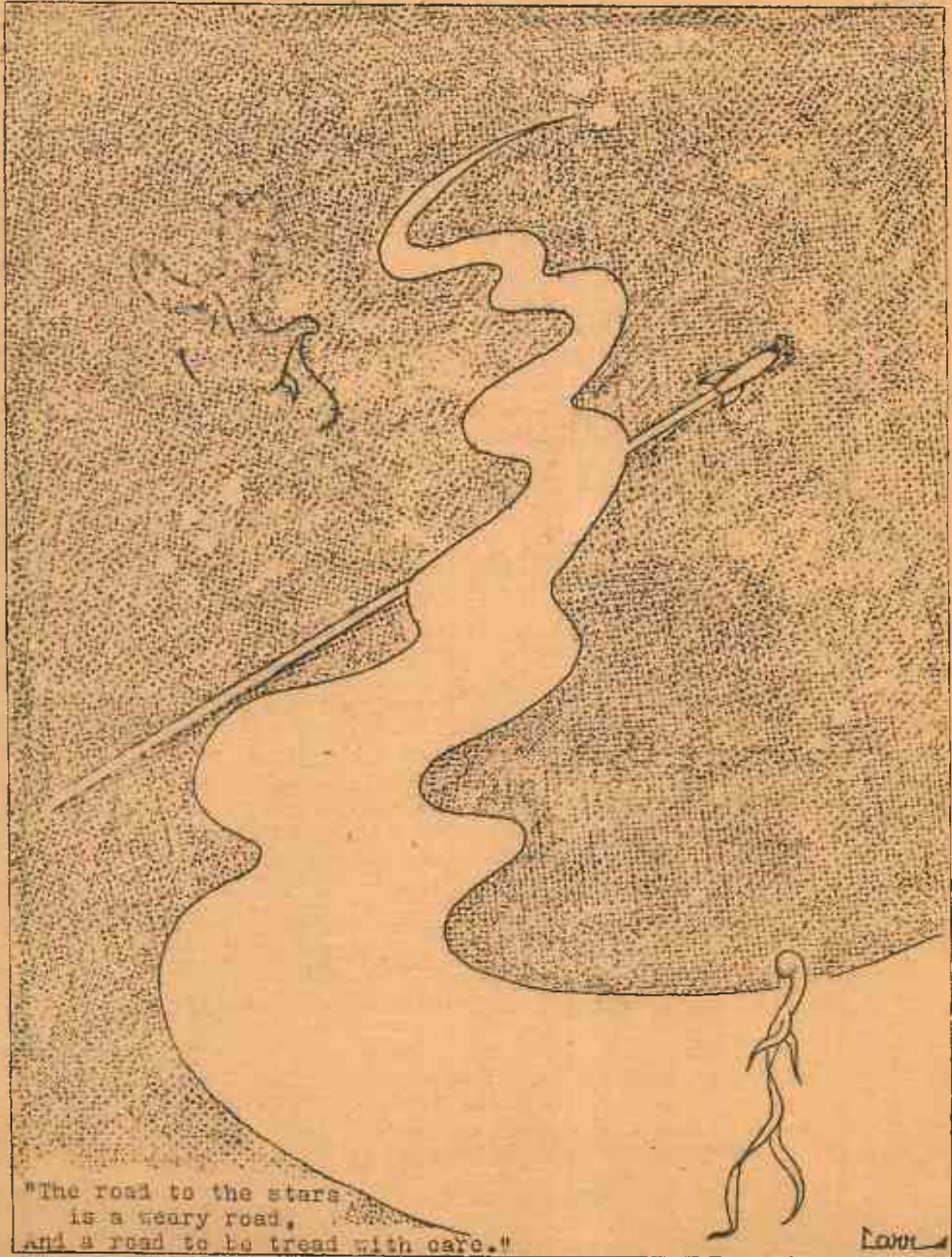


SPACESHIP

NOVEMBER 1954

26



"The road to the stars
is a weary road,
and a road to be tread with care."

Low

THREE OF A KIND

RICHARD K. VERDAN

HOW MANY PLAYER PIANOS CAN A SPACE MERCHANT SELL IN LIMBO?

The discerning reader will note the titles of three recent science fiction novels in the above heading. For the benefit of the undiscerning reader, they are Player Piano by Kurt Vonnegut, jr., The Space Merchants by Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth, and Limbo by Bernard Wolfe, issued by Scribner's, Ballantine, and Random House respectively.

There is cause for rejoicing in that list of publishers. For, although Ballantine is a comparative newcomer to the field, all are BNP's (if I may coin the term). It means that during the past year, the so-called "first-line houses" have seen fit to present science-fictional themes with their appeal slanted toward the mature readership.

It's also pleasant to note that the quality of writing inherent in these books is far removed from the usual bravura of space-opera. Galaxy readers, who read The Space Merchants under its serialized title, "Gravy Planet," justly praised the literacy and subtlety of Messrs Pohl and Kornbluth.

General critical opinion was sharply divided on the merits of Player Piano and Limbo, but most reviewers conceded that Vonnegut employed some masterfully satirical touches and that Wolfe displayed a pyrotechnical technique well-nigh Joycean in stature.

But, sadly enough, none of these three books seems to have greatly increased the stature of science fiction in the eyes of the reading public.

The symbiotic product of Pohl and Kornbluth probably fared the best of the three since it came out under the Ballantine aegis with the augmented circulation of their paper-backed edition. Player Piano drew no curtain-calls in the form of reprintings, although it did find its way into the offerings of a cut-rate book club. As for Limbo, it seems to have vanished into its namesake.

At any rate, none of the three cracked a best-seller list--and yet, to my mind, all did an excellent job of representing the "modern school" of science fiction. Each received a generous meed of fanfare and acclaim upon its appearance. Just one thing went wrong. Let's try to answer the question, "Why didn't they sell?"

I don't think it's a coincidence that the entire triumvirate, produced within the same twelve-month period, had a common theme--life on Earth in the not-too-distant future. All of the authors seem to have multiplied Brave New World by 1984 and extrapolated from there.

All Very Fine. Rather than frighten their hypothetical "average reader" with a mad dash through the aeons and parsecs, they wisely decided not to wander too far in either the third or fourth dimension. The accent is away from entomologo-optic chimerae of extra-terrestrial origin and toward inventions and innovations which are simple, foreseeable ex-

trapolations upon current technology.

What do we get? At first glance, three radically variant future civilizations: the huckster/consumer empire of Space Merchants; the engineer's functional-fascism of Player Piano, and the sado-masochistic megapolitanism of Limbo.

Seemingly, each of these science-fictionists took a long look at yesterday and today and projected their own highly individual tomorrows therefrom. Each of them obliterated nearly every trace of the Today known to you and me--blotted it out with bland disregard for Omar's sage observation that "Today has survived tomorrows without number."

It's common practice to rebuild the world all afresh for future civilizations but yesterday is a tenacious, hydra-headed beast, and its death-gargle is yet unheard. From the window of the room where I'm typing, I can see concrete proof of this in the ill-paired anachronism of a neighbor's house with a television antenna atop it and an outdoor privy behind it. But this is a minor quibble at best and it isn't begging undue credence for Pohl and Kornbluth to postulate a world where the stout oaken walls of the outdoor dooleys have been carved into wedding-bands.

What sort of world lies up the path and over the hill? Mass psychology and molding of the consumer to a desired pattern is the Pohl-Kornbluth answer. Technological and techno-illogical ascendancy is predicted by Vonnegut. Psycho-mystic mastery gets the nod from Wolfe. Three widely divergent answers to the question, "Quo Vadimus?"

So it seems at first glance.

But let's look a little further. What do we find when we probe into the actual plot-mechanics of these three seemingly-individual efforts?

A face well-known and familiar, bosom companion to F. Orlin Tremaine, and Fair-Haired Boy of First Fandom--that basic-basic stereotype, The Hero Who Saves the World.

Yes, He is back in all his swashing glory, his splendor freshly de-tar-nished--Don Quixote with napalm-bombs for the wily windmill, Lochinvar with a tommy-gun, Galahad in a sabrejet and Pasteur craftily combining aureomycin with the Sunshine Vitamin--waltzing through the fixed fight that he can't lose because his membership in the Invincible Heroes of Science Fiction (Local 938, AFL) is paid up past the end of the story.

Under the eyepatch of James Joyce in a Hathaway shirt, in the Wake of Finnegan, beneath the crewcut of a Samson whose head is shorn, bloody (if our British readers will excuse the expression) but unbowed, lurks Doctor Martine of Limbo: the indispensable man who pits his knowledge against the forces of aggression.

And Doctor Paul Proteus of Player Piano is Dr. Kildare, Dr. Christian, Dr. R/x for the ills and evils of his age.

Mitchell Courtenay of The Space Merchants is no M.D., but he, too, proves to be a Key Figure. Even though he goes to another planet--a liberty not accorded the conservative protagonists of the other two books--he still remains a simple, decent, two-fisted right guy at heart,

once the scales are stripped from his eyes and he realizes that it is his Mission In Life to Fight Tyranny.

But note this well: despite my rather crude approach to this problem of plot-structure, I am not implying any derision. I am not against the use of heroes, as such, in science fiction or any other form of writing. I'm not attempting to discredit lofty motives. Neither do I seek to impugn the accepted device of allowing a conformist character to rebel against what he discovers to be a false standard of values. This is not only a commonplace device, it's sound plotting per se, and the resultant portrait of a hero is a universal archetype.

I might add that, in my opinion, all three of the protagonists in these books are well-realized, individualized characters with recognizable attributes sharply limned in three dimensions.

But something is wrong.

And that something, in my humble or arrogant opinion, is simply this: the heroes are too important.

That's the point which pricks the bubble of reality for me. I'm transported back to the days of Hugo (Gernsback, that is) when, in every story, the brain-brilliant, muscle-mighty young fullback landed on Mars and immediately got involved with the Princess, the High Priest, and the Emperor--usually in that order. By the time you reached the fourth page of one of these epics, Our Boy was already the confidante of the highest figures in the hierarchy and his pluck, luck, and daring always decided the fate and future of the planet, the galaxy, the universe, or what-have-you.

And here we are again, sophisticated superimpositions of satire, sophistry, sociology, and psychiatry notwithstanding, Doctors Martine and Proteus as well as Just Plain Mitch emerge, sooner or later, to mix and mingle with and mangle the Big Wheels. It's that Key Figure motif all over again.

Modern writers take a certain pardonable pride in the fact that their heroes are no longer pure white, their villains not necessarily of the deepest dye. As a matter of fact, the pendulum has swung so far in the other direction that some writer might possibly and profitably shock his audience by actually playing hookey from the "Null-HA" (Non-Horatio Alger) School of Literary Effort and portraying a "pure" hero opposing a "black-hearted" villain as a novelty!

In these three books the current convention has been scrupulously observed. But another inconsistency has crept in.

It ties in with our Key Figure Problem and it's obvious enough. Although writers today avoid extremes of black/white character portrayal, they have not yet learned to avoid social extremes. The social matrices in question are unbearable and odious in toto, without a smidgeon of saving grace when conned from our mid-20th Century viewpoint.

If I may enter a brief, digressive note to Cyril Kornbluth's credit, his story "The Syndic" serialized in Science Fiction Adventures is one

of those all-too-rare tales which recognizes the possibility of virtue growing spottily among the baddies and certain undesirable aspects appearing on the side of clean living and soft drinks. I feel that complete, objective fairness demands the inclusion of this qualification.

The thing that made 1984 a convincing tour de force was its depiction of average citizens against an average background. We have already seen that our heroes in the three books under discussion are far from average; they are Important People. And, unfortunately, they move against Important Backgrounds. They are viewed through the malproportioned framework of the Big Picture.

Oh yes, the spear-carriers come to the fore at times--there is a sizeable section depicting Life Among The Lower Classes in The Space Merchants which does much to raise the credibility-level of that work. But the accent, be it broad or subtle, is on the Big Wheels throughout. One might say that the authors were guilty of "name-dropping." There is a tacit assumption that the common devil is a drab nonentity when plucked from his teeming brethren and is scarcely worthy of mention. This is, I think, the impurity in the bell-metal alloy which is responsible for the false note. The tone is as off-key as the trite B movies and the mass-produced slick magazine yarns where hero and heroine cavort their nubile forms against endless painted cardboard backdrops labelled "society resort," "luxurious yacht," and "villa on the Riviera."

But the VIP-Obsession Psychosis is almost the clear-title property of science fiction. It is at sharp variance with nearly every other genre of fictional writing. The plot of other stories is generally concerned with the struggle of the characters to make themselves at home in their milieu, but the science fiction hero, with fine monomaniac grandeur, must needs mold his environment to his own taste.

Is there some good reason why so much of science fiction must concern itself with the Alexanders and Attilas, the Columbases and Magellans, the James Watts and Henry Fords of the future? Why isn't there a bit more of the perspective and humility shown by Omar Khayyam when he wrote this?

When You and I behind the Veil are past,
Oh but the long long while the World shall last,
Which of our Coming and Departure heeds
As the Seven Seas should heed a pebble-cast.

It is certainly not a criminal offense, but to some extent it is a literary offense in these particular instances--because in each case the writer is promising the reader, in effect, "Come with me and I'll show you how the world of the future will be, how it operates, what it does to people." In 1984, Orwell did just that. But in these efforts, the authors' discriminative casting arbitrarily limits the reader to glimpses of Important Officials Guiding Destiny and Revealing Their Philosophy. The heroes and their peers seem just a bit larger than life-sized as a result.

So in no case was this reader left with the sense of empathy-affinity which resulted from his reading of 1984--a sense of "This is how it really is." Yet the writing skill lavished upon any one of them could

have easily created this impression had their dramatis personae been staffed with creatures fashioned of a more labile material.

This may seem a false criterion to some. It certainly will if we posit that science fiction is created solely as "escape literature"--whatever that may be. But I feel that in these three books the writers strove to achieve significant sociological portraits and that they erred in using a standard plot-formula. I believe this to be the reason the books failed to grip the imagination of the general public.

For the connoisseur of science fiction, however, there is much that can be unhesitatingly recommended. Fine writing, excellent characterization, and thoughtful extrapolation--all are present in generous amount. And there is encouragement in the feeling that, although literary maturity has not yet been fully achieved, these volumes are seven-league strides in the right direction.

In the last analysis, I am on the side of those who believe in the entertainment-value of reading, and opposed to the lofty critical precept that everything written must measure up to masterpiece stature.

Therefore I bow low and salute sincerely the creative abilities of Messrs. Pohl, Kornbluth, Vonnegut, and Wolfe--may their tribe increase!

--Richard K. Verdan

HOW LONELY

Spaceships move without sense of motion
through vastness like a void of ocean
spacemen track the void without a rim

Ancient seamen longed for home
behind the wake of foam
traced back to the rim

But what were miles at sea are years
in space emotions greater than fears
in gleam of stars without a rim

--Robert L. Peters



COMMENTS ON THE 68th FAPA MAILING

SPRING TORRENTS Some of my favorite epitaphs:

This is the grave of Mike O'Day
Who died maintaining his right of way.
His right was clear, his will was strong
But he's just as dead as if he'd been wrong.

On the twenty-second of June
Jonathan Fiddle went out of tune.

Here lies poor stingy Timmy Wyatt
Who died at noon and saved a dinner by it.

These and several hundred others are to be found in David McCord's excellent (but, alas, out-of-print) anthology, The Pocket Book of Humorous Verse (PB #388).

HORIZONS Uncle Don was one of my favorites many years ago. Last year I noted his obituary in the papers, which gave rise to the thought that perhaps the kindly old codger who read the funnies over WOR on Sunday morning had been slowly dying of incurable alcoholism. He hadn't been. # The Long Player, major lp catalog, has recently been expanded to include tape-music. This seems an inconsistency; why reject 45s and then list so unrelated a medium as tape? The tape repertoire, so far, is a conventional one: New World Symphony, Franck's Symphony, Rhapsody in Blue, Grand Canyon Suite, and similar standard items. Prices, so far, are very high, and to me it seems much more practical to stick to lps for my music. # There have been thicker mags in the mailings than GRUE. A postmailed MASQUE hit 90 pages, a SPACEWARP 80.

GRUE A glorious thing. # Postscript to Tucker's fine article: Degler popped up in 1949 as John Chrisman, editor of a curious farzine called Weird Unsolved Mysteries. The second issue of WUM was edited by one John York (also Clod) and offered books by C. Williamson Degler purporting to tell the truth about the Cosmic Circle. # Your account of your visit to the Silverberg domicile was a pleasant reminder of a particularly joyful day. It isn't every day that one sells a story and

has Mr. & Mrs. Grennell come bounding in, almost simultaneously. (The Grennells, unlike most of the fannish breed who have visited me, are thoroughly delightful and safe to trust within your walls. With most other fan visitors (a conspicuous exception was Ian Macauley) I found it safest to tie down everything portable and hide anything with sharp edges.

PHLOTSAM Asimov, having been induced to sing at Philly, and now at the Midwestcon, is probably going to become a tired old convention standby like Bloch, floating around from con to con singing mournful stefnal ballads. This may mean the end of the Foundation at last!

GROTESQUETTE Your mention of the Mona Lisa reminds me that the current MAD bears a (perhaps staff-written) letter from one Frank Smith, referring to the edition of MAD which reproduced La Gioconda on its cover: "...since the new edition came out with the picture of the Madonna on it with one of your screwed-up comic books in her hand, it is going a bit too far. Have guys gotten so hard up and ignorant for those comic books that you have to print a picture of her on your front cover? Don't get me wrong. It's not the picture that I'm mad about but what the picture stands for. But I guess you guys have not the brains to figure that out."

THE SPEER AMENDMENT This is a dubious precedent to set, but I'll go along with it. It seems fairly unlikely that 33 FAPAns will bother to vote on this, but preserving Speer seems to be a worthy notion. This had better not become a common procedure, or else we'll all soon be honorary members.

GEMZINE These are the most comprehensive mailing reviews I've ever seen. # Somewhere in the back of my mind is the memory of your selling a story to Howard Browne around 1950. What happened to it? Still kicking around the Z-D backlog--or are you secretly Mickey Spillane? # Far from imitating Geis' PSYCHOTIC, ABSTRACT seems to devote space each issue to hating the former mag to bits. Recently Vorzimer hoped in print that PSY would fold, presumably so ABSTRACT could vault over the purpling corpse in the race for top fanmag. # The so-called cartoons in this issue were perfect reasons for avoiding the N3F Mss. Bureau. Any fan with a scrap of talent can place his output without resorting to a manuscript bureau, and the scrapings from the Mess Boo are from deep down in the barrel.

SF PROGRESSIVE These were known as mijimags, correct? It's obviously an extinct art-form, but perhaps this one will touch off a flock of imitations. # Is this printed on toilet-paper?

RAHU Speer, in the Fancyclopedia, remarked that he had often had difficulties in consistently maintaining the editorial "we." Ten years later he still slides into first-person-singular with ease. # So Simon Eisner is yet another Kornbluth penname, eh? "Eisner" was responsible for the fine Galaxy short, "Luckiest Man in Derw."

FANEWS Somehow this magazine has been consistently unimpressive, and probably would have been a notable flop had it appeared as originally planned.

THE STFMAG This sort of parody is almost wholly unnecessary, in view of the unduly large number of straightfaced attempts at fanzine publishing that come out looking like this.

SHADOWLAND It's too bad that such a glorious means of reproduction must be wasted issue after issue on such banal fiction and page after page of spacefilling humor, when you have the means of publishing a fanzine of enduring worth and beauty. The cover was notable; not so the interior. If you insist on publishing fiction, there's better to be had. # It was interesting to compare the Clyde robot story with Harry Warner's similar but infinitely more pointed handling of the same basic notion. # If you don't know what to do with all your pages, why not invite some non-publishing FAPAN like Phyl Economou or Lee Jacobs to meet hiser activity requirements in your mag. This, at least, will spare us from such things as "7 Wonders of the Ancient World."

THE FAN SPEAKS See comment under THE STFMAG

MASQUE Gerald Fitzgerald seems to be a rare and thoroughly insurgent type. I would almost suspect that he's a figment of some Californian's fevered imagination, but he's too good to be false. # H.L. Gold's "Wish I'd Written That" is perhaps the most interesting of that lengthy series, since it reveals more than a little about the writer instead of the writer's tastes in science fiction. Gold brings the same intensity into an unimportant fanzine article that he does into everything else about him.

DAMN! The concept you cover by the term "hash-zine" is one which needs to be tagged, all right, but hash-zine is an unsatisfactory term of doubtful longevity. The image conjured up by the phrase is not one which indicates SKYHOOK or GRUE with ease. # About four years ago I found a filthy little junkshop someplace in Brooklyn where 1923-36 Argosy could be had at 5¢ each. I bought as many as I could carry--about thirty or forty, perhaps--and pieced out a few complete serials. It took me a week to wash the dust off, and I never got up the courage to go back there. # I still think Tod Cavanaugh is N.G. Browne. # Prokoviev's Alexander Nevsky is one of the few pieces of movie music to win praise as an independent score.

#

A novel I liked more than most recently is Chandler Brossard's The Bold Saboteurs, newly 35¢ed by Dell. Brossard's chief stamping ground to date has been in such little mags as Neurotica, but this is his second novel. (The other, Who Walk in Darkness, is available from Signet.) Saboteurs is a first-person account of one of the most bizarre and beguiling juvenile delinquents I've yet hit; for once, the backcover blurb on a paperback is totally honest.

Another little-mag author venturing into the daylight is R.V. Cassill, whose story, "Larchmoor is Not the World," appeared in one of the paperback little magazines last year (just where it appeared escapes me.) Cassill uses the collegiate background again in his Lion novel, Dormitory Women, marketed as an "explosive novel of sex on the campus" but actually a study in the collapse of a psychotic, very neatly drawn against a college canvas. Richard Matheson's Fury on Sunday, also a

Lion original, deals' similarly with a psychotic, but the Matheson book has considerably more zest and less depth than the Cassill. Fury on Sunday is quick, diverting reading, with the narrative power expected by now of its author, and ends in a remarkable holocaust with just about every character dripping blood.

For Gold Medal Matheson has produced I Am Legend, a blending of fantasy and science fiction concerning a 1976 vampire attack on Earth. Matheson does not quite pull the stunt off, but there are some effective incidents and an unexpected ending.

Worth investigating is Lewis Padgett's Line To Tomorrow (Bantam, 25¢)--a collection, drawn from Unknown and ASF, ranging from 1941 to 1949. Best of a good lot: "Compliments of the Author" (published in Unknown under Kuttner's own name) and "What You Need" (ASF Oct 45). The well-known "Twonky" is also present. The one trouble with a collection of this sort is that a discerning reader can see fairly easily that all seven are ingenious variations on the same theme: the central character comes to a hideous doom through hubris, or fuggheadedness if you prefer. The exception is "The Twonky," in which a couple of sympathetic characters are killed off gratuitously for having no flaw more serious than curiosity.

Ace Books has come out with a whole flock of stefnal items, apparently picking up where Ballantine has left off. The most recent one includes Daybreak--2250 A.D. by Andre Norton, which drew praise when published as the juvenile Star Man's Son, and as a bonus includes a Kuttner novel originally from Startling, "The Portal in the Picture." (The Norton item reminds me--who but Heinlein could get away with selling a juvenile novel to a top prozine, getting all sorts of rave notices? I'm referring to "Star LummoX," of course.)

A surprising item from Mentor is a condensed King James Bible--the second or third abridged bible issued by the reprint houses. Apparently no one has any intention of doing the very good service of reprinting the whole thing. Mentor is responsible for two tasteful editions of major religious works, The Meaning of the Glorious Koran and the Bhagavad-Gita, but an abridged Bible is not on the same level of value. # Another Mentor item of more value is John Ciardi's translation of Dante's Inferno, which is not quite as picturesque as the Dorothy Sayers version available from Penguin, but which (like the Sayers) maintains the original terza rima scheme. (The long-awaited Part II, Purgatorio, in the Sayers translation, is at last out from Penguin, with Paradiso to follow.)

Bantam has issued Zola's Restless Houses, and the new Lion Library has released de Maupassant's dull and rambling A Woman's Life. The latter shows none of the bite of the Frenchman's shorter work. A Lion Library item of some interest to fans is Steve Frazee's semi-stefnal The Sky Block.

From Avon, this summer, came Thomas Hal Phillips' The Bitterweed Path, an unheralded but very well done study in emotional conflict. Coming up from Avon is an edition of Balzac's Droll Stories. And A.A. Knopf's new Vintage Books made their appearance last week--good-looking volumes closely resembling Anchor Books in format and content, and priced at

95¢. A treat is a collection of seven Thomas Mann novelets, including "Death in Venice" and "Tonio Kroger." Also: Gide's Immoralist, Forster's Howards End, Eric Bentley's In Search of Theater, and others.

FAPAn Wilson Tucker led the paperback list this summer with two: Long Loud Silence from Dell and Time Masters from Signet. FAPAn Vernon McCain had a fine short story in the November IF, FAPAn Harry Warner hit Authentic with a short story, FAPAn Marion Bradley had a short story in the October Future, and FAPAn Bob Silverberg took up three pages in the same issue.

#

The norms arranged it so that I was in the pleasant little hamlet of West Copake, New York, on a warm Tuesday evening in mid-July, when, at about 6:45 EDST, a flying saucer appeared from the general vicinity of the full moon, slowly traversed the sky, and disappeared somewhere behind the Berkshire Mountains.

I'm not hoaxing. I saw a glowing object, roughly football-shaped, move across the sky in a straight line at an immense height. Its apparent velocity was not great, but this could be accounted for by its height. It was clearly visible in the sky and was neither a meteor, airplane, nor weather balloon. It appeared to be under intelligent control.

Until that balmy Tuesday evening, I had carefully refrained from forming any opinions on the flying saucer mystery, mostly because I had no first-hand information. Now I do. The flying saucers, I think, exist. I think I saw one. I felt a genuine thrill when I saw it, almost as if Kimball Kinnison had appeared before my eyes and asked for a light.

The following week I formed part of an expedition to a cave near Millerton, New York, and searched energetically for dero.

#

An item of rare quality is The Enchanted Duplicator, by Walt Willis and Bob Shaw, a novelet-length fannish Pilgrim's Progress. This is going to be one of the classics of fandom, and probably is a first-water rarity already. It's a fabulous affair, worthy of future editions for the folks who missed the boat on the limited first edition.

#

For those of you who missed the boat on SPACESHIP, there are still a few back issues of the thick subzine we once were. There's a handful of copies of the Third Annish, April 1952, 40 pages of Willis, Moskowitz, Boggs, Elsberry, and others, at 15¢ each, and one copy of #2, July 1953, featuring Grennell, Ellison, Elsberry, and Shapiro, going for the same price. There are also two copies of #25, July 1953, not up to technical standards but featuring complete Redd Boggs' much-hailed "Flight of the Skylarks," at 10¢ each. And issues 11, 12, and 13 of IRUSABEN, my former FAPazine, are still on hand at 10¢, all three for a quarter.

Richard K. Verdan, who authored the lead article in this issue, is a penname. Lurking behind it is a well-known fannish pro collaborating with a well-known proish fan; neither of them is myself, but no other hints will be forthcoming.

Nothing like topping an issue off with some rollicking good adverts:

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