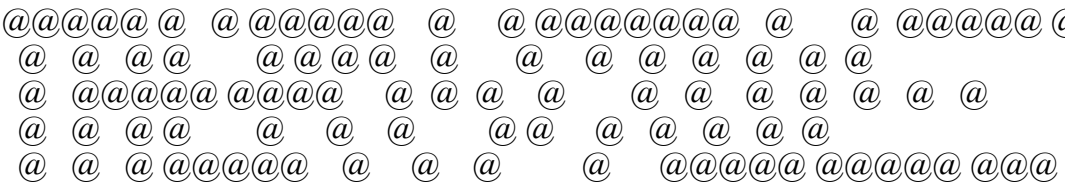

Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 03/03/95 -- Vol. 13, No. 36

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Middletown 5T-415
Wednesdays at noon.

DATE	TOPIC
03/08/95	Book: CYBERIAD by Stanislaw Lem
03/29/95	Video: Science in STAR TREK
04/19/95	Book: LE MORTE D'ARTHUR by Thomas Malory

Outside events:
The Science Fiction Association of Bergen County meets on the second Saturday of every month in Upper Saddle River; call 201-933-2724 for details. The New Jersey Science Fiction Society meets on the third Saturday of every month in Belleville; call 201-432-5965 for details. However, the March meeting has been moved to the fourth Saturday, and the April meeting *may* be moved to the fourth Saturday as well.

MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 m.r.leeper@att.com
HO Chair: John Jetzt MT 2E-530 908-957-5087 j.j.jetzt@att.com
HO Co-Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 n.j.sauer@att.com
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1. This week's book to be discussed is THE CYBERIAD by Stanislaw Lem, and if I could remember who recommended it, I would have been able to get a blurb for it. [-ecl]

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2. Well I hope nobody thinks I recommended THE CYBERIAD. I don't even like Lem. But here is Evelyn working her feminine wiles on me so....

Stanislaw Lem is the kind of author who goes through violent mood shifts. Sometimes he is dour and solemn; sometimes he is light and frothy. But he is just about never as light and frothy as he was when he wrote THE CYBERIAD. These are rollicking little tales of the robots Trurl and Klapaucius. Each is a sort of automated mad scientist--perhaps pixilated is a better description than mad--and their weird inventions that somehow are always more trouble than they are worth. These mad scientists are not so much like Dr. Frankenstein as Wiley Coyote. They invent poetry generators, they invent machines that insist that 2 + 2 = 7 and force the world to conform, they invent machines that can manufacture anything starting with the letter "n". The subtitle of the book is "Fables for the Cybernetic Age." And like most fables, if you look for it you will find a moral in each of these stories ... just enough so that you can claim you are reading a serious work of fiction. Enough so you don't feel you are wasting your time reading the book, but the stress is on humor.

...There, that odious task is out of the way. [-mrl]

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3. Generally these articles are of a whimsical nature. This week I will make some serious comments. We pay lip-service to living in a democracy, but we really don't. And there are times that I am glad that we don't. This week is one of those times. This week the courts are making a decision on "Megan's Law" and frankly it is better them than me making the decision and more to the point I am glad that it is a small elite of lawyers making the decision than The People. And those are sentiments that you will *very* rarely hear me expressing. And it is not that I have a strong opinion which way the courts should judge. I don't. It is much more that I am pretty sure that if it were put to a democratic vote what way

the vote would go.

"Megan's Law," passed last October 31, requires that law enforcement authorities inform the public when a convicted sex offender is released and moves into a community. The law was named for Megan Kanka, who was raped and murdered, allegedly by a convicted sex offender who after his release moved in across the street from her.

What is at issue then is something very abstract, the possible legal rights of convicted sex offenders versus the rights of communities to defend themselves against former and occasionally current offenders. First, I am not exactly sure what that defense would be other than warning children and parents who should be doing that anyway. It is not at all clear to me that if Megan's Law had been in effect all along it would have protected Megan Kanka. You are probably not going to be able to set up block

watches to keep former offenders under constant surveillance. But the real reason I am glad this is not put to a vote is that there is no question in my mind which side has the greater public appeal. On one side you have a fairly abstract principle, the legal rights of people who have supposedly paid their debt to society and are now free. On the other side you have a law intended to protect little girls. It is a law named for a little girl who was raped and murdered. And the law is intended to protect such little girls from predators. This side of the issue touches every protective instinct and fiber we have and it will undoubtedly be supported by a wide coalition. The right wing likes it because it is hard on criminals; feminists like it because it protects women; parents like it because it protects children. The only groups who would oppose it as a matter of policy is convicted sex offenders and groups with abstract goals of defending what they see as "fairness" or "the spirit of the law." That is the province of groups like the ACLU. And it will take some courage for them to advocate the side given that they get their funds from people whose sympathies would probably be in favor of the law.

The issue is extremely emotionally charged and for reasons many of which have little to do with whether the law is really fair or even

a good idea. There is little doubt in my mind that if a proposed law was instead that any one-time sex offender had to upon demand give any money he was carrying to any little girl who asked for it, in a true democracy that law too would get approved.

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4. IN THE MOUTH OF MADNESS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

> Capsule: John Carpenter takes a Lovecraft concept and spins it into a stylish horror film--one of the few really competent horror films I have seen in the 90s. Still most of the interest is in the buildup and the payoff is neither original nor surprising. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) text

It is ironic that while the Western seems to be in decline and horror films just seem to pour onto video store shelves there are more quality Westerns being made than quality horror films. The horror genre is a classic case of bad films driving out the good. The horror genre of late has been dominated by gore, splatter, plastic prosthetic makeup effects, teenage protagonists, predictable jump scenes, and a tired succession of sequels and remakes. Imagination and creativity are becoming increasingly scarce in most horror films. Now that impressive visual effects are easy, filmmakers are using them in lieu of atmosphere, style, and imagination. One filmmaker who still does use some style and

ideas in his horror is John Carpenter. While he falls short of the stature even of David Cronenberg in the same genre, Carpenter does occasionally turn out a very original piece of horror like PRINCE OF DARKNESS or THEY LIVE. IN THE MOUTH OF MADNESS is not up to those two films, but it is one of his better horror exercises.

A bit too much of the premise is obvious from the trailer, but the story concerns an insurance investigator, John Trent (played by Sam Neill), who has been driven mad by his recent experiences. Neill gives a bizarre and quirky impression of madness. Trent's

experiences involved looking for a missing horror writer, Sutter Cane (Jurgen Prochnow). As a publishing executive tells Trent, "You can forget about Stephen King, Sutter Cane by far outsells him." (If, in fact, it is true in the world of the film, one wonders why Trent would have to be told how popular Cane is.) The trail to find the horror writer leads to a small and strange New Hampshire town, Hobbs End--the story is an expansion of an idea by H. P. Lovecraft but, like PRINCE OF DARKNESS, contains more than one tip of the hat to Nigel Kneale and his QUATERMASS AND THE PIT.

Carpenter recognizes that the most disturbing images do not require special makeup and visual effects. Instead his most haunting scenes involve juxtapositions distorted just slightly out of our reality. There is more wrong with Hobbs End than that it seems like it could be the setting for a horror novel, but what is wrong in the town is artificial and a letdown after we see how the citizenry of Hobbs End react to the secret.

Neill's performance as a madman in the early parts of the film is a real departure for him, but he gives no signs of a severe strain in the events leading up to his madness. Charleton Heston, David Warner, John Glover, and Bernie Casey have minor roles and are under-utilized, though Glover is certainly of some interest as a doctor with a tenuous grip on reality.

At heart this story is an old idea--the small town that appears innocent and hides a deeply sinister core, but Carpenter has hung enough interesting gimmicks on the tale that his fans probably won't mind. I give this film a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

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5. Boskone 32 (con report by Evelyn C. Leeper--part 1 of 4 parts)

As usual, the schedule for this Boskone was available on-line before the convention, so we could plan out our weekend ahead of time. Of course, my planning *before* that was somewhat suspect, since I had said I could be on a 9 PM panel Friday, forgetting that the absolute best time to do the 255 miles was five hours. Luckily, we encountered *no* traffic jams (a minor miracle) and

made it there by 8:15 or so.

Four years ago, panelists registered in the regular registration area and were given their panelist information there. Three years ago, we had to go to the Green Room to get our panelist information, and this was in the other hotel, so this was a trifle inconvenient. Two years ago, they returned to handing out the panelist information at the regular registration desk. Last year panelists had to go to the Green Room. This year ... yes, you've got it: panelists registered at regular registration. I think I have figured out the pattern: odd-numbered years in the Green Room, even-numbered in the regular area. See you next year in the Green Room!

For some reason, there was a very high proportion of at-the-door registrations, and one friend who registered at the door said it took him an hour. An hour?! An hour to register for a 800-person convention is totally unreasonable.

Hotel

The Sheraton Tara remains quite nice (albeit with a water pressure problem on Saturday morning), and sufficient for the size that Boskone seems to have settled in to (about 800).

Dealers Room

The Dealers Room seems to have reached a steady state, with a couple of dealers in general new science fiction, a few used paperback dealers (many of whom seem to have something against alphabetizing their stock) a few small press and specialty dealers, a half dozen dealers in used and antiquarian hardbacks, and the remainder in buttons, t-shirts, and so on.

Art Show

There was an art show. I never got to it. (I guess I am just a panel junkie.) Mark saw a bit of it, but then again, his origami demo was in the art show. (Note: Even though he was promised a two-hour slot, he was asked to leave after an hour because the art show was closing. Programming needs to sort this stuff out ahead of time.)

Programming

I attended twelve panels and one performance in the forty-two hours this year, the same as last year.

Old Friends with Tattered Corners: On Rereading Books
Friday, 9 PM
Evelyn C. Leeper (mod), Constance Hirsch,
Teresa Nielsen Hayden

[Thanks to Mark for taking notes for this.]

The panelists started by listing their most reread books. Nielsen Hayden's was ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN by George Papashvily, which has been in print fifty years. It is the story of a Georgian immigrant who comes to the United States (that is the European Georgia, not the Southern one), and what happens. Nielsen Hayden said there was nothing else quite like it, and that people who read it reread it over and over.

I said that one thing I plan on rereading every New Year's Eve is "'A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations'" by Kim Stanley Robinson, because of the sense of transition it contains. Another book I reread a lot is Stephen Jay Gould's WONDERFUL LIFE, which has a fantastic feeling of strangeness. It is about the Burgess Shale and the discovery of pre-Cambrian creatures in it. These creatures were shoe-horned into the known species structure of the early 1900s, but now we are coming to understand how this is entirely the wrong approach, and how much more varied life was at that time. Most of them died out and left no heirs, so maybe it is my interest in alternate history that makes this fascinating. As Hirsch noted, "You are getting as much sense of wonder as from any science fiction book."

Hirsch said that last year she had kept a database of what she read and what she has reread the most is J. R. R. Tolkien's LORD OF THE RINGS (ever since as a teenager she discovered that there was a sequel to THE HOBBIT, as she related). This was also Nielsen Hayden's most re-read book (but not mine, which is probably Jules Verne's MYSTERIOUS ISLAND as a teenager or Olaf Stapledon's LAST AND FIRST MEN now).

(I noted that I also kept such a list, indicating that the requirement for being on this panel is that you are anal-retentive--and yes, it has a hyphen.)

Regarding THE HOBBIT, Hirsch got it out on books on tape from the library, and it "soaked up a marvelous part of the day." She said that she found it a new way of "listening" to the text. By literally listening to someone else's interpretation of the text, the reader gets a different way of understanding the text. For example, one actor did all the voices and the orcs started to sound like Cockney dock workers. What strikes her most strongly, besides the "voice" (or voices) that Tolkien is writing in is how sad the characters are, in that even if they win they lose. Also, while people run down Tolkien's prose, it is associated with a class and

style of people, and is right for them.

Regarding "listening with the inner ear," I commented that have set myself the task of reading all of Shakespeare's plays and, to use Mark's comment about some of what he has reread, they have really punched them up since school. Because I have seen a lot of Shakespeare plays performed, I now *see* the plays in my mind and *hear* the voices in my mind, and the humor (in particular) comes through much better. Nielsen Hayden said this was because the people who create the textbook editions of the plays suck out the jokes--literally, when they feel that the jokes make the plays too long or too bawdy for young audiences. My belief is that rather than dumbing down the plays, they should *show* the plays to students, preferably performed in some informal outdoor theater. The best performances of Shakespeare's comedies I have seen were at the Renaissance Festival in Tuxedo, New York, and in a park in downtown San Jose, California. In fact, when I read the comedies now, I am sitting in that park, I am seeing that stage and those players, I am feeling the breeze, and I am seeing and hearing the play the way it was intended. Seeing a faithful production of TWELFTH NIGHT in which one of the characters moons the audience as part of the plot is more likely to get the "Ace Ventura, Pet Detective" crowd interested in Shakespeare than a dry reading of JULIUS CAESAR in a classroom. (And TITUS ANDRONICUS would make a great splatter film.) Even a movie like Kenneth Branagh's MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING can make Shakespeare come alive for students. Nielsen Hayden said that in that film, the funny parts were funny, the shocking parts were shocking, and you get into it and don't

notice that everyone is "talking funny," the way they are in the usual sing-song "quality of mercy" renditions one gets in school. (At the TWELFTH NIGHT production in San Jose, Mark's mother asked at the intermission if they had changed the words, because it seemed much more understandable than she thought Shakespeare was.) But I digress, and should have saved these comments for the Shakespeare panel.

One reason students don't appreciate what they are reading is school (and hence get something different or better when they reread a work) is that not only do they never read the words aloud, they are never told to read *slower*. In fact, the reading loads students are given forces them to read *faster*, which makes the works less enjoyable. Speed-reading may be fine for non-fiction (at least some non-fiction), but doesn't work for George Eliot's MIDDLEMARCH. And there is no way to speed-read Shakespeare, which in any case shouldn't take more than two or three hours to read (per play), and if you don't have that much time to read great literature, then you have bigger problems than how to speed-read. Of course, the real problem is that when you have learned to speed-read, it's hard not to. When people learn to read slower and go back and reread a book, it's no wonder it seems totally different. Nielsen Hayden points out that speed-reading has its

uses: for example, in reading the Net, how fast can you kill the articles? But Nielsen Hayden also says that she needs to read slow for her job (as an editor), so she needs to keep both skills honed.

Now part of what drives people to speed-read are things like shelves of books waiting to be read, lists of books, etc., all screaming, "Faster! Faster!" It really does take running as fast as you can to stay in one place, and even that doesn't work.

Another reason students don't appreciate books in school is that the knowledge that there is a test at the end means they are concentrating on what they think they will be tested on, not on what they can get out of the work on a personal level.

Another reason why rereading gives a different or better experience is that the reader has gone through more life experiences, or can

relate this book to other books read in the interim, or just has a different perspective in general. A story about aging will mean something very different to a fifty-year-old than to a fifteen-year-old.

Not everything is worth rereading. The first science fiction novel Hirsch read was TRIAL BY TERROR by Jack Williamson, and when she mentioned this to him, he flinched. She has never reread it, and does not feel she has missed anything. We talked a bit more about what things we had read that were worse the second time through. Nielsen Hayden said that the style of DUNE bothered her a lot more the second time through. Learning in school to be more demanding of books made some "beloved books get bad." The only example I could think of was Stephen Donaldson's LORD FOUL'S BANE, which I didn't like the first time either. But I am sure that, like TRIAL BY TERROR, much of the science fiction I read and enjoyed in junior high school would be pretty bad if I reread it now.

However, I said that one of the earliest science fiction books that I read and reread was Franz Werfel's STAR OF THE UNBORN, which I think would bear rereading. Nielsen Hayden thought this odd, as this is a book usually read only by graduate students, and I was a thirteen-year-old. But I was reading it as a science fiction novel set ten thousand years in the future (or was it a hundred thousand?) instead of a philosophical work, although I suspect I got more philosophy out of it than out of most of the science fiction I read then. But it was science fiction, and in the house, so whenever I ran out of library books between my weekly trips to the library, it was that, or MYSTERIOUS ISLAND, or one of a small set of books in the house. (My parents were great believers in libraries, perhaps because being in the military meant we moved a lot and that made accumulating books inconvenient.) Bantam actually issued this in paperback a few years ago, where I suspect it sank with nary a ripple on the sales charts, alas.

Nielsen Hayden told of her husband's experience as a young reader. He had heard of this book called THE HOBBIT and went looking for it, but ended up with Sinclair Lewis's BABBITT instead, and all the while he was reading it, he kept waiting for it to become the

fantasy book everyone seemed to be talking about. Nielsen Hayden thought this might be the best possible reading of BABBITT.

Hirsch said her "reading error" story was of a friend who read Ray Bradbury's short story collection R IS FOR ROCKET, but since she knew only about novels, she kept waiting for all the stories (chapters to her) to get tied together. Nielsen Hayden said when her students read Shirley Jackson's "Lottery," one was really surprised by the ending--she thought the winner would get a refrigerator or something. Hirsch said that when that story came out, there was a real uproar over it, and someone else said that some people took it as fact, and wanted to know where it took place. I commented that there seemed to be a lot of echoes of "The Lottery" in some of Stephen King's stories, and that loads more people had read King than Jackson, and probably thought all these ideas were original with him. None of this had much to do with rereading, of course, but then a lot of this hour diverged from the topic.

Nielsen Hayden asked if when we reread a book it was ever a very different book than we remembered. This led us to a discussion of the fact that it sometimes *was* a different book, now that many books are being re-issued in their "original, uncut" versions. This is particularly true of Heinlein's works. Hirsch said that when she reread RED PLANET the hero was more trigger-happy, because the editor had toned that down in the earlier version. I commented that I had read THE PUPPET MASTERS recently, and had a similar experience. On the whole, the panelists seemed to feel that the re-issuance of Heinlein's earlier novels as they existed before his editor imposed changes on them serve a very useful purpose: they show how valuable editors are. Heinlein hated his editor, as his memoirs show, but she may have been a major factor in his popularity, since his later novels, written when Heinlein was powerful enough to resist editing, were not his best work (even before his health problems). Another author who seems (in my opinion) to be going through this cycle is Stephen King, although Hirsch said if you liked the characters in THE STAND, you will like the "expanded" version. My gut reaction to this was that while I liked THE STAND the first time around, if I want to reread a 1400-page book, LES MISERABLES would probably be more rewarding. The longer the book, the more I have to love it to reread it.

This in some sense got us back to the heart of the panel. As Nielsen Hayden said, "We know our mortality when we realize we will not ever have time to read all we want." Someone suggested that one reason to reread a book is that it's a form of memory: you remember where you were and what you were all the other times you

read the book. And if they were happy times, you are in a sense returning to them.

Being able to discuss books with people is another reason. Teachers say they often need to reread a book before assigning it. Usually teachers will have read the book at some point, but not always. I told the story of what happened when Mark's high school class had a substitute teacher who admitted she hadn't read DARKNESS AT NOON, the book under discussion. So the class spun an elaborate plot, very downbeat, which had nothing whatsoever to do with the book. This was passed from class to class during the day and embroidered upon as it went. By the end of the day, the teacher was saying, "This sounds really interesting; I'll have to read it some day if I want to get really depressed." The class agreed that she would get depressed, all right.

People in book discussion groups also have a reason to reread books. (There's an idea for a panel at a future Boskone: how to organize a book discussion group, with an emphasis on science fiction. I volunteer to be on this, and I know NESFA runs a discussion group, so they must have someone.) For those of you who are not working a standard shift, National Public Radio has a book discussion on "Talk of the Nation" Monday through Thursday from 2 to 3 PM, where people can call in and talk about the book.

Parties

For some people, parties are the main point of a convention. I, however, am not one of them, and my taste in parties runs more towards the sort where one discusses whether the relationship of the Japanese of TALE OF GENJI to modern Japanese is more like that of the English of BEOWULF or of the English of Chaucer to modern English. Given that, you are probably just as happy that I am not going to review the parties. I will ask why, if Boskone sized down because of non-fans coming for the booze, they decided to allow a whiskey company to have a hospitality suite open basically all day Saturday serving free whiskey.

"I Remember Babylon": Missed Predictions in SF
Saturday, 11 AM
Hal Clement (mod), Jeff Hecht, Terry Kepner,
Tony Lewis, Mark Olson

This was held in one of the small rooms, and was quite crowded. In fact, many of the items in this room seemed to be "over-attended," while the couple I went to in the larger room were half empty.

Unfortunately, there is no room size in between. There were also no microphones, except in the Ballroom, which made hearing the more soft-spoken panelists a problem.

Hal Clement explained the origin of the panel's title for the benefit of the audience members who did not recognize it: an Arthur C. Clarke story in which the Chinese launch a communications satellite and attempt to destroy Western civilization by broadcasting pornography, bull-fighting, snuff films, etc., direct to people's televisions. This story was written in 1960, so the title of the panel implied that Clarke was wrong in his predictions, but as Clement pointed out, we now do have direct broadcast television, and as someone else pointed out, we have these broadcasts, only they are going in the opposite direction, and the Third World accuses us of destroying *their* societies with *our* pornography. (When I was a student at the University of Massachusetts around 1970, Clarke came to speak there, and members of the Science Fiction Society were invited to join him at dinner beforehand. The Chinese had just launched their first communications satellite and I remember one of our members asking Clarke when "they were going to start broadcasting the good stuff.")

The focus of the panel, though, was what science fiction overlooked. Some people suggested the usual sorts of scientific bloopers in the category of, "If we knew then what we know now": Mercury's not having a light side and a dark side, Venus's not having oceans, and so on. But strictly speaking, this is not what the panel's title seems to be referring to. It appears more aimed at addressing what trends in technology, sociology, or other "developing" areas science fiction missed, rather than where science fiction used incorrect assumptions based on the current knowledge of the period in which the story was written. Stories written in 1950 and set in 1970 might seem a gold mine for this sort of thing, but the question is not whether the story got the name of the President in 1970 right, but whether the trends predicted came about, or were displaced by totally unexpected ones. Having a big anti-war movement would be an accurate prediction,

even if the war were the Tanganyikan War instead of the Vietnam War. (Quiz for the reader: what major development would that have missed?)

Tony Lewis said that one reason science fiction is often "accused" of having predicted the wrong things and missed what did happen is that science fiction is "not predictive, but preventative." George Orwell did not necessarily believe that 1984 was an accurate prediction of what might happen, but it was a warning about the *sort* of thing that could happen if people did not do something about it.

One of the major developments that one might expect that science fiction would have predicted, the panelists said, was the widespread use of the personal computer. Yet no authors seemed to have latched on to this. The example given was that in the "Foundation" series Hari Selden had some sort of hand-held computer

(what we might call a palmtop), but this was described as being the latest leap forward in his time, tens of thousands of years in the future. As I type this on *my* palmtop, sitting in a movie theater waiting for a film to start, I would have to say that Asimov got the time factor a bit wrong. But then, he always pooh-poohed the predictive ability of science fiction writers, noting that he wrote a book on how to use the slide rule right before the advent of calculators.

In regards to the personal computer et al, Robert Lucky of Bell Labs once said that the industry is a very poor predictor of what would catch on. It thought the Picturephone of the 1960s would be a big hit, and missed out on predicting the enormous popularity of the fax machine, the cellular phone, and the personal computer.

Asimov also did not extrapolate on the positronic brain, which he saw solely as a way to control a rather large, human-shaped robot, instead of as something that could control machinery or whatever in any form. In fact, one of the major problems with the predictiveness of "Foundation"--at least the earlier stories--is that there appears to have been very little technological change between our time and Selden's, but then suddenly the Foundation

starts developing/discovering major advances. And of course John W. Campbell's "Blindness" shows another variation on this: a character spends so much time trying to achieve cheap atomic energy that he fails to realize that the photoelectric power he has developed along the way is really the answer to cheap power that people need and that will catch on. We cannot always see which development is really the important one.

One thing that makes science fiction "guess wrong," according the panelists, is that people are interested in things beyond the scope of technology, and conversely, have no interest in what is possible. This tendency to "write for the market" instead of doing serious extrapolation means that we get stories in which we have matter transmission, but no other aspect of the world has changed--the author has not bothered to think out the consequences of his assumptions. (Actually, there was entirely too much time spent discussing the technical details of matter transmission, in part because one audience member kept going back to it, but also because panelists like Hal Clement *like* to talk about technical details. This is fine for a technical panel, but a bit of a side-track for a panel looking at predictions. There was also *way* too much time spent talking about the technology of STAR TREK, again because the panelists could not or would not cut off one person from the audience.)

As another example of where science fiction missed a prediction, one panelist said that no science fiction author predicted the rise of suburbia. Someone disputed this, claiming that Clifford Simak did that in CITY, but other people felt that the description in

CITY was more of a rural landscape than of suburbia. It was also claimed that science fiction missed out on malls, though at Chicon V Laurie Mann noted that malls, shopping concourses, etc., are just a variation of the "domed cities" which were indeed a staple of much early science fiction.

Another missed prediction of sorts that I can certainly understand is that computers will need to be backed up. I have mentioned this many times at work, usually as we attempt to figure out when we can do the backups, given that they make the computers unavailable

while they are running.

The panelists observed that science fiction writers generally take the science that we think we know and extrapolate it rather than try to predict new science. So even with the most "radical" developments in science fiction, there is an attempt to base them in current science. Most faster-than-light travel is based on some variation of Einsteinian physics, rather than some radical new discovery. (Thr panelists even gave an example: oil diffraction microscopes apparently dip their samples in oil to change the speed of light around them to improve performance. The panelists wanted to extrapolate this for faster-than-light travel although, as one panelist noted, it would mean that you arrived covered in oil, and another said this might lead alien races to think you were some sort of food.) Bob Shaw's "Light of Other Days" extrapolates from current (at least then-current) science to the "slow glass" and all its implications.

One problem is that the effects of technological or sociological changes take time. When Robert Heinlein wrote STARMAN JONES, computers existed, but Heinlein totally missed out on predicting the changes over time that computers would have had in navigation and space travel. Heinlein's DOOR INTO SUMMER, another panelist noted, had the beginnings of CAD/CAM (Computer-Aided Design/Computer-Aided Manufacturing), except it was implemented with "cut pieces of metal." (Sounds almost like steampunk, doesn't it?)

Clement says that he extrapolates on science, but not on history or sociology. But technology drives society and society (along with science) drives technology. What is more, we may be too close to the situation to know what is going on. For example, by some measurements, the rise in personal computers has not resulted in a rise in productivity. I think most people looking at the bigger picture would say this is incorrect (although a couple of the panelists commented on the large number of people playing solitaire and mine sweeper). Classic examples of technology driving society in unpredicted ways are the automobile creating a sexual revolution, and the VCR bringing about the breakdown of communal gatherings begun by television. (One could claim, of course, that Isaac Asimov in THE NAKED SUN, or Ray Bradbury in "The Pedestrian,"

did predict the latter.)

Writers have been known to deviate intentionally from extrapolation. Sometimes it is because they need a particular plot device (they are, after all, writing a story, not a predictive essay). Other times it is just a failure of imagination. The example given was STAR TREK. In the original series the communicators were hand-held. In the second series they were much smaller and put in badges. But the likely situation, at least according to one panelist, would be that they would be implanted in people's ear lobes (assuming they had ear lobes, as another noted) rather than still in a separate unit that could be lost, misplaced, etc.

Sometimes the mistakes in predictions that authors make are amusing because of their self-contradictory nature. Self-lighting cigarettes fall into this category--a high-tech version of something that science/technology has discovered is bad for us. Videophones with dials (from the old movies) are another example; even non-videophones rarely have dials these days.

Sometimes the mistakes are precisely because people extrapolate from their current knowledge. Olson gave the example of a writer from a couple of hundred years ago needing a method to have his hero travel great distances very quickly. Such a writer would give his hero seven-league boots rather than an airplane, since airplanes were not part of his knowledge base.

Of course, with any predictions there will always be those who have reasons why these predictions are wrong, and why technology X will never catch on. The panelists cited an essay written shortly after automobiles were first developed, which explained that they would never catch on for long-distance travel, because if you went far enough, you would need to refuel them and this would involve an entire network of fuel depots that obviously would not be possible.

Also, advances do not happen in isolation, and an author concentrating on one change will miss the synergy that occurs when it collides with another change. Herman Kahn's YEAR 2000 and the Club of Rome's LIMITS TO GROWTH both suffer from this--while they extrapolate some trends, they ignore (or perhaps more accurately, do not predict) others than move things in a different directions. It is like looking at a particle equidistant from three asteroids of comparable size, and calculating its movement based on the gravitational pull of only one of them. (Now there is a science fiction analogy for you!)

(Answer to the quiz question earlier: It would have missed the African independence movement of the 1960s.)

[to be continued] [-ecl]

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