



NIFLHEIM 18

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NIFLHEIM 18 is produced in much more haste than he intended by Dave Hulan, Box 1032, Canoga Park, California, 91304, for the 78th Mailing of the Spectator Amateur Press Society. Jotun Publication 179.

EDITORIAL

Here I am with the 4th Annish of Nif, and running for OE at that (not to mention that this is the mailing that will heavily influence the Pillar Poll), and I'm faced with the probability that I'll end up doing little more than bare minac for the Mailing. Believe me, it was unintentional - I had planned to have at least a respectable 12-15 pages this time, including several pages of MCs. But I was going to devote the 3-day New Years' weekend to doing the zine, and then Katya decided to have an open house New Years' Day, so I had to spend Saturday helping clean house, and then Sunday with guests in mastering a SAPSzine would have been de trop, and Sunday evening I was too tired to work on the zine, and today (Monday) were all the Bowl Games, which as a dyed-in-the-wool football fan I had to watch, so here it is ~~2:00~~ 8:00 PM on the 2d and I know I'm not going to have any more time to work on the zine. Tomorrow night Katya has to get her hair done, which will leave me just enough time to run this off and collate it afterwards. I couldn't take any longer because we're going to see the D'Oyley Carte Patience Wednesday night and Thursday night Lon Atkins arrives for the weekend. After that it will be too late to get anything to Wrai, so this is it for this mailing - whatever I can get done tonight.

First, of course, I wanted to ask you to vote for me for OE. I have no particular platform; I think that the last two OE's have done very well, and I have no idea of changing anything. I'll get the mailings out on time, print legible O-O's on the Rex (if it's not on one of its periodic blinks - if it is I'll make every effort to find someone with a mineo who can run the O-O off for me, and as a very last resort only will I resort to ditto), and keep accurate track of the treasury. I've served two terms as OE of SPPA and had no particular complaints either time on how I handled the job; I was a good deal more experimental in SPPA than I will be if I'm given the job in SAPS because SPPA hadn't developed any tradition regarding how the OEsip should be handled, but the basics of being OE of an apa don't change. I don't know if anyone else is running, so I can't very well campaign on the basis of my superior qualifications; I don't think more than a couple of members are any better qualified and as far as I know I'm pretty sure they aren't running.

Having gotten the campaign out of the way, such as it was (I had more to say campaigning for Wrai last year than I did for myself this year - odd...), on to more serconnish topics.

Like, I've read a few science fiction books lately, and it's easier to review them than it is to review the mailing, which I'd have to reread and thus take up valuable time. If I run out of things to say before I've gotten my requiredae in I may do a few quick comments, but more likely I'll do without the MCs and even the installment of The Compleat Card-Player this time.

First and most recent book to hand is Ted White's sequel to Phoenix Prime - Sorceress of Qar. [Dave or some other NYfan - I intend to send Ted a copy of this but am notoriously lax about mailing out extras of my spazines; would you see that he sees the review? He said that he always wanted to see fanzine reviews of his books.] In my review of Phoenix Prime I opined that Ted had thrown away two good characters, the Sorceress and Dorf. Ted asked, in a comment that Arnie published in SFPA, why I didn't include Elron as well, since he had introduced them basically to have characters for a sequel. Actually my reasoning then was that Elron hadn't been thrown away; he had played the role of a reasonable minor character in a novel and I wasn't disappointed when he was left behind. But the Sorceress and Hagendorf had appeared, influenced the action slightly, and then, despite the fact that they were obviously capable of much more, they had been dropped. Elron, on the other hand, had done about all he could do in the saga of Max Quest, so although he was a good character he could be dropped without its jarring anything.

I had cited this as one of the flaws in PP, and I don't think that Ted's assertion that he did it on purpose in order to have the basis for a sequel is valid. Leaving loose ends hanging in order to provide a hook for a sequel is maybe good commercial practice, but it's bad art. This doesn't mean that good writing can't leave loose ends (though I prefer writing that doesn't), but that preparation for a sequel is not a valid artistic reason.

Anyhow, I feel that Sorceress of Qar is a couple of cuts above PP, and just misses being a first-rate novel. The plot is simple enough, with nothing in the way of surprises; Elron returns to his city, Qar (is that pronounced "kwar" or "kar" with a back k?), to find that someone or something is clouding the minds of the citizens. It turns out to be the pair of Others whom Quest had banished to the world of Qanar at the end of the earlier novel - Quest had taken away their powers, but somehow they had gotten them back. Elron is captured, escapes, is captured, escapes, and goes through a couple of matter transmitters to the city where Dorf and the Sorceress are. There he learns that they had forced the Sorceress to restore their powers, and when she learns that they had not gone back to Earth as they had promised but were still on Qanar, she determines to go with Elron and attempt to help him destroy them. However, their attempt to use the transmitter ends in disaster; they land in a city on Qanar's equator, where the temperature is 140 degrees or more outside in the sun, and the nearest fresh water is in the mountains several days' journey away. Still, they manage somehow to make it over the desert and the mountains and through the jungle to Qar, where they are immediately captured. Shannara (the Sorceress) is gang-raped, and they again escape. They then cross an ocean in a boat to the old home city of Shannara, where they find a mental amplifier which enables Shannara to overcome the Others and destroy them, after which Elron and Shannara are married, Elron becomes Duke of Qar, and they look like they're going to live happily ever after.

The bare bones of it sound like every hack sword-and-sorcery novel ever written, from Edgar Rice Burroughs to Lin Carter, but Ted has tried to do something with it that hasn't, to my knowledge, been done before. Ted didn't quite make it either, which is why

the book falls short of being first-rate, but he didn't miss far and I do think he has it in him; so far he seems to be improving noticeably with each book of his I've read.

The difference is that while the plot outline tells you what happens in the book, it doesn't at all tell you what the book is about. The book is about the relationship between Elron and Shannara, and how it ripens from their first meeting when she is the daughter of a great technological civilization and he is a crude barbarian to their eventual marriage. In between there is their shared struggle with the desert, their first intercourse in the midst of a providential rainstorm, their growing spiritual union, the shattering of the rapport in the aftermath of the rape by Archer and Edwards, its return when Elron is wounded and lies near death, and their eventual united victory over their opposition. There are the elements here of a hell of a story, and one that has seldom if ever been told. If John D. MacDonald had taken these elements and written a story based on them it would have been a classic, I'm sure. Ted, unfortunately, isn't in MacDonald's class - yet, at least - and I couldn't really believe everything he was telling me.

I think that was the main trouble - I had the feeling too many times that Ted White was telling me something, not that something was happening to the characters in the book. Not always, by a long shot - some of the scenes came through very well, especially the sequence in the desert - but too often for the book to have as much impact as it could. You don't expect real people in a sword-and-sorcery novel, which means that the author has to work quite a bit harder than he would have to in a mundane novel to convince you that yes, you really are reading about people and not characters.

There were a few minor details that bothered me, too - I suppose one of the great risks of writing this sort of story is that you're not, obviously, familiar with your background, and you can make mistakes that will jar someone who notices something that you forgot. For instance, Ted makes an exceptionally big deal over the fact that in order to eke out their water supply they rig a crude still to remove more or less pure water from their urine. Now, I don't know if the still he proposed would work or not - I rather doubt it, but I'm not going to bet, and I'm willing to grant him that for the story - but at this time they are not more than a short distance from the sea, and if you can distill urine that way you can sure as hell distill sea water, which has a much lower mineral content as well as being psychologically more palatable. And it was an unnecessary goof, too, because nothing in the story required them to be near the sea, and out in an open desert he could have made the same point very validly.

Then the part about Shannara being able to read Elron's mind was handled a bit inconsistently; sometimes she didn't take action that she certainly would have taken if she could have read his mind, but at other times a big deal was made of it. And at one point Elron was permitted to read her mind, only that disappeared after the first instance and never reappeared. I could understand its absence during the time they were estranged after her rape, as being part of the estrangement, but in that case it should certainly have returned when

they once more achieved union. It didn't - apparently even at the very end of the book (did you forget about it, Ted?).

But these are minor details which don't really affect the overall effect of the book. To sum up my own feelings, I thought that taken as a sword-and-sorcery novel without pretensions to anything more, it was above average - the action was reasonably plausible, the writing readable, the ending satisfying. But because it had the potential to be much more, I was disappointed that it underachieved. There is at least this - I like the goal that Ted is obviously aiming for, and I hope he keeps shooting at it. There are all too few SF writers today who are even ~~attempting~~ trying to write the kind of fiction that I like to read; Ted is one, and I'm glad to see him selling.

On the other hand, the other sword-and-sorcery novel by a new author that I have read lately almost was enough to make me swear off my policy of reading everything available as long as it's S&S. I've ploughed my way through some pretty baad stuff in my fanatical S&S reading, but I believe that Tarnsman of Gor, by "John Norman" (an acknowledged pseudonym; the copyright is in the name of John Lange, but that's not necessarily any help. The guy is supposed to be a logic professor, and I believe it, for reasons to be stated shortly), is the worst piece of S&S I've ever read. It makes Thengor of Lemuria look like The Curved Saber by comparison.

The Ballantine blurb says that the author "has read little fantasy but has found that he likes to write in the genre because, as with many others, it frees him to explore new ideas, to relax in a world of his own creating, a world of action and high adventure," etc. Yeah. Well, one of the few pieces of fantasy he must have read is A Princess of Mars, because the story is almost as blatant a steal from Burroughs as the "Edward P. Bradbury" Mars stories. Not quite, but quite enough to convince me that he must have had some familiarity with Burroughs. I got the idea of a young college prof getting hold of a couple of volumes of the Barsoom series, reading them, thinking "I can do better than that", and promptly setting out and doing much, much worse. Now, Burroughs had lots of faults. His style was poor, his characterizations not especially good (though not as bad as some people make out), his science was ludicrous, and his plots bore no close inspection at all. However, "Norman" chose to stick right with Burroughs on these points. Where he differs from Burroughs is that where Burroughs was a master of fast-moving story action, so that you didn't have much trouble ignoring the inconsistencies in the plot, "Norman" spends pages and pages and pages setting up background. It isn't necessary. You don't start off a story of this kind by having the hero spend the first six chapters being taught all about the world he's come to. Burroughs didn't; even his imitators usually don't. A couple of pages to the effect that the next two months he was instructed in the language and the use of the sword and spear until he became more proficient with them than anyone in the whole of Mars (or whatever world), and then off on adventures. If you need a fact, introduce it at the time it's needed and back-reference it to the time that was spent in "school". That's elementary. However, "Norman" apparently doesn't understand this, and if Ballantine intends to keep buying his stories in which he commits this fault he probably won't learn. If I see a couple more of these abortions, I'm likely to begin to get the feeling that I can even do better...

Then there was Kris Neville's latest, The Mutants. I've played a good bit of bridge with Kris, and I think I can say he's the pro author I know best as a person (not counting a few fans who have sold a story or two at one time or another, like Len Moffatt or Al Andrews, but who have never really settled down to selling), so I wish I could say I found this a Really Great Book. Because much of Kris's stuff is first-rate. This one, unfortunately, isn't. It's a pot-boiler, which means nothing and goes nowhere. Kris is too good a writer for it to be a really bad book - it's readable enough, the suspense is well-handled, and I certainly didn't have any difficulty finishing it (as I did with Larnsman of Gor) - but it starts off like a book that could have some real meat in it and degenerates into a routine save-the-world epic just like Murray Leinster has written seven or a dozen times. Leinster, however, does it with a certain elan which lets him get away with it - when you pick up a Leinster story you don't expect all sorts of deep insights and human people and that sort of thing; you expect a fast-action story, a few shrewd comments on the universe in general, and probably an interesting kink at the end. And that's what you reliably get, so you're satisfied.

Here Kris has a good idea - an alien space-station which has taken a large number of mutated earth children (artificially mutated by the aliens) and is keeping them on the station, ready to destroy human life on Earth. There are about a thousand on one side of the station, mixed sexes, who are to mount the first assault and kill off all the humans (the mutants have telepathic and telekinetic powers which will make this easy; if that isn't enough, they have devices which will cause humans to go mad and kill each other). Then a second small group of mutants, all male, will be sent down to destroy the first group, whose powers will be interrupted by the turning off of the projector which stimulates their powers. After this the survivors will be allowed to live out their lives as they like, after which the aliens will move in without having exposed themselves to any danger at all (one of their cardinal principles).

However, they inadvertently forgot to pick up one of the mutants they had created, a girl, and the bulk of the story is how she begins to find out that she has strange powers, how the aliens learn of her and send one of the mutants down to destroy her, how he tracks her down and how she evades him, utilizing the fact that she has had far greater experience with the world than he has. Eventually he is captured and she convinces the government (levitating is fairly convincing when you can do it to order) that they are in danger. The world is saved and bully for our side. Of course there is a lot more to it than that. There is lots of suspense about how the world will eventually be saved, and to give credit where due it is built skillfully and your attention is held. But there is so much that could have been done with the story that wasn't. Almost nothing, for instance, is shown of the life of the mutants in the station. The aliens remain very shadowy figures, though I don't think they were supposed to. And worst of all, almost nothing is made of the relationship between the girl, Julia, and the mutant, Walt, who was sent to kill her. And the trouble is that Kris has done a good enough job of showing us their characters that we want to know what's going on between them, and then nothing does. It's one flaw in cre-

ating believable characters - once the reader starts seeing them as real people, he is really jarred when they start acting like Leinster characters (though it doesn't bother him a bit when Leinster characters act like Leinster characters). Julia and Walt have become real people halfway through the book; then they drop out of character, apparently only for the sake of the story. It didn't wash.

I can't tell Kris, any more than I can tell Ted White, how they should have written the story. I can say what I felt was wrong with it, but I'm not at all sure what changes should be made to improve it, when you get down to specific details. (I can tell John Norman all sorts of things he should have done that he didn't do, but he's nowhere near to being a professional-quality writer; Kris and Ted are both highly professional, even if both of them did turn out flawed books.) Possibly, of course, the original book was much better and included all the things that would have made this a first-rate sf novel - the things that are wrong are all things that could be explained by a poor editing job. I don't know what Belmont's policy on editing is.

And that's book reviews for this, and I should have a couple of pages over required after all. Good. Next time I hope to have also mailing comments and maybe even some ~~has~~ other goodies: this 55-hour work week can't last forever. Can it?

Congratulations to Boeing on getting the SRAM and SSF.

Congratulations to Dave Van Arman on Florida winning the Orange Bowl.

Congratulations to Lon Atkins on Alabama winning the Sugar Bowl (note to a couple of people from last time: Alabama has no policy against playing schools with Negroes on their teams. Nebraska had several. Big 10 teams have a policy against playing Southern teams in the South, and few major teams are willing to schedule games with a team if they can't get a home-and-home arrangement.).

Condolences to Arnie Katz on Buffalo losing a chance to play in the Super Bowl.

Condolences to Ed Cox, Lee Jacobs, and me on the Super Bowl being blacked out in Los Angeles.

And a Happy New Year to everybody!

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From:
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Printed Matter Only To:
May be opened for postal
inspection if necessary.

By the way, people, I live in a house now and won't be moving again for some time. See volente.