

# WHAT IS SCIENCE FICTION?

Why does a writer choose to write science fiction? For the majority the financial rewards are not high and their efforts usually pass the literary establishment unnoticed. When they are noticed they are usually treated with condescension, a novel being 'quite good for a science fiction book'. So if it's not the money and not the adulation of one's peers, why do people write science fiction? And what qualities does science fiction have that makes so many people read it? Is there something special about science fiction which sets it apart from mainstream fiction, or is the very category 'science fiction' an arbitrary one? These are just some of the questions to which I am trying to find answers in this occasional series in which a noted science fiction writer expresses his views about science fiction and why he chooses to write it.

This month's contributor is Bob Shaw, one of Britain's leading science fiction writers, with almost twenty novels to his credit, several of which have been Main Selections of the SFBC. He is a popular personality at conventions, where his Easter talks are a much awaited light relief to the exertions of fighting one's way to the bar. Among his best known works are the much-anthologised short story 'Light of Other Days', which introduced his fictional invention of 'slow glass', and the novel, *Orbitsville*, which won the British Science Fiction Association award for the best novel of 1975. He is married, with three children and lives in the north of England on the edge of the Lake District National Park. His principal hobby consists of sitting with his feet up and talking about science fiction with kindred spirits. I have also heard that he enjoys the occasional beer or whisky.

## My View by Bob Shaw

One of the things I have always liked about science fiction is that it doesn't predict the future.

Lots of people think it does, and feature writers for newspapers reveal their lack of understanding of the subject when they start listing all the modern marvels which were accurately foretold by science fiction writers. We writers often go along with them, taking the easy road, by trotting our old story about how Cleve Cartmill was investigated by the FBI in 1945 for divining the workings of the atomic bomb.

But the true fan of science fiction knows and delights in the fact that it has a lousy record of accurate prediction, that it has gaily portrayed thousands of different futures, most of which are incompatible with the others. There is even a thriving sub-group, especially in the cinema, of enthusiasts for science fiction that has been proved to be completely wrong. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, for example, has acquired a peculiar poignant charm it could not have possessed for its original readership.

This may sound slightly odd coming from a person who earns his living solely by writing science fiction, but I believe it is impossible to predict the future. If it were, science fiction would be dull. It would never have uncovered the crazy sparkling of treasures which have enriched all of us. It is true that certain world trends have become more clearly visible lately, and that the profession of futurologist has sprung up, but in the main any successful predictions in the science fiction field were achieved through the scatter gun effect. If you predict everything you're bound to get something right.

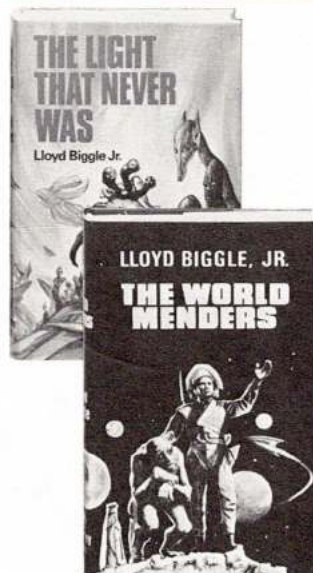
It would be disastrous if science fiction decided it knew enough about what lies ahead to enable it to trade in its scatter gun for a rifle — so here's to that band of imaginative writers who make wildly inaccurate guesses about the future. Long may they continue to do so!

© Bob Shaw 1979



## COMING SOON

In 1930 a ten year old boy in Brooklyn came across a magazine called *Science Wonder Stories* and as a result of that chance encounter he became an award-winning writer, a brilliant editor, noted anthologist, and demon literary agent. His name was Frederik Pohl and he traces his involvement with science fiction in *The Way The Future Was: A Memoir*. It is a book which I have been waiting for and am pleased to say will shortly be available from the SFBC!



## The Light That Never Was The World Menders

Lloyd Biggle Jr

*A double bill from Lloyd Biggle Jr which explores two different aspects of equality.*

**The Light That Never Was:** For generations humans have considered animaloids — non-human life forms — to be inferior, have never even entertained the thought that they might be superior. A very real moral problem therefore develops when a leading art critic receives a brilliant painting and discovers that it might be the work of a non-human intelligence... 240pp

**The World Menders:** On the planet Branoff IV the civilized master race, the Rascz, keep their slaves in terrible conditions. Cedd Ferrari, agent for the Inter-planetary Relations Bureau, is horrified and resolves to liberate the slaves, but with totally unexpected consequences. 205pp

*The Light That Never Was*

**SFBC £2.20**

Severn House £3.95

REF 6353

*The World Menders*

**SFBC £2.15**

Severn House £3.90

REF 6354

## NEWS BULLETIN

● **AWARDS — NEBULA:** A Committee consisting of George W Procter, F M Busby, Robert Silverberg, Charles L Grant and Gregory Benford, has been appointed by Jack Williamson, President of the Science Fiction Writers of America, to consider changes in the procedures for nominating and voting for the Nebula. During the year active SFWA members nominate stories and at the end of the year those stories with the most nominations are placed on the voting ballot. This year only thirteen pieces of fiction received more than five nominations, which means that being a Nebula nominee is rather meaningless, particularly when the award itself can be won with little more than twenty votes! The new committee will consider the problem and present proposals to make the Nebula more meaningful, but I think they are facing a difficult task.

**HUGO:** David Langford, who contributed a guest editorial to the April *News*, has handed the task of administering the Hugo Award over to Dave Pringle, who handles research for the Science Fiction Foundation. Although the Hugo nominations have not yet been revealed, I gather that Dave has been nominated for the Best Fanzine category. He publishes *Twll Ddu*.

**PROMETHEUS:** There are numerous awards for science fiction and now another has been added to the list. It would appear to be a meaningful award too — at least to the winner, the prize is \$2500 in gold! The first Prometheus will be awarded this September for quality speculative fiction which the award committee judge to best embody the values of libertarianism.

● **SFBC:** The first half of 1979 is now behind us, although at the time of writing the winter still seems to be here. It has been an eventful year, seeing an improvement in the production quality of our books and the introduction of the *News*. The fiction itself has been a good selection of the best published and has featured well known authors — Harry Harrison, A E Van Vogt, Harlan Ellison, Anne McCaffrey, Ian Watson, and Kate Wilhelm — and relative newcomers — Richard Francis, Garry Kilworth, John Morressy, Jeffrey A Carver and Joan Hunter Holly. The range of extras has increased and featured some of the most accomplished authors in the field — Clifford Simak, Michael Coney, John Wyndham, Spider and Jeanne Robinson, John Varley (I gather that *Titan* — SFBC £4.50, REF 6330 — is being tipped for a Hugo) and Tom Reamy (*Blind Voices* is likewise a Hugo possibility).

The rest of the year looks even more promising and features stories by Terry Carr, D F Jones, and Christopher Priest, an interesting anthology of new short stories, a collection of articles by Brian Aldiss, Guest of Honour at the '79 World Convention, and *The Way The Future Was: A Memoir*, a highly entertaining look back over a lifetime involved with science fiction by Frederik Pohl, in which, among other things, we find out what Isaac Asimov was like when aged 18!