



Richard H Francis

Richard H Francis — the H is fictitious and inserted to avoid confusion with the thriller writer Dick Francis — was born in 1945. He is married with one and a half children. For several years he and his wife lived in the United States and have also spent some time in the Libyan Arab Republic. He lectures in American literature at Manchester University. *Blackpool Vanishes* is his first novel; another entitled *Daggerman*, which he says isn't really science fiction, is to be published later this year.

Perhaps I ought to start by saying that at the time of writing *Blackpool Vanishes* I'd never actually visited Blackpool. In the novel my interest is not in the place but in something we all have lurking in our darker recesses, a sort of Blackpool of the mind.

I visited the actual town more than a year after the book was written, on a stormy October day. The sea — 'They get such seas' — as the senile Arthur Watt claims in my novel — was rough, and a murky brown colour; a friend who was with us bought a peculiar, impenetrable egg, made of confectionary rock, from a stall on the almost deserted pier; we drank several pints of beer in a cavernous pub, sitting at the table next to a couple who both looked horribly ill; we had cold fish and chips in a cafe near the front and our friend of the rock egg was told off by a woman in the neighbouring cubicle for talking

too loudly; we played the penny machines in one of the arcades and then went for a walk on the prom where my wife, eight months pregnant, gale-buffed, decided she'd had enough and we went home. Blackpool conformed surprisingly to the town that appears — or disappears, rather — in my book.

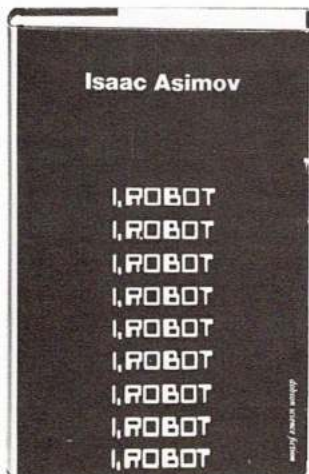
I wrote the novel in less than four months, early in 1976. One of the great advantages of the science fiction genre is that it enables a writer to set himself extreme — indeed ludicrous — problems: in this case how to account for the complete and abrupt disappearance of a large seaside resort. Art works in the opposite way from life in this respect, that in a book the bigger the problem, the more inevitable the solution. It is only when, say, Henry James drops a tiny pebble in the pond that ripples insist on going infinitely outwards in every direction. I wanted a plot that would proceed at great momentum, almost of its own volition because that would minimise authorial self-consciousness, and in an absurd direction, because that would give me the scope to do anything I felt like: explore reality, surreality, unreality, all the varieties of perspective that the machinery of science fiction so conveniently makes available.

Talk of inner space is fairly old hat now, but it is still worth making the point that sf's chief fascination is that it provides new places from which to look at ourselves. In other words, sf is simply a tool-kit of literary devices for the use of writers, and has nothing whatsoever to do with space travel of the last couple of decades. The reason why it is so much more interesting to read Asimov than to listen to some American broadcasting a pre-rehearsed speech from the surface of the moon is that real space exploration is a matter of extending the boundaries of the known universe, while sf is a method of reminding ourselves that we don't know our own world as well as we pretend.

Perhaps for this reason the alien planet in *Blackpool Vanishes* is underground, not up there; in a novel I've written since, an alternative world exists simply in the mind of one of the characters — as Blackpool did in mine.

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Science Fiction Classic



ISAAC ASIMOV I, ROBOT

In the early days of science fiction the robot was usually a villain — or rather the robot's creator was a villain, a Faust meddling in things which were God's domain — and the robot story usually followed the theme of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* in which the creator is destroyed by his creation, which then goes on a rampage.

In essence these stories advocated a retreat from knowledge, but Isaac Asimov believed that safeguards could be introduced to prevent the robot from running rampant and in 1941 he laid down the now-famous Three Laws of Robotics:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or through in-

action allow a human being to come to harm.

2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except when such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Today the laws are accepted everywhere and there is no doubt that when robots are actually built they will be subject to Asimov's famous rules.

I, Robot is the book in which the laws first appeared and it is without doubt a classic of science fiction — and will forever remain so.

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● **AWARDS:** The Nebula Awards will be presented at a banquet in New York on April 21, 1979, and providing the results are received in time, I will give full details in the next SFBC News. As far as I am aware, only two of the five novels nominated have been published in this country. There were few nominations for short fiction, only eight stories from all three categories receiving the minimum of five nominations needed to be placed on the final ballot.

NOVEL

THE FADED SUN: KESRITH
by C J Cherryh

STRANGERS by Gardner Dozois

DREAMSNAKE by Vonda McIntyre

BLIND VOICES by Tom Reamy (a future SFBC extra)

KALKI by Gore Vidal

NOVELLA

'The Persistence of Vision' by John Varley

'Seven American Nights' by Gene Wolfe

NOVELETTE

'A Glow of Candles, A Unicorn's Eye' by Charles L Grant

'Mikal's Songbird' by Orson Scott Card

'Devil You Don't Know' by Dean Ing

SHORT STORY

'Stone' by Edward Bryant

'A Quiet Revolution for Death' by Jack Dann

'Cassandra' by C J Cherryh

● **FILMS:** Talk of a film of Frank Herbert's mammoth and now classic *Dune* has been circulating for some time and the latest news is that the rights have been bought by Dino DeLaurentis. It is reported that Frank Herbert will get over \$1,000,000 and a percentage of the adjusted gross after three times negative cost, plus an additional fee for writing the script, which he thinks will take about three months.

Another 'classic' to be filmed is Robert Heinlien's *Stranger In A Strange Land*. Mick Jagger is reportedly under consideration for the lead role.

Film rights to Tom Reamy's *Blind Voices*, a Nebula nominee and future SFBC offering, have been sold for \$75,000.

Harlan Ellison (a collection of his short stories is featured next month) has recently completed the script for a film of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*, this month's SFBC 'SF Classic'. It is reported that the Warner film, produced by Edward and Mildred Lewis, will be budgeted for approximately \$30 million!

SFBC: Apologies for the error in last month's SFBC News which put the Member's price of *Stardance* higher than the publisher's.

I would be pleased to hear from any members who would like to comment on science fiction or the SFBC. Write: Paul G Begg, Science Fiction Book Club, Readers Union, Brunel House, Forde Road, Newton Abbot, Devon TQ12 2DW