

of Wells and Jules Verne date rather badly. The greater number of readers of *SFBC* books have grown up with modern science, with television and plastics, synthetic drugs, electronic computing machines, jet propulsion and atomic bombs. If so much can be achieved in fifty years, what can be expected of the centuries to come? Olaf Stapledon provided his answer in the third of our choices, and it is interesting to note that the spectacular advances of biology and psychology are often included in the new science fiction. Our present choice, *Minimum Man*, is an example of this, although here the emphasis is rather on the human side of the story. The simple problem of space travel is not enough—its effects, both physiological and psychological, are of absorbing interest. And why should we restrict its effects to human beings? Is there no other life in the Universe?

Our photographs of the Milky Way show us that there are thousands of millions of stars in our Galaxy, and our giant telescopes find as many galaxies in distant space. It seems outrageous to suppose that our sun, which is quite a third-rate star, is the only one in all these millions to have planets revolving about it, and this planet Earth is the only one with any form of life. It is perhaps too much to expect that other forms of life, if they exist, are similar to our own, but there is at least a probability that man is not a unique arrangement of atoms. So let us travel among the stars to find this other life. How long will it take? That is easy—we can let our space ship travel at any speed we please. Away with the restrictions of relativity, which would have us believe that nothing can travel faster than light. At such a speed—eleven million miles a minute—it would take more than four years to reach the nearest star, and over a million years to reach the nearest of the other galaxies. But this view of the universe is no restriction to the modern writer—he is free to describe adventures in time as well as space, and so his space ships speed from one universe to another in the course of a few pages. All imagination, this—but is not imagination the one great thing that lifts man above the lesser animals? And where can one find the scientific imagination more strongly displayed than in modern scientific fiction?

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Now turn back to the centre pages for another look at the photograph of Adromeda nebula which Dr. Porter chose to illustrate his article.

FIFTY YEARS OF SCIENCE FICTION

by J. G. PORTER, Ph.D., F.R.A.S.

My own introduction to science fiction was made some forty years ago with *A Honeymoon in Space* by George Griffith. The book was not new when I discovered it, for it had first been published in 1901—the year that also saw the appearance of H. G. Wells's *First Men in the Moon* as a serial in the *Strand Magazine*. I need hardly say that the idea of travelling in space among the planets took firm hold of my imagination, and it has remained with me ever since. Not that modern science fiction is entirely concerned with space travel, although some of its most severe critics, apparently educated only by certain forms of comic strip, seem to think that it is. On the contrary, it is the very breadth of its interests that make the modern science fiction novel so different from its predecessors.

At the beginning of this century, when even the telephone was a novelty, science had not yet shaken off that curious Victorian complacency—an unshakable belief in a simple mechanical universe, about which everything was known that could be known. One can quite understand why the writings of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells came as something of a shock, and yet even these brilliant writers were strangely limited in their outlook. Already in those days radio-activity had been discovered, and the first experiments with wireless telegraphy had been made. Forty years ago man had just begun to fly, yet there was still the same narrow view of the Universe—it was still a local collection of stars and nebulae, its boundaries not more than a few hundred light years away. The next ten years changed all that, for they brought us relativity and radio and the artificial disintegration of the elements, with a new understanding of atomic processes in physics and chemistry; and above all they taught us that the nebulae lie far outside our own stellar system, at distances of millions of light years, in an expanding universe.

The tremendous growth of science in the past thirty years has given us a different world, a world in which the writings

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