

issue works which are very easily obtainable elsewhere for less money, or should it lean more towards out-of-print material, and its own compiled anthologies of works?

From A. G. T., of Aden:

May I take the opportunity of congratulating you on the continued high standard of the selections that you produce, which has never varied in the years that I have been a member of the SF Book Club.

Perhaps the proof of my enthusiasm for the club is reflected in the fact that I am prepared to pay nearly as much in postage as the cost of the book, just to receive the book as soon as possible!

It might be a good idea to pass the relevant part of this letter to the editor of the Correspondence Column as an answer to some of the 'carping' I detect against the club, as opposed to healthy controversy over a particular author or type of sf which serves to keep both sf and the club alive.

Thank you once again for both good service and good value for money.

From R. S., of Ontario:

The quality of the choices in SFBC continues to amaze me. With the benefit of RU selections also, how can anyone not go along with the small price increase?

Any chance of getting more science fiction optionals? I have in mind particularly any hardback reprints of earlier SFBC selections.

From C. E. R., of Dorset:

I find the correspondence column of most publications very interesting, that of *SF News* being no exception. I was glad to see more letters published. Please permit me a few comments upon those in your hundredth issue.

I don't like the language used by I. M. G. (Elham) about adverse comments by others than himself—it is too much like an indirect hit at the selection committee. Their work must be difficult enough—you can't please everyone. The only good point in his letter is his desire for more space fiction. I will second that. I hope it is passed unanimously.

C. R. (Plymouth) says teleportation is not science fiction and calls it 'Impossible Tales'. Why not call those stories 'Fantasy Fiction'?

I have yet to read a sequel to an SFBC Choice. Why not one of *The Great Explosion*, showing what happens when a planet whose 'monetary' system is the exchange of 'obligations' gets too overcrowded, or a sequel to *Wasp* showing what happens to James Mowry when he is posted to another planet just when he was expecting an ovation for a job well done?

I entirely agree with you, Mr Editor, in suppressing a name at the request of the writer. There is no law against anonymity, whether the name is Smith or Pepys.

From M. D., of Stoke, Staffs.:

With 100 books, most of which were excellent, published at a ridiculous price, is not some word deserved? At which point I shall enter the controversy, and say that I feel the exceptions to be *The Stars are too High* (rubbish from first to last) and *The 27th Day* (good but juvenile).

From H. M. W., of Ilford:

Since I have been a member, on the whole I find the selections of books quite good, taking into account that everyone who reads them does not have the same interests or outlook on the subject. Some books I see in *SF News* did raise comments, i.e. Ballard's *Drowned World* and the sequel, or was it vice versa? I found myself at a loss with them; upon reading them I found myself as depressed as the characters depicted. I hope no more are published.

I also have a protest. How about keeping *Science Fiction News* science fiction news! Instead of what now appears to be RU News or any other News with a few lines squeezed in about SFBC. I enjoy reading other people's views on past books and I am sure other people miss the letters column. So more SF News and less of the rest, please.

[A word in our defence: we can only publish readers' letters and contributions to *SF News* if we receive them. We have, for example, said that critical articles would be very welcome, but we have only had one sent to us recently. In many ways, *SF News* is as good as members make it: we should be very pleased indeed to get far more articles, short stories, poems, letters.—EDITOR.]

## WANTED AND FOR SALE

MR A. DOWNING, 2 Haymans Green, West Derby Village, Liverpool 12, would like to buy SFBC titles 1-55 in good condition.

Sir Peter Womersley, Crossways, Stallingborough, Grimsby, Lincs., is anxious to obtain SFBC numbers 1-25, 28, 30-5, 37-40 and 42-6.

Mr J. P. Gardner, 30 Holford Road, Taunton, Somerset, would like to sell SFBC Choices Nos. 1-100, and some other sf titles.

Mr Alfred R. W. Gilbert, 'Endun', Carr Gate Drive, Wrenthorpe, Near Wakefield, Yorkshire, would like to sell quite a number of past SFBC Choices and a large collection of paperbacks.

The above members should, of course, be contacted direct.

## SCIENCE FICTION AND PHILOSOPHY

by Richard Gordon

(This article first appeared in *Vector*, Volume 33)

OF LATE science fiction has been used as the vehicle for all sorts of odd ideas, especially those dealing with philosophical and pseudo-philosophical concepts. Although it is difficult to split these concepts up into any sort of order, there appear to be at least two distinct trends. One, in general, glorifies Man, his works and his future, while the other does the exact opposite. Whether or not these philosophical notions are mere literary pretensions on the part of the authors concerned is a moot point. In science fiction, as in other fringe mediums struggling to obtain the approval of culture and the *cognoscenti*, we are constantly treated to the sad spectacle of some author desperately churning out passages of little value of any kind in his efforts to attain literary significance.

However, in the case of science fiction, it is interesting to note many similarities of view between different authors, and such unanimity would appear to suggest sincerity in what they are setting forth. At the moment, the most popular view of homo sapiens, for example, is that it would be something of an unparalleled disaster if he ever manages to perpetrate himself on an unwary galaxy. There is certainly much to be said for this idea! There is also the generally accepted fact that the average sf author has rather more of the crusading spirit than do writers of other branches of literature, and this would also appear to argue a sincerity in what they are writing about. But quite apart from such idealism is the sordid financial fact that even sf writers have to live somehow, and in order to sell stories even the best writers have to turn out potboilers. Many such stories in the sf field are characterized by slick philosophical notions which usually are as transparent as the story itself. The fact does remain, however, that the sf author is rather more prone to philosophize on the human condition than are most other writers.

This tendency to philosophize is usually obvious in the worst space operas and can be split up into one of the two trends in most cases. Symptomatic of the man-glorifiers is the following passage from Bester's *The Demolished Man*:

'... There is nothing in man but love and faith, courage and kindness, generosity and sacrifice. All else is only the barrier of your blindness.'

Taken out of context of the book, perhaps naïve, but refreshingly so, for the view that there may actually be some good in Man is virtually swamped by the second class, which is strongly symptomatic of Hiroshima and Belsen, and which refused to believe that Man will ever emerge beyond a gadgeteer talented enough to make bigger and better bombs to make life hell for anyone who happens to come into contact with him. Illustrative of this opposite and more common view is the following passage from Brian Aldiss's *The Dark Light Years*:

'By the standards of another species, our culture might merely seem like a sickness.'

It would now be valid to query whether this latter viewpoint, with its distrust of anything human, is one which is universal in sf today. To a large extent it is so. It would be true to say that modern sf is the most distrustful form of literature there is, which may be one reason why many people fight shy of it. It persists in showing people where they are going wrong in such books as *Brave New World* and in the Utopian satires of Pohl and Shekley. People being people, most dislike this, and thus sf is likely at best to remain a controversial and fringe genre. Even when modern sf is engaged in laughing at Man and his blunders, it is also being extremely satirical and critical—this, after all, appears to be the essence of modern sf. Thus the pessimistic and distrustful viewpoint characterized by the latter passage could be said to be generally symptomatic of sf.

The battle between the glorifiers and the denigrators does not employ the entire strength of science fictional philosophers, there also being those who are content merely to comment on Man in relation to his universe, but it is the most important and it would be most useful to consider it first.

Combat can perhaps be said to have been joined with the publication of Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, in 1940. Of course, there had been plenty of equally valid works written previous to this, from Lucian, up through Voltaire's *Micromegas*, to Wells, but it is most convenient to take this as a starting-point since sf proper had only begun some four years previously. This book contains many passages of great beauty, and although Stapledon's men undergo many catastrophes through their own stupidity, there is no mistaking the final words of the Last Man:

'... Man himself, at the very least, is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accompaniment, its matrix of storms and stars. Man himself in his degree is eternally a beauty in the eternal order of things. It is very good to have been man.'

First round to the glorifiers. Apart from the odd story expressing some doubts as to the somewhat aggressive nature of homo sapiens, sf sailed merrily along, engaged in world-wrecking, until the outbreak of World War II and of Robert A. Heinlein.

A good bit of Heinlein's considerable and doubtless well-earned reputation must have come from his peculiar philosophical notions, which are particularly prominent in his latest books. Although he spent most of his time writing stories in his first (and best) books, he still found the time to slip in the occasional idea. In *Methuselah's Children*, and again in one of his more recent novels, he made one of his better known remarks, to the effect that 'there are no dangerous weapons, only dangerous men'. I think there would be many people who lived near Hiroshima in 1945 to contest that particular opinion. In *Beyond This Horizon*, one of his better novels, written in 1942, he expresses the ultimate in pessimism, a view which has unhappily become very prevalent and which might be called crude existentialism:

'I know of no reason why the human race should survive... other than the fact that their make-up ensures that they will. But there's no sense to the whole bloody show. There's no point to being alive at all. I'm damned if I'll contribute to continuing the comedy.'

These words, spoken by Felix, the traditional antisocial hero of the book, were presumably symptomatic of the author's views when the book was written. Since then his beliefs appear to have grown stronger. One of his latest published novels, *Glory Road*, is chiefly memorable for having a plot which is constructed of peculiar philosophical notions rather than with action. Although several of the remarks he makes are amusing when taken out of context, the book as a book is considerably worse than anything else he has written, and as such is an excellent example of science fictional philosophizing carried to its worst and most undesirable degree. True, sf is supposed to be a literature of fresh concepts, but I have yet to see any form of novel which is able to succeed without having any sort of a plot to work on!

Heinlein is the prime example of the good sf writer who has allowed his philosophical conceptions to dominate his stories—to their detriment. For when he writes a story rather than a philosophical tract, then there are few writers to beat him.

Luckily most of the more serious sf writers who are accustomed to mixing in some philosophical notions with their story have not yet gone as far. Several excellent books have been written with a philosophical or moral background, while others manage to make telling points during the course of the story.

One of the best recent examples of the primary type of book is Aldiss's *The Dark Light Years*, already mentioned, which could be said to employ as its philosophy the remark: 'To our way of thinking, civilization is reckoned as the distance Man has placed between himself and his excreta.'

This is an excellent novel, which makes a number of very telling points, and it proves that an sf novel can employ a philosophy and still be an excellent story. Where Man is concerned, he could not sink much lower than the excretion in which the aliens of the story wallow. It is a complete denigration of Man, for by the end of the book one identifies completely with the unfortunate aliens, and sympathizes with their fate brought about through contact with the human race. For Man's near extinction, one spares not a tear. The satire is bitter, the philosophy is valid and telling.

Arthur C. Clarke is a good example of the author who writes straight adventure fiction with the occasional extremely moot philosophical points with regard to his characters. *Childhood's End* is the novel that immediately springs to mind. Karellan is one of the truly philosophic sf characters, and the novel as a whole displays a philosophical awe of the universe which few other sf novels have even approached. One calls to mind his scientist on the moon who regards the conquest of space as a new Renaissance, and also the character in *The Deep Range* who advances what most meat eaters would consider to be an immoderately liberal view:

'... within a century or so... we shall literally be going out of the Solar System. Sooner or later we shall meet types of intelligent life much higher than our own, yet in forms completely alien. And when that time comes, the treatment Man receives may well depend on the way he has behaved towards the other creatures of his own world.'

This is as telling a remark as I have read anywhere, and although not exactly philosophy, the point it makes is certainly a philosophical one, one which it would do everyone good to consider. For put this way, we would have no right whatsoever to complain if a bunch of intelligent B.E.M.s from Betelgeuse came along and decided to exterminate the human race in the interests of hygiene! The same point has been made before, but never quite so effectively.

A novel—or rather a set of novels—which carries this idea of Man debased in the presence of superior beings is the C. S. Lewis trilogy beginning with *Out of the Silent Planet*, in which Earth is represented as the silent planet of the title. This particular novel appeared in 1938 and was one of the first sf novels as such to embody a really serious attack on the human way of life. However, this and its successors were written from a mainly religious viewpoint with a religious aim, and I would guess that this has prevented many people from taking it in quite the same light as