

...assage is from a story by Clifford D. Simak, and it does perfectly the tantalizing sense of knowledge that all of us have had at one time or another—the sense that there is some universal key to knowledge round the next corner, and if only we could stretch just a little further . . .

Simak, much criticized for being sentimental and pastoral, seems to have a particular interest in this sort of problem. To return to an earlier point, he is one of the few sf authors of any stature to have retained some belief in the human being; he is prone to philosophize, but his brand of philosophy is direct, basic and very refreshing after the pyrotechnics of all his colleagues. Yet even he has his moments of pessimism. In . . . *And the Truth Shall Make You Free* he has his hero discover the purpose of the universe:

'David bent above the table and the answer was on the tape. *The universe has no purpose. The universe just happened.*

"'And the second question . . ." said Jed, but there was no need for him to finish, for what the question had been was implicit in the wording of the second tape. *Life has no significance. Life is an accident.*'

This is presumably the ultimate philosophical question, and there are few stories dealing with the problem that deal with it in any other manner. Whether this is a fault of sf or of modern society is difficult to say; most philosophies are usually depressing anyway.

There is a trend to philosophize in any and every sf novel and story published nowadays, and it can be carried to ridiculous lengths. Many novels which should have been written for mere entertainment, and which are no doubt meant as such, persist in dragging in heavy-handed philosophical and ethical points which only serve to slow up the story. A case in point is Harry Harrison's novel, *Deathworld Two (The Ethical Engineer)*. One of the characters, Mikah, is worse than cardboard. Although he is necessary to keep a somewhat forced story going, by the end he is completely unbelievable and detracts considerably from quite an enjoyable adventure story. Mikah—'a believer in truth'—spends his time acting entirely ethically, to his and everyone's detriment, even to the point of betraying the hero, who has saved his life continually, because it is ethical and because the hero is acting unethically. A little of this sort of thing is all right, but if someone intends to write an adventure novel then let him write it without dragging in pseudo-intellectual hash-ups. This is not to say that it is impossible to introduce a philosophy into a novel—this has been done many times, notably in van Vogt's Null-A series. Such novels are interesting, but they usually succeed merely in getting themselves entirely tangled up in their own premises (and again van Vogt is an excellent example of this—some of his novels are so complex that one virtually needs a high-speed computer to unravel all the different plots and sub-plots).

Humour and philosophy rarely mix, except where Eric Frank Russell is concerned, as is shown in *Next of Kin* and in the last half of his delightful novel, *The Great Explosion*. The latter shows just what might happen if a civilization were to be founded on Gandhian concepts of non-resistance and civil disobedience. Science fiction could do with more novels of this type; unfortunately they are all too rare!

On the whole, though, sf is uniformly depressing and holds out little hope for the human race, whether concerned with itself or with the universe. As to who is right over the battle about humanity, the glorifiers or the degeneraters, it is difficult to say. Both represent extremes and the real truth is probably somewhere in the middle of the street.

But at the moment, so far as sf as a *genre* is concerned, those who are pessimistic about Man and his capacity for goodness are clearly in the lead. This is in many ways a pity, for it is an extremely fatalistic approach, whether or not it is basically correct. This kind of sf is merely reflecting the current intellectual trends of pessimism and depression with the world and its inhabitants. However, there is a certain element entirely unique to sf in so far as this brand of pessimism is the only entirely objective brand available, and as such it could be said to be one of the few that are in many ways realistic. Even so, it is an artificial attitude and the sooner sf allows itself the luxury of a little more humour in the midst of all the pessimistic philosophies continually being expounded, the better for the *genre* as a whole. Life is not all tears, though one might be excused for thinking that such is the case after a choice dose of some modern authors. These authors appear to consider Man already consigned to the scrap-heap, without even realizing that in many cases it is merely by his own standards that Man has succeeded in condemning himself so thoroughly. It

future.

Let us hope there will be more.

CORRESPONDENCE COLUMN

From J. M., Bolton:

I would just like to tell you how pleased I am with the selections so far, but I too, like some of your correspondents, would like to see more 'classics' appearing, especially van Vogt's earlier work.

From S. A. G., Newport:

I must congratulate SFBC on such a varied and interesting selection of books. Personally I would like to see more books similar to those of J. C. Ballard appearing amongst the selections. As for the controversy raging over his books, I feel that it's about time I added grist to the mill. His first book, *Drowned World*, I would place amongst the classics. I found it neither the ravings of a madman nor indigestible. Instead I found it possessing a certain originality lacking in most sf I've read. The impression I gained from this book has yet to be equalled by any other. Could it be that it did actually scratch on the surface of the subconscious?

As for Ballard's other book, *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*, the first story, 'A Message of Starlight', again possessed the hauntingly strange yet familiar quality of *Drowned World*. Let's have more books like this, please.

From C. F. P., Chelmsford:

I was most interested to read the expected correspondence in *SF News* following the publishing of my letter condemning the writings of J. G. Ballard. It seems to me that all my criticsers have condemned their own criticisms and unconsciously supported my thinking in that they say Mr Ballard's books are 'difficult' or 'tend to lose contact with the reader' or 'I do not pretend to understand all Mr Ballard's stories or ideas' or '... symbolically above my ken'! To me, and most other people I have talked to on this topic, a novel, whether it be romantic, historical, science fiction, detective or what-have-you, is intended essentially to *entertain* and should therefore be understandable at least. Surely, to regard a novel as 'difficult' or 'obscure' is to admit that the work has failed in its object; one could argue that style of writing does, to a certain extent, make a novel 'easy' or 'difficult' to read, but never does this detract from the essential nature of the novel. One could quote some very famous examples here: I personally am very fond of the works of Charles Dickens and Thackeray, but many people try the novels of these authors and give up after the first few pages due to the sheer weight of the prose. However, it is an undisputed fact that both these authors have worthy plots, wit and excellence of style. When friends say that they cannot stomach these authors, I urge them to persist because it is either a matter of laziness or of lack of acquaintance with the style; my persuasion has invariably met with the same enthusiasm as my own. I have tried my advice on myself with Mr Ballard but to no avail—he has neither style nor content.

I still maintain that his stories are meaningless and badly written: the aforementioned correspondents are the very first that I have met who actually like his work, let alone finish reading any one novel! I very strongly suspect that these people have a somewhat *avant garde* attitude to these works—as do many people to modern music—and say they like them simply to impress.

Before I close I should like to repeat how much I enjoy the books, with the odd exception of course, and how much I enjoy reading the letters in *SF News*.

From D. A. S. C., Birmingham:

As always your choices are up to standard and I have only one minor criticism. The newsletter (?) sent with each choice is no longer anything to do with science fiction; it appears to have been taken over by some alien entity known as the Readers Union. Surely you have learnt that Science Fictioners have no interest whatever in the mundane and earthly books offered by this Union. Please kick them out or drop the newsletter altogether. I assure you, no one with his head in the stars bothers to read it.

[Comment: That last letter makes a point which we have in fact already taken. It became obvious that SF News was being overloaded with information about Readers Union books, and we do apologize for making this mistake. At the same time, we feel sure that the principle of making RU books available in SFBC is a good one: the habit of reading with one's 'head in the