

# science fiction news

No. 107

April 1966

Selectors: John Carnell, Dr J. G. Porter

## A NEW DEPARTURE

IN MAY we want to try a completely new form for *SF News*. This is for two reasons: first, we plan to make all the books issued in SFBC, Readers Union and Country Book Club inter-available between the three clubs, on the one condition that members must take the Choice issued by the particular club to which they belong. You need pay no attention at all to any books apart from those in SFBC unless you want to, but they will be there for you, the entire list of RU and Country Book Club; we hope very much that members generally will feel that access to such a range of books is well worth having.

This inter-availability scheme will begin in May, and in the same month *SF News* will become part of a larger magazine to be called *Readers News*, for all the members of the three book clubs—SFBC, RU and CBC. It is not at all a matter of *SF News* being reduced to a section of *Readers News*: it will keep the content it has now—information about books, articles, letters from members, the 'Wanted and For Sale' column—and with your help we hope that it will improve, but its format will be changed to that of an ordinary magazine, and useful information about forthcoming books in RU and CBC will be there for all the people who would like to have it. All that is intended by this new plan is to make things more interesting and easier for members: you will have information about a much wider selection of books, if you want to make use of it, and the new shape of *SF News* will make it a good deal more convenient to handle and to read. We hope that members will be pleased with the new plan.

(N.B. The May issue of *SF News* will be a Programme Number.)

## The May SFBC Choice

### THE SYNDIC by C. M. Kornbluth

CYRIL KORNBLUTH, who died in 1958, is recognized as one of the masters of modern science fiction; and *The Syndic* is described by Edmund Crispin as his 'most brilliant and fascinating' novel.

'Set in the future—not perhaps the so very distant future—it is a fast-moving, tightly plotted and highly intelligent political thriller. The Government of North America has been pushed into the sea and controls nothing but a fringe of territory in western Ireland, where its tight military formations are perpetually harassed by witchcraft-dominated savages. On the American mainland the east coast is ruled by the Syndic—free and easy, permissive, happy, perhaps doomed—and to the west is Mob Territory. Charles Orsino and Lee Falcara, offshoots of aristocratic Syndic families, are planted as spies in Government territory; and they discover how terrible the outside world is, and how dangerous the plot that is being hatched there to smash the Syndic for ever. And the climax, when it comes, is as unexpected as it clearly is—when one looks back—inevitable.

'Politically, science fiction writers are for the most part a timid and unimaginative bunch. The evil society of the future is likely to be seen as a totalitarianism of strongly Orwellian flavour; the corresponding "eutopia" is a welfare democracy differing from our own merely in involving, as one authority has sourly expressed it, "more decency and less television". And, if we agree that most sorts of novel, even within science fiction, take Man in Society as their ultimate subject, then this political uninventiveness impairs the vision of such writers in other than simply political ways.

'One of the rare books to transcend these limitations is the late C. M. Kornbluth's *The Syndic* (Faber 18s). By an original piece of thinking, which the passage of time has sharpened rather than dulled, Kornbluth takes as his near-future global upheaval not any plainly foreseeable version of World War III, but a gangster-led revolt of the masses against an unendurably coercive, puritanical, banker-dominated pluto-democracy. The sometime territory of the United States is divided between the Syndic in the eastern states and the Mob to the west, with the so-called North American Government controlling only the seas and a strip of the Irish coast.

'Unlike the Mob, which is irresponsibly despotic, the Syndic is a sort of paternalist-Poujadist-Mafia offering its supporters unrestricted access to "the pleasant things in life"—i.e. girls, liquor, gambling and consumer goods, plus a welfare fund unbureaucratically financed by protection shakedowns.

'The advantages of such a system are vigorously urged by its ideologues—there is a telling attack on "efficiency", for instance—but we never get to hear what it would be like to live under it. In (sadly) true science fiction fashion, a promising idea is dropped after the first half-dozen chapters in the interests of adventure, and the hero takes off for Ireland and attempted infiltration of the "Government", a piratical junta glimpsed with equally tantalizing brevity. Hibernian witches and their associates furnish most of the rest.

'In a teasing introduction, Edmund Crispin contends that the Syndic's system implicitly forces us to reconsider our own political assumptions. So indeed it does, and, from the viewpoint of 1964 in Britain, one wishes that Kornbluth had included censorship, say, in his list of superseded intrusions on freedom. The objection to the Syndic, however, is that the assumptions behind it are not really tough-minded at all, but soft and sentimental. It would be genuinely convenient and nice if governors who didn't have to worry about the consent of the governed went on caring about the governed. All experience shows that they never do. But, once more, it's very all right to get a novel that invites such questionings.'

KINGSLEY AMIS, *Observer*.

SFBC 7s (Faber 18s)

## THE NEW ESTABLISHMENT

by Ian R. McAulay

PRACTICALLY everywhere you turn, lately, there are people fighting to be first to throw the science out of science fiction. *Science Fiction Horizons* runs articles stressing the lack of literary values of once (?) popular authors; *New Worlds* has editorials which claim that science fiction must comment on the 'human condition' if it is to be good entertainment; Dr Peristyle's column in *New Worlds* grumpily advises readers who would like scientific accuracy in their reading to go and read the *Scientific American*; and even *Zenith* (that hotbed of reaction) has Joe Patrizio, who wants to throw out the science from the stories and from the name.

For years now fans have been complaining that science fiction ain't what it used to be, but it seems to be a new departure when the blame for the lack of enjoyment in much current science fiction is beginning to be laid at the door of science. A lot of the current furore is coming from a small group of professional writers and critics, most of whom have never been exactly noted for their regard for scientific accuracy. This snug little coterie is plugging the 'inner-space' jazz for all its worth, and a story apparently has to be obscure to the point of unreadability before it receives the accolade of the group's approval. To name a few names: we have Ballard reviewing books for the *Guardian*, and in the process sniping at 'scientific' science fiction; Moorcock, who is no slouch when it comes to obscure writing, accepting and publishing in *New World* stories so heavily allegorical that their symbolism must be explained to us poor ignorant slob in an editorial; and Aldiss (regrettably, from the author of a fine story like *Greybeard*) producing a rambling story about a science fiction author not writing a story! This preoccupation with 'the human condition' is not of course confined to science fiction, but it seems to have begun to seep in like sewage from other parts of the literary scene.