

science fiction news

No. 62

June 1962

Selectors: Kingsley Amis, John Carnell, Dr J. G. Porter

SECOND IN THE SERIES . . .

IN RESPONSE to our plea for sf short stories and articles, the number of articles has so far been much smaller than the number of stories. Below we print W. Auld's article, hoping that members will be inspired by this to put down their own thoughts on the *genre*, and the ratio of short stories to articles will thus become more balanced.

OH, FOR A BUG-EYED MONSTER

by William Auld

I HAVE been addicted to science fiction since the late thirties, and I have observed, generally with approval, its struggle for recognition and respectability. To a great extent these have now been attained: even the august highbrow weeklies occasionally review, and objectively review, the more important publications in this category; more than a handful of sf authors—Bradbury, Clarke, Wyndham and Aldiss are some who come instantly to mind—are known and respected by the 'aliens'. This is a good thing. Incontestably the literary standards of sf as a whole have risen during the last thirty years to new heights by whatever standards one chooses to judge. Indeed in one respect I rate sf superior to the majority of other fiction currently appearing; the narrative talent, the ability to maintain interest and suspense concerning *what will happen next*, possessed by almost all sf writers, however deficient they may be in other respects, is phenomenal, and is surprisingly rare among novelists in more conventional fields. One may make a broad distinction between two kinds of novel, the novel as a 'work of art' (James Joyce's *Ulysses*, say), and the novel as 'entertainment' (such as our good friend Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*). I hope it is not too cynical to say that a very large proportion of novels achieve neither category. Leaving aside the thorny question of whether any sf novels have so far been 'works of art', however, it is fairly safe to say that—at a moderate estimate—more than half the sf published can claim success in terms of category two. This is no negligible quality, and, I would claim, an indispensable attribute of any work finally to arrive in category one. It should never be forgotten that Shakespeare wrote first and foremost to entertain!

But respectability has only been achieved, as always, by alteration, and, I sometimes fear, by making concessions in conformity with the predilections of those whose good opinion has been sought. When alien critics pointed the finger of scorn at the crude melodrama and primitive style of early 'pulp' sf (it goes without saying among the *cognoscenti* that not all of it was as bad as they said), they were doing us a service and helping us to come of age. Though occasionally melodramatic, we are no longer crude, and our authors write good, sound, often delicate and subtle, standard English or American—or, when they do not, we are conscious that the jargon is intentional and justifiable. When the critics said that sf was deficient in characterization, apparently unacquainted with elementary psychology—even sometimes of elementary physics!—sub-adolescent in sexual subjects, and grotesquely phantastical, they were all too often right, twenty or thirty years ago. And we set about putting this to rights; and on the whole we have succeeded.

However, in one respect we have succeeded almost too well. A sitting target for the hostile critic—no matter how difficult the intrepid space traveller found him to overcome!—was the creature of genus *Bug-Eyed Monster*, who lurked in one or other of his innumerable guises on every planet of the universe, waiting perhaps to carry the virginal heroine off to his foul alien lair. Our authors have carried out a relentless campaign of extermination against this pest, and the universe has in general been repopulated with aliens either humanoid, vaporous or psychal. No more giant spiders or ants! Few are the remaining infestations of hairy 'things' with beaks dripping with green slime! Alien cultures now are seldom very alien, alas!

I confess I am growing rather bored with humanoids. They have their place of course; it would be dreary to reach the uttermost bounds of space without ever having come across life-forms with which we could feel a physical affinity; man must never be wholly unique. But, I am finding, it is almost equally dreary to meet only the almost-human, to be in the grip of