

science fiction news

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

NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE

The Unexpected Dimension

Algis Budrys

THE three short novels and four short stories that make up this book are all examples of a new and very successful form of sf writing. Mr Budrys makes use, certainly, of familiar sf themes—robots, time travel, immortality—but his underlying concern is with subjects of far wider interest and immediacy, with matters of life and death. The stories differ greatly in mood, some tragic, some humorous or fantastic, but they have in common an ironic view of mankind and its prospects.

This irony is sharply conveyed in 'First to Serve', the story of a robot who could be human but who is destroyed because those in authority want only mindless creatures, acting in blind obedience as soldiers; in 'The Distant Sound of Engines' a dying airman who has crashed on returning to this world from another planet passes on, to the patient beside him, the tremendous scientific data he has brought back, believing wrongly that the other man will convey it to someone in responsibility; 'Never Meet Again' is rare in sf in making a direct comment on the present political situation in the world.

The three longer stories all describe the world of the future, the ways which society may find to protect itself. In 'The End of Summer' mankind has reached a state of near immortality—only accident or suicide can kill. There is no ageing and consequently no birth; each individual keeps the physical state he had reached when 'immortality' was first discovered, and so the whole of mankind is imprisoned in the grip of changelessness. In 'The Burning World' life has come to a standstill for a different reason. The survivors from the last of the great wars have established, in a world of plenty, a society built upon the family as the all-powerful, self-sufficient unit; there are no armies, no form of state at all. Finally, in 'The Executioner', society is bound fast by viciously reactionary beliefs, dominated by a harsh and implacable idea of 'Justice'. Accusation before the courts inevitably bring condemnation and execution; the only appeal is to the Messire, the voice of God, and it seems that he has never spoken. . . .

The great fascination of these stories is that they are never brought to a neat and final conclusion: they leave much unsaid, much to be argued. Mr Budrys uses the form and the material of sf to bring a new light to the subjects that concern him most—the recurring problems of human society: Is violence ever justified? Is individual freedom possible? What makes life worth living? He has asked all these questions through the lives of men in a distant 'unexpected dimension', but they are in no way strange to us; we need to find the answers to them in our world, now. Reading these stories creates a strange and startling sense of kinship with the future, an uncomfortable feeling of 'we have been here before'.

Gollancz 15s; SFBC 5s 9d.

A story by a fifteen-year-old reader . . .

A Satanic 'God'

Chris Williams

ON THE first voyage to the moon one of the moon traveller astronauts set out to make a geological survey. This astronaut was a very singular man. Although he was by training a geologist, his devout following of Christianity made him fancy himself as a theologian too. He followed any discovery which might lead to further proof of God's existence with great enthusiasm. He wanted to use his own science to achieve this proof, for he felt it his duty to bring God once more to the people on earth, in an age when religion had sunk into oblivion.

As he climbed into his scout-car from one of the bays, the geologist thought about his survey programme. He checked his instruments and got into the pilot's seat, set his auto-pilot for the Mare Frigoris location and sat back to watch the scene around him. The black craters of the moon loomed out from the shadows, and as he looked at them he set himself to feel enjoyment. About half the journey had passed when the output tape from the auto-pilot showed an uncharted object on the close-range radar. He checked this as unidentifiable and tried its density, changing frequency until break-through occurred. It seemed denser than any lunar rock formation known to him, and from its radar shape it looked completely regular. He sent out a radio message to base but received no answer. The radio output gauge on the aerial showed plenty of power. He looked at the ionization gauge: it showed an enormous amount of ionized particles in the region of this strange object. The geologist could not resist the lure of his curiosity; he changed course towards the 'thing', travelling at the maximum speed.