

# science fiction news

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Selectors: John Carnell, Dr J. G. Porter

## NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE

# The Airs of Earth

by Brian W. Aldiss

THIS is a collection of eight stories. Instead of describing them briefly in the usual way, we are going to quote fairly extensively from Mr Aldiss's introduction to *The Airs of Earth*, partly because his view of sf is well worth thinking about, and partly because it has a direct link with another contribution in this *News*. Here is the writer's estimate of sf; later on we shall have the scientist's.

Mr Aldiss first:

'Perhaps the one thing worth saying is that it is almost impossible to say anything very fruitful about sf in general. There is only X's sf and Y's sf (not to mention Z's space opera), and because X and Y may be of very different temperaments their stories will contain different qualities.

'Sf is not all of a piece. One can make not only the valid distinction that some of it is very good and much of it very poor; one has also to say that every worth-while writer makes an individual contribution. Thus Arthur C. Clarke's sf is often concerned with forthcoming technological innovations. He is indeed likely to go down in history as the man who first thought of telstar. One has also to say that John Wyndham's and John Christopher's sf is in some respects the very opposite of this; that such novels as their *Day of the Triffids* and *Death of Grass* are symptoms of a revolt against an increasingly technological and inhuman society (I suspect that this is one reason why they have achieved their great popularity). One has to say that William Tenn is most interested in a technological society when it emphasizes human weaknesses already apparent. One has to say that Frederick Pohl exposes present-day economic evils by projecting them on to the future. And so on. To each his own *métier*. . . . A writer of traditional fiction writes a book, a novel. It centres round the problem three men have in seducing a girl, their various approaches and her various retreats.

'A writer of sf writes a novel. He begins by creating a new solar system and a future time to set it in. In that system he sets one planet in particular, gives it an appropriate biosphere and an ecology within that biosphere. He gives his creatures life and purpose, gives them a social system, domestic life, architecture, and a local substitute for coca-cola. He brings in some visiting Earthmen. Then he sets to work on Chapter One.

'An sf writer works hard for his living. He may be excused if he becomes impatient when a reviewer reads his work and says, "No characterization". He may be excused if he replies, with the well-known humility of any author facing any strictures, "You mean you want characterization *as well?*"'

The titles of the eight stories in *The Airs of Earth* are as follows: 'A Kind of Artistry', 'How to be a Soldier', 'Basis for Negotiation', 'Shards', 'O Moon of My Delight', 'The International Smile', 'The Game of God' and 'Old Hundredth'.

'Mr Aldiss ranges a wide spectrum of fantasy. He has a visionary quality.' *Daily Telegraph*. Faber 18s; SFBC 6s

## FICTION + FACT = POSSIBILITY

THE British Association for the Advancement of Science recently held its annual meeting in Southampton. Four of the speakers addressing the general section of the meeting considered the contribution of sf to science. What they said caused a good deal of comment in the press and we have been fortunate enough to obtain transcripts of their papers, with the British Association's permission to incorporate them in *SF News*. They are immensely interesting and encouraging, and we should like to be able to reprint all of them in full, but because of the limitation of space, we have had to shorten them to some extent. **We shall include them in this and forthcoming issues of the 'News', and we shall certainly welcome comments from members.**

The first contributor was Professor W. T. Williams, Professor of Botany at Southampton University. In his introductory remarks he said that the best, most imaginative sf was never written by scientists, because all active scientists must, to some extent, be prisoners of current scientific thought. Some of the ideas of the professional sf writer, however implausible, might only be impossible if the universe was really as the scientists thought it was, 'and examining them', Professor Williams said, 'may enable the scientist to understand better the nature of his own mental scientific inhibitions. A carefully selected course of sf could be an invaluable—and salutary—part of a scientist's training.'

In the main part of his paper, Professor Williams dealt with *Problems of Alien Biology*:

'The overwhelming majority of planets visited by space travellers are "earth-type" worlds, whose atmosphere contains oxygen and whose seas are water, and on which man can meet the indigenous intelligent beings in some physical comfort. A biologist is prepared to accept an alien of virtually any shape, given only that he, she or it is large enough. To have high intelligence a brain must be able to hold a large store of information; for this the brain itself must be large and must be housed in a body large enough to protect and maintain it. Stories concerning tiny creatures of high intelligence contain an inherent logical contradiction. . . . An intelligent plant would probably be large and virtually immobile; the tree people in Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* might just qualify. So might John Wyndham's triffids, for these are only slightly mobile and of rudimentary intelligence.