

A little thought would reveal that such a society would necessarily differ in important respects from our own, that the whole organization of rearing young would demand forms of family life which would make it improbable that the evolution of the civilization of such creatures would be parallel to ours. From my own experience of sf I feel inclined to assert that the majority of examples of sociological fiction rely on human horror at insects, particularly ants, raised to human size or possessing a technology equivalent to our own. . . . Aliens are rarely pleasant and their societies seldom credible. The problems raised by such writings, however, have an intrinsic interest; what forms of society, radically different from our own, could exist at the level with which we could communicate with them?

'In the vast mass of sf, many kinds of creatures have been described as having a high degree of culture—cold-blooded, such as reptiles, avian and ones based on solitary insects . . . but in the majority of cases the authors have not really considered the forms of societies that such creatures would have in any detail; they have merely assumed that any intelligent creature would have a form of life sufficiently like our own. . . . Occasionally there have appeared intelligent creatures whose form, and even mode of reproduction, is amoeboid. It has even been suggested that there are certain advantages for such creatures, in that as each individual is "born" fully adult, though perhaps rather smaller than most adults, there is no need for an elaborate education. There are obvious biological difficulties in imagining such creatures to possess intelligence, but, assuming these could be overcome, there still remains the problem of why they should develop a society. For there are no obvious reasons for any individual to associate with another. Human relationships rest on the necessity of a family life, even though some relationships are outside the family. This need for a family can be considered basically sexual, and such amoeboid creatures would possess no sex. Again, from their method of reproduction it would follow that there were no true individuals; human children differ genetically from their parents; new amoebae are, except for the chance mutation, identical in every respect with their "parent" body. What would be an individual's identity in such circumstances is hard to imagine, and this would again raise the question of what a society of such creatures could be.

'I now want to turn to some cases where there is no analogy (with creatures on earth). First in this category I will put telepathic aliens . . . such creatures are comparatively common in the literature. Unfortunately the notion of telepathic communication is by no means clear; most authors seem to write as if it were a process exactly like speech, except for the fact that no movement of the vocal organs takes place, and that there are no signals going from one person to another. Even in the work of scientists in the field of telepathy, such as Rhine and his team, it is hard to see what is meant to be happening . . . for what we communicate is generally something beyond the simple fact that a certain object is before our eyes. No doubt there are circumstances when this would constitute useful information, but something more is required before this could become a substitute for our own language. For what we say, even when we are reporting our own experiences, is only a small fragment of that total experience; language is one of the means of "filtering out" the mass of useless data that we do not wish to communicate. If there were "communication" direct between two minds the result would either be hopeless confusion or a situation where we would be inclined to say that a single individual possessed two bodies. . . .

'It may have been the realization of the difficulties just mentioned that has made some form of partial telepathy, under the control of the individual, a more popular theme. Such a suggestion still raises the difficulty of the nature of such communication, but, leaving that on one side, there are still other formidable difficulties. The situation would not be unlike the attempt of numerous individuals to communicate by means of unco-ordinated wireless transmissions on the same frequency; all messages have to be monitored to discover one for oneself; and there would be the constant danger of eavesdropping. One advantage of communication by sound waves is the limitation on range and the possibility of locating the speaker, and when this is supplemented by devices like the telephone, there would appear to be not nearly so great an advantage in the possession of universal telepathy, even if it can be turned off at will, as some writers would have us believe. . . .

'The final and overwhelming argument against telepathic societies seems to lie in the nature of the communication itself. For it is only by increasing the precision of symbols that any society evolves to be a more complex culture. . . . Indeed the constant effort to communicate exactly is one of the means of advance. With a different means of communication, such as telepathy would provide, this powerful stimulus would be lacking. For the sake of completeness I will mention one further problem, that of the communication between telepaths and non-telepaths, normally in sf, ourselves. . . . What would be communicated in such a contact is hard to see; writers usually slide round the problem by expressing the substance of the message in words of our own language. But if they occur in the recipient's head in this form, then what is to distinguish them from his own thoughts? The fact that they are new to him is no indication, for most of us occasionally have original thoughts, or at least ones that we have not had before.

'Much the same kind of thing can be said about a kind of society which is occasionally mentioned, that of intelligences so far above our own that we cannot even begin to grasp their

motivation or even the way of life of their society. If this is meant literally, then of course we cannot discuss them here. . . .

'Most forms of society different from our own that have been envisaged by sf contain fatal flaws, are not sociologically plausible, [but] one of the advantages of reading sf is that it does, if considered critically, make us more aware of the nature of our own social organization.'

## Help Needed

MR F. T. ATKINS, 578 Sewall Highway, Coventry, Warwickshire, and Mr J. G. Puroy, 77 Kingston Road, Oxford, each want to buy a copy of *Spectrum II*.

Mr P. J. Butcher, The Old Orchard, 4 Midway, Watford Road, St Albans, Hertfordshire, is anxious to discover any information about the writer R. Bretnor; he particularly wants to trace the story, 'The Gnurs they Come from the Voodwork Out', and to find out whether any other stories by Bretnor have been published in book form.

Will anyone who can help the above members please get into touch with them direct.

THIS MONTH'S CHOICE IS  
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by Brian W. Aldiss

(Faber 18s; SFBC 6s)

NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE IS  
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by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth

(Gollancz 15s; SFBC 6s)

## THE NEW PLAN

FOR the sake of new members of SFBC we will just repeat here briefly the information that the Readers Union range of Optional books is now available to members of SFBC, and that they may also choose books from the RU past titles list, which contains about 150 volumes. Each issue of *SF News* will in future contain information about the optional books to be published two months ahead—e.g. in this *News* you will find details of the Optional books which will become available in March. This advance information means that members will be able to send their orders in in good time—and it really is necessary to be quick, because the editions of Optional books are limited.

## THE OPTIONAL BOOKS FOR MARCH

*The March Extra (Optional) title*

**JOHN F. KENNEDY:  
Portrait of a President**

by Hugh Sidey

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Hugh Sidey was White House correspondent for *Time* magazine during the whole of Mr Kennedy's presidency; he was near to him during his everyday life and in the many crises which he had to face. The book was planned as only part of a story; as it went to press it was changed suddenly into a memorial. The author, who was in Dallas when Mr Kennedy was murdered, added a preface and a final chapter to encompass something of the tragedy, but essentially his book remains as it was planned, with its view of John Kennedy uncoloured and undistorted by mourning or by hindsight.

'It is a wonderful tribute to the late President that he could retain the respect of those caught up with him in the panting struggle against time . . . it is equally a tribute to his biographer that, from the *mélée*, he can at his best moments be clear-sighted and yet generous to the point of eloquence. It is good to know that a hardened political journalist caught something of the devotion a less sophisticated world had already suspected.'

*The Times Literary Supplement.*

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