

CORRESPONDENCE COLUMN

IN THE November issue of *SF News* we printed a letter from Mrs M. S. of Coventry, asking for members' reactions to the work of J. G. Ballard—particularly *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*. We have had a really lively response to the request: here are some of the letters which members have sent:

From M. G. T. of Sussex:

I think that stories such as 'Studio 5, the Stars' and 'The Garden of Time' have no place in a sf anthology. Fantasy, yes; sf, no. The general standard of the entire book I found deplorably low. I have found that most of the books by Mr Ballard just cannot be compared to those by authors such as Clarke, Heinlein, Van Vogt, Asimov and Russell. Like Mrs M. S. I found myself at a loss with *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*. No more like this, please!

From C. F. P. of Essex:

His [Ballard's] 'literature' is like the ravings of a demented (albeit educated) child, having no sense or theme. It is not even well written. One can apply a simple bit of Boole to this subject by letting stories be defined by two variables—whether the yarn is good (Y) or bad (Ȳ) and whether it is well (W) or badly (W̄) written. Hence there are four distinct categories: YW, YW̄, ȲW and ȲW̄, which we can simply call categories 0, 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Now there are a select few of category 3 (vide Asimov's tales, and those of Heinlein and Van Vogt, to mention some of the few); many sf tales belong to category 2 and are enjoyable, despite the poor writing; category 1 tales are rare, are a crying shame and give rise to future hopes of category 3; category 0 is by far and away the most common of all sf writing, and Ballard is a good example of the worst possible type of category 0 sf tale. Why the SFBC wastes its valuable paper and book space to two editions of this man's trash is quite incomprehensible.

I have been in SFBC since its inauguration, ninety-one issues ago, and, quite honestly, I have been very pleased—around 90 per cent of these ninety-one books have been category 3 sprinkled with category 2. The other 10 per cent were lousy and I've already told the Club so! However, I did not agree with the remarks of whoever replied to my earlier letter. I suggested that, instead of publishing rubbish, the Club published some more of the 'classics'—how about the *Foundation* stories, or the Van Vogt series. The replier suggested that availability of these in paperback form rendered it superfluous to publish them in hard covers. I'm sure many, like myself, would contradict this: a hardback is not only more durable but infinitely more attractive. For instance, why not issue Clarke's *City and the Stars*? So far as I know, the only edition of this available just now is a very poor, *unsewn* paperback that falls to bits on opening. I'd welcome this in SFBC format and binding, as I would my collection of Asimov, Van Vogt, Heinlein and Bradbury. Now there's a man SFBC has neglected—we had one nice selection but practically nothing since.

I should like to say how much better the new (?!!) covers and dust jackets are—much more 'polished' looking.

I didn't have time many many moons ago to reply to a criticism of the selection of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*; I must say now that I am a 'keen' Methodist, but found nothing in Walter Miller's yarn to criticize: indeed, quite the contrary. I wrote to the Club and thanked them for what I and many friends consider to be the finest piece of sf writing there is.

PS. I am extremely pleased at the latest move to allow us to buy RU books and extras—this obviously will benefit the RU coffers and will naturally please many SFBC members. Trouble is—the offers are too tempting!

PPS. Seriously, why have we not had any Wells or Verne when we've had three or four Stapledons?

From R. A. of Enfield:

I should like to add a little fuel to what looks like a promising blaze started by Mrs M. S. of Coventry. I do not find the stories of J. G. Ballard unintelligible and I would go so far as to say that I consider him the most original author to appear on the sf scene for a long time. Anyway, is his work any more 'far out' than some of Philip Jose Farmer's or Cordwainer Smith's (both of whom, incidentally, are conspicuous by their absence from SFBC)?

I notice that Mrs M. S.'s taste in sf leans towards the mainstream and that is fair enough, but I think she is wrong to assume that anything which she does not like or cannot understand is a 'con'.

Long live dissension!

From A. T. of Birmingham:

Too many of us are prone to accept the books sent to us without comment. This, of course, is sheer laziness on the part of the readers.

It is too much to expect that even the most conscientious and avid reader of sf will have enjoyed the issues from No. 1 to No. 91. In fact, I doubt whether some of them have been read at all!

Mrs M. S. is undoubtedly sane, intelligent and, above all, honest: she at least read *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*, which is more than I did!

I suppose, over the years, I have thoroughly enjoyed 70 per cent, read 20 per cent and discarded the remaining 10 per cent, which is a pretty good average.

I have heard fans sneer at B.E.M.s and so-called 'Space Opera'. Too simple? Fairy-tales for grown-ups? One reads for entertainment and instruction and in my opinion sf ought to be for pure pleasure, not half and half: books of any kind are like wines—it depends on what one likes, not what people think one ought to like.

PS. Let battle commence!

From B. B. C. of Cyprus:

You asked for other readers' opinions on *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*. My opinion is that one or two stories were

hard to follow but others were excellently written—'The Sound-Sweep', for example; I had no difficulty in following this one. I liked especially 'Garden of Time' and 'Prima Belladonna'. As for the one or two difficult ones, I found 'The Voices of Time' and 'The Watch-Towers' a bit above me.

However, I have enjoyed a lot more of the sf books from the Club than I have found difficult, and I wish to thank you for making my leisure hours enjoyable. Please keep up the high standard of selection.

From W. H. of Kent:

Drowned World held no pleasure whatever. But then, we sf fans have widely varying tastes, one of the better things, I suppose.

(That really sums up the whole matter: selections for SFBC will always be open to discussion and disagreement, and this diversity in taste and opinion is a very good thing indeed for the health and strength of sf. Our thanks to everyone who wrote apropos of the comments from Mrs M. S.; there is not enough space to print extracts from all the letters but we do hope that this selection will be an encouragement to other members to write about points that interest, puzzle or anger them!)

THIS MONTH'S CHOICE IS
DOPPELGÄNGERS
by Gerald Heard

(Cassell o.p.; SFBC 6s)

NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE IS
IN DEEP
by Damon Knight

(Gollancz 15s; SFBC 6s)

RU Optional Books for May VANISHED CIVILIZATIONS: Forgotten People of the Ancient World

edited by Edward Bacon

The Special RU title for May

IN THIS splendid book thirteen eminent archaeologists examine some of the strangest puzzles and enigmas of the ancient world, the rich and sophisticated cultures long forgotten, the vanished peoples whose achievements are matters of the most active research today. Much of the information contained here has not appeared before in book form; the latest evidence and conclusions—sometimes very surprising ones—are discussed in clear detail.

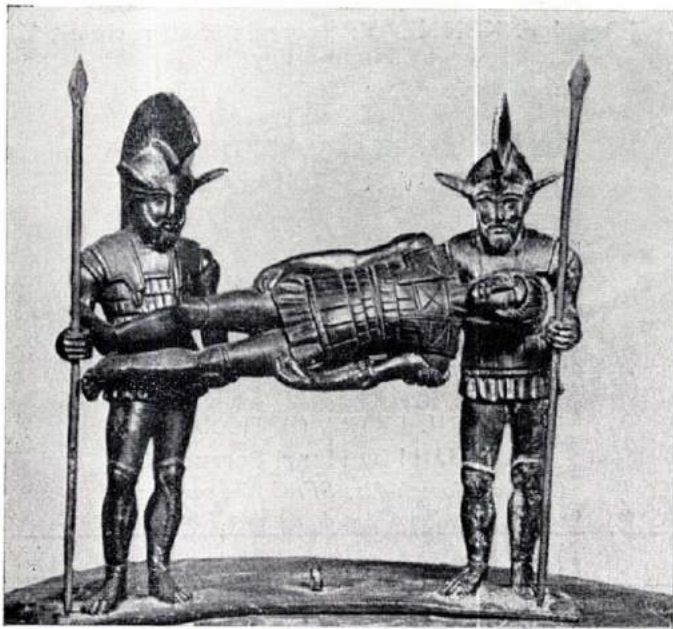
The magnificent illustrations, too, are the result of world-wide research: most of the colour plates (211 in all) were specially photographed or drawn for the book and a large proportion of the many other illustrations were specially prepared for it too.

Very little of the material in *Vanished Civilizations* was known as recently as the last century, and yet it deals with hundreds of years of arduous and sometimes splendid achievement by many human beings. The thirteen essays which comprise the text of the book take in places as far apart as the Central Sahara, Afghanistan, Easter Island, Central America; they rebuild a picture of the world of the Etruscans, the Sarmatians, the Khmers, the Mayas, the Urartu, and of other people like them, each one the creator and developer of a culture that has been gradually overlaid by time. This is a work of real authority, an exciting source of new knowledge and a splendid record of part of mankind's complex and astounding history.

'A symposium of well-written essays, lavishly illustrated, by a galaxy of specialists. The articles, succinct and lucid, include several of outstanding interest and value, some difficult or almost impossible to find elsewhere. . . . There is no doubt that this volume, beautifully laid out, printed and produced, will and should . . . contribute to the dissemination of useful knowledge about archaeology.' *The Times Literary Supplement*.

360 pages. 802 illustrations, 211 in full colour.

Thames & Hudson £8 8s; SFBC 88s, post free



Etruscan bronze work (reproduced from the book)