

SCI-FIC

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by Bob Tucker

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Not that you are interested, but we have more or less decided upon this as our permanent front-page format. Thank you. Pass on please, to the next paragraph, below .

The doldrums hit us. You know what they are. You are undergoing the malady known as "fanus doldrumus" when: (1) you leisurely amble to the postoffice, open the little door and extract several letters and fan-zines therefrom, exclaiming "oh, some mail, oh?" in a tepid voice. (2) the fanzines are brightly colored and include several items of material by or concerning you, and you say, "oh, there's my name." in very bored tones. (3) you open the mail, slowly read it, file it and go out for a beer.

That is the doldrums. We had 'em. We've still got 'em. They hit us every so many years, altho their smaller counterpart, the semi-doldrums visit our typewriter each Spring. Perhaps you know them. You don't want to do nothing except prove the theory of the Tse-tse fly, look at picture books, look at girls, idly wonder where you can pick up a bit of change, speculate on ten and fifteen cent beers, sleep, stare at people passing, and continue to file incoming letters away in the desk to be "answered sometime." That's us. So now YOU know why YOU haven't had a letter from us since last (winter) (autumn) (summer)....

We don't rightly know what brought us from hibernation at this time. Evans might have caused it. We stenciled and printed the sheet in this mailing which is on paper identical to this. Some of the things he mentioned aroused us. We almost forgot we wern't editing Le2 and several times caught ourselves at the point of inserting editorial cracks.

EEE raves about Smith. Just about every fan in Michigan raves about Smith the way the Democrats rave about FDR. Smith is something extraordinary in the way of authors. He isn't the type that attends a club meeting so visiting fans can get his autograph and vote him an honorary member. He's the type that squats beside you on the floor, eating cold chicken in his fingers, reading Jack Woodford's books so he can find out how to write, carrying on a conversation something like this: "well, Cong, as one big shot author to another, is there any truth to the rumor that etc."

we are having an awful time with fanzines and prozines. The first week in February we received a shipment of fanzines from Australia dated September and October, last year. (*) Julius Honeybags Unger is another party who causes us much weeping. We can't seem to get WRF weekly anymore. Now and then a few isolated issues will appear, minus photos. No attempt at a weekly mailing whatsoever. (*) And the prozines Future, Sci Fic Quarterly, Stirring Science . . . none can be had in this town of 32,000 population. I have heard a rumor that Stirring is back with us, but I have yet to see it, despite a subscription to the magazine I am supposed to hold. Not to mention money layed out for Cosmic. Oh well. Pernum said there was a sucker born every minute, but he failed to add that most of them are science fiction fans. Couldn't he have done something magnificent with fandom, tho?

There is no truth to the rumor that kibitzers are running these rumor gags into the ground by using them as mere space fillers.

It's been just about a year now. Just about twelvemonths since, somewhat starry-eyed and very hopeful, I started to work on Future and the Quarterly. I'm still starry-eyed, in a way, but not quite as naive about it. And a little better than just hopeful.

You see, I've been checking over all the letters, rechecking my rating sheets thru a systematic calculation of comments favorable, unfavorable, and indifferent, and a final check with circulation figures. These last are the most behind times; as I write this, I have the final ratings on the December book, but the circulation figures on the October issue are not all in yet. But these last seem to agree with the general tone of the letters and the ratings, which is definitely a hopeful sign. It means that I can depend pretty well upon the readers' letters as an adequate guide to action.

The system I use is quite simple, but rather effective. Items are rated as: 1st place, liked very much, liked, indifferent, disliked, or phew! I have marks for each classification: 1, v, a plus sign, /, -, 0 respectively, and, when I add up the scores, they rate 10, 10, 5, 0, -5 and -10 respectively. For simplification I give the final product A, B, C, D, or X respectively with plus signs for those which almost make the next bracket. 10 is A; 8-9 is B; 4-7 is C; 1-3 is D; and 0 or below is X. That A rating is very rare. It means that everyone who commented upon the story thought it excellent... and there haven't been very many of those tales. More frequent, I'm happy to say is the B, which is what happens when a yarn gets a nice long list of 1 or v signs, but few readers just say good. The grade C story is a good tale, and high C means it was definitely an asset. The D rating is no real disgrace, because it means that more readers liked than disliked the yarn, but it's a black mark against me nonetheless. While the X rating means bust and no fooling. I am happy to see there have not been many of these.

Three items go to make up an issue in my final rating of the issue as a whole. The stories; the departments, and the cover and artwork. Each individual artist is listed on my rating-sheet (the cover separately, of course) so I can tell at a glance whether he's improving steadily, standing still, slipping or what not. And I have filing cards for each author: every story is listed, with the issue in which it appeared and the order in which it came out noted, as well as its individual final score. That last is important, because just 2/7 doesn't necessarily mean much, for example, unless we know how it stood absolutely. A 2/7 (7.1) for example means that the tale came out 2nd place and rated a C plus. If it were 6/7 and still received that (7.1) then it wouldn't be held against the author; it would mean that while his yarn was quite good, the others in the same book were much better. On the other hand, if the tale were 2/7 with a rating of (3), then I'd know that I had slipped badly that time.

So far, the best liked cover has been the one Forte drew for "The Barbarians" on the August issue, with Bok's "Pogo Planet" for October a close second. Running third is Paul's cover for "30th Century Duel". On the interiors, Dolgov is in the lead with Bok close behind. But that's mainly because Hannes had more drawings, some of which had to be done in a hurry and which did not come out well. As far as the general tone of letters go, it's the other way around: Dolgy is the close second. Forte is very close behind, almost tied for second place. (And my personal opinion is that his cover on the April issue will be liked better than his first one. I'll have to eat more crow later if I'm wrong.)

So far, Damon Knight hasn't come out too well, but we'll see how his drawings in the February and April Futures are liked. And I'm eager to see how Streeter will compare with Forte.

Now we come to Cummings. Perhaps I had better give some personal data on him first. Personal data, that is, in regard to what I think of his tales. Well, back in 1940 I was asking Fred Pohl why he took Cummings stories -- or more precisely, why he took those particular tales. I didn't like them. I did like Cumming's long novels. I'd read a number of them-- "Exile of Time", "Wandl, the Invader", and so on. And these admittedly were not as good as his earlier ones. Then, early in 41, I managed to get hold of "Beyond the Stars" and "Brand New World". The former I enjoyed, but I really raved over the latter.

Around May, my publisher told me that arrangements had been made to reprint a number of Cumming's older classics, and gave me a batch of em to read. Frankly, I wasn't very happy about it, but realizing that the deal was a financial necessity, inasmuch as Future had not been doing well (we hadn't received the reports on the August book at that time.) I couldn't kick.

I kept an eager eye out on the reports. "Tarrano" was a big hit, no doubt about it. It's one of those few which got either l's or v's from everyone who wrote in. "Man on the Meteor", which I personally liked much better than either "Around the Universe" or "Into the 4th Dimension" got C ratings, with "Universe" leading. The general tone of comments on the Cummings reprints has distinctly been one of approval ---- there's no getting away from it.

The general result is: I'm pleased but by no means satisfied. Future and the Quarterly have improved, but they aren't first class books yet by a long shot. So far as most of the fans go, I may be ahead of a few titles, but I know that the well-established stf books, run by men with a lot more experience (and larger budgets) than I, are still way ahead. I'm keeping in close touch with all the competition and learning from them daily.

Now comes crow. I've blown off quite a bit during the year and have got to eat some words. First of all, I'll have to take back the fine phrases about "hopeful" futures and the types of stories you'd never see in my magazines. That's still largely my own individual opinion, but I've used a number of war stories, there have been dictators and unpleasant (to me) future setups in a number of the tales, stories which, nonetheless I considered good and some better than good.

And I think I mentioned at Denver that I would not cut stories. Not ever again. I had to cut "Beyond the Stars" heavily and may have to cut other novels, too. I don't approve of the practice. But it is necessary at times. At least I have the illusion that I have not damaged any yarn so far, but that is purely personal opinion.

Just what kind of a future Future has, I don't know. A fortnight ago (date of this writing: Dec. 15, 1941) I'd have made something in the nature of a confident statement. It's hard to say what the war will do to circulation. Right now, I'm making plans for the next issue as if nothing disasterous were going to happen. The fortunes of war and the fortunes of business are hard to differentiate at times -- however, when you try to add them both together --

At any rate, I owe the roads and fans a good deal; they've helped me no end. And if humanly possible, you'll see constantly improving issues of Future and the Quarterly right up to

The End

HAVE AT YOU, MR LOWNDES! (A dept. of comment upon what has been said and implied by Doc, in his report on pages 2 and 3, this issue. -B.T.)

Long ago when we were a callow youth, nothing thrilled us more than the sight of a stf pulp peeping from among the westerns and sports on the stands. Especially a new title, or a new title-cut on an old mag. Such as the little thrill we got from the new "face" on the current Planet. Alas (with the above exception), those days are gone forever. We've lost the power to be thrilled by such. So we thought, aided and abetted by wise columnists, that we were rapidly becoming a "has been" in stf---a guy who grew up and out of stf.

Now there comes a new line of thought, by some new columnists. This new theory says we are the same .. and the magazines are the same ... which is the root of all the trouble. Gilbert says this existing state can be explained by one prime example in one mag: wacky fantasy, wacky fantasy and more wacky fantasy. Perhaps so. At any rate we have lost the great interest we once held in Amazing, astounding and wonder. Quickly hiding the first-named under the nearest bed, let us proceed to the second. We no longer are bugs over this because it is too much "Campbell-opera". It (the mag) either needs a new editor or a new set of slants and policies to bolster our (and probably others') waning interest.

As to TWS .. well, we gave up long ago. Only one issue in recent years has so satisfied us that we read it from kiver to kiver. The 10th Anniversary issue. They didn't change editors for that issue .. but they did authors to a certain degree. So there may lay the clue.

Along comes Doc and Future. Covers such as those for "Pogo Planet" and the current "Alien Vibration" awaken in us the thrill that once was. On the inside we have Cummings as he once was. So we sit up and take notice. Surely you will agree with us that when ancient reprints are used there must be expert editing and cutting. We maintain that with the proper use of shears and pencil an old reprint can be streamlined into the kind of reading material liked today .. and we don't mean wacky fantasy. Considering the style and plotting, we would go so far as to say that they must be edited or risk becoming the counterpart of a Sears catalog in a country shanty.

We realize what Doc has to work with and what he must put up with. And we are perfectly content to take the Cummings he dishes out (hurry up with "The Brand New World" Doc!), hoping, always hoping that he seizes the power rightfully given him by the dictionary, and trims those yarns to the 1942 patterns. It can be done. We believe the wordy, dragging pages of "local color" and background could be polished, or killed altogether; the stupid dialog (relative to modern taste) eliminated and, well, pretty soon you have a readable story.

Consider Doc's article on pages 2 and 3. Originally it ran almost two & one-half pages of elite type. We edited it to the two pages of pica you now see, and lost nothing of value. Or so we believe. Many a hopeless story has undoubtedly been saved by good editing. In the fanzines many downright stinking articles have been saved by editors who had nerve & the knack of editing. We know, speaking from experience and not boasting. Well, not much boasting. But long before us, smart guys have pointed out that too many fanzine editors are publishers, not editors.

In closing, we once again doff our lid to Doc and Future. We think he has the best title, the best artist, and the best chances. So edit what material you've got to work with and see what happens.