



THE PURPOSE OF  
SCIENCE - FICTION

by

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I should just like to say a few words about the new sociological movement which is beginning to develop in science-fiction circles. There are some today, I know, who firmly believe in science-fiction for science-fiction's sake. They believe in subscribing to the four science-fiction magazines, in reading them with the attitude of earnest critics, in writing to editors and authors, in collecting fan magazines, stills from stf films, cartoon strips, etc., and in general making a kind of religious cult out of science-fiction. I think we all do this to a certain extent.

But to those who are firmly convinced that this should be the be-all and end-all of science-fiction, I have a question to ask - "Why?" Why do they read science-fiction and eagerly collect the magazines? Why do they subscribe to fan magazines which, with about half-a-dozen exceptions, are worthless? Why do they pester editors, publishers, and writers? And above all, why are they monomaniacs with the one fixed idea of spreading science-fiction?

Do they spread science-fiction because they wish to increase the profits of the publishers? To some extent, I am afraid, this is true, as a large percentage of those who cry "science-fiction for science-fiction's sake" have definitely a financial interest, whether as authors, publishers, editors, or distributors. I am not protesting against people making money out of science-fiction, of course, since if they work, it is only fair that they should be paid, and you can scarcely expect them to live on the admiration of fans.

I do protest, however, against their spreading of the belief that there is nothing better to live for than the reading, criticising and boosting of science-fiction.

I think that Gernsback was the first to realize that if fans were to be encouraged to boost science-fiction, they would have to be given a purpose. After all, it is rather silly when you tell people that you have organizations for advancing science-fiction and yet you cannot tell them why science-fiction should be advanced. And so Gernsback suggested that science-fiction was a kind of sugar-coated educator for teaching science.

Well, it is not my intention to argue on the right or wrong of Gernsback's Hypothesis. But I doubt very much if anyone who has studied science-fiction really believes in this view. And if it were true, I don't think many fans would realize the job of being instruments for teaching people Ohm's Law or the Binomial Theorem. Of course, in the early Gernsback stories, we did get some interesting data about the Fourth Dimension, the theory of relativity, etc, and I think that many fans will admit that their first introduction to the interesting social life of termites was Dr. Keller's story "The Human Termites".

But few modern science-fiction stories --even those by Wells, Stapledon, etc., can be said to contain much scientific information. Any one who does desire sugar-coated science can easily get it from such magazines as "Armchair Science", or such books as those by Jeans, Crowther, Haldane, or the Scientific Book Club. I have yet to hear of someone becoming interested in science-fiction and

then developing into a science-fanatic. In fact, I know several cases where persons who were formerly keenly interested in things like chemistry and physics have, after reading a quantity of science-fiction, lost this concentrated enthusiasm for chemistry and physics, and have started taking an interest in the world as a whole.

And I believe that this gives a clue to the real purpose of science-fiction. It is becoming more and more certain that if there is one thing that science-fiction does for an individual, it is to broaden his mind. It takes him outside his own egotistical little self, and gives him a mental birds-eye view not only of the earth and its teeming multitudes, but of our solar system our galaxy, and even of the cosmos. He begins to realize what no other literature can make realize - that this world of misery and happiness, war and peace, dictators and democracies, press-lords and tub-thumpers, capitalists and trade-unions, is nothing more than a cosmic speck surrounded by a microscopic film of air which transmits the ravings of so-called human wisdom of two billion conglomerates of protoplasm.

In addition, science-fiction stimulates the imagination. The reader is not afraid of gazing ahead, not only a year or two, but hundreds, thousands or millions of years. And it is this quality of stimulating the imagination and creating a detached point of view, that makes science-fiction something worth while and something which, it has been suggested, can do more for the world than any outpourings of politicians or scientists.

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If the world is to be saved by some organization of active scientifically-minded young men depicted in such books as "Things to Come", "Wings Over Europe", "Man's Mortality", etc., than there could be no type of person better suited for the task than science-fiction fans. To judge from the history of the past few hundred years, we can expect no brilliant moves on the part of politicians. From what I know of scientists, they also, with a few notable exceptions, would be worthless in a serious and determined attempt at world reform. But most science-fiction fans - and I have met scores of them in person - are altruistic, energetic, think on scientific lines, are keenly interested in humanity and the world about them, and have sufficient enthusiasm and energy to get what they want.

With these facts in mind, one or two American fans have advocated that science-fiction fans, reading as they do of Utopias, world reform, etc., should definitely play an active part in social and economic reconstruction.

It is not my intention at present to say much about this since my time is nearly up, but I should like to add that with the American views in mind, we in Leeds started, three months ago, a sociological group. Our chief activity, apart from discussions and talks, has been to send out a questionnaire to many fans whom we know are interested, with the object of finding out their detailed opinions on various subjects, and of finally obtaining an answer to the question: exactly what good can fans do? A lengthy report of the answers to this questionnaire - which has already provided us with much thought-provoking material - will be published in July.

Meanwhile, I would like to emphasize that the reading or propagating of science-fiction merely for the pleasure the stories give, or are supposed to give is rather pointless, as other literature is just as good in this respect. Furthermore, I doubt very much if science-fiction is a science-educator. But if science-fiction serves no better purpose than awakening in its readers the detached point of view I have mentioned, and if it makes them realize that the future is governed by our actions of today, and that what is good enough for today is much too bad for tomorrow, then I know that you will agree with me that our work and the role of such organizations as the Science Fiction Association is not in vain.

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(Publisher's Note:- The opinions expressed in this pamphlet are those of the author and not necessarily those of the IASFF.)