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This issue of Degler! begins a new department: book reviews. The frequency of this new feature depends, of course, on how many new books I receive each month. This week Ballantine Books has graced our mailbox with their April releases, of which we review:

THE SF CRITIC

B.E.A.S.T. by Charles Eric Maine; Ballantine Books, 1967. 75¢

I suppose the reason Charles Eric Maine remains in my memory is that he is the British equivalent of Robert Moore Williams. Both have been turning out poorly-written science fiction for a number of years, and both must, inevitably, be found on the Forgettable SF lists on either side of the Atlantic.

B.E.A.S.T. is based on a rather original story idea, which Mr. Maine has seen fit to cloak with a bit of 1930ish monster melodrama, some 1960ish James Bond-type sexcapades, and a good deal of *saue* British writing which fails to come off.

The delightful idea is this: given the formula for a planet, light, heat, atmosphere, all converted into a program in a computer, it should be possible to develop, all within the computer memory banks, the complete evolutionary history of some form of life. This form of life would, within the program, become intelligent and even pass us in intelligence. It would in effect become a super-BEM. Using the computer to translate, it should be possible to communicate with a creature completely alien to us.

Such a communication could provide valuable insights into many aspects of our own civilization which we, as members of it, are unable to see. Just as a citizen of China would offer a different view of American society, this B.E.A.S.T. would offer valuable insights into the total of human civilization from the outside looking in. You can clearly see that the plot possibilities are nearly endless.

This, then, is the idea on which Mr. Maine has built his novel. Unfortunately for the reader, he has seen fit to veil this intriguing concept in a plot so well ~~worn~~ that any better-than-average writer would have a very hard time indeed making a good thing of it.

From such a brilliant idea, Mr. Maine has seen fit to cloak this scintillating story idea in the muddy cloak of pseudo-sophisticated, *saue*, understating writing. It doesn't make it. His comments on casual sex, the Establishment, the British police, and other aspects of the British way of life detract visibly from the work of writing a good, strongly plotted book.

The novel is further marred by evident inexperience with computers. Mr. Maine has evidently never heard of time-sharing, and I wonder why the Ministry of Defense should worry about Dr. Gilley's (the chief Evil Person in the Book) use of computer time for his own experiments when several places in the book make it quite clear that the thing is used only for the 8 hour work day, and allowed to lie fallow, as it were, for the evening and night. I suspect that Mr. Maine Failed To Do His Homework on computers; it shows quite clearly.

Suffice it to say that the Evisal B.E.A.S.T., ~~cum~~ Dr. Gilley is destroyed by our hero, who on the next page denies that the thing ever existed. Well. The world is saved for democracy, and the Establishment rides on into the sunset.

I think Bob Silverberg or Phil Dick, to name but two, could write a hell of a good yarn around this central idea. And If I were you, I'd wait for their version and skip this one.

--- Andrew Porter

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Steve Stiles for T.A.F.F.!!!
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Last issue we held forth on the subject of Judith Merrill and the F&SF book review section. I suggested that if you didn't like what was being written, you should send a letter to the editor; letters count.

Mr. Ferman informs me that in the first six months of Miss Merrill's reign, there were indeed a good many letters, and that some 90% were in favor of the book review column continuing in that vein. If you want to see it change, write a letter.

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Several issues ago I came out against the proliferation of the local convention. If I might clarify my view, permit me to say that whereas fandom in general knows that those who put on these small conventions are all separate people or groups, the vast majority of hotel banquet offices, city convention bureaus, and hotel-chain convention offices tend to view fandom as a central group (the World Science Fiction Society, Inc.) with branches throughout the US. Thus, if one local con Goofs, it reflects poorly on fandom and conventions for possibly years to come. Likewise, poorly printed or confused progress reports (such as this current WesterCon's) reflect on Los Angeles' bid for the 1968 WorldCon. Immediately following are a few comments on my editorial.

.....:LETTERS:.....

Ray Fisher (4404 Forest Park, St. Louis, Mo., 63108): In theory, I tend to agree with you about there being too many regionals; however, in practice, it seems that every sf group in the country will soon be sponsoring their own meeting...I suppose this is because of the feeling that many fans are unable, for one reason or another, to travel the distance to larger cons. Also, just where are you going to draw the line...should there be just one..the World Con..or, if there should be more, well, then, how many more? ...oh,well...if the small Regionals attract enuf turn-out to be worth the trouble, I suppose no one should fuss. And, if they don't, maybe they'll take the cure, and start consolidating. /=/ Frank Dietz, (1750 Walton Ave, Bronx, NY, 10453): ...I disagree with your comments particularly directed to the Ohio meetings; they have been arranged for the Midwestern area fans, who live much too far away to attend any of the east coast cons...all in all, I don't think your complaint is valid... /=/ Brian Burley(6 Palm St., Dover, NJ, 07801): There are...a good many more fans than...a few years ago. There are a number of new groups, in new areas, who rightly wish their share of fan activities. They have 3 alternatives: 1) Do Nothing. 2) ...try to get involved in an established function. I recommend this alternative to anyone who enkoys menial jobs with no recognition. 3) ...Put on a regional. If successful, a regional enhances thegroups reputation. If not, the con will be discontinued, so why worry about it. {{See above-AP}} You object to a Columbuscon on the ground it adds too many cons. Why don't you object to 2 in Washington Baltimore {{ah, but I do-AP}} You suggest that some of the Ohio regionals combine. May I suggest you set an example by... working for the combination of the 4 separate NYfan groups, which seem to have a common membership, anyway...If there shd have to be less regionals, why doesn't a WorldCon work out a rotation plan? {{The 4 groups in NY are separate because two--Fanoclasts and Lunarians--are invitational only. The CCONY Club is only for CCONY students. And FISTFA...well, lots of people don't go there hardly, no more...and the WorldCon does have a rotation plan. You maybe meant something else? I'll print future letters, if I get them. --AP}} Normal news continues next issue.