

MEETING LOCATION POLL (Continued from page 1)

the sooner the better. Thanks!

In the meantime, we have made arrangements already for us to have the February meeting at the Man of Aran again. We hope to have a larger, thirstier crowd this time.

The January Meeting

At the January meeting, we held a book auction which was run by Bobby McLaughlin with her usual flair. It proved to be very successful, with over 45 books being redistributed. The money was sufficient to cover the cost of several meetings at the Man of Aran. In view of the popularity of this event, we will certainly make every effort to schedule another auction before Christmas.

New Library Rules, OK?

As a result of an attempt to increase the attractiveness of membership in the ISFA for people out of the immediate vicinity of Dublin, we are increasing the services of the Library, effective immediately.

Enclosed with this newsletter can be found a list of all the books in the Library (through 1 January 1978). The Library as a whole will no longer be brought to monthly meetings; rather, you should complete one of the Library order forms (2 are also contained with this newsletter), specifying whether you wish a book brought to the monthly meeting for you to pick up, or if you want it mailed to you. The charge for a book picked up at the meeting will remain at 10p.; mail order books will cost 30p. including postage.

While the new setup will reduce the opportunities to browse during meetings, in fact the choice of books available is increased. This is because the Library has grown so large (585 at the last count) that we have not been able to bring all the offerings to the meetings. To encourage participation, we are also removing separate membership qualifications for the Library. Nevertheless, to encourage further growth, whether a book is picked up or mailed out, 10p. of the fee may be waived upon the donation of another book to the Library.

It is recommended that you make corrections upon your copy of the Booklist when additions and recoveries are announced in the newsletter. This will enable you to get maximum reading opportunity from the Library. A list of the new procedures is contained in the front of the Booklist for your convenience.

Will whoever gave someone a fine article on SF Cover Art please tell John McCarthy who they are so that it can be properly attributed when published?

Announcements

I.) We recently received word from David Lass that the date of the meeting of the T.C.D. Gramophone Society to which we were invited and which was mentioned at the last monthly meeting, is going to have to be changed to some time after Mid-April. We will keep in touch with David and make sure that a revised date will be included in the next Newsletter and announced at the March meeting, if it is available by then.

II.) Will anyone who has copies of the first two issues of Issac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and is willing to sell them please contact Brendan Ryder as soon as possible.

Book Reviews

I.) The Birthgrave by Tanith Lee (London: Futura Publications, 1977. £ 1.25)

This is the first published novel of a contemporary British writer, who has adopted the first name "Tanith", based on the female heroine of Denis Wheatley's celebrated novel of the occult, entitled The Devil Rides Out.

However, Ms. Lee's novel is not written in this particular genre, but rather in the field of heroic fantasy, and sword-sorcery type epic, following in the footsteps of Michael Moorcock in the U.K. and Fritz Leiber in the U.S.A.

The Birthgrave recounts the autobiographical tale of "Karrakaz", worshipped as goddess of a lost civilization in prehistoric earth times, who travels through a barbaric world trying to find the true source of her origins. She passes through various adventures with primitive peoples, and at last discovers her true identity by an encounter with an alien spaceship, whose computer is linked with the brains of all the crew.

The computer explores the inmost recesses of Karrakaz's mind, and finally succeeds in restoring her lost memory, and knowledge of her true identity, after which she returns to the Earth, and begins a new life.

The style of the novel is rich and evocative, succeeding in calling to mind ancient powers and civilizations, with names such as Ankunic and Tower-Eshkorek.

It is quite a long work, being 408 pages long, but wholly absorbing once the reader has entered into the spirit of epic adventure, that forms the dominating force.

The only criticisms I have are minor ones. Firstly, the somewhat abrupt introduction of the alien spaceship and its computer in the last part of the novel, to resolve the mystery of the heroine's identity; secondly the fact that there are no maps included of the countries described, which would have been a help to the reader.

Apart from these items, it is an extremely powerful novel, with a sequel published recently entitled Vazkor, Son of Vazkor, both strongly recommended to ISFA members who enjoy sword and sorcery, combined with science-fantasy type novels. (Reviewed by David Lass)

II.) Human-Machines by Thomas N. Scortia and George Zebrowski (London: Hale, 1977. £ 3.75)

This is a collection of short stories, originally published between 1940-73, devoted to the theme of the "cyborg", short for "cybernetic organism", the term coined by two American scientists, M. Clynes and N.S. Kline in 1960.

These stories explore the various problems involved in the transference of a human intelligence into a plastic or metal body, and whether the resultant organism retains any human identity. There are certain similarities with the Issac Asimov "Robot" cycle of stories, which are interesting to compare in terms of common problems.

There is a valuable critical introduction to the stories in this collection by the two editors, and each tale has a brief separate synopsis on its title page. It is highly recommended to ISFA members who enjoy the hard, technological type of SF combined with human elements. (Reviewed by David Lass)

Remember Next Year!

Don't forget, friends, that the Annual General Meeting is only a few scant months away. We will be publishing a corrected copy of the ISFA constitution, along with the committee's proposals for further revisions. Member's suggestions will of course be welcome both before and during the AGM.

More Book Reviews

III.) Close Encounters of the Third Kind by Steven Spielberg (Great Britain: Sphere Books, 1978; as a tie-in with the Columbia-EMI film of the same name.)

The title may need some explaining. The term "Close encounters of the third kind" is well known to anyone involved in the UFO research field:

A close encounter of the First Kind is the sighting of an Unidentified Flying Object;

A close encounter of the Second Kind is physical evidence after a UFO sighting;

A close encounter of the Third Kind is actual contact between human observers and UFO occupants.

The first page of the book tells us:

The statistical odds against man being the only form of intelligent life in the Universe are enormous. Somewhere in the immense vastness of outer space there must be worlds - or other dimensions - where life has evolved far beyond human levels. Such superior beings in all likelihood have long since mastered techniques for interstellar and intergalactic travel that at present are literally light years beyond the grasp of earthly science. The overwhelming

evidence of the past thirty years (millions of UFO sightings of various kinds by reliable witnesses all over the world) indicates that such higher intelligences have been watching human affairs intently. And Government agencies of all nations are obviously not telling the people the full story behind the whole UFO mystery. The indications are that a major contact between humans and alien beings is imminent - if it has not already taken place.

Those of you who have seen STAR WARS at the Savoy, in Dublin, will also most probably have seen the trailer for CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND. Written and directed by Steven (JAWS) Spielberg, CLOSE ENCOUNTERS promises to be "the most beautiful, frightening and significant motion picture adventure of all time".

Well, remembering the remarkable work produced by Mr. Spielberg, I am quite willing to believe that the film should certainly be startling and definitely entertaining - possibly even thought provoking. Among the crew involved in its production were Richard Dreyfuss (who played Matt Hooper in JAWS), Douglas Trumbull (special effects wizard with 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY and SILENT RUNNING under his belt), John Williams (the composer who scored beautifully for JAWS and competently for STAR WARS), and, finally, we have French director Francois Truffaut (also a Hitchcock fan like Spielberg) playing the leading scientist in a group preparing for the most remarkable meeting off all time.

Taking all this into account, I will say little of the book. It was written directly from the film script and since Spielberg relies to a great extent upon improvisation from his players, there is a minimum of dialogue in the prose which, basically, just sets out to describe what we will see happening on the screen. My advice to anyone who intends to see the film and wishes to enjoy it fully...

DON'T READ THE BOOK!

before seeing the movie. It might very well dull the experience. From what is described in the book, it should certainly astound you. Taking my delight in special effects into account, I am really looking forward to seeing CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND.

Why don't you see it too and let us know what you thought of it? (Reviewed by Robert Lane)

IV.) Approaching Oblivion by Harlan Ellison

in this volume of eleven short stories.

In the introduction Ellison writes bitterly of his disillusionment with society and of his conviction that man is heading towards oblivion but is too complacent to care anymore. This preamble is worth reading as a bitter yet pleading attack on apathy, an attack which the author realizes is doomed to fail.

The compelling theme of mankind irreversibly approaching destruction is central to all the stories in the volume but Ellison treats some of them with a humorous, occasionally lighthearted touch, thus preventing the book from becoming a morbid contemplation of impending doom. The most obvious examples of this humour are "Cold Friend", "Erectophobia", and "I'm looking for Kadak".

The story which receives the most sympathetic treatment is perhaps "One Life Furnished in Early Poverty", in which a man returns to his own past, hoping to alter the course of his life by influencing his younger self. He realises too late the mistake he has made.

"Catman" is a story somewhat reminiscent of Ellison's earlier classic I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM in its treatment of a man's passion for a rather unusual love-partner and his relationship with his parents. Ellison horror at its best.

There is an interesting contrast between two of the stories, "Ecowareness" and "Hindsight: 480 seconds". The former portrays an indignant Earth determined to teach mankind a lesson for having the audacity to pollute the planet and destroy its resources. "Hindsight" tells of the last eight minutes of Earth's life before it is destroyed by the collision of an asteroid with the sun. A poet, the only human left to witness the disaster, tries to put into words what the loss of Earth means to mankind.

So even though Ellison sees man as a self-destructing, spoilt child in "Ecowareness", he ends the book with a note of hope. "Hindsight" shows the human race mourning the death of Earth but its end is brought about not by the hand of man but by Fate. APPROACHING OBLIVION is a book I recommend as entertaining yet thought provoking and as such is a must for all serious science fiction readers. (Reviewed by Rita Meehan)

What IS Science Fiction, Anyway?

This particular problem can be handled in a number of ways, as we are all too aware. For instance, what sort of books are often mislabelled by the general public as SF, when we would disclaim them entirely? Does Von Daniken count as SF? How about E.E. ("Doc") Smith? Or the occult?

A quick look at the 1977-78 Calendar of Events will reveal that we are supposed to have a debate on Science Fiction vs. Fantasy during the March meeting. Since no one has volunteered as yet, we are going to reschedule it for the April meeting on 30th April. To start things off, we of course need to answer the question at the top of this article; but the wide variety of responses makes it necessary to provide a working definition.

To achieve this, we are reproducing excerpts from a letter recently received from George H. Scithers, the editor of ISSAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE. The letter itself is a description of what he (and presumably Issac Asimov as well) consider marketable Science Fiction to be. (That is, what he is willing to buy.) We hope someone will become sufficiently incensed at his rather limiting definition to write a rebuttal,

or (who knows?) even present a different set of criteria. Talk it over among yourselves at the next meeting and let's see if we can get together a pair of teams for the April meeting.

Anyhow, here is the letter:

Gentlebeings:

The Science of science fiction excludes stories built on mythology or legend, from witches and warlocks to God and His angels. Clarke's Law says that a sufficiently advanced technology will appear to be magic; that kind is okay. But magic as magic: sorry -- no. Instead, science fiction is generally built on some scientific development, some future trend, some scientific discovery -- and above all, its effect on people.

Since this is Fiction, the science doesn't have to be something that has been or will be discovered. What you do have to do is to convince, to make it believable. H.G. Wells's Rule allows one impossible thing -- one independent wonder -- per story, not two or three. You may write of the invention of a time machine. Or you may write of the invention of a faster-than-light drive. But both in one story won't work, unless you plausibly show how one is a necessary and logical outgrowth of the other. Or, the other hand, since these two are familiar furniture for SF stories, you could write of the invention of -- say -- the time machine background that already takes the FTL drive for granted. However, you may not break any other rules except the one you've persuaded the reader to suspend disbelief about. Fiction, yes -- but as scientifically sound as your plot and background will allow.

Now Stories generally progress by narration; they are about beings the reader can believe in; and they tell the events that make a change in one or some of those beings -- growing up, learning, or becoming emotionally involved. We seldom buy the vignette -- a snapshot of a static situation. Virtually never do we buy a history lecture -- a synopsis -- where the events are told so objectively that the reader never gets into the story. For all the necessity of putting the reader into a strange and unfamiliar setting, remember: a story moves by action, for all that it needs colorful backgrounds and believable characters acting on believable motives.

Why do we reject? We've mentioned Lecture and Synopsis and Vignette. If your science or your logic or your characters aren't well done, then they Do Not Convince. A story that isn't about anything, that is Pointless, won't work either. While Tragedy can be a powerful story basis, a tale that ends in Futility is not; put it aside until you are in a better mood. Sex, as a necessary part of life is a necessary part of fiction. But sex-for-arousal and sex-&-sadism -- no. (We're not all that interested in sexless sadism either.) And in SF, one has great freedom to invent one's own cuss words; we feel

you can get along without the three or four most 'vulgar' words for the sex act and organs. When the reader (or editor) can't understand what's going on -- not enough description to feel the setting, characters operating on unclear, inconsistent, or unbelievable motives, and the like -- the story will be Murky or Cpaque, depending on degree. And if your story's only SF elements are a few exotic names applied to otherwise ordinary beings and things, we'll class it as a Bat Durston (after the cowboy of that name who called his pistol a "proton blaster" and planned to head off the bad guys at the Horse-head Nebula...) and we'll send it right back.

Science Fiction is a literature of Ideas, and new ones at that. The story of the planet choking on pollution, the berserk computer, the visiting spaceship too small to be seen, the setting that (surprise, surprise!) turns out to be Genesis 1:1 or Dalias TX of 22 November 1963 -- these have all been done to death years ago. Other ideas, though done often, are useable with a new twist. Running out of oil is a newspaper story; it's no longer an SF one. Straight-line extrapolation on what's already obvious -- no; but what happens afterwards when the trend changes direction -- ah, that can be SF. And if it's told with real people and interesting backgrounds, we may even buy it. Remember Blish's Principle: SF must have content, it must be about something.

And it must convince. You're allowed one outrageous assumption, but not violations of common sense. You may invent a faster-than-light drive to get to the next galaxy, but you must still know what a Galaxy is. It's not easy, to be entertaining, and convincing, and make sense; to have a point at all -- but if you do, we'll send money!

/s/G.H. Scithers

Well, there it is, folks. If you're interested in writing SF, by the way, contact Anita Woods at 19 Moorefield Dr., Clondalkin, Co. Dublin. She is, of course, the head of the Writers' Workshop. She has copies of this letter in its entirety and another one about how to spell and punctuate for the American market.

The Remote Future.

As the feature of a future meeting, we have asked Mr. William O'Donohoe, ufologist, to come to address us on the subject of UFOs. It might be remembered from the 8th January Sunday Independent that Mr. O'Donohoe is in the process of setting up a research group called the Irish Unidentified Flying Object Research Movement -- IUFORM -- and that he himself has often witnessed UFOs. We hope he will soon be able to take time off from a busy schedule to meet with the ISFA.

All enquires regarding the ISFA should be addressed to the Secretary, Paddy O'Connell, 11 Templemore Ave, Dublin 6.