

newsletter

The Bulletin of The Irish Science Fiction Association

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1979

NUMBER 24

NEWS & C.

- COMMITTEE CHANGES

At a committee meeting held on August 12th, chairman John McCarthy and secretary-treasurer Moira Harrison resigned their posts and as committee members, both because of increased demands on their time which made it impossible for them to give the necessary attention to their committee jobs. We would like to thank both John and Moira for all the hard work they did for the ISFA during their stints on the committee, and John also for the excellent handling of publications over the last two years.

To replace John and Moira, two committee members will be co-opted from the membership. We will be able to announce their names within the foreseeable future. No decision has as yet been made on who is going to our next chairman, but the post of secretary-treasurer has been taken over by Brendan Ryder, whose address is as follows:

18 Beech Drive,
Dundrum,
Dublin 16,
Ireland.

(Telephone 01-982594)

To this address all enquiries, membership (re-)applications, monies, and other correspondence regarding ISFA matters should be sent.

+++ UPCOMING MEETINGS +++

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+++ Sunday, 2 September 1979 +++

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+++ The monthly meeting originally planned for the last Sunday in August has
+++ been postponed to the above date. Starting as usual at 7.30 pm, upstairs in
+++ the Parliament Inn, Parliament Street, Dublin 2, this meeting will have a
+++ dual theme. Firstly, a number of members will have recently returned from
+++ the largest fan event of the year, the Seacon (i.e. this year's World SF
+++ Convention, to be held at Brighton in England). This should provide some
+++ food for conversation. And secondly, we hope to have another book auction,
+++ so once more you have a chance to get rid of any books you don't want any
+++ more, and to pick up some you've been looking for all these years.

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+++ Sunday, 16 September 1979 +++

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+++ At 7.30 pm the Writers Workshop will meet in the Parliament Inn. Anybody
+++ interested in the noble and intricate business of writing, whether it be SF
+++ or not, is welcome to come along and bring a story for reading and dis-
+++ cussion. Critics also welcome.

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+++ Sunday, 30 September 1979 +++

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+++ see page 2 +++

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- UPCOMING MEETINGS continued

On Sunday, 30 September 1979 the regular monthly meeting will be held at the Parliament Inn, again starting at 7.30 pm. At this meeting there will be an exhibition of Star Trek illustrative material, accompanied by a short historical introduction. Furthermore there will be a short SF quiz, not necessarily geared towards the trekkies among us, with a book token as prize. So dig into the old reference tomes, friends.

- AISLING GHEAL AND STARGATE AWARDS.

From September 1st, entries to the contest for the yearly Aisling Gheal Award can be sent in to the secretarial address (see page 1). The procedures and rules will be basically the same as last year.

Firstly, the length of the stories should not be greater than 20,000 words. Each person can enter only three (3) stories, including co-authored stories. On the typescript (it would be very helpful indeed if all entries would be typed) there should be no indication as to the identity of the author, other than a pseudonym (or e.g. your telephone number), and the entry should be accompanied by a letter saying which pseudonym you're using. This is to have the judging be as objective and un-biased a process as possible.

As far as prizes are concerned, we expect these to be the same as last year, i.e. first prize of £25.00, second of £15.00 and third of £10.00. Only one prize can be won per person. There will also be a free membership (of one year's duration) allocated by a lottery from among all the participants.

Finally, the closing date for all entries is 1 February 1980. So start writing, and let's have this year's contest be even more successful than last year's.

Also, as we told you in the previous newsletter, there will be a prize awarded for what the entire ISFA membership considers to be the best piece of SF writing, which can be fiction, poetry, criticism or anything else connected with SF, published in Ireland between 1st September 1978 and 31st October 1979. A voting form for this award, provisionally known as the Stargate award, will be included in the next Stargate, which should be received by the membership by the end of October, and the closing date for sending in these voting forms is January 1st, 1980. On the voting form your ideas on the name for the award will also be solicited.

- SF AND SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY RELATED AUDIO MATERIAL WANTED.

Michael Gardner of the Big D radio station has asked us for help with a series of programs he is going to do on Science and Technology, including SF, and is particularly anxious to get hold of any audio material, musical and otherwise, that members of the ISFA might be willing to lend him. This material should have some bearing on the afore-said subjects and be of interest to the general public. If you have anything, could you contact Michael at the Big D during office hours, telephone no. 01-789012, or at home in the evenings, telephone no. 01-302556, and make arrangements with him.

- PAST MEETINGS

The June meeting was held on Sunday, 24 June, at the usual venue. John Baxter - author of such books as The Hermes Fall and The Off-Worlders (well worth a read) and editor of The Pacific Book of Science Fiction et al. - showed a third facet of his multivariate abilities when he spoke on Science Fiction and Film. The rather smaller than usual attendance were fortunate in that they received one of the best ISFA talks I have heard.

Mr. Baxter began by pointing out some essential differences between literature and film as media, and, indeed, this was perhaps the central theme of his talk. Films "work" in an artificial environment. In the dark warm comfort of a cinema one's sensoria are destroyed and then the ensuing vacuum is filled, not with intellectual stimulation, but with the stuff of fantasy, and fantasies. Mr. Baxter traced this fantasy feeding from the early days of cinema. He showed how the early SF films

grew from the horror movies that went before them, and how this strand is visible even today. Thus the Golem became the Robot became the Dalek. He also showed how the early SF films took their themes, not from the pulp magazine stories proliferating at the time, but from the covers of those same pulps.

This led to a difference of interest between the fans and the filmmakers, and this split intensified during the 1950's. Paradoxically this split allowed film directors to treat their subject in an entirely cinematic fashion, and some very good films were being made. People like Jack Arnold with films like The Incredible Shrinking Man and The Creature from the Black Lagoon expanded the horizons of SF films, even if, perhaps, they alienated the more purist fans.

Finally, Mr. Baxter told how in recent years the increased involvement of mainstream SF people in films has led to a lowering standard. From a film point of view some recent highly successful films were not good; he looked forward to the day when SF films would again be made for the films' sake.

Mr. Baxter provided an interesting and amusing sidelight into the world of SF films by reading an excerpt from a Ken Russell script. And so ended an informative and enjoyable evening in a hilarious fashion. (Report by Eoin Bairead)

The July meeting celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing in an appropriate fashion, as the speaker of the night was Dr. Joseph Laffan who talked about space medicine, a field he has been personally active in. He discussed the physical and mental problems encountered by astro/cosmonauts from Yuri Gagarin's time to the present long-term Salyut mission (recently ended after almost half a year -ed.). Firstly, it was observed that scientists used to put a limit on the maximum speed a human body would be able to survive, e.g. 60 mph 150 years ago. Some deterioration of health was observed after the relatively short Mercury flight and some more after Gemini flights. Dr. Laffan stressed the importance of in-flight exercise, and when a vigorous programme was initiated in the Skylab missions, these crews came back far fitter and healthier than their un-exercised predecessors.

There are various problems connected with excess or absence of gravity. The maximum forces encountered are 4.2G during lift-off and occasionally 7G during re-entry, but these forces can be simulated in a long-armed centrifuge, and present no great problems. However, zero G cannot be simulated for any length of time, so that those who may have disorientation problems cannot be identified before the actual flight. Also, during zero G conditions, blood, which normally is drawn towards the legs, is distributed more evenly, leading to a build-up, or at least an increase, of blood in the brain. What's more, the heart doesn't have to work as hard at zero G to keep circulation going, so that it becomes smaller. Finally, there is a loss of red blood cells, but fortunately both the latter reductions are reversible with time, if one returns to normal circumstances.

Muscles and bones were the next items dealt with. The biggest worry in this area is the drain of calcium from the bones which leaves them brittle and breakable. Counter-action in the form of medication did not seem to be very effective. As far as the muscles were concerned, these would reduce in size during zero G, but exercise and a return to normal environment made this reversible as well.

Food was not of very high quality in the earlier missions, which were very short anyway. In Skylab the quality had greatly improved.

Dr. Laffan also discussed the problems connected with that staple of SF, the space suit. Since this consists of a large number of layers, a build-up of heat must be prevented. This is done by having water circulate through myriad tubes sewn into the undergarment, and having the heat removed from the water through a heat exchanger in the Life Support pack on the astronaut's back. A problem with excessive stiffness of the space-suit's gloves remains to be solved.

Dr. Laffan ended on the optimistic note that on the present evidence, there should be no major medical obstacles to interplanetary flights of fairly long duration. There was an extensive session of questions, all admirably well handled. A warm round of applause testified to our gratitude to Dr. Laffan for making the evening as interesting as it was.

On a more clearly celebratory note, Moira Harrison and Lucy Walshe had cooked a large amount of cup cakes, which were consumed in no time at all. Our thanks go to the two ladies for this. (report by Brendan Ryder)

REVIEWS

Journey by Marta Randall (Hamlyn Paperbacks, 1979, £1.00 + VAT etc)

During the last few years, any long-time reader of science fiction could not help but notice that there has been a great increase in the professionalism in SF marketing. One could also not help but notice that this has been to the detriment of SF and its popular image. It has been turned from an élite into a mass market; and this means that true fans (such as the members of the ISFA, for example) have had to endure what appears to be an unending avalanche of trite SF adaptations of familiar best-seller trash, in the finest tradition of Harold Robbins and Irwin Shaw.

But the assaults upon the dignity of genuine SF readership have continued on to new heights in Journey. The blurb on the back calls it a family saga --- this means that it chronicles the history, in this case over twenty years, of the members of a family who once were the sole owners and occupiers of the planet Aerie. There is only one vaguest involvement of SF-type science, and the reader doesn't even realise that it has occurred until about four pages further on. The characterisations are highly praised in the inside cover. I personally found them only marginally good individually; and I doubt if any family consists solely of emotional cripples, repressed closet queens, and psychotic teenage amateur vivisectionists on the male side, and heroic, brilliant, ugly, women who like sex with their brothers in the bath when they aren't having affairs with the sentient natives of indeterminant gender.

Some other points that one might expect in a review:

- Plot: None
- Conflict: None
- Style: Well, I guess you have to have a style, just as you have to have weather. There are innumerable changes in viewpoint character, most of which are indistinguishable except by sex. Granted, they are needed so that the reader can have an idea of what is going on. But only seldom is the story so engaging that such a reader actually cares what is going on.
- Challenges to the reader: Only patience is tested. No mental involvement necessary. (In fact, it might even be a handicap.)

What else can one say? Did I enjoy the book? No. Would I recommend it to someone? No. To nobody whatsoever. Under no circumstances. Let's be frank. Perhaps I should owe no ill feeling to Marta Randall. Fair play to her for seeing a yawning gap in SF marketing. But for the reputation of SF, for the hordes of potential readers of SF who will be driven to other forms of entertainment as a result of starting to read SF with Journey, I have to hope that the book is one of the most outstanding flops in the annals of SFdom. Randall deserves nothing but contempt from intelligent readers, and, indeed, from the many writers of real SF whom we have come to love and cherish. All writers must realise, whatever the genre in which they choose to sell, that a certain percentage of their readership will be new to that genre, and that of that another percentage will judge the genre as a whole upon their work. Obviously Randall has forgotten this; while one would hope that a sense of pride would keep her from writing such such trash as this, one would also expect that a sense of responsibility to the rest of the SF writing corps would prevent her from mailing it to a publisher. She seems to have neither sense; SF as a whole will doubtless suffer as a result.

Reviewed by John McCarthy

More Women of Wonder, edited by Pamela Sargent (Penguin, £0.95 + VAT etc)

I'm having a certain difficulty in reviewing this book. There is, in title and concept of this anthology of stories by women, an implicit suggestion that stories by women are different from stories by anyone else. I can see some justification in tempering slightly my critical activity when I review children's stories, or those by people who don't have full mental faculties. But I know women who are

bigger than me, or stronger/smarter/wiser. I also think that the best writer of science fiction today is Ursula K. LeGuin. So I am not disposed to treating women writers differently from men, and I'm not sure that the philosophy behind the anthology is one with which I would agree.

The anthology consists of seven short stories (six of them about 30 pages each) stretching from 1935 to 1974. These seem to me to show a remarkably small development in female awareness over the forty years, and an equally remarkable ability of women writing in the thirties to create a "rattling good yarn". "Jirel meets Magic" (the earliest story in the book) is great fun, as indeed is Leigh Brackett's "The Lake of Gone Forever". In fact one might summarize by saying that the stories are all well up to the standard of anthologies.

For me two stories stood out above the others. Kate Wilhelm's "The Funeral" is an especially sensitive and well written story. "The Day before the Revolution" by Ursula K. LeGuin must be one of the finest studies of old age, not just in science fiction, but in literature generally. If for this story alone (also printed in Galaxy and in The Wind's Twelve Quarters) the book is worth getting, if another reason be required, then the introduction by the editor (Famela Sargent) provides considerable food for thought. If you're not looking for didactic feminism, then the other stories each provide a reason for buying this book.

It is unfortunate (but perhaps not unintentional??) that the only contribution by a man (the cover illustration, by Adrian Chesterman) is so bad. I kept wondering did he talk to the man who did Pulsar.

Merely as a by the by, it's not as good as the first book, but it's still well worth a read.

Reviewed by Eoin C. Baird

Kingdoms of Elfin by Sylvia Townsend Warner

Xanthe and the Robots by Sheila McLeod (Penguin)

Echo Round his Bones by Thomas M. Disch (Fanthor Granada)

God of the Labyrinth by Colin Wilson

The Status Civilization by Robert Sheckley (Penguin)

Tiger! Tiger! by Alfred Bester (Penguin)

The Romans had, in fact, a word for it: "gravitas", which translates more or less as "the sense of something important being done." The first of these books, Kingdoms of Elfin by Sylvia Townsend Warner is notably, spectacularly and altogether pleasantly lacking in this quality. It is a collection of delightful, slight, whimsical pieces, as frothy and toothsome as the spun sugar cathedrals of a master pastry chef.

Like all sweet confections these cloy quickly and satiate easily. This book should be sampled lightly and often rather than being read at a sitting. Taken too much at a time it leaves a sticky taste in the mouth and a vague unease in the stomach. Whimsy, even in Ms. Warner's expert hands, can be easily overdone and shows to disadvantage in quantity, but in small doses this book is an admirable prophylactic for the humorless depression which descends all too easily in these anomiegenic times.

And yet, though this book lacks the sense of something important being done, I'm not at all sure that it is not a most serious book. Serious - not solemn. The courts of Elfin are no less important for being delightful, and the sugar spun style and content, I suspect, coat a pull of considerable strength. So cleverly does Ms. Warner handle it, however, that I am not really sure whether or not it was good for me, but I am perfectly sure that it was delightful.

The next book, Xanthe and the Robots by Sheila McLeod, is an entirely different cup of - not tea - but herbal medicine. From her first words: "Ah reader, we were happy." to the bitter (sweet) end: "There to be born again." we are emphatically told that something Very Important is happening. It is perhaps unfortunate that precisely what is never made clear. We have that omnipresent malaise of our time, the identity crisis, we have "lean, sinewy prose" (Hemingway has a terrible lot to answer for), we have the dehumanising effect of technology. What we don't have is

any sense of enjoyment, vitality or life. If the disease of the modern world is sterility and mechanization Ms. McLeod portrays it well but offers us no hope of salvation or even ameliorization. I know it's good for us, but does medicine always have to taste so nasty?

After reading the book I read the blurb on the back. This "(blends) the best of science fiction and the mainstream novel of character." It doesn't. Furthermore, if it succeeded in this dubious marriage, the result would be neither fish, fowl, nor good red herring. I see further that Ms. McLeod has received a Scottish Arts Council grant. No worse could be said.

I didn't like the third novel either. Thomas M. Disch's Echo Round His Bones again drips portentousness. Again the first sentence warns us. "The finger on the trigger grew tense." Faced with an opening like that you are in for a Literary Experience and you had damn well better never forget it. Which is a pity because Mr. Disch has written a rather good adventure story, ranking somewhere between The Stainless Steel Rat Saves the World and The Ion War. But Mr. Disch knows that Harry Harrison is not Real Literature (sorry, let's try that again more imposingly) REAL LITERATURE, and is convinced that he himself is. How can we tell? Easy, every character in the book is a creep and a bore. There is no one with whose company you would be content for more than thirty seconds in real life.

All of the above is a pity because Mr. Disch is a good writer. He tells a good story, keeps the pace going, keeps you wanting (despite yourself) to turn the next page... only at the end of it all I, at least, felt as though I had been spending my time with a particularly foulmouthed drunk. I didn't mean that Mr. Disch uses four letter words. He doesn't. The general attitude of his writing is a four letter word. If Mr. Disch stopped trying to write literature and started telling stories, he might easily create something great. He surely hasn't this time.

Neither has Colin Wilson (The God of the Labyrinth). Now this is very hard to state seeing as how Mr. Wilson is an eminent intellectual and has been ever since The Outsider (I'm old enough to remember that). Now this is not just a dirty book. Intellectuals don't write dirty books, everybody knows that. In fact, just in case you should miss the point he has included an afterword defining pornography and pointing out that his book isn't. The common reader may be excused for needing the clarification because virgins get deflowered with boring regularity and incredible verbosity in a pastiche of seventeenth century prose. It's great good fun but can the secret of the universe really be found by unlimited fornication. Given the natural proclivities of mankind it strikes me as a very poor way to keep a secret.

Make no mistake though, the book is delightful, provided you're well enough read to keep up with Mr. Wilson. If you can imagine a cross between Tales of a Guinear (? ed.) and Urn (? ed.) Burial, you'll enjoy this. Even if you can't you'll probably like it anyway. Provided only that you don't want anything to happen. Outside of Maidenhead being dealt with in a rather flowery (or deflowering) way nothing at all does until about page 230, but it's very entertaining getting there.

(Note for Irish History buffs: If you want to know where to stay etc. in eighteenth century Dublin, this is your bag!)

To turn from Colin Wilson to Robert Sheckley is a positive relief. At least, Mr. Sheckley has no particular message to send. Despite the publisher's blurb telling us what a wonderful satire it is, Mr. Sheckley's book, The Status Civilization, is a hell of a good story. Like all good stories it has indeed a moral, but like all good writers Mr. Sheckley sees no need to rub the reader's nose in it. In fact, if you want to, you can regard this as nothing but a good adventure story set against a well thought out background. If you want to dig deeper you can.

I mean, nice hero, beautiful girl, unlikely obstacles reasonably overcome, what more could you want. It's a thoroughly good read, with, if you want to work at it, disturbing philosophical overtones.

I feel that I've written less about this book than it really deserved. I enjoyed it. I think practically everybody else will too.

Now, when we come to Alfred Bester's Tiger! Tiger! we are again plunging into deep water. As the title tells us this lays claim to be more than a shoot-em-up. For the benefit of those few of you who don't recognize it, the title is a quotation from William Blake who is a very big literary gun indeed. But you don't need to know this to enjoy the book. Mr. Bester doesn't twist his reader's arm. Profundity is there, but a good story keeps our attention. It's only afterwards that we realize that the age old drama of sin and redemption (?) has yet again been re-enacted.

At the time we only ask: "What next?", "How does he get out of this?" This book has a deep deep symbology, from "jaunting" itself to Gully's removed (!) tiger mask, but all of the symbols are so cleverly worked into the story that never do we feel - not that word "gravitas" with which I began this review, but never do we feel heaviness, slowness, ponderousness. When you finish it, however, you will undoubtedly have the "sense that something important has been done." And, I think, you'll want to keep it on your shelves for the rest of your life.

Review by Walter Lee

Telempath by Spider Robinson (Orbit, 1978)

This is the first full-length novel by Spider Robinson, and is excellent up to a point. There are a few outrageous ideas upon which the story is based --- but once you have accepted them, you can sit back and enjoy it up to page 203.

The first major outrageous idea is that in the near future a demented scientist will develop an air-vectorized virus which will increase the sensitivity of the human nose by a hundred times (shades of Alan E. Nourse's story in his Tiger by the Tail collection). This scientist has, roughly fifteen to twenty years before the major action in the story, released his virus to carry out this end. Millions or maybe billions of people prove unable to tolerate their new sensitivity, and suicide in a variety of quick-acting ways like breaking their heads open on street paving. Human society is nearly wiped out.

The second outrageous idea is that the earth's atmosphere is, and has been, inhabited by intelligent invisible plasmoids, whose existence has only become obvious through their extremely slight odour. These beings eat pollution, by the way, and although they are telepathic, they are puzzled by the dual facts of a rapid decrease in pollution output due to the collapse of civilisation, and mankind's sudden violent reaction to their existence. A quasi-war breaks out among these "muskies" and the remnants of greater New York's population.

These details are quite properly revealed in the course of the action of the novel. Young Isham Stone, black son of a collaborator in the creation of the virus long before, goes into New York to find and kill the scientist. In the process of failing, he loses an arm and gets captured by the militia of his home, a new town called Fresh Start (pun on a US deodorant brand name??). These people wish to have him tried for murdering his father with a booby-trapped loo and a can of chlorine bleach. Events follow from there.

The writing is fresh, the ideas cleverly interwoven. Unfortunately, the book is resolved with what appears to have become a Spider Robinsonism: sticky-sweet happy endings, including a fake murder and telepathic communication with a miscegenistic fetus, as everyone cheers madly. I'm sure if you read the book, you won't quit on page 203 just because the novel suddenly putrifies. But think seriously of doing so, and enjoy the rest.

Reviewed by John McCarthy

Stardance by Spider and Jeanne Robinson (Orbit)

I should start by saying that I am a Spider Robinson fan. Honest I am. I thought that the review of Callaghan's Crosstime Saloon was a bit harsh (see Newsletter

No.23) (Telempath was reviewed above.) But I found few redeeming features in this new book, which is an expansion of the Hugo and Nebula winning short story.

One common recommendation to writers is that they should write about what they know. Obviously SF authors are either handicapped or aided by the fact that a lot of what they write about, no one has experienced, depending both upon their skill in inducing a willing suspension of disbelief in us, the readers, and upon the individual reader's background. The key point to Stardance is expressionist dancing --- what it is, how it works, what it is capable of communicating and how it does it. Unfortunately, I found the exposition on this aspect unconvincing in the extreme; another aspect of similar weakness was that of artistic videotaping. Both are vital to what little plot there is.

There are other weak points in the book. Personality conflicts are introduced but the resolution of these depends upon inadequately described motives or no motives at all. Why were they introduced, then, in the first place? Answer: to attempt to provide some depth to the major characters? For "Thud and Blunder"ism? Mil a fhios agam. Suffice it to say that they are not sufficiently developed so as to ensure a reasonable or readable flow. Far too many of the gimmicks used to develop characterisations are quite clearly ad hoc. These all serve to grate upon the reader. The book, such as it is, suffers.

But the weakest point of the book is the theme. To explain this, there must be a slight digression. What was it that made the Beatles as great as they were? Anyone with perspective must admit that many groups, or indeed individuals, have sold songs equally as popular as any given song of the Beatles. But how many groups continued to produce hits with such regularity and with so many different styles? Versatility is the key to long-term success in any mass media. Unfortunately, Spider Robinson uses the same theme in all three of his books that I have read: that the solution to all our problems rests upon a hithertofore undiscovered Deus ex Machina. In the case of Stardance, it is a symbiote that coats us with... well, read the book. The solution is foreshadowed, I'll admit, but with a clumsiness that makes me wince. (For an example of a much smoother brand, I would recommend Larry Niven's "Neutron Star", "At the Core" and "Flatlander" in his Neutron Star collection.)

What conclusions do I draw? I am very much afraid that if Spider doesn't work on his plotting, theme, and characterisations, he will prove to be a very short-term success. He can write. He has good ideas for clever scene-setting, and not a few good one-liners at his fingertips. I hope both for his own sake and for the sake of SF that he will realise what a full-feathered turkey he has churned out this time, and start over again. Two books in a row with a fake murder as a key event is just a bit too much.

Reviewed by John McCarthy

LIBRARY NEWS

The following books and magazines were donated by Rita Meehan, John McCarthy, Frank Roche, Mary Gallagher and Jacob Struben :

John Brunner, The Long Result

Algis Budrys, Michaelmas

Gordon Dickson, Time Storm

Peter Macey, Alien Culture

J.J.Pierce (ed.), Best of Cordwainer Smith

Frederik Pohl, A plague of pythons

Robert Silverberg, Earth's other shadow

Robert Silverberg, Invaders from Earth

A.E. van Vogt, War against the Rull

'Omni' (magazine), nos.1 and 2

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