

SF CRITIC

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Sleeping Planet, by William R. Burkett Jr. Paperback Library, 1967; 75¢.

This book was originally published in Analog. As such, it easily qualifies as the type of heavy-science, one-man-against-the-world type of novel that Analog periodically publishes.

The novel has all the classic components to it: a rugged individualist big city lawyer; an embittered AF truck driver with a fast tongue; a stick-in-the-mud bureaucrat who becomes a commanding general; and finally an eagle-eyed alien intelligence officer.

As such, it's certainly one of the better examples of this type of story. Aliens overpower the earth with a sleep-inducing dust; a dozen earthlings are unaffected, and begin to fight. Most are soon captured, but one battles on, enlisted the planet-wide resources of humanity's service robots, and the fast thinking of one of the captured earthlings.

It's carried off quite well for this type of story. Burkett has a solid grasp of his plot, and ties in all his characters neatly, with no words wasted. His scene shifts are, perhaps, a bit too abrupt, offering the reader a sometimes too sudden shift in viewpoint, but this deficiency is made up for by the solid flow of actions and events that hold the story together. A deft insertion of slap-stick, a bit of egomaniac general, the machinations of our ghostly heroes, and the sleuthing of our evil intelligence officer make this book highly successful. If you enjoyed Wasp by Eric Frank Russell, then you'll really go for this one.

Those Who Watch, by Robert Silverberg. Signet Books, 1967; 60¢.

The past several years have seen countless saucer sightings, UFO conventions, and books on the subject by reputable publishers. Utilizing this background, Robert Silverberg has written an interesting first contact story. The plot is based on some propositions that are perhaps a bit weak: that aliens in human form will inevitably become human in emotion as well, and yet be able to give up their human entanglements and return, quite willingly, to the alien worlds from which they came.

The story is basically that of a disabled observer-craft, whose crew para-jump to the Earth below, injuring themselves in the process. They fall into the hands of, respectively, a widowed mother, an embittered Air Force Colonel, and a deprived Indian boy on a backward reservation. How these emotionally-stunted people adapt to, and in turn adapt the aliens to themselves, is the basis of the novel.

Silverberg finds it necessary to throw in a 2nd alien power, perhaps to complicate the book, perhaps to speed the ending. His complications are, on the whole, basically without threat, although the blurb on the cover suggest different. The book could stand without the "interplanetary intrigue."

This is a competent book, with some faults. Silverberg's Air Force Colonel is perhaps too typically soured on life, and his abrupt about-face when presented with the evidence of alien life stretches the believability of his character. Other than this, the widowed mother and the Indian boy are portrayed with a mastery of the written word that Silverberg has used elsewhere.

The book seems to have been published, and the blurbs bear this up, as a book designed to catch the growing market for books on and about flying saucers. As such, it fares well. As science fiction, it shows more faults than Silverberg would have had in a book oriented purely at the science fiction market.

I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream, by Harlan Ellison. Introduction by Theodore Sturgeon. Pyramid Books, 1967; 60¢.

The basic trouble with this book is that the reader drowns in words before he even begins to read the stories. There is a biographical sketch on the first page, followed by 4 pages of introduction by Theodore Sturgeon, in turn followed by 6 pages of preface by Ellison himself. Then, the first story is prefaced by a page of introduction.

The trouble with all this is that frequently Ellison's introductions are more fascinating, more illuminating than the stories themselves. Ellison has the habit of telling funny Harlan Ellison stories which, often, make the stories he introduces seem drab by comparison. He also has a habit of telling all about his books many months before they are published. When they are published, they are frequently not as good as the stories about them.

Of the seven stories in this book, perhaps the most striking is the title story. A planet wide computer, embittered by the knowledge that it is sentient yet forever tied to this planet (a reason for which is not enclosed in the story), sends the 5 last humans alive about the planet, searching for food, as punishment for humanity's having built the computer as it is.

The story is without human meaning and hope. The realities in the story are the realities of a demented machine. Thus, the story is completely separated from human existence. In such a setting, the author can do whatever he wishes with the plot, characters, and actions. Ellison has such powers, and he uses them. In this the story is successful; more than this cannot, with any truth, be said.

There is not much to be said about "Big Sam Was My Friend." As the oldest story in this book, it is perhaps the most successful from the standpoint of entertainment.

Taking the book as a whole, it is not science fiction, but rather morality tales. Some of the stories read like it. Ellison has prefaced each of his stories by telling how each helped him over some burden, some hurdle in his personal life. They are not entertainment, but rather glimpses into the good and bad within Harlan Ellison. They would have been more successful without Ellison telling us what their purposes were; had he not prefaced each story with an indictment of all that is bad and painful both within himself and within the human race, then these stories would have had a chance of succeeding, of showing us something that we haven't seen, but as entertainment, not as a collection of sermons.

As morality tales, they are a failure as science fiction. I urge you to buy this book if only to see what Harlan Ellison is doing now. You can read the stories, and perhaps find them good entertainment. Or you can read the introductions, and perhaps catch a glimpse of the seedier side of Harlan Ellison.

RECEIVED AND NOTED:

Dolphin Boy, by Roy Meyers. Ballantine Books, 1967; 75¢.

The Fantastic Swordsmen, edited by L. Sprague de Camp. Pyramid Books, 1967; 50¢.

The Dolphins Of Altair, by Margaret St. Clair. Dell Books, 1967; 50¢.

The Winged Man, by A.E. Van Vogt & E. Mayne Hull. Berkely Books, 1967; 60¢.

Journey Into Darkness, by Frank Belknap Long. Belmont Books, 1967; 50¢.