

SCIENCE FICTION *News*

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WHY DO THEY DO IT?

Early in 1972, six new Australian paperbacks appeared in some of our overloaded outlets. Printed in Adelaide and credited to two unfamiliar Sydney publishers, none had an Australian author. Or a familiar one. Investigation showed that all were published originally by the British Digit Books in 1962/3.

De TIMMES [sic], Graeme

SPLIT. Universal Paperbacks. 5-160 p. 60c

De TIMMS, G.

THREE QUARTERS. Eclipse Books. 5-158 p. 70c

DAGMAR, Peter

ONCE IN TIME. Eclipse Books. 5-160 p. 65c

FOSTER, George C[ecil]

The CHANGE. Eclipse Books. 5-160 p. 65c

WADE, Tom

The WORLD OF THEEDA. Eclipse Books. 5-155 p. 70c

HAILE, Terence

SPACE TRAIN. Eclipse Books. 5-159 p. 65c

A less distinguished company is not to be wished for. None is worth reviewing, to put it bluntly. None of these names ever created any impression, unless this was the George C. Foster who wrote The Lost Garden in 1930 (in which case, what did he do in the mean time?)

Presumably the original editions sold small

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numbers in Australia: how small could have been ascertained. Nine years' dating and half of those sales would be too much to expect.

Considering how poor a prospect publishing SF in Australia is at best, it is hard to imagine the reasoning behind choosing such feeble material.

A N I M A G I N A R Y I N T E R V I E W

Good morning, Mr. Stone. My name is X. I am a book publisher, I'm thinking about producing some science fiction books, and I'd like to get some advice.

GS. Advice? Sure. Save your money. If you've got too much give some to charity and get some satisfaction out of losing it.

X. No, look, I'm serious.

GS. So am I. If you go into SF publishing you will almost certainly lose on it. Everyone else has, or if they didn't actually finish in the red they certainly didn't make enough to be worth while. Nothing's impossible, but this is something that's very hard.

X. I know that. Let me explain why I think I can succeed where others made a hash of it. For a start I'm in business, I've had a lot of practical experience and now run my own operation. I'm successfully producing different kinds of books, and science fiction looks like a possibility. I admit that I don't know much about it, so I'm trying to find out the score.

I've found out from your Index what's been done before, I've looked at some of it and where

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most of those guys went wrong is pretty obvious. But there's a lot I don't know, so I'm asking you.

GS. Well, I apologise for taking you for a half-wit looking for a fast buck. Trying to find out something about SF makes you practically unique. Well, what would you say were the outstanding mistakes in the previous Australian attempts?

X. They weren't all the same kind of operator, but they all had a lot in common as far as the end product went. They may not have been half-wits, but they were half-hearted. They didn't want to work at it, or risk enough money to give them a chance of success. Some of them were on a shoestring and cutting costs like crazy. Some were quite big organisations, but the SF was not a priority project: the management would scarcely realise that they were trying to break into a special field with unusual requirements, and the actual work fell to some overworked slob with no plan, no discretion, a tiny budget. Usually the format was terrible, cheap and nasty, badly printed and with cruddy artwork. Well, you don't get away with that. I've heard complaints about bad distribution, but I'd guess you could blame that on the kind of material it was and the standing of the people behind it, if it was true.

GS. Shoestring operators in particular don't do their own printing, and they're at the mercy of the printer, who has no incentive to do his best on that kind of job.

X. Well, there are printers and printers, but it's a point. But even with a reputable printer, paying for someone else's wages, stocks, overhead and profit as well is not a proposition

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-- especially because you can't get good book design properly carried out that way.

GS. And what about the choice of material?

X. I don't know much about this stuff, but I know garbage when I see it, and a lot of what I've seen is garbage. Especially the stories written by Australians -- oh, you get a few cases of guys with some talent, obvious beginners most of them, but they're mostly nowhere.

GS. Um. Have you by any chance heard of Sturgeon's Law?

X. That 90% of everything's garbage? Yes, I have come across this. It's quoted by some of the critics I've looked at, in Knight's book *In Search of Wonder* for one. I can't agree. A professional critic, or an intellectual snob, might think it's so, but don't you believe it. Any kind of entertainment has its own standards, and when you look at a story you're looking at an example drawn from a definite body of work meant for a definite public. You can't judge a story in relation to all fiction written -- sure, if you did that most stories are a long way from the very best. But I repeat, as examples of the sort of writing you can expect in popular mass circulation fiction, most of the stories in the Australian magazines and books so far are pretty poor stuff and a lot of them are the bottom. Weak plotting and writing that doesn't keep you reading. And as for science -- anyone with a high school education can see it's mostly trivial and unoriginal, even if it's not all wrong.

GS. Harsh words, but true. You were speaking of the locally written stories, where the edit-

ors didn't have much choice. What did you think of the of the imported material?

X. Better, but it's not consistent. It came from various sources and wasn't chosen with any care. Sometimes they took a whole issue of an American magazine, or what they cared to use of it; other times they took stories that had already been collected in books, which was better; other times they must have been offered a lot of stuff by an agent. What they ought to have done was hand-pick the best available, and they obviously didn't bother.

GS. One of these alleged editors admitted to me at the time that he didn't read any of the stories, he just picked them according to wordage to fill an issue.

X. Well, I'm not surprised. Quite apart from how good the stories were, if you're running a magazine -- which I wouldn't attempt under these conditions, it's got too much against it -- you absolutely have to have a consistent standard. But the same goes for novels as for shorts, as I was saying -- they weren't picked intelligently. Sometimes the material might be quite good, but it could be unsuitable because the potential readers had been eliminated by a British edition on the market not long before -- like those John Wyndham books.

GS. Well, those were books of continuing interest. Taking the long view, books like that go on selling for years and years.

X. Of course they do, but that's not how the ordinary paperback publisher works. Only really big operators can count on reprinting

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a book every few years and reaching a new age group. Anyhow, the same thing happened with mediocre books that would never justify a second edition.

GS. In short, then, what you have in mind is some decently produced, attractive looking books that won't look silly beside the best imported products, and the most promising material you can get rights to. That's the real catch, of course, to get hold of good enough material that your public hasn't read.

X. It is. That's why I think I need advice. Out of the thousands of SF books written in, say, the last fifteen years -- before that they'd start getting dated for the most part, right?

GS. Right, leaving aside enduring books that are in print anyway.

X. Out of these, there is a sizable percentage that have never been on sale in Australia. And out of these there is a sizable percentage that haven't had a second edition, so that there would be a potential readership abroad as well. Maybe we'd better make it books between 1955 -- no, 1958, the first satellites -- and 1966 or 7, over five years old. We'll still have a list of one or two hundred at least. All right. Then out of these I want to pick those which are quite good books and should sell. Does all this make sense?

GS. I think it does. You know, you just might make it.

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Review Section

ANNIHILATION FACTOR, by Barrington J. Bayley b/w
HIGHWOOD, by Neal Barrett Jr.

Ace Double (33710)
5-134, 5-122 p. PB 95c.

The new wave, or whatever, is hardly in evidence in either of these.

Particularly the first one. It couldn't be said that it is a serious novel, being an adventure story detailing a war between a stellar empire and part of itself with claims on the Emperor's throne, with a Galactic Menace thrown in (which is represented by a parsec-spanning life-force eater, no less) for good measure.

Appears childish to put it like that, but in reading it doesn't come across that way. In fact, there's some reasonably strong character development, especially the main character, who has a good deal of integrity on his own terms, but being a minor noble and not so minor officer it does not look that way to his adversaries. There are several of these, and his allegiance remains confused throughout. Should he side with the usurper who currently holds the throne, the pretender who wants it back, the anarchists who seek a better life for the masses (amongst whom is his lady love) or should he keep playing both ends against the middle and ensure he's at least around at the finish to make such decisions?

Fortunately, at least from the point of view of resolving his loyalties, he is able to escape this life of increasingly cynical opportunism by declaring himself wholly against the Galactic Menace and against all the other groups as well, since each is willing to compromise.

In the end he saves these other groups from

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the monster -- and I'm not giving anything away -- though he loses personally, only to find the monster not so bad after all. Not really a moral, but close to one, and a lot of fun for the reader regardless. Not great, but very good.

HIGHWOOD, now, seems to have pretensions of being a serious novel. At least there is no more story in the nearly 122 pages than would fit into 20 at the most, and I suppose the rest must go under some other heading, like social commentary.

Storywise, we have two "Federation" agents sent to observe and report on the state of civilization of the alien people who inhabit the gigantic trees of the planet Sequoia. The first is a male, the resident agent; the other, a female, comes on a mission necessitated by the vagueness and apparent incompleteness of the first's reports.

A mystery emerges: the alien males and females live apart, on separate branches, and apart from mating for procreation purposes are homosexuals. Not much happens until a neighbouring tree dies and the colony the agents reside with goes on a trek to slaughter those of their own kind who depend on that tree. To solve the further mystery of this the two agents proceed to the root of the matter (you might say) by descending to ground level, something the aliens never do. Once there they eventually get the answers from what they find.

If the reader has managed to retain interest to this stage -- which is difficult -- he will be rewarded, though probably not enough, in that the story picks up here in readability. Still, the explanation of the situation seemed unlikely to me, as did the whole plot. All in all, not much good.

-- John C. Young

The HOUSES OF ISZM b/w SON OF THE TREE
by Jack Vance

Ace Double
112, 111 p. PB

This is the first reasonably good Ace Double I've read for some time. An interesting point about it is that if, as the copyright dates indicate, Son of the Tree was written three years previous to Houses of Iszm (this still takes the two of them back twenty years, as near as dammit), Vance's style improved tremendously in the time between the two.

Son of the Tree is (once again) better than some of the stuff currently masquerading as SF (or should I say coily, speculative fiction?). Briefly the political system on the planet Kyril is a religious setup, with Druids of various ranks the rulers. The Druids wish to become the effective rulers of two neighbouring planets, Mangtse and Ballenkarch, as well. To bring this happy state of affairs about, they plan to introduce, initially to Ballenkarch, a slip of their own object of worship, The Tree, a truly monstrous vegetable growth, and then win the day -- or the planet -- by mass conversion of the populace.

Not terribly convincing? That's not the half of it! The means by which the original Tree keeps its subjects subdued is revealed, presumably as a surprise, on Ballenkarch. You may therefore be surprised when you read it.

Vance intruduces an Earthman, Joe Smith, as the chief protagonist. Perhaps the name is intended to indicate an anti-hero. If this was the intent, the portrayal of the poor idiot's aims, ideals and misadventures certainly extend the notion of an anti-hero.

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Joe has left Earth, which has become a myth the actual existence of which is disbelieved in this sector of the Galaxy (not a very convincing notion, that) on, of all things, a romantic quest. His Lady Fair fell out of love with him and into love with Another, who promptly took off for Outer Space. Joe wishes to encounter and force to return to Earth the usurper of his love's affections. (He can't ever have listened to Carmen Jones, whose heroine states unequivocally and truthfully "If you wanna start a fire where a fire was before, the coals you burn must be new coals.") His unshakable opinion is that on being confronted with her two suitors (supposedly the Other wouldbe rather an unwilling suitor, having been dragged back to Earth across the lightyears!) she will immediately see the folly of her previous choice and decide then and there to marry Joe.

This begins as the main romantic theme. But lo and behold! What fairy form is this that comes to seduce the Earthman? Why, 'tis none other than the bloodthirsty Druidess (in one of her first encounters she negligently orders that Smith be killed) Elfane. No sooner does she make sheep's (dryad's?) eyes at him than the poor halfwit falls in love with her.

Where the Usurper and the Lady Fair turn up, and how the plans of the wicked Druids are foiled (they have to be, of course) is just too trite to let you find out other than by reading it yourself. After, if you are going to buy the book to read Houses of Iszm, you may as well read its companion.

In The HOUSES OF ISZM Vance again deals with trees. These trees are much more interesting than the Druids'. Iszic trees are highly specialised and produce houses from their seeds; various strains

of tree produce varying types of house. The hero, again an Earthman, Aile Farr, is, sensibly enough, a botanist who wishes to study the cultivation of the trees. Whether he wishes to steal a seed is not made clear. Suffice it that the Iszics have a monopoly on production of the trees, and have no wish to have that monopoly broken by the export of female trees in any form from seed to full grown tree. Farr is somewhat of a crusader, since the thought of the homeless billions on Earth and throughout the Galaxy who might be housed should the Iszics release what are to them substandard homes at a reduced rate, incites him to consider some plots to smuggle out female seeds. Vance obviously has had some brushes with Terran customs officials, since he sketches them admirably in the description of Farr's encounters with Iszic Customs officers. (There is also a sketch, though not so well done, in *Son of the Tree*.)

Farr becomes embroiled, inadvertantly, in a scheme to smuggle a female tree to Earth. Just how it is done is clear to the reader from the beginning, but it does not detract from the interest of the ploys the smugglers use in order to capture the smuggled seed.

The ending is rather weak, and could certainly have been improved with no trouble, but the entire novel makes up for it. (After all, it is only one person's opinion that the ending is weak: you might like it that way.)

Vance knew better than to introduce a romantic interest into this plot, which is certainly stronger than that of *Son of the Tree*. *Son of the Tree* could have been improved tremendously by revision and omission of the said romantic element.

The verdict on the Double as an entity -- well worth buying and reading

- Denise Palmer

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PLEASE BEAR WITH US!

A small organisation relying entirely on volunteers to carry on its work cannot always keep up a regular publishing schedule. This issue is long overdue, for reasons beyond control.

We intend to continue dating issues in what should have been correct sequence, and hope to catch up by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, we thank you all for your support.