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In this issue:

Fillyloo, or Looking Backward - part 9

by Graham Stone

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CIVILISATION

I had been translated to Sydney. I came to Sydney at a highly impressionable age and stage, and found civilisation, which I had heard of before but not experienced.

There was a war on, but its immediate impact on me personally was slight. Popular literature was not at first touched. Sydney at the end of 1939 was positively inundated, smothered with science fiction, compared to the beautiful city of Adelaide where there had been just the odd magazine here and there. Newsagents carried the current SF magazines, all ten of them if my count is correct. Astounding, Amazing, Thrilling Wonder, Fantastic Adventures, Startling Stories, Marvel, Science Fiction, Future Fiction, Planet Stories, Tales of Wonder from England: ten. Unknown, but I didn't count it. Oh, and Famous Fantastic Mysteries which I'll get to had started. And often they had a table stacked high with back numbers for sale at a few pence or exchange at even fewer; and so did all the small rental libraries that supplemented the few public libraries of the time.

There was enough to be had to keep the most voracious reader of science fiction busy. It was possible to find most of the magazines back to 1934 (it got hard before that) with a little rummaging, and in the following two years I read I estimate more than 250 issues. There were other kinds of pulps in abundance, and I read some of them, but SF was what I wanted mostly and didn't leave much time for air, detective and whatever, though I did read a lot of Argosys and Blue Books.

What was to be found in 1940? Lots of the last three years; before that mainly back numbers of Amazing. Wonder in much lesser numbers, Astounding not often seen. I think this came from how well they had been marketed originally. The magazines up to 1933 were much less easy to find: A few of Harry Bates' 1930-33 issues: simple age made them uncommon, but still they were more often found than the mid-thirties issues

The Fillyloo bird ... flew backwards because he didn't care where he was going but he liked to see where he'd been. -- Robert Heinlein

under Tremaine's editorship. But searching revealed some Amazing and Wonder in the different larger quarto format (near A4: pulp size was about B5) which alone sorted them into different piles of old issues. Magazines of the 1920s were very scarce.

But the picture changed in the next few years. Firstly new magazines almost completely disappeared when American imports stopped, though a few straggled in. The stocks of back numbers naturally started declining. Yet more older issues turned up. I think a lot of accumulations found their way into shops as their owners were drafted.

I have been writing about what I read, the magazines in particular, more or less in order, but this is no more possible. I could reconstruct my reading of current issues in sequence, but with back issues? When I get to discussing the backlog, I toyed with the idea of surveying first 1934 to 1938, because that was what was most found for a while; then 1930 to 1933, less easily available, then the twenties. But no, I may as well start with 1926 and follow the history. So that's what I'll do. But I'm not quite there yet.

In 1940 New magazines were still erupting.

The publisher of Marvel Tales also offered Uncanny Tales with five issues irregularly from Apr/May 1939 to March 1940, with numbers that made no sense. The content has been described as sex and sadism: I have never seen it. But another product was one issue of Uncanny *Stories*, vol 1 no 1, April 1940. I saw it but didn't buy it, that's how bad it looked. It seemed to be lowgrade SF, featuring Coming of the Giant Germs by Ray Cummings with Keller, Kummer and R.de Witt Miller filling in.

Much more interesting and significant were two related pairs: Astonishing Stories and Super Science Stories (not good English but never mind) ed Frederik Pohl, starting Feb and March; and Stirring Science Stories and Cosmic Stories ed Don Wollheim, starting Feb and May. Produced very much on the cheap and edited by two active supporters of science fiction with access to many kindred spirits, who had initiated these ventures by approaching publishers to give them a chance to put

their ideas into practice. Here were early works of an important group of writers with works not finding place in the regular magazines: Cyril Kornbluth, Damon Knight, Robert Lowndes, Walter Kubilius, Isaac Asimov, James Blish, Richard Wilson, Dirk Wylie, John Michel, David Kyle. Others included Rocklynne, Bradbury, Bester, de Camp, Jameson, Heinlein, Simak, P.Schuyler Miller. Neil R.Jones' encounters of the Zoromes from *Amazing* continued. Even E.E.Smith with the unsuccessful *Vortex Blaster* series begun in *Comet*.

These looked forward, new voices were conspicuous. There was another trend, one that looked backward to the origins of SF.

Famous *Fantastic Mysteries*, foolishly titled, was an unusual magazine of great importance to the SF field, drawing on the Munsey magazines, *Argosy*, *All-Story* etc of twenty years or more earlier and bringing to light a lot of fine stories by such as England, Farley, Hall & Flint, Stilson, above all Merritt. Some of them were known by repute. It was a welcome surprise to see the first issue with its cover simply listing the contents. **The Moon Pool** by Merritt was an often mentioned classic, **The Girl in the Golden Atom** by Cummings was another I had heard of. There was a steady demand from a faction of readers for reprints of outstanding old stuff, and here was a magazine doing just that. (At the same time there was a similar reprint western story magazine, probably a one-shot: *Wildfire* by Zane Gray was lead title in the issue I saw).

So, I read **The Moon Pool** and **The Conquest of the Moon Pool**, in proper order as the issues of FFM came. Merritt was a revelation to a naive fourteen-year-old immersed in science fiction and exploring the stacks and stacks of cheap back numbers in the Sydney shops. Merritt stood out as a name to look for, one of the very best. It now seems really a bit strange that that year I was about equally impressed by *Grey Lensman*, *After World's End*, *The Black Flame* and the complete *Moon Pool*. I cannot have had much discrimination.

In the following two or three years I assimilated Merritt's **The Face in the Abyss/The Snake Mother**, **The Metal Monster**, **Dwellers in the Mirage**. I thought they were all great, above all the last. As for the

complete Moon Pool and Conquest, there is the mystery in the first story of the deadly supernatural being, then the revelation of the underground realm with its history, a time of advanced scientific powers and the origin of the Dweller, a synthetic energy life form.

The magazine, soon joined for a while by a twin *Fantastic Novels*, was notable for its excellent artwork. Paul was long established; Finlay had worked regularly for *Weird Tales* for a while, but not much in SF; soon Hannes Bok arrived, then Lawrence. Altogether, the appearance was a lot better than the average and I think helped to raise the standard by encouraging the other magazines to follow.

The stories overall seemed pretty good to me. Yes, they were of a generation earlier and often showed their age, but they compared well with the general run of the thirties. They were of course chosen with care from the better candidates.

We can only guess what attitude the editors of pulps like *Argosy* might have had, in 1900 to 1920, to many of their stories that we now call science fiction, the term not thought of then. What would they have called it if challenged? These stories were barely science fiction by modern standards: better called fantasy though I avoid that word as far too broad to be useful, and it wasn't used as much then as two or three decades later. They might have mumbled "scientific romance" perhaps. "Different stories" was another attempt sometimes used. Whatever, there was a nebulous class of stories that seemed to have a strong appeal to a lot of readers. Reader response and sales figures, what else does an editor have to go on? Whatever it was, they must have known they had something there.

Science fiction did not yet exist. What about Shelley, Verne, Lytton, Wells, Doyle, Griffith, Boothby and many more as well as pulp authors? There was a large number of isolated works which we can see were heading in the direction of science fiction. But there was no recognised body of work, no name for it. Nobody was aware that something was coming into existence. Verne and Wells attracted a lot of attention, but no one looked about and generalised to what they had in common with the many

others writing something similar. Science fiction did not exist, so it was necessary to invent it.

The inventor was Hugo Gernsback. The only world figure born in Luxembourg, aged twenty he moved to the USA in 1904, and established a business dealing in electrical and radio equipment and information, hence publishing books and magazines. To liven up his Radio News and Electrical Experimenter (later Science and Invention) he introduced fiction by himself and others, beginning with a serial **Ralph 124C41+**, twelve episodes beginning April 1911, about marvelous devices of the future. As fiction, the story providing excuses for them is so bad it's almost good. But we might say the 2011 is the centenary of the as yet nameless idea.

The fiction was popular, featured in every issue by 1914; a special issue, August 1923 had seven stories of "Scientific Fiction", introducing his original name for it (he also tried the contraction Scientifiction). Finally, he started the first magazine explicitly specialising in it, with the unfortunate title *Amazing Stories*, beginning April 1926. What this did was show that there was a tradition or a category that hadn't been recognised before, and gave it a name. At first it was all reprinted, from many sources. Gernsback knew what he was about, and knew what was available. But once there was a recognised place to print stories of this kind authors began writing for it.

There was really precious little science content in Gernsback's *Amazing*, or in any SF magazines before the late thirties. But there was a claim to have science content, so there was some effort to give a scientific explanation. Stories about going to Mars in early *Amazing* and *Wonder* were stiffened with explanation of how it could be done, and the vehicle and equipment needed was laboriously described, essential to the rationale and setting of the story. Soon there was some consensus on how it might be, and conventions accepted that cut down the verbiage, and writers developed the technique of introducing the theory along with the plot and action.

Broadly, science fiction is about what isn't possible at present but might be in the future, and what might happen as a result. This could be written

Fillyloo, or Looking Backward

in the most general terms as romantic adventure, and then with ever closer reasoning and attention to nuts and bolts as the possibilities and problems came to be more and more familiar and better understood. But Famous Fantastic Mysteries demonstrated that there was still interest in less sophisticated early works.

How had this happened? In the thirties, magazines normally did not reprint anything. Authors got a one-off payment for what was expected to be only one printing. Sometimes they might also sell the story for book publication, or in another country, but there wasn't much else possible. However, there were instances of reprinting. There was a group with "Spicy" in their titles, for instance: Spicy Mystery, Spicy Adventure &c. This word may seem strange but I see that repository of all knowledge the Macquarie Dictionary allows a meaning, "of a somewhat improper, scandalous or sensational nature." These magazines often ran a story again with a new title and byline, not paying the author anything, which was surely improper, indeed scandalous.

Weird Tales made a point of reprinting one old story each issue, the idea being that newer readers wouldn't have seen it. Whether they paid the author anything I don't know, but I doubt it. Generally it was assumed that the magazine owned the story and could reprint it if required. Then came Startling Stories with its Hall of Fame feature reprinting from Wonder Stories.

Some thinking had been going on at Argosy. Readers were asked what novel they would like reprinted, Merritt's **The Ship of Ishtar** from 1924 was most named, it was run again successfully in Oct-Nov 1938. Then his **Seven Footprints to Satan** from 1927 was repeated in June-July 1939. So, decision. An all-reprint magazine, later to become two such.

Reprinting of stories from the Munsey group stopped for several years after the magazine changed hands in 1943. The Popular Publications firm, objecting to pulp reprints, bought it intending simply to close it down. But there was an issue to finish a serial, and then so they continued drawing on non-pulp sources, mainly books. But they continued pre-

senting a lot of outstanding and varied material and later the policy was relaxed. To exploit the continued interest in Merritt the similar A.Merritt's Fantasy Magazine was started in December 1949 to run for five issues. The anonymous editorial presence of Mary Gnaedinger was restrained throughout, and the correspondence pages were lively. Altogether, a worthy and highly collectable group.

But they were one element in a broad change that was going on in what was understood to be meant by science fiction. In 1939 Campbell in his editorial announcing Unknown clearly saw a category of fantasy fiction distinct from science fiction, not a variety of it. But nevertheless of likely interest to Astounding's readers. He referred to two fantastic stories he had published to test reaction: **Wings of the Storm** by Manly Wade Wellman, in which a great tenuous living thing started hurricanes; **The Dangerous Dimension** by L.Ron Hubbard, about teleportation, the magical ability of matter transmission by mental effort.

He was not talking about a spectrum of plausibility from utter nonsense to reasonable conjecture; or of scientific theory from wild guesses to textbook extracts; or from vampirism and lycanthropy to modern medicine and psychology. But there was a semantic shift under way, and Famous Fantastic Mysteries I think helped it along. The magazine's strange title shows that those setting it up still had no clear idea of what kind of fiction it used. The naive reader mainly looking for science fiction as I was, attracted by Merritt and Cummings, found as well a great variety of the not quite or the clearly something else.

If Burroughs was absent there were writers transparently following his lead: Ralph Milne Farley's **Radio Man** series set on Venus with near-identical humans and intelligent giant insects. J.U.Giesy's **Palos of the Dog-Star Pack** with a quite Burroughslike pseudo-medieval culture on a planet of Sirius reached by astral projection. Charles B.Stilson's **Polaris of the Snows**, with an ancient Greek relict culture back on Earth in Antarctica, with misplaced polar bears and walruses and yes, a thermal region; sequels introduced Atlanteans and a Tarzanesque character.

There was Richard Tooker's **The Day of the Brown Horde**, about

BRITISH AMBASSADOR TO VIENNA
VANISHES IN PLAIN SIGHT

Nov. 25, 1809

ZEPPELIN HINDENBURG WRECKED
BY WEIRD COLORED LIGHTS
July, 1937

5,436-TON VESSEL, WITH
CREW OF 38, VANISHES
IN CALM SEA
May 16, 1938

CAN NEGRO EYE SEE
BEYOND VISION
OF WHITES?
Herald-Tribune

HERD OF CATTLE MADDENED
BY MYSTERIOUS FEAR
Herald-Tribune

DOGS FRIGHTENED BY
MYSTERIOUS NOTHING
Herald-Tribune

COLORED LIGHTS
SEEN OVER ISLE
OF MAN
Feb. 1938

MYSTERIOUS COLLIERY EXPLOSION
CAUSED BY STRANGE LIGHT
July 14, 1938

KING GEORGE V REPORTS SEEING
STRANGE COLORED LIGHTS

June 11, 1881

Newspapers, today and yesterday, report the disappearance or wrecking of trains, boats, airplanes and the vanishing of people, all associated with the phenomena of strangely colored lights—seen by some but not by all!

Are these facts associated with the action of people who at the last moment decide, through some strange intuition, not to board a train or ship that is later wrecked?

Founded on facts, Eric Frank Russell has written "Sinister Barrier" the most astonishing story since H. G. Wells' "War of the Worlds"!

Start this story today. It will fire your imagination. You will live with the characters through the most unusual experience of your life. It is destined to take its place with "War of the Worlds" by H. G. Wells, "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" by Jules Verne, "The Lost World" by Conan Doyle and "Outward Bound" by Suttan Vane.

SINISTER BARRIER

By ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

a complete novel in

The Big 160-page March Issue Of

UNKNOWN

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John Taine's **Before the Dawn**, with a time scanner following the life and death of a group of dinosaurs; and his **The Greatest Adventure** with thermal Antarctica again and barely rationalised monsters.

There was Wayland Smith's **The Machine Stops**, originating the theme of collapse of an over-automated world. George Allen England's **The Elixir of Hate**, rejuvenation getting beyond control. There was an adventive new planet and confused strife with its people in Ray Cummings' **A Brand New World**, with much of the ambience of early thirties science fiction, but overall there was perhaps more of mystical character. There was a great breadth of style, of theme, of inspiration.

By the 1940s-50s, the time of the postwar discovery of science fiction by journalists and publishers, fantasy had become a catch-all term. It would be applied to Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, H.G.Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs, William Hope Hodgson, M.P.Shiel, Olaf Stapledon, S.Fowler Wright, H.P.Lovecraft, Stanton A.Coblentz, E.E.Smith, George O.Smith, Ray Bradbury. It had also become common to speak of "science fiction and fantasy" implying that though these were distinct they were associated. I think fiction of the flatly impossible had become something like comic relief.

I seem to remember that August Derleth proposed a classification dividing popular fiction into Realistic, Romantic and Fantastic stories, though I don't think this was claimed to be a breakthrough in critical thinking.

It occurred to me at that time that it would be possible to develop a different interpretation of the whole field, by which all fiction is fantasy: indeed, the words are interchangeable. A special class defined by restricted subject matter is science fiction, in which imaginary events not as yet observed or expected or considered possible are allowed, if given an imaginary scientific foundation. A more limited special class is what we might call mundane fiction, in which the imaginary events have to be consistent with common knowledge and observation. Just as well that I didn't write up this idea, it might have taken on and given us nonsense like that inspired by the word "speculative" in the sixties.

It didn't take me long to find McKay Bros. newsagency in downtown Sydney, with new and little known magazines. An oddity there, *Marvel Tales* no. 4, Mch 1935. Cheaply produced, digest size, 104p with a black and mauve drawing on the cover. A private press item. But it had *The Creator* by Simak and part of a serial, *The Titan* by P.Schuyler Miller, both I thought excellent; also Lovecraft, John B.Harris and others. Produced by William Crawford with Lloyd Arthur Eshbach helping (two important names later), the first attempt to run a good quality little magazine of good science fiction alternative to the regular magazines. The idea was good but what they could afford wasn't good enough. Somehow a quantity of this one issue had been picked up by some wholesaler, and a batch had found its way to Australia and McKays to be put on sale at ninepence and linger on there well into the forties.

At this time I read a few books, notably three very important Wells works missed before. **The Island of Dr Moreau**, with a truly mad scientist transforming animals into travesties of men, and the questioning of what it means to be human. **The First Men in the Moon**, a moon voyage using antigravity; a logical inhabited moon, and its intelligent insect people's view of our civilisation. And **The Time Machine**, Wells' first substantial work (in later life he must have been displeased that many readers thought it his best). There is the classic explanation of the concept of time travel that established the rationale for its use ever since. And there is the haunting vision of civilisation's decline and fall.

There was Samuel Butler's satire **Erewhon**, with its penetrating dissection of some of the follies and pretensions underlying society. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, where the naive 19th Century sleeper revived in the year 2000 has the totally unbelievable socialism in force then explained at great length and in such unconvincing detail as to inspire uncounted books refuting it. There was Aldous Huxley's **Brave New World**, a vivid picture of a future utopia, lively but lopsided and full of holes. An apparent anarchy that is actually rigidly controlled routine without law and order and dissenting thought even existing.

And there was Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein**. Synthetic life, synthetic intelligence, and its consequences.

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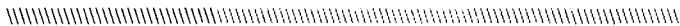
The Germ Grows
by Robert Potter.

A significant early science fiction novel, first published 1892. There is a secret colony in remote Australia with work in progress on biological warfare; other advanced technology, invisibility, flying machines; actually initiated by nonhumans from space. All this six years before *The War of the Worlds*, this appears to be the earliest suggestion of attack from beyond Earth. But, a novel by an unknown Australian clergyman, it made no impression at the time.

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