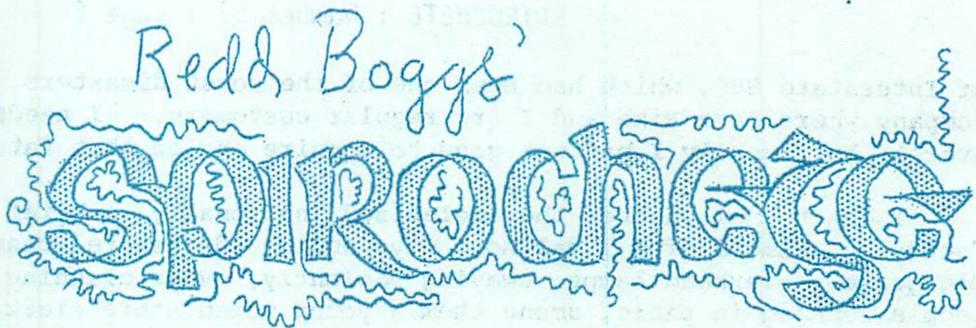


50

NOVEMBER  
1989



LIVE FROM SAN FRANCISCO!

"California, with all thy faults, we love thee still."

"I think there's something about California that conquers all. Everyone knows California has earthquakes, but they come here anyway and those who are here stay. I think optimism was bred in this state very early and very deeply. I don't know why."

-- JOHN GARDNER

"I SURVIVED THE GREAT QUAKE 1989." This slogan appeared on T-shirts sold at Fisherman's Wharf promptly after the big earthquake that devastated the Bay area late in the afternoon of 17 October. I didn't buy a T-shirt but I survived. I was sitting in front of the TV watching the preliminaries of the third game of the World Series at Candlestick park when a gigantic shock and a vast prolonged shrug of the earth nearly hurled me out of my chair. I hung on for those endless 15 seconds while the walls groaned around me and things cascaded to the floor. At the time, though, I had no time to worry about my belongings but only about my self. I have felt many temblors over these 27 years I have lived in California, and I knew this one was of incomparably greater magnitude than any of the others. On the other occasions Atlas had merely shifted the world from one hand to the other; this time he dropped it to knee-height before he caught it. This was the biggest California quake since 1906. As I scribbled very shakily in a note written only a minute or two later, this one was a "Really big shake" and the "worst [quake] yet!"

Books had toppled off the shelves (Bill Blackbeard remarks that everybody he knows ended up with heaps of books on the floor) and the floor-lamp had crashed over. The building had been wrenched and shuddered so mightily that I wouldn't have been surprised if it had tumbled down the hillside. But when I had a chance to check, I discovered that the electricity, gas, and water were still on. The phone had no dial tone, but this was probably from overloaded circuits, people calling friends and family for reassurance, because only 20 minutes later Jim Harmon got through from southern California to ask, "Are you still alive?" I made a hasty guess and decided I was. I wondered why I was spared after learning of the death and destruction not far away, news of which was already coming in.

The local TV stations had gone off the air with the first jolt, and for a moment I felt like one of the Neoterics in Sturgeon's "Microcosmic God," cut off from the "word machine" and frantically awaiting news. I flipped the dial till I found Channel 50 in Santa Rosa, still on the air and tranquilly showing their regular shows. It reminded me of the theory that when the world ends the radio and TV will continue to send out their commercial plugs till the very last second. Blacked out by the power failure, the TV stations in the Bay area struggled back to life using emergency generators and I learned that homes and buildings had collapsed, the Bay bridge had been ruptured, freeways had been damaged, scores of people had been killed or trapped in the rubble over the whole area. The sudden tomb that had been the two-tiered section

of Interstate 880, which had been one of the worst disasters, is near the Arvey Paper company where Dave Rike and I are regular customers. I needed mimeo paper (FAPA forever!), but luckily I had not gone to acquire any on that fatal afternoon.

I don't know whether they televised nationally a brief videotape taken by the "security" camera of a local Good Guys audio-video store that showed the onset of the big quake: overhead lamps swaying violently, VCRs crashing from the shelves, and people running in panic, among them a young woman store clerk. On the TV news afterward they interviewed the young woman, who said it was her first quake. They asked her where she was from. "Minneapolis," she said. "Did the quake frighten you so much that you're going back there?" they inquired. "No," she said calmly, "I like California." I do too.

#### STANDING AT THE DOOR

I always read the introduction, or foreword, of every book I pick up that has one. When I say "always" I mean quite often. But sometimes I don't go on to read the book itself. This perversity is not planned, of course. I really do intend to read every book that comes intimately to hand, but I don't succeed all the time. I read introductions, though, in the rather desperate way one roams the corridors of the hotel where the Modern Language association or the American Historical association is meeting, trying to find one lecture or session that sounds like it might be interesting. It doesn't need to sound like it makes sense -- one shouldn't demand too much of reality -- just sound interesting, a little bit interesting. You shop around among books, too. If someone speaks with animation in the introduction or foreword at the front of a book, you hope he may have something to say in the rest of the book, all those pages numbered in arabic rather than roman numerals.

Books, unfortunately, are not like pretty women. All pretty women without exception are interesting. You can count on it. Whoever -- if you're a redblooded male -- has spent a dull hour with a pretty woman? You needn't hear her speak, or speak to her. She is worth looking at, if that's all you can do. But a book has to be read to hold your interest. You can't just look with admiration; you must hear it "talk." There may be exceptions, but they are few. A book may appear a little appealing because of its dust-jacket or front cover -- not very often, alas -- or because of some other feature, perhaps its bulk or more likely its lack of bulk. (Slim books, like slim women, have their special appeal.) Or perhaps it's because of its distinctive typeface or format. Not very often, but once in a while, you are attracted to a book because of its title. Most writers and publishers aren't very clever in that department. But once you riffle the pages of a book out of idle curiosity you must be persuaded actually to read it by something more: something in it.

Even with books I go on to finish, I dally a long while, waiting for the impulse to get me to read it. I read the title page, the list of other books the author has committed, the table of contents, and the copyright page as a matter of routine. It is enlightening to learn, for example, that the publisher is Simon and Schuster, "A Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc.," located in the Simon and Schuster building in Rockefeller center, and that Simon and Schuster and colophon are registered trademarks of -- guess what! -- Simon and Schuster, Inc. I study "The Library of Congress cata-

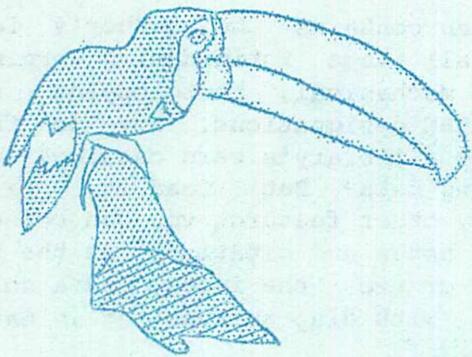
logging in publication data" (what a name!) which often contains the author's full handle, sometimes his dates of birth and death, and all those intimidating warnings against reproducing the book by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), and the catalog number and ISBN designations. Why do they print such stuff in the book instead of reserving it to a library's card catalog? Why should any casual reader care a damn about such mumbling data? But I read it, hoping, I suppose, somehow to be well-informed. There are many other features you can consult as well, if you still aren't convinced. There are the notes and citations at the end of the book, the bibliography, sometimes an appendix or two, the index, and a colophon: "The text of this book is composed in Granjon, with display type set in Garamond." Surely you wanted to know that, didn't you?

All these things give you an inkling of what the book is about, and whether it is worth reading. But after that, if you're lucky, you come back to the front of the book and find an introduction. If you're very lucky, there may be an introduction and a foreword. I'm sure that no one who receives this fanzine would want to read *My Secret Life*, the anonymous "erotic autobiography" of a nineteenth century rake. Fans, after all, are Above Sex. But it's hard not to be tempted once you discover the abundant prefatory material to the paperback "abridged but unexpurgated" edition. First there is a one-page "Note on This Abridgment," followed by the "Publisher's Preface" (8 pages), the "Introduction" by G. Legman (42+ pages), a one-page "Introduction" by an anonymous friend of the anonymous author, a "Preface" by the author (3+ pages), and a "Second Preface" by the author (one page) -- over 55 pages in all, a most titillating bit of foreplay.

You aren't usually offered such entertainment at the start of a book. But hundreds of books begin with an introduction by Isaac Asimov, which is treat enough. He chatters away so amiably, especially when introducing his own work, that you can almost see his glasses twinkling, his sideburns wisping in the breeze of his words. Or you may prefer Robert Silverberg, who is far more solemn, more introspective, with an impressive estimate of his own self-worth and no false modesty. They speak in their own voices, and before we hear them in their story-telling mode -- if the book is a work of fiction -- we accustom ourselves a little to the resonance of their tones.

Writers sometimes scorn the introduction, preferring (as they say) to let the story "speak for itself," but I like an introduction, and miss it when none appears. Before a concert we have introductions, too. We study the program after we reach our seats, and we hear the players tune their instruments. One great lack of sound recordings is that we seldom hear the tuning up as we do in the concert hall. Ah, they are playing Brahms, are they? (They are, if we are lucky!) Then let us listen for a moment to the disharmony of orchestral sounds in the sweet voices we will soon hear entwined in melody and counter-melody. We need to settle into our seats, to get ready for the wonderful experience we are to participate in. The tuning up is part of it, and the introduction of a book is part of our reading pleasure, too. Yes, let us have an introduction.

As with books, I tarry a while before reading a magazine -- or did, with magazines of the Golden Age -- but not for the same reason. I paused a while before the portico and contemplated the structure before me before I ventured in. Before I read anything else in a new issue of *Astounding* I perused everything else but the fiction. I studied the introductory material (i.e., the blurbs) at the head of each story, and scanned all the departments and features before I sat down to read a single story, even one by A. E. van Vogt or Anson MacDonald. I admired the cover painting by Hubert Rogers, and all the interior illos by Schneeman and Dold, read Campbell's editorial (in those days they were interesting), considered soberly the contents of "In Times to Come" and "The Analytical Laboratory," and of course devoured all the letters in



THE TOUCAN IS 25

Gretchen drew this picture of a toucan for a brief article called "A Toucan Looks at Lying" which I wrote for Spirochete #1, 19 November 1964. The title was a pun on A Texan Looks at Lyndon, a piece of political propaganda that Henry Stine and/or other LASFS members had franked into the Apa-L distributions just before the 1964 presidential election (Lyndon Johnson vs Barry Goldwater). The drawing pictures the small stuffed replica of a toucan which Gretchen brought with her when she arrived on my doorstep at 270 South Bonnie Brae, Los Angeles 90057, in August 1964, and which perched insouciantly on our floorlamp all that autumn.

It pleases me to reprint Gretchen's drawing -- always from her original sketch -- each November to honor her memory and to give her work a tiny share of immortality.

had my money back, or at least had not squandered time and energy lugging it home from the library -- a book that looked so alluring when I first laid eyes on it.

If you had hardly any money at all as a kid -- the usual state of my pockets in the Depression era -- it was fun to visit the carnival anyway. You could enjoy the pleasure that didn't cost anything at all: wandering up and down the Midway, listening to the barkers extolling the wonders inside, and looking at the garish posters promising Thrills Galore behind the fluttering walls of the sun-bleached tents. Same way with books, I suppose. You buy or borrow a book that, once you have it in hand, inspires you to do nothing more profitable with it than to hurl it across the room. But you have read the introduction. At least you have read the introduction. The book wasn't a total loss, after all.

"Brass Tacks." These preliminaries were indulged in, I suppose, merely to heighten the pleasure of having at last, after a month of feverish anticipation, a brand-new issue to hand, the very one Campbell had hinted about in "In Times to Come" the previous issue.

With books, though, it was and is different. Why all the lurking at the threshold of a book before actually reading it? Why all the dilly-dallying, perusing first the introduction and the rest of the extraneous material right down to the name of the incompetent artist who botched the book-jacket? I suppose I do this because I have been disappointed so often in the past. Books are one of the few genuine treasures of civilization -- indoor plumbing is a distant second -- but so few books are Really Worth Reading, depressing as that fact is.

The whole situation reminds me of the carnival sideshows I saw as a small boy back in Breckenridge Minnesota. The barker outside the tattered canvas tent promised eye-popping attractions if you just stepped inside (*Hurry! Hurry!*), but after you handed over your grubby nickel or dime you stumbled inside to discover the Fattest Lady in the World was only an ordinary woman in a tawdry sequined gown, perspiring freely and fanning herself vigorously, and not an ounce heftier than the housewife who lived across the street.

After an awful letdown like that you went away wishing you had your money back so you could buy some cotton candy -- surely a more nourishing treat to the juvenile soul than the rip-off in the tent. Too many books are a rip-off, too. The reason I tarry over the introduction to a book is that I suppose I am going to be disappointed again. I am going to wish I