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Redd Boggs'
SPYROCHNEGG

THE MORNING NEWS: SELECTED HEADLINES FOR JANUARY 2000

"Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things
before breakfast."
-- The White Queen.

DISAPPEARANCE OF U.S. SPACE SHUTTLE CALLED "BIGGEST MYSTERY OF 20TH CENTURY"

FAMOUS SCI-FI NOVELIST SHOT IN LURID LOVE TRIANGLE

EARTHQUAKE DAMAGE TO SPHINX "REPAIRABLE," EGYPTIANS SAY

NEW THEORY HINTS THE SUN MAY TURN "SUPERNOVA"

SILVERBERG NOVEL ENDS SECOND FULL YEAR ATOP TIMES' BEST SELLER LIST

PATIENTS WARNED OF NEW FLU CURE'S DANGEROUS SIDE-EFFECTS

TAMPA BAY FAVORED BY 10-1/2 POINTS IN SUPER BOWL

FORMER "TREK" STAR DIES OF "ICE" OVERDOSE

NEWLY DISCOVERED TENTH PLANET IS BIGGER THAN JUPITER, PALOMAR ASTRONOMER REPORTS

STUDY SHOWS POSTAGE-STAMP GLUE CAUSES CANCER IN MICE

DEATHBED CONFESSION MAY SOLVE JOHN F. KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION

"RUDY HUXTABLE" TOP SITCOM IN LATEST NIELSEN

JOINT U.S.-SOVIET MARS EXPEDITION SET FOR EARLY 2005

MARKET REACTS TO NEW INFLATION FEARS

NEW AIDS DRUG "PROMISING," SURGEON-GENERAL SAYS

PRESIDENT REVEALS FED BUDGET, PROMISES NO NEW TAXES

I, ROWBOAT

I was reading "Sidewise in Time" and "A Matter of Form" in *The Mammoth Book of Classic Science Fiction: Short Novels of the 1930s*, edited by Isaac Asimov, Charles G. Waugh, and Martin H. Greenberg -- a mammoth title and a mammoth editorial staff -- and found myself skipping paragraphs and whole passages. Impatient to get on with the story, I sent my eye leaping over the parts of Murray Leinster's novelet that describe in copious detail the events that took place when a Roman legion invaded Joplin Missouri and when Piltown or Neanderthal men attacked the British Aca-

demy of Science, and in H. L. Gold's story of those that involved the lengthy search for Wood, the man whose identity has been transferred to a dog's body.

Of course I had read these stories before, more than once, although that was a long time ago, and knew more or less what I was missing. This time I was eager to return immediately to the adventures of the students accompanying James Minott and to be there when they emerged at last into normal time; and to be with Wood at the end of the story when he unexpectedly came back to his own body -- surely one of the most striking passages in "classic" science fiction, or so I have always found it. But I am not sure whether I might not have skipped parts of the stories when I read them for the first time, so many years ago.

Do other readers do as I did? Do others disregard the author's intent and skim hastily over parts of the story that do not interest him, even though the story in general is of consuming interest? I think that all readers must, though this is seldom admitted straightway. Writers often complain, with justice, that their critics have not taken the time and effort to read them carefully, but I don't remember hearing a common reader confess, "I was so eager to finish this exciting story that I barely skimmed the last half of the book." (I have heard readers say that they sneaked a glance at the last pages of a novel "to see how it came out," but this is something else.) Still, it must be true that many readers, perhaps all readers, silently cheat in this way now and then.

Is this any way to treat the poor author, though? He has labored -- perhaps more diligently and skilfully here than anywhere else -- over some of the very parts of his story that you and I jumped over: subtleties of characterization, picturesque descriptions of scenery or of certain actions, all slathered on with a generosity that deserves more than a reader's short shrift. Arrogantly we readers have raced lightly over pages and pages the author created with sweat and tears, not reading them at all, or certainly not word for word. The author spent a day or a week on this passage, or that one, and lavished upon it his greatest craft, and there it lies on the printed page pristine and uneyetracked! As we read, swiftly and eagerly, so much of it seems only frou-frou and superfluous to the plot and action.

Surely we must admit that we are doing the writer a great disservice with our cavalier lack of reverence for his words. We are, in effect, performing a belated and unauthorized editorial job on his manuscript. But at the same time, just as surely, we as readers have the perfect right to do this. The author has provided the fluid medium upon which we voyage for a time. It has flowed like sweet water from his pen and we see it stretching before us: words, words, words, closely set in black type on white pages that bulk heavily in our hands: an ocean of prose, or a pond, or a river, or sometimes only a dismal little puddle in the gutter. The author has decreed the direction of our voyage, chosen our ports of call, and our ultimate destination. But we are not chips of wood adrift upon the swirling stream, swept on willynilly by the gush of rhetoric -- though this is the desire of the writer, who envisions the ideal reader. Instead we are (at the very least) rowboats, capable with some effort of beating our way upon the flood. By choice we can bypass some of the anchorages the writer has selected for our itinerary if they seem dull

and uninteresting -- if we are, as it were, offered Vladivostok when we are eager for Pago Pago. By choice, too, we can quit the voyage entirely at any point when it seems to us less thrilling than we expected.

Of course we must admit that we are perhaps missing a great deal in quality as well as quantity when we skip entire paragraphs and passages. Parts of the story that may not advance the plot a millimeter or contribute much of anything to the effect of the story may be interesting and impressive in themselves. For example, I remember Theodore Sturgeon's "A God in a Garden" (*Unknown*, October 1939), which I have not reread in many years, but which has in it an exact description of the operation of a block and tackle. This was nothing essential to the story; a lesser writer would have encapsulated it in a few perfunctory words that obscured his ignorance, but as Hemingway remarked, "If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story." When I read Sturgeon's story for the first time, 50 years ago, I remember being impressed with this passage and thinking that all by itself it revealed him to be a major talent. (It was only his second published story.)

If nothing else, the passages we skitter nimbly over in our haste to learn what is going on with Minott and his reluctant followers, or with Gilroy the reporter and Wood the transplanted human, act as "filling." All stories, like brick walls and concrete floors, are a careful admixture of ingredients if they are well-constructed. The effect of a satisfying denouement depends to a large extent on the passages we have so blithely neglected. A great story cannot consist wholly of exciting scenes without calmer intervals for contrast, although many unskilful writers often attempt the feat.

I suppose, in deference to Leinster and Gold -- "Sidewise in Time" in particular strikes me as a genuinely great sf story -- I ought to go back and read more slowly and carefully. I am no advocate of "speed reading," and in reading for pleasure, why the gadarene haste after all? But I don't think I can ever reform.

The Mammoth Book (my livre de chevet of the moment) is full of other stories I am eager to reread. I won't bother with such wretched things as "The Shadow Out of Time" and "Dawn of Flame" (called "Dawn of a Flame" in the running heads), which bored me half to death before and inevitably would again, but I have "Alas, All Thinking" and "Divide and Rule" to look forward to. I will try to read them nearly in their entirety and not skip too many passages as I peruse them again. Surely Harry Bates and L. Sprague de Camp deserve close scrutiny and should be read word for word, paragraph by paragraph. But -- like you, perhaps -- I become impatient when a story seems to bog down in superfluties, to grow tiresome and dreary when it ought to be speeding full-tilt toward the climax, the way a good little story should. When I get bored I skip a lot, second-guessing the author. What does he know, anyway? Sometimes I skip long passages in essays and articles too, even those by such masters as Edmund Wilson, Leon Edel, and Gore Vidal. Did you read all of this essay?

HOW SCIENCE FICTION CHANGED MY LIFE: 1

When I came marching home from the big war in November 1945.... Actually I didn't march. I moseyed gently, with my hands in my pockets. I marched very few steps even in the service, as few as I could manage, and wasn't going to march to the beat of any drummer at all after being discharged, even though I wore my winter ODs up to the front door and a little beyond. But that's what I was going to say: One of the first things I did after receiving my discharge papers was to buy some civilian clothes to replace that damn uniform. One of the things I bought was a hat.

I have forgotten what kind it was -- Lee or Adam, or some other popular brand of the time. I have no idea whether hats bearing such names are still manufactured, probably not. It was a fearsomely conventional hat, narrow-brimmed, with a dent in the crown. I think it was grey and had a small red feather in the band. My soul shrivels within me to recollect such dismal details. I purchased it at a store in downtown Minneapolis, and brought it home in a box. Taking it out and putting it on I peered at myself in the mirror. I thought I had looked rather jaunty at the hat store, but now I was disappointed and unhappy. I didn't resemble at all the fellow I had loved, or at least tolerated, over two decades and a little more. By necessity I had worn headgear of one sort or another in the Air Force, but I had never before worn a hat in civilian life. Such an adornment seemed even less sensible than a necktie, which I had never worn either. On the whole the hat felt about as comfortable as a medieval helmet and such loathly accouterments.

Having the hat in hand, however, I wore it a few times. One day a raging January gale snatched it from my head and hurled it like a UFO a great distance before it touched the ground. I chased it down, but if it had not eventually fetched up against a tree I might have let it go scudding down the street, and to hell with it. A sadder and a wiser man, I tested the elements each morning before venturing forth behatted ever again, and it seemed that there was always a big wind howling in my small corner of the universe. I avoided wearing the hat whenever possible. Even on the coldest days I didn't wear a hat. I wore earmuffs often enough, but no hat. After all, I had lots of hair.

About that time I came upon the photograph of a famous Frenchman -- I have forgotten who -- wearing a beret. "That's the headpiece for me," I said enthusiastically. "Fie on fedoras!" I went out to buy myself a beret. But those were sober, conventional times in a conservative town. I couldn't find a beret for sale anywhere. It must have been 20 years later that Gretchen bought me a beret -- in more enlightened times in a more bohemian town -- for my birthday. I added a peace symbol to the front of it, and thought it looked quite perky.

But back in Minneapolis, I wore my hat a few times for protective coloring, to job interviews and the like, but most of the time I kept it in its box, stored away in the closet. Just then the late-1940s science fiction boom began. I bought nearly every issue of every sf magazine in those days, and there were a lot of them. I soon ran out of shelf space, and began stacking magazines, once I had read them, in the closet. After a while the closet got so jammed that I began heaping magazines atop the cardboard carton containing the hat.

A year or two later, getting around to sorting the toppling heaps of magazines that had accumulated, I hauled them out of the closet and discovered that long ago the weight of those stacked on top of the hat box -- you remember those bloated Ziff-Davis monstrosities -- had crushed in the box and had mashed the hat into a two-dimensional object that, fittingly, resembled a flying saucer (as we called them in those distant times). I rescued the hat from under cascading issues of *Planet Stories* and *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* and tried to punch it back into a semblance of something having a crown as well as a brim. It still looked misshapen and be-draggled. Somebody -- a woman, no doubt -- suggested that I might get the hat "re-blocked." Did I want to go to the trouble?

Instead, with my fist I battered the hat to its former flattened state, took it outside, and sailed it into the trash barrel. That gave me the most pleasure I had ever gotten from that article of apparel. I was rid of it forever. It might have stayed around to vex me and perhaps even to lure me into wearing it again, except for the fateful weight of those stacks of science fiction magazines.