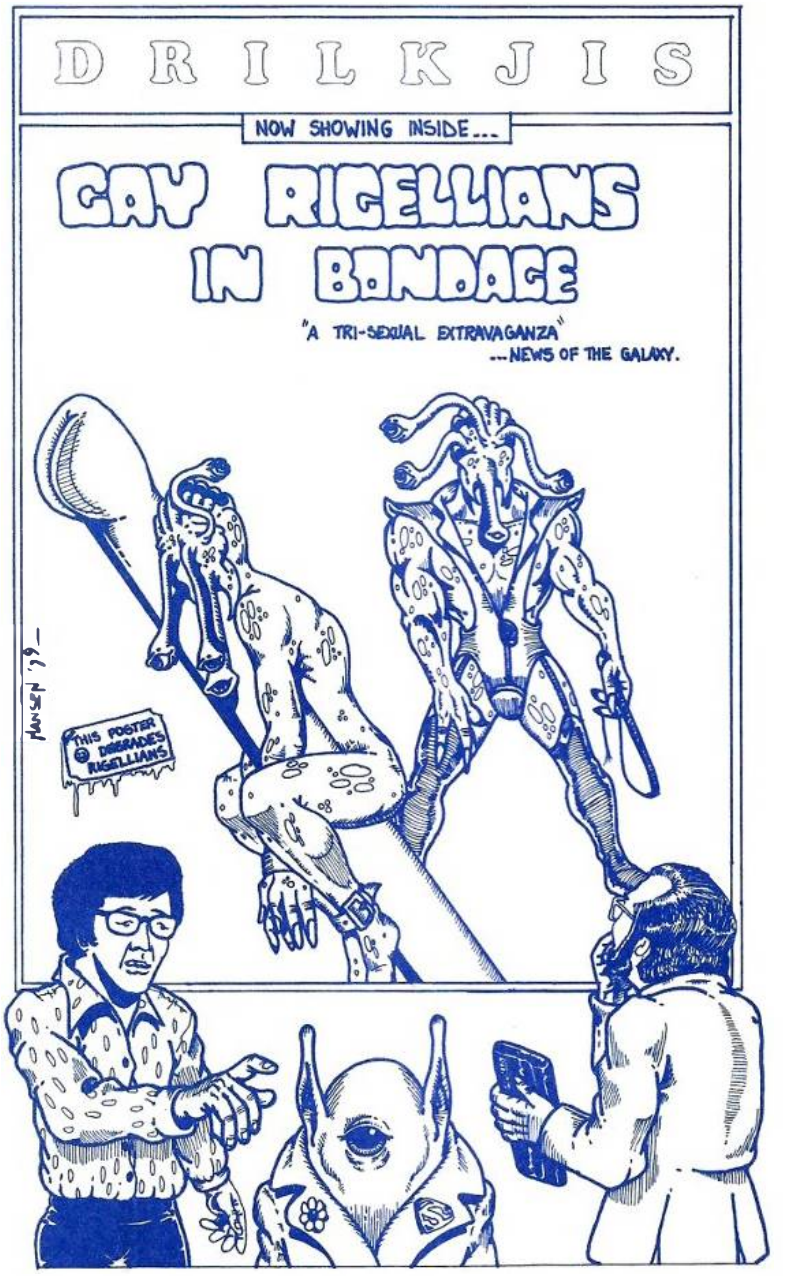
D R I L K J I S
NOW SHOWING INSIDE...
GAY RIGELLIANS IN BONDAGE
"A TRI-SEXUAL EXTRAVAGANZA"
---NEWS OF THE GALAXY.
THIS POSTER DEGRADES RIGELLIANS
MANSEN '19

CONCERNING AN ELEVEN FOOT POLE

"What do you use an eleven foot pole for?"

"Touching things you wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole."

House of Zeor by Jacqueline Lichtenberg is definitely an eleven foot pole job. You should approach the book, if you feel you have to approach it at all, sort of sideways, with gaze firmly averted, gently probing with said eleven foot pole. Once you have located it the best thing you can do is immediately go a long way away and open a bottle of champagne in celebration of a narrow escape, not forgetting to incinerate the pole as a security precaution. Of course, it may be that for some arcane reason you actually have to attempt to read it, in which unlikely event I would strongly recommend using the touch-sensitive properties of your eleven foot pole to detect the print impressions in the paper, taking care not to exceed a paragraph per day, and keeping an emergency bottle of scotch near to hand to fortify the spirit. Be warned! I read several pages at the beginning of this book and several fewer at the end without taking these simple precautions, and if I had not been almost totally paralytic at the time I would almost certainly have suffered more than the severe intestinal disorders and broken leg.

I couldn't read much of *House of Zeor*, but I read enough to discover it is nothing but a dirty book.

The story is about two related but different races descended from man, called the Sime and the Gens. The Sime have a propensity for offing the Gens by sucking all the *selyn* out of them; it seems they are biologically driven to this about once a month. The Gens, being quite sensible folk not ordinarily given to suicide, don't reckon much to this type of behaviour, biologically driven or not. However, the Sime are able to summon up the strength of ten, and when they entwine a Gen in their tentacles the Gen has had it. Oh yes, Sime have tentacles as well as hands; they are attached to the arms and... but the author is able to explain it better than I.

> Klyd leaned his eblows on the chair arms, twining tentacles thoughtfully.

Probably 'eblows' is a misprint in the text, but I cannot be sure -- for example:

> "Klyd...is he..."
> "Dead? Yes."
> "Runni?"
> "Undoubtedly. He used a tenth-degree augmentation on me. Do you know anyone else who could afford that?"
> "I wouldn't know a tenth-degree augmentation from a selur nager. But did you have to kill him?"

Things like that tend to open your mind to the possibility of little things like 'eblows'.

It is made absolutely clear by the author that the *transfer* of *selyn* is the dominant drive in relationships between the two races. The only comparably dominant drive in our society is sex, and thus we derive the basic symbolic relationship: *transfer* = sex. This hypothesis is strengthened by the existence of an act common to both actual and symbolic drives, the mouth to mouth kiss. Once this simple and obvious relationship is seen very many other things fall into place within the symbolic framework. The substance *transferred* is *selyn*, which must therefore be the semen symbol; even the sound of the two words is similar. The direction in which the *transfer* takes place leads us to some very interesting conclusions.

Selyn is *transferred* from Gen to Sime, which are thus seen to be male and female symbols respectively. If doubt remains on this score, consider the similarity between the lengths of the *need cycle* [my italics] of the Sime and the menstrual cycle of women. *Transfer* usually, but not necessarily, involves the death of the Gen. When it does, we are obviously dealing with symbolic rape. But this rape is rape of the man by the woman, so that quite evidently it is feminist wish-fulfilment. I quote: "...there is nothing so terrifying to a Gen as the attack of a Sime in hard need." The author is expressing her subconscious desire to go beyond the stated feminist desire of sexual equality to a position of absolute feminine dominance, which dominance is to be violently expressed so that men go in fear. It is no coincidence that the author refers to the 'Sime Series' and not the 'Gen Series'. Finally, at the end of the book, the Sime hero and the Gen hero achieve a non-fatal *transfer* together which leaves both of them feeling gosh-wow-wunnerful. Can this be anything but a symbolic orgasm?

What of real sex in the book? Well, the motivation for the Gen hero's excursion into Sime territory in the first place is to rescue the girl he loves, who has been kidnapped. Of course, he succeeds and is happily reunited with her at the end, but one wonders why he bothered at all. Sex in the Sime series is a pale and tenuous thing compared with *transfer*, and the two heroes have such a wonderful thing going together.

So why is *House of Zeor* a dirty book? That *transfer* equates to sex is obvious, not to say blatant. And the pages of the book are crammed with gratuitous *transfer*. Hardly a page goes by without *transfer* being done, or discussed intently, or mentioned in passing. The book positively oozes with *transfer*, so much so it is a wonder the pages don't stick together. It is disgusting, I say. I really have no idea how American publishers could bring themselves to publish it. Why haven't God-fearing parents wrenched it out of the hands of their innocent children (misled by the reference to *Star Trek* on the cover, poor kids) and burned it? But what I find really insidious is the way in which the author, in writing this book, has used such an incongruously naive style.

If any British publisher dares to take it on I shall tell Mary Whitehouse. ks

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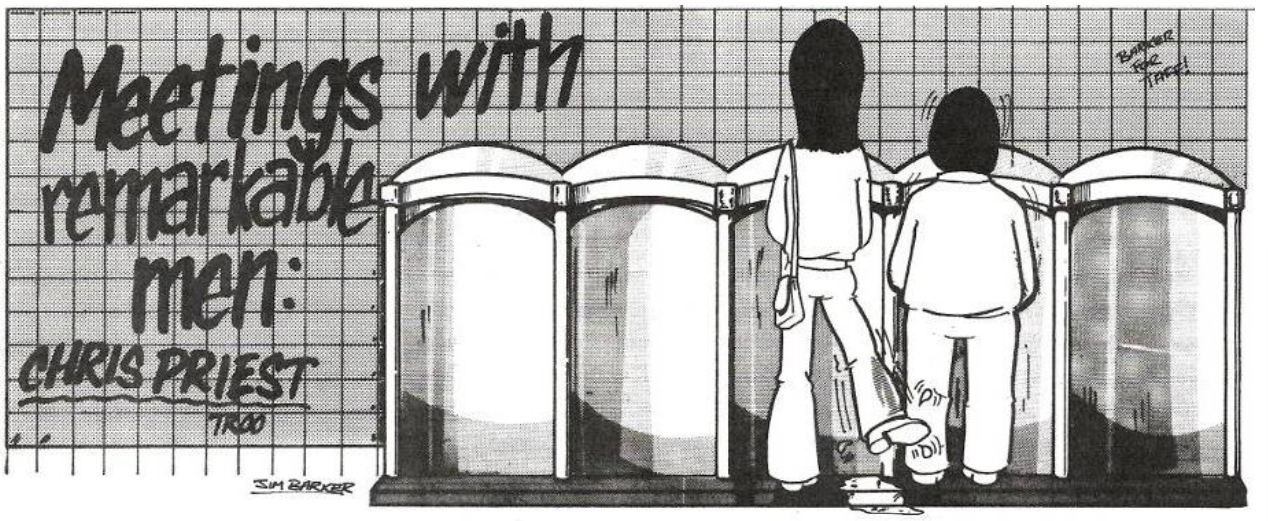
DRILKJIS is not available except for trade, loc, contribution, or 50p -- no funny foreign currency or foreign cheques, please. It costs us 60p to convert them.

DRILKJIS 5, March 1980.

Dave Langford, 22 Northumberland Avenue, Reading, Berkshire, RG2 7PW, U.K.

Kevin Smith, 10 Cleeves Court, St Marks Hill, Surbiton, Surrey, KT6 4PS, U.K.



I have borrowed the title of my talk today from the Armenian mystic Gurdjieff, who wrote a semi-autobiographical account of his quest for knowledge and understanding. He sought out a number of philosophers and mystics, became their disciple, and absorbed their wisdom. I'm telling you this in the hope that it will set a high intellectual tone to this convention. In fact, it sets the intellectual tone of this talk exactly... because I'm bluffing. Not only have I not read Gurdjieff, but I haven't even seen the film. However it's a good title, and it's somewhere to begin.

When I first started to go to science fiction conventions I did so for very simple motives. I was a fan of science fiction. Or, to put it more accurately, I was a fan of certain writers who had published science fiction. When I went to Peterborough in 1964 I did so in the hope of meeting John Wyndham, Ray Bradbury, J.G. Ballard, Robert Sheckley, Brian Aldiss... even, if I was very lucky, H.G. Wells. I wanted to be a science fiction writer, and I hoped that by rubbing shoulders with people like this that some of their talent might rub off on me. I soon discovered that if you rub shoulders with science fiction writers the only thing that's likely to rub off on you is dandruff.

When I first thought about what I should say to you today I felt a slight sense of panic. It might come as something of a surprise to some of you, but this is the first time I have ever given a talk at a convention. I've often taken part in panels -- usually the sort where we set out to talk about literature and end up arguing about money -- but never before have I been given a whole hour of the convention's time.

I started to go to sf conventions because I was a fan, and to a large extent I continue to come to cons for fannish reasons. They are above all fannish events, and any writer who comes along has to do so more or less on fannish terms. I'm proud of the fact that I have maintained fannish links for more than fifteen years, and it was this that gave me a clue as to what I might be able to talk about today. I saw myself as a sort of latter-day Gurdjieff, passing through the sf world for fifteen years, in contact with the great minds. Perhaps, I thought, I could give you a series of anecdotes about the remarkable men I have met over the years, passing on to you what grains of wisdom, or dandruff, I have picked up. So, with this in mind, I started making a list. Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Brian Aldiss, John Wyndham, John W. Campbell, Frederick Pohl, Rob Holdstock ... all these I have met. And, because in these liberated times remarkable men should really be called remarkable people, Ursula Le Guin, Vonda McIntyre, Leigh Brackett, Anne McCaffrey, Judith Merrill. The list extended indefinitely, easily filling an hour of your time.

But then I thought back to the very first science fiction writer I ever met, and my plans started to come adrift.

For many years I have sat in convention halls like this one, listening to Bob Shaw's serious and scientific talks. This weekend, as you know, he is my co-guest of honour at Novacon West. So while he's away I thought I'd take my revenge. I want to tell you the true story of how we met. Garbled versions of this historical meeting have appeared in fanzines over the years -- Brian Aldiss even wrote about it in the *New Statesman* -- but now I'm going to set the record straight.

In 1964, Bob Shaw was better known as a fan than he was as an author. Then, as now, Bob was in fact a BNF, or Big Name Fan. Any Big Name Fan was an awesome figure, but Bob was a legend, even in those days. Bob's mere presence in the same room was enough to strike me dumb. In fact, Bob then was probably very much like Bob now, always talking seriously about science, but I hade no way of finding this out. Then, on the last evening of the convention, Bob introduced himself to me. It happened like this:

Somewhere around midnight I was taken with a bodily need, and retired to the nearest Gents. Nature started to take its course, and all was well. At that precise moment, Bob Shaw walked into the Gents and came and stood beside me. Now, as most of you will know, one of the more remarkable things about Bob is that he can be in a bar all evening, and *stay* in a bar all evening. When I came into fandom, there was much serious scientific speculation that Bob actually kept a collapsible bucket under his coat. So you can imagine my feelings when I saw Bob walk into this Gents. Not only was I alone with him, but I was there at a moment of fannish history! Perhaps I'd even see the bucket! But before I could say or do anything about any of this, something quite extraordinary happened. I felt something splashing against my shoe. I looked down, and sure enough a small puddle had appeared. I looked up, slowly... and for a moment our eyes met. It was, as they say in Bob Shaw novels, a moment fraught with tension. Then Bob gave one of his peculiar, chortling snuffles. "Sorry," he said. "Would you like a return shot?" Unfortunately, nature had run its course, and as often happens during a stimulating conversation, I dried up. In the words of the Sunday newspap-

ers. I made my excuses and left... with a slight hopping motion.

There's a postscript to this historical meeting. Three or four years ago I drove up from London to spend the weekend at Bob's mansion in the Lake District. About twenty-five seconds after I arrived, having given me time to rest and recuperate after my long drive on the motorway, Bob suggested that we go down to his local. Actually, he claimed he didn't go there very often, and pretended to lose his way, but I noticed as we went in that the landlord was sending a telegram order to the brewery. So we had a drink or seven, and eventually I asked Bob if he remembered how we had met, all those years before. Bob claimed he didn't, so I reminded him. He sat in silence as I told the story, but was obviously puzzled why I should be telling him. He suddenly gave one of his peculiar, chortling snuffles, and said, "Do you want to borrow a Kleenex?"

So I decided against telling you this anecdote, because it didn't really seem relevant to my quest for knowledge. And the more I thought about it, none of my other meetings with remarkable men were all that remarkable. I could have told you about how my father-figure, Harry Harrison, cuffed me about the ear and said, "Get out of the way, you fucking fan." Or how the very first words ever spoken to me by Arthur C. Clarke were, "What about the variable albedo?" ...something which to this day is worrying me. I could tell you how I stood next to Harlan Ellison, and loomed over him. Come to that, I could tell you how Douglas Adams stood next to me, and loomed over us both.

But none of these memories are really helpful. All I've really learnt is that if you give a science fiction writer a chance he will piss on your shoe.

A reader's experience of science fiction is, in a sense, a meeting with remarkable minds. It was this that first surprised me when I encountered sf. Through their work, I met, for the first time, writers who could show me a different way of seeing things, who were way above the mundane things in life and were getting on with a kind of fiction that made me think for myself. Years later, I came across a passage in an essay by George Orwell, which describes this feeling exactly. Orwell was describing the effect on him of reading H.G. Wells as a boy:

> It was a wonderful experience for a boy to discover H.G. Wells. There you were, in a world of pedants, clergymen and golfers, with your future employers exhorting you to "get on or get out", your parents systematically warping your sexual life, and your dull-witted schoolmasters sniggering over their Latin tags; and here was this wonderful man who could tell you about the inhabitants of the planets and the bottom of the sea, and who *knew* that the future was not going to be what respectable people imagined.

Orwell always has the ability to pinpoint a feeling exactly, and this describes the effect science fiction as a whole can have on people who come to it with open minds. I myself came to it with the open mind of adolescence, as many of us do. The ideas of science fiction work on two levels. Firstly, there is the element of surprise or novelty, and secondly there is the less specific quality of making us think for ourselves, of applying a freshness of approach to our own lives.

I don't want to emphasize the importance of the ideas too much, because there is much more to science fiction than just novelty. I think ideas are misunderstood in some quarters, and given the wrong sort of importance. Science fiction is undoubtedly the literature of ideas, or speculative notions, but an idea in a story cannot exist outside the words that contain it. It therefore seems obvious to me that we should be at least as interested in the words as we are in the ideas.

This amounts to taking a more literary approach to sf, but I have found to my cost over the years that the very mention of the word "literary" seems to indicate some kind of mischief on my behalf. There is an anti-literature mood in science fiction, one that is shared by many readers, critics and even some of the writers. Literature is a dirty word; it is taken to mean "arty" or "boring" or "pretentious". Science fiction is fresh and exciting; literature would only muck it up. Literature is posh, literature is for the academics and poseurs. Science fiction is fun, and literature isn't.

This perverse attitude is especially ironic, because it seems to me that the best science fiction has the twin merits of being popular and widely read, and yet also deeply serious. Some of the most popular sf books in recent years have been serious novels, capable of being judged by the highest literary standards. You have only to look as far as the novels of, say, Ursula Le Guin to see this.

So in recent years I've become a bit of a literature bore, or so it seems. I have said, until even I am bored with hearing me say it, that a science fiction novel should be a novel first and science fiction second. That it should be recognized as an art and not a craft. That it should make demands on a reader and not pander to laziness. That it should not seek to compete with television or comics or films, but that it should be first and foremost a literary experience. That it should be peopled with characters who not only live for the plot but are living. That there should be a celebration of language and metaphor and style. In short, that a novel, whether it is science fiction or anything else, is literature above all else.

Yet in the science fiction world this kind of sentiment is seen as heresy. You have probably heard Heinlein's remark, that writers are competing for the readers' beer-money. When this was quoted in an SFWA publication by Poul Anderson, underlining the entertainment-value of science fiction, Stanislaw Lem was moved to reply. Writing in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, he said:

> If in the past all authors had accepted the suggestion of the two Americans [Heinlein and Anderson] we would have no literature worth mentioning. We would have none of the literary heritage of which we are so proud if every author worried about publishers, critics, censors, readers, public opinion, sales potential, and the like. My rebuttal to Anderson's thesis, then, is that marketing prospects or official approval or similar concerns have no business intruding in that narrow gap between the author's eye and the blank piece of paper. That the muse cannot be pursued over a bottle of beer goes without saying. In short, honest literature can never conform to external pressures or exigencies. To do so would be its death.

You would think that this was a civilized and reasonable reply, yet for these very words Stanislaw Lem was booted through the door. SFWA, the organization that represents the world's leading science fiction writers, chucked him out. You would think that a writer in the Eastern bloc would have troubles enough with the writers' union, and yet here was a writers' organisation in a free and democratic country acting in exactly the same way. Of course, it's not fair to tar every member of SFWA with the same brush, but out of a membership of nearly four hundred, less than ten registered a protest.

Nor is this attitude just a collective phenomenon. It crops up all over the place, in articles in fanzines, in interviews with writers, in criticism, in those infamous rejection slips from *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*. Boiled down to its essence, it says: "We are but entertainers, and entertainment is a humble trade. Therefore our sights are set low." I believe that entertainment is a high art, and should be treated as such. Everyone at the convention today is here

because we believe that science fiction is a stimulating, radical *and* entertaining form of literature, yet by their very words the Poul Andersons and Robert A. Heinleins are asking you to settle for less.

If you have the misfortune to read *Analog* you will have been exposed to the so-called wisdom of certain reviewers, whom I am tempted to call Loser del Ray-Gun and Creepy-Crawly Crusoe. These men, both of whom are said to have written science fiction, are leading spokesmen for the anti-literature school. Month after month they have stated their theory of sf. That it is first and foremost entertainment, that it should be well crafted, that it should have a comprehensible plot, that it should not make undue demands on the reader... and, as an afterthought, that it should have what they call 'characterisation' and 'good writing', as if these can be added later. In short, that sf should be lowbrow entertainment, pitched at the same sort of level as television films.

Perhaps it doesn't sound so very different from my own statement just now, with the elements coming in a different order. Well, that *is* the difference. It's a question of priorities. Ray-Gun and Crusoe appeal to the lowest common denominator of readership. I happen to believe that the readership of science fiction is intelligent and diverse.

As I move about the sf world, both as a sort of fan who comes to these conventions, and as a writer working in the field, I see more and more evidence that these insulting attitudes are taking over. I believe, for instance, that my views on the literary nature of science fiction are actually rather moderate, well-meaning and conventional. It doesn't seem to me that to say a form of literature should be treated *as* literature is at all revolutionary or extreme. You would think that it speaks for itself. Yet such is the consensus these days that the very act of stating the obvious is one that is treated as dangerous extremism. Because the *consensus* is an extremist viewpoint, anyone who opposes it looks like a different sort of extremist.

Nor is it just a theoretical debate. Such attitudes are filtering down and taking different forms. The present commercial success of science fiction is bringing with it a set of attitudes which are close cousins to the entertainment-or-literature argument. Some of you might have been present at Skycon last year, when Rob Holdstock and I got involved in a public argument with James Baen of Ace Books. A lady in the audience asked the panel how she should go about getting her work published. Rob and I said something soggy and organic, such as "write for yourself", whereas Baen said didactically that the only way was to "write for market". In conversation with him afterwards it became clear that the very fact that a writer is being paid means he *must* put market considerations first... and later we were told that there was no market for what he called 'British misery'. This presumably would include miserable British books like *Frankenstein, The War of the Worlds* and *The Day of the Triffids*. This points up the commercial silliness of such an attitude, because any publisher could probably retire on the sales of those three books alone.

Then there are the critics, who divide into camps of such extremism that neither side knows where the other lot are.

Doctor Johnson once said: "Criticism is a study by which men grow important and formidable at very small expense." So it is... but whether we like it or not, sf needs responsible criticism.

Writing is an art, and criticism is the natural companion to art. It defines and shapes it, it interprets it, it sets standards, it provides an overview of what individual writers are doing, it provides a context of intelligent debate. Original work *can* survive without it, and can of course be appreciated without it, but responsible criticism enhances art.

Science fiction critics are usually one of two sorts. There are those who have discovered that sf is literature, and have promptly gone barmy. These are the academics, who come to science fiction from the comfortable security of a chair at a university. There *are* a few good academic critics, but most of the criticism I have seen from academics has been pompous and narcissistic, apparently written with no love of literature, just a desire to impress.

The other lot are the crowd-pleasers, the likes of Loser del Ray-Gun and Creepy-Crawly Crusoe, who shy away from criticism and call themselves 'reviewers'. They claim to know what the common reader enjoys, and from this position of arrogance and ignorance parade their subjective opinions with all the certainty of the closed mind.

Neither kind of critic is worth a damn. They say nothing to the writer or the reader, and neither is able to join a larger debate.

Of course, there are a few exceptions. There are some perceptive critics in fandom, who are not showing off, who are not trying to agree with anybody and who write with honesty and insight. And the British magazine *Foundation* has a well-earned reputation for clear, unpretentious criticism. But this simply isn't enough to form a body of critical work. There should be a sufficient amount of sf criticism that there is disagreement amongst informed critics, that there is a continuity of debate.

At this point I was intending to turn away from the critics and have something to say about the responsibility of the writers. However, on the principle that dog shouldn't eat dog (except in private, when you can have fun) I won't say too much.

It is the writers whom one would think remain blameless, whatever venality there might be elsewhere in the science fiction industry. The trouble is, and I'll say more on this in a moment, with the increasing success of sf in the market-place the temptations laid before writers are the greater. At one time the hidden strength of sf as a genre was that although it was sold in the same way as the other categories, like Westerns, etc., it actually consisted of a large number of autonomous novels... just like general literature. An autonomous novel is one that stands alone. It explains itself, it does not require the reader to know something about it in advance, it contains its own self-explanatory universe.

Today, it seems that more and more so-called sf novels are going the way of the down-market bestseller, and are parts of a larger whole. We see an increasing dependence on sf jargon. We get film-scripts turned into a bastard form called a novelization. (I once saw an Ace book which was a 'novelization' of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, as if H.G. Wells's novel had died of old age or something.) We get sequels and series and trilogies and future histories. We're getting novelettes published in book form and padded out with cartoon illustrations. We're getting comic-book versions of stories and novels. We even got a comic-book version of *Battlestar Galactica*, as if something you can't watch has to be turned into something you can't read. The trend is towards pre-digested pabulum, baby-food for the mind. The Dark Ages are almost upon us.

All the ills of science fiction are caused by two distinct things, of which by far the more disagreeable is the pulp-tradition, an article

of faith held high and holy by virtually every science fiction writer or commentator you come across.

The fallacies of the pulp-tradition are so obvious that I'm genuinely surprised that they survive. The tradition goes like this: Science fiction was invented in 1926 with the inception of *Amazing Stories*, and after a few ropey years it started getting better, and then we had the Golden Age, and since then everything's been just mind-bogglingly good. Thus we progress from Bob Shaw's favourite writer, Captain S.P. Meek, to my favourite writer, Larry Niven.

Important figures in the pulp-tradition are Hugo Gernsback, who started it all, and John W. Campbell, who improved sf standards no end. In my view, Hugo Gernsback was a menace, and John W. Campbell is utterly irrelevant.

The advocates of the pulp-tradition simply cannot see beyond the ends of their noses. Science fiction has existed in British and European literature for about a hundred years. It existed as a natural part of all literature. Writers outside the science fiction category, both major and minor, have turned to the speculative themes of sf as a means of saying something. They did this before Gernsback came along, they did it all through Campbell's so-called Golden Age, and they continue to do it now. After fifty years, pulp science fiction has improved itself to the point where the half-dozen or so best sf writers can compete with writers outside. This is my principal indictment of the pulp-tradition: it put the clock back and created something worse. Gernsback and his imitators siphoned off speculative literature into crass, commercial magazines, and made it into trash. After fifty years, we're just recovering. The ignorance of pundits like Loser del Ray-Gun is the ignorance of the pulp-tradition itself. Ray-Gun would say that Larry Niven is a better writer than Captain S.P. Meek, but I would counter that by saying: "Is Captain S.P. Meek therefore better than H.G. Wells?"... or indeed, "Is Larry Niven better than H.G. Wells?"

You could argue that all of us here today, including myself, are indirect products of the pulp-tradition. This I do not and cannot deny. All this is made possible by Hugo Gernsback, etc etc. But think of it this way. The science fiction world today is like a colony. It is as if a number of people from, say, Britain were transported fifty years ago to a penal colony on Corsica. After half a century, the population has increased immeasurably, they have a few traditions and folk-heroes, and they think of themselves as Corsicans. The regime that put them there has long gone. What I'm saying is: "Hey, we're British really. Let's go home to Birmingham."

Obviously, a few people will choose to remain in Corsica, but perhaps the rest will leave. You can take it, therefore, that I'm all in favour of so-called science fiction rejoining the so-called mainstream. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner it happens the better.

The other besetting ill of science fiction is, paradoxically its present success. If you doubt this success, all you have to do is walk around the book-room here and see the truly staggering amount of stuff that is being published. Or you could go to the movies and see one of the two or three biggest box-office successes in the history of the cinema. You could read *Locus*, and see the sort of money that some sf writers make these days (but not all). Science fiction imagery is being used to sell everything from hi-fi equipment to instant mashed potato. To quote at least two hundred of the pulp-tradition believers: "We must be doing something right."

I often wonder if we are. As far as I can see, the present boom in science fiction is an artificial one. It is principally a publishing boom. Although there undoubtedly more people reading sf these days, and there are certainly more people writing it, the bulge is in the middle, where the publishers are. Too much stuff is coming out, and it's coming out faster than it could conceivably be written, or even read. Just take Britain, for example, where the activity is considerably lower than it is in the States, or even in France or Japan. Here we have twelve paperback publishers with science fiction lists. If each publisher brings out only one book per month (and in fact they bring out rather more), then in any one year we would have 144 new titles on the shelves. How many people can or want to read nearly three novels a week? And can you remember any year when there were more than about half a dozen new sf titles worth reading?

In practice, of course, most of the new books that come out aren't new at all. A very large proportion of all apparently new books are reprints or reissues. Much of the remainder is taken up with the stuff I talked about earlier: the film tie-ins, the series, the sequels. Only a very small proportion, about ten per cent, is new work, autonomously conceived, available for the first time. So the excess fat in the publishing boom does not necessarily reflect an equivalent boom in creative work.

You could say that a large market makes room for everyone, for a variety of tastes. Readers can select from a wide range of material. A lot of stuff is coming back into print, and some of it deservedly. And even if a hundred bad novels are published in a year, surely all of them are vindicated by the hundred-and-first, which might be the new *Left Hand of Darkness*, *Lord of the Rings* or *Dune*?

I don't argue against this. What I see is the danger of over-extension, of science fiction growing so fat that it collapses in a heap of blubber. We can take a lesson, in miniature, from the recent past.

A few years ago I read a letter published in the SFWA *Bulletin* that contained the following sentence. "I am now the largest market in the world for sf short stories." The writer of the letter was Roger Elwood, announcing the fact that he was signing up more than thirty new anthologies with publishers, and that he was looking for short stories to fill them. It was not long before this first batch of anthologies had grown to a number that some estimates put at more than eighty. What Mr Elwood did was to boldly go where no sf had gone before... in other words, to many publishers who had never done any sf. A majority of sf writers proclaimed that this was nothing but for the good, because it meant a larger market. Then many writers, possibly the same ones, rushed in to fill these new markets. The consequences of all this are well known. It was an artificially expanded market. Any publisher who brought out an Elwood anthology was competing with 79 or more similar books, and each Elwood anthology had the distinct disadvantage of being distinctively mediocre. Many of them sold as well as bacon sandwiches in Tel Aviv. Not only did the Elwood anthologies put themselves out of the market, but in the process practically annihilated what existing market there was for anyone else's anthology. Nowadays, it is a publishing truism that science fiction anthologies do not sell. The market for short stories is now somewhat smaller than it was a few years ago, because people were greedy.

I got a tell-tale warning pain in my elbow when I heard about Mr Elwood's anthologies, and I feel it throbbing again whenever I hear complacent noises about the present boom. The lesson from Roger Elwood is that an expansion of the commercial market will be short-lived,

and that it doesn't create a parallel boom in creativity. Indeed, the signs are that the market is full of padding these days. On the other hand, good writing and honest, ambitious work *will* create its own market, *will* bring about a natural expansion of the market.

Anyway, having had my grumbles, I should like to finish on a positive note. It is a great pleasure to be made the guest of honour at a convention, if only because it gives me the unique opportunity to speak candidly and subjectively about my own outlook. This is what you have been hearing, and I'm not speaking for anyone except myself. You should always remember that criticism is a form of autobiography... I'm not trying to separate myself from the things I have been describing. I am in, and of, the science fiction world.

I'd like to close, therefore, with what I suppose will be seen as a personal statement. Much of what I have said will sound as if I am intending to turn my back on sf in the future, and I'd like to correct this view. I see absolutely nothing wrong with science fiction as literature. The novel I'm writing at the moment is what we would all recognise as sf... the two or three ideas I have for the novels that will follow are all sf. I'd go so far as to say that the science fiction type of novel, the speculative novel, has more life in it, more potential, than most of the other forms of novel I have read in the last few years.

The only thing wrong with science fiction is the 'science fiction' label, and all the misbegotten attitudes that have arisen around it. We are all aware of the close-minded attitudes from people outside the sf world who have not read the stuff... we know that their dislike of science fiction is based on ignorance and prejudice. My point is that there are similar attitudes within the field, just as ignorant, just as prejudiced, yet they are mostly invisible to us because they appear to be on our side. These internal ignorant attitudes will eventually destroy the freedoms of creative writers, unless they are exposed for what they are.

Science fiction writers are blessed with many valuable things. They have an active, intelligent and open-minded readership. They have a successful commercial framework within which to work. The 'science fiction' label conceals a multitude of sins, but it also provides a liberal framework within which to write. New writers are still being actively encouraged. There is room for the experimental story, for the avant-garde, for the work you can't easily pin a label on. All this is valuable, and, as far as I know, unique in modern publishing. I say to the remarkable men and women who are my colleagues: write up to the level of your audience. Make life difficult for them. Give them autonomous, demanding novels. Stimulate them and entertain them. Don't listen to the Loser del Ray-Guns of the world, don't settle for the imaginatively second-hand, for the easy sequel to your first success. You're not writing for beer-money, you're writing for minds. Put your language first; language is the test of reality, the medium of ideas.

Thank you.

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE MEN was Christopher Priest's Guest of Honour speech at Novacon 9, November 1978.

From The Underworld

JOSEPH NICHOLAS

The basic trouble with democracy---as thoroughgoing authoritarians like Heinlein and Pournelle might say---is that everyone has a vote, and those who win usually do so via an appeal to the lowest common denominator of the electorate. An extreme and cynical view, perhaps, but one that strikes me as depressingly true of the Hugo Awards, which, as must surely be obvious to anyone with the slightest modicum of intelligence, are now more of an annual popularity contest than an objective test of the year's artistic achievements. Particularly last year's, handed out at Seacon: why else would Ben Bova have walked off with his 58th Hugo for his editing of *Analog*, which just happens to be the world's biggest-selling (about 100,000 copies per issue) pure SF magazine? That Ed Perman did not receive the award for his editing of *F&SF*---an altogether more literate and open-minded publication---is little short of criminal, and again demonstrates the Hugo voters' fatal (and execrable) tendency to value flashy ideas and clever wiring diagrams above intelligent writing and thoughtful speculation.

And what about the fiction? Well, most of that was pretty dull and forgettable. Chris Priest has elsewhere remarked that, overall, 1978 was a remarkably poor year for SF, and I can't but agree with him. C.J.Cherryh's *The Faded Sun: Kesrith*, for example, was merely imitation Andre Norton, displaying about as much originality and imaginative depth as the average *Daily Telegraph* editorial, and in five years' time will probably have been forgotten by all but C.J.Cherryh fans. Much the same strictures apply to Anne McCaffrey's *The White Dragon*, so repellently mawkish a novel that to call it the year's worst would be to understate the case by several orders of magnitude. That it won the Gandalf (a singularly useless award, instituted by Lin Carter on the probable grounds that he knew he wouldn't get one any other way---and hasn't even won it himself, ho ho) is bad enough, but that it was ever nominated for the Hugo (one of the nominations, believe it or not, being from McCaffrey herself) did more for my sense of wonder than any SF I've ever read; but then that's what a 50,000-copy hardcover US sale can do for you. The other three novels on

the shortlist weren't particularly impressive, either: James Tiptree's *Up The Walls Of The World* was, for her, a distinctly below-par effort (although I'd be genuinely interested to learn her reason for withdrawing it, and can't help wondering if it had anything to do with a desire to redress the nakedly reverse-discrimination feminist slant of the shortlist); Tom Reamy's *Blind Voices*, although undoubtedly the best of the five, was so on only the most minimal of scales; and the eventual winner, Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake*, was (a) not a novel but a series of cobbled-together *Analog* novelettes, and hence little better than a collection of subplots in desperate search of an overall frame, and (b) a deliberate pandering to the adolescent wish-fulfilment inherent in all of us---"Look how simply *wonderful* the world will be when we have true equality!"---and hence about as plausible as the idea that the USSR will one day voluntarily abandon its strategic nuclear attack capability. Yes, I know SF deals mainly in *un*reality, but McIntyre's unreality is so naive as to be acutely embarrassing.

The winners of the short fiction categories were (although such seems frankly impossible) even worse. How in God's name did Poul Anderson, who hasn't written anything genuinely new since about 1965, manage to pull down a Hugo for his novelette "Hunter's Moon" in preference to Tom Disch's far superior "The Man Who Had No Idea"? Because Anderson is a popular author, that's why, and unlike Disch doesn't try to make you think about what you're reading (by his own admission, he's simply competing for his readers' beer money---or: "Why should I try to produce works of art when I'm only writing for cretins anyway?" ---which is pretty damn patronizing however you look at it). "Hunter's Moon" is typical of him, all action and aliens and a plot dreamed up while watching soap suds run down the draining board on a Sunday afternoon, and the only good things I can find to say about it are (a) that its prose wasn't as impenetrably purple as usual, and (b) that its heroes weren't bloody Danish.

John Varley is an equally impoverished "writer" (I use the term advisedly) and although his novella "The Persistence of Vision" is different from the general run of his previous fiction---placing greater emphasis on character and less on gosh-wow gimmickry---it is nowhere near as good as Chris Priest's "The Watched". "But it's good for Varley!" I heard people cry, and it's a claim with which I must reluctantly agree---but what has the author to do with it? In this instance, quite a lot, since it was patently obvious that he wasn't getting the Hugo for his novella alone but because of a widespread feeling that he somehow "deserved" it. For Christ's sake! I thought we were supposed to be distributing these blasted trophies on the basis of artistic merit, not according to a roster of "Buggins' turns"?

(Oh look, I forgot to mention that C.J.Cherryh's "Cassandra" won the short story category. Hardly surprising, really, since I can't remember anything about it. Nor about any of the other short stories nominated, come to that.)

That the Hugos are so awarded, however, is not altogether surprising. When they were first introduced, back in 1953, the amount of SF published in any one year was small enough for everyone to have read everything, and nominate on that basis; but in today's boom conditions such is obviously no longer the case. There is, therefore, a clear tendency for people to vote for their favourite authors regardless of the actual quality of their output during the year in question, and occasionally (as with Varley) for those writers whom they feel have been "unfairly" passed over in previous years---whereas anyone with any integrity would bloody well admit that they hadn't read enough of that year's SF to form an even halfway comprehensive picture and show their ignorance by voting "No Award". Which is of course a pretty naive and idealistic viewpoint to adopt; and in any case, if enough people so voted there very likely wouldn't be any Hugos awarded that year, which would be *quite* unthinkable...

Bullshit. Just because the things exist doesn't mean that they *always* have to be handed out. If, as we clearly prefer to kid ourselves, they are genuinely intended to honour the "best" of any given year, then it makes a great deal of sense to actually withhold them if it is felt that the SF of that year does not measure up to our highest expectations---but, again, this is a pretty naive and idealistic viewpoint, and one alien to the majority of Hugo voters, who presumably prefer to compromise themselves by their lusty applause of the second or third rate rather than provide the authors with a salutary warning that they will not be fobbed off with the tawdry, the derivative, the shallow, the inconsequential, and the artistically derelict.

And the authors---what effect is a Hugo likely to have on the author who wins it? If past experience is any guide (and it usually is), the worst possible, since to achieve popular acclaim for one book or story generates a strong desire to repeat that success with the next book or story---in other words, to give your readers more of what they're already getting, and not even to think of trying something different. Instead of slow progress, therefore, sudden stagnation: which is why Robert Heinlein goes on turning out the same old one-sided pseudo-philosophical crap in book after book, Joe Haldeman is still playing around with tedious little spaceships and aliens and ray-guns, Spider Robinson is sinking deeper and deeper into glutinous purple sentimentality, Roger Zelazny keeps hacking out his formulaic one-dimensional action-adventure claptrap ...

At the moment, the justification for the Hugos is twofold. Firstly, so that the publishers can print HUGO AWARD WINNER on the cover of the book in question (and, misleadingly, on the covers of all the other books by the same author) and thus sell an extra couple of thousand copies of it (and them) to the credulous reader-in-the-street---who nine times out of ten wouldn't recognize good literature even if it were to bite him in the leg. (And if you think popularity is necessarily indicative of literary quality, then you'd better start justifying the absence of Arthur Hailey and Harold Robbins from your bookshelves.) Secondly, so that the author in question can screw a bigger advance out of the publishers for his next dollop of mass-market pabulum, thus graduating from a freezer full of hamburgers to one full of caviar.

And if these are the only justifications that can be found for the continuance of the Hugo Awards, then we would be doing the SF genre as a whole an immeasurable favour if we were to abandon them altogether. Right now.

"Stine plans an aggressive acquisitions program for Starblaze (Books)... An example of the sort of book he is looking for is *They'd Rather Be Right*, which has been out of print for 20 years. Printed as a Galaxy novel under the title *The Forever Machine*, the book received a Hugo Award in 1955 as Best Novel. Stine tried and failed to get the title for the Starblaze series; he was outbid by another publisher. 'That's the caliber of, and kind of book I'm looking for,' Stine told SFC."

SF CHRONICLE 1.3 (December 1978) edited by Andrew Porter

"The list of the Hugo winners in the science fiction novel is not quite as depressing as a summary of Pulitzer prizes, but give us an equivalent amount of time and we may well beat the Pulitzer jury by miles. Is there a soul who is now alive who remembers *They'd Rather Be Right*, which in 1955 drew the second Hugo ever awarded a piece of fiction? Unfortunately, I do, and I wish I didn't."

MORE ISSUES AT HAND by William Atheling Jr / James Blish (1970)

'This House Believes That Characterization Is Not Necessary For Good Science Fiction.'

A debate held at Novacon 9 (November 1979), chaired by Tim Stannard and featuring Ian Watson, Peter Weston, Dave Langford and Pamela Bulmer. Taped transcript courtesy of Aardvark House (Gerald Bishop); transcribed by Joseph Nicholas.

STANNARD: My name is Tim Stannard, for those who don't know; I am chairing this debate; what I say goes and is final; I will tell you the formal procedure as it is a formal debate. First of all I shall introduce the contestants; then I shall introduce the motion; then I shall call upon Ian Watson for the prosecution---sorry *[Audience falls about]* ---to propose the motion; Peter Weston will then oppose it; Dave Langford will then second the motion and Pam Bulmer will oppose it, secondly. After that it will be opened up to the floor. You will please address your remarks to me, but if you wish to ask specific questions or make specific points against any person speaking please say so. After that, the pros and the cons will have one last chat each and we'll take a vote of hands on the motion. Okay---

WATSON: Mr Chairman, don't you think that we should take a vote before and a vote after in the great tradition of BBC debates to see whether the oratory sways the audience, or whether this was all for naught in any case?

STANNARD: I take the point, but that is not the way it is done--- *[Halfhearted boos. Ken Bulmer: "Any bribes going? Any bribes going?"]* ---otherwise you might get quite a good idea of what you've got coming to you, Ian. *[Tittering. Introductions follow.]* Right---we're off. I will call upon Ian Watson to propose the motion, which is that: "This house believes that characterization is not necessary for good SF."

WATSON: Do I have to stand up, sir?

STANNARD: You may take your pleasure, whether you wish to *[Audience falls about again]* ---whether you wish to or not.

WATSON: Do you want me to stand up or sit down? *[Audience requests him to stand]*

STANNARD: You have seven minutes left.

WATSON: Oh---I want to tell you first of all about a very dangerous illness you can get. It's called heroin or hero-addiction, or character-addiction. Now, characterization isn't an essential element in the world's literature if we bother looking at it in a properly historical perspective rather than concentrating myopically on the mainstream novel of the last 200 years, which has not unnaturally hooked us on this notion of characterization, addicting us to it to an extent where it is comparable to heroin or hero-addiction. Now we misread an author like Chaucer (a great storyteller) terribly if we believe that characterization in his narrative poems was anything but a variable dependent upon content---moral, didactic content. Character in Chaucer, and many other writers, is generally determined by content, and this was how it was for thousands of years.

SF is a didactic literature---not in the Gernsback sense of teaching science, but in the sense that it is content-oriented. Thus SF belongs in the great world tradition of literature, where character is similarly conditioned by, and subordinate to, the ideas being put over. It belongs in the tradition of *The Canterbury Tales* (marvellous poems like "The Knight's Tale"---moral exemplars); it belongs in the tradition of Virgil's *Aeneid*, which of course is the Roman *Roots*, with Aeneas, *pius* to his family line, in the role of Kunta Kinte---there's a strong structural connection between the *Aeneid* and *Roots*, if you think about it; and *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*---Adam and Eve don't speak to display character but to incarnate great religious concepts. There was a mediaeval French poet called Jean Bodel who, speaking about the true subjects of literature in the Middle Ages, said (and I quote):---

> Ne sont que trois matières à nul homme attendant
> De France, et de Bretagne et de Rom la grant

I don't need to translate that, do I? *[Audience: "Yes!"]* "There are only three matters of interest to anybody: the matter of France, the matter of Britain, and the matter of Rome the Great." Now this wasn't a cranky straitjacket that this particular person was slapping on mediaeval literature but how it was seen at the time. Of course, nowadays there are more matters, or *matières*, but SF best recognizes its matters---there's the matter of aliens, the matter of space colonies, the matter of the future. Try to imagine the artificiality of an encyclopaedia of the mainstream novel which could in any way resemble Peter Nicholls's *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, with theme entries in it: realize, on the other hand, the appropriateness of theme entries in an encyclopaedia of science fiction---it has its matters.

Characterization, as we've dwelt upon it today, is politically connected with the bourgeois individualism of the propertied classes from the 18th century onwards. *[Hoots of derision; sarcastic applause]* So anyone who opposes this motion is a reactionary pig. *[Laughter]* Free-enterprise capitalism waves the banner of individualism; thus Art is said to create a range of marvellous, special individuals with whom one can make friends, in whose lap one can live a false life because, actually, all around, for most people there is an increasing alienation of self in the service of the same capitalism. (As an aside on this, I should point out that, with the opening of the Chinese market after Chairman Hua's visit, if we go on with this characterization business in SF we won't sell to the Chinese market opening for SF and this will be very bad for the country. So you will also be a traitor if you vote against this motion.) Today, this doting on character basically serves this maintenance function: it keeps up a capitalist status quo where individuals are alienated and live false lives in the bosom of fictional characters, and it also does this detrimentally to the future evolution of our consciousness. *[Member of audience: "Huh?"]* Yes! If we say that X, Y and Z, whom I take as boring characters in the mainstream, are fully-rounded, well-painted characters to whom SF should aspire, we ignore the fact that no one in this world is yet a fully-rounded character, and an Art that proclaims they are is lying. Barry Bayley wrote an interesting thing about his "five minute life" in *Foundation* recently, pointing out that most people only live for about five minutes, or fifteen at most; these are the moments when they're actually self-aware. The rest of the time we are running on autopilot; we are automata conditioned by consciousness programmes. *[Peter Weston: "Speak for yourself."]* I speak for you as well. *[Laughter. Stannard: "Order! Thank you."]* We---or should I say you ---have as yet very little real consciousness; we have quirks, tics, programmes; in fact we're automata most of the time. Some of my best friends are automata. We don't understand the programmes which govern us; we just obey them. SF is much more honest at presenting programmed exemplars. One of its major matters---using that word from that French poet who so wisely understood the nature of literature---is also evolution beyond this state: towards superconsciousness, towards other future, alien cultures different from ours. What we consider, from our conditioning by the mainstream novel, to be fully-rounded, real characters, actually prevent and work against this coming

evolution of consciousness by maintaining that we are as we are.

Characterization denies the future; it denies the alien; it denies future man. This is a reflex expected in mainstream literature, which is past-oriented---or rather, is enmeshed in its own misreading of the past. However, SF is future-oriented, and the future human will be nothing like what we understand by a well-rounded character---that partial, misleading semblance which does not enhance our lives at all but only pleasurably comforts us with images of our own automaton-behaviour writ large. Thus characterization is counter to the revolution of the spirit and the revolution of consciousness; it is counter to the future and thus, of course, biologically undesirable to us in the Darwinian sense. It also represents a betrayal of continuity with the real literature of the past, which asked the great questions as SF, with different insights, asks them today. I ask you to uphold the motion.
[Cheers and applause.]

STANNARD: Thank you very much. Peter Weston to oppose the motion.

WESTON: Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, and Ian Watson. I must comment upon my opponent; I must say, Ian, that I found your speech rather like your books: a lot of words, but rather lacking in characterization. *[Laughter]* What I think Ian probably meant to say--- *[Laughter]* ---was that in SF---and this is a valid point, one that I'm sure we'll all agree with---ideas are very important. Correct? Right? We all agree. However, Ian would doubtless maintain that ideas are all that matter in SF. I submit that that is not true. There is a simple way in which I feel sure I can convince you of my case. Last night I went home and looked at my bookcase and said to myself, "Which are my favourite SF books?" Or some of my favourite SF books. Let's just see what I picked out of the bookcase.

Rogue Moon. *The Big Time*. Come on! You've all read these, haven't you? I hope you have. *The Man In The High Castle*. *[Audience: "Yes."]* Budrys again---I like Budrys ---*Who?* Superb book. And then: *The Left Hand Of Darkness*, another good book. Now what is there in common about all these books? Well, they're all written in English, yes, yes. But they're a bit more profound than that; stretch your mind a bit to the real nitty-gritty of this debate; these books are by people who can actually write. *[Laughter]* They're not by Ian Watson, they're real interesting stuff; they have people. That's the key---people. Take *Rogue Moon*---in a way it's a strange book, because someone once said that *Rogue Moon* is about a bunch of psychopaths who argue the whole story through. Ian Watson would doubtless say, given the opportunity, that this is a book about a matter-transmitter and an alien artifact on the Moon. That is true; that comes into it; the artifact forms the basis of the last chapter. But the whole fascination of this book, I submit, is the character interplay. Does anyone in the audience remember the hero? Hawkes, Edmund Hawkes---a scientist, a cold, ascetic scientist wrapped up in this project, who meets a real fanatic: Barker, who drives a sports car; and who meets a girl, Elizabeth, the mother figure. All right, Budrys is overdrawing these characters, but by God it's fascinating stuff. That is what SF is about; not just gimmicks, but people.

And I could put the same argument about *Who?* The technology, the idea, the gimmick of *Who?*---it really happens offstage, the rebuilding of a man, half man half robot. This book is about the chacterization of the hero, Lucas Martino, and the agony he goes through; not about the gimmicks and the nuts and bolts, as Ian Watson might say, but about the people. And every good SF book---I'll give another example here, I'm not just sucking up, I mean it: *The Space Machine* by Chris Priest. It's a marvellous book and it isn't just about the space machine that gives it its title, although it forms the basis of the story, but about the character interplay between the man and woman, particularly in the first part. The first hundred pages are absolutely magnificent. The Martians are good; I liked the characterization. *[Laughter]* Can a Martian be said to have character? I don't know. But that is what SF is about.

Getting a bit beyond that, people like Isaac Asimov, of whom some of you may have heard, has written any number of books, some better than others. What is Asimov's best novel? Would you agree with me: *The Caves Of Steel*? *[Audience: "No!"]* Oh well---bunch of deadbeats in this audience. *[Laughter]* *The Caves Of Steel* is Asimov's best book by a very long margin, and the reason is the people in it. Not the Foundation and the robots and all the other Asimov gimmicks, but Elijah Bailey, a man living a fairly humdrum life (in some respects) in a huge city of the future, and what makes it interesting is the conflicts, the problems, that this man, this personality, faces and endures. One last example: Poul Anderson, who's not normally noted as the world's best SF writer, and is regarded as something of a hard-science writer---but *Brain Wave*, one of his very early novels, is a book about people and the effects of the gimmick on people.

To conclude, let me say that what makes SF succeed is the interplay of people with a problem or idea. If we take Ian Watson's argument, which I'm sure Dave Langford will also say, and say that all SF is just a cabinet of curiosities, a flash in the pan, a gimmick---we're relegating SF to trivia. I'm not prepared to allow my favourite literature to be so relegated. SF matters, and if you think it matters you will vote for us. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

STANNARD: Thank you, Peter Weston. I now call upon Dave Langford.

LANGFORD: Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, and all the *ad hominem* arguments who happen to be present. After all the foregoing frivolity, I feel it my duty to introduce a note of seriousness and solemnity into the proceedings by returning to the original wording of the motion: "that characterization is not necessary for good SF." This speaker is very tempted to prove by remorseless logic (as Peter Weston has in some way) that characterization *is* necessary for *bad* SF--- *[Laughter]* ---and leave you to ponder the obvious corollary. However, I'm not one to use a sledgehammer to crack a nut, and certainly not when I have a multimegaton nuclear strike capability which I can use instead. *[Laughter]* Characterization, I feel it my duty to explain, is not only unnecessary but undesirable, not only in science fiction but in any fiction. *[Laughter and applause]* Consider. On the one hand we have the truly rich and complex character: throbbing, pulsating, warm and alive--- *[Indicates self... Laughter]* ---brimming over with humanity and individualism, verbose, drunk---all human character is here. On the other hand is the sterotype: a person whose very existence is two-dimensional, whose very essence is a stale compendium of clichés; in a word, the man in the street. The present assembly is of course excepted---you have acquitted yourselves of being stereotypes or cardboard characters since you are not sitting in a stereotyped fashion in the bar, drinking beer of a slightly cardboard character. But: there are numberless millions of dull, stereotyped people (most of whom *were* at the bar last time I tried to buy some two-dimensional beer), and these people comprise virtually the whole of the human race. These are the people fiction is being written for, and beer is being brewed for, and therefore these are the ones that fiction should be about. In the same way, when writing for English-speaking people, it's rather a cunning wheeze to use English. *[Laughter]*

Reverting to SF, it's obvious that the statistics bear me out. The Perry Rhodan, *Star Trek*, *Space: 1999* and Lensman series of books are 100% stereotyped, utterly devoid of genuine characterization, and for that very reason sell better than any other SF. You might also add to that list of SF the books of Erich von Däniken. Remember, mass popularity must mean they're good---to argue otherwise would be to strike a blow against democracy, not to mention the Hugo awards. *[Laughter and applause]* An incidental side effect of this line of reasoning is the resolution of that old problem of whether so-called mainstream fiction is better than so-called SF. Less enlightened critics have always argued that SF was less good since it was so mediocre and stereotyped, but in the clear light of my reasoning it can now be seen that these qualities are what make SF so much *better*. *[Laughter]*

So characterization is undesirable in the literature of which SF is a part. There are of course other things to consider: SF is also part of the wonderful world of fandom and conventions (the part, in fact, which is supposed to make all the hangovers and dull speakers worthwhile)--- and in this context the characterization game can be actively unhealthy. Consider: the only rich, complex character writers can portray is their own---since even if you can find other rich, complex personalities, their owners are not in a position to lend them to you. Writers are therefore compelled to write about their own fascinating personalities in various guises, titivated here and there to make them marginally less boring. Luckily most writers

have quite a bit to say about themselves and rather enjoy revealing all; but having done so and exposed all their foibles and inner weaknesses, they become prey to con-men, blackmailers, itinerant psychiatrists and *Vector* interviewers. Faced with this onslaught, many writers display their inner strength by going into hiding. The whole so-called tax exile business is thus explained; here is the reason why writers retreat to such godforsaken spots as Ireland, Sri Lanka and Ulverston. The danger to the world of SF fans and conventions is obvious. If, for example, our very own Chris Priest started putting rich, complex characters into his books--- *[Laughter]* ---then sooner or later he'd have to move from Harrow into some remote place of exile and wouldn't be available as a Guest of Honour. *[Chris Priest: "Bye, folks." Laughter]*

Of course I have by now wholly convinced you---I can see you nodding off in agreement---and so can spare you my searching analysis of the precise definitions of the terms "science fiction", "fiction", "characterization" and "good". *[Stannard: "Good!" Laughter]* To set the seal on matters I'll simply repeat again the wording of this motion: "that this house believes that characterization is not necessary for good SF". Logically, you can only vote against the motion if you genuinely believe that out of all the vast mountains of SF written to date, and the still vaster heaps yet to come, there is not one book or short story which succeeds without using this modern fad of deep characterization. Peter Weston has argued, irrelevantly, that there are good books with characterization: but the point is, are there any without? Even any short stories? One very, very short story by Fredric Brown? If even one story in all these infinite vistas of time, space and probability can be good SF without its use, then characterization is not necessary but optional---and the motion must pass. *[Applause and cheers.]*

STANNARD: Thank you, Dave Langford. I now call on Pam Bulmer to second the opposition to the motion.

PAM BULMER: Is characterization necessary for good SF?
Well, we're talking about science *fiction*; and the fictional elements, I maintain, must be good, or we get bad fiction masquerading as good SF---as if the "science" means the word "fiction" takes on an entirely different meaning. I contend that good SF should contain the same basic elements as any good fiction. Good SF, by definition, must also be good fiction... the essence of which is story or plot, a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. It's impossible to conceive of events without people; if you don't have people you don't have problems. Our whole world is in fact a subjective interpretation of sensory data; a description, for example, of a space flight is just that, an essay, unless some incident is related, some conflict inserted to turn it into a story. There must be an element of suspense, and for that you must have character. The "truth" or convincingness of the writer's world will be affected by the convincingness of the characters.

Characterization... some of you may be old enough to remember Professor Joad on the old *Brains Trust*, who used to start everything off by saying: "Well, it all depends on what you mean by characterization." It isn't something you put into a book in dollops. To get good fiction you cannot just take a pound of descriptive writing, a pound of characterization, two pounds of action, three of dialogue, and seed them with sound, well-ripened ideas (but not too ripe), stir them well, simmer for a few weeks, bake in a moderate intellect, and then set aside to mature in a publisher's hands for 6 months. And then, of course, serve nicely garnished with a book jacket, publicity and glowing reviews. The process is much less mechanical than that. All the elements in a book---characterization, description, ideas etc.---will be a reflection of the total imagination of the writer. Good fiction relies on the power of the writer to bounce the reader into believing what he says. No story is anything unless the reader can sympathize with the character whose name he finds on the page. Let there be "truth" as to the men and women there. As readers, we need to be drawn into a relation of confidence in the writer, for then we're prepared to believe in what he or she says. The reader must see the writer as reliable. Reliability is created dynamically by our response to the prose; we trust the writer as we trust good friends. When characters do not convince---when they're wooden, thin, mechanical---we have no confidence in the sensitivity, intelligence, balance and wisdom of the writer. The reader may think "Yes, that's plausible," and then may think "Well, this writer's rather stupid and insensitive, self-indulgent and pretentious," and he can't take the writer's word for anything at all. We cannot switch our recognition of life's verisimilitude on and off. We demand consistency, within the convention of the word. It is not merely a question of whether characterization is necessary: faulty characterization destroys the credibility of the writer's world---we have an uneasy sense that something is not quite right.

I'm not talking here about characterization in depth, as found in the mainstream. SF can get away with minimal characterization. Characterization in novels of ideas, where speculation continues after the book is finished, can rest on types---stereotypes, if you like---as this is one end of the broad band of what we mean by "characterization". And here I'd add that of course Homer has characterization; his people are real, and he's before the *Aeneid*. *[Titters]* We must give some credence at least to characters, or types, or we cease trusting either the ideas they're propounding or the world the author is creating. In novels of ideas characterization can, as I've said, be minimal; the reader picks up signposts, usually visual; the author gives a rough guide and the reader thinks "Ah yes! Captain Kirk, or Mr Spock," but if the characters then become... *[drowned by laughter---partly caused by her having said "Dr Spock"]* ...the reader becomes disoriented. This is bad characterization; the stick people are not even consistent stick people. The falsity obtrudes into the world of the book and the writer loses credibility. The exploration of ideas is valid in itself, but ideas are what people have; if people did not exist it would be necessary to invent them simply in order to accommodate the ideas. Ideas cannot exist (except artifically) in a vacuum; they exist, of course, in speculative essays and can be explored there; they then stand out in all their purity. In fiction they must have sufficient characterization to support them: for example, Voltaire's *Candide*, which is only marginally SF, has only minimal characterization, but the whole is informed with a passionate concern for humanity and there's a vigorous intellect at work.

It could be argued that good SF often does not contain people; it may be about computers, planets, aliens, metaphysics (whatever that is), but these are all part of what humans think about. Computers cannot operate without programming, which is done by humans, or by a superintellect which is itself a construction of the human mind. A planet may be a character, as in Lem's *Solaris*... but for conflicts to exist which the reader cares about, for him (like Scheherazade's husband) to want to know what happens next, then the knowledge of human nature comes in. In other words, SF characterization is often deflected onto computers---for example, R2D2 in *Star Wars*, HAL in *2001*---or planets, or aliens (*The Left Hand of Darkness*), or Anne McCaffrey's dragons, or even onto superminds. But SF is written by human beings for human beings. If the characters created by the writer lack credibility, then we start having an imaginary conversation with the writer and cease to believe in his world. We may get some intellectual enjoyment from the book, but it ceases to be good fiction. The writer who betrays too much interest in his own ideas can never be more than interesting. We demand a different experience altogether; we must be entertained on more levels than the dry intellect. Wells, Orwell, Clarke, Aldiss, Ballard, Shaw, Priest... the list is endless... there are many, many SF writers who have characterization. One could argue about its depth; this varies enormously. Ideas, of course, are contained in all fiction, quite apart from SF; good SF explores science in its broadest sense: knowledge. It requires intellectual energy, and the quality of the energy, the vigour of the intellect, becomes suspect when it displays blatant ignorance of one of the most important areas of knowledge: human nature. Even at the level of pure entertainment, which I would not disparage, bad characterization will interfere with the story. Characterization, to the extent that it does not contravene the shared core of human knowledge about human nature, is not only necessary but essential for all good fiction, and especially for good science fiction. *[Applause.]*

STANNARD: Thank you, Pam Bulmer. Right---the motion is now open to the floor; would you stick your hand up very clearly and would you shout very loudly your comments, ideas or questions.

QUESTIONER 1: I would ask if by the term "characterization" good characterization is implied, or whether we are to assume that characterization is equal to consistency or the logical flow of events, as Mrs Bulmer seems to be trying to imply.

PAM BULMER: I looked at the question pedantically: it says "characterization".

Q.1: But that could mean bad characterization.

PAM BULMER: What I was saying was that you can have characterization which is stereotyped, which is characterization of a type. It's minimal, but it's believable. It's not rounded, it's not a whole person, but it performs its function.

QUESTIONER 2: Pam's definition of characterization includes the stereotyped---if you just have any person, a stick man, that's characterization?

PAM BULMER: No. Let me put it like this: characterization has an enormous hand, from just enough brushstrokes for us to understand that this is a human being to a sense that they ooze off the page, and you know this person---really know them. *[Tittering]*

CHRIS PRIEST: Mr Chairman, such is the power of oratory that I am almost but not quite persuaded to the motion. I'd like to ask Mr Watson a few questions. *[Applause. Mr Watson had asked some stern questions following Chris's speech, printed in this issue.]* My first question is: Would Mr Watson accept the recently-propounded Priest Principle that all criticism is essentially autobiographical, bearing in mind that the novels of Ian Watson do not contain credible characterization? *[Lone member of audience: "Hurray!"]* Point two: I'd like Mr Watson to comment on the idea that the essence of all fiction is metaphor, including the role of apparent character within metaphor--- *[Laughter]*

WATSON: Taking up the point about consistency mentioned by the first speaker---I did notice that Pamela Bulmer criticized the stick-people because they were not consistent stick-people. Now it seems to me that one of the great proofs of true character is the ability to act *in*consistently, so therefore we can't really jump upon inconsistent characters in any novel because they're actually acting true-to-life. *[Applause]* Now to Chris's point... we've all forgotten it.

PRIEST: All I said was that I suggest to you that all criticism is autobiographical and this therefore explains why the novels of Ian Watson do not contain credible characterization.

WATSON: That is because I am not a credible character. *[Audience and Stannard: "Ah!" Stannard: "Second point please, Chris."]*

PRIEST: God, it's difficult. Does Mr Watson accept the idea that the whole method by which fiction works is by use of metaphor, and that the role of character within fiction is but a metaphorical one, and has he therefore read "The Lesbian Horse" where all this is explained to him? *[Laughter and applause. "The Lesbian Horse" was the very short sequel to INVERTED WORLD, produced in a limited edition for Novacon 9.]*

WATSON: Well, no, actually I haven't, but Chris has raised an important point there, which is that character is metaphorical---i.e. we're not, when we develop these characters in novels, actually interested in them as characters but as stand-ins for ideas. I don't know why he chooses to back our side of the case so kindly, but it does follow logically from what he is saying. Yes: characterization in SF is metaphorical, and stands for something else; it is a way of putting over, as the great writers of all time (Chaucer and so forth) have put over, moral exemplars, principles, theological ideas (as in Milton). So yes, character is metaphorical, it stands for something else, it stands for ideas, it---

STANNARD: Thank you.
WATSON: And those people---
STANNARD: Thank you, Ian.
WATSON: Oh. *[Laughter]*

STANNARD: Time marches on. Peter or Pam, would you like to say anything against that?

WESTON: No. *[Tittering]*

QUESTIONER 3: Would the proposers of the motion suggest a few books that would back up Ian's very valid point? *[Joe Nicholas: "GOD'S WORLD, ALIEN EMBASSY..."]*

WATSON *[giving Joe a dirty look]*: *The Embedding, The Jonah Kit... [Boos]*

QUESTIONER 3: No, I wanted him to name other novels... books which have no characterization, and are still good SF.

WATSON: Well, there's Hoyle's *The Black Cloud; Star Maker* by Olaf Stapledon...

PAM BULMER: Haven't read it. I've read his other one, got ⅔ of the way through and gave up.

WESTON: If Mr Watson had read this thing as carefully as I have, he would realize that the characterization of the stars portrayed is very moving.

WATSON: But you, on the other hand, were talking about human characters in human society, not about the characters of stars.

WESTON: The motion does not say---I specifically said to the audience, "Can Martians have character?" And if Martians can, stars can. *[Groans from audience]*

WATSON: Ah: the opposition are now propounding a theory of good books dealing with nonhuman characters which we must hypothesize; and therefore, in order to produce nonhuman characters, we must distance ourselves from the banalities of our little circle of the Earth and avoid the tics and traits and attitudes which betray the ordinary character in a novel. So yes, I agree with you: we must get away from ordinary banal human characterization and move elsewhere.

FEMALE VOICE: I think it's time Dave Langford said something. *[Scattered applause]*

STANNARD: Would you say something please, Dave?

LANGFORD: There's a slight fallacy detectable in Pam's comments in particular. The fact that books are (usually) written by human beings does mean that they reflect the character of the writer, and I think we must subtract this influence. *[Pamela shakes her head, makes horrible faces]* I'm sorry if Pam didn't say it, but I'll say it all the same: if a technical manual, or a really brilliant nonfiction book like *War in 2080*--- *[Laughter]* reflects the character of the author a great deal, we have to discount that. Book characters are of two sorts: either they're lies (the writer is trying to make up characters and convince you, and usually failing), or the writer has plagiarized his own character, and because that's not part of the inherent, creative essence of a book it must be dismissed.

QUESTIONER 4: So far the speakers seem to have chosen books that I think not everyone here might have read. I think *Star Trek* is something everybody must have seen; could we have comments on the characterization or lack thereof in *Star Trek*?

WATSON: I would say that Mr Spock is a brilliant characterization of a person who, by the very nature of his biological inheritance, seems to lack character. *[Laughter and applause]* This is something which we will come up against when we move out into the Universe: hive minds, clone cultures and so forth. We tend to be a mixed-up, heterogeneous mess on this planet, but we're going to meet in the outside universe cultures which are homogeneous, much more programmed than we, and unless we try to create fictional correlatives of these now we'll have no way of communicating with them. So your Mr Spock is an excellent character; he's an alien because we can't realize why he has no character, that he has no character, and as soon as we do we'll perceive something of the nature of alien cultures and societies.

PAM BULMER: Mr Spock isn't an alien; he's just a human being without any feeling.

WATSON: No, no, he's got pointed ears. *[Audience falls about, cheers, applauds, they are going to hurt themselves, it is not good for them to laugh so much]*

PAM BULMER: I think I've been misunderstood at some point. What I was trying to say, and which I thought I said very clearly, was that in fiction you have conflict

---that is the essence of fiction---and to have conflict and problems you need people. And therefore people have to exist in the story, to some extent; if the novel is a novel of ideas then the depth of characterization need not be as great as in, say, a novel by Jane Austen which is concerned not with ideas but with people. The novelist of ideas can get away with less depth of characterization than the mainstream novelist: this is what I'm saying.

STANNARD: We have a written question from the floor, directed at Peter and Pam. "Where is the characterization in the two following classic SF stories"---and before you answer don't forget what the motion says---one: "The last man in the world sat alone in his room. There came a knock at the door." And the second: "And the sun sank slowly in the east." If you'd like to think about the motion and then answer it. *[Tittering]*

WESTON: Whoever is the evil genius* in the audience... Fred Brown wrote the first one; I don't know who wrote the second. I do honestly think we ought to draw the line at this, because we're talking about stories that are slightly longer than one sentence, aren't we---

STANNARD: Are we?

WESTON: Well, you can't have much bloody characterization in one sentence. *[Laughter]*

LANGFORD: Which only goes to show that an SF story of one sentence can dispense with characterization, and is thus the one exception which means that the motion must pass.

WESTON *[desperately]*: But one could say, really, that this is a condensed story, like a condensed novel, and all the characterization is condensed into the words "the man". *[Applause and cheers]* And the characterization is of interest: he's the last man in the world, he's spent the last 3 weeks worrying about it, and when that knock sounds on his door all his hopes and fears flash into his mind and he sees---what? As perceptive readers, you all appreciate the subtlety of that characterization.

STANNARD: Perhaps the story is a character itself.

WATSON: I'm disturbed at the idea that the phrase "the man" conveys instant characterization---this represents a terrible sexual stereotyping. *[Laughter]*

STANNARD: From the chair, may I say "rubbish", because man includes female.

WATSON: Usually females include men as babies, I'd say.

STANNARD: The word "man" is used in law as both male and female. *[Voice from audience: "Only if it's got a capital 'M'!"]* Not in law; and I'm a solicitor. *[Cheers and applause]*

WATSON: All right---Justice Stannard overrules that according to the statute of 1731.

STANNARD: Any other questions? Okay---I will now call upon Ian to sum up on behalf of the pro-motion.

WATSON: I was interested in the books that Peter mentioned. *Rogue Moon*---of course nobody here recognized the characters; they all realized it was about an alien artifact on the Moon. *Who?*---well, I think the title tells everything; no-one knows who the character is--- *[Laughter]* ---that's the whole point of the book. And of course there was an *argumentum ad hominem* from Peter Weston, mentioning myself and my books; I am only a spokesman at the moment, and bringing in the personality or the credibility of the books themselves immediately rules this out of any classical, logical court of justice. However: I've already pointed out that character is an illusion, a betrayal; also that we ourselves are not yet full characters but automata operating on programmes which characterization sustains. There's a bandwagon going on right now, in praise of characterization and the values associated with it. I was sorry to see Chris Priest on this bandwagon, clinging on by his fingernails. *[Tittering]* It's a bandwagon which says that characterization is a good thing in SF because we're moving out of the ghetto into a bigger world. Those who leap onto the bandwagon are not trying to think; they're following the programme of the crowd, the narrow crowd: they're not trying to become real, full beings.

Now, if you vote against this motion--- *[Joe Nicholas: "You will be taken out and shot."]* No, no, you will be part of a programmed bandwagon and will therefore prove my point about automata and the non-authenticity of character. So I can only conclude that if the motion before this house fails it will automatically have proved its point. *[Laughter]* In no way can we lose; so get onto the voting; we know the outcome; we can get to the bar before you.

STANNARD: Thank you, Ian. Peter, would you like to sum up for the opposition to the motion?

WESTON: It's very difficult to follow that brilliant address by my opponent, but all I can say is that if this motion is defeated we are once more plunging into the abyss that Hugo Gernsback opened in 1926 when he said, or implied, that all SF (or scientifiction, as he would call it) was about was ideas, when you have a little asterisk in each paragraph with a little explanation at the bottom ---which in Ian Watson novels would be a jolly good idea. *[Laughter]*

WATSON: That's an *argumentum ad hominem*.
WESTON: Well, whatever it is, it's fun.
WATSON: It's an argument against the man rather than the idea.

WESTON: It's against your books, Ian, really. *[Laughter]* If we say "Yes, Mr Gernsback was right" we are throwing out all the valiant efforts that have been put in over the last 50 years by writers to get away from, as I've said before, SF as a cabinet of curiosities. If you want SF to mean anything; if you want SF writers to write what I call good SF---because that's what the motion is about; any idiot can write bad SF *[Tittering]* ---we stand for good SF. And I just do not believe, as Ian perhaps implied, that *Rogue Moon* is not familiar to this audience, because it certainly is; these books and others like them are good SF and they are about people. That is my case; people matter; writing about people properly is characterization--- who can ever forget Alfred Bester's epic character Gully --- *[pause]* ---?

STANNARD: Foyle. *[Voice from audience: "Peter Weston can forget it."]*

WESTON: Peter Weston never forgets. This motion is... hang on, we're against it, aren't we. *[Laughter]* We're arguing against the motion; we're saying that characterization is necessary, and I hope you will support us by voting against a very false and base motion put forward by my opponents. Thank you.

STANNARD: Thank you, Peter Weston. The motion is: "This house believes that characterization is not necessary for good SF." Will all those in favour of the motion raise one hand and leave it up while it be counted. *[Pause. Kev Smith raises one hand; Joe pulls it down. He raises his other hand; Joe pulls it down. He raises his foot... Kev: "I came here without prejudice! They have convinced me!"]* I don't know people who wear shoes on their feet, but never mind.

WESTON: I don't know how Kev Smith dares stick his hand up when he's gone on at me that it's important to have people and all that stuff... shame on you, Kevin Smith.
SMITH: I came here without prejudice and was swayed by the arguments.
WESTON: You're violating all your own principles.

STANNARD: Okay---would you put your hands down now, please, and all those against the motion---would they raise their hands, please.

WESTON: This is our side---come on, lads! Come on Ken Bulmer, get your hand up!

STANNARD: And from the chair it looks very, very close. *[Pause]* I am not going to call for a recount. For the motion we have 43 people; against the motion we have 44 people. The motion is therefore defeated by one--- and may I say that it reflects on the brilliant oratory on both sides, who were very, very good. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. *[Sustained applause.]*

* Peter Pitt

St Sebastian's Reviews — Dave Langford

All books reviewed in this hallowed spot are paperbacks from Arrow; all cost 95p, or not, as the case may be.

Huge name authors have a problem which at first glance seems no problem: their doting publishers just love to keep their books in print. Even when the Hugoness of the name is well-earned, this often means that better-forgotten works are not permitted euthanasia. Perhaps Asimov can smugly contemplate the mind-shattering corniness of, say, the ending of *The Stars Like Dust* without a qualm, just as Silverberg writes fond introductions explaining how his younger self was so promising; but Brunner and others have tried to rewrite and improve lesser works, or even to suppress them altogether. James Blish's *VOR* (which up to this moment you had no notion that I was reviewing) is inferior Blish washed up by the great wave of Arrow's (commendable) Blish enthusiasm; it lies on the shelf like a peculiarly depressing bit of flotsam, provoking the heartfelt wish that the author had revised or burnt it. As it is, Blish the intellectual fights through seas of pulp to attack the timelessly relevant question of how to handle this indestructible robot bomb which challenges you to destroy it (otherwise it'll blow up the world). The author does his best: pretty good for 1958 but a mild embarrassment in 1980.

With Marion Zimmer Bradley, it's the Darkover name rather than her own which keeps the weaker books afloat. Not that *The Forbidden Tower* (£1.35) is weak; I rate it as highly as any of the series, but with reservations. Firstly, Bradley's total assurance in handling the background depends in part on the existing corpus (how would a newcomer to the series regard this book, I wonder?). Secondly, as Brian Earl Brown observes, the increasing fatness of the books seems not so much because the story is complex as because Bradley is inserting lashings of Darkover cross-references and trivia for the adoring fans. She *is* expert in her private world; one enthusiast remarks that she no longer needs to invent Darkover, she just 'goes there'; yes, this is now something Bradley can handle with one cerebral hemisphere tied behind her back. Is it mere perversity which makes me wish she'd try her talents in new, original settings? So far her wanderings from the homeland haven't been too encouraging---eg. *Hunters of the Red Moon*. In this middle-of-the-road space opera, Bradley slips on some of the mouldiest old banana skins known to SF. Translation machines can be either accepted as a wonder of science, or fleshed out with much plausible detail: Bradley opts for a disastrous middle course. We accept the machines when they appear, until after 36 pages thick with dialogue it's noticed *for the first time* that translations are painfully literal; later the machine effortlessly translates the line "We must hang together or assuredly we will all hang separately" into alien speech... Similarly with alien food: allergies don't exist and the same muck serves for all 'proto-simians'. Just announce "My preferred flavours are either sweet or salty, with no objection to mild sourmesses" (etc etc) and delectable nosh is yours. (Would that Wimpeys could do as much.) Is it mere perversity which makes me wish Bradley had stayed on Darkover?

Barry Malzberg's books also form their own continuum, linked by the Malzberg Hero's viewpoint---that of an organic computer locked in introspective loops, recalling Chesterton's "The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason." Yes indeed. The Malzberg organic computers chew endlessly on incomplete data, grinding out skewed and inhuman commentary in that frightful boneless prose, nonsequitur upon nonsequitur, cascading commas, the decay of language reflecting the decay of thought... *The Sodom and Gomorrah Business* (85p) is fairly typical; slightly more plot but elegantly inconclusive as ever. As usual I read it compulsively; as usual I'm unlikely to read it again; as usual, I admire Malzberg but wouldn't want to live there.

The Quatermass series (of books) has just fallen apart. I feel quite nostalgic about the reissued scripts---*The Quatermass Experiment*, *Quatermass II* and *Quatermass and the Pit*---which is odd, as in the late 50s when the BBC series appeared I wasn't so old as to be let watch vile Things pullulating in Westminster Abbey on a special effects budget of nineteen and elevenpence. The nostalgia is for a whole attitude now vanished, whereby Britain was a major power quite as likely as any Russki or Yank to develop atomic spacecraft, visit the moon, colonize the galaxy. (My initiation to this attitude must have been via the SF of Capt. W.E. Johns of Biggles fame: oh god, *Kings of Space* and Professor Lucius Brane and the rest... how could I forget?) All three scripts are still very readable. But the new *Quatermass* is a novelization, not a script, and suffers from its mere connection with the older work. Whenever Quatermass reminisces about past adventures (which he does quite a few times) the fantasy world of rockets and alien menace in 50s Britain clashes horribly with the real history of Apollo and the rest: this 1980s future has two incompatible pasts. For the rest, it's a TV sort of novel (even to the confusing scene/viewpoint shifts): good on visual detail, low on originality, high on unlikely coincidence, and burdened with 'scientists' reasoning by a mixture of analogy and hunch with a touch of 'well I got the right answer, so there' hindsight. Competently written, but too much TV and not enough novel. Has this been the first *Quatermass* review not to mention Nigel Kneale? TV sloppiness is catching.

Oops... here's a Penguin in amongst the Arrows. It's Fred and Geoffrey Hoyle's *The Incandescent Ones* (75p). Well... This is a book which raises many questions---an adventure story with puzzle after puzzle in the telling. Why, having agreed to do no more than buy a book at a certain time, does the hero follow the secret instructions thus received *without question*, even to the point of beginning a risky and illicit ski journey out of Russia? Why, when told he isn't human, does he instantly accept this? Why are the technology and society of the 23rd century so like today's that one assumes a near-future setting until corrected on page 28? Why do the 'Outlanders' bother to feed failing Earth with free power, and why are there no climatic effects from the gigantic laser beams which transmit said power all the way from Jupiter? Why, despite a grade A in physics, must the hero be told what e.m.f. means? ("I've heard of that," he says cautiously.) What can we deduce about his linguistic ability from the following: "'*Hello, stranger on the road,*' a voice called in a language not known to me, Turkish presumably"? (It was at about this time that I wondered, "Why am I reading this?")

And how would *you* recognize a fellow-conspirator at a party? "My immediate neighbours at the dining table were both red-headed, both women of middle age. There was also a red-headed fellow seated on the opposite side of the table, three places to my right. He had a brown face with strongly marked features. This fellow I knew must be my contact. Three redheads in one dinner party would otherwise be too many."

After interludes of torture (closely described) and "unremitting sexual battle" (which from the context might well mean Indian wrestling), our hero realizes his destiny: to ski the magnetic fields of Jupiter! Immense electrical currents flow along his skis to generate supporting fields, the return circuit being provided by a gas plasma. Why doesn't this create an opposing field and cancel the effect? Good question. What keeps the gas in place as you ski through vacuum at many kilometres per second? "Operator skill." And so to the glorious climax where our hero meets the Incandescent Ones and learns the answers to all his questions. Unfortunately the book ends before we learn them...

I'm sad to find Penguin publishing this sorry stuff, and the sadness is not lessened by the knowledge that an unknown author submitting it would have been bounced faster than you can ski a magnetic field. One can only suppose the Hoyles took a skiing holiday and belatedly decided to make it tax-deductible (see Garry Kilworth in *Focus 1*) by writing, as fast as they could, a book with lots of skiing.

the Regency Buck stops here

a Seacon Report

peter nicholls

Whenever I see the voluptuous Simone Walsh at a convention these days, she approaches me with a menacing expression, and a visible effort not to look maternal, and says, "Nicholls---you've got to see this one through---none of this sneaking off home after two days." The woman's a cretin, and hasn't realized that after Yorcon my allergy to conventions took an 180 degree turn. I now have a severe allergy to *not* being at conventions. Symptoms: sitting round at home not working, and brooding over what turned out to be imaginary peptic ulcers.

But this one was different. Not only a Worldcon, but a Worldcon where, it seemed to me, it was my job to mingle with the rich and famous, in order to publicize the Encyclopaedia. Granada co-operated in a predictable manner by delaying the binding of said work by ten days, thus ensuring that no copies would be on display. Clearly I couldn't waste time talking to fans and friends; my task, as I saw it, was to approach all 150-odd pros present in an unctuous, cunning and insinuating manner, and they would then tell the world to buy the book. I would speak to Bob Sheckley with levity, and Hal Clement with gravity. (The system had several flaws, one being that most of the pros wanted to read their own entries, and this often resulted in a vindictive refusal to speak to me thereafter, rather than unstinted praise and warm promises of future support. Even such naturally friendly types as Alexei Panshin and A.Bertram Chandler looked at me reproachfully, the former for the use of the phrase 'rather less successful' as applied to all of his books but one, and the latter for my chauvinist omission of all the awards he has won in Japan.)

I drove Terry Carr and Susan Wood down on the Thursday; the one tall, affable and witty, the other, generally speaking, short, affable and witty, but in this instance handicapped by a slight tendency to vomit which had overtaken her a week earlier, and which she imputed to British Rail sandwiches. I dropped them at the hotel, took my car to the car park, spiralled up and down the 14 levels looking for a place, found one behind a wire fence inexplicably empty, drove into it, and then found myself locked in. Half an hour later a police car, attracted by my plaintive whimpers, pulled up outside the bars of what I now realized was a private area, and inside two constables convulsed with laughter. "Looks like a fair cop, Jones." "Yes, Smithers, I've seldom seen such a vicious criminal expression." After my shouting, "Will you cretins go and get the key?" for ten minutes or so, they staggered off, the car weaving from side to side on account of the constabulary's tasteless tendency to giggle helplessly, and I was ultimately released. This was my introduction to Seacon.

This is meant to be the briefest of reports, impressionist in the manner of Seurat rather than your classical Corot con-scape in my usual long-winded manner. Adopting the principles of General Semantics (by which George Hay and I have attmpted to live ever since *The Players of Null-A* came out, George emerging from this régime rather stronger on style and enigma than myself) I will abandon linear narrative in favour of a non-Aristotlean juxtaposition of totally trivial events.

No point in going into how well the con was run; these military operations are tedious for lazy pacifists like me. It was amazing though, and raised the eyebrows of several American fans who had arrived ready to make all kinds of patronizing allowances for the inexperienced British. The hotel was good, too, and with a large enough variety of comfortable rooms and bars to absorb 3,000 customers without overcrowding. My duties were simple enough: I chaired a morning's session without trouble, and also chaired an afternoon panel of almost unendurable tedium during which everyone except Vonda McIntyre gabbled, and I panicked, and nobody knew any more at the end than at the beginning about what sf had to do with The Imagination.

'Meet the Celebrities' in the Wintergarden was a session cunningly designed (followed instantly as it was by a very loud Disco) to make it impossible to meet the celebrities, as Jerry Pournelle pointed out with his usual belligerence and high decibel rating. Pournelle is not lovable. (He was later seen looming some five stone and eighteen inches above Charles Platt, bellowing "Why don't we settle this thing now, man to man?", perhaps bribed by Pete Weston. Platt had called him a fascist pig, in print, but doubtless not meaning to offend. Indeed, Platt's behaviour was generally impeccable, other than his disparagement of Hilary Moorcock's (Bailey's) abilities at motherhood; unfair, surely, since Hilary has raised three children who all look exactly like Mike, yet during their brief descent on Seacon they all behaved like angels, as did she---rather damp ones, since with well-trained British masochism they spent half their time in the water.)

There seemed to be about a hundred celebrities introduced, and I was the penultimate, rather to my surprise. "Gee, Malcolm," I said, pleased, "it was nice of you to put me on the list of celebrities." "I didn't," little Mal responded chillingly: "Bob Shaw must have made a mistake." This was the first of many remarks designed to

chip pieces of yellowing paint from my self esteem. Another was my dialogue with Robert Silverberg towards the end of the convention. I'm rather shy of Silverberg, even though I met him at Aussiecon in 1975; I think it's his resemblance to Christ that worries me. Eventually, I found myself face to face with him at a pro party in David Hartwell's suite, and had to speak. "Well, Bob," I feebly began, "this is the third convention where I haven't talked to you." "Don't feel badly about it, Peter," riposted the saintly Silverberg, "I've noticed, but I simply put it down to your natural inarticulacy."

(This entire report is being written in the South of France---such is my dedication to fannish causes, fear of Langford and his hideous war-death-ray, and desire to postpone real work. I've just been out to dinner with the Hungarian shrimp, and have proved yet once more that the Ian Watson theory of linguistics is correct. The evolutionary imperative, subject to conceptual pressures when the going gets tough enough, can *create* language. I have no French at all, but faced with hunger pains, I just ordered a head waiter in unbelievably fluent patois, to bring me---I said this in French or Provencal or something locally decipherable---"something very large involving whipped cream, meringue, ice cream, and a variety of disgusting fruit"---and received an authentic, gross, American Sundae. I think I might be very sick, very soon.)

I was not along, hoping to meet the rich and famous. Every time I went off in search of them, usually finding them in large clusters in close proximity to their natural nutrient, free booze offered by publishers in extravagant suites, I found that little Mal had got there first, calling Frederik Pohl Fred, Laurence van Cott Niven Larry, but not making my mistake of calling Chelsea Quinn Yarbro Chelsea (she's called Quinn). One of my worst moments involved Malcolm's friend and soon-to-be bride, Chris Atkinson, also present at most of these occasions. Pissed as a newt, she sat, swaying on a bed (you can sway while seated if well-coordinated like Chris), and I approached her. "Hello Nicholls," she breathed seductively, "I was hoping you'd come over." Hello, hello, hello, I thought, yer well in 'ere Nicholls. "Yes my dear," I muttered reassuringly. "Peter, there's something I've always wanted to tell you..." she shyly commenced. Oh well, I thought, this forthcoming admission of hitherto suppressed passion will upset Malcolm for a while, but he's a philosopher... "Peter," she continued, with an upward curve of her drunken but still desirable lips, and I began to breathe rather hard. "...I've always looked upon you as a' (long pause) "father." I felt very old suddenly, and went to bed, thus missing the notorious David Pringle orgy.

(This may be the point to reveal that I was unable to locate Linda Hutchinson, with whom I fell in love at Yorcon, perhaps because I'd forgotten what she looked like. However, I fell in love twice more at Seacon, but shyness prevented my even saying hello to Caroline Cherry (or, according to the manic Wollheim, 'Cherryh'), because I'd heard she was a teetotaller, which is a pretty terrifying thing to be, or to Victoria Schochet, because I thought she looked too busy. I did say Goodbye to Vicki, but in the absence of a prior Hello it came out sounding feeble.)

In the old days, my sister used occasionally to appear at conventions, to everybody's admiration but ill-concealed horror, with Chris Priest. This time she turned up, to everybody's horror but ill-concealed admiration, with John Clute, the scourge of the writing classes. Helen, my sister, is in my view quite adorable, but her sentiments about me do not, recently, necessarily reciprocate this feeling. This failure may have to do with my often repeated observation to her at the convention (her appetite for alcohol will become an instant legend if I have anything to do with it), "Do you know that your eyes have narrowed to mere slits?" She doesn't appreciate keen observation, that's her trouble. Clute's trouble was that for many years he's been hideously insulting people in his occasional *F&SF* review column, not least Theodore Sturgeon whom he once unwisely referred to as 'Steamy Ted'. My threat to introduce him to Sturgeon had very nearly resulted in his non-appearance (he'd never attended a convention before), and when I actually got the chance, I'd only got as far as "Steamy Ted. I'd like you to meet John..." when he miraculously vanished, some form of jaunteing being involved. (Incidentally, my only contact with Alfred Bester was quite enigmatic... I was crossing the bar trying to hold five drinks, and Bester came up and took them from me. "Here," he said soothingly, "let me carry these for you. You look very tired." This from my long-time hero, a man 26 years older than me, was bad for morale.)

Later that same day, I was sitting at 1 a.m. in the bar with Clute, Disch and others, and managed to half-persuade Clute that the real action was elsewhere. "Where?" he asked cautiously. "Anywhere," I said; "if we walk upstairs we're bound to run into parties all over the place. We don't need to be asked, we just walk in." Clute bridled, but followed, only to jib completely at mounting the stairs. I grabbed his arm, but he backed away, his face a mask of panic. "What's wrong, John?" "I don't *want* to be a fan," he wailed, in absolutely stricken tones. God knows what dreadful initiation rites he was envisaging.

At the top of the stairs there was, indeed, a party in the SFWA Suite. Here Malcolm Edwards, who had thus far been a boringly sober administrator, could be recognized across the room by the familiar, idiotically wide smile and wholly owlish gaze, that he gets while drunk. "You're drunk, Edwards," said someone. "Only on the outshide," said Mal, "because I haven't had enough to eat." He swayed alarmingly to the right, and slowly swayed back to the vertical. "Inshide I'm purfly shober, but wordsh come out wrong." "Prove it," challenged a belligerent American. "How many fingers am I holding up?" Mal took on a look of intense concentration, and squinted closely at the problematic hand. There was a long pause, and he could be seen to be inwardly counting. "Between one and five," he finally announced, triumphantly, and fell over. "You'd better get some food," I said to the body. "Yesh," it replied, and looked thoughtful as it struggled yet again to its feet. "I know! Room shervice!" Mal tottered to the wall where there was a phone, and could be heard muttering pathetically, "ham sanwishes, ham sanwishes, ham sanwishes" into the mouthpiece, which he clutched to him as with infinite grace he slid down the wall he was leaning against, the friction ensuring that this phenomenon took place at no more than one m.p.h. Miraculously, the sandwiches (turkey) eventually arrived and Malcolm took on new life, just like Frankenstein's monster after being recharged with a few thousand volts.

This is not the report in which to find out about the Programme (I only heard the bits I was connected with), the films, the Video Room, or even the Art Exhibition (serried ranks of fantasy pictures, nearly all unbelievably imaginative in exactly the same kitschy way as each other). I spent most of my time in or about the downstairs bar, which was a fine place from which to observe the passing parade. It was here, early one afternoon, that a lovely and celebrated sf lady could be seen in close conversation with the less drunk but more obscene looking of the two actors who had performed so well in the Sturgeon-Campbell play, *Some of Your Blood*. (The other, such is the power of Aussie coincidence, was Johnny Joyce, with whom I was in the Melbourne University Dramatic Society 21 years ago; he was a good drinker then, too. Indeed, the Aussie past reared its head in various strange ways, none stranger than talking to GUFF winner John Foyster for an hour or so, before realizing that the sense of *déjà vu*

I'd been feeling was on account of his wearing a monstrous jacket in vertical gold, scarlet and blue stripes, which I ultimately recognized as my Old School Blazer. Foyster's lady friend, what's more, turned out to be the granddaughter of the man who was my headmaster in 1953.) Anyway, back to the lady and the actor in the bar. Talk gets more intense. Joints get rolled. People start staring. Actor's arm sneaks round lady's waist, then onto lady's breast. Lady's nipples get visibly much larger, so that they can readily be seen from right across bar. Lady finally disappears upstairs with actor just as public copulation seems inevitable.

Two hours later, lady walks unsteadily downstairs into lobby, hair a mess, mascara run, and huge happy smile on her face. I approach, and ask, coarsely, "How was it?" Unable to speak, lady sways and smiles, and holds up two fingers. "You did it twice?" I ask, intrigued by this game of charades. She shakes her head impatiently. "No." I gasp, my sophistication taking rather a battering, "you didn't have--- (pause) --- both of them? Both actors?" Lady nods head with great enthusiasm, and at last speech rises to her lips. "They were *ACES*," she breathes ecstatically.

Indeed, the appetites of this lady, normally a sober and respected member of society, had clearly been much expanded by the inhalation of medicinal herbs, for she approached me half an hour later. "What are you doing tonight, Nicholls?" she asked with a lascivious smile, her little tongue darting out to moisten her lips. Thinking fast I fell back on the old excuse, and quick as a flash claimed a prior dinner engagement with a French lady. "What are you doing after dinner?" she persisted. "Dinner might go on for a very long time," I said, alarmed at her state. There was a long pause for thought, and then, as the solution to the quandary dawned upon her, she smiled in victory. "Well then, you bastard, Nicholls, what are you doing at nine o' clock tomorrow morning?" Such devotion to duty is seldom seen in these decadent times.

This was not the night, though perhaps it should have been, when Quinn Yarbro (who used to be a professional fortune teller) read my palms, head bent in thought. "You're in a very anxious state," she informed me finally, but although this seemed an amazing diagnosis at the time, in retrospect I wonder if it might have had more to do with sweatiness than the reading of magic lines.

The following bit of dialogue was reported to me. "Do you know that you look exactly like the young Einstein?" said an admirer to American physicist-fan and hot-tip-for future-Nobel-Prize, Sid Coleman. 'Really?' drawled Coleman, "the effect I was aiming at was more the young Ringo Starr."

Unusually for me, I did nothing very terrible at this convention, and I even exchanged words with such old enemies as John 'Mad Dog' Brosnan, Christopher 'Hangdog' Priest and Colin 'Bite The Hand That Feeds You' Lester, though the latter's revoltingness was superior. After MC-ing a morning's session of the main programme, so my printed instruction sheet informed me, I had earned a free drink in Room 109. Imagine my horror on knocking at said door, to see Lester open it. I explained the situation. He looked at me with loathing (he was now the all-powerful Press Officer). "Very well, Nicholls," he barked, "you can have your free drink, but pour it yourself and make sure you've finished it in three minutes."

The first night I met and talked to a man, now rather elderly, who must surely be one of the pleasantest and most knowledgeable in the whole history of genre sf, Jack Williamson. I was ready to be unnerved, because I already knew from photographs that he exactly resembled my own late father. However, I managed to speak to him for fifteen minutes or so without too much in the way of Oedipal references coming out, though my half-memory of saying "Goodnight, Dad" when he left the party is, I hope, a false one.

Cathy Ball, the next day, to me: "Gee, Peter, I didn't know you could write!" "But Cathy, I've been a professional writer for some years." She shook her head impatiently. "I don't mean that sort of writing," she said, dismissing the world of the higher criticism with contempt, "I mean proper writing, FAN writing." This was one of the best backhanded compliments I've ever received, and was due, I suppose, to an earlier Con Report of mine which had accidentally found its way into a compilation of British fanwriting that Kev Smith had brought out for Seacon. I was really very chuffed about the inclusion, and would have kissed Cathy in gratitude, except that the queue was too long.

The best public moment at Seacon was Charlie Brown's half-hearted announcement that Dick Geis had once again won a Hugo as best Fan Editor, for *Science Fiction Review*; no-one was there to receive it, but finally an unhappy looking Fred Pohl was prevailed upon to make the acceptance. Those present will never forget the way Pohl drawled out: "Dick Geis is a man that I admire... but.. not..very..much."

The convention was simply too big for any single observer to give a coherent report of it, though interestingly enough, it had very much the same feeling as earlier, successful Eastercons (Coventry in 1975, Leeds in 1979, for example), with the same sort of lift parties, stair parties, obligatory glimpse of Brian Burgess's wholly disgusting nether parts, and so on, even though the programme side of things was so very much more highly organized than ever before, with fandom showing an alarming capacity to spawn NCOs on demand, and a number of willing enlisted men of lower ranks as well. Weston, as Field Marshal, was no more offensive than had been generally anticipated, and layabout Colonel Leroy Kettle showed a capacity for hard work that will get him into terrible trouble if he ever reveals it again. The Metropole Convention Manager had sworn, so Pete Weston told me, that it was impossible for the lager to run out. "We've got 3,000 pints on tap." It was with a feeling of great accomplishment, then, that we observed it actually to run out, quite soon, more especially as the Americans were by and large more sober that the British, and this feat of hard drinking was definitely down to Motherland with some assistance from Empire.

The only sour note was borne witness to by the large number of American pros wearing badges reading *AMERICAN TRASH*. Most of the Americans had very much hoped to meet their British counterparts, and also the higher-ups in British sf publishing, but the general feeling was that the British professionals were a little stand-offish, and not too readily available for talk. Too many British publishers had arrived with only small expense accounts, and as a result their entertaining was modest or non-existent. Some, such as Granada, were represented by amiable but really rather junior staff. It was Gollancz and Futura who raised the most ripples of annoyance, by throwing closed parties and turning away people of some distinction from their doors. Futura, it is rumoured, wouldn't let Joan Vinge in (though they've published her), nor the artist Freff (though they had used some of his illos without permissions being properly granted), nor even Karen Anderson, whose husband was actually inside the sacred party. She was not only turned away at the door, but the security guard (so rumour had it) said quite loudly and deliberately in her hearing, "I've had about enough of this American trash trying to gatecrash." Hence the badges.

All this was a great pity, and rather puzzling. John Bush of Gollancz, for example, is

normally the most hospitable of men, and his closed-door policy, if correctly reported, is uncharacteristic, and can't have done much to improve transatlantic relations. I boycotted the Gollancz champagne party in the Brighton Pavilion, to which I had been invited, after hearing this; perhaps I was silly. Anyway, I doubt if anyone noticed. By contrast, some of the larger American publishers were very hospitable indeed, and some of the pleasantest entertainment at the convention was due to senior editors like David Hartwell and Victoria Schochet. At Hartwell's first party, however, no more than two British writers bothered showing up.

For years now loud masculine rumours of a kind of feminist mafia in American sf have been drifting to these shores. If such women as Suzy McKee Charnas, Vonda McIntyre, Susan Wood and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro are meant to represent this supposedly unwholesome clique, then the rumour is unjust. All nice, friendly, and rather shy people, whose only visible belligerence seemed aimed not so much at men as at smokers. As someone trying not too successfully to give up smoking myself at the moment, I can for the first time understand just how sickening clouds of cigarette smoke must be to the non-smoker, and with reservations I applaud their stand. Suzy Charnas leafed through my Encyclopaedia (I had an unbound copy with me), and looked up the entry on Women. She read it carefully through, while I watched nervously. Was this feminist lady going to call me a male cretin? Tonelessly she asked, "Who wrote this?" "I did," I confessed, and waited for the blow to fall. "It's really very good," she said. This compliment pleased me more than any other single event at the convention, and I am hoping in future to be accepted in the USA as an honorary woman, at least for purposes of public social contact. Susan Wood, in her few conscious intervals between lying in bed with gastroenteritis, nibbled my ear several times (a sovereign remedy), and this was nice too. Thank you, Susan.

The other Encyclopaedia compliment I appreciated (sorry about all this boasting, but the subject obsesses me right now, only 2½ weeks before publication date) was from Greg Benford. He said the physics in the article on Tachyons (also written by me) was correct and up-to-date. I'd had nightmares on that one.

Unremarkable things about remarkable people: Fritz Leiber's private voice being soft and gentle, but the public voice so strong, orotund and professional; Sprague de Camp so spruce; Tom Disch's wonderfully inappropriate tattoo, and his magnificent Hawaiian shirt (and his unpleasing suggestion that I looked as if I needed a health farm almost as much as he did); Harry Harrison's familiar, barking laugh ("the trouble is," said someone, "that talking to Harry's so exhausting ---it's obligatory to laugh every two sentences ---I wouldn't mind if it were voluntary.").

Harry doesn't really approve of me, I don't know why, and he does have a wonderful way of getting hold of the wrong end of the stick; I was amused to catch him warning a lady about what he was describing as my predatory sexual habits, as if she were a timorous virgin, whereas she was in fact (a) an old and intimate friend, and (b) very distinctly after my virtue. I confess to some irritation about this---I always get annoyed about the presumptuousness of creating entire scenarios on the basis of purely circumstantial evidence.

I drank a lot: starting at around 11 a.m. every day and going through to at least 3 a.m. the following morning takes very careful pacing. I didn't really get drunk, but every now and then fatigue overtook, and I felt the pressure of too many people around too much of the time. I don't think affability faltered, but the eyes glazed every now and then from too much input. It was a happy convention, but unlike Coventry in 1975, my feelings stopped a little this side of euphoria. Despite the magnitude of the convention, the kinds of enjoyment it offered were curiously gentle. If Coventry '75 offered all the red-litten pleasures of the Inferno, Seacon '79 was rather more an elegant Limbo, or perhaps something rather stately, like the lower circles of Purgatory.

I did find out that Peter Roberts has a job collecting dead seagulls from Devonian beaches at £1 an hour. This strikes me somehow as the ultimate in satisfactorily fannish modes of employment.

On the stairs, dressed spectacularly (purple silk being involved), was the handsome black man who'd been in the Fancy Dress Parade, looking just like the Moor of Venice. "He looks very cheerful," observed my sister. "Yeah, but what's he done with Desdemona's body?" I responded. It's a pity he heard; the remark was intended to be literary rather than racist.

The single strangest person present was R.A. Lafferty. With a benign and Buddha-like smile, rope sandals, and a jutting pot belly, he floated through the convention, always alone, always apparently happy, but living in some other universe. It's as if there were some invisible force-shield protecting him from any mundane contact. I've always admired his stories, but lacked the nerve to speak to him, and possibly prick the invisible bubble. He was awesome. The French, who are braver than we, could not resist the temptation. Elisabeth Gille of De Noël books tried first:

"'Allo Mr Lafferty. I am Elisabeth Gille, and I 'ave published several of your books in France."

Absolutely no response. Elisabeth's friendly smile becomes a little tense. The seconds drag on. Lafferty's eyes seem fixed on some cosmic event taking place behind her left ear. Had he heard? Suddenly, and with some vigour, the Lafferty right arm shoots out, and gives her a little punch on the shoulder. "Well kid, keep publishing me, keep publishing me."

While not encouraging, this was not a total disaster, and Robert Louit of Calmann-Lévy books decides to try next.

"Er, Mr Lafferty, I have long been an admirer of your work, and in fact it was in a series which I edit that you were first published in France."

Lafferty's benign smile continues, unabated, unaffected and possibly unfocused. Louit presses on. "There is a curious feature of your work, Mr Lafferty, that I have never seen commented on; in some ways it reminds me of the English writer G.K.Chesterton."

Lafferty, although his forward motion has been arrested by Louit's speaking to him, shows no visible signs of awareness, though clearly he is in tune, in some metaphysical sense, with the infinite. Louit is feeling a little desperate.

"Well, of course, I could be completely on the wrong track." A man of great charm, Louit manages a self-exculpatory Gallic shrug. "For all I know you have never heard of Chesterton."

Louit stares beseechingly at Lafferty, entreating some response, *any* response. Lafferty smiles enigmatically, just as before. Does he know Louit is there? Robert, like Basil Fawlty when confronted with intolerable social situations, is considering escaping this one by fainting. Time is in stasis. Has it been seconds, minutes or hours? Infinitely slowly, the Lafferty eyes focus.

"You're on the right track kid." And he drifts on.

In some symbolic sense, Lafferty's invisible bubble seemed to focus for me something of what I, too, feel about conventions. But too all those people I spoke to through the force-field, and especially the Committee:

"Thanks kids. You were on the right track."

This report has been the truth and nothing but the truth, but for reasons of security and length, is *not* the whole truth. ☆

LETTERS

RICH COAD I'm just lying here in bed precariously juggling my attention between re-reading *Drilleis 4* and watching a movie about a hairy monster terrorising a ski resort (which is not a bad idea; were I a hairy monster I would terrorise only ski resorts beginning low on the ski set social scale say by tearing up Squaw Valley in California's own High Sierras, slowly trotting up north through Idaho's famed I Forget The Name Slopes, on into Banff, then a quick jet over to TA DA Gstaad to rend limb from limb every beautiful person in Europe. Why would I do this? Well, as a hairy monster, and thus not given to such existential questions as, "Why do I exist?" I can't answer that. I just do. I do not reflect. We hairy monsters just plain don't like people that deface beautiful mountains with expensive lodges, tram cars and beer cans just so they can ride up a stupid chair lift and slide down snow on two long flat pieces of fibreglass.)

CHRIS PRIEST Verbatim quote from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, January 1980, pages 8-9, signed editorial by Isaac Asimov:

> There are now four Grand Masters of Science Fiction, as chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America. These are: Robert A. Heinlein, Jack Williamson, Clifford D. Simak, and L. Sprague de Camp. The first of these was a Campbell discovery and creation; the last three had published material before Campbell, but were given a new birth by the man. I suspect it will be quite a while before a Grand Master will be chosen who was not, in one way or another, involved with Campbell.
>
> And of course, as everyone knows, there wasn't anyone as close to Campbell, as hovered over by Campbell, as molded by Campbell, as I myself was in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s.

Nothing omitted from or added to in this transcript. The context of the remark is a "tribute" to *Analog* on its 50th anniversary. The paragraphs before and after the quoted ones do not explain, modify or in any sense qualify the ARROGANCE, SELF-SATISFACTION, SELF-IMPORTANCE AND DOWNRIGHT OFFENSIVENESS OF THIS OVERWEIGHT, UNFUNNY AND OUTDATED SCIENCE FICTION WRITER.

Yours, etc. OUTRAGED, Harrow

TARAL Look at sf today. What can you say about a field of literature that enshrines as awkward and as talitative an amateur as Robert Asprin as a pro? But more important than incomprehensible lapses of taste is the loss of *affinality* the field is undergoing. What is passing as sf these days? Feudal societies with nobles and exaggerated senses of honour, horseback adventures with swordplay, cat people and dragons, telepathic woodfolk and elves... Look how many of the newly emergent writers are into this -- Cherryh, Lee, Bushyager, McIntyre, Asprin, Chalker, Duane... and look at the older writers who are drifting in this direction -- Anderson, Dickson, Zelazny, LeGuin, McCaffrey. *The Door into Fire, Master of Rhuka, White Dragon, Birthgrave, Heritage of Hastur, Dragon and the George* -- they're all pretty much the same book. Same background in rough detail, same sort of characters, same premises, same writing style. Only the plot is different from book to book.

BRIAN EARL BROWN Both *White Dragon* and *Dark Design* reflect a changed attitude towards marketing by the publishers. Del Rey, in particular, seems to insist on sequels to almost any half-way successful book, hence the seemingly endless series of Well World novels. And they want thick books. Great numbers of the massive novels being published today could do with pruning. And Ace books prints all of its stuff in large, inflated type so that what once was 160 pages miraculously becomes 250. Apparently people buy books by weight. 400 pages of McCaffrey is apparently a better buy than 200 pages of LeGuin. Thus writers who should know better are being encouraged to write ever more sloppy and banal material. And worse, the *fans* just eat this stuff up.

GRAHAM ASHLEY Certainly the magnitude of what an sf novel can cover is vast and this is perhaps what initially attracts readers to the genre, but it is not a sustaining emotion. You can only write about galactic war, for example, so many times before it becomes as commonplace as catching the train to work every day. At this point certain readers appear to require something more; not, paradoxically, greater scope, but in fact a narrowing of subject matter to the individual, which is the greater degree of characterisation Kevin cries out for.

ERIC MAYER Don't tell me about "magnitude" of themes, etc. SF heroes are invariably busy saving the world, and any world, or universe, that can be saved by one man's hitting the baddy over the head in one way or another can't be very big.

DEB ROHAN I'd like to share a story we read recently... I may have found a vocation for my old age.

> "Early in the 19th C.,...the ghost was first seen by a discharged soldier on tramp, a wild man who had broken every commandment and whose conscience was overloaded with crimes... One night, unable to find a sleeping place in the workhouse, he made up a bed for himself in a corner of one of the wards. He was discovered in the morning a changed man. He...described the apparition in tones of terror. A thing had descended the stairs at night on three hoofish legs and with a voice like that of a roaring jackass bellowed through a grating where he was sleeping. It was a dreadful nightmare which came night after night. Watch was kept, and one night an old woman who walked with a stick was caught roaring and braying through the grating. Asked to explain herself, she said that this was her way of converting the tramp to a Christian way of life."
>
> (E. Maple: *The Realm of Ghosts*)

WAHF WILLIAM BAINS, GERALD BISHOP, BOB DAY, ALUN HARRIES, JOY HIBBERT: "Got a cutting from the Radio Times about a performance by the 'well-known counter-tenor Kevin Smith'." STEVE McDONALD, JONATHAN PALFREY: "British writers have the tendency of retreating into enigma, because, I suspect, they often lack the ability to write a good, straightforward story." *(Damn right! Any layabout could toss off THE MAGUS or FINNEGANS WAKE but it takes real ability to craft a book for Del Rey.)* DAVID REDD: "Think again before dismissing Jack Chalker!" *(I did, I did... DRL)* PETER SINGLETON, STEVE SNEYD: "'Mainstream' is merely a subset/aberration of the millennial epic/SF tradition..." *(Mainstream is a subset of the whole of literature, and its form, the novel, was rather different from the forms of literature that had preceded it, among which we must include the "epic" and among which we cannot include SF. Thematically, too, mainstream is closer to the tradition of literature than is SF. SF developed from the mainstream, and its proponents would be better advised to argue its merits on the grounds of the new things it can do, than on spurious proofs of its better historical connections. KJS)* PHIL STEPHENSEN-PAYNE: "I trust you've learnt your lesson and won't give Joe a column unless his standard bucks up rather a lot." *(Both editors quite liked THE FADED SUN: KESRITH, but Joe's other comments this time seem valid to us. Besides, the space needed filling... DRL)* KEVIN TYLER, ROGER WADDINGTON and doubtless quite a few others mislaid for the usual reasons. If only those readers who failed to respond could be made to remit guilty apologies to those letter-writers whose letters we mislaid, a great deal of effort on both editors' parts could be saved...

AFTERTHOUGHTS

The illustration on page 2 is not of the editor after reading 3 paragraphs of *House of Zeor* without his 11 foot pole, but it might as well be. § The other editor also took his 11 foot pole to the book and was interested to note that while Sime tentacles are described within as pearly grey things, the cover artist has seen their inner significance and depicts them as *wet, red* and *glistening*. Personally, the editors doubt such explicitness should appear on public bookstands. § Both also deny responsibility for the deplorible spelling on the back cover. This is what happens when you let artists draw words as well. § "OK Dave, start the duplicator...."

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