

GILGAMESH

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Jerome Kretchmer, New York's environmental protection administrator, says he would like to use the moon as New York's garbage dump. "To me the moon is nothing more than the world's largest landfill....We got guys walking around on the moon and not helping to solve the problem. I look up at the moon and I think how much garbage I could put up there."
(Associated Press)

I have to admit that I'm no longer a publishing giant. Never mind my past contributions to fandom in terms of fanzines or pages; the fact is that my records have been surpassed often, even by people I've never heard of and you haven't either, people who've published reams of mailing comments for LASFAPA or other apas, folks who became big name fans nobody ever heard of. It's all irrelevant, all those issues of FANAC and INNUENDO and LIGHTHOUSE and even the SFWA FORUM; although 378 fanzines and such sounds like a whole bunch to me, there are probably people around now who've published over a thousand.

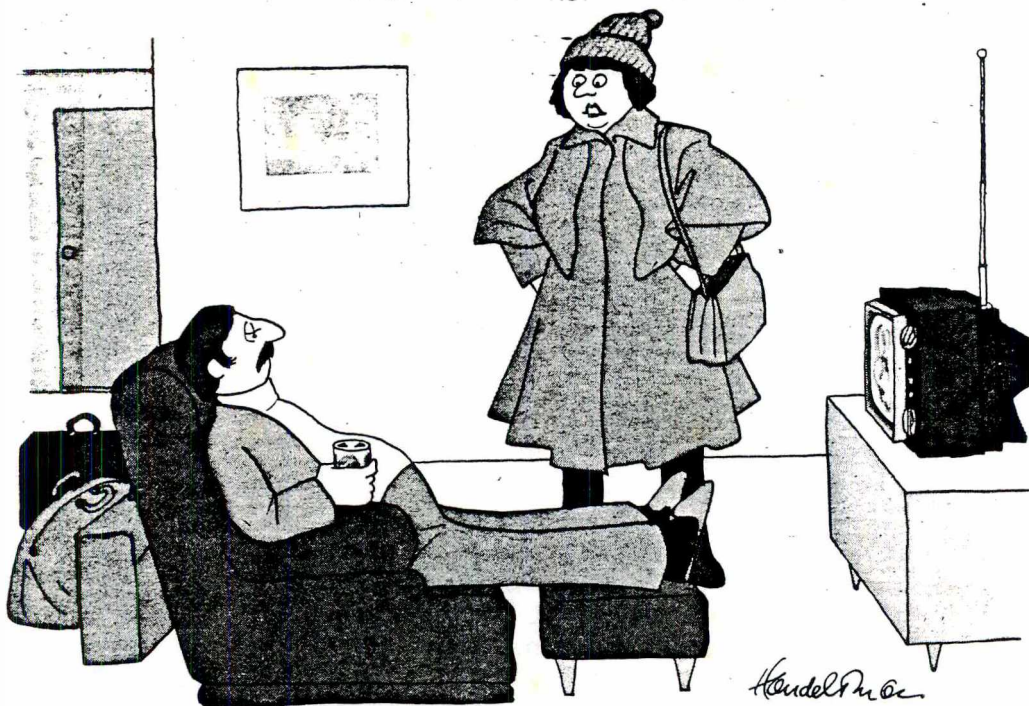
Well, if I'd really wanted to maintain my famous-long-ago reputation as a fannish dynamo, the Isaac Asimov of the amateur set, I would have published more these past few years. As it is, I haven't done a GILGAMESH or any other such thing in over a year now. Why, Bob Silverberg has pubbed his ish more recently than I have; so, for that matter, has Vinç Clarke. If I don't look out, Harlan Ellison will return as a fan publisher before I do, perhaps with THE LAST DIMENSIONS.

But the truth, of course, is that I don't much care about setting or keeping fannish records; I publish GILGAMESH when I have things I feel like writing about, and time to do it. I was talking with Kim Stanley Robinson recently about an article in the Bay Area Gazette on the concept of the Great American Novel; the writer wondered how the idea of such a thing ever got started anyhow: "No one writes about Don Quixote as the Great Spanish Novel, or about candidates for the Great Russian Novel, the Great French Novel, etc." Stan said, "Maybe it's because Americans are so competitive." Maybe so, in part, but you folks know that though I'm depressingly American in many ways, at least I'm not mindlessly competitive; so though I do notice records, I don't make it a practice to chase them. Thus this is the first GILGAMESH since June 1982, and I feel apologetic only because in the interim I've let a whole lot of interesting comment-hooks in Lilapa slide by unanswered, and largely lost contact with many of you both in Lilapa and friends at large.

I have some second-thoughts about how the idea of the Great American Novel got started. As I recall, it happened during the nineteenth century when American literature was held in low esteem by European critics and such; American writers felt that what was needed was a superlative American novel that would bring literary respectability to the U.S. or even Canada, etc. Ironically, the two novels that are the current top candidates for the Great American Novel were published during that period -- Moby Dick and Huckleberry Finn -- but the critics on this side of the pond mostly ignored them.

We've had any number of candidates since then that were touted highly by our home critics and sometimes by the Europeans too -- Faulkner's Light in August, Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, Mailer's The Naked and the Dead, Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, etc. -- but we haven't been able to agree on which book was best and the European critics haven't either. Assuming it matters a damn, I'd vote for Faulkner and Salinger and would add Heller's Catch-22. But the fact is that American literature now includes enough excellent novels that we don't need a single champion, which explains Stan Robinson's further comment: "Whenever someone asks me about the Great American Novel, I cheat and say it's Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude." That is indeed a cheat -- in a court of law, the judge would say, "Strike that from the record as nonresponsive to the question" -- but in truth, "America" does include Central and South America, not to mention Canada, so

Stan's answer is fair, sort of.

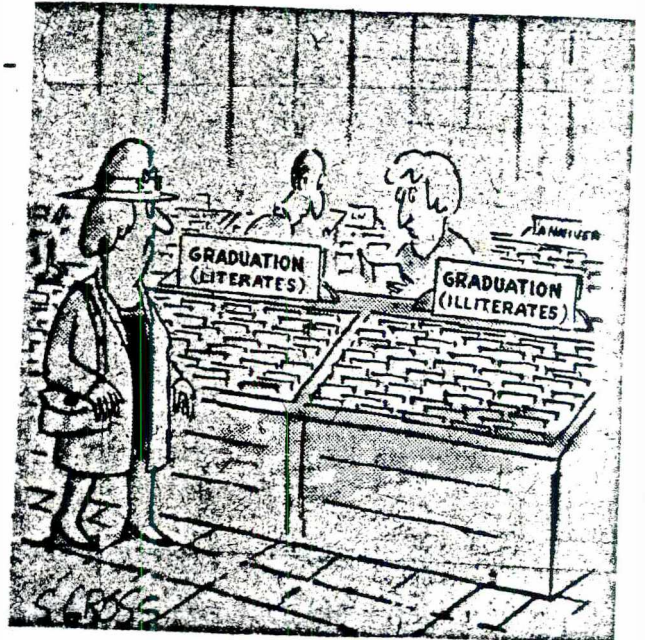


"You could care less? Don't you mean you couldn't care less?
That kind of crummy English is why I'm leaving."

if we found and agreed on one Great SF Novel, it wouldn't change the way non-sf critics view the field. They would, after all, just say, "This is a great novel, but of course it's not really science fiction."

Hell, they might even be right. I don't agree with the kind of special pleading that says sf has different aims and values than mainstream literature (the Idea is the hero in sf, so normal emphasis on characterization doesn't apply, etc.), but I do think it's true that sf requires kinds of thinking and some specialized methods of writing that have no equivalents in the mainstream and thus wouldn't be recognized or appreciated by non-sf critics. For instance, if we were to put forward Joanna Russ's And Chaos Died as the Great SF Novel, how many mainstream critics would be able to recognize its virtues in presenting a future star-spanning society from the inside, with little or no effort at making that background and its values, which are implicit rather than explicit in the prose, as the rather stunning achievement that they are to those of us who understand the sf field? The same difficulties would apply to Bester's The Demolished Man or Keith Roberts's Pavane, etc.

No; I think that if we left it up to non-sf critics to name the best sf novels of even a given year, we'd always get winners that were literarily conservative and seldom represented real advances in the sf genre. Awards like the Hugo and the Nebula, tainted as they are by friendship votes and lowest-common-denominator values (most members of SFWA are, after all, basically just sf fans who have sold a few stories), still express a literary consciousness of what science fiction is really trying to do, so despite their shortcomings I think these awards are much more meaningful than the opinions of non-sf people. We know what we're trying to do, and we even know why.



-oOo-

The foregoing remarks have a bit to do with some of the panels I was on at Westercon (or "Westerchron," as they so cutely named it) in San Jose over the July 4th weekend. The panel, called "Critical MSS," dealt with literary criticism in science fiction, and besides me it included Damon Knight, Bruce Boston, Raylyn Moore, and Paul Edwin Zimmer. A motley group, to be sure, and I wasn't at all convinced beforehand that I'd enjoy it. But Damon was genial and trenchant as always and the rest of us all found reasonable things to say from time to time, with nary a real plonk in the lot. Among other things, Damon remarked that when he stopped writing criticism and went back to writing fiction, thus putting him on the receiving end, he found that other critics's comments on his books seldom told him anything useful; he concluded that the real purpose of criticism is to educate the readers rather than the writers. Raylyn repeated the old saw that a story should change the reader in some way, and I found myself reacting rather sharply against this notion, which suddenly struck me as self-congratulatory: sure, every writer in sf gets letters saying,

"You changed my life," but since a lot of sf readers are adolescents who experience new discoveries every month anyhow, this doesn't really mean a whole lot. A little later, I repented of my remarks and said that it was more a matter of degree, that any good story should offer the equivalent of a life-experience to the reader and in that sense a good story would change the reader at least a little bit. Carol was in the audience for this panel and she later told me she was glad I'd corrected myself, because she'd been itching to correct me in just the same terms I used. You lose some and you win some.

That particular panel, on which I served as moderator, was the last of four on which I served during the con -- one Friday afternoon when I'd just got there and three on Saturday, practically in a row -- and I think it was the best for me, mainly because by then I was completely warmed up. The one on Friday, during which Phil Klass, Tom Whitmore, Susan Rubinyi-Anderson, Ray Nelson and I talked about our nominations for the ten sf books we'd take to a space station (the sf equivalent of a deserted island, apparently), was mainly just a listing of My Favorites from each of us, and Bob Silverberg told me later that it hadn't offered him anything intellectually. I certainly agreed, but "the ten best sf books" is really just a gimmick subject designed to get an audience involved in arguments about their own favorites, so I hadn't felt the need to go into the subject more deeply, and in the terms of the panel as I saw them I think we did okay. I kidded Bob by saying he was just annoyed because we hadn't nominated any of his books, though in truth some members of the audience had mentioned Dying Inside and the panelists had agreed. But Bob was right, really: we'd just mentioned our personal favorites without any



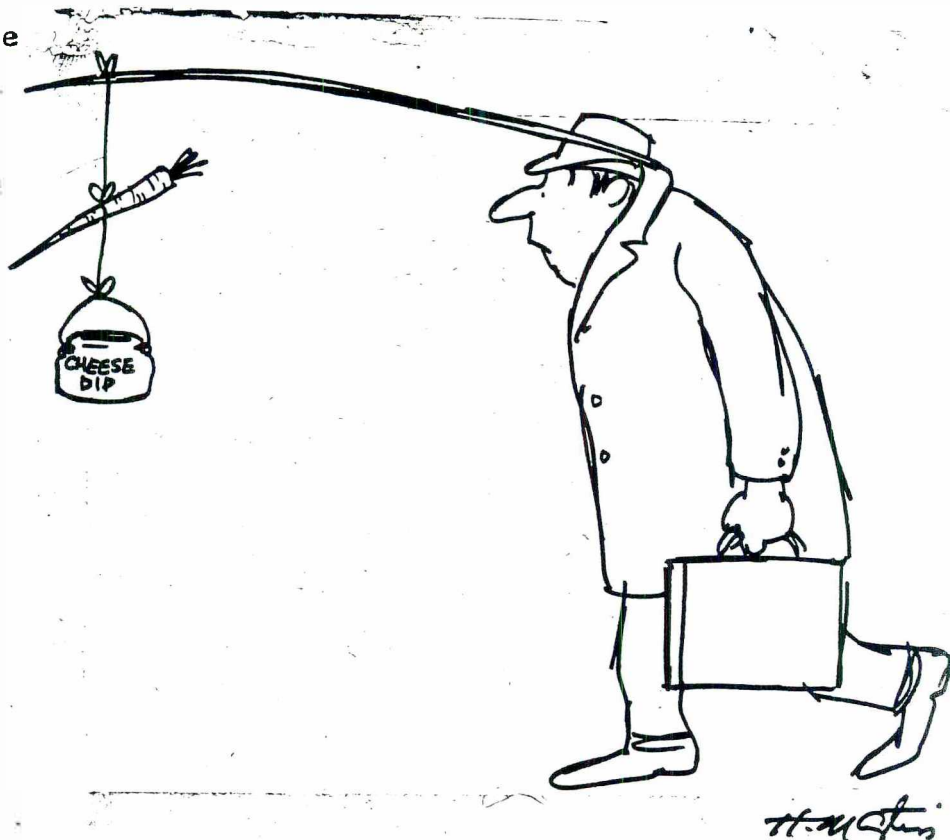
lengthy discussions of why we still thought books we'd read at age 14 could still stand up among the best. (Certainly we never addressed the question of which were the Great SF Novels as such.)

I shouldn't make it sound as though none of the panelists at this Western-con had done their homework for the various topics they discussed, though. I sat next to Phil Klass during both that late-Friday-afternoon panel and my first on Saturday, which was about humor in sf, and I noticed that Phil had prepared notes for each panel beforehand. I jokingly accused him of trying to show up the rest of us, but he said since he was used to formal lectures in the college classes he

taught he'd developed the habit of outlining his remarks beforehand. I subsequently noticed that, in fact, most of the panelists with whom I appeared came prepared with notes or at least with paper and pen so that they could write down ideas while others had the mike. I began to wonder if I was the only panelist who chose to speak completely off the cuff, and was relieved to see that Damon Knight, during the "Critical MSS" panel, had a blank notepad before him on which he doodled only "Bullshit," "Merde," and "Scheitzdrek."

During that panel on humor in sf, I did my best (probably because of Bob Silverberg's criticism the evening before) to introduce discussions of theories of humor and how they applied to science fiction -- I mentioned the difficulties of employing recognition-humor in stories about unfamiliar futures, off-the-wall humor of the Lafferty sort, and how the basic sf theme "If this goes on..." could lead into reductio-ad-absurdem plots. But not even Phil Klass followed my leads, so that humor-in-sf panel mostly consisted of panelists giving examples of their favorite funny science fiction stories. (I was pleased, however, by the fact that though most of Ron Goulart's work was dismissed as trivial, his SF Specials novel After Things Fell Apart was cited as the exception. I've always thought Goulart sold himself short by relying on easy gags, and when I commissioned ATFA from him I told him at some length that I wanted him to concentrate on social satire, which I think he can do very well.)

Of the middle panel of the three I did Saturday I'll say little:





"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. The course is 'The Roots of the English Novel.' I'm Professor Fowles, and I assume all of you can read and write."

the advice-to-aspiring-writers panel, which those of us who regularly appear there call the "How To Count Words" panel. The usual things were said, mostly by Jim Frenkel, and there was the usual crowded hall, whose members asked the usual questions ("How do I get an agent?" is usually the most sophisticated of these).

Backtracking a bit to the panel on sf criticism, I might mention that we also discussed how bad most current sf book reviewers are, and I asked the panelists about the dumbest reviews they'd ever had. A couple responded with excellent bad examples, and more recently I read Tom Easton's column in the September *Analog*, which included this idiotic comment on a novel: "Message, on the other hand -- well, it's gotta be there. You can tell. The thing's lit'ry as all get out in tone, so there's got to be one." Easton evidently can't tell a Message, which John Norman can write, from a theme, which is an almost organic part of any serious novel. (The review was of Greg Benford's latest novel. Greg will be reading this GILGAMESH, so I wonder, Greg, if you've ever had a dumber reviewer's comment.)

Westerchron (urk) didn't consist entirely of panels on which I appeared, and no doubt fortunately so. There were plenty of other panels and such but I won't tell you about them because I didn't attend them: four panels is about my limit these days, participating or listening, so I spent the rest of the convention In the Bar or at

parties and such. This Westercon had a SFWA suite -- actually two side-by-side rooms, one for smokers and one for non-smokers -- but at any time I visited it, it was mostly empty. The convention committee had arranged to have the SFWA suite on the same floor as all the other party rooms, which led to a floorful of parties every night that apparently drew off most of the writers and other professionals -- and there were tons of them, ranging from Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven from Los Angeles to Ed Bryant from Denver and Beth Meacham, Ellen Datlow, Jim Frenkel and Joan Vinge from New York, among lots of others. That party-floor had a balcony outside the rooms, which enabled Carol and me to step outside and promenade from end to end looking in at each party to see which ones we wanted to join: convention heaven. I wish more sf conventions could offer as much for nighttime fun.

In the effective absence of the SFWA suite, we went to lots of fan parties, both those that were situated along the promenade and those that were held more privately on other floors. The latter included the nitrous oxide party, offered by local fans, which was chockful of people with N₂O-filled balloons and long lines of those with flaccid balloons who were queued up for refills; stoned conversations abounded and rebounded among those who waited, though those who had just been served tended to stand in place and hum to themselves. There was a small balcony off this room too, on which I ran into fans such as Ted White and Lucy Huntzinger and managed to talk with them when my own balloon was drooping. Even when my balloon or my lungs were full, I found the conversations there delightful to listen to.

It was at this party, Saturday night, that I first noticed a delightful phenomenon: it seemed that there were a number of people there, only a few of whom were adoring neofans, who took pleasure in refilling my balloon for me (going through the line, refilling theirs as well as mine), so I mostly managed to stay flying and listening to others talk. I remember discussing the colored lights on the nearby freeway with Maude Kirk, and quite a few other such random subjects; these conversations were couched in the most profound phrases, of course.

But there were some bright-eyed neofans around, or at least they were new to me (possibly some of them have published 500 fanzines that I've never seen), and at a couple of the parties I noticed that they seemed to gather in clumps around the BNFs, listening to the wise conversations of their wizened elders much as I, long ago, listened to Art Rapp and Charles Burbee. Ted White usually attracted such audiences and he seemed not to notice; maybe he's just been to more conventions than I have lately or maybe he's just used to people listening to him -- Ted has a natural talent for holding-forth, and he's good at it. But the newer fans were also listening closely to anything Bill Bowers said (Bill was a surprise attendee of the convention, at least to me, and his presence was a treat), or Art Widner, or even me. Hey, I'm not used to being regarded as a fount of fannish wisdom at cons, but I wouldn't mind getting used to it.

One incident from Sunday night will show what I mean: I got to one of the fannish parties at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. and remarked that I hadn't had any dope all night, whereupon Amy Thomson, late of Idaho and now living in the fannish Mecca of Seattle, phoned the room where

she knew Ted White and Jerry Jacks were and said, "Terry Carr wants you to come up here and bring some dope." Damned if Ted and Jerry didn't appear a few minutes later, though only long enough to whisk me back to their room. Amy and a friend whose name I've unfortunately forgotten came with us and we toked up and talked till Jerry went to bed, whereupon the rest of us went back to the party. Art Widner singled me out as we came in and told me someone named "Bill" had been disappointed when I left earlier because he'd been hoping to talk with me. "Go talk with him," Art said, and sat me down next to



"Well, the first day of the rest of my life was rotten."

this fellow, who looked as suddenly shy as I felt. I said hello and got no particular response, so recognizing the artificiality of the situation I chatted with Art and with Ted until someone mentioned that it was Bill Breiding who was sitting next to me; I said, "Oh, Bill Breiding!", recognizing his name as that of a prominent local fan, and Bill looked pleased but didn't say anything, so I continued to talk with anyone who said anything to me, and when

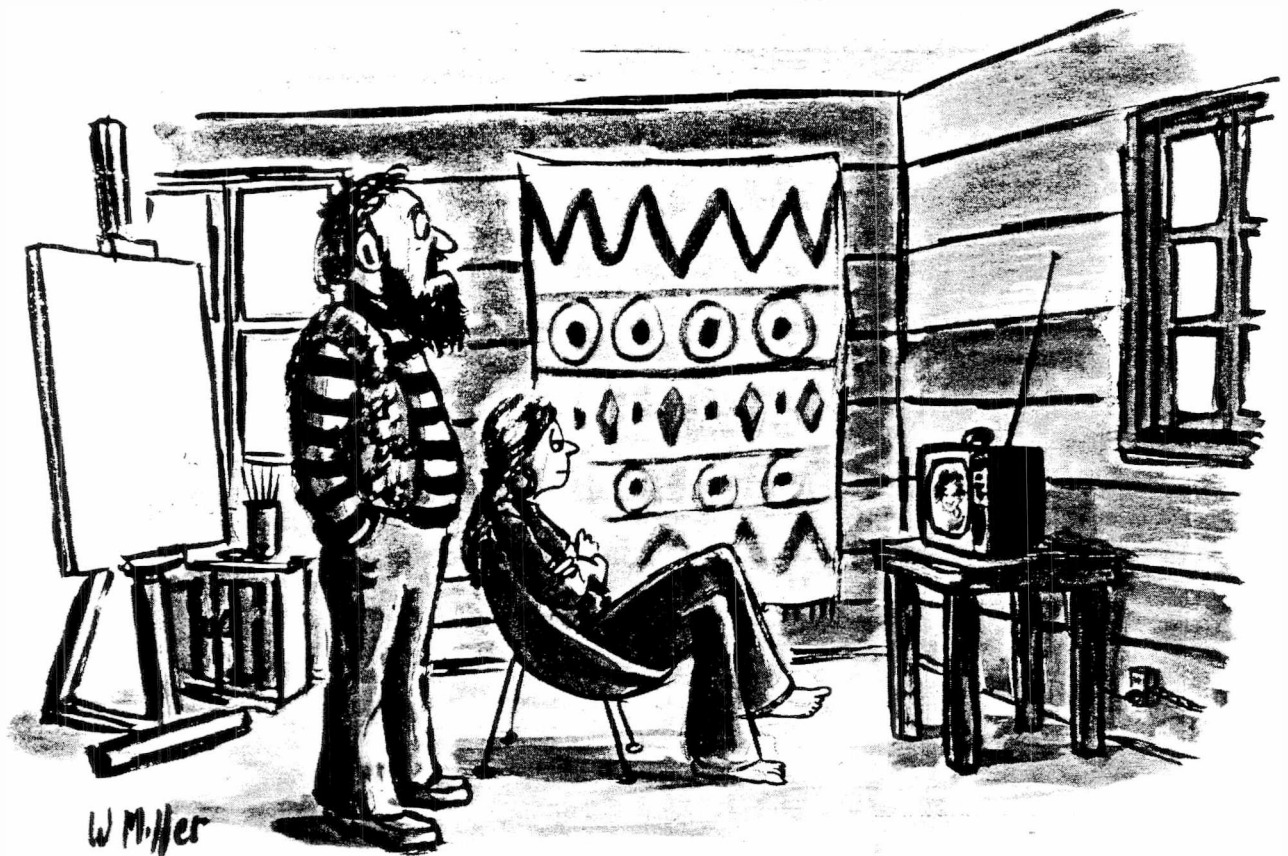
I left the party about dawn I still hadn't said a word directly to Bill Breiding. Probably just as well: if he thought I was fascinating from reputation, he was misled.

That night had started with a dinner at the hotel's restaurant that had included Ed Bryant, Janet Gluckman, and half a dozen more. The restaurant was far better than most con-hotel restaurants (as Carol and I had discovered when we had dinner there previously with Beth Meacham) and we lingered past the 8:00 p.m. starting time for the guest of honor speeches. I managed to drag us all out not long thereafter because I really wanted to hear Damon Knight as toastmaster and Tom Whitmore as Fan Guest of Honor, though I was prepared to miss Phil Klass's Guest of Honor speech, having heard enough of Phil, enjoyable as he always is, during the panels on which we'd both appeared; besides, Beth Meacham was having an Ace Books party fairly early in the evening. Our group got to the ballroom shortly after Damon started talking and I soon realized that Damon was giving pretty much the same talk I'd heard before at a worldcon; still, Damon's always great fun

to hear, and he did introduce a number of variations. Tom's Fan Coll speech was mostly about behind-the-scenes semicatastrophes he'd seen at various conventions, and that was amusing too, but I was prepared to leave as soon as Phil was introduced and I'd applauded him: Damon's remarks had filled most of an hour to start with, and the announced starting time for Beth's party was already long past. But they called an intermission before Phil's talk, so I took the opportunity to visit the men's room.

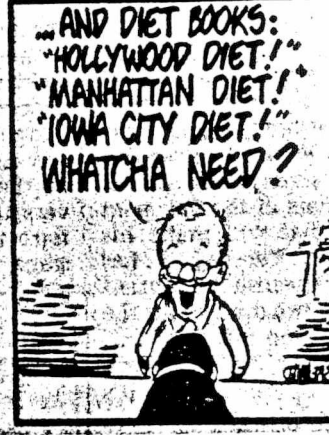
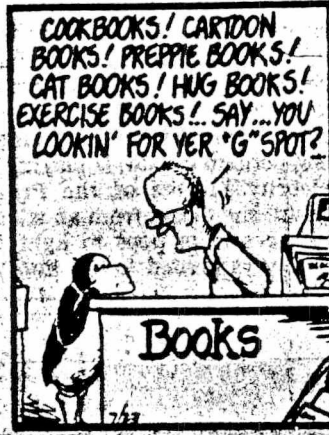
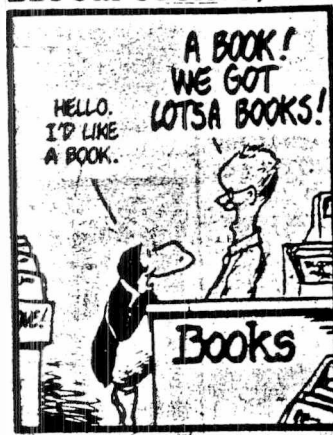
I was in a stall there when some people came in and one of them -- it sounded like Jerry Pournelle -- said, "That's the first time I've ever heard a toastmaster talk as long as the Guest of Honor." Without thinking I called out, "And I'm glad he did!" But I was taken aback when I heard someone who was obviously Phil Klass reply (so much so that I don't remember what he said). I stayed hidden in my stall till they left.

Back in the ballroom, the official proceedings continued with the presentation of the Invisible Little Man Award, which is given at each Westercon to someone who's made significant contributions to science fiction that haven't been recognized by major awards. (Previous winners include George Pal, Ray Bradbury, Andre Norton, Cordwainer Smith, and Phil Klass himself.) As someone began to talk about this year's winner I was sitting restlessly, wanting to leave and go on to



"I mean, like, don't you think it kind of weird to get electricity from our windmill-powered generator and then use it to watch reruns of 'I Love Lucy'?"

BLOOM COUNTY / Berke Breathed



Beth's party, when I heard "long-time fan" and "turned to writing and editing," and then "the Ace Science Fiction Specials," and I covered my face with my hands: Christ, I hadn't expected this, I wasn't ready for it. I was announced as the winner and I made my way to the podium and was given the award, which as usual consisted of only an inscribed base, the Invisible Little Man being, of course, invisible. I called up enough presence of mind to say that the last time I'd been given an award at a convention was at the 1973 worldcon when I'd won a Hugo as Best Fanwriter and, because the Hugos hadn't been prepared in time, I'd been handed a similarly untopped base, only later to receive in the mail the spaceship to adorn its top. I didn't realize just then that even the Invisible Little Man award was supposed to have on its top a pair of footprints, which were missing from my award because again the manufacturers hadn't finished in time. (At a party later that night Debbie Notkin relieved me of the award and said she'd get it back to me once they'd attached the inscribed footprints; I now have the completed award, which looks splendid. That Invisible Little Man has big feet, by the way.)

The applause when I was announced as the winner of this award was loud and warm, which helped me get up to the podium quickly, but all I could think of to say when I returned to my seat was, "Shit, this is going to make it look awfully tacky when I leave the room during Phil's talk."

Tacky or not, I did leave as soon as Phil was introduced and I'd clapped for him; I went out into the hall and sat staring blankly while I calmed down. The award had really moved me; I was shaking for a while. The Invisible Little Man award has been presented since the fifties, when I was a fan and it was the only sf award besides the Hugos, so I'd wanted to win it for a long time.

Before too long people like Ed Bryant and Norman Spinrad exited too and a bunch of us went up to Beth's party, where we found Kim Stanley Robinson and his wife Lisa and were soon joined by Damon and others. I talked about things both future and past: the new SF Specials series with Beth and Stan -- whose novel The Wild Shore will be the first of the series in March 1984 -- and ancient fan stuff with Damon, including a possible trade of issues of his 1940 fanzine SNIDE, since he's now missing an issue or two. (I have numbers one and two, Damon; what will you trade me?) It was such a good party that I stayed for hours, leaving with some reluctance when I remembered I'd promised

a number of other people I'd come to their parties. I spent the rest of the night going from party to party; they were all good: the one for Tom Whitmore, Bill Rotsler's party for Paul and Neola at which Bill gave me a copy of "The Best Punctuation of the Year edited by Terry Carr" (I found a typo, Bill, tsk), and of course the one where Bill Bowers turned up. One doesn't expect to find Bowers at a west-coast regional convention, and I didn't really believe it was him till he gave me a copy of his latest OUTWORLDS; then I began to look around for Mike Glicksohn, but he wasn't there.

I spent Monday afternoon mostly in the hucksters' room buying old pulp magazines. (I always go there on the last day of a convention, when many dealers mark down their prices.) Frank Robinson was selling pulps in mint condition at comparatively low prices because he believes collectors should be encouraged; he even asked me who my favorite writer of the thirties was and when I said it was G. Peyton Wertenbaker he gave me the March 1930 Amazing with Wertenbaker's "The Ship that Turned Aside." I bought a bunch of others from him too.

Monday evening I came home, and Tuesday Bill Rotsler came to stay with us for a couple of days; Bill is our most frequent guest these days on our guest waterbed, though in the last year we've had both Bob Shaw and Michael Bishop here. With Bill, Carol and I visited Frank Robinson later in the week, when I bought yet more pulps from Frank and Carol got a lesson on Frank's computer because her employers were just then buying a similar one for her to use in her job at the University of California. Friday night, Jon Singer, who'd been in town for the convention, came over for a visit and Carol, Bill, Jon and I sat around having silly conversations after the sun went down and we could no longer admire Carol's new garden on our sun-deck. (Carol has two passions these days, flowers and computers; if you're visiting and want to talk about anything else, you have to talk with me, which is much duller.) Fortunately, Jon knows as much esoteric information about flowers as about anything else, so we had a good time.

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Sidney Coleman must have some sort of writer's block these days, because whenever he isn't visiting here we never hear from him except when he sends picture postcards from his travels. I suppose he thinks we expect him to be brilliant at all times -- which is true, of course -- but fortunately he does travel a lot, so we get postcards fairly frequently. When he and Diana left the Bay Area last summer they drove back east and Sid sent us the following note from the mountains of Colorado:

Benefits of Science Fiction, No. 8 in a series.

As I was rushing down from a mountain pass, I met a young man laboring upward.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," I said.

"What's happening?" he said.

"The sun grows cold," I said, continuing my descent.

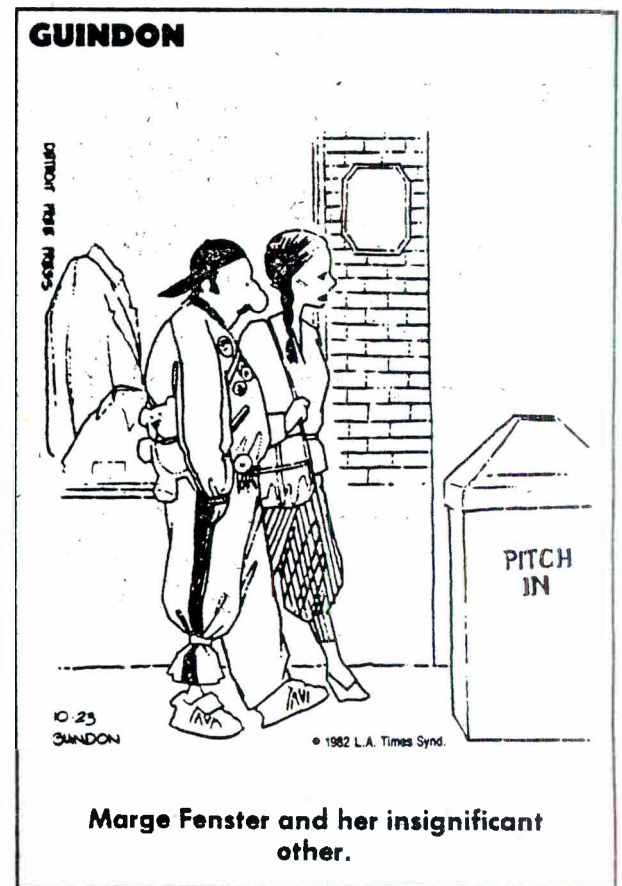
Benefit No. 8: No matter what the circumstances, the science fiction reader is never at a loss for an appropriate reply.

This year Sid and Diana were apparently traveling in Europe, for we got this note on the back of a picture postcard from a tourist cave in Yugoslavia:

Here it is cold and damp; water drips from the ceiling and blind white salamanders swim in subterranean streams. Indeed, it is much like Bob Toomey's old apartment in the East Village, except cleaner and more spacious.

We do hear from other old friends too, and sometimes they even come to visit us, as Peter and Lew Graham did recently. They were midway through a cross-country vacation trip and came by one evening with their kids, Andrew and Rae. I'm fond of children provided they're other people's and personable, both of which Andrew and Rae are, so we had a jolly time over pizza that night. Andrew and Rae had fun looking at my old comic books ("Oh, you have Captain Marvel #125? I have number three." -- I didn't have the cold heart to mention that mine was from the original series, but they seemed impressed when I brought out the first issue of Mad Comics). Andrew explained the intricacies of current video games so entertainingly that I almost wanted to start playing them myself -- aroint thee, Sathanas!

Peter is still working in library administration at Columbia University, and Lew pursues a career in painting -- she'll probably be exhibiting her work in NYC galleries soon. Peter seems happy with his life since he left fandom, unspoiled by the fame of having been the person who first noted, "The golden age of science fiction is twelve." Even Sturgeon's Law gets quoted less frequently than that remark these days, it seems, and viewing the current state of science fiction I can certainly understand why.



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What else is new here that's worth talking about? Dunno: various things in progress, a few finished. Don Myrus, editor of Best of Orni, visited the Bay Area a few months ago and Steve and Grania Davis threw a party; Myrus promptly commissioned me to choose two stories to re-print in Best of Orni's "SF Classics" feature. We subsequently settled on stories by Anderson and Wolfe and I got paid several severals of dollars for my efforts; the stories appear in the latest issue, along with a brief introduction written by me and considerably revised by ther. Universe 14 is finished and will appear from Doubleday next summer, featuring some very odd stories. Doubleday will publish The Best from Universe (#s 1 to 10) next spring.