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(dissecting)

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Operational Procedures

Supervised by

Richard Delap

I haven't much general comment to make this time as there has been little noticeable change of format or content in most of the magazines. WORLDS OF TOMORROW and WORLDS OF FANTASY bit the dust, their expiration marked only by a general lack of response. WOF never did find its image, and WOT, which expired once before because of poor distribution it was said, never recaptured the enthusiasm of the Pohl-edited issues. The other Galaxy magazines remain on a bi-monthly schedule and don't seem destined for more frequent issue in the near future. F&SF and ANALOG are now the only monthlies in the genre, and even cursory first-aid inspection promotes the conclusion that the field is very sickly indeed. Anyone know the number of a good specialist doctor?

Magazines for MARCH-APRIL, 1971

AMAZING STORIES and FANTASTIC:

Ted White's editorials are readable, Alexei Panshin offers more than the usual praise-plus-softened history in his discussion of Hugo Gernsback, and there is a grand total of two (count 'em) two reasonably good stories in these issues (not including the serial). FANTASTIC also features a much-better-than-average letter column and, for laughs, Robert Thomas explains the most repulsive exploitation feat in recent history--Scientology, as a means to "expanded consciousness". If these things are what you buy sf magazines to have, it's a mealtime of malts and jellyrolls; for the fiction afficianados, however, pickings are mostly low-cal.

AMAZING STORIES -- MARCH:

Serial:

The Lathe of Heaven (part one) -- Ursula K. LeGuin.

Novelettes:

Gemini Cavendish -- Gordon Eklund. ##### There's some momentary interest in this story of a young orphan whose parents have been disposed as "waste" and who is enrolled in a rigidly-structured school to build his "index rating" to an acceptable level. But in spite of its fast pace and quick characters, Eklund's inconsistencies get out of hand and his last-minute twists are more annoyingly preposterous. Likely written too quickly, and too carelessly.

Short Stories:

A Girl Like You -- Ted White. ##### White seems to be making a comment on the judgment of morals and seems to feel, when all's said and done, that black is black, white is white, and all shades of gray are reprehensible--at least, they are in this riot-torn future of racial and sexual hatred. The story is offensive,

both philosophically and artistically, and written with a complete lack of style or forethought. Poor.

Servo -- Calvin Demmon. ##### Pity young Underwood, working away his adolescent years broasting chicken on the tourist-trap planet, Servo, dreaming of the day he can be freed of his servitude and escape to Earth. Demmon's story is chock-full of unexpected satirical jabs and plot twists which will keep the reader hanging right on the edge of a chicken-chopping cleaver. Funny.

Reprint:

The Achilles Heel (1940) -- Raymond Z. Gallun.

Science:

The Ultimate City -- Greg Benford & David Book.

Article:

What Is Scientology -- Robert H. Thomas.

FANTASTIC -- APRIL:

Novella:

Wolf Quest -- Ted White. ##### A sequel to Phoenix Prime and the first part of a forthcoming novel, this is very disappointing in that its adventures always promise something exciting while nothing ever actually happens...aside from an enigmatic conclusion which is not as satisfying as White might hope. The plot concerns a long and arduous trek made by Makstarn, son of Max Quest (of the earlier book), and his mysterious wolf companion. Moments of interest are drawn out to unreasonable length, and White's very rough writing could certainly use some last-minute polish to rid itself of lines like "The road climbed . . . towards the mountains' feet." Argh!

Novellette:

Dread Empire -- John Brunner. ##### Brunner's Traveller In Black series reaches its conclusion with this evocative and fanciful merging of the varied threads of chaos at Clefftor Heights--where Garch Thegn seeks to make magic beyond all comprehension, where suffering children are freed at last from bondage, where wishes take on reality at a word from the traveller. This one reflects a Swiftian irony which has at its base the logic and good humor of the best fairy tales (which never should be appreciated only by children, anyway). I feel sure Brunner is quite satisfied with this final story, and many readers will be sure to find it the best in the series.

Short Stories:

The Eight Thirty to Nine Slot -- Geo. Alec Effinger. ##### There is a nasty element to this deciduous satire, leaving a bad taste not quite offset by some of the truths in its theme of brainwashing. It is, in effect, taking potshots at the hunters, but in using the same ammo it forces the reader to the conclusion that there is no respectable stance at all. Hmm, you don't really suppose there isn't....?

How George Duchamps Discovered a Plot to Take Over the World -- Alexei Panshin. ##### Your failings are my failings, and your secrets are my secrets, and in the end there's not much difference is there? Is apathy, in reality, a radical movement? Panshin was worried with this for perhaps five or ten minutes; the reader is advised not to be worried at all.

The Iconoclasts -- Dennis O'Neil. ##### Three youngsters make a short tour of an empty New York City, marked by seemingly senseless destruction of man's most treasured objects. The climactic revelation concerns man's evolvment to a higher plane, but the story itself remains a sadly empty glimpse of a very large subject.

Reprint:

The Garden of Hell (1943) -- Leroy Yerxa.

Article:

Science Fiction In Dimension: The Short History of Science Fiction -- Alexei Panshin.

ANALOG:

One more magazine featuring a good story in each issue, with the rest of the fiction, bad as it is, suffering even more in comparison. JWC works up a bit more good sense in his April editorial than one usually sees here, and his discussion on ecology is interesting in spite of some errors of omission. The science features are okay, though J.R. Pierce gets a little overbearing with his plugs for Bell Laboratories, even if they are deserved. P. Schuyler Miller's book columns are okay, too. The fact is everything's okay except the majority of the fiction--I mean, would it be too difficult to get one issue of even reasonably good stories? (By reasonably good I mean ones which don't make your stomach turn and your mind recoil at their tired familiarity and/or artistic crudity.) The mind boggles at the very idea....

MARCH:Serial:

The World Menders (part two) -- Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

Novelettes:

The Missing Man -- Katherine MacLean. ##### The newest Rescue Squad story features Ahmed's perusal of logic and George Sanford's tune-in to emotion to track down the missing Carl Hodges, New York's brain behind the maintenance of the city's automated services. An undersea city is destroyed while the neurotic masses "turn on" watching the event on TV, and as tragedy compounds MacLean makes you feel fear with her excellent depiction of terror, notably one crowd scene during an attempted escape from a second doomed city. And though the reader may not like her final philosophical tête-à-tête, it's worked logically into the story and therefore sits well. Very good.

The Operator -- Christopher Anvil. ##### On a planet of freezing snow and raging beasts, the colonists struggle to survive the elements as well as a delusion-inducing "pox". Troubles mount as visitors from the civilized worlds find this wilderness playground more dangerous than they'd bargained for. But Anvil explains nothing adequately--the colonists' primitive living conditions, the planet's odd ecological plan, the sudden switch from last name to first name of the protagonist midway through the story--and these adventures are an insultingly poor show.

Short Story:

May the Best Man Win -- Stanley Schmidt. ##### The sure-to-win Presidential candidate objects to his nomination on the grounds that his heroic exploits in space do not alter the fact that he is, by his own time if not Earth-time, too young to be in the running. It all sinks into a mire of cheaply-motivated discussion in which everyone loses, especially the reader.

Science:

Celestial X Rays -- Margaret L. Silbar.

APRIL:Serial:

The World Menders (conclusion) -- Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

Novelettes:

The Unreachable Stars -- Stanley Schmidt. ##### The Earth has long ago lost thoughts of trying to reach the stars, and even while technology remains advanced, it is used to maintain an immensely overcrowded world at not much better than subsistence level. Will the alien observers offer help or will they simply watch as man continues to make his judgmental errors?-- The story seems to work within its own limits, but those limits are much too confining, weakly-motivated and contrived to convince the reader of a basic, discordant logic. Too bad.

Heart's Desire and Other Simple Wants ---W. Macfarlane. ##### The Ravenshaw stories are usually fun, and this latest is no exception. This time Ravenshaw is staying out of sight (but not out of trouble) in an easy cross-country ramble to interview people supposedly involved in various aspects of the paranormal.

The opening pages are awfully dawdling but things pick up when Ravenshaw's secretary, Nell, turns up unexpectedly at a witches' coven and everything spills into a mad scramble through the "infinite worlds". As I said, fun.

Short Story:

Higher Centers -- F. Paul Wilson. ##### Even the science is piggyback basics in this disgustingly silly story of a death-terminating epidemic of unknown origin. The whole mess is a horrid blend of old gosh-wow pulp and modern (so they say) defeatism, and if anyone can point out some sense in this garbage, they've surely more time to waste than I do.

Science:

Real Science for Real Problems -- John R. Pierce.

* * * *

FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION:

I mentioned "reasonably good" before, so here comes F&SF with a reasonably good issue (March) as if to meet the challenge (?) headon. In April the special Poul Anderson issue offers some tributes to one of sf's most popular writers, which makes this issue a collector's item despite a definite lack of quality in most of the stories. Kelly Freas escapes from ANALOG long enough to produce the superior Anderson portrait featured on the cover, a much nicer job than he's been doing for Conde Nast of late. Science columns by Asimov, book columns by Blish and Russ, and film reviews of Searles are F&SF's superior addenda, each given just enough space to prove their worth. Reasonably good average, so I'll just have to shut up, or start asking for all-embracing superiority. And we don't expect that until we die and go to heaven, do we?

MARCH:

Serial:

The Faceless Men (conclusion) -- Jack Vance.

Short Stories:

The Tour -- Ted Thomas. ##### Rehabilitating criminals with the use of drugs can be dangerous, but according to Thomas' controlled and thoughtful tale, perhaps not exactly in the way you might have imagined--that is, not by the drugs themselves but in the hysterical reactions of the unscientific to their own fears and greeds. Well done.

The Sun Pond -- George C. Chesbro. ##### Chesbro combines two ideas into his story with ease and craftsmanship--first, a future society which is only beginning to discover the mechanics of time travel, and second, another plane of existence harboring the rejects from our own reality. A story of discovery and mystery and also a love story, it disappoints only in that it whets the appetite for further developments. A novel, Mr. Chesbro?

The Way Things Work -- Ron Goulart. ##### Another strikingly unplotted episode in the adventures of Jose Silvera, troublesome freelance writer who flits from world to world like a crazy pinball. This time he's writing questionably educational novels for children, searching for a missing ladyfriend, and, as usual, trying to collect a past-due fee. The dialogue is amusing enough to make this acceptable for fans.

The Art Machine -- Stephen Barr. ##### I cannot honestly state whether I like this story or not--which, when I think about it, probably means the story is successful to its purpose. It tells of the day when "the sciences had gone as far as they might" and the only thing remaining to be truly understood is Art. Some may call Barr's final answer a cop-out, some may think it funny, and some, like me, may just not know what to think.

Birdlime -- B.L. Keller. ##### The pubescent Booba Lawson is a member of the "now" generation, an utterly freaked-out, intensely self-loving, self-awed nincompoop. She is also the object of the sinister attentions of a demonic lover with a nasty interest in her soul. But this young "bird" can't be trapped by birdlime unless it's put in the right place, and evil is only evil to those who conceive of it as such. Quite simply, this is a very funny story and you should read it.

Reprint:
The Tenant (1960) -- Avram Davidson.
 Science:
Euclid's Fifth -- Isaac Asimov.

APRIL:

Special Poul Anderson Section:
Profile: Poul Anderson -- Gordon R. Dickson.
Poul Anderson: The Enduring Explosion -- James Blish.
Poul Anderson: Bibliography.
Verse: The Unicorn Trade -- Karen Anderson.
 Short Novel:

The Queen of Air and Darkness -- Poul Anderson. ##### I liked parts of this story so very much that it seems an utter shame to end it unsatisfied and longing for something entirely different than what is offered. The legendary figure of the title appears as a guiding influence to the civilization of the planet Roland, where humans have settled and seem intent to stay despite strange occurrences like the occasional disappearance of a child. But one widowed woman, while grief-stricken at the loss of her only son, is not about to give up without a search and seeks aid to explore the unknown, forbidding forests of Roland for an answer. The search for the mysterious Outlings becomes real and earnest as Anderson imbues his tale with a convincing alien feeling while carefully piecing his clues together. Sad to report, then, that the final picture is crashingly trite, with a long-winded explanatory climax that is untenable and undramatic. Oh, damn....

Short Stories:

The Power of the Sentence -- David M. Locke. ##### A college lecture in sentence structure becomes an open debate between two beings who use the lecturing professor as a mouthpiece. It's unrelievedly clever, very precious, and in the end much too silly and expiring from overkill.

The Unsigned -- William Walling. ##### Though not an advocate of defeatist stories, I must admit to preferring the honesty of defeat to the pseudo-heroics of tripe like this, in which a young man finally rebels against his consumer-oriented society of inherited debtorship, winning out not through perseverance or talent but through dumb luck and loopholes. Awful.

Darktree, Darktide -- Michael Bishop. ##### I admire Bishop more with each story, and this one is a brooding and frightening thing, running deep and dark with old-fashioned terror while cutting a path through modern concepts of twisted psychology. As a young boy is drained by a horrible succubus in a manner repellent but fascinating, the reader will have a great time counting the cold chills racing up and down his spine. Very good.

Bruno -- Dean R. Koontz. ##### Bruno is a policeman. He's also from a counter-Earth. He's also a bear. And when he joins forces with a private eye on our own world to seek out an escaped alien criminal with weird powers, the results should be wild and funny. I'll at least give Koontz credit for trying--he keeps trying until everything collapses under a monstrous heap of strained effort. Maybe next time, kid....

Science:

The Plane Truth -- Isaac Asimov.

GALAXY:

The final monthly issues of GALAXY are none too good, so one sort of hopes the new bi-monthly schedule will give editor Jakobsson a less hectic pace and therefore more opportunity to maintain the increasingly high level the magazine has been striving for (and often successfully reaching) of late. Features are on the wane here, with only Budrys' book column a regular appearance. Theodore Sturgeon, however, takes a guest spot in the editorial space (March issue) for a simplistic, brief but quite readable lecture titled "After Sex--What?" Jack

Gaughan continues to do his best handling all the artwork for GALAXY and its sister magazines, the very thought of which brings me to the point of sympathetic exhaustion.

MARCH:

Serial:

A Time of Changes (part one) -- Robert Silverberg.

Novelettes:

The Mountain Movers -- A. Bertram Chandler. ##### On the planet Olgana, Lieutenant Grimes finds a new adventure with a direct tie to the relatively ancient past of Earth, specifically a distinctly cultural line to Australia. That this country is the author's homeland may help to explain the convincing mood of an otherwise familiar plot. But it certainly is the first "mood piece" Grimes story that I've encountered and I'll have to admit I enjoyed it more than the usual stuff.

But the Secret Sits -- Greg Benford. ##### Benford improves his style progressively and there are some nicely-turned characterizations and snappy dialogue to interest the reader here; but his plots still suffer from underdevelopment and are strung up on rusty hinges which give little dependable support. This one about future college research, with subsequent and important social/financial status, is fast and often funny but falls apart when trying to come to terms with its moralistic aspect.

Mother In the Sky with Diamonds -- James Tiptree, Jr. ##### Tiptree tries his hand at pseudo-hard-science sf, but the results will likely only be appreciated by those with the patience to wade through the many pages of rock lyrics, nearly incomprehensible slang (bringing to mind Burgess' superior work in A Clockwork Orange), the adventures of a company inspector among the asteroids, and the "mother" of the title whose method of existence is too long-delayed in the explaining. It didn't grab me in one reading, but with close study it may offer something. (I don't guarantee it, however.)

Short Stories:

Pegasus Two -- Ernest Taves. ##### U.S. astronauts on the moon discover a Russian ship crashed nearby in a story that is sf only in that the events, as described, have not actually happened. It is, not incidentally, a morality play in which man's nature is split into villainous and compassionate roles, but the story never quite works since its opposed poles never elicit the ironic meaning which seems intended.

Choice -- J.R. Pierce. ##### The theme is a familiar one--in a world of automation, what happens to human communication?--but Pierce tells his tale so swiftly and with such real concern that its familiarity is comfortable without becoming really boring. The story has clan and a compassionate rather than harsh sense of human motives. Good.

Frog Pond -- Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. ##### More pollution paranoia in this dull-edged slice of the near future where a young rural boy and a stranger from the implied police-state city discuss their world and its emergence. Yarbro tries to keep it lively with unexpected revelations, but there's not much unexpected material left along this line.

Here Comes the Sun -- Duncan Lunan. ##### A minute-by-minute rescue operation (to save a group of aliens from the planet of a star going nova) makes such tense dramatic suspense that only repeated interludes of conversational science and mood-shattering explanations could ruin it. And Lunan, unaware it seems of the strength his story possesses, does exactly that.

Gehenna -- Barry N. Malzberg. ##### What is the modern hell? A common point in a large city, a mode or route to a common destiny, or is it our individual concepts which make the initial point, route and destination that which it in time turns out to be? You might call this a thinking man's horror story, you may call it incomprehensible, but it should stop you cold for at least a few moments.

APRIL:Serial:

A Time of Changes (part two) -- Robert Silverberg.

Novelettes:

To Fit the Crime -- Joe W. Haldeman. ##### With a temporarily-remolded body of plasti-flash, agent Otto McGavin poses as an authority on the alien Bruuchians, whose lifespans have been decreasing drastically (for unknown reasons) since the exploitation of their world was begun, and seems destined to disappear like previous agents as he slowly uncovers a group of nasty facts about activities on Bruunch. It's a sparkling little mystery story fleshed out with bright characterizations, clever dialogue and imaginative details (like the remarkable alien "stillness" phenomenon). Quite entertaining.

Liaison Assignment -- Duncan Lunan. ##### One more Interface story in which men can instantly cross light-years through a space-spanning "disc", this one with an excessive interest in the pseudo-technical maneuvers of zipping from place to place in a handy-dandy multi-purpose spaceship. There soon appear marauding aliens, pretty girl in distress, etc., all the trappings of purple pulp--exciting, I guess, for those easily excited by purple pulp.

Defender of Earth -- Gordon Eklund. ##### Did Sarah Bigelow murder her associate in the Lazarus project (a top-secret investigation of immortality) or did the man actually commit suicide? The defense lawyer and pivotal character, John Wance, is interest-catching but still resists Eklund's efforts to give him substance; while the farcical undertone of the plot, with its fact-oriented judge-and-jury machine, blends better than one might expect with the emotional dramas of the people. Good of kind.

Short Stories:

Necessary and Sufficient -- Theodore Sturgeon. ##### A scientist with a not-quite-workable method for world birth control, a "troubleshooter" assigned to find what's blocking a practical solution, and a step-by-step countdown in double problem solving--it's not the idea which counts for so much here (it's a pretty familiar ploy, after all) but Sturgeon's method of subtle sidetrack and innuendo with characters, especially those around whom the story moves but who are never brought in directly. Not great, perhaps, but quite readable.

Takeover -- Ernest Taves. ##### Computers taking over the world? No, that's over and done with; now it's men taking the world back, or what's left of it. Flipping a cliché over doesn't do much to make it more believable, and Taves' added domestic tribulations only seem to get in the way of the plot. Routine.

The Exorcism -- J.R. Pierce. ##### A sequel to last month's "Choice", this features Harvey's efforts to break off his relations with the computer-controlled "processors" (androids) and cultivate relations with real human beings...if he can find any. The first story's compassion turns to schmalz as Pierce substitutes a trowel for a brush with a distinctly heavy-handed result.

IF:

Del Rey handles the book reviewing chores but otherwise there is not much to give IF any sort of special notice. Quality tends to be lower for IF generally but the current issue slips a couple of goodies among a worthless lot of verbiage. Many readers objected to IF's once-termed "juvenile" image, but it at least had a personality of some sort, juvenile or no. Now it begs to be judged strictly on the quality of its fiction, and it will be noted that it fairs poorly much too often in this respect.

MARCH-APRIL:Novella:

Star Crossing -- Gred Benford & Donald Franson. ##### The few humans remaining on the watery world of Denobola find themselves battling uncertainty, and eventually each other, with every turn of the infantile plot of alien invaders scheming to

take over this key planet re an impending war. The story is simple-minded tripe that the authors have managed to pad into a bigger paycheck by making the humans a dense and contemptuously stupid lot, while the shape-changing aliens fill in the holes with comic-book prattle. Gross, idiotic and dull, it is not fit for man or beast...or invading alien.

Novelettes:

One-Generation New World -- W. Macfarlane. ##### The latest in Macfarlane's Ravenshaw of WBY series (earlier stories in ANALOG) and quite possibly the best so far of these fast and funny stories. Ravenshaw and Nell become involved with greedy characters desperate to find the secret of traveling to alternate worlds, and the tale culminates with a suspenseful battle on a world where the "people had revolved around an unexpected axis". As much philosophical as adventuresome, and delightful as both, it's brightened as usual with Macfarlane's refreshing dialogue.

Relief, Insider -- Keith Laumer. ##### Take a dash of Fantastic Voyage (inside an alien!), add a generous dollop of below-the-belt punches at diplomatic protocol, and mix in a smart-aleck blender named Relief--viola!, the latest Laumer farce, ready to serve. As with most easy-fix snacks, it comes out a bit on the flat side since the punch lines aren't quite funny enough to offset the tepid plot (if you can even call Relief stories plotted). Pretty stale.

Space Slick -- Gerard Rejskind. ##### Moving out to the planets, man is mining the satellites of Jupiter and leaving ugly and dangerous fuel slicks floating in space. The man who succeeded in saving Earth's polluted environment is now asked to investigate this new problem, during which Rejskind manages to make every character deliver at least one boring and dramatically useless lecture. The pollution crisis makes this junk too easy to sell, I think, and it's damnably impossible to read. Poor.

Short Stories:

Gambler's Choice -- Bob Shaw. ##### On Horta VII, a member of a mapping team finds a group of cylindrical objects which soon prove to be primed and dangerous "weapons" of unknown origin. The man is trapped, oxygen nearly exhausted and ammunition low, until the ship's captain, a slick-talking computer, deduces the odds for his survival. It has nothing to distinguish it from dozens of similar stories.

Slaves of Silver -- Gene Wolfe. ##### This Sherlock Holmes lampoon is a crackling, witty bit of fun that even non-fans of the detective master should enjoy. Holmes is in the form of a "declassified" human, March B. Street, and his assistant is an inimitable "bio-mechanic" (robot doctor), yclept Westing. The plot, involving kidnapping and color-coded messages, is amusingly traditional and irreverent at the same time. Very good.

Casey's Transfer -- Leo Sayo. ##### Not so strange to see a man dressed as a Revolutionary War soldier in modern New York, is it? Nor to see him and a tramp dining at a posh restaurant. Nor to realize he's simply been set down in the wrong time period by something. No, not so strange; just another of those gimmicks posing as a story. Sigh....

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WORLDS OF TOMORROW and WORLDS OF FANTASY:

These, it turns out, are the final issues of both magazines. News-stand sales apparently were not enough to make up the huge printing costs, so fans can now put their collection up on the shelf, wait a few years until collectors' prices begin to soar, then reap the rewards. Actually, I don't think prices will ever climb too high on these two since neither featured much regular output of classics (though a complete set of WOT, Issues 1 to 26, features some good serializations and short novels). These last efforts are ordinary and merely slither away with a few quiet whimpers, while fandom at large seems to be quite unconcerned since sad outcrys have been very, very few.

WORLDS OF TOMORROW -- No. 26, SPRING, 1971:

Novelettes:

Summons to the Medicmat -- Sydney Van Scyoc. ##### Van Scyoc's "A Visit to Cleveland General" was an excellent shuddery item about future hospitals, so one might expect the author to score again when turning to the field of medicine. She has chosen to tell of "medicbooths" where people stop off regularly to get their prescribed doses of drugs, supposedly helpful but soon revealed to be a huge rip-off by the mighty drug corporations. Dramatically it's an old saw about one man driven by circumstance to face the reality of his own drug dependence and to finally choose whether to fight the system or give in to it. The reader is forced to draw his own conclusions in the end, but since the "hero" is carelessly shallow there's not much incentive to make a reasoned choice. Fair.

Epic -- William Rotsler. ##### The surviving member of the first trip to Jupiter finds himself a couple of decades later involved with the Hollywood studio preparing the dramatized (i.e., highly fictionalized) film version of the event, much to his distress. Rotsler's background of the "real tinsel beneath the false tinsel" has become too much the cliché behind the cliché to surprise many readers, but even at this the plot is spun out so fast and lightly that the throwaway yet sometimes quite depthful dialogue makes it fun in spite of the calculated sentiment of a psychological deus ex machina windup. Okay of type.

Short Stories:

Perfect Match -- Roger Dee. ##### Two aliens looking for host bodies and a human couple aching to be reunited after separation by the Vietnam war all converge at the right time to wind up this short piece in a predictable bit of irony. Dee, however, should learn that irony comes with the unexpected. Mediocre.

On Venus the Thunder Precedes the Lightning -- David Duncan. ##### The sad thing about this story is that a good idea never comes to fruition because of Duncan's oversimplified detail and muddled concept of the true depth of the implications of Hume's cause-effect relation. The Venusians' simple reversal of Earthly values leads one to hope for more development than Duncan can possibly lace through this short work, which cops out with a dreary re-reversal.

Hold My Hand, My Love -- Michael G. Coney. ##### Here's a convincing picture of a balanced ecology (which readily assimilates humans into its plan) coupled with a slightly less convincing one of Oedipus amok. Dramatic but thematically crude, it doesn't succeed completely but is surprisingly readable in its partial success.

The Boy on the Stairs -- Dale E. Randles, Jr. ##### Another overpopulated future, here with a single, thirtyish woman who suddenly finds her days filled with visits from the highly-taxed, burdensome third child of a neighboring family. Randles tries to flesh out the woman with a reasonably-motivated background, but the story mires down in helpless melodrama when the woman tries to adopt the child as her own.

The Switcher -- Robert Wells. ##### The title refers to a creature that can switch minds with whoever looks into its eyes, and in the 27th-century world willing to pay huge sums for novel entertainment this proves to be a money-making attraction. There are dangers, of course, the worst of which is a tendency to slip this tired idea through on the shock value of sophisticated immorality. Sorry, Wells, it's still old hat.

A Prince of the Captivity -- Daphne Castell. ##### Colonizing a new planet, man is not consciously aware of the solitary intelligent being who resides there, influencing all life yet never known except in dreams. The effort to communicate the idea of an utterly alien life force is well intentioned but the story per se suffers from a moody and vague formlessness.

That Other Dimension -- M.G. Ogan. ##### A small appetizer for 5-minute entertainment, with a crackpot inventor (not really so crackpot in the end), his be-yoo-tiful wife (38-24-39), and a dishonest employee of a dishonest organization (both very eager for !Money!). Not very original, perhaps, but appropriately light.

The Agent -- Richard Hill. ##### Space Rock is the newest sound in music performed by Alien Corn, the newest group to hit the millionaire status. But like all such groups their time comes and goes as audiences turn on to something new. The thing is to find a new audience...with the help of an agent who's really out of this world. Mild humor.

Waiting in Crouched Halls -- Ed Bryant. ##### Three humans, specially powered with the ability to navigate their ships in and out of null-space, are sent to kill Black William, an energy-eating, world-destroying monster from space. Bryant obviously knows this is pretty stale stuff and tries to spruce it up with psycho-sexual adumbrations, most of which muscle in as extreme and pretentious overwriting.

Heart of the Giant -- Larry Eisenberg. ##### Terran vs. alien, violence vs. non-violence, aggressiveness vs. passivity--themes of today (and yesterday) posited in the future to show the unending conflict and over-crossed division between absolutes. I would have preferred more strength of detail in both character and background, but it's nonetheless a smoothly-handled little story.

WORLDS OF FANTASY -- No. 4, SPRING, 1971:

Short Novel:

Reality Doll -- Clifford D. Simak. ##### Simak's regression into shallow themes and childish plots continues with this novel which spends many pages in a Great Trek across a planet of mysteries, ostensibly in search of a missing man but eventually in search for personal fulfillment. But fulfillment is only deserved by characters who show a true need for it, and Simak falls far short of making his humans the type for which readers can maintain sympathy. His pig-brained captain remains pig-brained to the end yet still finds his way into "heaven"; his heroine is as beautiful and brainless as a thousand other pulp heroines; George and Friar Tuck are never more than half-realized supporting characters; and Hoot, the friendly and affectionate alien, is so busy keeping an edge of sanity alongside the idiocy of the humans that he is never given a chance to fully develop. There are occasional glimpses of alien lifeforms--the centaurs, the herds of murderous "beasts", etc.--that seldom amount to more than momentary diversions in Simak's endless, repetitive dialogues, with the beasts making an unexpected appearance to inject some pseudo-suspense into the nonsensical climax. To some readers the inane "reality" philosophy of this novel may appear innocuous foolishness; to fans of the brilliant City, it can only mark the author's recent sad pandering to a denominator of bubble gum stupidity. (Putnam is offering a longer version of this novel, but you'll have to look for a review of it from someone else; I couldn't hack this one a second time, especially not a longer version.)

Short Stories:

The Passing of Auntie Mat -- Ross Rocklynne. ##### Good and evil, matter and anti-matter; the physical and theosophical combine into one--that is, if you can accept this version of the confrontation of forces "behind the back of God", one in which the eternal woman Lilith plays her farewell performance. Rocklynne tries, but somehow this never really turns into a story.

Korman Widens Lead in Poll -- Frank S. Robinson. ##### One more pact-with-the-Devil story, here combined with political strategy as a man unwillingly and thoughtlessly gives himself and his family in hopeful return for a "decent" future for his country. And though one keeps hoping Robinson is leading toward a new and surprising quirk, it is, alas, the same old song and dance.

The Garden -- M.L. Brannock Lunde & David Lunde. ##### Allegorical swords-and-sorcery?...well, I suppose it must be tried at least once, but this is an unusually weary effort as two men--one a seeker of heretics, the other a balance to judgment--encounter monsters, stone women, deserts, whirlwinds, etc., to finally find that "the only constant is change", Tiresome.

Hunt with the Rain -- S.C. Beck. ##### Call it fantasy or sf, what you will, there is a blend of the two here that defies classification, a story of elementals in people-form and their struggle to retrieve a "handful of dreams". It's strong on mood, but with a startling blend of smartass humor and eerie reality that gives it a tasty and lingering flavor. Well done.

Ptolemaic Hijack -- Ruth Berman. ##### The crew of a passenger airliner find themselves transported into a Ptolemaic universe (the sun and planets revolve around Earth), and a world of sorcerers and sorcery, knights and trolls. Berman concentrates on action and wisecracks, the action faring better, and it may satisfy those who groove on this sort of thing. I found it a bit thin for my tastes and can't particularly recommend it.