

At the EasterCon this year, I was agreeably surprised to hear SF discussed not only during the Ted Carnell Talk but everywhere fans were gathered - room parties, bars, restaurants, under tables - everywhere.

We all agreed that currently SF is in a bad way but, thank goodness, few people were fatalistic about it. Some people wanted it to go back to what it was ten years ago; others wanted it to slant off in new directions and embrace elements from other fields while still retaining its own distinctive essence. Still others wanted to steer a middle road.

Now why this virtually unheard of phenomenon of fans discussing SF over almost an entire Con?

I think it's because they were, until fairly recently, comparatively complacent about SF. It was there to be read and enjoyed and read and enjoyed it was - until a number of gradual changes combined to make it cease to be either.

Our complacency was shattered when we realised that there was nothing currently enjoyable or readable in most modern magazine SF. We're worried now. So are the publishers - they aren't getting our support or, more important, the support of the general reader who obviously feels as we do.

I'm going to try, if it's possible, and attempt an analysis of what's wrong with current SF.

Drawing on points raised on the Saturday of the Con, I might be able to piece together some idea of what happened to make SF what it generally is today, and also discover what is needed. For a long time I'd had my own ideas - and was surprised and glad to see that other people had much the same ideas - people

like Arthur Thomson, Brian Aldiss, Ken Slater, Ted Carnoll, Eric Bentoliffo, Ted Tubb, Archie Morcer and Ron Bennett. However, we differed on some angles - so don't get the impression that I'm putting words into the mouths of the above people.

What is wrong with current SF ?

I should say that one of the reasons for SF ceasing to satisfy and stimulate as many people as it once did is because publishers are wary of introducing elements into the field which are virtually new and untried. But first, here are the three general categories which I use in deciding how I'm going to review books and stories:-

- 1) Books etc. which don't interest me at all - which are more than hard to read and which leave me bored, with a sense of time wasted.
- 2) Books etc. which have been well-written (often good adventure stuff) and leave me satisfied.
- 3) Books etc. which have been well-written about real problems and fundamental truths, and which leave me stimulated, wanting more. Books which, in fact, have contributed in some concrete way to my own career as a writer and my own career as a human being.

Sorry if that sounds pretentious.

Most SF today (in magazines) comes into category 1; a lot more comes into category 2; a very little comes into category 3. Hardly enough to count, in fact.

In England there are nine magazines published regularly which are Science Fiction in content. Six of these are American reprints and are, in order of current popularity:



- |                             |       |
|-----------------------------|-------|
| FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION | (2)   |
| ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  | (1-2) |
| GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION      | (1-2) |
| IF SCIENCE FICTION          | (1-2) |
| ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION    | (1-2) |
| FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION      | (1-2) |

I have listed my own ratings against them. 1-2 ratings are where I've given the magazine benefit of the doubt. So, out of six magazines, five I count as mediocre, one as satisfying.

British magazines are all, of course, run by NOVA now, under Ted Carnell's editorship. These, for the record, are:

NEW WORLDS (2)  
SCIENCE FANTASY (2-3)  
SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES (2)

Thus, it's obvious that I find them all satisfying for the most part, and one is sometimes stimulating.

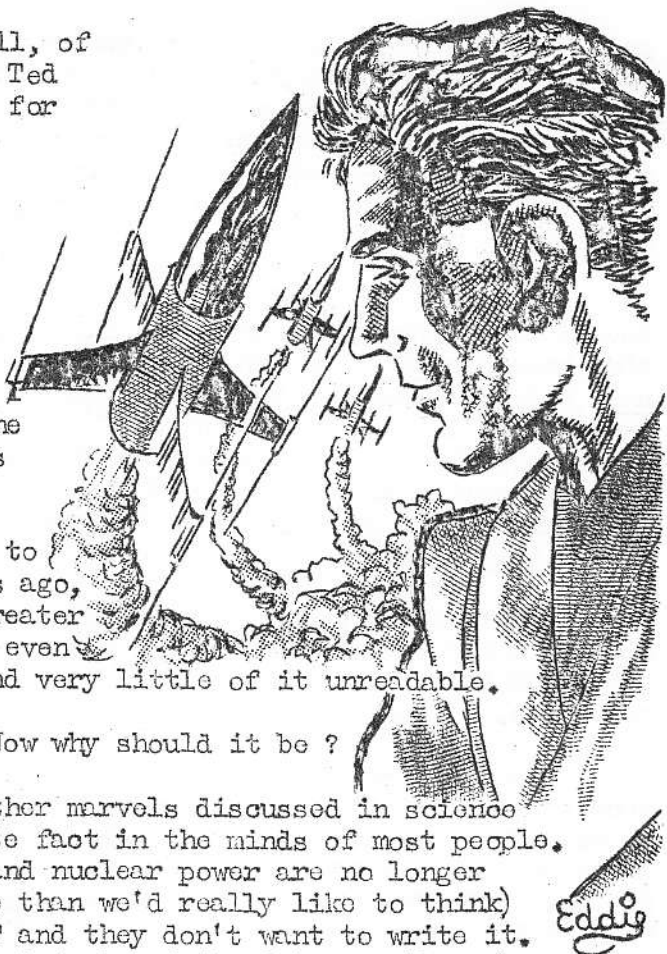
If there was space here to analyse SF of ten years or less ago, I'd probably discover that a greater percentage was stimulating, an even larger percentage satisfying and very little of it unreadable.

That's the position. Now why should it be ?

Space travel and many other marvels discussed in science fiction stories are now concrete fact in the minds of most people. Thus, stories of space travel and nuclear power are no longer escapism. The escapists (more than we'd really like to think) therefore don't want to read SF and they don't want to write it. These stories are no longer about facts of the future - they are about facts of the present or even of the past ! So if you give your story a future background or not, it is still dealing with a contemporary problem and thus can be handled better in a contemporary setting (NERVES by del Rey, ISOTOPE MAN by Maine and CHAIN REACTION by Hodder Williams). SF of twenty years ago, it is obvious by reading these books, is undisputable fact of today.

Also, much of the good stuff in SF is not really SF as we think of it; many of the best writers are not essentially SF writers. The mediocre writers (most of them these days) are dealing with contemporary problems but haven't the knowledge, interest, time or ability to present these problems against a contemporary setting. They take the easy way out and write them up as SF, slanting them at the SF market, writing in a slick, pseudo-sophisticated style which is so brittle that it crumbles under the strain of serious reading. They sell them to editors (many of whom are as concerned as we are about the state of SF) who, to fill a magazine, take what they can, hoping to get the occasional good story out of a batch of crud. The editors have lost most of their potentially good writers to other fields or to pocket-books and hard-cover novels. The magazines exist - they have to be filled.

Fewer and fewer really good writers are coming into the field. Those who used SF as a vehicle for discussing important



problems can, often as not, discuss their problems in contemporary fiction or fact. Rewards are better outside of the field. The good science-fantasy or science-adventure writers (L. Sprague de Camp is an example) are writing good historical-adventure tales or good contemporary-adventure tales nowadays. Rates per word, increasing in other fields all the time, remain static within the SF field.

A few of the good writers continue to write SF out of sheer love of the genre (I'm surprised that there are a few left) although they have proved to us and to the general public that they don't need the SF vehicle to turn out a worthwhile novel or short story. James Blish in the USA and Brian Aldiss in Britain are good examples of writers who still enjoy writing SF and who, although they've gained reputations outside the SF field, stick to their first love. But there aren't many writers of their ability left - and there aren't many entering the field !

Most of the authors contributing to the SF magazines are old and tired - they have ceased to be stimulated by the ideas they once had - and it seems they have an inability to think up new ideas. They're in a rut, man, but good.

To risk the criticism of repeating myself - those who were once worth reading, but could only write SF, are no longer coming up with fresh ideas; those who were once worth reading, but could write outside the SF field, have for the most part gone into other fields. The few who are still worth reading and are still coming up with new ideas are either sat upon by editors (largely because of those editors' bosses - the publishers) or can only write a small amount of the stuff, compared to the large amount being published.

That's the situation. I'd like to enlarge on it sometime. The best way to do this will, if possible, be to answer any criticism this article may arouse from you.

#### How can SF be stimulating again ?

I don't think, personally, that it can regain its lost life by going backwards and becoming what it was ten years ago. Anyway, the idea of SF going back is paradoxical.

No. it needs new approaches, new angles and fresh treatment, and the standard of writing (a standard set by the best of the current authors) must continue to aim higher.

There are two directions in which SF can go if it wishes to survive - both directions are forward, of course. Some of it can become adventure fiction (the kind Ted Tubb can write so well) and some of it can go deeper into the fundamentals of humanity and can, at the same time, remain largely a speculative fiction (the kind Brian Aldiss is writing more and more). In the States I can think of Fritz Leiber as a parallel of Tubb and Blish for Aldiss (although all, of course, have dissimilarities of style, approach etc.)



Some of the best of the recent SF published (either in magazine form or book form - interestingly it's usually both in the long run) has dealt to some extent with theology. A CASE OF CONSCIENCE by Blish, for instance, JUDAS DANCED by Aldiss, A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ by Miller. A number of the virtually or altogether unheard of new writers are interested in theological SF themes. I am one, and two of my close friends are others. I have met more. The field of real theology is still very fresh and a great deal of good SF could deal with it.

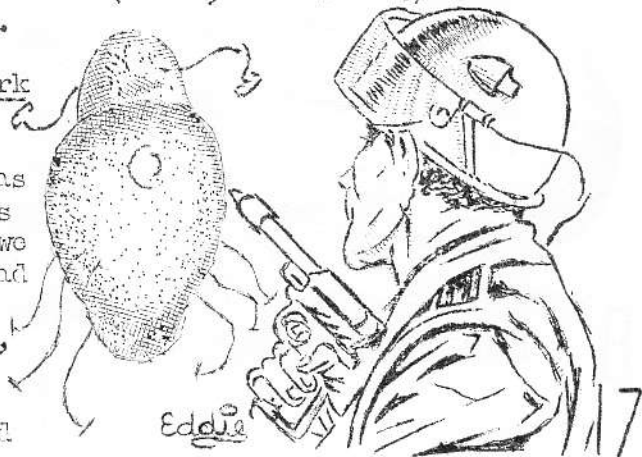
We musn't forget fantasy. A great many of our best English literary figures write straight or borderline fantasy a lot of the time. William Golding, Mervyn Peake, Henry Treece, J.R.R. Tolkien and many others (others I've heard of but haven't as yet read).

There is no need to describe adventure-fantasy or adventure-science-fiction here. We must all have read it at some time. But adventure must be good adventure - its standards must be high. Adventure (pure emotion) must have its place; but I feel that the more serious appreciators of SF will find more to interest them in the second category (one, of course, can still embrace elements of the other). Luckily, I enjoy both.

Out of the magazines, I can see hope in only four of them. Three of those four are British - the other is R&SF if it manages to get out of the rather brittle rut it is currently in.

If the editors of these magazines wish to begin improving their publications almost immediately they cannot expect to print 'real' SF all the time. Borderline fantasy, serious occult fantasy (something like the kind of stuff Charles Williams tried to write), satire and - yes - even Space-Westerns (although these should be excellent - not nearly so) should all be published along with the little that is currently worth reading of pure SF. This will fill the magazines with work which, at least, should be worth reading. Slowly these editors should encourage not only established Goldings, Lewis's and Peakes into their ranks - but new (and good) writers of the same category. Slowly these editors should steer them off on to SF tracks and encourage them to write the pure stuff. We already have the standards set by the writers I have mentioned (Blish, Aldiss etc.) so I am not suggesting the impossible.

Editors have got to work on this - they've got to be intensely dedicated men like Campbell was - but Campbell has gone as far as he can (perhaps too far with ASTOUNDING) and we need new Campbells who have had their baptism-of-print in the new literary climate. These, in turn, will probably go the way that Campbell has gone - and, in turn, will be replaced



with newer Campbells. This, let's face it, is the way of things. We can thank Campbell for creating the altered climate, now we must forget the climate which caused Campbell to do what he did and work under the conditions he has made (making new conditions for those who will follow us). This is the only way in which literature as a whole can continue to live fully with virility and scope.

Many of these comments, could, I'm certain, apply to the current stagnation of literature here, in the States and in France. As in SF, there is still good writing being published - but not enough! Poetry, painting, playwriting - it's the same in those fields also.

The British Science Fiction Association may play an important part in helping to establish the new climate and many of its members feel that this is so. I'd advise any of you to join, if you haven't already done so. You'll be supporting something worthwhile - as you'll discover.

.....Mike Moorcock.

