

A tall, golden lattice tower, possibly a radio tower or antenna, is shown against a dark night sky filled with numerous bright stars. The tower's structure is composed of interconnected beams, creating a complex geometric pattern. The stars vary in brightness and size, with some showing prominent diffraction patterns. The overall scene conveys a sense of reaching for the stars or exploring the unknown.

Damon Knight

**IN
SEARCH
OF
WONDER**

IN SEARCH OF WONDER

essays on modern science fiction

by
DAMON KNIGHT

Introduction by Anthony Boucher

Third Edition: Enlarged and Extended

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Coming soon! Everything by Damon Knight!

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~ ~ ~

*To CHET and LARRY
For old times' sake*

~ ~ ~

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION

There are few more misused words than *CRITICISM*. In one false sense, it's used to mean restrictedly *adverse* (what authors call *destructive*) criticism, as if a favorable (*constructive*) evaluation could not be the result of critical analysis.

And in another misprision, it's used to mean *reviewing*.

Reviewing is a lesser art, with a more immediate functional purpose. The reviewer's objective is to express his reactions to a work in such a way that the readers of a given periodical will know whether or not they want to read it. The critic attempts to measure the work by more lasting and more nearly absolute standards, to determine its place, not for the reader of the moment, but for the cultivated mind viewing the entire art of which this work forms a segment.

All of the rest of us—Henry Bott¹, Groff Conklin, August Derleth, Floyd C. Gale, Villiers Gerson, H. H. Holmes, J. Francis McComas, P. Schuyler Miller, Hans Stefan Santesson—are primarily reviewers; damon knight, in most of his published assessments of science fiction and particularly in those gathered here, is a critic.

¹ Forgive me, Dr. Asimov; these names are arranged alphabetically.

Professional criticism is extremely rare in the science fiction field. God knows criticism of science fiction has been more than plentiful outside our orbit; but the critical contributions of self-appointed scholars and intellectuals have been marked by equal portions of distaste for science fiction and complete ignorance of it. (It's worth noting that one of America's most esteemed journals of opinion recently asked Ward Moore to contribute a critique of science fiction—then canceled the assignment when an outline showed that the piece would be both informed and favorable.)

Within science fiction, criticism—and frequently of a high order—has appeared almost solely in amateur publications; indeed the wealth of material, critical, bibliographical and biographical, that has appeared in fanzines, from *Fantasy Commentator* to *Inside*, is such that a university library with a complete fanzine file would be the Mecca of Ph.D. candidates in the twenty-first century.

But damon knight² has introduced criticism into professional magazines—partly because he is equipped with the background and intellect to do so (but then so are most of the reviewers mentioned above), and largely because his magazine outlets, if not always the most affluent or the most widely circulated, have given him free rein and virtually unlimited space.

² Every time I type that name I have to reassure myself that I have not been reincarnated as a cockroach.

Most of us have free rein to the extent of being allowed to say precisely what we think (though at least one of my reviewing colleagues has been subject to arbitrary editorial revision of his expressed opinions), but we're very tightly restricted in the matter of space, so that we are forced to present a persuasive (we hope) statement rather than a closely reasoned analysis.

With all due respect to E. E. Smith, Ph.D., who has expended a good deal of serious research in statistically tabulating the percentage of verdicts in which various reviewers and critics are "right" or "wrong," both reviewing and criticism are matters of opinion. There is no ultimate, absolute Esthetic Truth; and if you attempt to judge the rightness or wrongness of others, you simply set yourself up as a reviewer of reviewers, a critic of critics, and just as fallible as any of them.

Nevertheless, you tend to rate a man according to the extent to which his opinions agree with yours; but knight, by virtue of the analytical, essayistic treatment made possible by his freedom in space, has an all but unique quality: You can disagree completely on the book in question, and still admire (and

even to some extent agree with) the critique.

Personally I find myself agreeing with knight to an embarrassingly suspicious degree.³ But when I do sharply disagree, I always recognize that knight has read the same book (some reviewers seem to have read a wholly different collection of words printed and bound under the same title)... and that a rereading might possibly convert me to his viewpoint. A striking example is Curme Gray's *Murder in Millennium VI*, which originally struck me, in 1952, as one of the most unprintable abortions I had ever read. The knight critique in this volume not only brought the entire book vividly back, after four years, to a mind which thought it had mercifully forgotten the whole thing; it also persuaded me that the novel does indeed possess one rare virtue which I had completely overlooked, and I now find myself tempted to go back and reread the book with knight's analysis in mind.

³ In this volume knight covers 81 books, of which I've read and reviewed 75. I'm in unquestioning agreement on 56 of these and have minor reservations—largely matters of emphasis—on 16, leaving only 3 items for real controversy.

Successively or simultaneously, damon knight has been a science fiction fan, even an actifan (the uninitiated will have no trouble with that fannish word if they'll simply pronounce it aloud), an editor, a critic and a creative writer.

Science fiction readers are used to the phenomenon of the writer-editor; in this field, unlike most others, almost every successful editor is or has been a successful writer. But the writer-critic is more controversial, if by no means uncommon. The question of whether an arbiter should also be a creator is, as I've written elsewhere,⁴ a tough one: "Either way, the victim of an unfavorable review can make what seems a legitimate complaint. If the reviewer is not a writer, what does he know about the field? He's probably soured and frustrated because he can't sell, and takes out his spite on those who do. If he is a writer, he's jealous of competition, he can understand only his own kind of story, and who's he to talk anyway—look at his own stuff!"

⁴ *The Mystery Writers Handbook*, by the Mystery Writers of America (Harpers, 1956).

In knight's case, at least, the writer-critic duality seems to work out admirably. There's plentiful evidence in this volume that he loves competition and that he understands intimately many types of stories not remotely related to his own work. And if you "look at his own stuff," you can only be dazzled and delighted by such virtually perfect short stories as "To Serve Man" (*Galaxy*, November, 1950) and "Not With a Bang" (*F&SF*, Winter-Spring, 1950) and such an imperfect but brilliantly stimulating novel as *Hell's Pavement* (Lion, 1955).

(*Pavement*, incidentally, is knight's only previous book. The present volume marks an unprecedented event: the publication of a science fiction author's collected critiques before his collected short stories. The latter collection is long overdue—*publishers please note!*)

And the practice of the critical profession has developed in knight-the-writer an unusual and valuable quality of self-criticism. He is able, as is almost no other professional writer of fiction, to stand apart from his completed work and look at it objectively. While an editor is still brooding over what suggestions to make for salvaging a flawed but potentially fine knight story, he'll receive an unsuggested rewrite which solves all the problems.

Knight can be so dazzlingly individual as either critic or writer (he didn't do badly as an editor either; possibly the most tragic instance of stupidity in the whole misbegotten science fiction "boom" was the almost contraceptive killing off of *Worlds Beyond*) that writers and readers alike have been highly curious as to what he is like as a person.

The science fiction universe teems with flamboyant outsize extroverts; surely a man who, in print,

manages to stand out as a personality in such company must be something spectacular in the flesh.

So came the Thirteenth World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland in 1955 (that happiest, warmest, most delightful of Conventions!), and Damon Knight, who had been out of direct contact with fandom since before his rise to professional prominence, decided to attend.

The fans at the convention got ready to bug their eyes; the professionals checked the condition of their body armor. (I don't know why Knight has such an undeserved reputation as a hostile critic; this volume contains far more praise than attack, and if the debunking of Austin Hall is as devastating a hatchet job as I've read, the section on Heinlein is a sheer love letter.)

And Damon Knight appeared and suddenly one understood the reason for those minuscule initials. One could not possibly write, with conventional capitalization, "And Damon Knight appeared"; it would be overstating the facts.

A batch of editors and writers staged for the Convention a satiric skit on the past, present and future of science fiction—written, memorized, rehearsed, costumed, lighted and presented in something under 24 hours. And while we were writing it, there I was in a room with three men who could out-taunt me. This is not a common event, even in science fiction circles; but Fritz Leiber has trained Shakespearean articulation and projection, Randall Garrett has an improbable and even indecent amount of the Effervescence of Youth, and Sam Moskowitz has a voice which is obviously the Creator's working model for the Last Trump.

I know when I'm licked. I stretched out on a bed and settled down to the pleasant task of contemplating fellow-collaborators Mildred Clingerman and Judith Merrill, while creative contention thundered around me.

And off in a corner of the hotel room, Damon Knight found a typewriter, set it up on a desk, found paper and carbon, and wrote the skit. All of the rest of us had starring parts and chewed them down to the last scrap of hamfat; Knight did not appear in it.

I should like to know Damon Knight well; I hope in time I shall do so (and possibly even discover the existence of Damon Knight). But meanwhile I think of him as the man at the typewriter, quietly getting something done while the rest of us make a great foofaraw about it.

This book is, I think, another example of Knight's getting something done.

What kind of book is it? Well, it's easier to start off by defining a few things which it is not.

It is not an earnest endeavor to reach the ultimate implications of science fiction as a form and its place in our culture; if you want that, see Reginald Bretnor's *Modern Science Fiction: Its Meaning and Its Future* (Coward-McCann, 1953).⁵

⁵ In print from [Advent:Publishers](#).

It is not, except inadvertently, a compendium of useful how-to notes for the writer of science fiction; see L. Sprague de Camp's *Science Fiction Handbook* (Hermitage, 1953).

It is not a gently persuasive lure for the reader who knows nothing of science fiction; see Basil Davenport's *Inquiry Into Science Fiction* (Longmans, Green, 1955).

It is not even, to be strictly accurate, quite a book, any more than loosely assembled series of short stories and novelets, as Knight points out, are really novels.

It is a collection of critical notes and essays managing to cover, among them, most of the principal trends and individual authors of modern science fiction—in book form, I should add, since the magazines are considered only indirectly as sources of book material.

It is addressed—though the wit and clarity of the writing should make it readable to anyone—specifically to the regular reader of science fiction... a marked advantage in that the writer of critique

for the general literary public must spend much of his time in uncomfortable defensive or evangelist postures. (And too, among ourselves one can attack faults in science fiction without being misinterpreted as attacking the genre itself.)

And (this is the “getting something done”) it provides conclusive proof that, to quote knight’s introductory credo, “science fiction is a field of literature worth taking seriously, and that ordinary critical standards can be meaningfully applied to it.”

Some of us have been going around, aggressively or piteously, arguing that look, science fiction is part of literature. Others have disregarded the problem; and most astoundingly, John W. Campbell, Jr.—who of all people should know better—has recently⁶ asserted flatly that science fiction is not literature and cannot be assessed by normal literary standards or critical values.

⁶“Science Fiction and the Opinion of the Universe,” *Saturday Review* May 12 1956.

Meanwhile damon knight has simply gone ahead, taken science fiction seriously as a field of literature, applied ordinary critical standards, and made the result meaningful.

It’s as easy as that if you settle down to your typewriter in a corner away from the foofaraw.

—ANTHONY BOUCHER

Berkeley, California

AUTHOR'S NOTES

To the First Edition:

This book consists mainly of critical pieces written from 1952 to the present. I owe very grateful thanks to people like Jim Blish who said there ought to be a book, as well as to editors Lester del Rey and Robert W. Lowndes, who between them gave me my start in this field, and to Earl Kemp and Sidney Coleman for many invaluable suggestions.

These short essays make up an informal record of the period that will be known to science fiction historians as the Boom of 1950-1955. It was a period that produced some of the best science fiction ever to appear in hard covers, along with a fascinating flood of the worst science fiction ever conceived by the mind of man. Bad and good, I've taken it all for what enjoyment or moral could be squeezed out of it. The flood has now receded, but if science fiction runs true to its cyclical pattern, there'll be another about 1960. And, I trust, I'll be on hand with the same net and gun.

To the Second Edition:

The FLOOD came, but I was not there. I resigned as *F&SF*'s book reviewer in 1960 because the then editor, now my agent and a good friend, declined to publish one of my reviews as written. (The review in question appears here for the first time, in Chapter 10 [The Tomorrow People].) Afterward had a couple of invitations to review s.f. books for magazines, but there seemed to be good reasons why, having stopped, I should not start again.

This new edition contains a few things written especially for it, along with the reviews I wrote between 1956 and 1960, and a mass of material that was omitted from the first edition for one reason or another. I have taken the opportunity to try to correct the typographical errors, dropped lines and other blemishes of the original edition. I have corrected some errors of my own (such as writing "Isaac" when I meant "Jacob") and have made some minor revisions for style. With one or two exceptions, I've made no effort to update the book; topical references, like the one about L. Ron Hubbard's disappearance into the Middle West, remain as written.

—DAMON KNIGHT
Milford, Pennsylvania

1. MYSELF WHEN YOUNG

I grew up in the little town of Hood River, Oregon, where my father was principal of the high school.

I was an only child, big-headed and spindling. Because of my slow physical development, I began losing touch with my contemporaries when I was eight, and from then on I got most of my ideas about life from books. I read all the fairy tales in the public library, and am tempted to put that down as significant, but on the other hand I read everything else too. I attacked the library systematically, first by authors—all of Dickens, all of Dumas—then by subject—all the pirate books—and finally at random.

I discovered pulp magazines when I was ten. First I was attracted by the air-war magazines, full of Spads and Fokkers; then I saw and bought something called *Amazing Stories*. It was bigger than other pulps, about 8 1/2 x 11, and the cover, in sick pastels, showed two helmeted and white-suited aviators aiming rifles at a bunch of golliwogs. This was the August-September 1933 issue, and the cover story was “Meteor-Men of Plaa,” by Henry J. Kostkos. That was the beginning.

Not all the science fiction magazines were available in Hood River, and I could not always afford to buy them, but when we made our annual family trip to Portland, it was not only the amusement park that drew me, but the second-hand bookstores with their stacks of old *Science Wonders* and *Amazing*. On one such trip I found a new magazine on the stands, one I had never even heard of before—*Astounding Stories*. Back in our hotel room I developed a fever; it turned out that I had the measles and we were all quarantined. My parents must have been chagrined, but I was blissful, lying there reading “The Son of Old Faithful” by Raymond Z. Gallun.

For me, the attraction of science fiction was like that of fairy tales, but it was much more powerful because the stories took place in a future in whose reality I could believe; moreover, they were not stereotyped, endlessly recycling the same princesses and ogres, but ranged over a fascinating plurality of strange worlds and creatures. I lived in these worlds whenever I could, because I couldn't bear the world I was really living in; but there was never enough science fiction. I ordered books by H. G. Wells from the state library, and I prowled the stacks of used-book stores looking for any title that vaguely sounded like s.f. I was always disappointed: *Man of Two Worlds*, for instance, turned out to be a novel about an Eskimo.

I kept running into incomprehensible responses in other people around me, as when I criticized the new comic strip *Flash Gordon* because the natives of Mongo spoke English, and a friend of mine said, “What else would they talk?” I came to believe that somewhere in the outside world, probably in New York, things were altogether different, and Hood River became hateful to me because I couldn't get out of it.

In the late thirties and early forties there was a rash of new magazines. Among these were *Super Science* and *Astonishing*, edited by Frederik Pohl. In one or the other of these I found a listing of fan magazines. I sent for some, and got into correspondence with Bob Tucker, the editor of *Le Zombie*. I drew cartoons for him. Then I published my own fanzine, *snide*. Other correspondence followed; the fans I got to know in this way included Richard Wilson, Donald A. Wollheim, and Robert W. Lowndes, all members of a New York group that called itself the Futurian Society. I didn't know it then, but *snide* was my passport out of the Pacific Northwest.

When *Astounding* was in full flower in the late thirties, with stories in every issue by Robert A. Heinlein and beautifully realistic brush-drawn illustrations by Hubert Rogers, I would have given anything to be Campbell, or Heinlein, or Rogers, I didn't care which. I knew I couldn't be an editor, and I wasn't well enough trained to be an illustrator, so I tried to write. I sent Campbell a story, and he

sent it back with a letter of rejection on gray stationery, signed with a looping scrawl.

I now know how much more this was than I had a right to expect, but I was frustrated because I didn't see what was wrong with the story and didn't know how to make it better.

I kept trying, and eventually sent a few stories to Bob Lowndes, who was then acting as an agent. Lowndes sent most of them back with patronizing letters about plot and characterization; then he wrote me that Donald A. Wollheim was putting together the first issue of a new magazine and would print my story "Resilience" if I would donate it. (Wollheim had no editorial budget for the magazine and had to fill the whole issue this way.) I agreed, of course; I would have paid him a modest sum.

My last year in high school was a nightmare of boredom. When it was over, my father offered to send me to college, but that was the last thing I wanted. We agreed that I would go to Salem for a year and attend the WPA Art Center there.

The Art Center occupied the basement of a building that I think must have been an abandoned school. There were classes in ceramics, figure drawing, design, lettering, and other things. My sculpture teacher was a shy, almost illiterate, scrawny, unshaven little man named George Blais, who had gotten himself written about in *Time* the year before by teaching sculpture to a class of blind young people. His scorn for the conventional half-reliefs then being carved in front of the new Capitol building, and for the gilded woodman on the dome, was pure and noble. He cared for nothing but art, and when I last knew him, was working in a sawmill to support his family while he taught himself abstract painting. Under his direction I made a few small pieces and cast them in plaster, and did one piece in sandstone (stolen from a construction site). It was one of the best times of my life.

While I was in Salem in 1941, the first issue of *Stirring Science Stories* appeared, with my story in it. The printers had changed "Brittle People" to "Little People" in the first sentence, rendering the story unintelligible, but I didn't care: I had had the thrill of seeing my name and my words in real print for the first time. (There are other sensations to equal this, but not many.)

After my graduation, my father retired; he had been principal of Hood River High School for twelve years. He bought a mimeograph, set up shop in my old room, and wrote and published (on long newsprint pages, like those of the school paper), a book called *The Stencil Duplicated Newspaper*. I contributed a chapter on cartooning to this work. He published an edition of five or six hundred copies and sold them by mail.

It was from this book, probably, that the Library of Congress got my middle name, Francis. I dropped it in my teens and never used it professionally, but for more than thirty years librarians across the nation have patiently written it in on the title pages of my books.

Although I liked the Art Center and did not regret my time there, I began to feel that I had no vocation as an artist, or any desire to go on to school. When the Futurians invited me to come to New York, my parents agreed, with what I thought at the time was surprising alacrity. Now I have grown sons, and I know better.

The Futurians were planning to attend the World Science Fiction Convention in Denver that year, and it was agreed that I would join them. My parents drove me there over precipitous mountain roads and dropped me at the hotel.

The Futurians, when I met them, were an odd-looking group. Wollheim was the oldest and least beautiful (Cyril Kornbluth once introduced him as "The gargoyle on my right"). He was, I learned later, almost pathologically shy, but he was the unquestioned leader of the group. Lowndes was ungainly and flatfooted; he had buck teeth that made him lisp and sputter, and a hectic glare like a cockatoo's. John Michel was slender and looked so much more normal than the rest that he seemed handsome by contrast, although he was pockmarked and balding. He had a high voice and stammered painfully. Kornbluth, the youngest (a few months younger than I), was plump, pale and sullen. He had narrow Tartar eyes and spoke in a rumbling monotone; he looked ten years older than he was. He like

to play the ogre; at the art auction that weekend he bid fifty cents for a Cartier illustration, got it, and tore it in half. Chester Cohen was about my age, and although he was nervous and jumpy, a nail-picker (not enough left to bite), he was able to freeze on command and hold a pose indefinitely; once Michel pretended to hypnotize him in an elevator and left him there, to the consternation of the hotel employees. They had to find out who he was and carry him up to his room, where he lay like a corpse until Michel arrived and snapped his fingers.

Heinlein, a handsome man in his thirties, was the guest of honor at the convention, and we glimpsed him and his slender brown wife Leslyn occasionally. Cohen was struck by the punchline of one of Heinlein's anecdotes ("Evidently you don't realize I'm half Jewish. Come, Leslyn!") and kept making up variations of it for years, e.g., "Evidently you don't realize I'm half pissed. Come, Leslyn (hie)!"

The center of Futurian activity at that time was the Futurian Embassy, a railroad apartment on 103rd Street. It had four rooms in a row: first the kitchen/bathroom (the tub was under the drainboard), then two small rooms for Michel and me, then the living room which was also Lowndes' bedroom. The apartment was bare but sunny and clean. I paid my share of the rent (I don't remember how much, but probably about \$7), and was expected to keep my room clean and wash the dishes. Lowndes did the cooking; his specialty was Futurian Chop Suey—noodles, hamburger, and a can of cream of mushroom soup; it was better when it had rotted a day in the refrigerator. I don't now remember what Michel's contribution was.

Kornbluth, at home in New York, played the ogre seldom. His humor was sardonic and sometimes cruel, but he was the least malicious of the Futurians. He told us stories about his relatives. Visiting cousins from England said in the morning, "I cawn't find my pents." An American cousin, female, stepped into the bathroom after him, locked the door, and said, "Well?" Cyril replied, "I'll be through in a moment," finished washing his hands, and left. He played at being grown up. One fall day he came in wearing a hat, solemnly explaining that in cold weather a man needed headwear to balance the bulkier outline of his overcoat.

Kornbluth was writing stories under various pseudonyms for all the Futurian magazines. He was nineteen. One of his unfinished stories, which I found lying around at the Embassy, began with a flashback in the stream of consciousness of an intelligent mouse during intercourse. Another, called "The Ten-G Pussies" (about cats, raised under ten gravities in a centrifuge, that became so muscular that if they leaped at you, they would go right on through), began with a philosophical dialog about the nature of cuteness. Still another was a long poem in the style of Edgar Guest, ending, "Emulate the idiot who eats his own shit—*it's delicious!*"

None of us knew any girls, or had any way of meeting them, except Wollheim, whose girl-friend, Elsie Balter, was part of our circle. I see now that if any of the rest of us had gone to work, or to school, we would have met girls in any desired numbers. We once got dressed up and went to a Trotskyist meeting, because we had heard the Trotskyists had a lot of horny girls. There were a couple of girls, but they wanted no part of us. Another time we went down to Greenwich Village to Anton Romatka's poetry circle, because Wollheim said we were the real writers and would command instant respect, but it did not work out that way.

Lowndes and Michel and I shared another apartment after the Embassy; it was in Chelsea and was called the Futurian Fortress. At various times Lowndes and Michel, Lowndes and Jim Blish, Michel and Larry Shaw, Chester Cohen and I briefly shared apartments.

For a while Chester and I journeyed out to Queens twice a week to have our eyes treated by a marvelous old fraud named Dr. Cooley, who had a battery of peephole machines of various sorts into which we peered. He looked like Colonel Sanders, and had been in some other line of work before he discovered his "vibrations." He told me solemnly that he had determined that nervous impulses were carried by the bloodstream, and when I pointed out that that was contrary to the general impression, I

said, "Yes, I know." His other patients all improved their vision, but we didn't, and eventually we quit. The time was not wasted, because I used Cooley as the central figure in a story called "Thing of Beauty."

Lowndes got tired of his unsuccessful agency and turned it over to me. I dutifully trudged around to various editorial offices with my unsaleable manuscripts. In the anteroom of Campbell's office one day I met Hannes Bok, who showed me a check for a thousand dollars, then a huge sum: he had just sold Campbell a novel for *Unknown*. Campbell was a portly, bristle-haired blond man with a challenging stare, who told me he wasn't sure how much longer he would edit *Astounding*. He might quit and go into science. "I'm a nuclear physicist, you know," he said, looking me right in the eye.

Fred Pohl had persuaded Popular Publications to publish *Super Science* and *Astonishing* in 1940 and had edited both magazines for a year or two. He left after a disagreement with the publisher in 1942, but was rehired as Alden H. Norton's assistant shortly afterward, at more money than he had been making before. In 1943 there was a vacancy under Norton, and Fred recommended me to fill it; he also lent me a white shirt to appear in when I applied for the job. I was hired at \$25 a week.

Norton, a large, bald, amiable man in his forties, was the overseer of half a dozen pulp magazines. He had two sports fiction magazines, the two science fiction pulps, a detective magazine, and *G-8 and His Battle Aces*. As was customary at Popular, he read all the manuscripts, bought stories and scheduled them; the rest of the work—copy-editing, proofreading, and so on—was done by his assistants: Fred, a young woman named Olga Quadland, and me. Each of us had two or three magazines to work on routinely, but *G-8*, because it was so awful, was rotated among us.

G-8 and His Battle Aces was written entirely by one man, Robert J. Hogan. He wrote the lead "novel," the short stories, and the departments, and brought in every other month a huge stack of manuscript which then had to be rewritten line by line. A *G-8* manuscript edited by Fred, which they showed me, had no word of the original text unchanged. The one I tried to cope with concerned a plot by the Germans in World War I to make their soldiers incredibly fierce by injecting them with rhinoceros juice.

Popular Publications at that time had forty titles and was the largest pulp publisher, followed by Better Publications under various corporate names, then Street & Smith, then a straggle of little companies with eight or ten magazines apiece. A year or so before I started to work there, Popular had bought up the assets of the Frank A. Munsey company, including a number of pulp titles. The pulps were still the principal enterprise of the company, and there was no hint that they were coming to the end of their time.

One of the assistant editors in another department was an attractive, matronly Southern woman named Harriet Gross; she was charming and loquacious, told stories about herself, one of which I later discovered she had swiped from Tallulah Bankhead, but never mind. She was vehement on the subject of darkies. "They nevah even built a *wall*," she said. This was my first friendship with anyone who was bigoted in that way, and it struck me as an interesting observation that it was possible to be a redneck without being in any other respect monstrous. I tried to get this into a story called "World Without Children," where a sympathetic character argues against preserving Negro genes in a sperm bank, but Horace Gold cut that part out.

After about a year I left Popular and went looking for something new. Lowndes was still at Columbia Publications, where he edited all the magazines (including one ingenuously called *Complete Cowboy*) with the exception of the two love pulps, which were edited by a large woman named Marie Park who later appeared in reducing-salon advertisements headlined, "I looked like a water buffalo."

James Blish and Virginia Kidd, who had come into our circle in the mid-forties, were married by this time. After an attempt to make a living as a free-lance writer, Jim went to work as a reader for the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. Presently he got me a job there too.

Scott Meredith, born Feldman, was a small, slight man who as a young writer in Brooklyn had been so poor that he had walked across the bridge to hand-deliver his manuscripts. He had saved his money in the air force, and after the war, in partnership with his brother Sid, had opened the agency, which at first did such a feeble business that the partners had to sweep the place out themselves. This stage did not last long.

Meredith took full-page back-cover ads each month in *Writer's Digest*, these ads, which were lively and ingenious, encouraged amateur writers to send their mss. for evaluation at \$5 for a short story and \$25 for a novel. When the manuscripts came in the morning mail, they were distributed to us, and it was our job to read them and write letters of comment, for which we got \$1 out of the \$5, and \$5 out of the \$25. The first letter to a new client always began by explaining that his story was unsaleable because it did not follow the Plot Skeleton. The letter went on to enumerate the parts of the Plot Skeleton, viz.: 1) A sympathetic and believable *lead character*, 2) an urgent and vital *problem*; 3) *complications* caused by the lead character's unsuccessful attempts to solve the problem; 4) the *crisis* (this element was added by Blish); 5) the *solution*, brought about by the lead character through his own courage and resourcefulness.

In a concluding paragraph the letter pointed out which of the elements were missing (ordinarily all of them were) and invited the client to try again. Subsequent letters grew more detailed.

At one time, at Meredith's, I found myself in company with Donald I. Fine and James A. Bryans, a slow, gangling man who later became editor in chief of Popular Library. Still later Fine became the head of his own publishing house. I trained myself to pot either of them with a wad of paper, sitting on the floor and standing.

When Ejler Jakobsson invited me to go back to Popular, I was pleased, particularly since Jake had inherited Al Norton's department, which included the two science fiction magazines. (Norton was now an associate publisher.) This was the reason Jake wanted me, anticipating my help in a field unfamiliar to him, but in this we were both disappointed. Jake rejected stories I recommended with enthusiasm, including two early Charles Harness stories, and filled the book with other things I thought barely publishable. We disagreed about the merits of the generic pulp covers, and he was not amused when I traced one of them, putting football uniforms on the figures instead of spacesuits.

I was tired of Popular again, and wished I had my own science fiction magazine to edit. I asked Fred Pohl, now an agent, if he knew of any publisher who might be interested; he suggested I try Alex Hillman of Hillman Publications. I sent Hillman a written proposal and was called in for an interview. Hillman, who looked like an evil Charles Coburn, hired me in ten minutes.

I wanted to call the magazine *Science-Fantasy*, but the firm's lawyers, after a haphazard search, advised against it because both words were in use in the titles of other magazines. We finally settled on *Worlds Beyond*, swiped from the title of a symposium edited by Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, *Of Worlds Beyond*.⁷

⁷ In print from [Advent:Publishers](#).

The atmosphere at Hillman Publications was utterly unlike that at Popular. I had an office to myself for a week or two, then was put in with the staff of Hillman's fact detective magazines, headed by an irascible, popeyed man whose name I have forgotten. Every editor seemed alone at his little desk, even though several of us worked in the same room. Meeting Hillman in the hall was an unnerving experience. Smoking a cigar, he lumbered down the hall staring straight ahead, hands clasped behind his back. When I said good morning, he continued to stare and lumber. (I used him as the Boss of Colorado in my novel *A for Anything*.)

I had the tiniest of budgets, but since I was using about half reprint material I could afford to pay

the going rate for new stories. Fred sent me an elegant satire by Phil Klass which I retitled "Null-P." I got stories from Poul Anderson, Fred Brown and Mack Reynolds, John Christopher and others. I wrote a book review department, which I called "The Dissecting Table." The magazine folded after three issues.

In the forties nearly every science fiction magazine had a book review department, but the reviews were about an inch long, and always ended, "A must for every science fiction reader." I knew that better book reviewing was possible, having seen Pohl's brief reviews in *Super Science*. (Once I entered his office when he was composing one of these reviews; he typed a few words, laughed, and said, "I'm a bitch.") When Lester del Rey started two new magazines, *Space Science Fiction* and *Science Fiction Adventures*, I was able to talk him into letting me do the book department in one of them. He paid me, if I remember, \$15 a column.

These reviews and the ones I wrote later were well received, even by their victims. (Bob Tucker told me that he had been present when Jerry Sohl read my review of *Point Ultimate*, and that Jerry had laughed and cried at the same time.)

I was trying to pay science fiction the compliment of taking it seriously, something that had never been done in any extended way within the field before. Up to this point, our admiration for science fiction had been indiscriminate; we liked some things more than others, but we liked everything. To criticize science fiction severely would have been to risk allying ourselves with the outside critics who scorned it.

Eric Frank Russell wrote a reasonable letter suggesting that the best way to improve a writer was perhaps something other than drawing and quartering him. He told a story about being taken to an art exhibition and shown a painting which he thought a daub. Then he was informed that it was the work of a quadriplegic, and his opinion instantly altered. I responded that s.f. was certainly full of mental cripples, but that a work of art should be judged on its merits.

After a year or so Lowndes offered to run any reviews I sent him, no matter what the length, and to pay his usual rates, i.e., half a cent a word. At various times I also published reviews in Harlan Ellison's huge sloppy fanzine *Dimensions* (where my column was called "Gardy-loo," a call formerly used when throwing the contents of chamber pots out of windows), in Walt Willis's *Hyphen*, in *Infinity*, and finally in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. When I quit, in a dispute over a review *F&SF* refused to print, I had been reviewing books for nine years.

2. CRITICS

This credo appeared in my first review column for Lester del Rey's *Science Fiction Adventures* (November, 1952).

Some readers (not to mention writers, editors and publishers) may be unpleasantly surprised by the pugnacious tone of the reviews that follow. I won't apologize—not very often, anyhow—but I will explain. As a critic, I operate under certain basic assumptions, all eccentric, to wit:

1. That the term "science fiction" is a misnomer, that trying to get two enthusiasts to agree on a definition of it leads only to bloody knuckles; that better labels have been devised (Heinlein's suggestion, "speculative fiction," is the best, I think), but that we're stuck with this one; and that it will do us no particular harm if we remember that, like "The Saturday Evening Post," it means what we point to when we say it.

2. That a publisher's jacket blurb and a book review are two different things, and should be composed accordingly.

3. That science fiction is a field of literature worth taking seriously, and that ordinary critical standards can be meaningfully applied to it: e.g., originality, sincerity, style, construction, logic, coherence, sanity, garden-variety grammar.

4. That a bad book hurts science fiction more than ten bad notices.

The publishers disclaim all responsibility; angry readers please apply to me.

Nowadays, we like to think, everybody loves science-fantasy, from Artie Shaw to Clifton Fadiman but occasionally we are reminded that not all the world's respectable literary parlors are yet open to us. Such a reminder is Arthur Koestler's short essay, "The Boredom of Fantasy," in the August, 1953 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*.

After a burst of good-humored laughter at the expense of one of A. E. van Vogt's wilder novels (the hero of which Koestler identifies as "Robert Headrock"), Koestler admits that he is partially addicted to the stuff himself, deals briefly and penetratingly with the history of the field, and then gets down to his major point: He likes it, but it isn't art.

... Swift's *Gulliver*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are great works of literature because in them the oddities of alien worlds serve merely as a background or pretext for a social message. In other words, they are literature precisely to the extent to which they are not science fiction, to which they are works of disciplined imagination and not of unlimited fantasy.

This criticism is less than we might have expected from one of the most brilliant of all living novelists. All that Koestler says here is inarguably true, and perfectly irrelevant.

"A similar rule holds for the detective story," he goes on. Just so; and for the historical story, the realistic story, the story of protest, the story of ideas, the story of manners, the story of adventure; in short, for all fiction. Science-fantasy is a form: what matters is what you put into it.

Again: "This is why the historical novel is practically dead today. The life of an Egyptian civil servant under the Eighteenth Dynasty, or even of a soldier in Cromwell's army, is only imaginable to us in a dim outline; we are unable to identify ourselves with the strange figure moving in a strange world." Koestler should have added, "unless the writer has genius"; in science-fantasy as elsewhere, this is not a true statement of a limitation but only of an obstacle. We have not been to Mars; neither have we been to Elsinore, nor to ancient Rome, nor, most of us, to a Russian prison, to a penthouse, to a sweatshop, to a DP camp.

This obstacle was brilliantly surmounted in Koestler's own first novel, *The Gladiators*; and what is *Darkness at Noon* but a masterful exercise in speculative imagination?

If science-fantasy has to date failed to produce much great literature, don't blame the writers who have worked in the field; blame those who, out of snobbery, haven't.

This question of the respectability of science fiction has vexed a lot of the people who read it. Thousands, I suppose, have torn off the covers of science fiction magazines before taking them home and many must have felt guiltily doubtful about the contents even then. Science fiction has long had, still has a dubious aura: we read it for a certain special kind of satisfaction, but we are frequently aware that according to ordinary standards of taste we ought not to like it.

Dozens of scholarly articles have been written to demonstrate the special nature of science fiction ("the *genre*") and why it really is (or isn't) a scare literature for adolescents. Most of these have been produced by people with only a superficial acquaintance with the field, but even knowledgeable critics often add to the confusion.

To see what may be at the bottom of all this argument, suppose we try asking two questions:

1. What is reputable fiction?
2. What is special about science fiction?

Reputable fiction—meaning fiction that the critics and the librarians like—has many distinguishing characteristics, but two of them appear to be central: It is fiction laid against familiar backgrounds (familiar, at least, to readers of reputable fiction—as far as the reader's personal experience goes, a South Dakota wheat farm may be as exotic as the moons of Mars); and it tries to deal honestly with the tragic and poetic theme of love and death.

The disreputable forms, the Western, science fiction, sports story and so on are defined by their backgrounds; but please note that this is a convention. You could define all of fiction in this way, piecemeal—"New York stories," "South Dakota wheat farm stories" and so on, but it isn't convenient or necessary to do so. What really distinguishes the disreputable forms is their reduction of love and death to perfunctory gestures, formalized almost like ideographs. (The villain falls over a cliff; the heroine falls into the hero's arms; neither event takes more than a paragraph.)

Detective fiction, a half-reputable form, owes its half-acceptance to its partial honesty with death. The popular forms, the slick short story, TV serial and so on, suppress both love and death (substituting "romance" and "menace"); that's why they are popular.

Now, what is special about science fiction?

It might be more appropriate to ask what is special about "mainstream" fiction. The latter is restricted to a small number of conventional times and places. Science fiction includes all these, and all others that a writer of our time and place can imagine.

Science fiction is speculative; but so is every work of fiction, to some degree; historical and exotic fiction particularly so.

These are convenient standards, and it's inevitable that librarians and critics will use them—but there must have been a time when stories about India or Alaska or the South Seas were "outlandish," "weird," "unbelievable," "unheard-of" and so on. Such stories have gained mass acceptance simply by being around long enough to become familiar; and we may expect that science fiction will do the same.

What we get from science fiction—what keeps us reading it, in spite of our doubts and occasional disgust—is not different from the thing that makes mainstream stories rewarding, but only expressed differently. We live on a minute island of known things. Our undiminished wonder at the mystery which surrounds us is what makes us human. In science fiction we can approach that mystery, not in small, everyday symbols, but in the big ones of space and time.

That's all—or nearly all.

Science fiction is already moving out of the realm of disreputable forms, just as the Western is, and just as, to a considerable degree, the detective story is moving upward from its half-reputable status. It can't, I'm afraid, ever become a popular form—it won't stand the suppression. But it can be wholly respectable, and in such stories as C. L. Moore's "No Woman Born" (*Astounding*, Dec., 1944), Philip Jose Farmer's "The Lovers" (*Startling*, Aug., 1952) and many more, it's well on the way. The librarians are already on our side; give the critics time.

Literate and informed criticism of our field is rare, as you know; even in the s.f. magazines, book reviews are mostly of the "shopping guide" type, written by people who, in James Blish's phrase, "like everything, but not very much." In the organs of respectable criticism, we are used to reading awe-inspiring blurbs of ignorance from people like Phil Stong, who once innocently revealed that he thought a light-year was equivalent to 186,000 "plain years."

This volume, therefore, is a unique treasure: *The Science Fiction Novel—Imagination and Social Criticism*. Here are three brilliant and searching essays by Robert A. Heinlein, Robert Bloch and the late C. M. Kornbluth (plus one dud, by Alfred Bester), and an equally brilliant introduction by Basil Davenport.

Heinlein's contribution is especially valuable, first, because he happens to have written so many of the pivotal works in the field since 1939; second, because he has a seldom-displayed but highly developed critical talent.

For the first time, in this book, he gives the sources of such stories as "Waldo" and "Blowups Happen"—both frequently cited as examples of prophecy in s.f.—and shows why they were no more prophetic than "for a man to look out a train window, see that another train is coming head-on toward his own on the same track—and predict a train wreck."

He pays a graceful tribute to Edmond Hamilton, whose imaginary spacesuits in a 1931 story influenced Heinlein's in 1939—which in turn influenced the real ones he and L. Sprague de Camp helped develop during the war. And he asks, "... is it surprising that the present day space suit (or high-altitude pressure suit, if you prefer) now used by the U.S. Air Force strongly resembles in appearance and behavior the space suit visualized by Edmond Hamilton in 1931?"⁸

⁸ Alas, Hamilton never described his spacesuits; what Heinlein remembers are the cover and black-and-white illustrations by Hans Wessolowski, an unsung contributor to the space program.

In the dispute over the best definition of s.f., Heinlein casts his ballot for Reginald Bretnor's (paraphrased): "(Fiction) in which the author shows awareness of the nature and importance of the human activity known as the scientific method, shows equal awareness of the great body of human knowledge already collected through that activity, and takes into account in his stories the effects and possible future effects on human beings of scientific method and scientific fact."

This definition is perhaps at once a little too broad and too limited (it includes *Arrowsmith*, but excludes stories which most informed readers would simply call bad science fiction): but it does have the great virtue of defining good science fiction, and of showing that much of the magazines' current contents is not s.f. at all, but "pseudo-scientific fantasy." Kornbluth's main point, or at least the one that gives his paper its title, is that science fiction is ineffective as social criticism. Within the narrow terms he chose, the point is made; s.f. has produced no novel that has visibly and inarguably changed the ways of the world, as did *Don Quixote* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (But I wonder if Kornbluth didn't get a negative result merely because he was looking in the wrong place. Heinlein mentions an electronic device he thought up for a 1939 magazine serial; a classmate who read the story was intrigued and put the idea into development; the final version was in use all through World War II.)

The remainder of the paper is given over to Kornbluth's first and only try at the tricky, fascinating field of symbological criticism. He warned us he would make mistakes, and I think there is no doubt that he made some: for instance, his calling Swift's Houyhnhnms symbols of primitive virtue is pretty clearly an error (tipped off by his remarking in the next breath that "It is curious that Swift's symbol for primitive virtue should be the horse"). He was mistaken, too, in supposing that there is anything unusual in the womb-image as the symbol of dread and horror; see Erich Neumann's monumental work, *The Great Mother*. But his interpretations of Orwell's "Room 101" in *1984*, the unspeakable Eich of Dr. E. E. Smith's Lensman series, and other matters, are nothing short of spectacular.

Alfred Bester's breezy, rambling monologue is disappointing to me as some of his stories are, and the fact that one throws light on the other does not seem to help much. My admiration for Bester as an artist is all but unbounded (and goes back almost twenty-five years, to a story he has probably forgotten himself: "The Unseen Blushers."⁹) But even in his best, most dazzlingly pyrotechnic work, his carelessness with scientific fact sometimes bothers me; and to hear him say, as he does here, that the essential ingredient in a story is charm, or "personality," and that the science in it is unimportant—even though it perfectly and logically accounts for *The Stars My Destination*—only intensifies the irritation.

⁹ *Astonishing*, June 1942.

When Bester suggests that people don't turn to science fiction for information, of course he's right but they don't turn to s.f. for misinformation, either.

Robert Bloch, a loyal s.f. fan for many years, begins by describing his childhood, when "stories about Bug-Eyed Monsters were read by bug-eyed boys."

He notes in passing, very perceptively, that most science fiction is symbolic rather than realistic. For the adolescent rebelling against his elders, "There's a vicarious thrill in breaking the law, even if it's the law of gravity."

But he wonders what has happened to the uncompromising social rebelliousness of thirty years ago when novelists dared to suggest that our Way of Life was not in all details sacrosanct: and he shows, in a devastating attack, that s.f., supposedly the last stronghold of independent thought, actually has been repeating the same safe old ideas for years. Part of the list follows (condensed): "1. A TOTALITARIAN STATE. 2. The UNDERGROUND. 3. FORCIBLE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUES. 4. The assumption that SCIENCE WILL GO ALONG WITH THE GAG and obediently wash brains for Capital, Labor, the Military, the Clergy or whatever..." (This one, incidentally, seems to me to be no assumption but a well-documented fact.)

The full list runs to nine points, all deadly accurate. It may be true, as Bloch intimates, that if better stuff is not being written, it's because the readers don't want it; but it can hardly do any harm to wake writers up occasionally with such a well-directed battery of pins in the rump.

I've said hardly anything about Basil Davenport's introduction, because it is itself a critical summary, competing with this one (and, I'm afraid, superior in every way). But I can't do better than to quote his closing lines, as the publisher's jacket blurb does:

"This book has given me the pleasure, all too rare since my college days, of being a book that I could argue with. No one can agree with all these papers, since they do not agree with each other; but where you disagree you will find yourself wanting to say exactly how far and why. That is my idea of a really stimulating and enjoyable book."

I now turn to a less authoritative but equally stimulating book: *New Maps of Hell*, by Kingsley Amis.

Amis, the lionized author of *Lucky Jim* and other satirical novels, is a young English lecturer who in 1959 took part in the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism at Princeton, and had the temerity to take for his subject, not the early English poets, but science fiction. This book is based on the lectures.

“... whatever my shortcomings, I am not that peculiarly irritating kind of person, the intellectual who takes a slumming holiday in order to ‘place’ some ‘phenomenon’ of ‘popular culture’; one recalls with aversion those attempts to ‘place’ jazz by academic musicians who thought Duke Ellington’s band was a kind of minstrel troupe.”

Jazz and s.f., for Amis, have a good deal in common. “Both emerged as self-contained entities some time in the second or third decade of the century, and both, far more precisely, underwent rapid internal change around 1940.... Both of these fields, again, have thrown up a large number of interesting and competent figures without producing anybody of first-rate importance; both have arrived at a state of anxious and largely naive self-consciousness....”

He notes that s.f., like jazz, has an indefinable and incommunicable special interest—you either do it or don’t—and goes on to try his hand at two definitions of the field, of which the second is of interest: s.f. “presents with verisimilitude the human effects of spectacular changes in our environment, changes either deliberately willed or involuntarily suffered.” His tone is self-depreciatingly, and rather self-consciously, ironic; nevertheless, his observations are impressively documented and shrewd. Inevitably, he slips now and then, as when he swallows Richard Matheson’s puerilities, in *I Am Legend*, as plausible scientific rationalizations of the vampire story (and writes “aerophobic” for “anaerobic”); or when he states flatly, “What will certainly not do is any notion of turning out a science-fiction love story.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Cf. “The Lovers,” by Philip Jose Farmer, “Saucer of Loneliness,” by Theodore Sturgeon, and “The Escape,” by Don A. Stuart, among many others.

What particularly fascinates me about the book, however, is its vivid demonstration of how much any critic is at the mercy of his own bias. To Amis, although he perceives and respects other values, the main thing about science fiction is its satiric quality. This shows conspicuously in his assessment of s.f. writers: he calls Fred Pohl “the most consistently able writer science fiction, in the modern sense, has yet produced.”¹¹ At the other end of the scale, he deprecates H. G. Wells’s work as being not “a daring imaginative statement” but “a concretization.” By this ugly word, Amis means the quality which to me is the supreme achievement not only of the story in question, but of all notable fantasy writing: the quality which gives a story life, makes it a thing-in-itself, rather than a shadow or projection of anything else.

¹¹ His evaluations of other writers are odd: he slights Kornbluth, and calls Mervyn Peake “a bad fantasy writer,” which is simply incomprehensible until we realize that for Amis, this phrase is identical with “a fantasy writer.”

Amis’s hunger for satire in s.f. is unsatisfied even by Orwell’s savage and bitter *1984*, “which instead of being the remote nightmare it is could have been the savage *short-range* admonitory satire on political forces that Orwell had it in him to write and that nobody since has even looked like writing.”

Presumably what Amis likes most about *Gulliver's Travels* is its mockery of the people and institutions of Swift’s day, rather than the story for its own sake. From my own bias over to this is such a leap that I get a strictly science-fictional jolt out of sharing Amis’s viewpoint.

But certainly his bias is as good as mine; so is the bias of the technically-minded critic who wants more wiring diagrams, or the socially-minded critic who wants more lectures. If there is anything reassuring in all this, it is that s.f. is more fruitful and various than we generally (in our biased impatience) realize; it contains all the things Amis praises, as well as all the things for which he

professes to look in vain: short-range satire, sexual inventiveness, anti-interplanetary-colonialism
propaganda, and a lot more, all except a tittle of it crud, according to Sturgeon's Rule; yet what are w
all but God's sparrows?

3. THE CLASSICS

Now that American Science Fiction, past its majority, is heading for the peaceful middle age of an established form, some of its earliest adherents feel as if they had suddenly grown long gray beards; there is nothing more pathetic, I suppose, than the look on the face of an old-guard fan who's waiting to say something about Stanton A. Coblentz, while all around him people are talking about Heinlein.

With understandable bitterness, some have been driven to the extreme position that no science fiction published later than 1935 is worth reading—while among their younger colleagues it isn't hard to find those who will put the date still later, and argue that everything published before it was trash.

But whether you belong to either group, or to neither, there's almost certain to be something in *The Heads of Cerberus* for you. Those who yearn for the Good Old Days are bound to like it—it was first published in *The Thrill Book* in 1919. Those who insist on the close reasoning and the satirical wit of modern science fiction will find surprising amounts of both here; and if, like myself, you have a foot in both camps, you're sure to be delighted by this connoisseur's blend of the quaint and the ageless.

Terry Trenmore, not the ingenu but the hero of this story anyway, is the sort of big, flamboyant, sentimental stage Irishman that used to turn up all the time in the popular arts until, I guess, about the time Victor McLaglen retired and Brian Aherne went back to drawing-room comedy. You couldn't write about such a man today, he doesn't exist; but here he is, for those that love him, musclebound and poetic as ever.

For contrast, look at the world into which Trenmore and his friends stumble: Philadelphia in the year 2118, ruled as a pocket oligarchy by "Penn Service" and its glittering court of Superlatives—the Loveliest, the Cleverest and so on—chosen and kept in power by blatantly rigged tests, while the proletarians have no names at all, only numbers which they must wear on Landon-sized lapel buttons. It isn't the best social satire in the world; but it's modern enough, if you like, to have come out of the pages of a 1956 magazine.

P. Schuyler Miller calls this "perhaps the first work of fantasy to envisage the parallel-time-track concept." You can read it that way, to be sure, but it's perversity; the author tells you in plain terms that the story's about something quite different and at least as interesting.

Philadelphia 2118 is a world of might-be, a philosophical spark struck off from the brain of the first traveler to find the way out of our prosaic universe of what-is.

"Many times have I sought him there. Many times has his name come up in some such fantastic connection as it came to you. I have seen, as it were, the shadow of his thought sketched in the tangible phantasmagoria which surrounded me. But either he evades me purposely, or he is dead, and only his mind endures as an invisible force..."

That passage has a dusty taste, and much of the writing is the same or worse, but not all by any means. Let me quote the beginning of Chapter 5:

When the marvelous oversteps the bounds of known possibility there are three ways of meeting it. Trenmore and his sister, after a grave discussion of certain contingencies connected with the Catholic religion and a dismissal of them on grounds too utterly Celtic and dogmatic for Drayton to follow, took the first way. From that time on they faced every wonder as a fact by itself, to be accepted as such and let go at that.

Drayton... compromised on the second way, and accepted with a mental reservation, as "I see you now, but I am not at all sure that you are there or that I really believe in you!"

Fortunately there was not one of the three so lacking in mental elasticity as to discover the third way, which is madness.

Now that, I submit, is not dated writing and is never likely to be; it's lucid, didactic, analytical and above all, zestful: an adjective which describes nearly the whole of the book. "Francis Stevens," we are given to understand, wrote only out of need and stopped at once when the need ended; but she wrote in the only way good writing is ever done: with joy. There is no plot necessity for the interlude in the half-world of Ulithia; it's pure fantasy for the love of it; and there are lines in that chapter that are feather-touches along the cheek.

One of science fiction's few genuine classics, out of print in this country since 1937, is Karel Capek's wonderful *War With the Newts*.

The publisher's cover blurb for the Bantam paperbound edition ("... a great novelist's electrifying story of what *might happen to our world tomorrow...*") is of course pure space gas, as Tom Corbett would say. This is a satire, one of the great ones. It has enormous charm, human warmth, gaiety, wit—and all the time, gently, patiently, it is flaying human society by inches.

The Newts (a giant species hitherto known only as a fossil) were discovered on the shore of Tanah Masa by gloomy old Captain J. van Toch, who took a paternal liking to them. ("What's the use, you ought to be honest even with animals.") At first they brought up pearl shells, in exchange for tools to build their dams and breakwaters, and weapons to fight sharks. Later, when it was discovered that they could talk, it was natural for more and more people to seek other uses for them.

With great ingenuity, and in spite of the most disheartening obstacles, people succeeded.

The flesh of the Newts has also been taken to be unfit for human consumption and even poisonous; if eaten raw, it causes acute pains, vomiting, and mental hallucinations. Dr. Pinkel ascertained after many experiments performed on himself that these harmful effects disappear if the chopped meat is scalded with hot water (as with some toadstools), and after washing thoroughly it is pickled for twenty-four hours in a weak solution of permanganate potash. Then it can be cooked or stewed, and tastes like inferior beef. In this way we ate a Newt called Hans; he was an able and intelligent animal with a special bent for scientific work; he was employed in Dr. Pinker's department as his assistant, and even refined chemical analysis could be entrusted to him. We used to have long conversations with him in the evenings, amusing ourselves with his insatiable thirst for knowledge. With deep regret we had to put Hans to death, because my experiments on trepanning had made him blind...

Fed, protected, dissected, exploited, armed by every nation against every other, the Newts continued to grow in numbers as well as in knowledge. Not so many years after old Captain van Toch passed away, there were already twenty billion worker and warrior Newts in the world, or about ten times more Newts than people.

... The young Newts apparently stood for progress without any reservations or restrictions, and declared that below the water they ought to assimilate all land culture of every kind, not omitting even football, fascism, and sexual perversions;...

Then one day the world awakened to find an earthquake had sunk three hundred square miles of Louisiana under shallow water. A strange croaking radio voice came out of the sea:

"Hello, you people! Don't get excited... There are too many of us. There is not space enough for us on your coasts any longer. Therefore we must break down your continents...."

Only out of a landlocked and tired little nation could have come such raw despair, so incredibly blended with gentle, calm affection. "The Newts," says Egon Hostovsky in his *Note on the Author*, "are, of course, symbols of nazis and communists." So they are, fleetingly, at the end of the book, which trails off into a nightmare much as Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee* does; but most of the time, I think, the Newts are ourselves as Capek saw us—gentle, long-suffering, mute; the natural pre-

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