

SCIENCE FICTION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

CHAIRMAN
BOX 3186
THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER
WOOSTER, OHIO 44691

TREASURER
7 AMSTERDAM AVENUE
TEANECK, NEW JERSEY 07666

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Editor: Fred Lerner, 7 Amsterdam Avenue, Teaneck NJ 07666 USA

Associate Editor: Janet Kagan, 1292 River Rd, Edgewater NJ 07020 USA

SFRA ABSTRACTS

Many contributions to the study of science fiction are made in the form of papers presented to scholarly meetings or science fiction conventions, or as articles published in journals outside the SF field. In order that SFRA members might know of such work, from time to time the SFRA NEWSLETTER will publish abstracts of these papers. Members are encouraged to send abstracts for this column, along with the date and place of presentation or publication. The address or institution of the author will be given, together with information on the availability of reprints, if this is provided. The first abstracts in this series are of papers presented at the Northeast Modern Language Association's conference at Saratoga Springs (8 April 1972).

"The Work of Clifford Simak", by Virginia L Carew (Queensborough Community College, New York): Since science fiction differs from other fiction in problems of setting rather than in problems of plot, character, theme, etc, and since Simak is probably the best creator of setting writing today in science fiction, it seems appropriate to demonstrate the quality of his work by discussing setting and its relation to theme in some of his major works: *City*, *Way Station*, *Goblin Reservation*, *The Werewolf Principle*, etc. Particularly important is his ability to make the strangest of things credible in beautifully developed American rural settings (usually reminiscent of his native Minnesota).

"The Politics of Pan-Sentience in *Star Maker*", by Curtis C Smith (State University of New York -- Albany): Stapledon's works should be read for their political as well as their religious significance. *Star Maker* is Stapledon's critique of the Left. While it is critical, even satirical, of the Left, Stapledon's cosmic history is dialectical. Stapledon satirises the communists of the Other Earth, but he also develops an essentially Marxist analysis of that world. Moreover, the symbiosis (e g, Arachnoid-Ichthyoid) of the crisis worlds is thesis and antithesis; the synthesis is the waking world, from which has been swept both ruling class exploitation and the machinery of bourgeois democracy. The mad worlds perhaps satirise the USSR's mania for industrial development to the exclusion of the quality of life. The final thesis and antithesis -- Earth versus the cold light of the stars -- is transcended by a greater, not a lesser, significance to the human struggle. Thus Stapledon is answering the Left's charge that SF is escapist. The sense of

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SFRA MAILBAG

Dennis Livingston:

I'm sure many members of the science fiction community, like myself, have long been frustrated at the resounding indifference paid by major book review outlets to our chosen literature, and especially by the *New York Times Book Review* section in every Sunday edition of that newspaper. Now and then a work of some mainstream writer like Nabakov or Piercy with SF-type themes will get in, but only on its strength as a mainstream piece of writing, with the SF component usually referred to by some euphemism or other (put the skeleton back in the closet). Sometimes an out-and-out SF work will be reviewed in encapsulated form in the "New and Novel" section by Martin Levin in each issue. But, while I would not want to vouch for my memory here, in the ten years and more that I've followed this magazine, I do not ever recall seeing a science fiction book, written by an acknowledged science fiction writer, published as a science fiction book, ever receive a regular, full review in this outlet -- much less a front-page review -- even tho superior works of detective fiction do receive such reviews. All the classics of SF of the past years -- from *Dune* to *The Left Hand of Darkness* -- might as well have been second-rate porn for the coverage they get here. (The *New York Times Book Review* does review first-rate pron.) Finally fed up with this situation, I wrote the review editor last year to demand some coverage of SF books, some inclusion of SF in the regular, full reviews as if it was a literature worthy of no more or less attention than that given to fiction in general; if the *Times* didn't know who to send such books to for review, I offered my services in providing names. I was delighted to get back a reply that, after the turn of the year (1972), SF would be regularly reviewed. At last..., I thought! Hah!

It turns out that, friends, we have been tokenised. SF is still not the subject of regular reviews as if it were a decent literature, etc. What bone we have been thrown is an SF review column by Theodore Sturgeon. Now, he is one of the ablest writers in the field. But I am disappointed, on two counts. First, his column has only appeared a few times in the last few months (it is called "What If?..."). More important, it is not really an SF review column -- it is a listing of new SF books on the market, with plot summaries of each. If there is any substantial criticism, pro or con, of the books he "reviews", I haven't seen it. The *Times* has clearly pushed SF back into the ghetto by giving it its own very occasional review column, as if this answered the issue of full-scale reviews like all those other guys get. To be sure, for the non-SF-fan casually interested in SF, the service Sturgeon supplies is useful in alerting one to new books. But to those of us who were looking forward to true critical commentary and analysis of SF works, the disappointment remains, with some anger. Is there nothing SFRA can do about this collectively?

-- Center for Marine Affairs, Scripps Institute of Oceanography, Box 109, La Jolla CA 92307 (15 Jun 1972)

Sharon Wilbur:

I reacted to *A Clockwork Orange* in several ways. The plot horrified me when I thought that the future might be like that. The cinematography was excellent, or so I thought. Kubrick shows the sex and violence in some instances in high speed and in some instances to a musical background. This reduces sex and violence to an artistic effect while not taking away the dramatic impact. Now to dwell for a moment on "Ludovico's Technique": sure it shows a dramatic means of rehabilitat-

ing young thugs. Maybe they needed such a means. I did not find Alex "a likeable young thug, degraded by rehabilitation", as did one critic. I felt in sympathy for his victims. I felt that the film brought out the fact that any new techniques will always be political footballs. Alex's crimes were condoned after the Ludovico technique was cracked.

Perhaps the only way of looking at the film is as an allegory of evil vs complacency. This to me is what makes the film and book so horrifying. People have ceased to care about their fellow man. Everything is taken for granted. Burgess creating a new slang to go along with his projected future I can understand. What I could not take in the film was the Cockney accent of Alex. It is hard to believe that regional accents would have survived. What did not offend me was the Korova Milkbar with its use of sculptured nudes for furniture. Was the use of milk mixed with drugs symbolic of the patrons' desire for a better world?

Now here is my reaction to Robert Plank's review which appeared in the April 1972 SFRA NEWSLETTER: (Points 1 & 2) I did not find the crystallographer the most sympathetic of the victims; instead, I preferred the "cat lady" whom I did not think "a strange rather masculine type". Of all the victims, she showed the best sense in not falling for Alex's sob story. As it was, it took violence to kill her. (3 & 4) Let's face the fact that the movie shifted the emphasis to sex and violence. (5 & 6) I do not think that Alex's parents treated him any more warmly in the movie. I agree that Kubrick changed the character of the boarder. (7) I do not think that it was a thirst for revenge on the part of Mr Alexander but a well calculated political ploy.

One definition of mainstream literature might be that, if it is full of symbolism, it is mainstream. Someone could do a study of all of Burgess' works with this kept in mind. I think that under my definition *A Clockwork Orange* would qualify.

-- 131 Willow Avenue, #1G, Cornwall NY 12518 (22 Jun 1972)

SFRA ABSTRACTS

(from page 1) the vastness of space and time, which his works convey, is inherently anti-bourgeois and progressive.

"The Vampire in Literature and Film", by Wayne A Losano (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy): The vampire, that long hated and feared villain of film and fiction, has experienced a startling rebirth in popularity. The late sixties and early seventies have seen republications of classic vampire thrillers such as *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, new publications such as the Barnabas Collins series, the *Dark Shadows* television show, and films such as *Count Yorga, Vampire; Daughters of Darkness*; and *Vampire Lovers*. Traditionally the vampire has appealed to our love of the grotesque and unusual, our fascination with death and afterlife, and our sexual fantasies. For today's audience, the vampire provides an escape from reality which partially fulfills the modern individual's search for fantasy in an increasingly scientific and predictable world. Vampire tales also appeal, perhaps paradoxically, to our love for order and justice. With the hero we must seek out and correctly destroy this unnatural villain in a restoration of order and good akin to that provided by the detective story. The increased bloodiness and sexuality of recent vampire tales may reflect a change in our society. As the mass media daily accustom us to real horrors, our fantasy horrors must become increasingly more horrific to provide escape.

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

John Gardner, *Grendel*. (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1971). 174p, \$5.95

At first, the idea of the story of *Beowulf*, retold in novel form by Grendel, strikes the average fantasy enthusiast as the typical "English Major's Revenge". Who, especially those who have had to struggle with the difficult Anglo-Saxon original in the undergraduate days (as this reviewer did), would not almost immediately write the book off, mentally, as a mere gimmicky thing? But they would be wrong. John Gardner has, in *Grendel*, attempted to present a sympathetic self-portrait of the monster and yet to present him still as a monster, in the old meaning of someone or something nonhuman or nonnatural. We come to sympathise with Grendel and with his nearly formless, primeval dam, a powerful depiction of the dark aspect of the Great Mother. Professor Gardner's achievement in *Grendel* may perhaps be compared with Robert Browning's presentation of Caliban in "Caliban upon Setebos", or with William Golding's presentation of the Neanderthal people in *The Inheritors*. In all three works the alien is presented with sympathy and humor, and in the presentation the reader is caught up into a new appreciation of his own world, because he sees it thru fresh eyes.

As Grendel dies he makes a final statement -- the last sentence of which is a masterpiece of irony and ambiguity typical of the book as a whole -- of the relativity of Good and Evil:

Again sight clears. I am slick with blood. I discover I no longer feel pain. Animals gather around me, enemies of old, to watch me die. I give them what I hope will appear a sheepish smile. My heart booms terror. Will the last of my life slide out if I let breath? They watch with mindless, indifferent eyes, as calm and midnight black as the chasm below me.

Is it joy I feel?

They watch on, evil, incredibly stupid, enjoying my destruction.

"Poor Grendel's had an accident", I whisper. "So may you all."

The devotee of the fantastic and the student of Early English literature alike should find *Grendel* disturbing and yet deeply satisfying.

-- Veronica M S Kennedy,
St John's University