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SCIENCE FICTION ON CAMPUS

While taking a graduate course in the history of higher education last fall, I undertook a research paper dealing with the development of the relationship between SF and academe. In the course of my research, I was in touch with at least a third of the people listed by Jack Williamson in "Teaching SF" as teaching a science fiction course at college level. Their responses evinced a remarkable degree of unanimity concerning certain points, which I felt might be of interest to members of SFRA.

As Williamson's paper shows, science fiction courses appeal to students in a wide variety of disciplines, and are offered in many academic departments other than English. According to my informants, the courses are invariably oversubscribed at registration, and student enthusiasm remains unabated at the end of the course. One or two respondents reported difficulty with students who thought they had signed up for a "gut" course, or with avid SF fans who monopolised class discussion time and intimidated the neophytes. Occasional mention was also made of the shortage of critical literature dealing with SF, and of the problems involved in deciding which approach -- historical, literary, thematic -- might work best. Some respondents wanted information about other material which they might use in their courses; others had questions concerning additional sources of information for their research topics. All this, I feel, argues the need for more and better communication among teachers of SF courses. SFRA could be the prime medium thru which such queries and information could be exchanged, if only all present and possible future teachers of SF courses were members and utilised this newsletter to the fullest. We might also consider having meetings of SFRA members attached to the various regional SF conventions, solely for the purpose of facilitating this kind of cross-pollination.

The one universal complaint from teachers of SF courses had to do with the difficulty of getting a sufficient supply of the desired titles in paperback. Courses frequently had to be tailored to what was available, rather than to what the teacher wanted to deal with. SF paperbacks are notoriously badly distributed, sell out quickly, and go out of print with equal speed. A partial answer may lie in the usual hard-cover college textbook anthology, tho it is hard to see how this can ever become more than a jumping-off point for a course; SF is a multifaceted genre, lending itself to a variety of academic approaches not easily contained within the covers of any one book. The soundest long-range solution clearly lies in urging university libraries to develop and maintain adequate collections of SF to support teaching and research activities.

Very few difficulties with administrators were reported by those setting up SF courses within the past two or three years. Admittedly, the Establishment sees the SF course as a device which at one and the same time provides (continued on page 4)

FROM THE DRONES CLUB TO TRALFAMADORE: AN IRONICAL INFLUENCE?

One of the peripheral, but very considerable, pleasures of reading any work of literature is to notice possible "influences". Sometimes one is morally certain that the particular correspondence between one work and another is the result of the play of unconscious memory. However, often this rather serendipitous recollection makes for a bizarre collocation of works, adding a new dimension of irony to one or both.

A possible example of such an unconscious memory of a work perhaps enjoyed in adolescence occurs in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five (1969). There is surely no need to do much more than mention the phrase that is the leitmotiv of the novel -- for Mr Vonnegut's works in general, and Slaughterhouse-Five in particular, are justly very popular and highly esteemed: several seminars, for instance, at the 1972 Modern Language Association Conference were devoted wholly or in part to his work -- "So it goes". Readers of Slaughterhouse-Five will recall that this formula occurs frequently thruout the novel, usually as a commentary on some pointless or grotesque disaster:

Early in 1968, a group of optometrists, with Billy among them, chartered an airplane to fly them from Ilium to an international convention of optometrists in Montreal. The plane crashed on top of Sugarbush Mountain, in Vermont. Everyone was killed but Billy. So it goes.

While Billy was recuperating in a hospital in Vermont, his wife dies accidentally of carbon-monoxide poisoning. So it goes. (pp 21-22)

Perhaps the writings of P G Wodehouse may be less familiar to readers of the SFRA NEWSLETTER than those of Kurt Vonnegut. Mr Wodehouse, who is still flourishing as a man and a writer at the age of over 90, was from 1914 on a frequent contributor to such widely-circulating American magazines as The Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, and Redbook, to name only three. His airy farces, lovingly delineating the amiable follies of the eccentric English aristocracy and the "Bright Young Things", were and are still enjoyed by several generations of American, English, and other readers. It is possible, then, that Mr Vonnegut might have read some of them. Did he read the collection of stories, The Crime Wave at Blandings (Doubleday, 1937) / English title, Lord Emsworth and Others (Herbert Jenkins, 1937)? Certainly he might have read it: he was fifteen in 1937. My contention is that he probably did read it, because of a particular expression that is used several times at the end of the story "The Masked Troubador", when the various Beans and Crumpets of the Drones Club comment on the latest foolish episode in the career of a supremely silly young man, Freddie Widgeon. This time the luckless Freddie, blighted in his love of Dahlia Prenderby and in defiance of his uncle, Lord Blicester, has entered a contest -- Amateur Night at the East Bottleton Palace of Varieties -- in the hopes of winning five pounds as a singer, cleverly disguising himself in a velvet "Lone Ranger" mask and calling himself "The Masked Troubador". Needless to say, Freddie's enterprise ends in disaster. His fellow clubmen philosophise:

There was a thoughtful silence.

"And so it goes on", said the Crumpet.

"So it goes on", said the Senior Bean.

The Junior Bean agreed that so it went on.

Did Mr Vonnegut read the story, and, if so, did he unconsciously repeat the closing phrases, used to describe a comic disaster, to point up his own blackly comic view of life? If this is just the play of a too-active critical fancy, may I only say in self-defense, "So it goes".

-- Veronica M S Kennedy
St John's University

THEATRE NOTES

Dramatisations of science fiction and fantasy stories are usually pitiable things at best: one need only think of the "authorised" version of The Hobbit, complete with Fairy Princess giving Bilbo the sword Orcrist to slay Smaug, the "dream sequence" frame of Winnie the Pooh, and the horrible mishmash of the dramatised version of A Canticle for Leibowitz. It has even led to some speculation that fantasy and science fiction can't work on the stage.

There are a few contrary straws in the wind, however. A short fantasy entitled "The Cretan Bull" by Kenneth H Brown (author of The Brig) was given its world premiere this fall by the Department of Dramatic Arts of Drake University. Mr Brown manages to create a believable secondary world of chilling intensity occasioned by the chance meeting of three people in Central Park. It is far better than the interesting but dramatically inept plays of Ray Bradbury, and in general tone is even better than some of Joanna Russ's near-fantasy plays. This is probably due to the fact that Mr Anderson's experience with the Living Theatre leads him away from the sterile Theatre of the Absurd mode of writing. I'm afraid the full implications of his play were missed in the review by Henry Hewes in the Saturday Review, but the play belongs more to the SF world than anywhere else.

John Jakes has recently turned to playwriting, and has written an excellent book for a musical version of The Wind in the Willows. I haven't been able to obtain the music for the Jakes version, but if it is half as good as the book, we may have a winner. Mr Jakes has also written a short adaptation of Lester del Rey's "For I Am a Jealous People". The opening of the play is flawed by a not-necessary attempt to establish a willing suspension of disbelief. I would prefer to see the play open with the TV broadcast rather than the present "establishing" scene, and I feel that del Rey's concept of a hell-fire and brimstone preacher is too dated to withstand close scrutiny. At two points the play bogs down in tedious exposition that is poorly motivated, but it moves to an impressive climax. Mr Jakes shows considerably more skill in dramatic form than in his narrative writing, and one hopes that he will continue. While not yet in the same league as Ken Anderson and Joanna Russ, he has already surpassed Ray Bradbury as a dramatist.

Mr Brown's play is available only in manuscript form at present as he is considering rewriting, but the two Jakes plays have been published by Performance Publishing, Elgin IL 60120.

-- Ivor Rogers
Drake University

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

Thomas Peckett Prest, Varney the Vampyre, or, The Feast of Blood. (New York: Dover Publications, 1972). 2 vol, xviii, 868p, paperbound. \$10.00

Dover Publications has performed a very valuable service to connoisseurs of the fantastic in literature by reprinting (with a most perceptive introduction by E F Bleiler) the Victorian subliterate horror classic, Varney the Vampyre, or, The Feast of Blood (1847), by the star of Edward Lloyd's stable of Salisbury Square "Penny Dreadful" witters, Thomas Peckett Prest, who modestly cloaked himself on this occasion under the pseudonym of "James Malcolm Rymer".

As the title-page says, Varney the Vampyre (by the author of "Grace Rivers, or, The Merchant's Daughter") is indeed "a romance of exciting interest". It is largely a series of episodes, each one presenting a feastlet of blood in the career of a vampire so perdurable that he puts the Dracula of novel and film to shame. Indeed, no mere stake can keep Varney down. Thru 220 chapters and 868 pages of furious adventure, enlivened with reprints of the original illustrations, uncertain in details of historical costumes and wooden in execution, we can follow Varney from the opening scene, when the vampire, at midnight, during a terrific storm, attacks his first recorded victim, "a girl young and beautiful as a spring morning", thru several returns from the tomb, to his awful end, when a plunge into the crater of an erupting volcano finishes his career of gruesomely described blood-sucking.

Let us hope that Dover may reprint such other Victorian underground classics as Prest's novel about Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street (as he was known into the 1950's on the British stage, impersonated by the happily-named Todd Slaughter), which is rather tamely titled in Lloyd's series, The String of Pearls, and his rival G W M Reynolds' Wagner the Wehr-wolf (sic). Hitherto one has either had to invest considerable time and money in hunting down these forgotten works or else has had to read them in the scholarly but most un-Gothic surroundings of the British Museum Reading Room.

-- Veronica M S Kennedy
St John's University

SCIENCE FICTION ON CAMPUS (continued from page 1): a response to student demands for experimental courses and offers a seductive lure to freshmen now that the number of applicants for college admission is declining. Alternatively, one might say that our time has come. Certainly there is every reason to believe that SF courses will expand in number; there is no other subject matter which lends itself so readily to opening up topics for discussion and investigation in so wide a variety of academic disciplines. Not only do we need more library resources; we need more critical articles written with the intellectual insights and analyses of these various disciplines. Both teachers and students can illuminate their colleagues by realting class material to SF and vice versa. (I lit my own small candle against the dark last semester in Teachers College. Taking a course in psychology of language, I was able to write a paper on linguistic devices in SF which persuaded my professor that he should investigate SF.

As an adjunct to Jack Williamson's irreplaceable paper, I now propose to go thru all the college and university catalogs in the US in order to work up a fairly firm list of SF-related courses currently being offered. I hope to announce sometime this fall the availability of such a list. In the meantime, I hope other members of SFRA will use the newsletter to announce research projects.

-- Florence Brand
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Columbia University