

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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THE CURIOUS CASE OF *THE FALL OF ROME*

"This peculiar farrago..." begins *Library Journal's* review of R A Lafferty's *The Fall of Rome* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971). *LJ's* reviewer (Barry Baldwin, of the University of Calgary's Dept of Classics) assails the book as "polluted with errors of fact, a notable ignorance of or scorn for the sources, and meaningless rhetoric" and condemns its lack of notes or bibliography. "The book is fun, but hopelessly unreliable", is his conclusion.

This is reasonable enough. A lot of SF writers have written works of non-fiction; and these have not always been kindly received. Just as historians have criticised some of Isaac Asimov's essays in their field, so Lafferty's history has come under fire.

However, a question of definition arises. In a letter to *Library Journal*, Lafferty claims that *The Fall of Rome* is a novel; in conversation at Noreascon, he repeated that assertion. *LJ's* reviewer replies that it is just as bad a novel as it was a history -- if novel it was. For neither the galleys (which Mr Baldwin saw) nor the published book itself lay claim to be anything other than straight history. So it has been reviewed, and so the librarians have classified it. My own reading of the volume leaves me no grounds for disagreement with this decision, except that I have a bias toward accepting an author's own classification of his work.

In a letter to the SFRA NEWSLETTER, Virginia Carew says "I'm not sure what it is exactly, but it's not a novel. *The Fall of Rome* has to be some kind of historical essay with philosophical overtones. Further, it seems to be a serious attempt to look at the Roman effect on civilisation from a new point of view". She sees similarities in Lafferty's approach to those of Carlyle, Henry Adams, and especially Tacitus. "Even if the book has no other virtues (and I feel it has many), it has Lafferty's style."

I find Ms Carew's assessment of *The Fall of Rome* more agreeable than Mr Baldwin's. And I certainly think that, given Lafferty's science-fictional variations on time and history, this quasi-novel is a proper subject for our consideration. I hope that the SFRA NEWSLETTER will be offered some reviews of *The Fall of Rome*; and our letter-column will of course be open for less formal comments on this curious business.

-- Fred Lerner

SFRA MAILBAG

Leslie Kay Swigart:

I agree wholeheartedly with your review of Siemon's *SF Story Index*. As a librarian (although not a member of ALA) I was outraged by his appalling techniques not only of compilation, but also of presentation and of advertising (although the advertising was probably done by ALA: "The most comprehensive and definitive guide to science fiction -- published by the most respected name in publishing" -- *Analog*, September 1971, p 3 -- ridiculous!!!)

-- PO Box 25474, Los Angeles CA 90025 (8 Feb 1972)

James D Merritt:

The Fossil Collection is located in [New York University's] Fales Library on University Place and is under the direction of Dr Theodore Grieder. It was assembled by Wm Hadley Smith and contains an astounding collection of the publications of the amateur press (both the United and National Amateur Press Associations, both of which H P Lovecraft joined), including a nearly complete run of HPL's own *Conservative*. I say nearly complete because some thug has stolen vol I no 1, and has mutilated a number of other issues. It also includes Sonia Greene Lovecraft's *Rainbow* and innumerable amateur journals for which HPL wrote poems and stories and criticism. Today, for instance, I came across a poem in *The Brooklynite* for Nov 1924; many poems and some criticism in *The Tryout* (Haverhill MA) for all of 1920; "The Statement of Randolph Carter" in *The Vagrant* for May 1920, etc, etc. These were definitely not fanzines. They are almost all pretty awful -- including *The Conservative* which is rabidly "pro-Aryan", anti-Semitic, and frighteningly racist. HPL is, as you doubtlessly already know, often a very unattractive individual....

-- English Dept, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn NY 11210
(16 Feb 1972)

NOTES AND NOTICES

Brian Aldiss is nearing completion of *The Billion Year Spree*, a history of SF. It will be published in England by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and in the USA by Doubleday. The first chapter, "on the true origins of science fiction", will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Extrapolation*. ## He also writes that he needs a list of pulp magazines which were first published during the years 1925, 1926, and 1927. (His address: Heath House, Southmoor, nr Abingdon, Berks, England).

Greenwood Press is now getting its reprint of J O Bailey's *Pilgrims through Space and Time* ready for the printer. They will also be reprinting Chad Walsh's *From Utopia to Nightmare* (1962).

Jan Finder (p A Staatl Neuspr Gymnasium, 544 Mayen, Am Heckenberg, West Germany) is coordinating a Tolkien program for EuroCon (Trieste, 12-16 July 1972); those wishing to present papers should contact him immediately.

Walter W Lee Jr (PO Box 66273, Los Angeles CA 90066) has completed his *Reference Guide to Fantastic Films*; it is being prepared for publication, and will be available towards the end of the year. Send a stamped self-addressed envelope for a sample page and ordering information.

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

John Baxter. *Science Fiction in the Cinema*. (New York: Paperback Library, 1970). \$1.25

Gene Youngblood. *Expanded Cinema*. (New York: Dutton, 1970). \$4.95

Because I am well over a year behind in everything, including book reviewing, John Baxter's *Science Fiction in the Cinema* may be in the process of disappearing from the stands. Hopefully it will be reprinted and kept in print for some time, even tho its usefulness is greatly limited by its lack of an index. The most comprehensive of all the recent books on SF film, it suffers only in its lack of depth. Most films are given a sentence or two, and even *2001: A Space Odyssey* is limited to ten paragraphs (including a bit of plot summary). I find Baxter's critical stance less well thought out than Carlos Clarens' in *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film*, but his inclusion of many SF and borderline films is very helpful. Even so, there are gaps. The treatment of the silent Russian SF cinema is less complete than in Jay Leyda's *Kino* (and Kuleshov's first name is usually written Lev rather than the anglicised Leo), but this book is far and away the best work that has been published to date.

Another book from 1970 that is still around is Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema*. It has a short index and an eclectic bibliography that includes such diverse works as Plato and J R Pierce, Norbert Wiener and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This is the secret of his success, because he has managed to fuse Marshall McLuhan, Arthur C Clarke, A H Maslow, and the Tibetan Book of the Dead into an omni-media book of aesthetics. In a stunning series of color photographs he shows a few of the frontiers of art and science that are literally light years ahead of the most fantastic extrapolations devised by SF writers when describing the arts of the future. Altho he does not mention SF as such, and does not think highly of *2001* -- preferring the "Cosmic Cinema of Jordan Belson" -- he is mining the same vein that has inspired many of the best new SF writers. Highly recommended for post-*Star Trek* fans.

-- Ivor Rogers
Drake University

Neil P Ruzic. *Where the Winds Sleep*. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970). xiv, 234p, index.

This is a history of man's colonisation of the Moon from 1969 to 2045. A combined chronological and topical arrangement is followed; a good deal of technological information is conveyed in terms a layman can understand. The writing is crisp, and the extrapolations are not timid. The book is not only a good example of futur-ology for the layman, but should also serve as a useful source of background ideas for SF writers.

-- Fred Lerner
Research Foundation,
City Univ of New York