Scratch Pad 33

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First time in print for thirty years . . .

On writing about science fiction

by George Turner

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1. Why bother?

John Foyster has recently published his opinion that the reviewing of SF books in fanzines serves little purpose because the reviews appear far too long after the books themselves; and he has some right on his side. The flogging of dead horses is certainly unproductive. Nonetheless, fans will continue to write reviews and, I hope, *ASFR* will continue to publish them. The review is the beginning — small and inconsequential, but still useful — of discussion and ultimately of informed criticism.

The tone of many letters in fanzines suggests that fans resent criticism — that they prefer their likes and dislikes inviolate and regard disagreement as an intrusion on their right to undisturbed enjoyment. An afternoon at the Easter Conference out in the wilds of Boronia reassured my opinion that this is not really so. Here science fiction was discussed knowledgeably and sometimes with insight; and it is interesting that a number of speakers who deprecated the idea of taking SF too seriously proceeded to take it very seriously indeed. And so they should. One's pleasures *should* be taken seriously. The more you understand the things that appeal to you, the wider and greater pleasures open up before you. Mere acceptance of enjoyment leads to surfeit; the pursuit of the roots of pleasure can offer relaxation and enjoyment for a lifetime.

One of the simplest methods of such pursuit is discussion, but in verbal discussion there is too much diversion and spur-of-the-moment argument and one is apt to retain only a general impression of disagreement and perhaps one or two striking points. One's own ideas rarely become clarified under these conditions, except on relatively simple points.

A better method is to write down what you think — and then try to justify what you have written. And then write down what you *really* think. The written word stares back at you, unaffected by your emotional involvement; your only recourse is to erase it and begin again. If you persist, you are likely to evolve a statement very different from the attitude of mind you started out with, because you have begun to think with your brain instead of with your emotions. You will have written something useful because it is true as far as your knowledge can encompass truth, and it may be in complete opposition to what you thought was your opinion. You will have done something good for yourself, and possibly for others. You will have added a little more to what is known and thought.

So by all means write about science fiction. In the dear dead days of *Amazing* and Gernsback, fans *changed* SF by writing about its weaknesses and possibilities. It can happen again; SF is still only a literary youngster, with development before him.

So write reviews, and write them honestly. It is a beginning. *But* remember that praise and blame do not constitute criticism. They are statements of personal opinion, and worthless. The reasoning and justification are what matters. Much good work has waited too long for lack of informed understanding; much valueless work has persisted too long on the wave of thoughtless praise. (One could do a joyous article on the nitwittery of Hugo voters.)

In fact, if you are going to write about SF (or, for that matter, any kind of literature), there are some basic principles to be observed. They are neither many nor unduly restrictive, but they are essential.

The single greatest weakness in present writing about SF is a lack of discipline, with the result that ideas are presented with irritating fuzziness, statements make it difficult to decide where emotion leaves off and thought begins, and far too much wordage is expended on detail while the large issues are scamped. This lack springs not from an unwillingness on the part of the writers to give of their best, but from a lack of realisation that critical writing is a craft and not just something that anyone can toss off when he has an opinion to spare.

The amount of careful thought and expression encountered at Boronia was enough to convince this visitor that *ASFR* could become a force and an authority in SF if its contributors settled down to the business of genuine critical writing.

These notes, then, are designed to indicate the basis of such writing, and to show that it is in essence a fairly simple thing, not the preserve of aesthetes and super-intellects.

They will treat first of **reviewing**, which is the rock-bottom basis of criticism and a valuable discipline in itself; then with the **theme article**, which is a freer and more rewarding product; and finally with **criticism**, wherein we will swim in much deeper waters.

It should not be assumed that these notes are presented as being finally authoritative, nor that they are definitive in the sense of saying the last word. Whole libraries have been written on the subject, and even blood spilt in the argument. Treat them as an outline of the craft. The individual will soon find his own style and manner of suing the tools of the trade.

2. Reviewing

Reviewing must be honest and fair. Writers suffer bitterly from the arrogance of reviewers who are more interested in producing a striking article than a just summation of the work under notice. A favourite method is to concentrate on one aspect of the work and write the review as if this were the only notable thing about the book. This is dishonest, unfair to the writer, misleading to the reader, and all too common in reviewing. Another ploy is to choose a good book and seek industriously to prove that it is a bad book, so that the readers will cheer the analytical acuteness of the reviewer and agree that he is a very cunning and amusing man. The writer, poor devil, can only sweat in silence; if he talks back he will be accused of being unable to accept criticism.

Here are the ingredients of a good review:

A. The prime purpose of a review is to present a description of the work under notice, so that the reader may have some advance idea of whether it will interest him or not. The review which does not do this does nothing. 'Description' does not necessarily mean a run-down of the plot (which may do the author an active disservice: most plots sound dull or silly when presented in outline), though this may be done briefly and with discretion. Description should include a clear statement of what appears to be the central theme of the work (and you may be surprised to discover how far two people can differ about this), a note of the type of work it is (e.g. adventure, hard science, fantasy, satire, juvenile) and a careful appreciation of how well it succeeds or how badly it fails in what it sets out to do. For this last you must present the hard facts to back your decision. Then should come any outstanding aspect such as characterisation, background detail, literary quality (if you are lucky), extrapolative ingenuity, scientific validity and so on. Given so much, your reader has a chance to decide whether the book is his meat or not. If you are uncertain of the writer's intention, say so; you may be dealing with a controversial work which requires discussion and argument of the reader; don't simply adopt a point of view and hammer it, for this is not fair play and you may regret it later when your ideas have clarified with the passage of time.

B. A review should be based on what the books attempts and how it succeeds or fails. Is it a *competent* adventure or an *inept* fantasy? (Note that the words *good* and *bad* are avoided in this context; you should be dealing with demonstrable facts.) Here we have John Bangsund's beloved double standard, and here its existence is justified; in fact one needs a standard for each type of work. The question for the reader of adventures is how does it measure up to the general standard of adventures, not how does it compare with a comedy of manners, for example. Placement on the literary ladder is a task for the critic, not the reviewer. One would not review *Last and First Men* on the same basis as *A Princess of Mars*. Under such treatment poor Dejah Thoris would simply lay her last egg and expire; alternatively, the Stapledon work would have to be dismissed as plotless, wordy and lacking love interest. (This makes it easy for the reviewer. The critic, with the whole body of literature threatening his judgment, has no such enviable task — and no multiple standard to help him out.) Whichever niche the book fills, the general method of review remains the same. If the suggestions in the preceding paragraph are followed, your reader will know fairly surely whether he wants the book or not, because you will have told him that one is a vast extrapolative work dealing with the progress of the human soul in its quest for God, demanding concentration and an open mind, while the other is a cloak-and-dagger shenanigans demanding little beyond the willing suspension of disbelief and an imperviousness to sloppy prose.

C. Whether you personally like or dislike the work is not of prime importance. This is not to say that your opinion is unimportant; only that it must not be offered as a reason for reading or not reading the book. Your business is to display the wares, not to push or pan them at the whim of personal taste. You may get a hell of a kick out of every word of Heinlein, but that does not mean that all his books are equally good (even if he has a roomful of Hugos). You may find Frank Herbert a howling bore (as I sometimes do), but you must recognise his solid qualities, which are many. You are writing for all readers of SF, not crusading on behalf of your own prejudices and enthusiasms.

D. Nevertheless, your personal reaction will appear, though it must not be used to set the tone of the article, which should be judicial and balanced. This is an argument against those who have suggested that a review should begin with 'I like/dislike this book because . . .' The printed word is too influential to use so roughly. When you do this you set the tone of the review for or against, and the reader's opportunity for judgment is withheld. Your personal reaction will appear later in the review, when you decide whether the plus values outweigh the minus or vice versa, but it should be made clear that it is a personal reaction.

The dyed-in-the-wool Smith fan will not be influenced by your angry decision that *Skylark Duquesne* is a barrage of quintessential bull, but the newcomer to SF who has heard of the Smith mystique and is considering trying one or two of his books deserves better than an unqualified blackball. Also, if you review consistently, your likes and dislikes will become known and readers will have an extra guide to their choice. They will know how dependable you are, and whether or not your choices habitually coincide with theirs. When this happens you will have arrived.

E. Be careful with quotation. Quoting from the text is considered a must among magazine reviewers, and editors are inclined to insist on it. I don't know why, and feel it is a problematic procedure and one that can be grossly unfair to a book. To quote in order to illustrate a point is fair enough, but remember that when you quote out of context you remove the words from their surrounding atmosphere. The passage of magnificent prose which you quote may seem inflated and pretentious when lifted away from the psychological build-up which preceded it, and your gleeful example of bad grammar may have been put there to gain an effect which your once-over-quickly reading has failed to detect. However, bad work should be castigated and examples may be given. Just take care when selecting. (And having done this, check your own prose. Twice.)

F. Don't go nit picking. Every work has faults, and the minor faults may be ignored. Bad grammar, for instance, is a major fault if it persists throughout the book, but the occasional lapse is not worth your notice. If the odd lapse is a real howler you can perhaps give it a gleeful lime, but don't emphasise it too much. A useful test question is: 'Does this particular fault distract my attention and spoil the general effect of the book?' If it does not, ignore it. Most of the book's readers will do just that. The question of scientific validity is less simple. If a whole story is based on a misconception or false data, tear it apart by all means, but don't be too hard on the occasional lapse which does not greatly affect the general validity of the story. At a later stage the critic will consider these things in relation to the writer's work as a whole, but the reviewer is concerned only with the book he has just read.

G. Don't attempt criticism in the space of a review. You cannot say anything useful about ultimate values in the space of a few hundred words and still provide the information which is the purpose of your review. The art of criticism involves reading and re-reading, comparison with other works, decisions concerning manner and matter, consideration of values literary and psychological and philosophic, extended quotation and endless investigation of purpose and meaning. Not only can it not be done in a few sentences, but it cannot be done at all after a single reading unless it is a very simple book indeed. Even such a vulgarity as a Retief story could not be adequately criticised without consideration of the whole body of Laumer's work.

Having done all this conscientiously, what will you have achieved?

Well, you will for once have looked straight at a book with all personal bias removed as far as is psychologically possible. If you do this consistently your entire attitude to fiction is likely to change — for the better. You will become aware of subtleties and requirements which a writer has sweated over and which you perhaps have in the past dismissed as decoration or incompetence. And your pleasure in reading will gain new dimensions.

But, the writer may well protest, I want to do more than this: I have ideas and arguments to offer, insights to make known and refutations to put forward.

And rightly so. But these there is another type of article, requiring a different technique. I call it the Theme Article, or perhaps the Contemplative Review, for it stands somewhere in the great gap between reviewing and criticism and has no true generic name. It belongs, joyfully, in the cut-and-thrust arena of polemic and outright literary warfare.

But the review is the basic work, the discipline which forces the writer to look straight at a work for what it actually is. Who has learned to do that is ready for creative work, for even minor criticism is creative, and I suppose the Theme Article can be thought of as minor criticism. Accent on minor.

And minor critics have a habit of developing into good writers. Why? Because their training teaches them the basic fact of all effective communication of reality: See what is there. Then describe it.

Interlude

At this point the reader is entitled to ask for proof of the pudding, to say 'Put up or shut up. Show some samples.' If this is meant to say that the samples must be the author's own, the challenge is not a fair one, since if it were to be applied consistently practically no-one would be entitled to do critical writing of any kind — except published writers, and they are, for many reasons, apt to be unreliable as critics of their own field, though good enough when surveying work which has no competitive personal interest for them.

I could refer you to a dozen books of essays which apply this system entertainingly as well as precisely, but in this case I am able to refer to some reviews of my own, which have been written strictly within the limits set out above. The books concerned are *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, *The Revolving Boy* and *Lord of Light*.

The Revolving Boy, being a straightforward novel, required only a straightforward treatment.

Yesterday's Tomorrows, however, posed a problem because of its complexity. Being non-fiction, it contained much more meat than a novel can hope to encompass, and being in my opinion an important book (in regard to SF) it could not be simply forced into the mould. The mould, however, is flexible and can be expanded sufficiently to hold a book like this in fair perspective. My solution was to devote a major part of the review to an outline of the content of the work (a formidable task, believe me) and to sneak in all other relevant matters as opportunity offered. I have yet to meet with a book which will not respond to this formula for reviewing if the writer gives proper consideration to his task and makes full use of the opportunities to rearrange the essentials and give prominence where it is due.

Lord of Light posed a more irritating problem, in that it was plain that the author had attempted something which he had not achieved, but in the attempt had achieved something else of importance. The problem here was to decide on the general category of the book and hence on the standard against which it should be judged. (One can never be too didactic about this; most novels embody aspects of several categories.) Other reviewers might choose other standards than the romantic adventure, which was the aspect which brought forth the most definite response in me, and might be forced to damn it utterly whereas I

perhaps gave it a better review than it deserves. And yet it gives pleasure. So you can see that there are problems, and by no means small ones, even with an apparently cut-and-dried system. The thing is that what I have propounded is not a system, but a set of limits within which to work; these limits can be pulled in or pushed out at will.

There was another pleasure in doing this particular review, in that it allowed me to demonstrate my personal method with regard to SF reviewing. This is a determination to discover and present what is *good* in a given work, and balance it against what is bad; I feel that only in this way can one be fair both to those who will like the book and those who will not. Where I can find no worthwhile virtues I do not propose to waste JB's space and your time on the thing. A bad work is only worth notice in a larger context, as an aspect of some theme covered in a wider discussion.

Which returns us to the Theme Article.

3. The Theme Article

This is much more difficult to describe and define than the Review, since it is so much less restricted and can cover so much more ground. In the Theme Article the writer can let his head go, so long as he observes (as always) a few basic requirements. These are broadly the requirements of any good essay, and may be summarised thus:

A State your theme clearly and given an indication of how you intend to approach it. This saves you endless asides to the reader in the course of the work.

B Lay out your arguments without frills. Justify each one of theme (by quotation, logic, deduction or whatever method suits) before passing on to the text.

C Don't use digression unless it is relevant. Even then be judicious in the use of it, and don't forget to relate it back to the main line of argument. If you don't, your readers will be puzzled and probably bored.

D At the end, summarise and present your conclusions briefly.

Plenty of other things matter, such as style, construction, mood and a dozen more, but this is not a treatise on the use of techniques. Good plain prose on the above lines will give a workmanlike job on most subjects. Your own personality will show through as you grow more adept and learn to break the rules with safety — by substituting for them another set of rules, not flinging them overboard. This has ever been the problem of the rebel — to find something to replace the object of his rebellion.

Broadly speaking, the Theme Article deals with a specific section or group of sections of its subject. It attempts to track down elusive meanings, reveal unsuspected relationships, summarise complex and sometimes apparently unrelated works, or refute the conclusions of other writers. It may do much more, It can do anything you wish it to — if you know your subject, which is the first requirement. You can't write an article on the basis of an opinion and hope to contribute to the pleasure or understanding of others. Reason counts. Opinion counts only after it has been justified.

(Digression: A Theme Article is not just a longer Review. Reviews are for new works. The Theme Article is for reappraisal of works already known, or for investigation of their impact and importance and relationship to the business of being alive. A common practice is for a reviewer to review a book, then expand his comments into a Theme Article. This is a bit unfair to the book, which becomes saddled in the reader's mind with all the faults laid at the doors of a dozen other related books mentioned in the text. It can be done fairly, but rarely is.)

The article may be about a particular book or story or (more commonly) about a group of works related by the writer's prime subject. Or it may be about an author or group of authors. Or an aspect of SF. Or the policy of a magazine as shown by its contents. Or a scientific or sociological idea current in the genre. Or anything at all which is germane to the policy of the magazine you are writing for.

Here is a list of titles (self-explanatory, I hope) which could head articles of genuine interest to SF fans, together with subtitles indicating the possible range of such articles:

- **The Decline and Decay of Robert A. Heinlein.** The history of a descent from clarity to muddled thinking. Works cited: 'The Green Hills of Earth', 'By His Bootstraps', 'The Roads Must Roll', *Orphans of the Sky*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Glory Road*, *Farnham's Freehold*.
- **R. F. Starzl as the Progenitor of Stanley Weinbaum.** A comparison of their works, with some notes doubting the claims of some others regarded as 'originals'.
- **Why Is H. G. Wells Still With Us?** An enquiry into the continuing viability of the Wells canon as against the ephemerality of so much modern science fiction.
- **Towards a Definition of Science Fiction.** Notes towards the drawing of a useful line between SF and fantasy.
- **The SF Critics and Their Blind Spots.** A summation of the critical attitudes of Judith Merril, Damon Knight, Algis Budrys, P. Schuyler Miller and others, with some remarks on the pitfalls of adopted attitudes.
- **The Ruthless Editors.** The mutilation of manuscripts and the subjection of quality to policy.
- **Frank Herbert and the Intellectual Approach.** Or, Why choke the baby with an excess of bathwater?
- **An Anatomy of the *Analog* Story.** What Campbell has built and what he has destroyed.
- **The Role of Character in SF.** An answer to the critic who said it could be a disadvantage.

The point about all of these suggested themes is that they could only be dealt with by referring to a broad range of SF novels and stories, common themes and accepted conventions. The value to be obtained from each would be not so much in the summation of individual problems (which, after all, only provide the pegs on which to hang the discussion) as in the side issues, the revelations of individual thinking, the oddments of special information, the production of unexpected relationships which inevitably distinguish this type of work. (The writer's bonus is that by the time he has finished the article he knows much more about his own thinking than he did when he started — and much more about SF, because he has applied his brain to it instead of his emotions.)

In any one of these suggested articles the writer could fire off a whole Guy Fawkes Night of explosive ideas and conceptions. If the titles seem to indicate a limited sphere of action, the attempt to write one of them — any one — would touch off huge areas for exploration and investigation. In fact, these titles have been deliberately chosen because it would be possible, within the bounds cited, to present through them an almost complete summation of the aims, ideals, history and future possibilities of SF. I don't suggest that anyone should try it on this basis, though no great ingenuity would be required; I put it in only to emphasise that in the Theme Article you can range at will — so long as your ranging is relevant to the stated subject.

The Theme Article has far more value than the Review. The Review does a simple service; the Theme Article is the blood and bones of discussion, dissension and the propagation of ideas.

It is also the blood and bones of literary criticism, the accumulation of skeleton and flesh which one day presents itself to its started creator as a complete and integrated body of ideas, a definitive work on a subject close to his heart.

4. Criticism

About the art of criticism there is little that can profitably be written here. None of us is likely to attempt it in the near future, for it is a lifetime occupation, laced with determination, love and tears.

It is fashionable to regard professional critics as cloud-borne academics whose findings bear no relation to the realities of the subjects of which they treat. This is both ignorant and unfair. Without the critics, who tirelessly chart the paths of the endeavours of others, those paths would long ago have wound into the morasses and dead ends of confusion and stasis.

Would surgery exist if some form of anatomy had not preceded it? Would it continue to advance if anatomy and microscopy were not forever enlarging its boundaries of effort? Well, the critic is the anatomist and microscopist of literature. He searches and prods down to the last word of text, the final idiosyncrasy of idiom, and even spelling, to wrest out the secrets of meaning and construction. The writer, who is by and large an intuitive workman, rarely knows the facts of his own production. It is the critic who at length tells him what he has done and even, sometimes, how he has managed to do it. And it is the critic who resolves the puzzles and problems of the reader, who likes such and such a book, but 'just doesn't get the idea' of this or that passage. It is the critic who watches trends of social movement and philosophic thinking and rescues appropriate works from oblivion at the moment when their impact will at last be made; who scratches over the rubbish heaps of forgotten books and every so often waves one in our faces, crying 'Look what you missed, boys!'

A Voyage to Arcturus was published at the wrong time. It failed. 1920 was the wrong climate for it. Reissued in 1963, it is still in print, and five years is a long time for any but a very good book indeed (or a bad but popular one, which is something else). It was not rediscovered by an SF fan but by a thoughtful critic who realised what he had and persuaded Gollancz to give it a further try. (They did, and made it the cornerstone of a whole series of fantasies of three and four decades ago. Pity. They didn't understand that because one book is good, others in the genre need not be. They weren't.)

But it is not my business to justify the critic's existence. The artist knows the value of the man, and his opinion is, in this case, the only one that matters, because criticism, informed and dedicated, is the touchstone of his endeavour and the compass of his uncertain paths.

It is not likely that high-powered criticism could be of much value to SF. The genre has not yet produced more than half a dozen works worth so much expenditure of effort. Even Wells, in toto, is not considered of much critical importance.

Criticism is, in fact, not for the general reader. It is highly technical work, written for people deeply versed in the subjects treated. (Would you read a chemistry treatise for entertainment?) Criticism requires extensive knowledge of literary techniques, language and languages, philosophy, history, psychology and a sufficient smattering of *all* really important subjects to be able to bone up on them at a moment's notice.

Don't try it yet awhile. I'm damned sure I won't. But we can all paddle happily in the Theme Article for the rest of our lives and still not have rippled more than the surface of SF.

Appendix: Some SF Reviewers

Since I have insisted on a differences between the functions of 'critic' and 'reviewer', it may be as well to categorise the work of some current critical writers on the three groups I have presented. As with the whole essay, nothing here is offered as being definitive, but my practical examples of who-fits-where may make clearer what is meant by the terms as I have used them.

To start at the top *criticism* has been a rarity in SF. Kingsley Amis's *New Maps of Hell* is the only volume I have read which deserves that description, though there may well be others. It is an attempt to see SF as a genre, to discover where it is going, what it does best, what purposes it serves and what purposes it might serve. One is not required to agree with Amis's conclusions, but the depth and incisiveness of his understanding cannot be ignored. This is a major attempt to detect and demonstrate definition, philosophy and aesthetic.

On another plane, Jack Williamson's study of H. G. Wells, published in *Riverside Quarterly*, must also be admitted as criticism. Written as a degree thesis, it is an earnest estimate of Wells's earlier works, including most of the SF. Unfortunately it is unoriginal, pedantic and dull — the sort of thing which frightens readers away from criticism.

Such articles as Brian Aldiss's 'Judgment at Jonbar' (*SF Horizons*, Spring 1964) may in some quarters be classified as criticism. This one is a lengthy (10,000 words or so) appreciation of Williamson's *The Legion of Time*, used as a basis for a plea for better critical standards in SF. (Rightly so; Aldiss's attempts to discover virtues in the thing cannot hide its grisly cheapness. One bright idea doesn't justify a bad novel.) To the uncritical it may appear profound and scholarly, but it is in fact a pretty slick *theme article*, entertainingly written but superficial in approach. Don't imagine I decry the article: it is a very good one. Such items are needed, and Aldiss knew precisely what he was doing when he wrote it. I only point out that this is not work of the depth required of criticism. But it could, as part of a large body of work composed of such articles, eventually form an integral section of a truly critical structure of a much broader scope. In itself it is no more literary criticism than a finger is a whole hand. But if we are to develop critics, Aldiss may well become one of them.

Of the magazine columnists only P. Schuyler Miller is a true *reviewer*, the only one who concentrates on the work in hand and doesn't seek to write crafty articles to celebrate the knowingness and insight of Miller. You may doubt his value judgments, which are sometimes peculiar, but every reviewer has his blind spots which the reader has to learn for himself. (I instance his relish for inflated prose, which he describes as 'poetic', and his curious veneration for Andre Norton's untidy habit of leaving loose ends all over her novels.) But once you recognise these things you can read between the Miller lines and get a sound idea of the work under review.

The rest, from the revered Knight onwards, all write

moody theme articles disguised as reviews, and the books inevitably come off second best, even when they praise them. One feels that these reviewers keep one eye firmly fixed on some future collection of their critical gems, and that the writer and book under notice are less considered than the reviewer and his immortal reputation.

Knight and Blish have published collections of their reviews and essays, but in neither case have I found it possible to extract a critical philosophy. Knight is too interested in whooping after hares to bring down any real deer. Blish, despite moments of real insight, seems uncomfortably concerned with the world in relation to James Blish rather than the reverse. Both write good articles in general, and sometimes write them extremely well, but they are neither critics nor true reviewers.

Moskowitz perhaps deserves a mention for sheer persistence and volume of published nonsense, including some pretty cheap scandal disguised as 'SF history'. Well, that's his mention.

A good standard of reviewing may yet be the contribution of the fan magazines.

THE REVIEWS

W. H. G. Armytage: *Yesterday's Tomorrows*
Routledge & Kegan Paul: 35s0d/A$5.60

This book is subtitled 'A Historical Survey of Future Societies', which is, I suppose, a fair description; but it is much more than that. It is a history, stunningly documented, of man's attempts to determine the direction of his own future, from the days of priestly prophecy to the contemporary use of technical groups armed with the weapons of mathematics, psychology, games theory and that whole intellectual and physical gimmickry which allows man to eavesdrop on the secrets of his own behaviour.

Science fiction rears its anything but bug-eyed head very early in the piece, occupies an honoured position throughout most of the survey (which runs to more than 90,000 words) and is edged out only in the last chapter, wherein real science takes over the running with a vengeance.

That *Yesterday's Tomorrows* contains a pretty good outline of the development of SF is incidental, a bonus which happens to be necessary to the theme because the SF writers and their progenitors have played a major role in documenting man's attempts to read the future. This bonus may prove to be the main attraction for some readers, though the hard-core thesis is never really hard and the only doubtful moments seem to be the fruit of faulty proof-reading. Professor Armytage has, in fact, the gift of presenting the complex in graspable form and of never allowing the reader to become entangled by the many threads of the survey, which of necessity ranges backwards and forwards in time and space in the formative sections. He is Professor of Education and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at Sheffield University and has published two other books on the utopian theme, one a study of actual utopian experiments (*Heavens Below*, 1962), the other of technological prophecies (*The Rise of the Technocrats*, 1965); so he is no beginner in the subject.

This reviewer simply has not the erudition to judge the reliability of many of the Professor's statements, but sees little ground for doubt, and has enough general knowledge to be reasonably sure that the main argument is sound. Even if it should prove less than perfect, this book will still delight as a grab bag of oddities for the bibliophile and the collector of outré information.

There are many detectable errors of description and ascription which the SF addict will leap upon — the introduction of slans credited to Van Vogt's *Destination Universe*, *Galaxy* cited as an earlier title of *Worlds of If, Science Wonder Stories* confused with *Amazing Stories* — but none of them appears to affect the validity of the thesis, in which magazine SF plays only a very minor role. In general the work bears evidence of a daunting thoroughness of research.

The mass of information is vast, and summary can offer only the barest outline; ideas worth a whole article slip by in a couple of sentences.

The book progresses steadily from nonsense to science, as promised in the preface:

> The rise of these 'conflict models' of prediction out of what might otherwise be regarded as futuristic fantasies is the theme of this book.

Armytage begins with the Hebrew prophets, with their prophecies of national glory counterpointed by denunciation of private abuses. (SF now uses the abuses as rather sickening pointers to the future.) He moves swiftly through the Greek oracles and the Roman books of the Cumaean Sybil, gives a quick nod in the direction of Plato searching out ideals — and suddenly, on page 14, we are at the birth of SF:

> Bacon considered the fable was a method commended for science . . . In other words, inventions which men were not ready for, could be set forth in fables.

Bacon, though he produced his own utopia in *The New Atlantis*, probably derived the method from More's *Utopia* (1516). Previous fabulists, such as Lucian with his Moon journey, had not been concerned with science or speculation, only with a fantastic setting which would permit outrages of satires; they were not science fictionists. More and Bacon were, in essence if not in intention.

They, like most of their immediate successors (Armytage reports 875 such literary items by the year 1800), were concerned with law, religion and politics rather than with technological science, though the aeroplane and the submarine popped up insistently and Baron Münchhausen's 'biographers' postulated something like a tape-recorded book. These works were not intended as prediction but as serious consideration of the ideal human condition. Man's ambitions were not yet technologically centred. But prediction was an obvious next step and by the nineteenth century it was flourishing — in France.

Camille Flammarion's *Fin du monde* is well enough known; sociologist Gabriel Tard's *Fragment d'histoire future* and novelist Anatole France's *Pierre Blanc* (set in 2270 AD) are less well known, and Armytage quotes from at least six other Gallic forecasters busy with their crystal balls. They were not adding much to the genre or to genuine soundings of the future, but earlier, in the eighteenth century, a new voice had sounded. The Marquis de Condorcet has remarked:

> All that is necessary, to reduce the whole of nature to laws similar to those which Newton discovered with the aid of the calculus, is to have a sufficient number of observations and a mathematics that is complex enough.

The way was being prepared for investigation on a tougher

than fictional scale.

In the nineteenth century a whole constellation of events pushed prognostication violently ahead and changed its nature. Steam power ushered in the age of technology, the industrial revolution took place, the principles of socialism and communism became widely disseminated and Jules Verne became the father of technological SF. And this last was not the least of these happenings in its effect on prediction.

In 1857 James Clerk Maxwell applied the calculus of probabilities not to card games and elections but to matter in motion — all kinds of matter in all kinds of motion. Mathematician Laplace thought this might lead to 'social physics'. It didn't, but the idea is not dead, and SF still plays with it uneasily. From this to the idea of actually manipulating the future was a quick move. Malthus's *Essay on the Principles of Population* supplied some ideas for Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which in turn inspired in Francis Galton the dream of a eugenically controlled society — as Armytage remarks, 'the arrival rather than the survival of the fittest'.

The day of the grim utopias was upon us. The Malthusian nightmare is a dark thread through all the SF of the period (there was a huge amount of it, including, staggeringly, a novel by Anthony Trollope), and after Jules Verne the machine age furnished the further nightmare of man aground under the iron heel of his own creation — hence Jack London's *The Iron Heel*.

It is tempting here to plunge into the store of rare and forgotten novels by surprising people which Armytage unearthed in his research, but space forbids. (To me the book is worth having just for these references and the fascinating quotation from many of them.) As yet the scientists had not moved in and the novelists held the field. Bellamy's famous *Looking Backward* held it for many years, being probably the most successful SF ever written — it outsold *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Then H. G. Wells arrived on the scene, trailing a herd of imitators, and by 1910 nearly all the major themes of SF had been stated and examined more thoroughly than the modern reader might credit. By the time magazine SF arrived there was little to do but embellish the past and rediscover lost themes. SF, though immensely popular, was in the doldrums; new directions were needed. At this point SF begins to retreat from the foreground of the book, its major duty (popularisation) soundly done. It seems to this reviewer that the new directions are being cautiously explored, but Professor Armytage is not concerned with this — he is a historian, not a literary critic (though there is a close connection between the two).

Utopias as such were now to be examined rather than merely postulated, and the scientists, philosophers and mainstream novelists (I wish we could get rid of that silly term) were to move *en masse* into the field, rather than remain lone and scattered voices.

So we had, in the early twentieth century, a 'superman' period, nourished by the German sensational novelists looking over their shoulders to Nietzsche, and in England by Wells, D. H. Lawrence, Shaw and (surprise?) W. B. Yeats. There followed a reaction against the superman and mechanisation — Kipling and Chesterton were doughty dissenters — and the protest reached its peak with Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World* and *Ape and Essence*) and Robert Graves (*Seven Days in New Crete*).

While the English were reacting against the violent utopias, the Americans were still pushing the dream of a technological future. The SF magazines spawned; industry plunged into the era of the gimmick. Popular culture was, as usual, a generation behind the intellectuals. Simultaneously the Russians put politics into SF, which was to be expected of a society where *all* activity is regarded as political. And the British, via Olaf Stapledon, C. S. Lewis, J. B. S. Haldane and Bertrand Russell, demonstrated religious argument as essential to any understanding of tomorrow and lifted the argument out of SF into the realm of predictive philosophy. (Stapledon and Lewis were not writing genre SF, whatever the fans feel about them; they were creating philosophic fables, using a loose fictional form in order to reach a mass audience. Back to Bacon and More!)

All the ingredients were there save one. The atom bomb provided it. Absolute prediction had become essential.

At last the American materialist outlook and the European humanist argument joined in the effort to really discover the future rather than theorise about it.

The second-last chapter deals with 'Surmising Forums' — specialist groups whose business is to sort what *will* happen from the infinity of 'what happens'. Their progenitor may be visualised as the British Royal Commission on Coal early this century — a board of experts detailed to survey resources, advise on usage and predict the exhaustion point.

What develops here I do not propose to tell: it would be tantamount to revealing the solution of a thriller. Suffice it that this chapter and the next, 'Operational Eschatologies', are as far in advance of SF ideas as SF is in advance of popular science. They deal with things that are actually happening. They contain little that one is not at least marginally aware of, but they juxtapose ideas and factual effort fin a fashion which dramatises man's relation to tomorrow with the kind of force every novelist dreams of attaining just once in his career.

Professor Armytage makes no comments, draws no conclusions; he might well object to my outline on the ground that a reviewer with a different cast of mind would perceive a radically different structure in his book. But he gives few clues, only indicates the signposts; you follow and find out for yourself, do your own interpreting.

This is a basic textbook for the science fictionist, be he simply a romantic seeking the lost sense of wonder (it is here), a completist seeking knowledge of the SF past (it is here) or a thinker deeply concerned with the trends and directions of his civilisation (the clues are here). And every SF *writer* should regard the final chapters, especially the last, as required reading, for here are revealed areas in which SF thinking lags far behind scientific and philosophic thinking.

This is an exciting book; it gives something of a cold douche to reflect that it won't be everybody's meat and that some may even find it difficult or dull. I can only recommend it. I haven't read an SF novel to equal it in interest since *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

And if the final prognostications are rarely reassuring, there is this comforting epigram from sociologist Arnold Green to allow a little hope amid the impending gloom:

> The chattering of one's teeth is often mistaken for the approaching hoofbeats of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

I hope he is right. Indeed I do.

Gertrude Friedberg: *The Revolving Boy*
Ace Special: US60c A70c

This would appear to be Mrs Friedberg's first SF novel, and a highly successful venture it is. Without being a mind bender or world shaker, *The Revolving Boy* has charm, originality, competence and, in its later stages, the carefully constructed suspense which only professionalism can achieve — and then not too damned often, alas.

The story concerns a boy with a sense of absolute direction, a boy who always knows where he is, even in absolute darkness. Like a compass, his metabolism is orientated in one specific direction, which he is drawn to face automatically, and when he turns away from it he has to make a compensatory opposite turn in order to achieve physical comfort. He has to compensate not only for the normal divagations of everyday life, but for the movement of the earth in space and of the solar system in space, and for every cosmic change which alters his orientation to a mysterious something lying somewhere in the specific direction to which he is orientated. Fortunately for his sanity (also for that of the reader and the author) he does not have to compute these compensations, but makes them automatically.

Mrs Friedberg defends this conception by an interestingly stated comparison with the perfect pitch so highly prized by musicians; she could, I think, have used migratory birds also, but did not. Thank heaven she does not take the incompetent plotter's way out — label it ESP and toss realism overboard; her boy's talent has a physical basis.

The first half of the book establishes the nature of this talent, with its peculiarities and advantages, and has the easy charm which so many women can give to stories about children. It develops that young Derv's talent is connected with the fact of his having been born in weightless condition in space, and that his basic orientation is due to a signal emanating from the direction which he naturally faces when at rest. For reasons psychological, emotional and practical these things are best concealed, but eventually truth emerges and a team of scientists monitor the signal in order to discover whether or not it is produced by intelligent entities. There is no way of telling. The project becomes a background matter in the institute involved, with observations made from time to time just to make sure the signals still exist. Derv grows up and moves from the area, and changes his name to avoid awkwardnesses of one kind and another. The signals keep coming, but the project is routine; nobody is devoted to it any longer. Then, sixteen years later, Derv becomes physically and psychically ill, and disorientated: the signals have stopped. His wife's efforts to help coincide with a resurgence of interest in the institute, and it is suddenly necessary to find Derv again to make tests. But Derv, threatened with an exploratory operation, has left the hospital and vanished. The rest of the tale is no more than a breathless piece of suspense fiction leading to the location of Derv and the solution of the problems connected with the signals.

Nobody saves the world because nobody needs to. Politics and vast organisations do not move across the scene, because Mrs Friedberg has written a novel about a handful of people with a problem. The aliens sending the signal do not make a dramatic appearance at the end because their presence would be just an obstruction to good story telling; and the way Mrs Friedberg writes her tale, we couldn't care less whether the aliens are sentient vegetables or Barsoomian thoats; they just don't matter. Attention is concentrated on Derv and his personal problems, on the slow and detailed unfolding of his predicament and on sharp little pen-portraits (never deep but always lively enough to catch the attention) of the peripheral characters.

And Mrs Friedberg has one great ace in the hole at all times — she has an original idea. Thus one can never anticipate her plotting, because the idea is hers alone, to date, and only she knows how she is about to handle it from chapter to chapter. It is a restful book, and easy to read; its prose is at all times adequate, never fancy, and shows a respect for quality and plainness of statement. One hesitates to think of the megalomaniac mess so many writers would have churned out if they had changed on the same basic idea — or of the manner in which others would have tossed in the gimmick as one of a dozen like it without pausing to examine it for interest and intricacy. Mrs Friedberg really examines her basic idea, lifting it out of the gimmick class and making her book centre solidly upon it.

As a bonus she gives, quietly and unemphatically, a fresh and surprisingly detailed view of everyday life in the near future — the action covers about thirty years from the early seventies — and her ideas about clothing, home construction, decoration, eating and comfort appliances are genuinely original and thoughtful. She treats of these things without emphasis (because they are her characters' mode of life and therefore not obtrusive to them) in quick references here and there. If one cared to go through the book and collect them all, I think there might appear quite a detailed view of one woman's ideas of what we may expect within our lifetime.

I can't imagine *The Revolving Boy* winning any Hugos, but it is a better book, both as literature and SF, than some which have. It is simpler than, say, *Lord of Light*; it attempts less but succeeds better at what it attempts, and is a better book. It may turn out to be forgettable in the long run, but for the moment of reading it has charm and warmth, two qualities cherishable for their rarity.

Roger Zelazny: *Lord of Light*
Faber: UK 21s0d A$2.75

Lord of Light is excellent entertainment, a repository of novel idea twists, a humdinger of an adventure, and contains a number of more solid features for the serious minded. It shows Zelazny's strength and much of his weakness, but for this reviewer the strength prevails. Some may consider it pretentious or indigestible, but that is the reader's privilege; like it or not, the book has many virtues.

At a vaguely defined time, at least some centuries before the story opens, a space ship lands on a planet light years from Earth and is, presumably, marooned there; at any rate it does not leave. It may even have been a colonising vessel. Its crew are occidentals, many of them scientists of one kind or another, some of them possessing or later developing special talents of the ESP variety (including at least one fascinating new one). The passengers must have been Hindus, though this is not explicitly stated.

The scientists establish themselves as leaders, dictators, and eventually as gods. They assume the names, aspects and attributes of the illimitable Hindu pantheon, or such of them as seem useful, build themselves an impregnable Heaven, and rule the world. But to establish man on the planet they first have to conquer the local inhabitants, who are a pretty powerful breed of various physical, non-physical and mixed varieties. The most powerful, the Rakasha, are subdued and cast into a pit and sealed in. So here we have Hell and its demons.

And between these opposites are the 'mortals' — the unfortunate passengers — who have degenerated under

the ungentle guidance of their gods into something like a medieval Hindu culture. They are not permitted technological progress. The gods knock this on the head wherever it appears. Over the centuries the rulers have become literally gods in the minds of the people, and are worshipped in the Hindu fashion. Even the doctrines of karma and dharma are preserved by scientific means. The gods can transfer minds/souls/personalities (have it your own way) into new bodies, and so have themselves lived through the centuries since the advent. They make something of a profitable business of it among the mortals also, and, more importantly, use it to keep the mortals and each other in check. If you don't care for the other bloke's activities, have him reincarnated as a dog or a monkey and so render him harmless; or, if you merely feel spiteful, provide him with a fine physical frame which turns out to be epileptic.

The story is the familiar one of the crew member who disapproves of the cynical and self-seeking rule of the gods and sets out to improve the lot of the mortals by giving them technology. The story, with its self-evident conclusion, is only a string on which to thread a rip-roaring series of ideas and incidents, and it is in these that the fascination of the work lies, as it does in any fantasy.

'Fantasy', I wrote just then, and stopped to think. *Lord of Light* is not easy to classify, for Zelazny provides a scientific, or at least science-fictional, basis for all his miracles; the story is true SF. But the story-telling *method* is pure fantasy and so is the style. And behind these lie a number of ideas and incidents pointing to the possibility that his original intention was to write an anti-religious satire, which became swallowed in the intrigue and high adventure of the fable. With the science we need not concern ourselves. It is of the Van Vogtian type, and its main use is to keep the reader's feet on the ground and remind him that this is a tale of real people, not a variation on the Tolkien mythology or a sword-and-sorcery romance.

The fantasy element is provided by the uninhibited nature of the incidents, the outrageously stylised characterisations (necessary when the characters are gods with definite aspects and attributes) and the artificial but effective style, which I propose to discuss later.

The satirical element crops up every so often, sometimes but not always amusingly. There is some fun to be had with the religious aspects of the introduction of modern plumbing, the prayer wheel considered as a one-armed bandit and the hot line to Heaven. There is something savage in the treatment of Nerriti, the one fanatical Christian remaining among the gods. His followers are zombies, and his fanaticism is such that he has these mindless and soulless things kneel in the imitation of prayer. Even Jonathan Swift could not have been more brutal than that. And the rebel hero, Sam, is much confused in his idealism. He takes on the aspect of the Buddha but is all too ready to fight when things do not move quickly enough to suit him, and each time loses by it. He makes the ancient and heretical mistake of enlisting the powers of Hell as allies, in the delusion that he can deal with them also when the time comes.

Last, but by no means least, though Sam wins his battle and is acclaimed a liberator, it is in fact Yama, the Lord of Death, the cynical and invincible and allegiance-swapping slayer, who makes his victory possible. Sam's final apotheosis is as Maitreys, the Lord of Light, but it is Yama who has indeed given light to the world. To investigate this too far is to invite some shuddersome conclusions and perhaps shed some peculiar light on Zelazny's mental processes, but this can only be done at a later date when one has achieved some perspective on the book. My present feeling is that much of this is not ideologically intentional but dictated by the necessities of the plot, and that the satirist has been overwhelmed by the story teller.

A good thing, too. Religious satire is twopence a bunch these days but good story tellers are becoming increasingly rare. There are peculiar errors in the story and some irritating lapses in the style, and even some trick prose which is quite effective until you extract the meaning from it, but these things, whough they halt you for the moment, are swiftly recovered and the tales goes quite triumphantly on.

Lord of Light won this year's Hugo for best novel. Whether or not it was best novel of 1967 is not important (Hugo winners rarely are), but it deserves recognition as a stylish and competent piece of work. For this reviewer, Zelazny deserves a public cheer and a statuette on the workroom shelf. He has done what so many fans have been howling for someone to do — he has brought back the lost sense of wonder. *Lord of Light* is by no means a foolproof work of art, but it has given me more pleasure than most SF of the past two or three years.

A note on style

Those who feel that criticism of a good work is mere carping are warned not to read any further. Those who care for the art of writing may find something of interest.

Since Zelazny has been widely praised for his style, and has a fistful of Hugos to his credit (one of which made me wonder what had got into the voters), it may not be amiss to see how far he has progressed in what seems to me his best work to date.

'A Rose for Ecclesiastes' was my first encounter with him, and showed a style laboured but worth watching; at that date he was trying too hard and it showed. ('Rose' was good stuff, though.) The novelettes in *Four for Tomorrow* showed that 'Rose' was not just a one-shot success; then came *This Immortal* and my heart sank. Bags of style, yards of ideas, a whole cornucopia of incidents, and at the end of it all a tired old solution that SF should have discarded long since. I thought that perhaps he was a novelettist but not a novelist — it often happens like that. Then 'Damnation Alley' and a couple of other pot-boilers for Frederik Pohl had me weeping that another promising talent had sold out for quick returns. (I have not read the widely praised *The Dream Master*.)

Lord of Light, however, shows a Zelazny well on the way to literary maturity. His mistakes are bad, but his successes are noteworthy and he has obviously attained an easy mastery of his medium; he makes it work for him, and has learned the trick of moving easily from one method to another without showing the seams. In *Lord of Light* he does this last thrity or forty times and nearly always with smooth success. He has also penetrated to the heart of the fantasy style and avoided the traps which have swallowed so many writers whole.

He uses the style so often and so wrongly described by dazzled readers as 'poetic' because it presents them with pretty pictures and powerful emotional identifications. Merritt and Williamson cut their own throats by making this mistake, and you will find it pretty soupy going if you try now to read *The Moon Pool* or *The Stone from the Green Star*, where words like 'iridescent', 'resplendent' and 'amethystine' spatter the pages like gobs of scented porridge. Lovecraft reached the height of raging boredom by making everything 'inexpressible' or 'indescribable', when it wasn't a

'lurking horror coiled about the shuddering depths of my night-enshrouded soul'.

Zelazny has seen that the fantasy-romance style depends not on 'poetic' language but on a deliberate avoidance of the poetic idiom. He has adopted a dignified and very unambiguous prose, slightly elaborate in syntax but plain in vocabulary, which hits off the medieval nature of his story very well. If occasionally he overdoes it, we are prepared to look the other way for a moment.

Where he fails shockingly badly is, not unexpectedly, in an area where most American writers fail in the fantasy attempt. It seems almost as if they have a defective ear for stylised prose, and commit errors of literary tact which would raise the hair of an English writer. This may well be because the English writer soaks up the old language traditions with the air he breathes; the comparable American tradition is starker and more realistic. As early as page 2, after several hundred words of dignified introductory work, the Lord of Death converses with a man who has been reincarnated as an ape:

> 'Your prayers and your curses come to the same, Lord Yama', commented the ape. 'That is to say, nothing.'
>
> 'It has taken you seventeen incarnations to arrive at this truth?' said Yama. 'I can see then why you are still doing time as an ape.'

That 'doing time' jars just when the spell was taking hold. We are ripped abruptly from medieval India to twentieth-century America, and have to find our way back. The odd idiom in the wrong place is tactless; realism of speech has no place in a style which is fiercely anti-realistic. Yet there are other passages wherein the gods drop their masquerades among themselves and speak with a curious mixture of old and new idioms, as though the habit of ritual has deprived them of facility with natural speech, and these passages are very effective in pointing the different nature of the personal drama from that of the universal drama. It is a pity when this happens, as it too often does, in the wrong place.

And he uses that horrible 'he did' construction which bedevils amateurs trying to imitate archaic forms of speech: 'He did near empty the wine cellar . . .' 'and then he did make his way . . .' It would be possible to quote about a hundred examples of this usage, which has never existed in that particular form in the English language, except very occasionally as a special syntactical device to effect a focus of attention, or (in second-rate prosodists) to establish rhythmic harmony. A simple past tense is all that is required and is all that the English normally used; anything else is obtrusive and serves no purpose. The Elizabethans, whose prose was very straightforward, considered it a foppish affectation.

Zelazny is also guilty of occasional trick prose; that is, writing nonsense for emotional effect in the hope that you won't notice the meaning. 'Mustaches the color of smoke', he writes. Now tell me what colour the mustaches are — dirty, grey, white, blue, sulphur yellow, oil black? And we have this: '. . . the eyes of an ancient bird, electric and clear'. Some bird, with a reverse metabolism. The reader has to be on his guard against this sort of thing.

Also against the bit of James-Bond-type snobbery put over when one character produces a bottle of burgundy from Earth! It must have been a thousand years old, and serve him right who drank it! The reddest of wines would be more acid than vinegar by then. Which only goes to show that it doesn't do to throw these 'effect' bits in without checking first.

Again, in two places Zelazny writes what he possibly thinks is poetry. I'll say one thing for his verses — they are better than the nauseating tripe Heinlein offered as 'balladry' in 'The Green Hills of Earth'. It is a peculiar fact that few novelists can write verse and few poets can write effective novels (Kipling, Hardy and Graves are outstanding exceptions); they simply do not understand each other's media and in practise mishandle them abominably. I only wish Zelazny hadn't done it; he ruined two good scenes with the unnecessary lines. And that's the worst of it — that they were unnecessary.

If all this sounds very minatory, let's not be too concerned over it. The meaning is no more than this — that Zelazny has proved himself capable of the grand effect but still needs to perfect himself in detail. There can be little doubt that he has, if he cares to use it and to really work at it, the literary equipment to sweep the SF board clean as a stylist and technician.

But to do it he will have to be prepared to forego the easy money of pot-boiling for the magazines and make his play among the hardbacks. It is only by tackling the toughest competition that a writer, like an athlete, discovers the limits of his form.

One whom I told I was going to review this book murmured, 'Be kind to it', as though the poor thing had been delivered over to the tigers. *Lord of Light* needs no-one's kindness. Despite weaknesses and shortcomings it can stand up very stoutly for itself.

Bruce Gillespie here: Sorry for the copout of publishing a thirty-year-old slab of George Turner, but I'm maniacally busy on preparing *The Unrelenting Gaze: The Best of George Turner's Non-Fiction*, and I don't have any other way to maintain my membership until this project is finished. Much is old-fashioned in George's piece (especially the universal 'he'), but much still makes sense. And the individual reviews are still spot on. 58,000 words done so far, and still typing. Congratulations to Maureen on the Hugo nomination. Vote soon, and vote often. Best wishes, everybody. **5 May 1999.**