

SCIENCE FICTION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

CHAIRMAN
BOX 3186
THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER
WOOSTER, OHIO 44691

TREASURER
7 AMSTERDAM AVENUE
TEANECK, NEW JERSEY 07666

SFRA NEWSLETTER #9

Volume 2, Number 3

25 MARCH 1972

The SFRA NEWSLETTER is published monthly by the Science Fiction Research Association, Inc, a nonprofit scholarly organization. It is sent to all voting, supporting, student, and institutional members. Address all correspondence to the Editor: Fred Lerner, 7 Amsterdam Avenue, Teaneck NJ 07666 USA. Assistant Editor: Janet Kagan.

FIRESIGN THEATER: SF OR INSANITY?
or, Truth is Stranger than Reality

In the past year or two, a quartet of zanies calling themselves the Firesign Theater has been gaining attention among certain segments of American culture -- most notably the counter-culture, who regard them as some sort of a drug trip without chemicals, and science fiction fandom, who see SF devices and plots in some of their work. The latter is evidenced by the nomination last year of *Don't Crush That Dwarf; Hand Me the Pliers* for the Dramatic Presentation Hugo; Firesign fans are backing the group's fourth album, *I Think We're All Bozos on This Bus*, for a nomination this year as well. Now, there must be something to all this that merits closer attention, so let's take a look.

Altho the group has five albums to its credit, all on Columbia, the third and fourth (*Dwarf* and *Bozos*) seem to be the most SF-oriented. The science fiction in *Dwarf* appears mostly in the background, surfacing as subtle clues now and then: references to foreign occupation of Los Angeles, the division of the country into zones, and even a line about the world having come to an end, "...the world as we know it, you mean". *Bozos*, however, is more blatantly science-fictional, depicting a future society complete with technological advances: an electric bus, life-like moving holograms, a mastermind computer called Dr Memory, and a robot President. In this future, people have coalesced into stereotype categories, such as Bozos (the lowest-common-denominator Middle American) and Boogies (analogous to today's hippie/freaks).

On the other hand, most of what the Firesign does could more accurately be called surrealism. Scenes shift in strange ways, meanings become blurred and ambiguous, as in a dream. One of their favorite devices is to refer to the fact that it's only a record after all, as in the "Nick Danger" sequence on their second album: "Which side are you on?" asks one character; the other replies, "Side two". Or this bit:

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Nick Danger."

"No, let me introduce myself. My name is Nick Danger."

"If you're so smart, why don't you pick up your cues faster?"

And one of the main phenomena in *Dwarf* is the shifting from level to level, from a scene of a man watching TV to the scene he's watching, to a movie on the TV -- and at one point, a character from one movie gets up and walks off the set into the set of a different movie on another channel of the same TV. Quite a demand is made on the listener to keep up with the action and to figure out what parts relate to what other parts and how.

And then, of course, on the other hand (or have I run out of hands already?) the Firesign Theater doesn't have to mean anything at all. A pet FT phrase is "Malmborg in Plano"; they looked in the phone books of two cities called Plano and found nobody named Malmborg in either of them -- hence, "Malmborg in Plano" means nothing, like the old *Mad* word "potrzebie".

Near the conclusion of the Nick Danger episode, rather than solve a complicated situation, the "radio show" is interrupted by FDR announcing the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the United States' unconditional surrender to Japan. Is this some alternate world in which the US lost World War II? More likely it's just a joke, just a surprise bit for humorous effect. The same could be said for almost everything they do. Worlds of science fiction, no matter how fantastic, are intended to be real, to be taken seriously, even if the stories set therein are not themselves serious; but the worlds of the Firesign Theater aren't real, they're dreams. They are weird juxtapositions intended to boggle the listeners' minds.

Sure, the Firesign Theater can be interpreted as science fiction; but they can just as easily be interpreted in a number of other ways as well. What does it all mean? Your guess is as good as mine.

-- David Emerson

(NOTE: See also Rolling Stone #92, 30 Sept 1971, pp 38-40 -- DE)

Firesign Theater albums:

Waiting for the Electrician or Someone Like Him (Columbia CS9518)
 How Can You Be in Two Places at Once When You're Not
 Anywhere at All? (Columbia CS9884)
 Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers (Columbia C30102)
 I Think We're All Bozos on This Bus (Columbia C30737)
 Dear Friends (Columbia KG31099).

FUTURES ON A JERSEY AFTERNOON

The Drew University Conference on the Future: Mankind, Machine, and Man was held on the campus of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey on Saturday, 4 March 1972. Isaac Asimov was the keynote speaker; he suggested that the widespread dispersal of the human race thruout the Universe might lead to a cultural pluralism that would realise humanity's true potential. A three-track program was followed during most of the day, followed by discussion sections; Fred Lerner led one on "science fiction and the future".

The campus was pleasant, the facilities excellent, and the sessions graciously and skillfully guided. But we were disappointed by the superficiality of many of the presentations; several speakers gave generalised predictions with no documentation. There seemed to be more wishful thinking than disciplined extrapolation in evidence.

-- Fred Lerner and Janet Kagan

NEXT MONTH'S NEWSLETTER will include the quarterly SFRA CALENDAR, so please send in information on any forthcoming conferences or meetings with which you are connected.

SFRA MAILBAG

Veronica M.S. Kennedy:

Recently, when I was teaching Robert Browning's enigmatic poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came", I was struck by the possibility that the late "John Wyndham" (John Beynon Harris) had been inspired to write *The Day of the Triffids* by one particular stanza in the poem, stanza 12:

If there pushed any ragged thistle stalk
 Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents
 Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents
 In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to balk
 All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk
 Pushing their life out, with a brute's intents.

I present this idea without any evidence other than the resemblance between the character or nature of the triffids and that of the malignant weeds of the poet's vision of the ultimate Waste Land, and with only the supposition that, as "John Wyndham" received a conventional British education, he may well have known the poem.

-- 105 West 13th St, New York NY 10011 (3 March 1972)

Hal Hall:

In looking back over the NEWSLETTER, I re-read your review of Siemon's *Science Fiction Story Index*, and have to disagree with you slightly. I agree that the Siemon index is far less than it could have been, and that it has many flaws; however, for two reasons I think your advice not to buy could be questioned. First, Siemon does cover almost 100 anthologies not indexed by Cole. Second, the index does have value for libraries, in that it covers many of the anthologies and collections most likely to be found in general library collections, i e, those which were accessible thru standard library tools. Finally, I think that the advice to wait for a supplement to Cole or wait for a new compilation should be accompanied by an indication as to when to expect such a volume. In many cases, any index is better than no index.

-- 3608 Meadow Oaks Lane, Bryan TX 77801 (21 March 1972)

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

Wilson, Robin Scott, ed. *Clarion*. (New York: New American Library, 1971).
 239p, Signet paperback. \$.95

"An Anthology of Speculative Fiction and Criticism from the Clarion Writers' Workshop".

It is not my intention to speak of the short stories themselves; they are worthy of note because they represent some of the newest comers to the SF field, but they have been sufficiently covered elsewhere. What makes this volume unique is the inclusion of eight essays by those established writers, editors, and critics who attended the Clarion Workshop as teachers. All of the essays are valuable for the insight they provide on their authors.

Kate Wilhelm's "Something Happens" and Samuel R Delany's "Reading Between the Words" offer fascinating glimpses into the gestalt of the writers' workshop itself. Wilhelm's is especially interesting for its comments on the female SF writer, Delany's for the exercises he employed to develop and stimulate his students. Both are mandatory reading for anyone who plans to become involved in a writers' workshop of any sort.

Joanna Russ, Fritz Leiber, Frederik Pohl, and Robin Scott Wilson all offer broad views of SF and the problems of genre. "...That quality which most clearly distinguishes SF from non-SF writing has to do not with content but with method", writes Pohl. He goes on to give this view of the method: "If we throw dice and see a six come up, the layman sees only a six; the writer using the SF method sees that a six has come up, but that any of five other possibilities might have come up." Leiber lists thirteen separate types of fantasy and adds, "Categories... and genres ... are valid and useful only insofar as they make it easier to discuss stories". Russ carries this further: "Genre writing has two faults: staleness and constriction. The first is accidental, but the second is essential.... Current science fiction ... shows signs of being a genre and of also becoming a convention. ... The genre must die before it can become real art." Wilson's summation details the various attempts to define SF and discusses the impulses that lead to writing and reading SF.

These four essays combine to provide what would be an excellent introduction to the problems of SF-and-the-genre. Should someone decide to present a collection of essays for classroom use, I sincerely hope that he/she will consider these.

-- Janet Kagan
Barnard College

NOTES AND NOTICES

Seamus Murphy has been staging fantasy- and SF-oriented dance productions at Queens College in New York City. 8-6-45, which he describes as a "science fiction fairy tale", is a "total audience participation work". It has a cast of 25 "guides", and includes narration. Free performances will be held at Queens College the evenings of April 13 and May 5. *Fabrication: An Image Fracture* and *Consummation: An Act of Love* are take-offs on the influence of consumer technology on American life. (For information: Seamus Murphy, %Seamus Dance Foundation Inc, 214 East 82nd St, #25, New York NY 10028.)

The Northeast Modern Language Association of America will have its annual convention at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs NY, on Saturday 8 April 1972. Under the presidency of Veronica M S Kennedy of St John's University, the "Fantasy and Science Fiction" section will include three papers: "The Politics of Pan-Sentience in *Star-Maker*" (Curtis C Smith, SUNY-Albany); "The Work of Clifford Simak" (Virginia L Carew, Queensborough Community College); and "The Vampire in Recent Literature and Film (Or: Whatever Happened to Bela Lugosi?)" (Wayne A Losano, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute). The Chairman of Local Arrangements for the convention is: Prof Mark Gelber, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs NY 12866.

The Popular Culture Association will have its Second National Meeting at the Commodore Perry Motor Inn in Toledo, Ohio April 5-8. There will be a session on science fiction on Thursday, 6 April, under the chairmanship of John R Pfeiffer of Central Michigan University. ## The May 1972 issue of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* has a section on "Science Fiction and the University" with articles by Philip Klass ("William Tenn"), Thomas D Claeson, Darko Suvin, and Isaac Asimov.