

Worlds of if

Book Reviews by Frederik Pohl

WHOEVER "Sarban" may be, the novel *The Sound of His Horn* (Ballantine) is a valued addition to recent science fiction, once you get to it.

This takes some bit of doing. The book has an introduction by Kingsley Amis (rather surgical in tone) and then Sarban has chosen to "frame" the story itself. ("Look here!" He straightened up abruptly and turned round. "You're not tired, are you? Mind if I tell you something? Let me fill your glass, then sit down and I'll tell you a tale.")

The effect is that one has made two false starts before beginning the story itself. And as the story takes some space to get where it is going, it seems possible that a number of readers will wander off to the refrigerator and never quite get back.

This would be a major loss. Once Sarban begins to get down to particulars, he reveals a talent for horror that is all the more penetrating because it is couched in a literate and attractive style. It is Sarban's purpose to explore what the world would have been like if the Nazis had won

World War II. His draft of the consequences is convincing and frightening. Inevitably the war was renamed, becoming "The War of German Rights." The victors have Nazified every spot on the globe; there is no longer an external enemy. Internal resistance is not ended, but it has come to take such shapes as conspiring to change the emphasis of a National-Socialist slogan. Civil rights do not exist. In fact even the identity of non-Nazi groups has been so far suppressed that one character is unable to guess whether a group of slaves are Czechs, Russians or Chinese. He isn't even interested. "They seem to me very much just lumps of undifferentiated Under-Race."

There are many such glances at the outside world, but they are only glances. The main course of Sarban's story concerns itself with the life of the great hunting preserve of the Reich Master Forester. Here the quarry is human—sometimes "lumps," sometimes criminals. Here are men like stags and girls like game birds, hunted by a scrupulous sporting code, making what lives they can out of what

little humanity is allowed them.

The Sound of His Horn, a slim book to begin with, spends more than a quarter of its pages on introduction, prologue and epilogue. What is left is not much over novelette length, and so there is not the space for a detailed study in full dress. It hints and evokes, instead of stating. It may sometimes leave one unsatisfied; but it will hardly leave anyone unmoved.

IN A remarkably irritating new book, *Stadium Beyond the Stars* (Winston), Milton Lesser proposes to tell us about a group of young athletes en route from Earth to "Ophiuchus" to take part in Interstellar Olympics. That's what he proposes. What he accomplishes is something else again. The athletic-competition theme drops from sight almost at once, flickers briefly a time or two and then is seen no more. Instead Lesser gives us a stale hash of menacing aliens.

Stadium Beyond the Stars moves its thin, pale plot along only with the help of fantastic amounts of snooping, skulking, eavesdropping and shadowing. Everybody is always following everybody else around in the shadows, and what they learn from this your reviewer cannot tell, for a careful study shows that if every character in the book

had slept through its action, the end position of all parties would have been just about the same.

The story is classified as "young adult" reading—that is to say, it is ostensibly aimed at the later teens and actually is read mostly by twelve-year-olds. If a science fiction writer has any responsibility at all to keep his facts straight, it would seem that the responsibility is gravest of all in stories aimed at the young.

To this ideal Lesser comes nowhere near. There aren't very many factual statements in *Stadium Beyond the Stars*, only doubletalk; but even the doubletalk is in its implications absurdly wrong. It would be easy to draw up a list of a dozen instances of this, but as it would also be repetitious let one suffice.

One of Lesser's characters is a space captain who sights a derelict; he wishes to match course and board it. The derelict is comparatively motionless and the space captain's command is traveling at "barely sublight speed," so Lesser rightly supposes that some time will be necessary for deceleration. How is this done? Lesser says *first* the space captain circles back to the derelict, *then* goes through the long deceleration.

Not only does Lesser tamper with awfully elementary science, he hardly troubles to remember his own inventions.

It is not ignorance that is demonstrated here. It is contempt. Contempt for his medium. Contempt for his readers. Contempt for his own story.

What is even more incredible is the necessary assumption that someone read this before allowing it to get into print. Does Winston have an editor? If so, does the editor edit?

WELL, MAYBE he does. It is satisfying to be able to report that another Winston writer (and another writer who is sometimes less than sensible with his "science") has done a fine, competent job in a second Winston juvenile.

The author is Robert Silverberg; the book is *Lost Race of Mars*. The book is fun. Listed as for the "8 to 12" group, it will most likely be read by the first-graders and read to the pre-schoolers. They will like it very much. Possibly they will sometimes have a little trouble with its vocabulary. They should; that's how kids learn.

In *Lost Race of Mars* Silverberg invents a likable family who, for persuasive reasons, travel to a well-thought-out and well-described Martian settlement. They are pioneers and, as it turns out, discoverers. What they discover is the "Lost Race" of the title.

This is all very simple, of

course. The plot is not simple because Robert Silverberg is too feckless to invent a complicated one; it is simple because he has the wisdom to realize complications would be out of place. All in all, Silverberg does this book so well that he makes it look easy; pray heaven it is—for him—because then we can hope that he will do many more.

ANOTHER WINSTON juvenile, now reissued by Signet, is Arthur C. Clarke's *Islands in the Sky*. A youngster enters a quiz contest and wins the great prize, which is a trip to a space satellite. Through accident, helped by youthful guile, he stretches the trip to include half a dozen, all described with Clarke's splendidly matter-of-fact detail.

It is an entertaining book even for adult readers, once they reconcile themselves to a teen-age level of plot and character; but it does seem deceitful of Signet to publish it without a single hint anywhere that it was designed for a juvenile audience.

IN ALGIS BUDRYS'S *The Unexpected Dimension* (Ballantine), the unexpected common feature of its seven stories is remorse. His heroes have variously founded societies, invented world-shaking machines, served false ideals of justice, etc. Whatever they

did, they did it before the story opens, and they're sorry for it now.

The stories themselves are fine. Budrys walks a crooked mile to get from beginning to end of a story, but the detours are not without point and never without power.

Philip Jose Farmer's *Strange Relations* (Ballantine) is a collection of five short pieces arranged in the form of a family album: the stories are *Mother, Daughter, Father, Son* and *My Sister's Brother*. (The last two have had their titles forcibly wrenched into conformity with the pattern.)

Farmer is an important writer, who repays study. He is, it is true, an acquired taste, but that is only another way of saying that he is his own writer instead of being a copy of someone else. In his work are several highly individual qualities—one, an explicit curiosity about reproduction and elimination; two, an astute knack for inventing alien biology; three, an obsessive concern for the subconscious wounds which express themselves in the human sum called "personality."

Nearly all of Farmer's aliens are meticulously and brightly drawn. Nearly all of his humans have pockets of rot in their brains which seep through, polluting their actions. No matter what great struggles his characters may

engage in in the physical world, their real battle is always with the wild black storms that scourge their minds.

Very much like Farmer in his inventive care, C. S. Lewis is utterly unlike him in orientation. Avon has just reissued Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, which demonstrates that science fiction can be used to bring us closer to God. Surprisingly, it also demonstrates that a theological tract can be a fine, entertaining novel.

AVON'S NEWEST Double Novel combines George O. Smith and A. E. van Vogt, both doing what they do best.

Smith's *Lost in Space* is a first-contact story with a generous overlayer of interstellar navigation theory. It is not a major work, but it is not in any way a dull one.

Van Vogt is . . . van Vogt. The name of the story is *Earth's Last Fortress*. The plot concerns a great struggle in some future age, involving the totality of human history on one side or another. It contains all of van Vogt's usual deadpan overstatement. When a character is surprised, it is by "the deadliest shock that had ever stabbed into a human brain." When a character is confused, "His brain was an opaque mass flecked with the moving lights of thoughts, heavy with

the gathering pall of his suspicion, knowing finally only one certainty."

Certainly van Vogt creates an urgency in almost everything he writes; it may be that these crushingly insensitive phrases are necessary to create that urgency. It may be, indeed, that the only proper verdict on van Vogt is an Irishism: If van Vogt were a better writer, he would be a worse one.

IN THE seven stories in *Out of Bounds* (Pyramid), Judith Merrill demonstrates a reliable French saying: The more it changes, the more it's the same thing. Her stories are different as different can be in plot structure, theme and character. Yet they are very much the same in effect, and the reason is the overpowering subjectivity of her writing. What she has to sell is not adventure or speculation. It is emotion . . . a fine thing in measured doses, but maybe too saturating for a collection.

Which also pretty much applies to *A Medicine for Melancholy*, Ray Bradbury's short story collection now re-issued by Bantam. The stories are short and varied—pastiche, vignettes, O. Henrys, gleanings of autobiography—but every one of them is capable of delivering a jolt to the glands. It is useless to try to evaluate Bradbury as a sci-

ence fiction writer. What he knows of science you could put in your eye, and what he cares about it is less. A story like *Dark They Were*, and *Golden-Eyed*—Earthmen, by virtue of settling on Mars, turn into Martians—makes no sense at all, but it generates a mood well and movingly. But *twenty-two* of these in a row?

Miss Merrill has another book for us this month. This one is a novel, again published by Pyramid, most unpromisingly entitled *The Tomorrow People*.

What the title seems to suggest is a sort of lackluster cuteness, quaint and folksy. The suggestion is a libel. The book is a real piece of work. The themes the author weaves into the structure are important and fresh; her characters are drawn in depth. All in all, it is the biggest, probably the best, piece of work we have seen from her since *Shadow on the Hearth*.

The locale wanders across the face of the Earth and out into space. The themes are space travel, politics and biology—both non-human and all too human. It is quite a can of worms the author has opened here, but she is equal to it. The elements are laid in place with skill (barring an occasional lapse like "helicopter" for a vehicle in which to travel about the face of the Moon) and all the radiating

threads draw neatly together at the end; she has not merely given her story a conclusion, she has provided it with a climax. You will find the book worth reading.

You may also find, however, that you wish you had a road map now and again. Here too the author salts the stew with a heavy dose of character introspection and emotion; she will not—*will not*—tell you what is happening in her story; she will only tell you what her characters think about it all. The characters talk endlessly—not only aloud. After every line of dialogue is another line, in italics, to let you know what they *mean*. (Special attention is invited to page 20. This page has no italics, and it seems to be the only one of its kind in the book.) Finally, the author has adopted a “teaser” style of narration in which nearly all the relevant information about what is going on is concealed from the reader.

All this makes thorny going, but there are roses.

CHARLES ERIC MAINE'S *Fire Past the Future* (and what does that mean?) involves a nuclear device at work on a remote Pacific atoll. The device is not a bomb. It is a time machine. The whole island is interdicted for security reasons and Maine thus creates a closed universe in

which to set his story. The story itself is a whodunit.

In another Ballantine novel, Chad Oliver continues to put his anthropology degree to excellent use. The story is *Unearthly Neighbors*, a detailed examination into first contact between Earth and the long-armed, toolless, tribal inhabitants of Sirius IX. Other science fiction writers have invented more “alien” aliens than these for us to make contact with. Few, though, have been as able as Oliver to convince us that this is the way first contact is going to be.

In a twin bill, Robert Moore Williams gives us *World of the Masterminds*, a novel, and *To the End of Time*, a short story collection (Ace). Williams is always a competent writer and sometimes a moving one, but in these he has sacrificed everything to speed and action. When the Earthmen and the aliens have finished bopping each other over the head, the battlefield is left a clutter of begged questions and abandoned premises.

A properly ordered Halloween will have a gathering of congenial persons (for example, science fiction writers), a supply of suitable refreshment (for example, cider spiked with applejack) to make them merry, and suitable entertainment (for example, ghost stories) to make them creep. As a purveyor of this sort of

entertainment, Basil Davenport has no equal. Here, in the abridged version of *Tales to Be Told in the Dark* (Balandine), eleven of his most successful opera are reproduced, with hints from the master on how to congeal an audience. Davenport means the stories to be told aloud, but you will find them almost as much fun to read.

From Ace another double volume: Andre Norton on one side, Richard Wilson on the other. The Wilson is *And Then the Town Took Off*; it has all of his virtues—grace, smoothness and ease—and all of his faults, the worst of which is a reluctance to dig beneath the surface. *And Then the Town Took Off* is about—well, about a town that takes off. It disappears; aliens have burrowed beneath it and floated it away into the sky. There is then a struggle to get it back with battles between nations (it drifts toward Russia) and among the parts of the administration of our own. It is all witty and bright and disappointing only because you can't help feeling the man can do more.

Much the same can be said about the other occupant of this book, Andre Norton. Her story is *The Sioux Spaceman* and the title again tells you about all you need to know. She does not falter in her word-handling or her understanding of her characters;

and if you accept in the beginning that this book is going to operate safely in conventional areas, then you will enjoy both ends of the volume.

SOME BOOKS are meant for the ages; some age more rapidly than bakery bread. A book which should be read immediately, before it grows stale, is the collection of essays on nuclear weapons and their effects, edited by John M. Fowler and published by Basic Books under the title of *Fallout*.

The title is misleading. Actually of twelve chapters only a few are concerned with the rain of fission products that is seeping into our bones. The others have more urgent dangers to discuss.

It is true, say the authors, that fallout is killing some thousands of persons, mostly children. "Military preparedness inevitably costs lives: there are some 1,400 deaths each year in our armed forces from peacetime accidents." However much we may dislike the probability that one additional child in each average community will contract leukemia from the fission products over the next few years, Ralph Lapp's chapter, sketching the probable face of nuclear war, makes it clear that the real thing to fear from The Bomb is The Bomb itself.

Let us suppose war comes. First there would be the heat, igniting every inflammable object over some 5,000 square miles. Then the firestorm (in cities at least), killing the unburned survivors by asphyxiation, sucking all the oxygen out of the air. Then the blast, extending in some degree as far as a hundred miles from the burst. Then the fallout. This is the pattern of one bomb. It needs to be multiplied by scores or hundreds.

John Fowler takes up the story with a chapter on the prospects of national survival after a nuclear war. He posits a hypothetical 1,400-megaton attack (probably smallish, as against what might be delivered) that was imagined to have taken place on October 17th, 1958. To fill out the picture of the if-world results, weather records were consulted, tracing the wind-driven pattern of fallout, estimating what aid might have come from rain or storm to help control the resulting fires.

The answer is not encouraging. Fowler quotes from Congressional testimony of John N. Wolfe on this point: "It is most likely, in my opinion, that these fires would go unquenched until checked by the winter snows, spreading over hundreds of thousands of square miles . . . With the coming of spring thaws, espe-

cially in the mountains, melt-water from the mountain glaciers and snowfields would erode the denuded slopes, flood the valleys, in time rendering them uninhabitable and unexploitable for decades or longer . . . I visualize those persons unsheltered in heavy fallout areas after three months to be dead, dying, sick or helpless; those sheltered, if they can psychologically withstand confinement for that period, will emerge to a strange landscape. The sun will shine through a dust-laden atmosphere; the landscape in mid-January would be snow-covered or blackened by fire; at higher latitudes blizzards and sub-zero temperature would add death and discomfort; both food and shelter would be inadequate and production incapacitated."

There is very little comfort to be found in this book for those who, like Edward Teller, suggest "conventions" to limit the use of nuclear weapons, or for those who minimize the effect of nuclear war on the total history of a nation. It would be only an episode, they say; it would not destroy a country. Would it? "If a nuclear war could not destroy civilization and the economy in the warring countries, then perhaps we do not understand what is meant by civilization and national economy," says Fowler.

The list of contributors is distinguished and expert; and there is an introduction by Adlai Stevenson, reminding us (with manfully concealed self-righteousness) that the same administration which in 1956 sternly rebuked him for proposing an end to bomb tests in 1958 put his suggestion into practice. The hopeful implication is that some of the frightening faces the world's governments are making at each other are only for effect; reason may ultimately prevail, as it has in the suspension of testing. It is good to have this hopeful implication. It is about the only one to be found in the book.

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY, which has given list room to both the "Steady-State" hypothesis of permanent creation (Fred Hoyle) and to its "Big Bang" theory adversaries (George Gamow), now offers equal time to a proponent of the Middle Way.

In *The Oscillating Universe*, Ernst J. Opik accepts the hypothesis of creation of the galaxies from the explosion of a "primordial atom." (This is the "Big Bang" hypothesis.) But, he says, this was not a unique event. The universe does not have a beginning and an end; like Hoyle, he believes it goes on forever. That exploding "atom" which produced the expanding universe, says Opik, was itself

formed from the contraction of a universe before ours—which itself had been born in a "Big Bang"—had then expanded to the limits gravitation would allow—and had then collapsed, thus generating another "atom."

Further, he says this is the fate of our own universe and all the universes yet to come. "Some 25,000 million years from now the Day of Reckoning will come. The whole universe—all galaxies with their suns shining or extinct, their planets dead or still carrying life on their surface—will precipitate itself into a narrow space, almost a point. Everything will perish in a fiery chaos well before the point of greatest compression is reached. All bodies and all atoms of the world will dissolve into the nuclear fluid of the primeval atom—which in this case is not truly primeval—and a new expanding world will surge from it, like Phoenix out of the ashes, rejuvenated and full of creative vigor."

Like Gamow and Hoyle, Opik has coated his cosmogony with a layer of popularized astrophysics, very well done and very informative. New American Library has much to be proud of in presenting three such articulate and persuasive scientists. It's too bad that at least two of them must necessarily be wrong.

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