

*Over the years, this magazine has published a number of columns by distinguished scholars and critics in science fiction. It has occurred to us that it might be useful to find out how the science fiction writer reacts to advice given him in critical essays and book reviews. This month, we have invited comment from the author of *Rogue Moon*, originally published here and subsequently nominated for the 1961 "Hugo" Award as the best science fiction novel of the previous year.*

Algis Budrys, who has been writing and selling science fiction for the past ten years, is, to all intents and purposes purely a professional writer. It is from this pristine viewpoint—for which this magazine disclaims all endorsement and responsibility—that he speaks as follows.

ABOUT SOMETHING TRULY WONDERFUL

by Algis Budrys

THERE MUST BE SOMETHING truly wonderful about science fiction. Not even the wide, vast, and occasionally weedy "mainstream" of general literature supports such a proportionate number of people publicly concerned with where it has been, where it is going, and where it should go in preference. In the light of the currently prevailing critical opinion no other field finds itself so persistently measured by its present inability to resemble another.

For several years, now—1956 was about the time the phenomenon really took hold—one of the surest ways for an sf writer to judge his accumulated esteem has been to count the number of times he is critically described as being a writer who has finally learned enough to leave sf and attempt doing work for the "mainstream."

There are many people who don't feel that way about science fiction. But right at the moment, and particularly in the public eye,

science fiction very often seems to be saying that (1) Obviously the best current science fiction is nevertheless not as good as something else to be found elsewhere, and (2) That if we all work very hard, some day we may develop ourselves to the point where we can imitate the "mainstream" so well that (and what other conclusion is as logical, from these premises?) sf will have become indistinguishable from it and we won't have to put up with it as a separate field at all.

It seems to me this is the conclusion many of us may draw in the backs of our minds. I don't see how any writer in the field can escape the nagging feeling that he is expected to work himself out of it if he can, and perfect his craft to the end of expunging the field if he can't.

Now, having read a number of critical essays, and book reviews in the form of critical essays, I am well aware of the ease with which very large conclusions can be drawn from premises too scanty to be limiting. And so I draw back a little from the concluding sentence in the paragraph above, and think on what effects might be observed in the field, if it were at least partly true.

It seems to me that if it were true, then some people in the field, loving it, appreciating it, remembering how much it brought to them in the past, would want

to do an about-face—would want to force a return to the science fiction of the 1930's and early 1940's, when we were bursting with technological enthusiasm and had no inkling that less than a score of years later some of us would be working to bring on the night.

It seems to me that if it were true, then some writers in the field would become extremely conscious of themselves not as members of a team—proponents of a 'school,' if one prefers—but as individual careerists first and foremost. The writing of science fiction would become only an incident in a much larger literary life plan, and, since many science fiction techniques are incompatible with the "mainstream," we would find these writers steadfastly avoiding any training in these to them incidental techniques.

It seems to me that if it were true, we would find the critics—not all the critics; perhaps not even most of the critics, but the most accepted critics, in a climate partially created by those critics—judging new work as being indicative either of a future merger with the "mainstream" or of an attempt to return to the old-fashioned virtues.

Some critics would approve of one alternative, and some of the other. It does not matter whether any of these things seem "good" or "bad." Nor does it seem reasonable

to suppose that what is happening—whatever is happening—is the result of conspiracy rather than normal evolutionary processes. But the chances are slim that work along or toward any third alternative will be publicly recognized as such, except possibly by the readers, who, incidentally, seem to have lost almost all the channels they used to have for communicating *their* opinions in public, where they could be useful.

If these things can be observed to be taking place, that would be quite a cleft stick to be caught in. If we were caught in it, we would have two alternatives, I think. One of them would be to go along with the process—to try to transform our sf writing into an instrument for personal ambition, neglecting all needs, the readers' included, for the sake of training ourselves, here, toward a career elsewhere; failing in that larger ambition, to confine our efforts, here, toward the best imitation we could deliver of what seem to us to be the best features of another field.

The other alternative would be to work toward finding another alternative; to give up the notion, if we have it, that we must influence ourselves and others in the field away from the field, and to search for what is both artistic *and* unique in science fiction.

For certainly there must be human situations—genuine human

situations, not merely plot problems—which can result only from the impact of humanity upon the Universe. Some of them are certain to be quite adventurous in and of themselves, and all of them can certainly be meaningful to almost every human being, for we all do impact upon the Universe from the moment we are dragged squalling into it until it finally pushes us, squalling, out, and even then is not done with working the clay we inhabited. The stuff of both adventure and art is there to be encompassed—nor are art and adventure in any way incompatible, to say the least—and a trained science fiction writer is potentially the best kind of writer to capture it not only with beautiful letters but with searching mind.

Somewhere within those parameters lies science fiction's unique *metie*, and no truly thoughtful person is in a position to say it is intrinsically inferior to any other.

The "mainstream" writers who have confidently attempted to subsume it have not done well, except ephemerally—which ought to tell us all something about the advisability of trying to harvest the other man's crop—and have failed to do as much as we ourselves have now and then done; that is, produce a genuine work of art in science fiction.

I don't know that art is the proper objective of each and every story ever written—I believe it is

not—but I bring in the above point as a supporting postulate for my feeling that one crucial test of a literary field's right to *develop* its own standards is the ability of at least some of its steady practitioners to produce at least one work of art—some creation that instantly shivers the onlooker's entire world—that could not have existed outside it.

But if we strike out on our own, we face several hardships, all of us. For one thing, it will become impossible to sustain a critical reputation in the field largely on the strength of one's knowledge of critical standards and methods in some other field.

It will become impossible to give professional advice to sf writers on the strength of one's professional training—even one's considerable professional training.

It will become impossible to sustain an sf reputation on the strength of a close resemblance between one's work in the field and other writers' work in another field.

And since the writers of science fiction in such a situation will have become interested in science fiction readers as their primary audience, rather than as a group of casual spectators watching an audition, it will probably happen that readers' opinion columns will return as a feature of the magazines—and that some readers may even be stimulated to become writers in their own turn. When that happens, of course, the need for copious scholarly and/or critical discussion as a directive force will have abated, and the self-conscious period in sf's history will have passed.

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