

In the last issue we published Professor Rabkin's article on *We* (on which see comment in the last of this issue's letters), and we mentioned that he had submitted two articles. Here is the second, an important reconsideration, among other things, of what we have come to think of as the "fixup".

The Composite Novel in Science Fiction

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If it is true that composite novels are "immensely more common in genre SF than in any other literature in the world" (Clute, p. 432), this fact doubtless arises from the peculiar realities of publishing during the so-called Golden Age of American science fiction. Virtually all historians of the field agree that this now mythologised period began with John W. Campbell, Jr.'s accession to the editorship of *Astounding Stories* in October, 1937 (Clute, p. 506), but some see it as ending with the post-World War II renewal of British influence in 1946 (Panshin, p. 302) while others see it as extending well into the mid-1960s (De Bolt, p. 89). However one defines it, this period saw the burgeoning and dominance of a special kind of short story within a unique milieu. When Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of *Amazing Stories* in April, 1926, he wrote that his magazine was "entirely new—entirely different—something that has never been done before... [and t]herefore *Amazing Stories* deserves your attention and interest" (Gernsback, p. 225). In that same editorial, Gernsback called the work he intended to publish "scientifiction" (Gernsback, p. 226). Thus, at one stroke, a genre that goes back solidly at least to the novels of Mary Shelley if not to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, More's *Utopia*, and Plato's *Republic*, finally had its own name, its first periodical, and, for better or worse, an intimate association with pulp publication. Indeed, Gernsback even named as his antecedents Verne, who had been until then read "primarily by the children of the bourgeoisie" (Versins, p. 929; my translation); Poe, who published almost exclusively in periodicals, wrote no novels, and produced only three pieces over 18,000 words; and H. G. Wells, a journalist for his entire career. But the market for Gernsback's special brand of fiction turned out to be rich. By the early 1950s, in the USA alone, there were thirty-eight science fiction monthlies (Pohl, p. 30). How did these magazines foster composite

novels?

Consider pulp paper, the sort just one slim grade up from newsprint. Anything published on pulp paper must be ephemeral because pulp deteriorates so quickly. Since sf was physically ephemeral, the thinking was, it could not be artistically valuable. This opinion affected not only critics, who tended to denigrate science fiction until the 1970s, but the sf editors themselves. Until about 1960, no work published as science fiction brought more than 2¢ a word and ½¢ was much more common. While a mainstream novelist, had one been paid so little, at least could have multiplied these paltry rates by 80,000 or 100,000 words, this was impossible for science fiction writers unless they could arrange instalment publication in advance. Until Ian and Betty Ballantine founded their eponymous publishing house in 1952 (Clute, p. 83), instalment publication was the only American outlet for original science fiction novels. This meant, of course, that writers sought to establish relationships with magazine editors who were, after all, their paymasters. And the best way to establish such a relationship was to produce work that the editor knew would sell. That's what keeps the pulp rolling.

In order to know what would sell, and in order to generate enthusiasm for his product, Gernsback struggled in his pages to foster the Science Fiction League, a sort of literary consumer club (Clute, p. 1066). While the club never took hold as a subscription magnet, it did ultimately produce the most active fandom associated with any genre and, along the way, it fostered active letters columns in which readers commented on their preferences, saying exactly what they did and not like in the previous month's offerings—and why. Campbell expanded this practice in *Astounding*, running a package of four "Readers' Departments" that included not only some full letters from readers but an "Analytical Laboratory" in which he reported the rank ordering that all respondents had given to the previous month's pieces and sometimes a summary of reader reasoning (Campbell). With this information in hand, editors and writers alike would then try to achieve in the next month's issue what was most liked in the last.

The twin efforts to arrange for instalment publication and to discover what already had been liked at first led quite naturally to two types of composite novel. One might be called the *domain novel*, something like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, wherein the continuing return to the same domain, some combination of setting and at least some characters, gives each new story both the virtues of familiarity and the capacity to deepen one's understanding of a writer's narrative world. The other might be called the *framework novel*, something like Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, wherein the overall structure justifies producing one story after another. This second was much rarer because it is hard to keep both a frame story and a main story going month after month, but they did exist. And once having established an audience for one's stories,

writers could then string them together, often with a bit of new glue, and sell them as free-standing novels. A.E. Van Vogt, a master at this, called such works "fixups" and within sf that is still the general term for composite novels (Clute, p. 432).

There are three reasons that it is unfortunate that Van Vogt coined this term. First, "fixup" suggests either that the original work was somehow flawed or that while it may not have been flawed as a story, it was certainly not fit to be part of a real novel. This is clearly not so with the much admired work that eventually became Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, the first sf work ever to get a front page review in the *New York Times Book Review*, or Arthur C. Clarke's *Tales From the White Hart*, one of the best received humorous sf series of all time. But "fixup" suggests something less worthy.

Second, Van Vogt himself, although he wrote genuinely classic melodrama, like *Slan*, was notorious for his mechanical methods of writing. He wrote that all narrative should be encapsulated in 800-word scenes each laying out an idea with some action, then dialogue, a bit of exposition, and then a twist (Van Vogt in Gunn). Then one simply strung 800-word scenes together to make stories and finally one made "fixups" of the stories. This was financially successful for Van Vogt, with his *Weapon Shop*, *Null-A*, and *War With the Rull* books, but the books themselves really were mere fixups, excuses for novels all inferior to *Slan*. Hence the term fixup, coming from Van Vogt, tarred the science fiction composite novel with a crass brush.

Third, the term "fixup" suggests that the composite novel is produced after the fact, as if the writer had somehow stumbled into a happy reader response and now wanted to capitalise on it with as little effort as possible. This has clearly been true for some authors and some books, but publication history indicates that rather more often sf composite novels arise from careful planning; even if that planning happens not to be completely finished before the first component is published, by the ultimate publication, a single controlling design has been realised. As book publication became easier for sf authors, such intermediate-stage planning began to seem an ever more worthwhile investment of creative energy, and so arose a third type of composite novel, what might be called a *concept novel* in which some previously published material is used, often with extensive revision, in creating a much larger work held together by and exploring some overarching idea. In the mainstream of fiction, John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, and each of its component volumes, is such a work. In science fiction, Clifford Simak's *City* and Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* are such works.

Whether we are dealing with a domain novel, a framework novel, or a concept novel, the point of recognising that we have a composite novel at all is that we be able to see how some part of the whole takes on special life within the whole although it had a perfectly adequate role in its separate publication. I would like to indicate how this works in composite novels of each kind.

Perhaps the most widely read sf domain novel is Bradbury's 1950 book publication, *The Martian Chronicles*. Although readers who fail to see the design often refer to this book as a collection of stories, they are mistaken. Of the twenty-six sections in the authorised, American edition, nine were published there for the first time, surely an indication that the author was more concerned with having the book as a whole see print than with milking its parts for financial gain. But it is also true, some will argue, that Bradbury's 1951 collection, *The Illustrated Man*, apparently haphazardly interlaces five more Mars stories with thirteen others within a loose framework of a tattooed man each of whose tattoos emblematises one of the eighteen stories. This being so, surely Bradbury just put all the available Mars stories into his first collection and then, when it hit, put newer ones in his second. But this argument also fails because some of the Mars stories in *The Illustrated Man* were clearly available for *The Martian Chronicles* since they had already been published, "The Visitor" in 1948 and "The Concrete Mixer" in 1949. Remember, *The Illustrated Man*, too, is reprinting earlier material, although here the feeble frame does not compel us to see the whole as a composite novel.

The confusion about the degree to which Bradbury may have crafted *The Martian Chronicles* is exacerbated by comparison of the American and British editions (Contento). The British edition includes "The Fire Balloons", a Mars story from the American *Illustrated Man*, and a non-Mars story, "The Wilderness", which in America appeared in Bradbury's next, non-composite collection called *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, while it excludes "Usher II", a key component of the American composite novel. To make matters worse, the British edition of *The Illustrated Man* includes "Usher II". What needs to be remembered here is that the sales of stories, and of their reprint rights, were largely in the control of the periodicals that published them originally. Yes, they cooperated with authors whom they wished to retain, but they also needed to keep their pennies-a-word operations afloat. It seems clear that where Bradbury could control publication, he did; where he couldn't, he didn't.

The Martian Chronicles is set largely in the domain of a fairyland Mars, a place where American Earthmen will get a second, cleaner chance (Rabkin, pp. 110-126). The culmination of this saga is a story called "The Million-Year Picnic" in which an American family, after most people on Earth have been destroyed by atomic war, lands on Mars and blows up their own rocket so that this time technology will not outrun humanity's moral sense. They await the prearranged landing of another family, with whom to begin better, and when the children ask where the promised Martians are, the father directs them to see their own reflections in the waters of a canal. At that moment, the redemption of mythical America can begin, and the chronicles of Mars end. This time we will not destroy. Published alone, "The Million-Year Picnic" was a nostalgic confection. Published as the final capstone of the chronicles, it is a confirmation of the struggle of

decades. It is no accident that of these stories, written over a four year period, "The Million-Year Picnic" was the first by almost half a year. It presents the vision toward which the whole book aspires. It demonstrates why Bradbury created this domain at all.

Perhaps the best known sf framework novel is Englishman Arthur C. Clarke's *Tales From the White Hart*. That this is so is unfortunate from a formal standpoint because the framework adds so little. Harry Purvis is one of a set of habitués at a tavern and a teller of hilarious, but not always impossible, tales. Each of the fifteen chapters, written over a two year period, contains another evening's tale prefaced by the remarks of a first-person narrator who explains the tavern scene that motivates each tale and sometimes, as with the last chapter, offers a wrap-up. In the final wrap-up, the group has moved taverns to follow their favorite publican but somehow no one knows how to locate Harry and Harry never comes to the new locale. This is the *Canterbury Tales* without the by-play or the pilgrimage. Although the narrator expresses wistful hope for Harry's reappearance, most readers, after fifteen tales, have had enough. Clarke was right to end.

Much more rewarding is James Blish's *The Seedling Stars*. Here the framework has humanity forced to find ways to expand into new worlds as populations grow, as disasters mow us down. Just as each traveller in the *Canterbury Tales* must tell a story, each locale in this pilgrimage must elicit a new type of human. To accomplish this, we have developed a controlled mutation machine that will transform our seed into something adapted to worlds utterly different from our own. These mutations will then necessarily be much unlike us and yet, in their own niches on their own worlds, they are human. As finally published, *The Seedling Stars* contains four sections. The first is a rewriting of a piece first published in 1955. The second rewrites a piece published in 1954. The third rewrites drastically and combines two stories, one first published in 1942 and the other in 1952. And the fourth is a slight revision of a piece originally published in 1955 (Tuck, p. 52). Put together, the framework of essential humanity persisting through necessary change comes alive. The oldest story, "Sunken Universe", in its original form was an adventure tale of microscopic humans living in a puddle. Combined with a rewritten "Surface Tension" to make a new story of that name, the tale becomes a tour de force of humanity struggling with the aid of other microbes to make its way from one puddle to another. Rewritten as the penultimate tale in the composite novel, "Surface Tension" sings of the persistence of human hope. When, then, the last story, "Watershed", shows another mutation of humans attempting to descend from the trees to reseed our abandoned earth, the possibility that prejudice will now be overcome, having experienced so many different versions of "human," is a hope we can hold. The framework of mutation and the larger theme of tolerance reinforce each other in ways that transcend any single component of the novel.

Perhaps the best known sf concept novel is Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*. This work contains nine stories originally published over a ten year period and held together by the notion that there exists a set of rules (The Three Laws of Robotics) that controls the minds and actions of robots so that they cannot help but do humans good. Of course, whose idea of good dominates is, in each story, problematic. As a novel, these stories are set within the biography of Dr Susan Calvin, the world's greatest "robopsychologist". As the tales multiply, it becomes clear that the reliability and honesty of robots makes them saviours for humanity in Calvin's eyes. But what does the author think? He does, after all, allow individual human characters to distrust robots, to claim that their creeping control "for our own good" makes us their prisoners. Yet in every case, although the matter is never settled to everyone's satisfaction, humans are able to turn robots to our greatest good, or, when we cannot control them, it turns out that their actions serve us nonetheless. In a sense, *I, Robot* is a utopian work with technology making for ultimate human happiness, or for ultimate entrapment. Which shall it be? In the last story, Calvin confronts the world controller, Stephen Byerley, who may be a man or perhaps a perfect robot keeping his identity secret so as not to alarm the world full of humans he so flawlessly, and necessarily, serves. On the last page, Byerley claims that his global administration has made conflict forever "evitable". Isn't that wonderful? Yes, but from now on, "'only the Machines ... are inevitable.' [Byerley says, a]nd the fire behind the quartz [screen] went out and only a curl of smoke was left to indicate its place" (p. 192). This image of extinction, surely, must settle the issue: the machines are bad. But coming after eight stories in which they are inevitably good, what should we think? We should think, given that this book is written by a man who wrote a guide to the Bible, that Asimov is here relying on medieval iconography in which the Annunciation is indicated, as in the Merode Altarpiece, by a light coming down so brightly onto the Virgin Mary that by comparison a candle is extinguished (Janson, p. 287). Were one to read the last story alone, few would look for an arcane religious allusion in that final image in the office of the mystery man, an allusion that makes us rethink what "good" means throughout the composite novel; but with the other stories leading up to it, the notion that this image is mere extinction is problematised and we work to uncover a far richer theme.

In the same way, Walter Miller's *A Canticle For Leibowitz* is much richer taken as a whole than read in its parts. Originally published over more than three years and then rewritten for composite publication over a period of two more years, this is one of the most enduring of Golden Age sf works both for sf readers and for more general readers. I have discussed elsewhere (Scholes, pp. 221-226) the deep religious symbolism in this cyclical novel. Let me here make two points. First, the symbolism is enriched yet further by composite publication. The story takes place in three movements, each set largely in a monastery in a post-nuclear

holocaust Utah. The first movement is 600 years in the future, the second 600 years further, and the third 600 years further yet. This is a novel about cyclicism and the return of life with the aid of some higher spirit. But only taking the three movements together can a reader see that the book spans eighteen centuries, eighteen being the Hebrew numerical equivalent of the word for life. At the centre of the second tale is some Hebrew writing which turns out to be the beginning of a prayer, the Sh'ma, called the central prayer of Judaism. In that second tale alone, the Sh'ma makes an ambiguous promise. But taking the second tale as the central tale in a composite novel that ends with three new dispensations in the sea, on earth, and in the stars, the Sh'ma is fulfilled. The novel itself emblazons a vision of hope.

My second point is that the possibility of anatomising composite novels into domain, framework, and concept novels does not mean that every composite novel must fall within one of those categories. *A Canticle For Leibowitz* set largely in one locale, and with a continuing, mystic character who recalls the Wandering Jew, could be a domain novel. Given the necessity for successive abbots to defend spirituality against one sort of threat after another as the world develops, this could be a framework novel. And given the commitment to working out a cyclic notion of history, this could be a concept novel. This anatomy, then, rather than limiting the composite novel, should suggest the great flexibility and power of the composite novel, a power that can perhaps best be explored, as we see, in the field of science fiction.

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THE
REVIEW OF
SCIENCE FICTION

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Spring, 1996

In this issue we feature three articles on Gene Wolfe:

Michael Andre-Driussi dives into the Lake of Birds
and Peter Wright comments on and grasps the God-Games
in The Fictions of the New Sun

In addition:

John Moore maps cyberpunk and the American South

David E. Nye looks at the relationship between Apollo
and the American public

Graham Dunstan Martin examines the reaction to the
fantastic

Eric S. Rabkin dissects the composite novel

There are letters from Kent Hägglund, Robert Day, Andy
Mills and Alan Myers

and reviews by Bailey, Butler, Gilmore, Hay, Kincaid,
Sawyer and Wright

of books by Aldiss, Anania and Barbulescu, Broderick,
Clark, Clarke, Evenblij and Holland, Jeter, Robu and Wells

The cover picture, courtesy of Hodder & Stoughton, is a
detail from the cover picture for the fourth volume of Gene
Wolfe's *Book of the Long Sun—Exodus from the Long Sun*, which
will probably be published in 1997 (ISBN 0 340 63835 4).