

Potlatch 8 Program Notes

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Expressing the Infinite: Pro-Religion and Anti-Religion in SF

Participants: Loren MacGregor, Hank Graham, Jerry Oltion, D. T. Steiner

Notes by Ian Hagemann, typed by Tom Whitmore

Prolog:

Is Science Fiction religious? Can SF writers be religious at all, or is the very nature of SF antithetical to traditional spirituality?

The Panel:

JO: is a mad scientist, and writes for Analog (where a different kind of religion, founded by L. Ron Hubbard, started). HG has a Choctaw/Catholic religious background: he was involved in Daniel Conan youth (?), and is primarily an illustrator.

LJM: was raised Catholic, converted to Methodist and has come back to Catholicism. He used to run around in a cassock and play priest and was very angry about Catholics, but returned after deciding there was something important about Catholicism: its expression of ethical/moral encouragement helps him run with his better side. DTS writes SF and horror and was also raised Catholic, but is now a good humanist and a Wiccan.

Is Damon Knight's story "Not With a Bang" a story about faith or just one about the pride of a woman and a selfish jerk of a man? It seems to substitute a Victorian code for spirituality. This led to a discussion of spirituality vs. received religion: Brian O'Leary's book **The Second Coming of Sc((ience))** is a woo-woo new age but convincing book about spoon-bending: double blind testing is treated like a western religion. Do we have suppressed natural abilities?

One role of SF is to challenge taboos. Examples include del Rey's "For I Am a Jealous People" or Butler's Parable series. SF can work with traditional myths like **Dune**, challenge them like Clarke's

“The Star” and its rebuttal, or explore the end-points like Mary Doria Russell’s **The Sparrow**, Heinlein’s **Revolt in 2100**, Lewis’s **The Problem of Pain**, Blish’s **A Case of Conscience** or Atwood’s **The Handmaid’s Tale**. Also, it can look at how people react against religion like Morrow’s *City of Truth* or Sarah Zettel’s **Fool’s War**. She is a practicing Muslim; there are also Black Muslim books not published as SF like Kent Smith’s **Future X**. Other different religious takes include Zelazny’s **Lord of Light** and the last Blish *Okie* story (**The Triumph of Time**) which deals with the last days of the universe. Panshin talks about half-realized transcendence in **The World Beyond the Hill**, seeing similarities in this Blish tale and Clarke’s **Childhood’s End** and “The Nine Billion Names of God”. Doris Lessing looks at contemplation in **The Making of the Representative for Planet 8**; Mishiko Kuiko’s **Hyperspace** is about science as a religion. Does science ask for faith also? Not all religions demand faith; they play the same emotional role. See much of Vernor Vinge, Heinlein’s **Sixth Column**, or Miller’s **A Canticle for Leibowitz**. Scientists never prove theories, they only disprove them: see Thomas Kuhn’s **The Structure of Scientific Revolutions**.

Science has the tenet that provability is worthwhile. Zelazny uses this as a trapping in his adventure books; Greg Egan’s **Axiomatic** uses infinity and infallibility in a book about an ersatz religion. Lots of Blish deals with this; see also Lewis’ **Perelandra** series. In many, there’s too little faith and too much sophistry. Philip K. Dick basically says maybe there was no god, but we create it. Is religion part of each day, like a job? We don’t distinguish between a practice and moral guidance. Eleanor Arnason’s **Ring of Swords** is about trying to live right in a religious sense. Similar religious books include Huxley’s **Island** and Le Guin’s **The Lathe of Heaven**. There is the same feeling of Russell and Lewis: leftover religious agonies. There’s a rip-off version going around now: my faith is restored, but it depends on stopping time or something similar. Star Wars has the Force instead of God: **E.T.** has a usurped and debased Christ scoffing “no sense, no faith” where there can’t be a meeting of minds. It’s okay to have mystery! Jerry Oltion commented that religion is an alien meme.

People bring their own set of ideas to fiction. “Narnia” may have forced the religious issue, but that’s like getting married and then falling in love: the issue was always present. Lewis’s later book **Until We Have Faces** shows growth on this. One story that hit Loren was the old **F&SF** story where space travelers come to a wall with a sign saying, “This is the end of the universe. If you want to see what’s on the other side, put a quarter in the slot.” They did, and saw nothing.

Does any story that raises ethical and moral questions also raise spiritual questions? There’s a change with the spiritual/religious. In SF there’s a lot of anti-clericalism but a love of spirituality. There’s a lot of contact with the transcendent: some books rekindle this well (Wolfe’s **Book of the New Sun**, Simmons’ **Phases of Gravity**). Does religion equal the structure of belief? This is a conventional and false structure within SF. “Servants of Baal” is about religion used as a tool to oppress where spirituality is actually a tool to escape oppression. See also the short story “Abandon in Place.” Madeleine L’Engle’s books have death and funerals but feel great; Le Guin, Sturgeon and Alice Sheldon’s college writings (“There’s Sirius”, “Large”, “Faraway” and “Don’t Care”) are similar. Whether religion has meaning or is meaningless, it gives comfort. It’s about going on in life and putting away greatness; Cherry Wilder’s **A Princess of the Chameln** or Le Guin’s **The Left Hand of Darkness** for examples. Octavia Butler’s **Parable** books are about hell, but rather confirming and uplifting because the people hang on. There are books to jerk you out of your complacency that you might want to throw against the wall. McKillip’s **The Riddle-Master of Hed** adds religion and ups the stakes, in much the same way as Shakespeare does.

Closing comments: Spiritual content is something you bring to a work. Dorothy Sayers, who really was anti-Semitic, was liked so much one wanted her to be above prejudice even though she was tight and narrow-minded. S. M. Sterling's **Draka** series is about a sympathetic slave-owning culture, as is Terry Pratchett's **Small Gods**. Recent issues in field physics and opr((???) waves are relevant.

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“Living in Astro City” — The Role of Meta-Fictive Narrative in Science Fiction

Participants: Lenny Bailes, J. Steven York, Sean Prescott, Tom Whitmore, Dave Hartwell

notes by Debbie Notkin and Lenny Bailes

Prolog:

This panel grows from and is exemplified by Kurt Busiek's excellent comic book adventure series and other experimental works.

Lenny Bailes, who suggested the panel, defines “meta-fictive narrative” as the “coinage I'm using to describe the effect of building upon shared memes in our collective reading experience to create new explorations that don't require the author to re-invent the wheel.”

Used well, as in Kurt Busiek's *Astro City*, the technique allows a speculative conversation between author and readers that transcends commonly perceived genre limits. This technique:

1. Re-evokes mythic qualities of a secondary universe that we've started to take for granted.
2. Provides new implications and mirrors of familiar, cherished tropes.

In Busiek's *Astro City*, the tropes are myths of the urban, costumed super-hero. Streets and buildings in *Astro City* are all named after comic book writers and artists. Characters and plots drift in and out of resonance with figments of our childhoods, and are spiced with contemporary realism.

Lenny suggests Ellen Kushner's books **Swordspoint** and **Thomas the Rhymer** as “word-only” novels that draw on meta-fictive techniques, and adds that some of the stories in the Patrick Nielsen Hayden/Michael Resnick-edited anthology **Alternate Skiffy** function as another type of meta-fiction.

Here are some of the issues the Participants may discuss:

1. How is meta-fictive narrative different from parody or pastiche?
2. How is it different from simply reworking the premises or characters of a previous work? (James Blish: **A Case of Conscience** —>Alexi Panshin: **Rite of Passage**; Robert Heinlein: **Podkayne of Mars** —> John Barnes: **Orbital Resonance**.)

The following characteristics are usually found in meta-fictive narratives:

1. The story builds on previously-existing memes to create an enhanced narrative.
2. The reader is presumed to be familiar with the shorthand of the story — the root principles

which aren't spelled out again and again for novices.

3. The author is free to explore new sides of characters, issues, and situations

Lenny goes on to ask, rhetorically, “What distinguishes this from cult fiction and ‘series hackwork’ with repeated elements,” and offers examples such as “Nero Wolfe, StarTrek technobabble, most Justice League of America stories, etc.?” (We will take Lenny aside and gently thrash him until he agrees that the Nero Wolfe stories are the finest things ever to appear in literature, better even than “Captain Billy’s Whiz-Bang.”) *[[Or at least the first 10 or 15 of them — LB]]* He continues: “What are some other examples of comic books, s-f or fantasy novels that successfully employ meta-fictive techniques?” He suggests, for consideration, Alan Moore’s **V for Vendetta** and *MiracleMan*, or possibly William Goldman’s **Princess Bride**.

Panelist intros:

Lenny Bailes: occasional author of s-f criticism, longtime s-f fan and comic book reader. At age 14, consistently succeeded in embarrassing Superman editor Mort Weisinger by presenting itemized lists of contradictions and continuity flaws in DC titles.

Steven York: has written video games and Generation-X (X-Men) novelizations.

T. Sean Prescott: A longtime comic fan who is currently trying to sell a comic book. An enthusiastic fan of Alan Moore.

Dave Hartwell: The panel’s reality filter. A professional s-f editor with a Ph..D in English literature.

Tom Whitmore: Knows everything about science fiction (boasts Lenny as Tom enters a mild demurrer). Owned and worked in an s-f bookstore for 10 years, he is a consistent winner of s-f trivia contests at conventions and comic book reader, but not steeped in Busiek’s work.

The Panel:

LB: Astro City. We’re all living there. Kurt Busiek’s comic book series (of this title) is an exemplar of something exciting. Filter for the panel to discuss: What makes these things really good and exciting? Lenny suggests — a cross fertilization of techniques. He connects Astro City to Ellen Kushner’s **Swordspoint** and **Thomas the Rhymer** as being in no specified country [or in an independent country of the mind and heart]. DGH, edited the books, pointed out to Ellen that they weren’t mediievally possible. She said “I don’t like Christianity, and it’s my book.”

TW: The first books like these were Christian: **Pilgrim’s Progress** and **The Divine Comedy**.

TSP: There are layers and layers in Busiek’s work: Astro City on Superman comics on pulp heros all the way back to the gods of myth. Echoes of other layers even if Busiek isn’t aware of it. Anyone unfamiliar with the layers finds a good story, but misses some of the meaning.

LB reads a quote taken from Neil Gaiman’s introduction to the second Astro City collection:

“I’m going to tell you something important. I am going to tell you one of the secrets

of the trade. I mean it. This is the magic trick upon which all good fiction depends: it's the angled mirror in the box behind which the doves are hidden, the hidden compartment beneath the table.

It's this:

There is room for things to mean more than they literally mean.

[...]There are, in my opinion, two major ways in which superheroes are used in popular fiction. In the first way, superheroes mean purely and simply, what they mean on the surface. In the second kind of fiction, they mean what they mean on the surface, true, but they also mean more than that — they mean pop culture on the one hand, and hopes and dreams, or the converse of hopes and dreams, a falling away of innocence, on the other.

[...]Astro City is what would have happened if all those old comics, with their fine simplicities and their primal, four-colour characters, had been about something. Or rather, it assumes they *were* about something, and tells you the tales that, on the whole, slipped through the cracks."

DGH: says he's fallen away from the comics faith. He read them in the '50s. Now he reads them occasionally. In the 1930s and '40s superheroes were acting out their personalities. Only a limited number of stories could be told in that frame. In the 1960s, new characters were built on the old templates. There were some new stories to tell, but not for very long. Denny O'Neill started to inject character rounding. Art Spiegelman was working on the edges, along with Gilbert Sheldon, who created *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* and *Wonder Warthog*. They followed O'Neill with certain aesthetic ideals. But some of the humorists of the '50s were ahead of their time. Pogo (a famous comic strip by Walt Kelly) was complex, funny and literate. Many of the Pogo stories included direct satire and contemporary parody, picking targets like the U.S. Army and Joseph McCarthy. Example: *Who Stole the Tarts?* *The Town on the Edge of the End*, another Pogo story, was a sentimental fairytale.

LB: Pogo is a good example of Gaiman's point. Things mean what they mean on the surface and also something else. Gaiman, himself, uses similar techniques in his *Sandman* stories.

DGH: The main *Sandman* story arc is too simple, but there are beautiful pieces set into some issues.

LB: The *Sandman* story arc plays with archetypes and draws on various influences. Some of it is myth retelling. The **Seasons of the Mist** sequence borrows from **Paradise Lost**. The accompanying artwork varies widely with the mood of the stories from lush and impressionistic to minimalist. :

TW: *Sandman* is the inverse of **Paradise Lost**. The fall from godhood (or something similar) to humanity.

LB: But he's playing with the tropes and myths, offering new approaches and soundbytes.

TW: He's assuming that his readers are literate, which many authors have forgotten how to do.

DGH: Contemporary comics spend too much time alluding to themselves.

LB: Dave's making an important distinction: that allusion isn't the same thing as meta-fiction.

DGH: *Astro City*'s allusions are well-done because they're direct.

Cynthia Gonzalez: I come to this without a backlog of comics history. I come in as a comics newbie.

Alan Bostick: I'm not familiar with contemporary comics. Do contemporary books have too many allusions to other books? Doesn't reference to other books make literature.

DGH: Metafiction is a contemporary technique: fiction about fiction ... fiction that acknowledges that it is fiction.

TW: Is magic realism the same thing or a counter-trend?

DGH: It's a countertrend.

LB: reads a definition of metafiction:

"Metafiction is, literally, fiction about fiction. It is generally used to indicate fiction including any self-referential element. Metafiction typically involves games in which levels of narrative reality (and the reader's perception of them) are confused, or in which traditional realist conventions governing the separation of 'mimetic' and 'diegetic' elements are flouted and thwarted."

A diegetic element is one implied or suggested by an action, but not literally rendered, such as the boom after a picture of dynamite exploding (without the "boom" caption in the panel). A mimetic element represents or simulates something in the reader's reality. When the reader's expectations are thwarted, the author can create a deliberate counterpoint or "confusion effect."

TSP: Back from specifics, this is a rather high-falutin' way of talking about what happens in any genre. There are always examples that push way outside the limits. Things have to be looked at in the context of their time and the extraordinary ones in any genre fuel the growth process. Self-referentiality is one of the things that makes a genre a genre.

TW: Early examples can set standards that people struggle for years to equal: **The Stunt Man, All that Jazz**.

David Levine: On the distinction between "pushing the envelope" and "metafiction": *Astro City* is metafiction because it consciously references [other works]. **Kingdom Come** and **Kingdom** [graphic novels from DC showing the alternate future of the Justice League of America] are just on the other side of the line; they can be read as a commentary on the industry.

TSP: It [DC's **Kingdom**] is also a theory about what happens in society when our myths have gone.

[TW comments: the breakdown of civility].

LB: **Kingdom Come** is more an illustration of building on a single established story, like **Podkayne of Mars**->**Orbital Resonance** or **A Case of Conscience**->**Rite of Passage** — it continues a dialog on an idea but is not a metafiction.

DGH: Whether the genre is comics or superhero comics, what you want when you're looking for good art has to do what the genre does and *transcend* the genre at the same time.

Debbie Notkin: Look at Dianna Wynne Jones' **Tough Guide to Fantasy Land**: a metafictional look at what's wrong with a small conversation that has nothing new in it.

TW: Dianna Wynne Jones is working in her own small genre, coming from the **Book of Weird** and the **Glass Harmonica** Terry Pratchett does that, too.

LB: We sent Kurt a heads-up on this panel and he suggested Pratchett's writing as humor that isn't simply pastiche or parody. I'm thinking about *The Tick* cartoon series as something equivalent to what Pratchett does.

TSP: *The Tick* is writing inside the box. And the box can get smaller and smaller, the less you've read. *Astro City* and *Pogo* bring in a whole new box.

David Levine: *Doonesbury* started out straight and has gotten metafictional. Also **Dykes to Watch Out for** makes you look at Andy Capp and wonder what the actors do in their time off.

Carlis Nixon: The metafiction distinction is important. Metafiction is not new. Tropes are part of what makes people comfortable in a genre. Metafiction is not about tropes, but is supposed to jerk you out of the story.

TW: Tom Stoppard is a great example.

TSP: *Astro City* is a very poor example of metafiction because it doesn't jerk you out of the genre.

Ian Hagemann: All the art that I like is an interplay between what I expect and what defies my expectations. The *Coyote Gospel* in *Animal Man* is a great example of bringing Coyote into the real world. In *Watchmen*, *The Tales of the Black Freighter* is an internal story commenting on the story you're reading.

LB: Metafiction can jar your appreciation of reality or can deepen your appreciation of a universe. I don't know if "metafiction" is the right name for the second kind of experience.

TSP: **Who Framed Roger Rabbit?** seems to do both, about cartoons and the making of cartoons.

TW: Grabbing onto what Ian said about the tension between expectations fulfilled and expectations blasted: in comics, which are a serial form, there has to be something that keeps you coming back *and* that tension. Tom Disch's **Feathers from the Wings of an Angel** -perfect *Saturday Evening Post* story. Keeps you reading because you're expecting the other shoe to drop.

DGH: Of course, you know that cynical, ironic Tom Disch wrote it.

Alan Bostick: [Comments on **Maus** for a look at the structure with the framing sequence of :”now” and the main story.]

LB: **Maus** comments on the real world. *Astro City* comments on fiction.

Alan Bostick: But **Maus** is very metafictionally structured, the story commenting on the story.

SY: Starman [a DC superhero comic] is also metafictionally structured.

TSP: You can come in as a young person and you want just the first level. As you grow and change, and you see life more complexly, you want your concerns reflected in what you read.

LB: What makes some of these stories good and some of them boring? The *Jack-In-the-Box* story arc in *Astro City* is an interesting development of the “son of a superhero” trope. But *Batman Beyond* sucks.

DGH: No one should be surprised by bad art.

TSW: Is it just referring to itself, or does it say more?

DGH: Works conceived for just a genre audience expect no other; some works are conceived for a genre audience *and* a greater audience.

Carlis Nixon: Let’s keep the distinction between metafictional allusions and other kinds of allusions. Sheri Tepper’s **Mavin Manyshaped** plays with the genre, but is not metafictional. They’re both enriching, and they may overlap, but they’re not the same thing.

TW: Back to the tension between expectations and the unexpected; look at Will Eisner in *The Spirit*, breaking the panel.

LB: Why I like *Astro City* so much and why it makes me happy: because it makes me feel that there’s something alive and vibrant inside, and it’s connected to my 1990s world. [The narrative devices play upon archetypes that remain fixed in my mind.]

Debbie Notkin: Like **The Phantom Tollbooth**, or **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**?

LB: Yes, like that.

Cynthia Gonzalez: You bring a little bit of the tollbooth world back with you.

LB: I’ve thought many times about the core of the original Batman myth: a moral agent who challenges criminal violence without using a gun — and then considered Busiek’s *Astro City* equivalent to the “batarang,” the “electro-stun” clown-noses employed by Jack-In-The Box.

David Levine: A metafiction about how TVs [howl] and comic books simplify?

LB: Characterization to hone realism down to the minimalist central point.

Ian Hagemann: Homage is something else. {John Varley's] **Steel Beach** improves your reading of **The Moon is a Harsh Mistress**, and it's also good fiction. Janet Lafler said that to be good politics, it must be good art. Rap music is good when you feel that they really listened to what they're sampling and chose it for a reason. If you don't have wide horizons, you can't do metafiction and maybe you can't do good art.

LB: There's good entertainment that leaves the audience entirely inside the box.

Debbie Notkin: Wide horizons are necessary for metafiction.

TSP: Don't lose track of good writing and good storytelling. Busiek is also writing very traditional superhero stuff [in other comic books] such as Thunderbolt's inside-the box subversion.

?: In the 1960s, there was a "What If? Superman series called Imaginary Tales.

LB: "What if?"/"Alternate worlds" stories aren't the same thing as metafiction.

[[Tom — if this is getting too long, feel free to cut the next bit. I've appended it because it fits into the last point reported in Debbie's notes:]]

[From a pre-Potlatch e-mail conference among the Participants]:

Sean Prescott wrote:

Curious to know: Would you say that DC's *Elseworlds* stories, and Marvel's "What if...." tales, fall into this category? Marvel's "What if..." stories rely on the reader knowing about the altered events. True, some of them have been good stories in their own right. But they are still offshoots of some event in the already established Marvel universe. Whereas DC *Elseworlds* take an already established character or set of characters and put them in other settings (IE. Batman in the days of King Arthur, or Superman, if he had been raised on Barsoom.

Also, How about Dave Sim's *Cerebus*? Not sure about this one, I am still trying to wrap my mind around this Meta-Fictive idea.....

LB replies:

I think the answer to this (by the model I'm proposing) is to look at the development of tropes in the story and consider how story setting setting impacts the total effect.

With [Neil Gaiman's introduction to Astro City] in mind, look at the differences between Astro City, Alan Moore's Watchmen, and most extended episodes of the Justice League of America. Consider **Kingdom Come** and **The Nail**, possibly the best JLA stories ever written. Are they about something

more than the travails of the individual superfolk? (Does the Alex Ross artwork change the mix?)

What are the alternate Sman/Bman stories actually about? (I haven't read them.) Are they just simple mappings of what the characters think, and do in the regular books to different backdrops?" "He rides a thoot and jumps around a lot more on Mars." Or do the Burroughs tropes and setting add new insights or resonances to our collective experience of Batman or Barsoom? "Geez, these red guys and green guys fighting all the time are a real pain in the ass. Tough on the farmers and merchants. On Earth I used to know the difference between the police and the criminals. You know that JC guy who spent the night in Utah in a cave up in the hills? I sure hope the sheriff doesn't catch him."

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Pushing SF: Readers, Writers, Editors, Librarians

notes by Jeanne Gomoll, transcribed by Tom Whitmore

Participants: Rachel Holmen, David Bratman, Debbie Notkin, Margaret McBride.

Prolog:

What motivates you to pick up a book by a new writer in the first place? The cover? A cover-blurb recommendation by someone whose opinion you respect? Writers, readers, booksellers, editors and librarians each have a set of tools to use when someone says, "What books do you think I should read?"

The Panel:

DB introduced the panel by reading the program book description.

RH: First, we look for what we don't publish in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* (hereafter *MZB*): for example, gruesome or sexual beginnings or a bad agenda (anti-feminist for example). Then we look for elements they like: favorite books, or authors of bestsellers; juveniles, just because Rachel likes them; or who's a hot author. David asked Rachel what *MZB* does to signal the different perspective of the magazine. Rachel said the magazine isn't comfortable with strong sexual content because the magazine is read by so many young readers.

DN: I don't identify myself as a bookseller any more but I recall having these goals:

1. Helping people find books they'll like
2. Helping people find books on the edges of what they like
3. Helping people find books who don't think they like SF.

Methods for helping these people include:

1. Asking what book (that they've already read) they wish they could read for the first time
2. Identify the common denominators of people's reading interests and point them toward new books/authors.
3. Identifying those books that will cross boundaries for people who think they don't like SF.

How do you identify those books that many people will like in spite of genre? It takes a different kind of reading and dedicated booksellers.

DB: Libraries and general bookstores share a situation in which the collection is selected by people other than those who interact with the customers: distributors in bookstores, buyers in libraries (usually someone who works at the reference desk). Depth of experience of the distributor or buyer results in good or poor depth of collections. In libraries, adult books are separated by genre, but not children's books. One way to keep books in library collections is to do "subversive checkouts"; if books don't get checked out, they are more likely to be removed from the collection. Children's collections are often influenced by patron recommendations. Make recommendations: librarians listen to them. If you feel the whole SF section needs re-doing, your recommendation to that effect won't work well – go to a different library.

MMB: I am a college teacher and public speaker with an audience of non-SF readers. Public speaking can introduce folks to the tropes of SF and make the SF genre more accessible to people who aren't familiar with the field. It helps to explain to the audience the concept of "delayed coding": wait a while to find out what "zapping the microwave" means, or ignore it: the author may just be establishing a setting. Another concept: some authors have the style of dropping the reader into the middle of the action, where the reader has to figure out what's going on later in the story. For folks who simply don't know how to suspend disbelief, I'll sometimes suggest mythology as the bridging concept to teach books like **The Gate to Women's Country** (Tepper), **I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream** (Ellison), **A Canticle for Leibowitz** (Miller), **The Space Merchants** (Pohl and Kornbluth), or **Dreamsnake** (McIntyre).

RH: Book award lists are another way to get readers to read unfamiliar works. This was the case when I was reading from the World Fantasy Award lists.

DN: Nancy Pearl, a book evangelist for the Seattle Commission for the Book, says "You owe a book fifty pages." If you don't like it after 50 pages, you can put it down. This helps many new or slow readers give something new a chance.

Audience comments:

Janet Lafler: finds herself being asked for recommendations by friends who consider her a widely-read reader. Being asked by non-SF readers for SF recommendations makes her nervous. She emphasizes that they don't *have* to like SF and tries to give them some background for the fiction she recommends. She's leery of lists because of the strange juxtaposition of good and bad fiction that comes from different judgments and perspectives. So the lists might be confusing to new readers who expect a single perspective.

Lenny Bailes: likes to warn new SF readers by explaining the different mindset of SF as opposed to mainstream fiction. [explaining that SF sometimes assumes a different mindset in the reader than mainstream fiction]

Margaret and Debbie: like ambiguous photos that make us try to figure out what we are seeing. "Subjunctive tension" (per Samuel R. Delany) is the way in which a single sentence can have multiple meanings, especially in SF.

Cynthia Gonzalez: feels it necessary to finish books because she purchased them, but sometimes

feels cheated for having wasted book-reading time.

Another audience member blames bad blurb writers for bad descriptions of novels, which led one audience member to get another to try a Lovecraft novel, and a question about visual media fans who think they know what written SF is like but really don't.

DN: Star Trek books, for example, don't involve the audience in setting the scene. Familiarity of continuing characters has a lot to do with popularity. Margaret brought up Butler's **Dawn** which starts with the familiar (alien abduction) and gets very weird from that.

Amy Thomson mentions her **Virtual Girl** as an example of how character-driven fiction can easily draw non-SF readers into SF.

DB: Terry Carr's collection **Science Fiction for People Who Don't Like Science Fiction** contains many downbeat stories, and may not be the best book to bring in people who think SF is negative fiction.

Jerry Kaufman: takes issue with Debbie's suggestion that TV SF is to blame for people who dislike written SF. Debbie replies that she was saying that visual media killed off *short* fiction because short stories require too much work for not enough payback. Lenny Bailes talks about people who think they don't like SF because they think media SF is representative. They need to know that some SF contains much more engaging characters and psychological depth.

An audience member comments that more SF is being written because of the media versions: for example, Scotland has more SF readers and writers because of the **Highlander** series. And another mentioned that young readers sometimes start with media tie-in novels.

An audience member commented that some non-SF readers who say they hate reading short stories really just dislike the "required" ironic/melancholy tweak that is usually found at the end of mainstream short fiction, and may actually like SF if they can find out that SF doesn't have that tweak.

An audience member asked Margaret how her talk differs when she's talking to college students as opposed to senior citizens. She replied that she hasn't dealt with this group yet, but has been thinking about talking about the "Alien" theme, broadly defined: including women, androids, etc.

Jerry responds to Lenny about his hypothetical non-SF reader who might not appreciate the SF icing on his fictional cake, and wonders what the SF-content icing is, if it isn't necessary.

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Bedside Books: What Do People Read When It Isn't SF?

notes by David Bratman, transcribed by Tom Whitmore

Participants: Kate Schaefer, Mary Kay Kare, James Glass, Mike Moscoe

Prolog: "Bedside books" aren't just those that sit near the bed, they're the books that you keep around for handy access. We'll talk about dictionaries and reference books; myths, legends, westerns, mysteries ... as well as SF and fantasy.

The Panel:

KS: What books do you have piled beside your bed, or intend to read, that aren't SF?

MK: I read almost everything. At a mystery/SF crossover panel, an editor commented that mystery readers specialize, but SF readers read anything.

JG: I usually read four books at once, including one non-fiction. I try to sample as many SF writers as possible, as well as mysteries, espionage and popular science. I recommend Timothy Ferris.

MM: Watch your reading while you're writing. the tone and tenor of what you read can influence what you write. When writing, I limit myself to something that keeps me in the right mood, or fosters it. When not writing, I read the "competition". Then there's research: science magazines, or whatever is hot.

MK: I read history and anthropology. Recently I read a book on a Druid prince, for the picture of the culture. Peter Tremayne medieval mysteries, for some reason. Food: cookbooks and the history and anthropology of food. Examples: **How Much Depends on Dinner**, a detailed cultural history of the foods in a normal dinner. **The Rituals of Dinner**, a history of food and meal etiquette and the cultural effects. Ray Tannehill has a good book on food. This stuff doesn't get into SF much, though there is **Like Water for Chocolate**. The effects of American food on European eating could be research for how alien foods might affect us.

Jim: I speed-read, like an editor, when it comes to fiction, but I slow down on research. I've been reading Chinese fiction for the flavor of their culture and writing, as research for a novel. I do that reading before sleep, so it steeps in the mind overnight.

MM: By reading multiple books, it's easier to give initially uninteresting books a better chance; I can get through 30 or so pages of each at a time.

MKay: It's a lot harder to read 100 pages of a book than it used to be because books are so much longer!

KS: If the book I have to read is stultifying, I put it away for a while. but if it doesn't grab me the first time it probably won't do so later. Someone commented that likes and dislikes change, and Mary Kay mentioned **Starship Troopers**.

Janet Lafler: What about mainstream fiction? Anthony Barrett, Rebecca Goldstein (spelling on these?).

MK: Beautifully written, but most of it's pointless. Robertson Davies is an exception.

Bill Humphries: **Cold Mountain!**

Jeanne Gomoll: I was irritated by Jane Austen, but got back into her because of the movies. "Oh! She was being subtle and ironic!" So sometimes you just need the right entry.

MK: Also Harlan Ellison. At 11, I thought he was dumb. Reading **Dangerous Visions** at 16 changed

my life. It could be age, or just viewpoint that changes.

MM: You eventually have to stop your research. Set deadlines. You might be screwing yourself, but you've got to stop sometime: you can't wait for that debate to be settled.

JG: During the academic year (I teach), I rewrite, outline and research. The first draft must be done at the end of a 3-month summer.

Lenny Bailes: An SF reader might regard mainstream reading as an exercise in training the palate for more subtle tastes. Immerse yourself in a slower-paced story by enjoying the subtlety in language.

MK: but SF can be subtle too, without being as pointless as mainstream.

KS: Fiction gives emotional, instead of (non-fiction's) literal truth. A. S. Byatt is a fine mainstream writer.

MM: When textbooks get revised, the information changes but the conclusions don't. I write novels of "Man the Scavenger" to counter the textbook images of "Man the Hunter."

Louise Marley: What about mainstream novels by genre writers, like Bradley's **The Catch Trap**?

MK: Pangborn's novels like **The Trial of Callista Blake** are also good examples.

Unidentified audience member: But good mainstream writers do horrible SF: P. D. James, Cecilia Holland.

KS: But I *liked* **Floating Worlds** (Holland's SF novel). It was subtle and peculiar.

Janet Lafler: I no longer separate fiction by genre. I put everything on the shelf by author, including non-fiction, which can result in some interesting juxtapositions like Candas Jane Dorsey - Dostoyevsky - Conan Doyle. This gives a different view of the books.

Art Widner: I sort by urgency of reading. How do you winnow?

Tom Whitmore: recommended **Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream** by Jay Mitchell.

MK: Choosing books to read depends on mood.

Sheila Bostick: I pick from my unread stacks.

MM: The business of writing dictates what I read. I have less time for pleasure reading.

Unidentified: I sort books by archaeological strata....

Jeanne Gomoll: I read for a different view. Piercy, McIntyre and (Delia) Sherman set me thinking about 17th-18th century France. Authors do research to give readers a new window, which can start us on our own research and thinking.

MM: A thesis may be brilliant, but badly written. A novel carries the ideas out where people can see them.

Dave Howell: What else gets brought in to the metaphorical bedside? Movies, websites, travel?

MM: The web is disappointingly inaccurate. Kate: But you can send in corrections, and see them appear!

Ruth Lafler: What about books you keep on hand for love or reference?

JG: An encyclopedia of astronomy and a Mandarin dictionary.

MM: **On Killing** explains how difficult killing really is, psychologically.

MK: Sayers, Allingham, and Marsh mysteries on my bedside for love. For reference, the Encyclopedia Britannica (eleventh edition, of course).

KS: I kept Delany, then Crowley, now Byatt. (Comment: you need an A next....)

There followed an odd digression into the causes of violence and the effects of violent literature.

Last recommendations: John McPhee (Mary Kay), classic SF (Mike), Hemingway and Steinbeck (Jim). **Starlight 2** edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Maureen McHugh's **Mission Child**, Sarah Zettel's **Playing God**, Nalo Hopkinson and the **F&SF** book review columns (Kate).

—oOOo—

Why Don't Mums and Kids Go On Adventures?

Participants: Jae Leslie Adams, Carlis Nixon, Jeanne Bowman

notes and transcription by Lenny Bailes

Prolog:

A discussion on choosing books for bright young readers: What books did we read as children, and what would we recommend?

The Panel

CN: Reads children's literature as a discovery process for her job as a librarian.

JLA: Is a mom. My kid hasn't been a reader, since school doesn't serve him well. School culture doesn't support intellectual activity. As a rule of thumb "don't recommend anything, because kids are stubborn.

JLA's kid reads R.L. Stine's Goosebumps books. J.L. doesn't care for them. "He would only read

media tie-in titles but **Redwall** [A “pre-teen romance” talking animal fantasy by Brian Jakes] whetted his attention and got him to read faster.

JB: Her youngsters were non-readers, so she read aloud. “I rebel at reading **Goosebumps!** I’ve found success in reading classics, rather than bowdlerized “for children only” versions. I swap recommended lists with my friends.

JLA: I found it interesting to ask my kids about the reality of scale of the Jakes book. “What do you think about the animals riding carts and horses, the relative size of the horses and the rats, etc?”

CN: I didn’t like **Redwall**.

??: What’s the recommend age level for the Jakes books? Do they have pictures?

JLA: 5 to 7.; The expensive editions have pictures. And you can read **Flower** to them when they’re 3 years old.

JB:It [the age level suitability] depends upon the individual child.

JLA: I prefer mostly British authors, but the kid likes Edward Eager. [**Half Magic, Knight’s Castle, Magic By The Lake, Magic or Not?, The Well-Wishers**] He liked [Heinlein’s] Starship Troopers.

JB: In our house, we have a rule: “You have to read the book before you can go to the movie.” Sometimes the kids protest, but afterwards, when they see the movie, they appreciate having read the book “Gee, why did you change this?”

CN: There’s an age-gap between [Tolkien’s] The Hobbit and **LOTR**. A young child who appreciates the first may not like the second.

JB: **The Hobbit** leads to George MacDonald (**At the Back of the North Wind, The Princess and Curdie**).

CN: [Didn’t like the religious symbolism in the Narnia books.]

Lenny Bailes: I was overwhelmed by the Narnia books as a child. They were very powerful, but we Jews weren’t supposed to believe in the divinity of that [Lion/JC] guy.

Ruth Lafler: I was brought up in a non-religious household. I didn’t get the symbolism at first.

Doug Faunt: I saw the symbolism as a literary retelling: The Bible rewritten as fantasy.

JB: [returning to theme of the panel]. Most of these books are just kids taking off without the parents, rather than “Mom and Kids” adventures.

Karen Schaeffer: In **Half-Magic**, the mom has a half-adventure. Generally, if parents are there in the story, the magic won’t operate. But in Eager’s books the parents don’t seem to impede.

CN: Early Heinlein and Panshin books have kids and parents together. In Alan Garner's books [**Weirdstone of Brisengamen**, **Elidor**] adults are also involved. [KN recommends William Fast and William Main's **Thrift**.

JLA: [recommends **The Stone Quartet** [author?]] linked stories about people working in stone — how kids gradually work their way into the community.

JB: I find Susan Cooper's Green Witch stories terrifying.

CN: [Finds the Cooper books compelling, but dislikes the use of a "designated protagonist." The protagonist becomes a hero on birth-status, rather than on merit of character. The villains are "arbitrarily evil."]

JLA: It's a good strategy to share what you like about the book with the kid.

JB: And what you thought was dumb.

LB: What do you think about the classic durability of the [Frank Baum, Ruth Thompson] Oz books?

JLA: They're not sophisticated enough for a contemporary audience.

JB: I think they're good read-aloud books.

JLA: Kids don't get all the references in **Alice in Wonderland**. Recommends Mistress Masham's *Repose*.

CN: MMR builds vocabulary. It introduces children to the flavor of the 18th Century.

[Participants and audience suggest some other childhood favorites: **The City Under the Back Stairs** (Evelyn Sibly Lampman), **The Wonderful Adventures of Nils** (author?), **The Finn Family Moomintroll** (Tove Jansson).

?: What about Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* books?

JB: They didn't go over in our house.

[More recommendations: *Swallows and Amazons* (John Christopher), Arthur Ransom books.

KN and Doug Faunt second recommendation of Arthur Ransom: **Captain Flint's Trunk**, **Heidi's Alp**.

JLA: **The Magic Pudding**.

?: Are the ship details in the Ransom books too technical?

CN: I don't think so.

Kate Yule: The Arthur Ransom books might as well be fantasy, from the kids' perspective.

Lenny Bailes: Thinking about ships reminds me of a great, obscure story called **The Ship that Flew**. It's by a woman named Hilda Lewis, but reads like a lost volume in E. Nesbit's *Bastable* series. The eldest of four children discovers an old magic shop, run by a proprietor with a patch on his eye. He becomes enamored of a sculpted wooden ship that will cost him "everything he has, and a bit over." When he takes it home, it turns out that the ship can fly and travel through time. He and his siblings embark on a magic quest to discover the original owner (whose identity gradually becomes obvious to any reader familiar with traditional Norse mythology: "Man with an eye-patch?" Flying ship?)

Anna Vargo: [Recommends **Bongo Larry** and **Lizard Music** by Daniel Pinkwater.]

JB: Daniel Pinkwater definitely has finger on the pulse.

JLA: [Recommends Jane Yolen's *Commander Toad* series.]

CN: British recreational writers are better than American ones. [Recommends the *Changes* trilogy and **Seventh Raven** by Peter Dickenson.]

Anna Vargo: [Recommends **Order Down Stairs** by Dianna Wynn Jones.]

CN: **The Sherwood Ring** and **Perilous Guard** by Elizabeth Pope. The author is a Shakespearean scholar.

LB: Maurice Sendak (**Where the Wild Things Are**, ?? and **The Night Kitchen**). What do you think about Bruce Coville? (**My Teacher was an Alien**, etc.)

?: Bruce Coville books are geared to the 5th grade mind.

JLA: They can buy them with their own money.

Doug Faunt: One thing my parents were always willing to do was to buy me books.

JLA: [recommends **The Magic Pudding** by Norman Lindsey.]

Other titles recommended by the panel: **Hungry Cloud** by Tom Engram.

[[Tom, feel free to add anything to this that I've overlooked.]]

—oOoo—

Why Didn't They Choose the Rocketship?

Participants: Alan M. Clark, Dan Conan Young, Loren MacGregor, Rose Prescott

Prolog:

From the viewpoint of an editor, artist, writer, or reader — what books would you choose to illustrate? What scene? Why?

The Panel:

LJM: [started as a typesetter. he wants to write it, typeset it, design the cover and run the press. Steve Ditko is an artist who has influenced him — particularly with silhouettes: people pulling stomachs open. Loren likes the edition of **The Stars My Destination** illustrated by John Schoenherr (who also illustrated Frank Herbert's **Dune** and Disney's **Old Yeller**).]

AC: Would like to do a book but feels he doesn't have the skills to have complete control. "There's lots you have to know! (E.g., fonts without serifs." Currently, he prefers to be part of a team.

LJM: The editor of the **Sword of the Demon** hardback set it in *Sans Serif* with a ragged right margin, making it difficult to read.

RP: [was introduced to science fiction by her father reading issues of *Analog* aloud to her. The first s-f story she read on her own was Asimov's *Nightfall* and she thought it was icky. Her grandmother was an art teacher. "My grandmother told me Irish tales and Jim Fitzpatrick was an illustrator whose drawings worked. (**Book of Conquests, [Lon] Of the Long Arm**).

National Geographic had great photos, but she wanted to see more subjective artwork. Says he didn't like the Oz books. "Denslow's illustrations were too light and fluffy." She has a secret hankering to reillustrate the old Oz stories. "I like the Barry Moser version, but I'd still like to do my own — put Ronald Reagan's head on [P.T?] Barnum's body. The Wicked Witch is Nancy.]

LJM: I saw Dan's illustrations in a comic book, **Leave it to Chance**.

DC: [Sees himself as divided 50/50 between being a writer and an illustrator. He loves children's books and collects them. "One of my favorites is Tasha Tudor's **A Time To Keep**, which depicts comforting seasons in turn of the century Pennsylvania." He also likes **Tres Riches Heures** by Dave de Berry and **The Haunting of Hill House** by Shirley Jackson. (Steven Spielberg has just purchased movie rights to the latter.) Dan did a sample cover for a [Dreamworks edition?] — the main character was disturbed and psychic. He was sent to investigate a haunted house. Ben Shahn did the illustrations in a Reader's Digest condensed versions, which were really great.

LJM: Is George Tucker going to do Kafka? One Tucker piece, *The Voice* shows a figure sitting, looking haunted, with ear to the door, listening. This communicates a surreal power and eventually became the cover for a Tucker retrospective collection.

RP: Tucker's illustrations for *The Raven* made me want to illustrate Poe's *The Gold Bug*.

Margaret McBride: [would like to see illustrations for Eleanor Arnason's **A Woman of the Iron**

People and **Ring of Swords** a hooker playing Hamlet. Also Dawn Butler's **Mind of My Mind** — the publisher changed a black person in the book to blue out of fear of loss of sales. One of Chip Delany's essays tells a story about visiting a "trench philosopher." The philosopher asked for copies of some of Delany's books and Chip felt embarrassed about the covers. Later, the books were done with better covers, but the designs weren't related to the story content.]

RP: In Australia, a Steven Barnes book was published illegally. After 15,000 had been printed, the books were recalled. The cover portrait looked somewhat aboriginal, but at least the color [of the character] was right.

?: [Has a copy of Babel 17 with a cover showing a girl in chain mail and a dragon.]

?: Has a copy of [?]'s first novel from White Wolf. The cover shows a surrealistic picture of a vampire and doesn't relate to the novel. There was [added?] a brief scene with vampires, just in case vampires happened to get on the cover.

LJM: [has a black friend who liked the cover of Bester's **Golem 1000** because the figure depicted at least was black.

AC: "Dream to work" is someone whose work I really like. I'm currently working on a story by Bruce [?], and it's very exciting. The look of a book is very much influenced by [marketing concerns]. Perhaps authors shouldn't be allowed to be involved. Distributors know.

Margaret McBride: [Was on a penal with an editor from Tor who received a memo from distributors saying that the book *must* have a cover with a half-naked girl on it.

[[Here follows a brief discussion of the publishing myth about green covers on books hurting sales. This was held as a truism in the industry for a few years until someone discovered that the difficulty with green covers was not reduction of sales, but the difficulty of rendering the color accurately with then-current printing technology. By the time of the investigation, printing technology was capable of handling green covers, and the myth was subsequently exploded. —LB]]

LJM: [likes the aviation art of Keith Morris. Someone asked him early in his career, "what do you want to do?" He replied that magazine illustrators should first serve an apprenticeship in a printshop. That way they would get to see the colors actually available to production and work with those palettes.]

AC: The printed version of a book cover is often several generations away from the original.

LJM: [has a problem with the artwork of the Brothers Hildebrand. The light sources are all wrong. You look at a picture and the light sources of different portions appear to be coming from all sorts of crazy directions.] "Someone I knew once admired the middle page of a Tolkien calendar. I took him to the Palace Hotel Bar where a Maxfield Parrish original was on display. I showed him how Parrish's lighting effects direct your eye. [Loren liked the cover on an early Dave Smeds novel — a barbarian on horseback — which had good composition. But there were no horses in the novel.]

RP: [hated the cover for George Stewart's **Earth Abides**. The head and body of the subject were

disproportionate, the picture had two light sources. The breasts of a woman on the cover were lighted from both above and below. The face of this woman turned out to be a likeness of the editor's girlfriend. The protagonist's face was drawn after the editor.]

Carlis Nixon: [Questions the assertion that good covers don't sell.]

LJM: [Answers Carlis by citing the example of covers by Leo and Diane Dillon for Terry Carr's Ace Science Fiction Special series. These colors were beautifully done, but the books had disappointing sales figures.]

Lenny Bailes: It's almost like the low sales figures of the Ace Specials with the Dillon covers created a publisher's engram for years about using abstract and surrealistic art on s-f book covers. I became really depressed, in the '80s by the trend of using photo-realistic art on the covers of s-f novels. This seemed to start somewhere around the success of using them on Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover* novels. I disliked this trend, because for me, s-f illustration should be a little bit like radio drama. Something should be left for the listener/reader's imagination to fill in.

AC: I'm not sure whether I'd call those covers "photo-realistic." Actually, they're more like "hyper-realism." Many people believe that more details in the picture means higher quality. [AC agreed that the "hyper-realism" trend in s-f covers had been discouraging to him, as an artist, for many years, but he thought that it had just about run its course. Other styles are beginning to creep in, again.]

RP: Photography in films is also more crisp now. You don't see the "textured" look of earlier movies, which was more satisfying.

LJM: If I'm watching TV, I can instantly recognize the black and white style of *The Twilight Zone*..

AC: Sometimes trends in art reflect a tendency to over-generalize [for the mass demographic].

RP: A good example of overgeneralization is the way Hollywood thinks any female writers over the age of 35 are "out of touch."

LJM: [Mentions some of his favorite s-f artists of the '50s and '60s, Powers, Emshwiller, and Vallejo]

RP: Vonda Macintyre had cover approval for the original edition of **Dreamsnake**. Boris Vallejo did one that depicted a woman astride a python, which Vonda immediately rejected. But Vallejo's artwork is really dynamic.

LJM: [Would like to see Vallejo do Kipling.]

DC: The name of a well-known artist on a cover helps to sell a book. Some White Wolf books show "sweet models" on the covers — very unvaried.

RP: A lot of artists have a stable of models.

LJM [liked Dave Stevens' illustrations for **The Rocketeer**. Would like to see him do some s-f covers.]

AC: [Would like to see more of Darrell Elliot and Rick Berry.]

Lenny Bailes: Rick Berry is an encouraging example of a publisher bucking the "generic" trend and beating the system. It's really great that Tor commissioned him for the covers on some of the Steven Brust books.

RP: [Likes pencil drawings by Sweet (?). But it doesn't reproduce well in books. Relates an anecdote about stippling.]

LJM: Virgil Finlay also did stippling.

Margaret MacBride: [Shows some recent books with covers that she likes: **Lark on the Wing**, Steve Gould's **Jumper**, **Artificial Things**. She likes these covers because they evoke the spirit of the book, rather than depicting a specific moment or scene.]

AC: [Says that he prefers doing covers that evoke the book to specific scene illustrations.]