

The Labor Day Group

The annuals are out, and here, if we can trust the amalgamated wisdom of our four editors, are the thirty best stories of 1979. It is in the nature of annual reports to pose the question, *Was it a good year?* and it pains me, as both a shareholder and a consumer, to answer that for science fiction, as for so many other sectors of the economy, 1979 was not a good year.

Against such a sweeping judgment it may be countered that sf is not a unitary phenomenon nor one easily comparable to the tomato harvest. Sf is a congeries of individual writers, each producing stories of distinct and varying merit. A year of stories is as arbitrary a measure as mileage in painting. Nevertheless, that is how the matter is arranged, not only by anthologists but by those who organize the two prize-giving systems, SFWA, which awards the Nebulas, and Fandom, which gathers once a year to hand out Hugos. The overlap between the contents of the annuals and the short-lists for the prizes is so great that one may fairly surmise that something like cause-and-effect is at work. As the SFWA nominating procedures are conducted in plain view, it seems certain that the editors will keep their eyes open for the likeliest contenders, since the annual that most successfully second-guesses the awards nominees has a clear advantage over its rivals.

All this preamble as a caveat to those seeking a buyers' guide to the supremely best of the three annuals. Each one has its unique excellences (as well as excellences shared with a rival); each, sad to say, includes stories that would be more at home in a workshop than an anthology. What I mean to do is to lump the three annuals together and review the year 1979 in all its annualness, including the awards for short fiction.

First, some raw data. Not counting overlapping choices, there are thirty stories, by twenty-nine writers, in the three annuals. These include all but one of the short story nominees for the Hugo and the Nebula (the omitted writer is represented by another story) and five of the ten nominees for novelette.

Review of *The Best Science Fiction of the Year #9*, edited by Terry Carr; *Best Science Fiction Stories of the Year*, edited by Gardner Dozois; *The 1980 Annual World's Best SF*, edited by Donald A. Wollheim and Arthur W. Saha; and *Timescape*, by Gregory Benford.

A significant proportion of the authors of the nominated stories constitute a generation unto themselves. George R. R. Martin, Vonda McIntyre, Tanith Lee, Jack Dann, Ed Bryant, Michael Bishop, and John Varley were all born between 1945 and 1948 and first began publishing within two years, either way, of 1971. *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* doesn't have an entry for Orson Scott Card, a multiple nominee, so presumably he came to prominence somewhat later, but my guess, based on internal evidence, is that he would belong to this group. These eight, from a total of twenty-nine writers, wrote something better than 40 percent of the total fiction wordage in the three annuals, and they have to their communal credit seventeen Hugo and Nebula nominations this year. All of them (except Tanith Lee, who is English) are listed as members of SFWA. Most of them were at Noreascon Two in Boston on Labor Day this year, where I met some of them and didn't meet others.

I don't mean to suggest that anything like a cabal is at work, only that a coherent generational grouping exists, such as the groupings Malcolm Cowley speaks of in his essay "And Jesse Begat." Further, I'd suggest that these writers have more in common than those (myself among them) who were lumped together under the rubric "New Wave," that they possess something approaching solidarity, as the Futurians did in their day. The relative strength of their showing at award time may be accounted for innocently enough by the natural fecundity of writers in their early thirties, as well as by the ordinary mechanics of literary careers. Older writers of established reputation tend to devote more of their time and talent to novels. Younger writers are often best able to claim their place in the sun by devoting their best energies to shorter forms and then crossing their fingers at award time.

The awards are a serious business. If there were any doubt of that, one need only listen to the testimony of the winners, one of whom, George Martin, in accepting his award this year, spoke of how he'd lusted after a Hugo when first he'd attended a world convention in the early days of his career. Another, Orson Scott Card, wrote eloquently in a fanzine of his own high regard for the significance of both awards.

Man is a political animal and inclined to pursue self-interest, so it should not be wondered at that in the past, some writers have politicked for these awards with varying degrees of high-mindedness and high-handedness. My reason for noting so much that is common knowledge is not to deplore human nature but to suggest that the work of this latest generation of sf writers—the Labor Day Group, I'd like to call them, since that is when they are most likely to be found all together—has been

unduly and unnecessarily influenced by the clubhouse atmosphere of the sf world and its awards systems. A sense of personal vision is rare in their stories, while a sense of writing to please a particular audience, Fandom, is sometimes obtrusively present—as it was, for me, in last year’s double award-winner, “The Persistence of Vision,” by John Varley.

There are solid behaviorist reasons why this might be so. Having served their literary apprenticeships in the sf magazines during the seventies (a decade otherwise notable for disillusionment and retrenchment), they were witness to the failure of the “New Wave” both as an aesthetic program (art can’t be brought into existence by manifestos) and commercially. To a reasonably levelheaded apprentice writer it became increasingly clear through the seventies that art was a problematical commodity and that most of what went by that name was claptrap anyhow. By contrast a competent entertainment engineer who could guarantee production of *n*-many pages of fictionware might do very well for himself. Look what happened to *Star Wars*. What the market rewards are simple problems clearly solved by wholesome, likeable characters; ideally, the interest of the work should be telegraphable in one sentence: “What if there were a world as big as its orbit round its sun?” “What if snakes were beneficent instead of poisonous?” “What if there were Giant Insects?” It was good enough for Grandpa, it was good enough for Grandma, and it’s good enough for the Labor Day Group. If art’s to be part of it, it must be the kind that conceals art, and conceals it well; on the whole, it isn’t worth troubling about. Art, these days, is a branch of the welfare department, and worth maybe five thousand dollars in an NEA grant. A Hugo can bring in fifty thousand dollars on the next paperback contract.

Some cases in point, from this year’s crop of Labor Day Group stories: Ed Bryant’s (or bryANT’s) “giANTS” (in the Dozois annual) is about giant ants, like in the movie *Them*, only different. There are these ants in South America, see, that are really scary and they’re heading this way, and here’s bryANT’s twist—we defeat the ant invasion by inducing immoderate growth, since beyond a certain size exoskeletons are dysfunctional. I remember encountering the same observation some years ago in a book of essays by Arthur Clarke, and I’m sure the idea wasn’t original to him. Bryant dramatizes this common knowledge by having someone unaware of it informed of it, after much cajoling, by someone in the know—generally, and in this case, a poor sort of drama, since by a simple shift of point of view the story is reduced to the bare notion one already knows. Inexplicably, “giANTS” won a Nebula. Congratulations.

The winner of the Hugo for short story, George R. R. Martin's "The Way of Cross and Dragon," appears in both the Dozois and Wollheim/Saha annuals. Though full of a good deal of incidental sf invention (droll aliens, pretty planets), the dramatic structure is like that of "giANTS," but the idea being ferreted out by the protagonist is both more original and full of resonance. Martin contends that all supernatural religions are the result of someone's decision to tell a whopping lie, a contention that deserves ampler and more serious treatment than it receives here. Were it set in 100 A.D. instead of in the far future it might have grown teeth at least as effective as those belonging to Martin's other winner this year (capturing both Hugo and Nebula for best novelette), "Sandkings" (in the Carr and Dozois annuals). Like "giANTS," "Sandkings" is an insect-horror story; unlike "giANTS" it fleshes out its premise with ample and well-paced suspense, heaping on grue and ingenuity all the way to the gratifyingly inevitable end. Apart from a couple of sideways glances in the direction of sex, "Sandkings" could have appeared in 1940 in *Astounding* without a ripple of anachronism, and if it had, we'd still be reading it today. I think it's destined to become not only a great movie but a classic board game as well: it's that neat.

There are at least three nominated short stories in the annuals that seem superior to the winning stories by Bryant and Martin. "Vernalfest Morning" (in the Dozois annual) is a relatively minor effort by Michael Bishop, but fiercely imagined within its small compass. (Bishop, I should remark, is probably the least representative figure in the Labor Day Group. Numerous stories and his recent novel *Transfigurations* evidence a degree of extramural literary savvy and ambition that promises still better things to come. His chief point of correspondence with the Group is the way in which all traditional sf ideas comfortably coexist—space wars, telepathy, aliens, catsup, onions, mayonnaise.)

"Unaccompanied Sonata," by Orson Scott Card (in the Wollheim/Saha annual), is a grimly effective futuristic fairy tale, whose pastel colors adorn a heart of purest anthracite. The best story Bradbury's written in years.

My own favorite among the also-rans is Connie Willis's first published story, "Daisy in the Sun" (in the Wollheim/Saha annual). With lyric ellipses, Willis describes a world in the grip of epidemic schizophrenia precipitated by news that the sun is going nova. The heroine is a sexually disturbed adolescent girl in a condition of fugal amnesia. All the way through I thought, "This won't work," but it did. What a great way to begin a career.

So far, I realize, 1979 doesn't look so bad. Indeed, from the thirty stories at hand I'd be able to assemble a selection of at least eleven tales that fizzed agreeably in the mind. That selection would include all the stories mentioned above, except "giANTS," and, from the Carr annual, stories by Philip K. Dick, James P. Girard, and George Turner; from the Dozois annual, a novella by Hilbert Schenck, "The Battle of the Abaco Reefs," that exercises the geopolitical imagination as well as a week of dire headlines. That's nine. Well, put in Rick Gauger's "The Vacuum-Packed Picnic" (in the Carr annual), a piece of good-natured high-tech bawdry, and then let the flip of a coin decide between "Options," by John Varley (in the Carr and Wollheim/Saha annuals), and "Down and Out on Ellfive Prime," by Dean Ing (in the Carr and Dozois annuals). Varley pussyfoots about a ticklish subject and finally avoids it, but his evasions are at least craftsmanlike. The pleasure of Ing's tale is in the engineering problem he's devised for his space colony; superadded to that, however, is a thesis, stated but not to my mind proven, that bums will survive better in outer space because . . . I can't remember why.

Meanwhile, down at the bottom of the barrel, it would be possible to assemble a counter-anthology of the worst of these thirty "best" stories that few readers could read through without dark thoughts about 1979 and what it may bode for the future of sf. No need to castigate those by novices; they are less to blame than their editors for being picked before they're ripe. My pick of the worst by Labor Day Group members flies in the face of received opinion, since one (bryANT's "giANTS") got a Nebula, another was a Hugo nominee (McIntyre's "Fireflood," which I discussed in the July 1980 Book column), and the third, "The Thaw," by Tanith Lee, appears in both the Carr and Wollheim/Saha annuals. "The Thaw" is a conventional sf horror story told in the wisecracking style of a fifties sitcom and set in a woefully underimagined far future.

Finally it isn't worth my time or yours to explain exactly why a particular dumb idea is particularly dumb, especially when the dumb ideas come from pros who probably know better and intend to have the damn thing published anyhow. So without elaboration, and with one loud boo each, I will add to the list of worst stories: "Galatea Galante, the Perfect Popsy," by Alfred Bester, and "Lime Shards," by Gregory Benford (both in the Carr annual); "Bloodsisters," by Joe Haldeman (in the Dozois annual); and "The Locusts," by Larry Niven and Steve Barnes (in the Wollheim/Saha annual).

Enough of trees and back to the forest. It occurs to me that the fault may not lie with the 1979 harvest but with their being too many harvesters

in the field. Can sf support three competing anthologies? By way of odious comparison I got down two of Judith Merrill's anthologies, from 1965 and 1966, and yes, by golly, not only were tomatoes juicier in that golden age but there were more of them—thirty-three contributions in Merrill's 1965 volume and thirty-five in 1966. Nor was hers the only annual at the time, for Carr and Wollheim were producing one for Ace. In both years there were more stories of Hall of Fame caliber, stories I still remember vividly at this distance in time, a much larger proportion of work by writers of established reputation within the field, and—the most significant difference—several stories by writers who weren't dues-paying members of the club. In 1979, by contrast, none of the editors has ventured outside the ghetto walls (unless Carr's taking Dick's story from *Rolling Stone College Papers* can be construed that way). In their honorable mention lists at the back of their books neither Carr nor Dozois cites any stories from non-genre magazines or anthologies. (The Wollheim/Saha anthology doesn't trouble to provide a list of runners-up, nor does it offer a survey of the sf year, as the other two annuals do. People who like to talk to the driver of the omnibus will miss such small courtesies.)

It's no longer enough to speak of the walls of the ghetto: now there's a dome, and (on the evidence of most of these stories) communications with the outside have ceased. For a writers' organization to give an award to such a story as "giANTS" is tantamount to erecting a sign at the airlock, saying: "Science Fiction—abandon all taste, ye who enter here." Indeed, I've heard it argued that sf transcends, in its nature, the canons of mundane literary taste. How often, though, what seems like transcendence from one point of view looks like a lack of plumbing from another.

This is not to suggest that sf, in its institutional aspects, should be disbanded. Conventions are fun, and trophies decorate the den like nothing else. But for writers (or readers) to frame a standard of excellence based on purely intramural criteria, and to make it their conscious goal to win an award, is to confuse literature with bowling.

Of a book as good as Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, a reviewer can say very little except, take my word, this is superlative, read it. Not only does *Timescape* accomplish the specific task of science fiction (what that task is may be assumed, in these pages, to be self-evident), but it also clears the hurdles of the mainstream novel with strength, grace, and intellectual distinction. Its prose is lucid, flexible, and eloquent without straining after "poetic" effects. Its characterizations have a precision and amplitude of observation rare in even the best sf, since it is difficult to be precise or observant about hypothetical social structures. Contemporary

realism necessarily has its edge in that regard, but Benford is able to possess himself of that advantage by setting half his novel in 1962. His scrupulous treatment of the recent past becomes his touchstone for that part of the book set in 1998, a date equidistant (from 1980) in the near future. The year 1962 seems amazingly long ago, an age of Golden Oldies, blithely unaware of the crises pregnant in the womb of time; crises that have become by 1998 an economic and ecological debacle of global proportions.

The plot concerns the efforts of a group of Cambridge physicists in 1998 to get a message back to the scientific establishment of the year 1962 warning them of the world's impending doom. The medium of communication is a beam of tachyons, a particle theoretically symmetrical in relation to time and thus able to ignore the One Way traffic sign that grosser particles (and mortals) must obey. It will give away few turns of the plot to note that the tachyons get through to 1962, since the story's suspense depends rather on how the message is interpreted and whether it is to be believed, a drama that allows full scope to Benford's ability to portray scientists in the round—as politicians, as professional intellectuals, as members of a common culture. As a group portrait of the scientific community *Timescape* compares favorably with the novels of C. P. Snow or even with a nonfiction work like Watson's *The Double Helix*.

As a work of the imagination, comparison becomes more difficult, since sf writers so seldom attempt anything of this magnitude and seriousness. "Seriousness" is usually a term I cringe at, since it implies a kind of moral superiority in a work of art. Nevertheless, I would call this "serious fiction" in the sense that it eschews playfulness and works with the simplest materials on the largest possible scale to create a moral paradigm of great hortatory force. Beside it even such admirable recent works as *The Dispossessed* or *The Fountains of Paradise* (to cite works that share Benford's "seriousness" and his determination to express the imaginative core of scientific thought) seem thin and schematic.

While I can't pretend to judge the physics of the book, I'm willing to defer in such conjectures to the authority of Dr. Benford, who heads the physics department of a major university, and is accounted the expert on tachyons. I'll take his word on tachyons. However, when the characters beg to speculate about standard time-travel paradoxes, such as "Was that my grandfather I murdered last night and should I warn him about me?" I feel no such compunction. The only answers to such eternal quandaries are those that art provides, the sense of closure that comes when an engrossing story finds the tellingly right cadences for its finale.

To speak in more detail of the beautiful resolution of the plot would be

to spoil the pleasure of a first reading. Avoid, if you can, the inside blurb of the book jacket, which gives away far too much of the story. Indeed, just throw away the book jacket—it's sinfully drab.

Timescape is a superlative novel, i.e., beyond comparison. Read it and proselitize for it. This is one of those rare works of sf, like *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, that can speak to the unconverted.