

S C A N S I O N

Sydney Science Fiction Group news sheet

After some months hibernation, SCANSION is back once more, a minor sign of the general resurgence of interest afoot amongst Sydney's science fiction fans. The double issue of a fortnight ago was the first since August.

To lead off this number, a couple of reviews: I have chosen two novels for comment because they exemplify opposite poles of science fiction writing. Firstly, ENTERPRISE 2115, by Charles Grey (Merit Books, London, 2/- Sterling). I gather that the publishers of this vigorous science fiction story told in the grand manner have distributed review copies far and wide. Their confidence of receiving a good press will not, I believe, prove to have been misplaced. Any English original science fiction pocket book has a considerable prejudice to overcome before it can gain acceptance -- a prejudice that has been built up by the overwhelming amounts of bad material presented in this form. This novel suffers also from an overly conventional and slow-moving opening section. However, it soon gathers momentum, and develops into a fast-paced story of action against a well built-up background of future science, a story of the type which built up science fiction's popularity. There are some pleasing ideas here, and although the novel as a whole is not very "deep", it is pleasingly free of the preciousness and word-fiddling that characterise much modern science fiction, and within its author's apparent aims, it is an eminently successful work.

The second novel is A MIRROR FOR OBSERVERS, by Edgar Pangborn (Doubleday, New York, \$2.95) which, we learn from NEW WORLDS No.39, has been chosen for the 1955 International Fantasy Award. The selection of this novel, while giving deserved recognition to a fine work, highlights a trend about which it is not possible to be entirely happy. Although this story treats issues beyond the personal relationships of a few people, these issues are only background, and not always convincing background at that. The writer's treatment of the Martians, particularly of Elmis, the first person narrator, demonstrates great literary artistry. The vast sympathy and understanding of the Martian aliens is made very real. Also, the touches by which Angelo and Sharon are portrayed, both as children and as adults, are masterly; but in those aspects of the work that distinctively qualify it as science fiction, the writer is not strong.

His world-picture is one seen by a man of singularly insular -- or perhaps more aptly described as "provincial" -- outlook. His naive acceptance of American small town life as the standard pattern of both normal and best human behaviour, and his unmistakeable implication that any other mode of life is historically insignificant deviation (to lapse into marxist jargon, which is singularly apt in this instance) must astonish many of his readers. When writing of the catastrophic "para" epidemic, he is very convincing telling of little episodes and scenes, but fails to make his broad picture, that of world-wide calamity, convincing. This inability to "put over" happenings on a large scale is a serious weakness in a science fiction writer. Finally, in the matter of the "mirror" itself, and its relationship to the theme of the story, the reader cannot escape the impression that Pangborn himself is not too sure what he's trying to say. The message is apparently that "man must learn to see himself", but the clumsy attributing of mystical powers to the mirror clouds the moral, and detracts much from the story itself.

Notwithstanding these serious shortcomings, this book is one of the outstanding works of modern science fiction, and stands head and shoulders above the other books considered for this year's Fantasy Award. The disturbing trend is that towards a concentration of interest in the personal inter-relationships of small groups of

people, in a manner that makes the science fiction content of a story background and often of little relevance. In extreme cases this results in stories falling into a class with the "transplanted Western" or "transplanted jungle story", stories that do not belong in the science fiction field, but just happen to have a Venusian or some such background because at the time they were written there was a market for science fiction. Certainly, there has been need for improved characterization in science fiction writing, but if this is attained only at the expense of the inventive vigour which bestows on good science fiction its peculiar attraction, those who expect science fiction will be disappointed. There is plenty of room in the field for a proportion of stories treating "small" or personal subjects in the science fiction idiom, but the unwillingness of contemporary writers to tackle the "big" story is unmistakably contributing to the falling readership of today. The reader who buys GALAXY's every issue is unlikely to be greatly impressed by large numbers of stories on the effect of Venusian spices on domestic felicity, etc. After all, he may buy the WOMENS' WEEKLY as well. So then, my enthusiasm for Mr. Pangborn's excellent novel is tinged with concern for science fiction as a whole.

SYDNEY SCIENCE FICTION GROUP NEWS

With spring has come a renewal of enthusiasm and activity. Making my first visit to the Clubroom in Post Office Chambers for some weeks, I was pleasantly surprised at the good attendance and the animated conversation going on. The change in the status of the library, now run as a business by David Cohen, has improved the service -- this is no criticism of Sherry Bohman, who worked like a Trojan in the final period of the North Shore Futurian Library -- and whatever doubts we may entertain concerning the clubroom and library both now being proprietary concerns, the fact is that this position is making it possible for both services to be continued through a period in which club organization and voluntary work have failed.

David and many of the fan group are obviously out of step on a number of issues, but at present these do not prevent the holding of very enjoyable Thursday evening gatherings at the room he makes available. The group earlier offered to contribute to the rent of the room, apart from the admission charge per person levied, but David refused this, and reserved the right to run the show "his way". So far this has worked well. In the event of serious disagreement between David and the fans, the group would undoubtedly feel free to seek another meeting place as they have done before when their interests became irreconcilable with clubroom management policy.

Activities afoot: At the Convention this year, a project was launched to gather fans at Albury or Canberra this Easter. In the succeeding months it was decided that there was more to be gained from a trip to Canberra, Albury having suffered a previous fan depredation, and Canberra offering the attractions of a considerable indigenous group and an air service. The Sydney fans intending to make the trip have been in touch with Geoff Bennett of the Canberra Futurian Society, and have had the benefit of his advice on hotel accommodation in the capital, and are at present waiting on comment from Melbourne. It seems probable that the Sydney group will number about ten, and the trip will make a good dress rehearsal for the trek to Melbourne later in the year.

Tai Ping Group now the Hay Street Irregulars: The group of fans who meet over lunch every Saturday in the big private room of the Tai Ping restaurant in Hay Street has given itself the above name. Possibly some activity is contemplated. Anyone interested in sitting in on a session will find the Irregulars seated behind heaped plates of chow mein from about one-thirty. If you can't locate them, ask the manager for the "science fiction people".