

The Doldrums of Space

In the last few years, science fiction has come of age. Not as an art form; since at least the time of Wells a small portion has merited passing grades aesthetically. Rather, it's come of age financially. Intermittently since Clarke and Kubrick's 2001 and quite regularly since *Star Wars*, sf titles have been appearing on both hardcover and paperback national bestseller lists. In just the last few months, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, Stephen Donaldson, and Robert Heinlein have jostled for position with the likes of Ludlum, King, and McCullough—and if that doesn't sound like a list of Nobel nominees that's because these days books are not judged by canons of Serlit, but by those of Sacprac, or Sound Accounting Practices. In terms strictly of Sacprac there could hardly be two more marketable commodities than the latest books (to call them “novels” would smack too much of Serlit, and anyhow they really aren't) by those major brand names of science fiction, Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke.

Now though Asimov and Clarke are as close to household words as any writers in the field, a name alone is not enough if a book is to be bankrolled to the tune of a million-plus dollars, the publicized advances received by both Asimov's *Foundation's Edge* and Clarke's *2010: Odyssey Two*. The name must also represent continuation of already established success—in Asimov's case his *Foundation* trilogy, with five million copies in print and the retroactive Hugo Award as “Best All-Time SF Series”; in Clarke's case the antecedent work is *2001*, the movie of which was still on *Variety's* list of the ten best-grossing movies the last time I looked. Furthermore—and caveat emptor to all mere readers—both books trail off with a sense of many golden eggs still to be gathered. “The End (for now)” is how Asimov puts it on page 366. Clarke is not so succinct in his promise of the vast read ahead: “only one of them can inherit the solar system. Which it will be, not even the Gods know yet.”

Far be it from me to fly in the face of Sacprac and suggest that the lack of either a beginning or an end ought to be accounted a liability in a fictional commodity. Let's be fair and judge each slice of these two con-

Review of *2010: Odyssey Two*, by Arthur C. Clarke; and *Foundation's Edge*, by Isaac Asimov.

tinua on its own merits. Was it fun to read? Did the pages turn effortlessly, or at least voluntarily? These are questions that a responsible accountant ought to ask of sequels that are to be followed by sequels of their own, since even the most loyal name-brand consumer may grow bored and stop consuming if a certain bare minimum of drama hasn't been provided.

My sense of the matter is that *2010* delivers the goods—not abundantly but better than one might expect, given the act it had to follow—while *Foundation's Edge* proves after only a few pages' testing to be unpick-upable. I did read every chapter, from a reverence for the Protestant Work Ethic, but it may well have been the dulllest book of its length I've ever read all the way through.

However, before I get into an anatomy of that debacle, it would be well to speak of the merits of *2010*, since they are quite representative of the merits of the genre as a whole at its meat-and-potatoes mid-range (and therefore of what Asimov omits to provide). Clarke's recipe for fiction stew can be as bland as those blenderized dinners the astronauts grimaced at in the movie of *2001*, but even so there is always something engineered to be tasty, or at least mind-filling, in every chapter. His best moments are intensely pictorial. Those who've seen *2001* will be able to recycle its props and characters as they read *2010*, and if they can splice these memories with the stunning NASA photos of the *Voyager* fly-by of Jupiter, the result will be as close to a theatrical premiere unreeling in the imagination as the unassisted printed page can offer.

The story enacted against this Jovian backdrop does not afford dramatic satisfactions on a par with the scenic pleasures. Plot—in the sense of characters interacting—has never been Clarke's strong suit, and in *2010* he is weighted down by the expository problem of all sequels, how to rehash the story-to-now while getting a new show on the read. He accomplishes the task with professional economy, if not magical ease (an accomplishment I didn't appreciate till I was halfway done with the Asimov book, for Asimov is never done reciting his trilogy's antecedent plot). Clarke's expository problem is compounded by the fact that the characters of *2010*, a joint Russian-American exploratory team, are sent to find out what happened to the spaceship *Discovery* and dear old HAL the computer, a mystery to which viewers of *2001* already know the solution. Worst of all, Clarke is obliged to reintroduce the metamorphosed hero of *2001*, David Bowman, into the cast of *2010*, and Clarke's imagination doesn't function well at transcendental temperatures. Bowman flits about the solar system like a faster-than-light ghost in search of someone

to haunt, and the ease of his flitting tends to set at naught all the slower-moving hardware the author has been at such pains to build.

Clarke labors against these difficulties with stoic cheer (and the confidence, no doubt, that at the end of his long trek through this familiar territory there will be a gold mine as his reward), and if the results are neither stirring nor mind-bending, there is a sense of intellectual cohesion. Some of the logical lacunae of *2001* are puttied up (such as, Why was that big black brick parked way out by Jupiter?), and the stage is set for *20,001: Odyssey Three*, which is almost certain to be more fun than the book in hand, now that the stage has been so carefully set.

In the face of *Foundation's Edge* having fun and reading a book begin to seem like incompatible activities. Asimov attempts so little and achieves so much less that a critic shrinks before the task of describing emptiness so vast. To say that Asimov's characters are wooden and his dialogue cliché-ridden is only to point out what even his boosters willingly concede. In any case, wood may well be the best construction material to use when aiming at a mass audience. But there should then be—as all kinds of popular literature know how to provide—compensatory pleasures, such as pacing, derring-do, and grand-manner melodrama. As to pace, *Foundation's Edge* is so slow that its entire gist can be condensed into a small novelette (and so it was: you can read it in the October *Omni*). There is virtually no action but the movement of puppets' jaws. The dramatic impact of the story falls short of a Senate filibuster. Nothing happens but a succession of stilted arguments about vague threats to the galactic order among characters who have no existence apart from their conference tables. There ensues a slow game of Spaceship A following Spaceship B through hyperspace, with Spaceship C trailing along at a leisurely pace, all as thrilling as an evening of Parchesi. This leads up to a showdown at which all concerned are deceived into thinking they've reached a negotiated agreement, a deception accomplished by beings of virtually omnipotent "mentalic" powers, which, had they been exercised at the start of the long tale, would have obviated all debate.

Even this summary doesn't begin to express the *tameness* of the book. Just as there is no action, there is nothing that can pass muster as an idea. Ideas are supposed to be science fiction's forte, and the realm of ideas staked out by the *Foundation* series is nothing less than (literally) universal history. But history, for Asimov, is a seventh-grade pageant conducted before the PTA. There is no account of daily life, no consideration as to how political control is exerted or maintained. Two social classes are in view—orators at conference tables and (briefly) farmers who speak in

Amish accents (and are called Hamish). No thought has been given to such potentially interesting, and historically momentous, considerations as logistics, trade, or communications, as these would be modified by galactic distance. Perhaps in 1950, when the trilogy was finished in its magazine version and Asimov and the world were both so much younger, that degree of fine-tuning might have been asking for the moon, but there has simply been too much water under the sf bridge since 1950—the work of Delany, LeGuin, and Aldiss, to mention only three galactically minded future historians—for such pabulum to be promoted as food for thought.

What then of the scientific razzmatazz that Clarke can fill a chapter with when all else fails? Asimov, after all, is a first-rate expositor of science to the lay audience. No one is more capable of explaining neutrinos and black holes so that they seem to make sense.

In *Foundation's Edge*, alas, there's scarcely a glimmer of that capability. In order, perhaps, to keep the book consistent with the original trilogy, all scientific imaginings are conducted at Captain Video level. Spaceships and thought-controlling "mentalic" rays zip through hyperspace as nimbly as fingers can type. At journey's end there is one (count it, one) new idea; new, that is, to this series. It's an idea that's been around sf long enough to have earned chestnut status, and readers who would like to encounter the idea with some of its first gloss still on it should track down Richard McKenna's fine novella "Hunter, Come Home."

Whether, despite all this, the book will enjoy the success of its antecedent trilogy would seem to lie in the hands of the ten-to-twelve-year-old segment of the reading public. My own advice to them is to save their quarters for the video games at their shopping malls. They'll have more fun—and learn a marketable skill at the same time.