

1979: Fluff and Fizzles

Few writers consistently give their best energies to short fiction. To judge by internal evidence, many short stories serve to take up the slack between novels or to channel the spillover of manic moments. Sometimes the results merit attention, but—as any magazine reader can bear witness—sometimes they don't. However, if the writer has a name, even his slightest tales are likely to find a publisher unwary or desperate enough to issue them as a collection. Some writers, by the uniformly high quality of their shorter fiction, would seem to defy this cheerless theory, but even in their cases I doubt that editorial discretion has been responsible. Writers seem able to find excuses for reprinting anything they've published (just as the parents of mutants, in all those stories, try to protect their six-fingered, limbless children). These all-worthy collections are either by writers so unvaryingly artful that they never have off-moments or (more likely) by those civil enough to employ their creative troughs in some other way than by cranking out words at three cents each.

Each of the three story collections under review is an honorable exception to the above rule—but only partially. Of the lot, Brian Aldiss's *New Arrivals*, *Old Encounters* achieves the highest level of wheat to chaff. Of its twelve stories, three are among his most accomplished, another three or four are middling-to-good, a few are only so-so, and one, "Space for Reflection," is godawful—full of lame jokes, woozy philosophizing, slipshod prose, and interpolated fables of smug whimsicality, all thrown into a shapeless picaresque bundle of *Candide* as told to Kurt Vonnegut. Not only is it as bad as all that, but Aldiss knows it is, even as he writes it. Witness this bit of dialogue between Dumb Dragon and the hero, who is touring the universe in search of truth:

"I really must tell you," says Dumb Dragon, "one of my latest animal stories. Do you mind very much?"

Jeffris enjoyed the man's company. "Make me like it."

"That's good. Storytellers are brave men—they always battle with

Review of *New Arrivals*, *Old Encounters*, by Brian Aldiss; *The Golden Man*, by Philip K. Dick; *Dark Is the Sun*, by Philip Farmer; *The Catalyst*, by Charles Harness; and *Fireflood*, by Vonda McIntyre.

the listeners' wish to dislike what they [sic] hear, for the listener wishes to be ruler of the story, although inwardly he longs to be dominated by it."

Truly, the only way this listener is ever going to like that story is by some greater torture than having to read it (which I did, every word). It isn't as though Aldiss were incapable of high humor, philosophic aplomb, agreeable whimsy, or sheer madcap invention. But sometimes (it seems) he wakes up in the morning with an ashy taste in his mouth and decides that writing is a bum's business and that he'll revenge himself on the fact by writing something fascinatingly abominable. He's capable of writing a whole book under that impetus (e.g., *The Eighty-Minute Hour*), but usually his dyspepsia is dispelled by a single tale.

"Space for Reflection" is perversely (i.e., deliberately) bad. Aldiss also has days when he merely nods, and the result (again, with an interpolated self-criticism) rambles on like this (from "Song of the Silencer"):

"I recognise that your intentions, and the intentions of government are good. That you have become tainted by power is inescapable. Such is human nature. Power warps imagination."

"Cut the verbosity!"

"That is my endeavour. I'm nervous, can't you see?"

If Aldiss can't resist the impulse to conquer his bluer moments by writing them away, at least he should be able to recognize, with a year or two of hindsight, that the bottom of his barrel is far inferior to the top of his bent and that the twain should never meet in one collection. With a little more patience, *New Arrivals*, *Old Encounters* might have been a thoroughly good book—indeed, a classic collection—rather than a miscellany of hits and misses, for Aldiss has that essential virtue of the complete short story writer, Range.

The three best stories in the book exhibit that range at full stretch. "The Small Bones of Tu Fu" is an extended metaphor in the most graceful of chinoiserie frames, the narrative equivalent of a perfectly turned sonnet that yet avoids becoming that hybrid anomaly, a prose poem. "A Spot of Konfrontation" is broad farce, skillfully constructed and richly ornamented, set in a future Tahiti, where— But why spoil good jokes by telegraphing their punch lines? Enough to say that Aldiss here combines the mellow bawdry of his mainstream novels, such as *A Soldier Erect*, with the verbal ingenuities of *Barefoot in the Head*. "Indifference" is sf of classic simplicity in both design and execution. The drama is subdued but heart-

felt. It treats of philosophical matters that all too easily (on the evidence of “Song of the Silencer”) could lead the author into hollow pontifications, but because the ideas are grounded in characters roundly and ironically imagined, their expression has the timbre of life.

When Aldiss is good, he is very, very good, but when he is bad he longs inwardly to be dominated by an editor. Thus Spake Dumb Dragon.

On some days of the week Philip K. Dick is my favorite science fiction writer, but while I’m in the witness box and under oath I must say that when he is bad he, too, is horrid. *The Golden Man* is not without A+ offerings, and no serious reader should flinch from the categorical imperative of buying it: fifteen heretofore uncollected stories spanning the years from 1953 to 1974, with an introduction and notes by the author—a first edition, in fact, for only \$2.25. However, a lot of the fowl in this book are turkeys. As such they have a baleful fascination for us loyalists who must ask ourselves how the germs of Dick’s greatness can be discerned in, Lord help us, this.

An instance of this, from “The Last of the Masters” (1954), a hyperkinetic foray into hairy-chested-style hugger-mugger. Here is the tail-end of its action-packed denouement:

Tolby was heavier. But he was exhausted. He had crawled hours, beat his way through the mountains, walked endlessly. He was at the end of his strength. The car wreck, the days of walking. Green was in perfect shape. His wiry, agile body twisted away. His hands came up. Fingers dug into Tolby’s windpipe; he kicked the youth in the groin. Green staggered back, convulsed and bent over with pain.

“All right,” Green gasped, face ugly and dark. His hand fumbled with his pistol. The barrel came up.

Half of Green’s head dissolved. His hands opened and his gun fell to the floor.

If that isn’t bogus machismo, John Wayne never had a career. But I suppose we all looked silly, we pulp writers of long, long ago, so I shouldn’t cast the first stone.

Other stories here resist being liked by virtue of their depressive rather than their manic tendencies. My least favorite, “Precious Artifact” (1964, when Dick was in his novelistic prime), presents the archetypal Dickian situation—the world as a mirage engineered by invading aliens. But the tone is flat and affectless, the supporting detail thin and uninspired, the prose written with a dogged determination to provide a week’s groceries.

The story's sixteen pages read like sixty—not because his theme is depressing, but because he is writing with his last three ergs of working energy.

I've written elsewhere, in his praise, that Dick's method relies, more than most writers', on improvisation. Characters spring to life and seem to behave autonomously. Such a method is easier to employ in novels, where there's more room, but Dick's best stories display a similar scatty sense of design and amplitude of invention. It may be that Dick conserves his best inspirations for his novels—or else those ideas just grow, like Topsy, into novels, while lesser inspirations wither on the vine. Whyever, his ratio of success for short stories has not been as high as for novels, and these stories represent a kind of second or third pressing, having been passed over when his earlier (and better) collections were assembled.

Even so, the book includes a couple classics. "The Little Black Box" (1964) is a masterful account of Christian conversion as alien invasion; it strikes a Mozartean balance between irony and sympathy. The title story, from 1954, though a degree less quintessential, is a thoroughly implausible though well-worked-out account of a superman of the Blond Beast variety. One can't read it without wondering what the results would have been if Dick had freaked out in that direction. Jorge Borges goes to Gor!

But he never would or could have. Witness "The King of the Elves" (1953), a fantasy that rivals Wells's "Mr. Skelmerdale in Fairyland" for its blend of the banal and the magical. The hero, Shadrach Jones, a filling-station attendant, is approached one night by a group of indigent, pathetic Elves. They elect him to be their king and ask him to lead them to battle against the Trolls, who are, as we all know, taking over everything. Jones is doubly an underdog, the victim not only of his Trollish employer but of his minion Elves (who represent a kind of Divine Schizophrenia à la R. D. Laing). While many underdogs may turn out to be supermen when their secret identity is revealed, Dick's underdogs are too grounded in an observed humanity for fantasies of resentment to come to a van Vogtian fruition.

The jewel of the book is the introduction, a meditation on the nature of sf and a memoir of his career, in which he tells of grocery shopping at the Lucky Dog Pet Store and of writing fan letters to Capitol Records to prophesy that Linda Ronstadt's new record would be "the beginning of a career unparalleled in the record industry." He daydreams of the epitaph to be carved on his gravestone in his alternate existence as a talent scout:

HE DISCOVERED LINDA RONSTADT
AND SIGNED HER UP

It's that beguiling mixture of bravado and humility that gives his best stories and novels their induplicable air of being centered in something more than an alert intelligence; Dick's fiction seems prophetic, not in the trivial sense of predicting events or trends, but in the Old Testament sense, in the sense that Dante, Blake, and Shelley are prophetic, because they speak from the burning bush of an achieved human wisdom. Readers who feel such claims are not too large will not rejoice greatly in *The Golden Man*, but Dick is of that stature where even his failures merit publication.

In a recently published interview, J. G. Ballard remarked that he always gives a favorable review to a book if he hasn't read it. He also professed to find it puzzling that when he'd told this reviewer of his charitable practice I appeared to be shocked. Truly, I am of the puritanical conviction that a reviewer is obliged to read to the bitter end in fair exchange for his pay and the right to crack wise. However, this often leads to a situation where the unworthiest books never receive their just desserts critically because savvy reviewers, dreading to read them, don't undertake to review them. That leaves bad novels in the hands of bad or venal reviewers, not an ideal alternative.

All this by way of excusing myself in advance for being unable to finish Philip Farmer's *Dark Is the Sun*. Its four hundred-plus pages grew stiff beneath my despairing gaze and would not turn. This review became overdue, and still each time I'd read another few pages it would happen again. My problem is I'm unable to read fast enough and carelessly enough to enter the hypnagogic state demanded by this sort of book. *Dark Is the Sun* is meant for speed readers whose high-speed attention will construct from the asphalt of the prose a world of low resolution and high escapist involvement; not a novel but a daydream in remedial-reading English. It doesn't work on me. Like a skeptical visitor to Disneyland, I find my attention straying to all the inauthentic details: the concrete trunks of the palm trees, the threadbare astroturf, the staticky roar of the android lion. After a while only the tourists are of interest—i.e., the question of whether *anyone* can enjoy something so routinely phony and, if so, whether it's the inauthenticity itself that they enjoy, or have they, incredibly, suspended disbelief.

It begins slowly. In chapter 1 the hero, a teenage Tarzan, sets off from his barbarian home to quest for a bride. In chapter 2 he saves his dog Jum from a furry blue crocodile, or athaksum. In the process, Farmer spells out his artistic credo:

“Hang on!” Deyv shouted. Later, he was to think that this had been nonsense advice, since the dog had no hands. But he had to say something; that was the essence of a human being. Say something, even if it means nothing, because as long as one is talking, one is alive.

(For the entire one hundred pages I could get through, Deyv’s exploits were frugally padded out with such say-something, say-anything maunderings.)

In chapter 3 Deyv walks along an Old Highway and admires the jungle scenery. In chapter 4 he flees a pack of hungry khratikl:

There were perhaps a hundred of them. They flew swiftly, cutting across the wind, their leathery wings flapping. Deyv staggered across the short grass. His legs felt weak, and his head swam. He drove on, aware that Jum and Aejiip were not running in their best form by any means. Nonetheless, they were faster than he. A glance showed him that the khratikl had veered to cut him off. He tried to increase his pace, and he did. But not by much. Whatever had shocked him had taken a great deal out of him.

That paragraph is representative. Without perpetrating any real, and possibly amusing, howlers, the prose clunks and thuds and hobbles from one perfunctory thrill to the next. The imaginative component is of a piece with the prose; one composite animal follows another, but not one is scary or even interestingly odd because Farmer’s heart isn’t in it. He knows, from his earlier imitations of ERB & Company, what formulas to follow, and he follows them like a train on its tracks.

Why flog a dead horse? First, because Farmer is able to produce much better work, when his imagination is in gear, and it should be made clear to him that no one mistakes this mouthwash for roses. One assumes he manufactures it because he thinks it’s what the audience demands. More likely, it’s what his editors tell him the audience demands, and that is the second reason for flogging this dead horse: *Dark Is the Sun* typifies the worst tendencies of commercial publishing to cash in on any established success with any imitation, however brummagem and tawdry. Farmer is no stranger to such trafficking. Indeed, he’s sometimes shown genius in finding legal ways to expropriate literary properties as diverse as Edgar Rice Burroughs and Kurt Vonnegut. But he always showed himself to be a merry sort of rogue in those encounters, out-Heroding Herod with X-rated hyper-vulgarity. This time he’s eliminated all gleeful traces of his own talent for outrage, and

what is left is perfectly represented by Ballantine's klutzy, sanitized-Frazetta cover art. Science fiction offers so many richer varieties of Barsoom-derived opiates that even the twelve-year-olds and the addicts should have a hard time getting off on this one.

Charles Harness's *The Catalyst* is a different sort of sad story, an honest effort to write a good book, which fails through one fatal miscalculation: it shouldn't have been sf. An earlier sf novel, *The Ring of Ritornel*, has been held up as an exemplar of baroque pizzazz by both Damon Knight and Brian Aldiss—sf as choreographed by Busby Berkeley. Unlike that book, *The Catalyst* is set in a gray day-after-tomorrow where not much happens. A team of scientists sets out to find a catalyst that will allow them to synthesize a new drug economically. They do, and then (surprise) Trialine, the drug so synthesized, proves to be effective against novarella, a dread disease Harness has invented for the express purpose of giving Trialine something to do. Along the way, boy meets girl.

On these dry bones there is nevertheless enough meat that even two-thirds of the way through, the story seemed redeemable. However, most even of these meaty bits, which concern office politics in the chemical industry, are spoiled by the blurry focus of the near-future setting. Harness's incidental extrapolations don't hang together: the industrial scenery seems rather contemporary, but there are grown-up clones on hand—in A.D. 2006. If the same tale had been set in 1980, as it easily could have been, Harness would have had the advantage of drawing from live models. Concerning chemical technology he obviously knows whereof he speaks, but when the periodic table intrudes itself it is like a visit from Godzilla. The girl destined for the hero's arms is a clone traumatized by her lack of a navel. Even sillier, by way of supplying an apothecosis with some transcendental wallop, she gets a belly button. Shades of Pinocchio!

To become a rock musician one need not have mastered counterpoint, and one can begin to publish science fiction with only a rudimentary knowledge of the craft (never mind the art) of writing. Characteristically, sf writers have had public apprenticeships. We start off young and—again, like rock stars—are under a certain pressure to remain, as Dylan has it, "Forever Young," since even today's expanded audience is still predominantly adolescent and college-aged and wants to read stories that speak to the condition of youth. This being so, it isn't hard to understand why so many of sf's brightest stars have attained their stardom by their mid-twenties.

One of the recentest such stars, already with two Nebulas to her credit, is Vonda McIntyre. McIntyre's stories, collected in *Fireflood*, appeal not just to the condition of youth but, more particularly, to the condition of female youth in the seventies—to, in a word, girls. And why not? Most sf till now has taken the form of daydreams for adolescent boys (e.g., *Dark Is the Sun*); why shouldn't girls be allowed the same cheap thrills? (Not a pejorative, mind you, but an allusion to Janis Joplin.)

In assessing *Fireflood*, therefore, I want to distinguish between its strictly literary failings, which may be ascribed to inexperience, and two extraliterary features, which, though I find them off-putting, have undoubtedly contributed to McIntyre's success with her chosen audience. These are: (1) a worldview that divides everyone into an uncaring, imperceptive, closed-minded Them and a loving, hip, holistic, and victimized Us; and (2) a tendency toward tears. In story after story characters are implored to surrender to their stifled need to cry or else are discovered crying as the curtain rises by way of proving they're one of Us. An instance, from the Nebula-winning "Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand":

"Can any of you cry?" she said. "Can any of you cry for me and my despair, or for them and their guilt, or for small things and their pain?" She felt tears slip down her cheeks.

They did not understand her; they were offended by her crying.

Well yes, they were, rather. Though I can wet a handkerchief with the best of them, I do find such solicitations tasteless, not to say mawkish. If a drama awakens sorrow and pity, well and good, but a writer shouldn't ask for tears, not, especially, in a tone of righteousness. But girls will be girls, and vice versa. The fact remains that McIntyre is a talented storyteller and, more commendably, a writer who works at perfecting her craft and extending her range. Rarely is she lazy or slipshod or glib (as all the other books under review are, in part or, in Farmer's case, in whole). Her plots unfold naturally and move at the right, deliberate pace. Her characters, when not being forced into the role of spokespersons for Us, are modeled with conscious art and seem dimensional. Once a story has got off the ground, she can write spare, modulated prose of varying intensity that bears comparison to Christopher Priest's or her mentor's, Ursula LeGuin. Best of all (if the arrangement of the stories in the book can be construed as chronological), she seems to be moving from strength to strength. In the concluding novella, "Aztecs," she is able finally to write "paid" to an emotional theme dealt with obsessively, but never quite successfully, in many of the other stories—the need to renounce a love that

is in conflict with personal growth. In “Aztecs,” the science-fictional metaphor is the natural embodiment of this theme, and McIntyre is able to dispense with homilies and lachrymose appeals for sympathy. She just tells her story, and it works.

While *Fireflood* certainly merits an A for effort, it doesn’t work. Though McIntyre usually steers clear of formula hugger-mugger, she is capable of sacrificing narrative consistency on the altar of those old heathen idols of the pulps, Suspense and Adventure. In the title story the heroine, a human being mutated into a super armadillo, is fleeing from Them and is slowed in her subterranean progress by tree roots whose “malleable consistency made them harder to penetrate than solid rock.” Somehow I doubt that, but if there were no obstacles in her path how would she overcome them? In the matter of extending her range, McIntyre often attempts more than she can handle. On the evidence of the one satirical story, “Recourse, Inc.,” I’m convinced she has no sense of humor. She needs lots of room for takeoff: her very short stories lack all pith and crackle. But these are negligible failings and don’t weigh much in the balance against the success of a story like “Aztecs.” Vonda McIntyre will undoubtedly carry off a lot more Nebulas.