

## Sic, Sic, Sic

There can be few more alarming examples of the decline of scholarly standards in American universities during the recent decades of rapid growth than this collection of essays about Arthur C. Clarke, edited—as part of a series—by Drs. Joseph D. Olander, an associate professor of anthropology at Florida International University, and Martin Harry Greenberg, director of graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. Academic critics are traditionally forgiven for flat prose and laborings of the obvious, but the infelicity, imprecision, and leaden-headedness of the introduction to which these learned gentlemen have signed their names are not up to the level of literacy one may demand of an undergraduate paper.

A sample:

One of the major images which emerges about Arthur C. Clarke is that of “hard science fiction” writer. When all is said and done, Clarke’s authentic commitment seems to be to the universe and, like Asimov, to the underlying sets of laws of behavior by which the mystery inherent in it will probably be explained.

How is it, then, that he is associated with mysticism, mythology, theological speculation, and “cosmic” loneliness? Hard science fiction, if nothing else, usually needs to come to closure, in its qualities of validity and consistency, with specific explanations and scientific justifications. Yet much of Clarke’s fiction pushes the mind outward and ever open. If this is accomplished by an explication of assumed or searched-for universal laws, it is understandable and consistent with science-based extrapolation.

Not all the contributors achieve the same heady combination of slow-think and academic duckspeak, but only two of the nine essays evidence any amplitude of argument or close attention to a text. Many offer no more than descriptive catalogues of Clarke’s stories and novels without

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Review of *Arthur C. Clarke*, by Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg; and *The Best of Arthur C. Clarke, Volume 1 (1937–1955), Volume 2 (1956–1972)*, edited by Angus Wells.

any effort at seeking other meanings than those the author himself has underlined. In “The Cosmic Loneliness of Arthur C. Clarke,” Thomas Clareson explicitly denies a psychological dimension to his fiction, maintaining that Clarke’s “loneliness” can be understood as a relation solely between mankind and the cosmos. It is disingenuous in a critic, not to say evasive, to discuss Clarke’s loneliness without ever noting such salient associated features of his fiction as the virtual absence of interpersonal conflict (commonly called drama), the exclusion of women from his dramatis personae, and an affective landscape as arid as the moon’s.

By his refusal to interpret Clarke’s work, Clareson at least avoids the pitfalls that Betty Harfat and Robert Plank fall into as they try, in the tradition of *The Pooh Perplex*, to fit Clarke into Jungian and Freudian schemas. Of the two, Harfat’s essay is the more awesomely malapropos. She devotes entire pages to explaining the spiritual truths of yoga, and when she finally gets round to relating these to Clarke, the result is such butchery as Cinderella’s sisters experienced trying to squeeze into her slipper. None of the contributors, however, surpasses Robert Plank in his ability to write passages that can evoke a proverbial sense of wonder. Here he is discussing the fortuitous resemblance he has observed between the extraterrestrial slabs in 2001, “a heavy block of black granite” in St. Exupery’s *Citadelle*, and a 1962 painting by an Austrian artist:

How can such a convergence of view be explained? . . . Do we have here a manifestation of a universal, genetically transmitted and unconsciously understood symbol, that postulated psychic structure which plays a rather small role in Freud’s theory but which Jung makes a cornerstone of his? Very little has been done so far to confirm or refute the hypothesis through empirical studies. The thought rarely strikes laymen that this might be needed. It is unlikely for instance that Gilliat (a reviewer of the film) made any survey to find out whether to “atheists” (by which term she probably, though erroneously, means to designate people without religious feeling) the slabs do or do not look like girders. The newer discipline of semiotics might claim the problem as within its jurisdiction, but does not seem to have gotten round to it. It would be preposterous to think that we could solve it here. As an indication of the emotional significance of the slabs, though, it is highly telling.

Of course, quoting out of context is always unfair. One must read Plank’s entire essay to appreciate the degree of muddle he is able, in only twenty-eight pages, to achieve.

The two essays in the book that are not major intellectual embarrassments (those by David N. Samuelson and John Huntington) first appeared in *Science Fiction Studies*, a Canadian journal that has proven, along with the *English Foundation*, that one may accord academic attention to sf without becoming an accomplice in the decline of the West. However, with the scholastic fortune of science fiction entrusted to the likes of Olander, Greenberg, & Co., I have little hope of the field's escaping a ghettoization within academe parallel to its ghettoization without.

Poor Clarke—he has been as ill-served by his publisher as by his critics. In 1973, Sidgwick and Jackson brought out *The Best of Arthur C. Clarke* at £2.50; four years later they have reissued it in two paperback-sized volumes, shoddily produced, for £3.95 each. Inflation alone can't account for a price rise of 316 percent. Clarke is a popular writer, and when early editions of his books wear out, libraries automatically restock them. I can think of no other explanation for such pricing policy. Surely for £7.90 one might expect *The Complete Short Stories* rather than this haphazard selection. There are no criteria by which these eighteen stories can be considered their author's best work. The first four are the rawest juvenilia. (The earliest of these dates from 1937, not 1932, as the title on the book jacket of volume 1 mistakenly declares—a fair sample of Sidgwick and Jackson's production standards.) No stories have been included from *Tales from the White Hart*, and only a single vignette from *Reach for Tomorrow*, collections that represent Clarke's maturity. Further, too many of the stories chosen have obsolesced badly and can only be read as period pieces.

On the whole, however, Clarke suffers less than most equally prolific writers would by having such a random sample served up as his best. Aside from the few undeniable classics, such as "The Star" and "A Meeting with Medusa" (both included), his work is more notable for its reliable evenness than for peaks of excellence and troughs of failed ambition. He writes to a formula—but the pleasure of reading his shorter fictions is like that afforded by watching good billiard players. Clarke is an expert at inventing scenarios that illustrate Newton's laws of motion, of deploying vector quantities with human names in the ideal frictionless environment, not of green baize, but of outer space.