

1981 and Counting

Algis Budrys

Some people say Algis Budrys is the only real science fiction critic in America, where there are a lot of book reviewers. He is the son of diplomats who were unable to return home after World War II, and he has lived here ever since.

Budrys is best known for his novel *Rogue Moon*, though the recent *Michaelmas* was also well received. His most recent book is *Some Will Not Die* (Starblaze), a revised version of the earlier *False Night*. He reviews books for the *Washington Post* and other newspapers, and his criticism appears regularly in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Many of the major novels of 1981 were stages of larger works—Julian May's *The Many-Colored Land*, Gene Wolfe's *The Claw of the Conciliator*, to name two that we may be sure have been taken permanently into the SF literature. 1981 was the year in which it was announced that Arthur C. Clarke had not, after all, retired, and that Isaac Asimov was working on another book in the *Foundation* series. Frank Herbert produced another *Dune* book, not quite a sequel to its predecessors, yet what else but a sequel? In the fantasy domain of SF, there was the announcement of Terry Brooks's sequel to *The Sword of Shanarra*, and the news of more volumes in the *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*.

In a literature that is increasingly discussed as if it contained, nothing but novels, 1981 will undoubtedly be looked back on as a year indissolubly tied to other years. May's novel is a major event; inventive, rich, the work of an author so long absent from the field that she was little more than a legend to the present generation. But it won't be 1981 that's recalled in connection with this occurrence; the *Saga of the Pliocene Exile* will be said to have appeared "in the early 1980s," as will Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*. What we have here is a year that for one reason or another will not carve its particular niche in the traditions of our field, despite the fact that a great deal of good and sometimes superb work appeared in it.

Or so it might be said. But we haven't talked about the short stories, of which this anthology will give you what I think is the best possible sampling. I commend them to you without much further comment; you'll see for yourself that inventiveness and freshness have not vanished from the field, and that the media for shorter work are obviously alive and well.

What I would like to talk to you about is this instance of the difference between what is perceived and what happened. I think this is a difference that has been widening. Not dangerously, alas for dramatic propositions. But enough so that we might do well to consider it, and rein it in a little.

One can hardly blame publishers of novels for pretending that novels are all that are important. And since it's largely the book publishers who command the advertising and public relations means to communicate the sense of what's going on in the field, the reader even of many magazines is apt to feel that anything not a novel is somehow less considerable. Again, that's not hard to understand—the magazines carry the ads and the book review columns that subtly reinforce this impression. And should a magazine carry a biographical sketch of, or an interview with an author, what is usually mentioned is the work published in books. Some of the fiction in the magazines is labeled part of "a novel in progress," or an excerpt from "a forthcoming novel." It all goes to make the freestanding short story, novelette, or novella appear to be some sort of by-the-way thing.

And yet the major influential works in American SF have almost always been of less than novel length; most of them have been outright short stories, little packages of utter revolution.

This is not invariably true. But this would be an utterly different field without John Campbell's "Twilight," Fritz Leiber's "Coming Attraction," Cordwainer Smith's "Scanners Live in Vain," Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s "A Canticle for Leibowitz," or James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" It would be different as well without *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *The Space Merchants*, or *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but again and again it has been the short work that left ripples spreading through the field in

general, whereas even the greatest novels-the aforementioned three, plus *The Demolished Man*, *Slan*, *Dune*, *Childhood's End*, to add some others-have signaled not so much a general change as a milestone in a particular writer's career. And no career, no matter how mighty, is ultimately as important as a shift in the direction of an entire literature.

How can a short story do this, when a novel has so much more scope? Well, a novel-particularly the recent SF novel, where the fashion is for the epic-is about many things, for all that it may have a strong unifying theme. A short story-an ideal short story-is about some one thing, and in the right hands can be about some one thing that doesn't ordinarily occur but occurs with great force. And it occurs in one swift moment of crystallization, with an almost audible pang, whereas the usual novel grows and flowers in a more majestic manner. The truly effective short story is harder to write than a novel of equivalent worth.

This is a fact that professionals have long recognized, and for that reason, when they instituted the Nebula Awards, they were careful to see to it that short work would be properly rewarded. And whereas the novel Nebula is usually won by an established name in the field, the short-work Nebulas have been quick to recognize the uncommon newcomer.

In a sense, this is a reflection of the fact that the major novelists come from the ingenious young short-story writers, by and large. By and large, there would be a natural tendency to seek out the newer names, to let the established writer wait for his novel Nebula or to rest content in Nebulas past, although that tendency does not express itself as clearly when one looks down the lists over the years. But whatever the actual factors are, the short-work awards represent a consciousness for the future, while the novel Nebulas honor the present.

And so I've verged on giving the impression that the short work is, after all, recognized as much for what it promises as for what it is. But this is not true in any common manner. It is possible to believe, when a new writer appears with short work of Nebula quality, that he or she will probably be a major novelist of the future. In that sense, there is a promise. But it is a promise that exists in addition to the independent merit of the work. If it is not fulfilled, if the author never does produce a major novel, he or she may still have a great influence on the field.

As "Don A. Stuart," author of "Twilight" and usherer-in of the Golden Age of 1940s SF, John Campbell never wrote a novel. Ray Bradbury's "novels" of the 1950s are short-story collections gathered from the 1940s. Theodore Sturgeon's reputation rests not so much on his novels, proficient as they are, as on works such as "Microcosmic God," "Killdozer," and countless other novelettes and novellas, including "Baby Is Three," the core of his best-known novel, *More Than Human*. The novel of A Canticle for Leibowitz is not as important as the original short story. The novel of Lester del Rey's "Nerves" or of James Blish's "A Case of Conscience" did not

strike with the impact of the original novellas. And this pattern, laid down in a time that may be little more than misty legend for most of today's readers, persists.

If Damon Knight, for all his good books, is still a man remembered almost exclusively for his short stories, and if few recall that *Fahrenheit 451* was originally "The Fireman" but quite properly consider Bradbury essentially a writer in short forms, there is still Harlan Ellison, and there is still the fact that John Varley, James Tiptree/Alice Sheldon, George R. R. Martin, Lisa Tuttle, Tom Reamy, and, yes, even Joe Haldeman and Joanna Russ, would occupy almost precisely the same places in this field if they had never written a novel. And their names form only part of what could easily be a much longer list. We want to remember that the new Foundation novel is the first Foundation novel Asimov ever wrote: the longest previous piece was a two-part serial, and even so was unique for length.

The fact is that the history of this field would be much what it actually is if all its books were dovetailed short stories or expanded shorter works; although the percentage of freestanding novels has risen sharply over the past twenty and particularly the last ten years, still a large proportion of what we see in the libraries and on the "new books" table at the store continues the historic tendency to assembled work. It is not possible to go on from this to a statement that people buy these books out of a nostalgia for the

original short stories; that wouldn't account for the multigenerational popularity of the Foundation series or The Martian Chronicles.

No, the conclusion one comes to is that SF readers, unlike the readers of general fiction or of any of the "category" fictions of which SF is mistakenly adduced to be one, on some level recognize that the short-story form is the essential SF form. We like our books with multiple climaxes, casts of characters who may come and go in midstream, events that come in series rather than develop in parallel. We don't like them to

the exclusion of all other possible forms available in long formats, but we do like them, very much, and in that way we differ from most other readers.

What this seems to reflect is some version of the old saw that in SF; the idea is the hero. I would rather argue that in SF a demonstration of what can be done with the idea is the hero-i.e., the thing to which the reader thrills. But however complex you want to make the concept, it remains true that in a literature of ideas, the tendency would be toward the best vehicle for defined ideas, and thus toward the short story. The problem with the short story in a commercial literature, which SF obviously is, is that the short story doesn't pay very much. Therefore, the prudent writer is motivated toward the novel.

Behold, then, this book full of the work of imprudent writers? That hardly seems a fair description. Let us think again:

For one thing, it's possible for a type of writing to be an obvious commercial property without being a thoroughgoing commercial literature. SF is aggressively marketed by publishing houses that turn it to account, and I think we can safely presume that those houses would at times publish something else, if they could find a type of product that brought in a higher return on the investment. From that end of the business, the transaction is a simple profit-and-loss event.

A book is a package, marketed like package goods. And although in SF-almost uniquely in SF-the magazines verge on being cottage industries, directed by what amount to family-held small corporations and in at least one case produced, all but the printing and binding, in the publisher's own exurban home, it is nevertheless possible to see the magazines, too, from an accountant's point of view. That this cold view does not represent the paramount truth-that even the glossy Omni owes its existence to a publisher's personal preference for and heavy involvement in it-does not dispel the fact that the cold view exists, or that the casual observer may readily see it as the only view. But the writer sees it all from a different stand-

point, and has sufficient evidence that the reader, too, does not share the corporate comptroller's simple criteria.

Every writer of SF, from novice to Grand Master; is well aware that there is more than enough money available for work whose essential quality need be no different from what it was in the days when all rights in perpetuity for a novel were going for three hundred dollars. (Admittedly, six hundred dollars was more usual, but being totally swindled by an evanescent corporation was also not unheard of.) Every writer in the field over the age of fifty has worked under those conditions, which now make for amusing anecdotes at the table, and there are plenty of them. An awareness of money thus saturates the field, and in most cases is restimulated with some poignancy when the first of the month rolls around or the favorite child elects for an Ivy League education. But that is the writer as business manager; it is not the writer alone at midnight with a blank piece of paper, self-assigned to the task of making something come to life that has never been seen before.

The buck stops there. Some writers are content to produce work not particularly new, or not new at all except in unessential details, but you won't find any of that work here. Most writers, when writing, are hindered by the thought of money; any thought not concentrated on the task at hand is an intrusion and tends to get itself thrown out.

Whether the finished work will be good, bad, or indifferent, according to the writer's talent and circumstances, while it is happening it is an exquisitely personal process, dependent on inner rearrangements of everything that the writer's entire life of thought has made of every piece of information ever presented to the mind by the senses. It is something that has never happened to anyone else in the

same way, and never will happen to anyone else in that way, throughout the history of human self-awareness. The writer writing is situated at a unique moment in the history of the universe, and knows it. The writer writing a novel has moments of respite. The writer doing shorter work does not.

Lest we lose ourselves in the grandeur of this romantic vision, let us remember that while this condition is noble, it is not elective, and furthermore not unique to writing or even to the recognized arts. It comes with the territory. It can be described in simple Pavlovian pleasure/pain terms, and can be made to seem little just as readily as it can be made to seem transcendent. But what it does mean in any case is that the inner sensation of writing finds its purest, most intense form in short writing.

This does not mean that any given short story is "better" than any given novel. The sensation of writing has nothing to do with the quality or nature of the finished work. But it does have to do with how the writer feels at midnight. And I think, in truth, that top-flight writers feel more intensely. Therefore I am suspicious of the writer who has stopped doing short stories, and if you look around you will notice that very few of the writers who do more than entertain you as before have stopped doing short stories even when it makes no economic sense to continue. And this is just as true outside SF, except that it so happens SF offers a deeper and broader range of media for short fiction than any other field.

Obviously, I don't think it does just so happen; it is inherent in the nature of the field, reinforcing the nature of writing, that makes it happen. And when we speak of the nature of the field, we speak of the reader.

Obviously, nothing would happen without the reader. Not so obviously, no one concerned with the process of creating, editing, publishing, marketing, and critically evaluating writing can have an exact idea of what goes on in the reader. We do not read the same way; there is a glass wall between what we are and what we were-readers moved by reading to a desire to write or at least shape writing. And it is the central irony of our present estate that even the attempt, let alone the successful attempt, has forever removed us from being able to read simply. We all try to remember what that was like, and we all try to guess; we can identify an "audience" (although

we do not know precisely which given individual might be a member of it unless he or she steps forward and tells us), but we cannot identify a reader.

So, like the marketers, we tend to speak of markets. There is no other rational approach. But we practice the irrational; what will pass through the glass wall is intuition, and this unquantifiable but very real sense of reader presence informs our midnights. I don't think any two of us could agree on what that presence is, exactly. Fortunately, we avoid making comparisons. I know who you are; my colleague, over there, probably has some different picture of you, but I would not care to disturb his equanimity by correcting it, and I appreciate her showing me the same courtesy. Nevertheless, there are some objective evidences, and these tend to point toward the idea that the SF reader, too, tends to favor short work in the sense that it seems to be more readily discussible.

Writers very rarely meet readers in an innocent situation. One party or the other—probably both—is aware that whatever is said will be conditioned by something with more overtones than the usual one-to-one interaction. So I can't be sure. But it seems to me, over a span of thirty years, that while you cannot generally expect readers to recall the titles or even the authors of stories read some time ago—barring a few cherished favorites—what readers remember about a novel is the title, and what they remember about a short story is the central statement. What, for instance, is *Stranger in a Strange Land* about? Well, it's about a fellow, raised by Martians, who comes home to Earth with a new and effective slant on religion. But what is that slant, exactly? Ah, well, that takes several paragraphs of rumination and discussion—not a bad thing in itself, but inherently fuzzy—whereas Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall" says that people who have never seen the stars will go crazy with fear at their first glimpse of the open night sky, no matter how glorious; period, sharp edge.

A defined packet of readily retrievable information, tagged by an emotional response, has been stored forever in the reader's mind. It is a clear-cut piece of personal experience. Together with similar experiences stored nearby, it can be used to build up an ongoing picture of what SF is, and what good

SF is, and what sort of SF the reader would like to see more of.

It can do more than that-it can provide the reader with checkpoints along the road he has come. I can tell you exactly where I was when I first read "Nightfall"-curled up on a surplus U.S. Marine bunk at the freshman campus of the University of Miami, in the Everglades, turning the pages of a brand-new copy of the first edition of *Adventures in Time and Space*, in early 1948. I can tell you where I was when I read "Twilight," and I can do the same for you in re "Coming Attraction." But although I am very fond of *Pebble in the Sky*, have read *The Moon Is Hell* with admiration and fascination, and have read and admired a great many Fritz Leiber novels, the experience of reading and assimilating a novel has its own rewards but does not usually have that moment of crystallization.

And I think it's through those moments that a reader places himself in context as a reader of SF; such moments define for her, in a sense, what SF is; they help to form the impulses that will lead to buying a proffered book or not buying it, to support a magazine or regard it with boredom, and thus to encourage the field to trend in some particular direction in preference to other possible directions. It is also through those moments, of course, that the impulse to become a writer is coalesced.

So 1981, despite the many good novels that appeared in it, is by circumstance a year in which the role of the shorter work emerges with particular clarity; it is for the work in this volume, very likely, that 1981 will be remembered specifically, by readers and by readers-turning-writers, and it is because of outstanding short work that any number of SF futures will be dated from it.

And now I leave you to it.