

MIMSY WERE THE KUTTNERS

by James Gunn

version 1.0

Scanned from The Road to Science Fiction vol. 3 by drOrlof

In 1940 two fantasy writers married and produced a family of science fiction writers. The fantasy writers were Henry Kuttner and C. (for Catherine) L. Moore. Up to that time Kuttner (1914 - 1958) had written mostly fantasy and horror stories for *Weird Tales* and humorous science fiction for *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Startling Stories*, and Moore (1911-1987) had written mostly romantic fantasy for *Weird Tales* and an occasional science fiction story for *Astounding*.

After their marriage almost everything they wrote was a collaboration in some degree under seventeen different pseudonyms, of which the most important the ones they used for the stories they published in the wartime *Astounding* - were Lewis Padgett and Lawrence O'Donnell. Beginning early in 1942, *Astounding* began to publish these new kinds of Kuttner-Moore stories; over the next ten years it would publish forty-seven of them, forty-one of them between 1942 and 1947, thirty-three under the name of Padgett, nine under the name of O'Donnell, the remainder under Kuttner or Moore.

The metamorphosis of the Kuttner-Moore style was as dramatic as the later rebirth of Robert Silverberg as a literary artist. Whether it was because of the newly combined talents or a conscious decision to create a new kind of story, Kuttner and Moore began to produce fiction of dramatic substance and often with a surprising literary quality.

The stories that were mostly Kuttner's usually were published under the name of Lewis Padgett; they included "The Twonky," "Piggy Bank," "Mimsy Were the Borogoves," "When the Bough Breaks," "What You Need," "Line to Tomorrow," "Private Eye," two novellas, "The Fairy Chessmen" and "Tomorrow and Tomorrow," a series about a drunken inventor named Gallagher, and a series about mutant telepaths called "Baldies." Under the O'Donnell name he wrote most of "Clash by Night" and the novel *Fury*. Later *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* published "Two-Handed Engine" under the Kuttner name.

The stories that were mostly Moore's were published under her own name or the name of O'Donnell; they included "The Children's Hour," "No Woman Born," and "Vintage Season." The last, published in the September 1946 *Astounding*, and "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" were the two finest stories produced by the Kuttner-Moore collaboration, and both were selected for *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame* volumes by the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA).

Science fiction has produced an unusual number of collaborations. Such joint efforts work variously and variously well. At best, the authors work as fast as or faster than they can work separately and produce work that neither can produce alone. Some collaborators write separate sections and then rework each other's sections; some have one writer do a first draft and the other the final draft. The most successful seem to work closely together throughout, with one picking up where the other leaves off. At least this was the method used by Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth, and by the Kuttners.

Moore described their method in an introduction to a paperback edition of *Fury*:

After we'd established through long discussion the basic ideas, the background and the characters, whichever of us felt like it sat down and started. When that one ran down, the other, being fresh to the story, could usually see what ought to come next, and took over. The action developed as we went along. We kept changing off like this until we finished. A story goes fast that way. Each of us edited the other's copy a little when we took over, often going back a line or two and rephrasing to make the styles blend. We never disagreed

seriously over the work. The worst clash of opinion I can remember ended with one of us saying, "Well, I don't agree, but since you feel more strongly than I do about it, go ahead."

By 1948 the Kuttners' contributions to Astounding had dwindled to only a few stories. They had returned to Kuttner's birthplace, Los Angeles, where Kuttner earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Southern California and nearly completed a master's degree in English (in 1958 he died of a heart attack at the age of forty-four). Moore also earned a bachelor's degree and a master's degree.

Their production of science fiction in these years dwindled as a consequence of their studies, and as a consequence of their creation of seven mystery novels - five of them between 1956 and 1958 and nine novels or novellas of science fantasy for Startling Stories and Thrilling Wonder Stories between 1947 and 1952. After Kuttner's death Moore taught fiction writing at Southern Cal and wrote screenplays for Warner Brothers' Maverick, and 77 Sunset Strip before her remarriage.

The Kuttners' period of intensive science fiction writing was brief, only half a dozen years, but they helped carry Astounding through the war years when Heinlein, Asimov, de Camp, van Vogt, Sturgeon, and many others of the new writers who had been attracted to the Campbell Astounding were busy with other matters, particularly the war effort. And the Kuttners sustained the Golden Age with such skill that no drop in quality was perceptible. Kuttner was named favorite science fiction writer in a 1945 fan poll as information about his Pseudonyms became widely known.

More important, they broadened science fiction to encompass a concern for literary qualities and cultural reverberations; they expanded its techniques to include those prevalent in the mainstream, and expanded its scope to include the vast cultural tradition outside science fiction. Much of the development of the genre over the next twenty years would follow paths the Kuttners pioneered.