

Holmdel Science Fiction Discussion Group
Club Notice - 5/17/79

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

(All meetings are in room 3H-506 on Wednesdays at noon.)

DATE ----	TOPIC -----
6/6/79	IMPERIAL EARTH by Arthur C. Clarke
6/27/79	STAND ON ZANZIBAR by John Brunner

Our library is in HO 2D-634A. Rich Ditch (x3432) is librarian.
Evelyn Leeper (HO 1B-527 x6334) is Club book-buyer.

1. Our June 27th discussion will be of the John Brunner novel STAND ON ZANZIBAR. This is a fairly long novel, so it is recommended that you start it early. Evelyn will accept individual purchase requests until 3 P.M., Monday.

2. At the last meeting everyone submitted their list of two books that they wanted the discussion group to read. It appears that everyone's selections were available (or that they could satisfy themselves with alternate selections that were available) so the attached sheet is a list of books that have been chosen. On June 6 these books will be scheduled and shortly thereafter a list will be circulated to club members listing the dates and approximate F&SF price including discounts, tax, and shipping charges. We will order the books in five meeting groups, so you can tell Evelyn at that time which of the first five discussion books you would like her to buy for you. This whole scheme just may work!

3. Dave Ungar is planning an evening listening and perhaps a discussion of Firesign Theater tapes at his apartment (I think it's an apartment) in Eatontown on Friday evening, May 25. Firesign Theater is often on the fringes of science fiction and occasionally there work has some interesting science fictional ideas. People interested in the Firesign Theater evening should contact Dave on x3892.

Mark Leeper
HO 1B-512 x7093

Books Chosen For Discussion

Brunner, John	THE SHEEP LOOK UP
Clarke, Arthur C.	A FALL OF MOONDUST
Clarke, Arthur C.	CHILDHOOD'S END
Cooper, Edmund	A FAR SUNSET
Cowper, Richard	THE TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS
Harrison, Harry	BILL, THE GALACTIC HERO
Laumer, Keith	DINOSAUR BEACH
Le Guin, Ursula K.	THE DISPOSSESSED
Leiber, Fritz	A SPECTER IS HAUNTING TEXAS
McCaffrey, Anne	DRAGONFLIGHT
Pohl, Frederik	THE SPACE MERCHANTS
Stapledon, Olaf	STAR MAKER
Van Vogt, A.E.	THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER
Van Vogt, A.E.	THE WORLD OF NULL-A
Vance, Jack	THE EYES OF THE OVERWORLD

LUCIFER'S HAMMER
by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
Fawcett Crest, 640 pages, \$2.50

Lately I've gotten the feeling that Larry Niven has run out of good ideas for science fiction novels. As a result, it seems he has turned to more and more collaborations, such as the recent series of books with Jerry Pournelle. "Mote In God's Eye" was long but acceptable as a form of SF; "Inferno" was junk but mercifully short; "Lucifer's Hammer" seems to combine the junkiness of "Inferno" with the exceedingly long story of "Mote".

"Lucifer's Hammer" is concerned with a very large comet, called Hammer-Brown after its discoverers, that collides with earth - certainly a science fiction theme. However, the treatment is strictly disaster novel, with a list of "Dramatis Personae" filling two pages.

The book can be divided into three major sections, corresponding to before, during, and after "Hammerfall". In true Disaster Story (DS) fashion, we follow the lives of each of the characters through all three sections, cutting from one storyline to another. Using all 640 pages, our authors cleverly interweave these storylines, bringing us to a finale where the forces of true love, nuclear power, the space program, and a little mustard gas triumph over anarchy, black power, cannibalism, religious crazies, and the environmentalists. As the story closes on a new ice age, we can rest assured that the Forces of Good will have Man spreading out among the stars just as Robert Heinlein had meant us to do.

The most obvious problem with this novel is its size: it would make a far better story if it were only one third as long as it is. Niven and Pournelle expend 195 pages on their "before" section, covering a six month period starting with confirmation of the comet sighting. With so much lead in, I would think that both the SF and the DS readers would be bored. No wonder no one can envision making "Lucifer's Hammer" into a movie.

The "during" section, by comparison, covers 104 pages. Even though the action is far more interesting, this section is still too long, since we get "instant replays" of the disaster from each character's viewpoint. Quite redundant.

The final half of the book is concerned with the good guys preserving what they can of society from the savages newly created by the destruction of civilization. It is obvious that Niven and Pournelle do not agree with this quote from "Science Fiction Review": "Civilization is a luxury provided by looting the earth. In the long run it will be short-lived."

I have other objections to "Lucifer's Hammer" in addition to its exceeding length. Surely our authors could have invented better imagery than this from page 443: "The wind acted like a horde of catnip-maddened kittens." What magazine slush pile was that gem taken from, I wonder. And the most appropriate adjective I can conjure up for the nauseatingly repetitive phrase "Hot Fudge Sundae falls on Tuesdae this week", is icky. That phrase, by the way, is used to describe Hammerfall.

But those were minor annoyances; "Lucifer's Hammer" is offensive in other ways. One example is the harping about the imperative need for nuclear power (NP) accompanied by the character assassination of anyone who questions NP.

Barry Price, in charge of the San Joaquin Nuclear Project, lectures his mistress/assistant (or perhaps the reader) on NP versus fossil fuels as follows: "We've got the only clean way to go, and we've won every time the public got to vote." Obviously before Three Mile Island. Elsewhere, we find Barry upset at the politicians who want to hide SJNP behind 50 foot earthen embankments. Don't they know that "It's a beautiful plant", as Barry points out? Later, we are taken on a safety tour for a group of women from a nearby PTA. In three pages, the women are convinced that the cooling systems are designed to keep any problems inside, and if the PTA ladies are satisfied, then surely the reader should believe in the safety of NP? If that's not enough, even the baddies admit that NP isn't all that unsafe when compared to conventional power plants, just before they set out to destroy SJNP.

Accompanying this defense of NP is an attack upon NP opponents. TV newsman Harvy Randall encounters a woman in her twenties, wearing expensive jeans "not from The Gap". Mabe Bishop, of the People's Lobby, thinks people shouldn't be "hiding in the root cellar afraid of a comet", but should be concerned about "Spray cans ruining the atmosphere, destroying ozone, causing cancer. A new atomic power plant in the San Joaquin Valley making radioactive wastes that will be around for half a million years! The big Cadilacs and Lincolns that are burning m-megatons of gas." Our hero Harv leaves Mabe spluttering with this well-reasoned reply:

"The reason people are still burning gas in those big comfortable cars is that they can't get enough electricity because the air's

already full of crap from fossil fuel plants and we're running out of fossil fuels, and damned fools keep delaying the nuclear plants that might get us out of that particular box. And if I ever hear the words 'spray can' and 'ozone' again I'll track you down wherever you hide and throw up in your lap."

Another major source of annoyance in "Lucifer's Hammer" are the continual side references to science fiction. These include: Asimov's Foundation (the Mule, Galactic Empires); SF bookstores; SF authors at Apollo launch; Conan the Barbarian; "The Lord of the Rings" (the Shire, Galadriel); a magazine interview with Asimov; a quotation "from the introduction of a science fiction story by Gordon Dickson"; chapter headings from Clarke and Heinlein. My favorite occurs on page 559, when Tim Hamner first sees SJNP: "Oh, but its beautiful! It's like a 1930s Amazing Stories cover. The future!" Could these SF references be there to keep Niven's fans in line, convincing them that this really is an SF story, and not another "Towering Inferno"?

Some other points that didn't ring true with "Lucifer's Hammer" are:

- the Credit Card companies that took no precautions to protect themselves from massive debt problems when "Hammer Fever" caused people to stockpile survival materials purchased with plastic money;
- the political forcing of the Apollo/Soyuz mission in less than six months;
- the Russian kosmonaut's name of Pieter Jakov;
- Tim Hamner's sentry duty description of a rock that "looked like a Cadillac", not just like a car;
- the probability of Alim Nassor meeting old friend Sergeant Hooker after Hammerfall;
- the probability of three former lovers of Maureen Jellison, including one astronaut from the Apollo/Soyuz "Hammerlab" mission, arriving at the Jellison stronghold after Hammerfall.

My advice: wait for the Reader's Digest condensed version. In the meantime, read one or more of the following post civilization novels:

- "The Long Afternoon of Earth", by Leigh Brackett;
- "The Cloud Walker", by Edmund Cooper;
- "Earth Abides", by George Stewart.