

Holmdel Science Fiction Discussion Group
Club Notice - 9/10/80

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

(Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.)

<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
9/17/80	RAX [alias HELLO SUMMER, GOODBYE] by Michael G. Coney, rm 4H-205 [DORSAI! by Gordon Dickson, at HP]
10/8/80	CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ by Walter M. Miller, rm 4H-205
10/29/80	ICERIGGER by Alan Dean Foster, rm 4H-205
11/19/80	CITY by Clifford Simak, rm 4H-205
12/10/80	<to be announced>, rm 4H-205

Our library is in HO 2C-401. Rich Ditch (x3432) is librarian.
Debi Bennett (HP 1B-368 x2408) is in charge of South Plainfield
activities. Evelyn Leeper (HO 1E-321 x6334) is Club book-buyer.

1. As usual, here is your reminder that we have a meeting coming up. The book in question is RAX (also known as HELLO SUMMER, GOODBYE) by Michael G. Coney. If you happen to be one of our HP fellow travellers, your discussion book is DORSAI! by Gordon Dickson. Enjoy it.

2. We are going to try to get the notices out earlier. The mail room, which had been getting more dependable, seems to have let us down with our September 3 notice. It went out the evening of September 5 and most people did not receive it before the September 10 meeting.

3. My friends in the human factors department tell me that in a notice with four items, less than one person in a thousand will actually bother to read the second to last item. Almost everybody reads the first item and the last item. Most read the second item, but almost nobody reads the second to last item. Nobody seems to think that the third item is important enough to read. If this fact bores you, that's what you get for being the oddball by reading the third item.

4. Included in this notice is a review of FIRE-STARTER by Stephen King and of the new Broadway science fiction musical, "Charlie and Algernon."

Mark Leeper
HO 2B-515 x7093

CHARLIE AND ALGERNON
a play review by Mark R. Leeper

I think that since I was a teenager my two favorite novels have been WAR OF THE WORLDS by H. G. Wells and FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON by Daniel Keyes. So it was that I reacted with much gritting of teeth and trepidation when I read that WAR OF THE WORLDS was to be adapted into a musical. My reaction was much the same when I read a few months later that FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON was to undergo a similar fate. It is a bitter pill to see one of your most cherished works of fiction turned into a musical. When you really like a story, it is unlikely that any adaptation measures up to your impression of the story, and to be turned into a musical seems just about the worst fate imaginable for a serious science fiction story.

Well, Jeff Wayne's WAR OF THE WORLDS saw the light of day first and I had to admit that for the most part I had been wrong. It was not an ideal adaptation of the book, but it was a respectable one. The music did reinforce the feel of the story rather than distracting attention from it. With an opened mind, I waited to see the musical FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON. I saw CHARLIE AND ALGERNON in the first week it was open on Broadway. Watching the play I was once again back to gritting my teeth. The play, simply put, is odious. Even had the play been given a professional production from a cast and crew that were not making repeated and obvious blunders, it would have been a travesty on the book. Playwright David Rogers demonstrated that he could only read the novel on its most banal level, and even that level he did not understand.

FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON is the collection of perceptions of Charlie Gordon, a moron whose intelligence gradually rises to the genius level after he is the subject of a scientific experiment. His view of other people evolves from blind trust to profound understanding of the motivations of people, particularly those whose cruelty to his former self he did not understand or even perceive until his intelligence was increased. At the same time he is given a bird's eye view of the scientific community and civilization as a whole. That's the book. For the play, Charlie becomes more proficient at the sort of talents that a musical play writer, like Mr. Rogers, would appreciate. Charlie dances, sings, does passable comedy routines, and makes love. All this is the benefit of an increased intellect. One gets the impression that Mr. Rogers feels that civilization has been sliding downhill since vaudeville died.

Rogers consistently blunts the cruelty of the world to the moron Charlie to make the story more lovable. One of the most powerful scenes of the book has the tormentors of Charlie urging him to try to operate a complicated piece of bakery machinery in the hopes that Charlie will break it and hence give everyone a day off. Still unaware of his increasing intelligence, Charlie

demonstrates that he is the only person present who is capable of operating the machine. The tormentors suddenly see the butt of their jokes advancing beyond them. The play left the scene almost intact. It merely killed the scene by having everyone present seem proud of Charlie and how intelligent he has become. We are told tongue-in-cheek of Charlie's remarkable intellectual achievements, like reading WAR AND PEACE overnight, and later reading books at a second a page, but the high point of Charlie's development is when he sweeps his former teacher off her feet and takes her off to make love to her. This, we must believe, is what it was all for.

Had the play not been unintentionally tragic, the comedy of amateurish staging blunders would have made the afternoon much more bearable. The lighting of the stage went from being almost too bright to watch in some scenes to having the actors suddenly and unexpectedly immersed in darkness in the middle of a scene. The orchestra consistently drowned out the dialogue as an act of mercy. Early in the play two actors were moved onto the stage from either side on rolling platforms. It might have been an impressive sight if both actors hadn't almost lost their balance when the two platforms collided stage center. Charlie sings a song about how he is running through a maze while his own maze fails to descend to the stage. Oh, I haven't told you about the giant maze, have I? Charlie's intelligence tests have him run through a giant metal maze which drops mysteriously from the ceiling. An impressive sight but a totally silly idea. Charlie gets even worse abuse from Algernon the mouse who is slightly undertrained. In one scene Algernon fails to climb Charlie's leg on cue. In another he distracts attention from the action of the play by jumping up and down in his cage, trying to reach the open top that would have afforded him the freedom to choose his own acting parts. But the final indignity was when Algernon could be seen to leave his own little critical comment on Charlie's shoulder. Algernon, I couldn't have said it better myself.

FIRE-STARTER, by Stephen King. Viking, New York, 1980, 428p, Cloth, Novel, \$13.95. ISBN 0-670-31541-9.

Ten years ago, Andy McGee and his future wife, Vicky, took part in an experiment run by "The Shop" (a government agency even more secret than the CIA). The purpose of the experiment was to determine if a new drug, Lot 6, could bring about any sort of extra-sensory or psychic powers. Since most of the subjects went mad or committed suicide shortly after the experiment, no more testing was done. However, the Shop maintained surveillance on the remaining subjects.

It is now the present, and Andy McGee is running. His wife, who had developed mild telekinetic powers, was killed by agents of the Shop who were trying to find Charlene ("Charlie") McGee, their daughter. By using his new-found ability (mental suggestion), Andy has managed so far to keep Charlie from the Shop. Charlie, it seems, is a pyrokinetic--she can start fires merely by willing them. (She also appears to be somewhat telekinetic, but that is peripheral to the story.) Apparently Lot 6 modified Andy's and Vicky's genetic structure to the extent that their offspring is a "mutant". The Shop now sees Charlie as a valuable weapon, and will do anything to get her.

While a one-line description of the plot may make this book sound like a rehash of CARRIE, it is not. Of all King's works, probably THE DEAD ZONE is the closest in theme. Both THE DEAD ZONE and this book deal with the problems faced by people who have extraordinary abilities. (In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is not king!) In both books, the powers are acquired in a specific manner (in THE DEAD ZONE by a blow on the head, in FIRE-STARTER by drugs and genetic mutation due to drugs). But Johnny Smith's talent (precognition/mind-reading) in THE DEAD ZONE is passive, or rather, self-contained. It does not affect the world external to Smith unless he specifically wishes it to. Charlie McGee's case is different. Her pyrokinetic ability is an subconscious one; it can flare up (literally!) whenever she is angry or upset. And it very much affects the outside world. In addition, she has her talent from birth and must be trained to control it in much the same way that one toilet-trains a child, though obviously much sooner. (One scene which brings out this parallel particularly well has Charlie arising in the middle of the night to go to the toilet, not to urinate but to dispose of her built-up pyrokinetic energy by boiling the water in the toilet bowl!) Johnny Smith, on the other hand, is an adult when his power finally comes through and can cope with its consequences in a much more adult manner.

It is interesting to trace this theme of "uncommon individual" through King's novels. His first novel, CARRIE, gives no real explanation for Carrie White's psychic abilities and is almost religious in tone. 'SALEM'S LOT tells another "uncommon individual" story, but in this case, the "uncommon

individual" is a vampire, and the story is told from our point of view. In THE SHINING, King begins to tell the story from the point of view of the "uncommon individual", Danny Torrance, who has "the shining" (precognition/telepathy). THE STAND deals with any number of "uncommon individuals", being driven by the forces of good and evil. Since THE STAND is basically allegorical in nature, no real scientific explanation is attempted for these forces. It is only in THE DEAD ZONE and FIRE-STARTER that King attempts to rationalize psychic powers, to place them in the real world, as well as to tell his story from the point of view of the "uncommon individual". Whether King's future novels will continue this trend or not remains to be seen.

What is apparent is that in FIRE-STARTER King has brought together ideas from all his previous works. His "uncommon individual" is a young girl who has had her abilities since birth (like Carrie White). (The idea of child as "uncommon individual" is also found in THE SHINING, although there the child--Danny Torrance--is a boy.) Like Carrie White and Johnny Smith, Charlie McGee is shunned and feared because of these abilities. Within her we see the struggle of good and evil which was portrayed on a much larger scale in THE STAND: Charlie enjoys setting fires because it "makes her feel good", but realizes that it is (generally) bad to do so. This conflict between evil (in this case hedonism) and good (self-control) is a recurrent theme in King's works. Johnny Smith wonders about the morality of using his abilities, Carrie White is repeatedly told her powers are evil, and the humans of 'SALEM'S LOT are battling the vampires in a war of good versus evil. In all these cases, King does not attempt to sidestep the issue, but rather shows that the individual must make the choice, even though it may kill him/her. Carrie White must decide whether to use her power, as must Johnny Smith, as must Charlie McGee. (Even Charlie, at eight years old, realizes that she cannot abdicate her choice to the government.) The characters in THE STAND must align themselves with either Mother Abigail or Flagg. Danny Torrance cannot ignore the warnings his "shining" gives him, no matter how much he wants to. (Nor can his "mentor", Dick Halloran, though he tries desperately to rationalize his way out of the dilemma.) And Ben Mears and Mark Petrie of 'SALEM'S LOT must eventually stop running and turn and face the evil that pursues them.

In many ways, however, FIRE-STARTER is an amplification of the themes specifically presented in THE DEAD ZONE. It is true that the theme of "superman as pariah" is as old as literature itself--"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live", etc. Stapledon's SIRIUS and ODD JOHN, Van Vogt's SLAN, Wylie's GLADIATOR, and Jerome Bixby's "It's a Fine Life" are some of the more outstanding recent works along this line. But King brings the story much closer to home in both THE DEAD ZONE and FIRE-STARTER by setting it in the present, with realistic present-day characters, and a reasonably rational explanation for what are normally considered non-rational powers. He does, however,

retain a religious or spiritual thread in the character of John Rainbird, an American Indian who works for the Shop, and who sees Charlie as serving a mystical purpose in his life.

The only fault I can find with this novel is the ending. One problem is that it does not really wrap up the story (unlike the endings of King's previous novels). Another is that it seems to be intended to be a "punch-line" ending in a somewhat overly cutesy way. The combination of the two leads to an ending that lacks the power of the endings of King's other works. Up until now, King has tended toward the "gotterdammerung" or "ragnarok" type of ending--a no-holds-barred, pull-out-all-the-stops finale. After having that sort of expectation, and after reading about such power as Charlie has, I found the ending somewhat anti-climactic. Possibly the ambiguity of the ending is intentional and will be explored in a later novel (though not a sequel per se, just as FIRE-STARTER is not a sequel to THE DEAD ZONE), but for the present it remains a flaw.

In spite of this one defect, I would certainly recommend the novel. (And by the way, FIRE-STARTER has been optioned for filming. This seems to be standard for Stephen King's works in spite of the less than enthusiastic reception received by Kubrick's THE SHINING and the TV-movie of 'SALEM'S LOT. Although King's writing creates very vivid pictures in the reader's mind--one could even call his writing cinematic--filmmakers have yet to discover how to translate this to the screen. CARRIE comes the closest, and it came from King's weakest novel!)

Evelyn C. Leeper