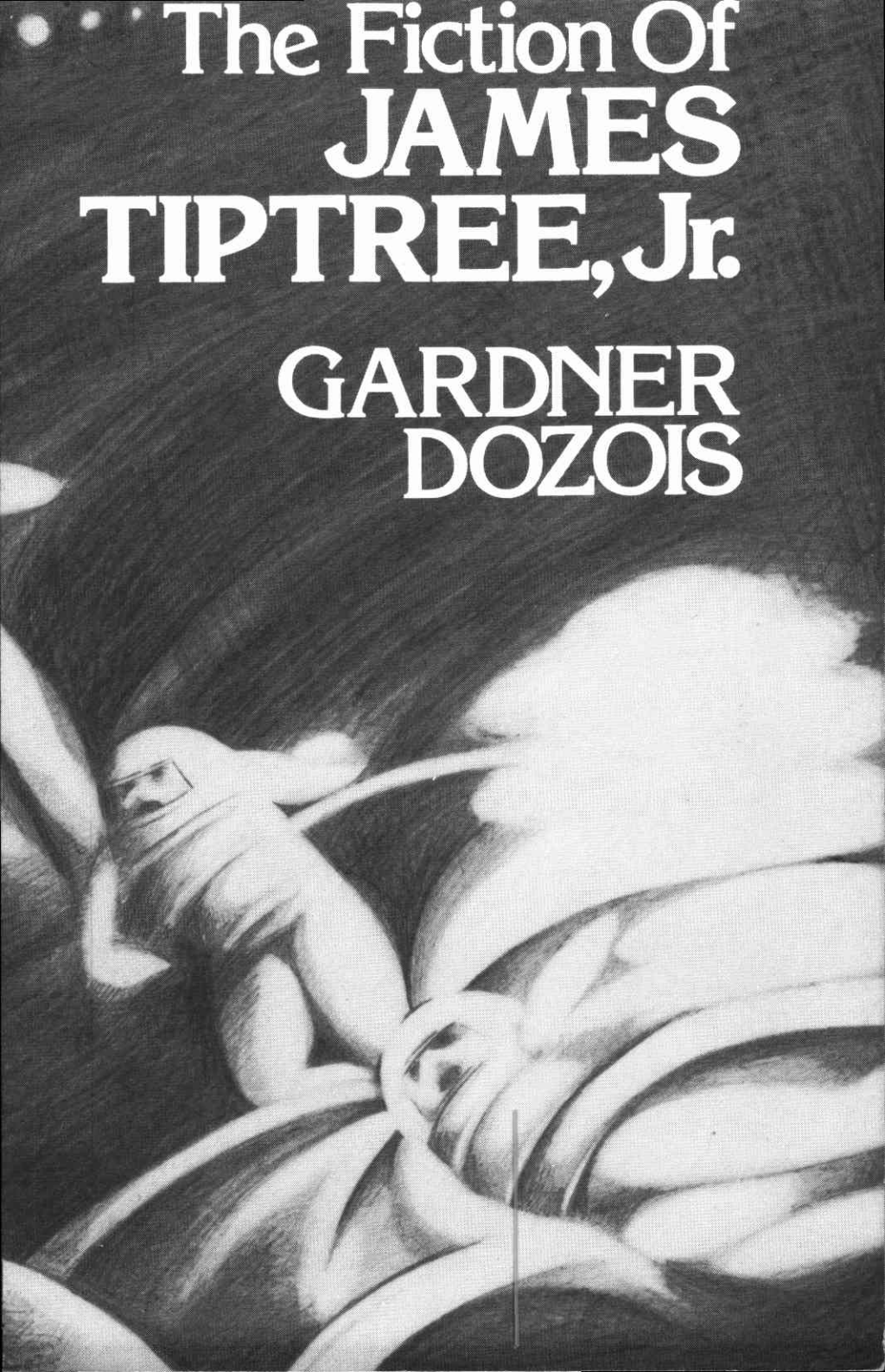
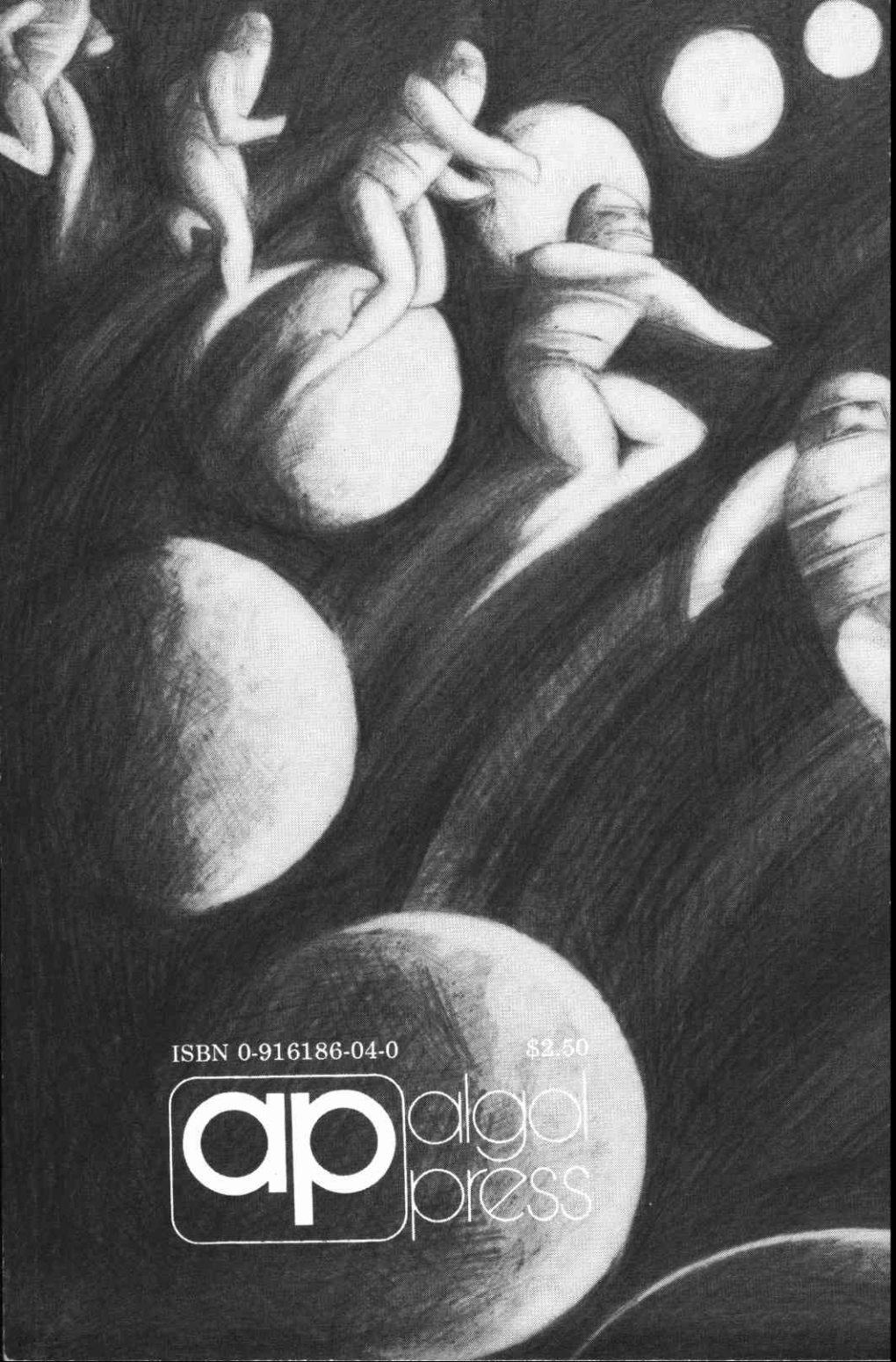
The Fiction Of JAMES TIPTREE, Jr.

GARDNER DOZOIS





ISBN 0-916186-04-0

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Cover by Judith Weiss

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The 32nd World Science Fiction Convention, Discon II (Labor Day Weekend, 1974), featured an unofficial program item of high interest to convention attendees: the Great Tiptree Hunt.

Every year the Hugo Awards for the best science fiction of that year are presented at the World Convention, and James Tiptree, Jr. was a finalist for the Hugo Award with his 1973 novella "The Girl Who Was Plugged In." He was facing stiff competition. Gene Wolfe, another finalist, had already won the Science Fiction Writers of America's Nebula Award for his novella "The Death of Doctor Island," and many thought that the story would take the Hugo as well. The ballot also featured two popular novellas by Michael Bishop, making the contest in the novella category one of the tightest and most difficult to predict in years, and tension was high.

Sometime on Saturday afternoon the rumor started: Tiptree is here!

Now the science fiction community is a tight-knit and clannish one, both among the readers—the fans—and the writers—the professionals, the pros. True, there are professional circles distinct from fannish circles, but, even with the most aloof and elite of writers, those circles overlap astonishingly, making for a degree of consanguinity between reader and writer—and between writer and writer—unknown in any other field of literature. Everyone knows everyone else, or knows *of* them at least, and even those people who generally avoid science fiction conventions and professional meetings are known to be known: someone, somewhere, knows them, has had them pointed out to him in passing, has spoken to them on the telephone, or at least knows someone who has.

Not so with James Tiptree, Jr.

Unique, among living science fiction writers—and certainly among SF writers of his stature—Tiptree is an enigma. No one in the tight-knit SF world, fan or pro, has, to my knowledge, ever met Tiptree, ever seen him, ever talked with him on the phone. No one knows where he lives, what he looks like, what he does for a living. Although he corresponds copiously with a number of people in the SF community, he volunteers no information about his personal life, and politely refuses to answer questions about it. His only known address is a post office box in MacLean, Virginia.

To hint that Tiptree's reticence has stirred up curiosity about him would be to make an understatement of major proportions. To state it simply, most SF people, fan and pro alike, are wild to know who Tiptree "really" is. Certainly the "Tiptree is here" rumor ran through Discon II like fire through a dry prairie. There was nothing impossible about it, after all—Tiptree's box address was only a few miles away, and if the Tiptree name really was a pseudonym—something that Tiptree himself denies, by the way—then he could attend

the convention and remain perfectly incognito simply by registering under his "real" name. People began to look around at their fellow convention attendees with the shrewd and feverishly-speculative eyes of the amateur sleuth, and friends could soon be heard in conclave drawing up lists of possible suspects.

The next evening Tiptree did indeed win the Hugo Award for "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," and there was a collective indrawing of breath among the Hugo Banquet attendees as everyone waited to see who would come up to the podium to accept the award. The breath-holding proved to be premature—Tiptree's Hugo was picked up for him by Jeffrey D. Smith, Baltimore editor (of the fanzines *Khatru* and *Phantasmicom*) and long-time Tiptree correspondent, who admitted that even he didn't know whether Tiptree was there or not. That should logically have been the end of the Tiptree Hunt, but somehow the anti-climax of Tiptree's non-appearance only served to convince people that he *was* at the convention after all, and to heighten the hysteria. Occasional remarks were addressed to Tiptree from the podium during the rest of the banquet program, on the seemingly unquestioned assumption that he was in the audience, unnoticed but observing all, like some latter-day Scarlet Pimpernel. High-ranking members of the convention committee assured me that he was in attendance, incognito, although no one knew just which of the convention's thousands of members he happened to be. Jeff Smith later that night in a hotel corridor told me that every time he left his room he expected to find the Hugo gone when he returned, replaced by a mysterious little 'thank-you' note from Tiptree. By the time that night's parties began to die, a theory had been proposed by frustrated amateur bloodhounds that Tiptree had the ability of alter his molecular structure at will, like Plastic Man, and was managing to mingle undetected by assuming the form of coke machines, TV sets, lamps, ashtrays, and so forth. By the end of the convention, Tiptree had still not been found, but everyone I talked to was convinced that he had been there.

Only I, recent recipient of Tiptree postcards postmarked British Columbia, wasn't so sure.

Who is James Tiptree, Jr., and why should we care about him?

We should care about him because, at his best, he is one of the two or three finest short-story writers in science fiction; because he has produced a body of work almost unparalleled in the genre for originality, power, and consistent quality; because he has managed to be a literary synthesist as well as a trailblazer, bringing together disparate—and often formerly hostile—traditions to produce viable fictional hybrids; and because, perhaps most

important, he is one of the most influential of all present-day SF writers in terms of his impact on upcoming generations of authors—much of the future of science fiction belongs to Tiptree, both through those shaped directly by him and those who will—perhaps unwittingly—follow his well-blazed paths, and if we are to understand that future it first behooves us to make an attempt to understand Tiptree.

Science fiction is a genre in which meteoric careers are commonplace, but even for science fiction Tiptree's rise to prominence has been phenomenal. Other writers have perhaps blazed across the sky more rapidly than Tiptree, but few of them have risen as high, and almost none have conquered the firmament as completely as Tiptree has, changing from a fiery literary meteor to a constant first-magnitude star. In less than a decade, Tiptree has gone from total obscurity to great recognition, has won both the Nebula and the Hugo Awards, and has assembled one of the largest and most diverse—and most devoted—followings of any of the decade's new writers except Ursula K. Le Guin.

Even for science fiction, Tiptree's audience is amazing in its scope and catholicity—it seems to cut across all lines and through all social strata; it is impossible to pigeonhole the "typical" Tiptree fan. Similarly, although there are, of course, people who dislike Tiptree's work, it is just as difficult to type them, to predict who they will be, to say that such-and-such a group don't care for Tiptree. As a writer, Tiptree is definitely his own man, a maverick individual even in our maverick and individualistic field, and the reader's response to him is always on the same one-to-one level.

On a personal level, however, "Who is Tiptree?" is a much more difficult question.

Piecing together the few definite personal statements available to us, we learn that Tiptree "was born in the Chicago area a long time back, trailed around places like colonial India & Africa as a kid . . ."[1] (from this and one or two other clues we can surmise that Tiptree is at least 50-55 years old), that he has spent time "joining organizations, getting in the Army, milling around in the early forms of American left-wing sentiment, worrying about Is It Going to Happen Here—an occupation I haven't given up—getting out of the Army, doing a little stint in government, trying a dab in business, etc., etc.,"[2] that he is "a WASP"[3] (spiking the rumor that Tiptree is a black, or, much more widespread a rumor, an Amerind—the Amerind speculation probably comes from the fact that Tiptree sounds like an Amerind name to some people, although in all likelihood the name is English, if it is Tiptree's "real" name in the first place), and that he is a man (spiking the most persistent rumor of all, that Tiptree is "really" a woman). Tiptree has also admitted

to spending most of World War II in a Pentagon subbasement, and has described himself as "a Midwesterner who batted around jungly parts of the globe when young and worse jungles with desks when old."

As Robert Silverberg says in his perceptive introduction to Tiptree's second short-story collection, *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* (1975): "Because Tiptree lives just a few miles from the Pentagon, or at least uses a mailing address in that vicinity, and because in his letters he often reports himself as about to take off for some remote part of the planet, the rumor constantly circulates that in 'real' life he is some sort of government agent involved in high-security work." The fact that many Tiptree stories depict just such agencies and just such work with a great deal of verisimilitude has only added fat to the fire of the secret-agent rumor, as has Tiptree's own admission that he spent part of the summer of 1945 "interrogating certain intelligence officers of the defeated German Luftwaffe. (I hasten to add that these interrogations were not conducted with red-hot pincers, dungeons, etc.; they were conducted at desks and the only 'torture' consisted of fumbling a pack of American cigarets into view; the German officers were housed rather better than we and were busily engaged in writing their memoirs, but they were short of tobacco.)"[4]

All that aside, I, for one, don't believe that Tiptree is a secret agent (although it does seem likely, as Silverberg says, that Tiptree "may well have some sort of professional entanglement with the Washington bureaucracy") and Tiptree himself has denied it vigorously, declaring "I do not, repeat it, work for the CIA, the FBI, NSA, the Treasury, the narcs, or the Metropolitan Park Police."[5]

Nevertheless, the average science fiction fan, if he or she has any opinion on the matter at all, probably continues to think of Tiptree as the Secret Master of the CIA, and—barring Tiptree's incontrovertible exposure as a CPA or a dental-floss salesman, or somesuch—probably always will.

It cannot be denied that the Mystery Man mystique surrounding Tiptree has given a romantic boost to his reputation, and contributed in some degree to his success. And so the second most-common explanation for Tiptree's dogged avoidance of the public eye—usually given with a knowing smile and a wink by those who have finally been talked out of the Tiptree-as-James-Bond concept—is that it is a shrewd piece of public relations work and opinion-manipulation, a gimmick calculated to create an attention-attracting and sales-enhancing air of mystery and romance.

For me, this doesn't ring true either. In his letters (Tiptree carries on a voluminous correspondence with a wide variety of people, and acts as mentor for a growing number of young writers and would-be writers), Tiptree comes across not only as an earnest and ingenuous man but also as a

constantly self-deprecating and perhaps self-doubting one who often agonizes over the "inadequacy" of his fiction. Silverberg, for instance, after describing Tiptree in *New Dimensions III* as a major writer, felt constrained to add, with some exasperation: "nobody doubts that except Tiptree himself, who with apparent sincerity keeps professing, in his letters, high regard for the work of colleagues not fit to change his typewriter ribbons, and seems genuinely surprised whenever an editor chooses to publish his work." It's true that Tiptree seems not only unconvinced by his own success but almost unaware of it—he reportedly had to be coaxed and almost coerced into assembling this collection in the first place—and it is difficult to picture him as a calculating media manipulator and publicity flack.

However, there are other ways to interpret Tiptree's reticence. Here's one possibility, for instance, from a Tiptree letter responding to a letter in which I described the hysteria at Discon:

> Wonderful account of the convention. I have never attended an SF con, I mentally multiply by a power of ten the already weird cons I have attended in life, must be great. As to great Tiptree mystery, it will be anticlimax of year. I seem to have accidentally aroused the winkle-it-out predatory instinct in a lot of active young minds, had no such intention. Merely recessive. (I have been known to flee in terror on the front steps of a home rocking with sounds of party in progress.)[6]

Tiptree has also said, "I believe something about the relation of writers to their stories, that the story is the realest part of the story-teller."[7] It becomes plain that a good deal of Tiptree's stubborn silence on the topic of himself is a consciously-assumed aesthetic stance. When Tiptree *has* been coerced by editors into supplying interpretative/auto-biographical material to grace his stories, he has also taken that same opportunity to express his dislike of the whole process, in no uncertain terms: "Abominations, that's what they are: afterwords, introductions, all the dribble around the story."[8]; "Reading an afterword is like watching a stoned friend sail onto an interstate expressway. One can't help looking and one is seldom made happy."[9]; "Writing about your own story reminds me of those tremendous floats you see in small-town Labor Day parades. You have this moving island of flowers with people on it being Indian Braves or Green Bay Packers or Astronauts-Landing-on-the-Moon (Raising-the-Flag-at-Iwo-Jima has happily gone out of fashion) and great-looking girls being great-looking girls. That's the story. Under each float is an old truck chassis driven by a guy in sweaty jeans who is also working the tapedeck and passing cherry bombs to the Indians. That's the author . . . my feeling is that the story is the game. Who really needs me and my carburetor troubles up there blowing kisses with Miss Harvest Home?"[10]

Of his self-imposed invisibility, Tiptree himself has said:

. . . I could give you a set of plausible reasons, like the people I have to do with include many specimens of prehistoric man, to whom the news that I write *ugh, science fiction* would shatter any credibility that I have left . . . Or that I'm unwilling to tarnish my enjoyment of this long-established secret escape route by having to defend it to hostile ears. . . . Or, conversely, that my mundane life is so uninteresting that it would discredit my stories. . . . the last remaining part of my secretiveness is probably nothing more than childish glee. At last I have what every child wants, a real secret life. Not an official secret, not a q-clearance polygraph-enforced bite-the-capsule-when-they-get-you secret, nobody else's damn secret but MINE. Something THEY don't know. Screw Big Brother. A beautiful secret REAL world, with real people, fine friends, doers of great deeds & speakers of the magic word, Frodo's people if you wish, and they write to me and accept my offerings, and I'm damned if I feel like opening the door between that magic reality and the universal shitstorm known as the real (sob) world. . . .[11]

For me, that last reason rings particularly true: one can hear echoes of it all throughout Tiptree's work: the search for a "real" world more meaningful than reality, the secret life more intense than mundane living, the hidden potentiality that transcends everything in its realization. Perhaps it also helps to explain Tiptree's ambiguous attitude toward his own success, the feeling one repeatedly gets that Tiptree can not quite believe in the reality of his own accomplishments.

Certainly Tiptree's painless transition to professional status, as told here in his own words, sounds more like a Horatio Alger fantasy than like the would-be writer's usual sad sad song:

Couple of years back under a long siege of work & people pressure, I set down 4 stories and sent 'em off literally at random. Then I forgot the whole thing. I mean, I *wasn't rational*; the pressure had been such that I was using speed (VERY mildly), and any sane person would have grabbed sleep instead. Obviously, one more activity was sheerly surreal. So some time later I was living, as often happens, out of cartons & suitcases, and this letter from Conde Nast (Who the hell was Conde Nast?) turned up in a carton. Being a compulsive, I opened it. Check. John W. Campbell.

About 3 days later I came to in time to open one from Harry Harrison.

. . .Three years later I still haven't got it together. The thing has gone on and on, 21 as of now, and I still don't believe it. I don't deny I love it, but I deny being happy. It's too weird. As I told David Gerrold, if these guys only knew it, I'd have paid them for their autographs. I mean, years, years and years, I've been the kind of silent bug-eyed Rikki-Tikki-Mongoose type fan who thinks those guys who wrote them walk around 6 inches off the ground with private MT channels in their closets, step in and Flick!—Gal Central."[12]

Nobody knew it yet, but with the sale of those stories James Tiptree, Jr. had launched a career that would make him one of the greatest fictional teleporters of them all.

The first Tiptree story to turn up in print was "Birth of a Salesman" in the March 1968 *Analog*, a heavyhanded farce in which a Harried Administrator—a Tiptree archetype—must

cope with the problems involved in running an interstellar matter-transportation network. Full of comic-book aliens with funny names and routine slapstick (one of the aliens keeps stealing a secretary's skirt, and I almost expected it to begin chasing her around the desk as well), the story would be indistinguishable from a thousand other minor magazine-fillers except for its narrative drive and the author's ability to keep a number of disparate plot elements simultaneously in the air. Later, these very traits would help to establish Tiptree's reputation, but there was little in his initial performance to indicate that a giant had just stuck an arm up above the horizon, and "Salesman" went completely unnoticed.

Next came "Mamma Come Home," published as "The Mother Ship" in the June 1968 *Worlds of If*, in which another variant of the Harried Administrator, a CIA man this time, must find a way to thwart a group of eight-foot-tall "Girls from Capella" who want to use Earth as a source of male harem slaves, and who intend to turn down the sun to keep their market literally on ice. Again, nothing here is tremendously original, but the treatment is looser and jazzier than that of "Salesman," and the humor somewhat more sophisticated, in spite of a smattering of giggly-coy jokes about breasts, Living Bras, and sex. "Mamma" also demonstrates a developing feel for the offbeat but well-turned phrase, a knowledge of history in its analogic and cautionary aspect, an eye for cultural/bureaucratic absurdities, and a good deal of familiarity with the inner working of government security agencies. Like Robert Heinlein and Jack Vance, Tiptree would become adroit at the art of working small plausible details into even his most *outre* situations, and the method is used here to create enough verisimilitude to at least partially neutralize a melodramatic and improbable plotline. Max the CIA man comes up with an ingenious but unlikely way to scare off the aliens, saves Earth, and marries the formerly man-hating heroine. I—like most readers, I suspect—put the magazine down and promptly forgot the story. When I came across "Mamma" again in this collection, years later, I was startled to associate it with Tiptree; first time around, the author's name had not stuck at all.

Nevertheless, "Mamma" is head-and-shoulders better than "Salesman," superior to most of the second-string material published in SF magazines, and is also memorable as an early treatment of one of Tiptree's obsessive themes: cultural contamination, the meddling of one culture with another less-advanced one—a theme he explores more thoroughly, and with much more subtlety, in years to come.

In 1968 two other Tiptree stories were published—"Fault" in the August *Fantastic*, a minor raconteur-style story that telegraphs its gimmick much too early, and "Help," first published in the October *If* under the title

"Pupa Knows Best." "Help," a sequel to "Mamma," was, like most sequels, pretty much more of the same, only less so. Again the theme is cultural contamination: interstellar missionaries forcibly converting Earth to an alien religion, and then fighting a disastrous holy war here with a competing sect. This time the imemdiate and long-term consequences are explored somewhat more thoroughly, and the aliens themselves are more three-dimensional—S'serrop, for instance, an idealistic young alien who falls into heresy for the Earthmen's sake, is by far the best alien characterization Tiptree had yet come up with. Max the CIA man again saves Earth, by an even more improbable and melodramatic ploy this time, but in spite of the obligatory happy ending, the story actually concludes on a cautionary and downbeat note that is a foreshadowing of darker stories to come. "Help" falls somewhere between "Salesman" and "Mamma" in merit, a minor but entertaining and occasionally ingenious story.

The same could be said of all Tiptree's 1968 output: clever stitching, bright primary colors, thin cloth.

"Faithful to Thee, Terra, in Our Fashion" was published in the January 1969 *Galaxy* under the title "Parimutuel Planet"—his longest story to date. Stylistically and thematically, "Faithful" belongs with the 1968 grouping of stories, rather than with the other 1969 stories that would follow. It is an unabashed retelling of "Salesman," to such an extent that one is tempted to think of "Salesman" as merely a rough first draft for "Faithful." Both stories are frantic farces, featuring breakneck pacing, frenetic (and not always altogether successful) plot-element juggling, slapstick action (one menace is disposed of by a pistol-packing mouse), heavyhanded humor ("My ear is full of rat-crap."), oddball and improbable aliens, and lots of characters with funny names ("Snedecor," "Ooloolulloolah"). The heroes of both stories are, for all practical purposes, identical and interchangeable, as are their basic situations—the Harried Administrator in this case running a planet-wide inter-species racetrack instead of a matter-transporter network, but having to cope with the same general types of problems and systems-breakdowns, and, in Tiptree's own words, "with the throng of wild indians, crackpots, active idiots, weirdos of all descriptions which we call the General Public."[13]

But the differences between the two stories are more significant than the similarities. Tiptree had become a somewhat deeper and more sophisticated writer in the interval, and "Faithful" not only accomplishes everything that "Salesman" does, but does a good deal more besides. For one thing, the Raceworld concept is both more original and more colorful than the matter-transporter network of "Salesman," opening up a greater and more flexible range of dramatic possibilities, and the social/logistic problems

inherent in the concept are worked out with more imagination and completeness. The pacing is, if anything. even faster than that of "Salesman," and the prose is smoother and more flowing. Tiptree blips everything by at such a headlong pace that one tends to allow him his pistol-wielding mice and his giant ice-slug races ("the contestants had covered fifty feet in the extraordinary time of six months"), things that one otherwise might find too ludicrous even for low comedy if Tiptree slowed down long enough to let you think about them. But Tiptree never slows down. "Salesman" is merely a slice-of-life story, a static thing with no real point beyond the way that Benedict does or doesn't cope. "Faithful" however has a number of subplots and leitmotifs significant over-and-beyond the a day-at-Raceworld travelog, and an underlying philosophic conflict that transcends the how-will-he-cope? framework of the plot. As in "Mamma," serious themes crop up inside the farce, and co-exist with the fun-and-fury: the lost Home, self-destroyed; the almost biologically-intense drive of the exiles to return home, or, failing that, to somehow deny its loss through the continuation of the race ("How can Terra be dead when mother fish in the seas teach their young about her?"); and the drive for personal transcendence—all themes that Tiptree would return to again and again.

Most of the aliens in "Faithful" are unlikely comic-book caricatures—as are the aliens in "Salesman," and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the aliens in "Help" and "Mamma"—but with the coming of the Magellans in the last part of the story, the skull-faced "golems from the Clouds," we are suddenly faced with another Tiptree archetype: the Alien, the remorseless and unknowable Other whose motivations, thoughts, and actions we can never fully understand. The Magellans loom into "Faithful" like grim spectors, incongruous and shocking to encounter in the midst of this frothy little farce, and instantly all the other aliens in the story become people in funny costumes; the Magellans are immediately and viscerally recognizable as Others, Strangers, "alien as the smooth bleak regard of sharks met under water."[14] From "Faithful" on, when we meet an alien in Tiptree's work, it will more and more often wear the dark and inscrutable mask of the Other.

If Tiptree had stopped writing at this point, and if no other stories had appeared in print, I suspect that he would have been quickly forgotten, although "Mamma" or "Faithful" might eventually have been anthologized. Nothing he had done so far indicated that he was anything more than a moderately-promising minor writer, of the sort that surface in the genre by the dozens, publish one or two decent stories, and then disappear forever.

Tiptree's next published story however, "The Last Flight of Dr. Ain," published in the March 1969 *Galaxy*, sent an

immediate shockwave throughout the genre. This was to be Tiptree's first major breakthrough, his first story to attract serious attention or to generate any real excitement—it, and not the 1968 stories, would create the first impression of Tiptree in the minds of most readers. A basically simple story of a bacteriological warfare specialist who chooses to wipe out humanity rather than allow the pollution-death of the entire biosphere, "Dr. Ain" is distinguished by an eccentric narrative device in which the "whole damn story is told backward."[15] : scenes shift rapidly, a series of different viewpoint characters are utilized, the narration is circumstantial and reconstructed rather than direct (Ain is seldom the major focus; his movements are deduced from the testimony of a number of minor witnesses), and hints are scattered throughout about a mysterious ailing woman in Ain's past. It is up to the reader to put all this together, like a jigsaw puzzle, in order to discover who or what the woman actually is, and what Ain has really been up to.

This approach would become increasingly popular with Tiptree. He has said, ". . . I feel that readers have a right to complain if there isn't a bit of mystery, an angle or insight tucked away under the surface, like a thingie in a cereal box . . ." and cites "Dr. Ain" as ". . . a perfect example of [Tiptree's] basic narrative instinct. Start from the end and preferably 5,000 feet underground on a dark day and then DON'T TELL THEM."[16]

If the puzzle-solving aspect helped to make "Dr. Ain" memorable, then the style also served to lift it above the run-of-the-mill pulp average. As in "Mamma," Tiptree manipulates small telling details to create an air of authenticity. But here, for the first time, he combines his ferocious narrative drive with a stripped-down plot and style. All the filler, all the blumf, all the unnecessary scenes/exposition/bits of business that fattened up his earlier stories—all is gone. Nothing remains that isn't vital to the exposition.

This kind of lean, supple, stripped-down exposition would become a Tiptree trademark. Later, Tiptree would learn to compromise between the stripped-down exposition and headlong narrative drive of stories like "Dr. Ain" and the richer introspective mood and lusher stylistic detail of stories like "The Snows Are Melted, the Snows Are Gone" to produce fiction that combines the best of both modes.

"Dr. Ain" was a finalist for the short-story Nebula Award that year, sharing the ballot with Robert Silverberg, Larry Niven, and Harlan Ellison. Silverberg took the award, but, in Silverberg's words, "the juxtaposition of one unfamiliar name on that ballot with three such well-known ones ensured that Tiptree's next few offerings would get more than usual scrutiny from his fellow writers."[17]

Nevertheless, Tiptree's next published story, "Beam Us

Home" in the April *Galaxy*, went virtually unnoticed, and remains seriously underrated to this day, even though it is better than "Dr. Ain," one of Tiptree's two or three finest short stories, and possibly one of the finest SF stories of the decade.

If "Beam Us Home" is so good, why was it overlooked? And overlooked it was, so completely that Tiptree himself, while admitting that it is one of his favorites, has wistfully referred to it as "one story no-one seems to have noticed or liked . . ."?[18] My guess is that it was read too superficially, and that people confused the surface gimmick with the story. "Beam Us Home" is ostensibly the story of a boy who comes to believe that he is a member of the *Star Trek* crew on detached secret duty on Earth (Tiptree apparently believes that the *Star Trek* element will be a "surprise," but as any even moderately-perceptive reader should realize almost at once that this is the television show in question—Tiptree has given it away incontestably by the story's third paragraph—I don't feel that I'm really spoiling anything by spilling the beans), but as Tiptree himself has said, the *Star Trek* element "wasn't the *story*. It was just an angle."[19]

Tiptree's fiction is greatly concerned with loners, mystics, exiles, misfits, green monkeys, "all those first & only children . . . All those addled dreamers . . ."[20] :—the Human-as-Alien. And the *story* of "Beam Us Home" is Tiptree's definitive handling of the loner theme. As one of the characters mulls herein, "what if a person is sure of his identity but it isn't his identity?" (p.305, Ace edition), and few stories in modern science fiction explore such a complex and subtle theme with such sureness, sympathetic understanding, and grace.

Tiptree's stripped-down exposition works wonderfully here. In 5,000 words we not only get a compelling three-dimensional portrait of the boy Hobie, but we are also shown the entire course of his life from childhood to transfiguration in a series of short scenes and representational snippets. The effect is not sketchy or superficial, but rather that of a spotlight playing here or there in time, bringing everything it touches to vivid life. "Beam Us Home" is far superior stylistically to anything Tiptree had produced up to this point, and holds up well against even his best subsequent work. The prose is at once lean and muscular, supple and evocative, and there's hardly a false step in the entire story.

As social commentary and prediction, "Beam Us Home" is razor-sharp and bullet-accurate. Tiptree himself has said "I take a little sad credit too, recall that ["Beam Us Home"] was written in 1968 and check the social prediction scene."[21] And again, in discussing the same story, "I just wish history would stop acting as if it were trying to copy me."[22]

Seen in this light, the *Star Trek* device, far from being a shallow little gimmick, is a near-perfect social metaphor for

our times, and the delineation of Hobie—a person so alienated from humankind by his own sympathetic humanity that he prefers to think of himself as an observer from a spaceship—allows Tiptree to make several wickedly-accurate statements about the orientation and thrust of our civilization.

"Beam Us Home" is also one of the few SF stories to successfully deal in genuinely science-fictional terms with the thematic material of the Vietnam War. Like the handful of other SF writers who have managed this—(the examples that come most readily to mind: Samuel R. Delany with *Babel-17* (1967); Joe Haldeman with *The Forever War* (1975); Philip K. Dick with "Faith of Our Fathers" (1967); Fritz Leiber with "America the Beautiful" (1971),—the experience has been first assimilated and then extrapolated from rather than utilized directly (Tiptree's war is in Venezuela; Haldeman's in another star system), and as a result, is both more effective polemically and less easy to dismiss as a limited argument applying only to a specific situation. We have only to listen to Tiptree here ("Contrary to the old saying that nations never learn from history, the U.S. showed that it had learned from its long agony in Viet Nam. What it had learned was not to waste time messing around with popular elections and military advisory and training programs, but to ball right in. Hard.") and then glance at the morning headlines to realize that "Beam Us Home" is, sadly, every bit as relevant today as it was eight years ago.

The story even manages to survive its tagged-on "cute" ending—whether Hobie goes down in the plane or is beamed up (teleportation as transcendence?) is ultimately unimportant; what counts is the recitation of the forces that got him up there in the first place, forces all too evidently still at work in all our lives.

From the level of "Faithful" to the level of "Dr. Ain" is a quantum jump in literary sophistication, but the further jump from the level of "Dr. Ain" to that of "Beam Us Home" is astounding, and I suspect that both "Dr. Ain" and some of the stories then unpublished were actually written before "Beam Us Home."

"Your Haploid Heart" appeared in the September 1969 *Analog*—the last Tiptree story for that magazine. A tale of biological mystery on a far world, "Heart" would not reach the level of accomplishment of "Beam Us Home," nor attract the attention and acclaim of "Dr. Ain," but it would help considerably to solidify Tiptree's reputation. A solid and satisfying piece of science fiction, squarely in the mainstream of the genre, "Heart" helped to reassure the genre audience that Tiptree was no one-shot wonder. A hostile critic could have dismissed Tiptree's first four stories as apprentice-work, and the striking but uneven "Dr. Ain" could have been a fluke, but no one could explain "Heart" away so cavalierly.

There is an air of solid professionalism to the story, of quiet confidence, of competency—obviously this author was here to stay and was in conscious control of his content and his craft. The odds were that he would go on to produce a substantial body of work.

Portents aside, "Heart" is admirable as a story in its own right. Not only is the biological mystery ingenious and well worked-out—we get a foreshadowing here, with "Heart's" supernaturally seductive aliens, of the theme of "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side"—but "Heart" is one of the few times Tiptree has indulged in the traditional SF art of world-building, creating not only an alien race and an alien world but an entire cultural/biological /psychological surround as well. He does it well enough to make one wish he would attempt it more often. The human characterization in "Heart" is also adroit and sympathetic, although the protagonist is beginning to look a trifle familiar. Max from "Mamma" and "Help," Ian Suitlov from "Heart" and Don Fenton from "The Women Men Don't See," are clearly all the same person, regardless of different names and superficial differences—the world-weary but decent Government Agent who has misgivings about his job, almost a Graham Greene character—while Hobie of "Beam Us Home," Dov of "Forever to a Hudson's Bay Blanket," Amberjack of "Amberjack," the young Petey of "Her Smoke Rose Up Forever," and, in a slightly different key, Vivyan of "The Peacefulness of Vivyan," are clearly all the same person too, a different person—the Radiant Boy. "Her Smoke Rose Up Forever" also seems to suggest that the Radiant Boy grows up to be someone very like Colin Mitchell of "I'm Too Big But I Love to Play" or like Dr. Ain. Perhaps in a variant he could grow up to be the Government Agent or the Harried Administrator as well.

Unaccountably, "Heart" has not been reprinted in either of Tiptree's two short-story collections, even though it is a prime example of early Tiptree, and a good deal more substantial/successful than several stories which would be included in the collections. Its omission especially is puzzling since "Heart" is also one of two 1969 Tiptree stories to be reprinted in Best of the Year anthologies, appearing in revised form in Wollheim and Carr's *World's Best Science Fiction 1970* (1970).

Tiptree closed out 1969 with two relatively minor stories, "The Snows Are Melted, the Snows Are Gone," in the November *Venture*, and "Happiness Is a Warm Spaceship" in the November *If*. "Snows" is a mood piece, more somber, lush and introspective than most Tiptree to this date, and is notable mostly as a demonstration of Tiptree's driving concern with the survival of the race, with the eternally-recycling conflict of life and death—a theme to which he would return in such stories as "On the Last Afternoon,"

"Love Is the Plan the Plan is Death," and "She Waits for All Men Born." Revised—and improved—the story was reprinted in Harrison and Aldiss' *Best SF: 1969* (1970). Of the two November stories, "Happiness" is the weaker. Tiptree himself has referred to it in print as "a turkey,"[23] and while that overstates the case somewhat, "Happiness" is a disappointing return to the level of "Mamma."

Tiptree published only one important story in 1970 (there were three very minor ones: "The Man Doors Said Hello To," in the Winter 1970 *Worlds of Fantasy;* "Last Night and Every Night" in *Worlds of Fantasy #2;* and "The Night-blooming Saurian" in the May-June *If*, a coy scatological fantasy), but that was the incredible "I'm Too Big but I Love to Play" in the March *Amazing.* The story of an immense, immortal, galaxy-skimming energy-creature amusing itself by creating "duplicates" of the miniscule life it finds on Earth, "I'm Too Big" was the most avante-garde story Tiptree had yet produced, experimental both in style and content.

Ostensibly another cultural contamination story, "I'm Too Big" is actually a study of the whole process of intra-system communication. Beyond the jazzy style, the rapid scene changes, the breadth of conceptual vision, the chilling authenticity of the S.B.R. Institute thinktank, and the fascinating portrait of a godlike alien at play among the stars, the heart of the story is this statement by Colin Mitchell's simulacrum: ". . . communication! Two-way communication. Interlocking flow. . . . You can understand why a system would seek information—but why in hell does it *offer* information? Why do we strive to be understood? Why is a refusal to accept communication so painful? Look at it—a process that ties the whole damn human system together, and *we don't know fact one about it!*" (p.248, Ace ed.)

Tiptree's characters are inordinately concerned with communication, empathy, breaking down the barriers, and "interlocking flow," and "I'm Too Big" is one of Tiptree's most intense statements about "the hurtfulness of garble. . . . The ultimate misery of They Don't Understand . . ."[24]—a thing that may well be the driving force behind all of Tiptree's fiction. An odd little repeating leitmotif also appears in "I'm Too Big" for the first time—the idea of one force or being manifesting itself *through* another, a symbiosis of marionettist and marionette; this would turn up again, in a number of different keys, in "Her Smoke Rose Up Forever," "The Peacefulness of Vivyan," "On the Last Afternoon," and, especially, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In."

"I'm Too Big" is also significant in that it marks a switchover point from one set of markets to another. Until now, most of Tiptree's major stories had been published in *Galaxy* or *Analog*, but from now on (with the exception of

"Mother in the Sky with Diamonds," his last *Galaxy* story), he would seem to turn away from his old markets, dividing his major magazine stories between *Amazing* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.* At the time, *Amazing* and *F&SF*—especially *Amazing*—paid a good deal less per word for stories than *Galaxy* and *Analog*, and it is interesting to speculate about the reasons for the shift. What had changed? Well, for one thing, long-time Tiptree supporter Frederik Pohl had been replaced as *Galaxy* editor by Ejler Jakobsson, who may not have been as well-tuned to Tiptree's wavelength. But more importantly, the stories themselves had changed—the best of them had deepened, matured, mutated, become more complex and daring in conceptualization and execution, and had moved away from the mainstream of science fiction toward the wild and ambiguous territory on its fringe. "I'm Too Big," for instance, is the first Tiptree story to use hard-core profanity (barring an isolated "shit" in "Beam Us Home"), and also the first to make any really extensive and forthright use of sex. It may be that Tiptree was now more interested in working for markets that would give him free rein than in conforming to the strong editorial taboos of his former markets for the sake of a higher word-rate. The editors of *Amazing* and *F&SF*, Ted White and Edward Ferman respectively, were smart and sophisticated enough not to put Tiptree in a straight-jacket, to let him take the bit in his teeth and run where he would, and Tiptree would repay their editorial acumen with story after story of first quality.

The years 1971 and 1972 were bumper ones for Tiptree, the best ever by the standards of quality and productivity. The major growth-spurt of Tiptree's reputation would take place in the 1971-1972 period, although the harvest sowed would not be fully reaped until 1973 and 1974. During this period, Tiptree's recognition-factor would skyrocket, and he would go from being an interesting new writer to a Name.

Tiptree published four stories in 1971—"And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side" in the March *F&SF*, "Mother in the Sky with Diamonds" in the March *Galaxy*, "The Peacefulness of Vivyan" in the July *Amazing*, "I'll Be Waiting for You When the Swimming Pool is Empty" in David Gerrold's anthology *Protostars*—and an incredible nine stories in 1972—"The Man Who Walked Home" in the January *Amazing*, "And I Have Come Upon This Place by Lost Ways" in Harry Harrison's *Nova 2*, "Painwise" in the September *F&SF*, "Amberjack" and "Through a Lass Darkly" in David Gerrold's *Generation*, "Forever to a Hudson's Bay Blanket" in Harlan Ellison's *Again, Dangerous Visions*, "On the Last Afternoon" in the November *Amazing*, and "All the Kinds of Yes" (original title "Filomena & Greg & Rikki-Tikki & Barlow & the Alien") in Robert Silverberg's *New Dimensions III*—an overwhelming avalanche of fiction,

comprising the bulk of Tiptree's published work to date.

The year 1971 also saw the start of a series of articles by Tiptree in the Baltimore SF journal, *Phantasmicom*, edited by Donald G. Keller and Jeffrey D. Smith; the mail interview with Tiptree conducted by Jeff Smith in *Phantasmicom 6* remains to this day the major source of personal information on Tiptree—a thin trickle of information to slake the dozens of thirsty questions that would arise during the next few years.

Of the 1971 stories, "And I Awoke" received the most attention and acclaim—rightly so, for it is one of Tiptree's very finest stories. Tiptree's first story for *F&SF*, "And I Awoke" was a Nebula finalist that year, and came within a few votes of winning the award, finishing as first-place runner-up. Possibly Tiptree's finest handling of the cultural contamination theme, "And I Awoke" deals with an original and subtle kind of alien meddling—the idea that just coming into contact with clearly-superior alien races will adversely alter our "balance of life," shaking and stunting our racial identity and acting as a fatally-draining supernormal stimulus. The story is memorable for its vivid characterization, its almost Burroughsian framing device, and for the fever-dream picture it paints of the underground nightlife—similar to the gay cruising-circuit of today—of those who spend their time trying to pick up alien "perverts" in spacer bars. As can be seen, "And I Awoke" follows the example of "I'm Too Big" in its liberal use of profanity and sex, and is probably somewhat more daring than the genre average even today.

An attempt to "drift the story out in the dreamy voice of a brain-tampered boy,"[25] "The Peacefulness of Vivyan" is a largely successful experiment in the matching of mood, subject, and style, and another of Tiptree's many Lost Home stories. "Vivyan's" protagonist is even more exiled and alienated than usual, having in effect lost himself as well as the Desired Place, but oddly, is also much more contented and bland—having lost the memory of his loss as well, he has also lost something of his humanity. Although more conventional than "I'm Too Big" and "And I Awoke"—it probably predates them—"Vivyan" is an engrossing story, and memorable for its low-key, hushed, murmuring prose, a stylistic mode that Tiptree has only occasionally used.

"I'll Be Waiting for You When the Swimming Pool is Empty," told in "florid dead-pan rococco,"[26] may be Tiptree's most successful comic piece. When it avoids the scatological, Tiptree's humor is always broad and bouncy and anachronistic, and although "Swimming Pool" works hard to come up with some very gruesome effects involving dead babies and disembowelment, it is too manic and cheerfully grotesque to really qualify as black humor. It is funny, however, and it does manage to function on two completely separate levels at once—the vaudevillian overstory that details

the misadventures of Cammerling the Nice Terran Boy, and the understory, in which "Swimming Pool" proves to be a deadly serious and actually rather grim study of cultural contamination. The two levels do resonate with and reinforce each other, particularly when you think the story over afterward, but Tiptree plays it "straight"—i.e., ostensibly just for laughs—throughout, and this probably accounts for "Swimming Pool's" success, as compared to a story like "Faithful" where over- and understory are continually clashing.

Like "Beam Us Home," "Mother in the Sky With Diamonds" is an overlooked and underrated story that is actually one of Tiptree's best. The late John W. Campbell reportedly called this story of a crisis-filled day in the life of an Asteroid Belt insurance-adjuster a "compressed novel,"[27] and he was absolutely right. Tiptree's narrative, always fast-paced, is here almost frighteningly swift, giving "Mother in the Sky" more headlong impetus than any other Tiptree story, and propelling the reader non-stop through a mass of action, human detail, social background, and new ideas sufficient to have fueled a trilogy by most other authors.

There is something almost obsessive about the thoroughness with which Tiptree strips down his fiction, his insistence on rapid and headlong pacing. Perhaps it comes from Tiptree's experience with bureaucratic obfuscation and long-windedness, from

> hidden years of writing crap headed MEMO, SUBJECT, TO ... PROBLEM, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS. And then trying to do it like they said and then discovering that when I really did do it like they said—
>
> Nobody could read it. Not even me.
>
> So then more effort imploring the reader-fish to bite, to *read* about my goddam problem. I even tried putting dirty stories in footnotes, somewhere they're still there stamped Swallow Before Reading ... Above all it was cut, cut, *cut* ... Starting with that gorgeous line you like best. ... my aim really is not to bore. I read my stuff with radar out for that first dead sag, the signal of oncoming *boredom*. The onset of crap, stuffing, meaningless filler, wrongness. And don't *repeat* at me, you bastard ... Bleeding Sebastian, how I have been bored in my life. The interminable, unforgivable, life-robbing information-less timelost entropy-triumphant stagnant retching BOREDOM I have suffered ... I won't do it to anyone else. If I can help it.[28]

"Mother in the Sky" is in essence pure space opera, of course, but as he has done elsewhere, Tiptree transfigures the familiar material, not only by good writing and characterization, but by standing familiar assumptions on their heads and taking another look at them through his own unique eyes. The Asteroid Belt civilization is a familiar setting for SF stories, and a body of conventions has been built up describing what such a civilization would be like. Most SF writers would accept most or all of these conventions when writing about an Asteroid Belt society, but Tiptree accepts few of them, replacing them instead with a bizarre and

fascinating society of his own, featuring remote-controlled cyborg slaves, biologically-altered people, spaceships made of monomolecular bubbles of "quasi-living cytoplasm," degenerate drug-runners, and an entire psychological set radically different from our own.

Of the 1972 stories, "Amberjack" and "Through a Lass Darkly" are minor enough to be dismissed out of hand, and "And I Have Come Upon This Place by Lost Ways"—a story in which the social significance is laid on with a trowel—is oppressively heavyhanded and one-dimensional.

Looking through the six remaining 1972 stories, it was once again brought home to me that—along with the drive for personal transcendence—Tiptree's most obsessive theme is the search for the Lost Home. Three of the 1972 stories deal centrally with it, and at least two of the others echo it peripherally to one degree or another.

"The Man Who Walked Home," "Painwise," and "The Milk of Paradise" are all stories of people searching for Home with the obsessive and monomaniacal intensity of Ahab in pursuit of the White Whale—one searches for what he has lost through the mutable wilderness of time, another through the vastness of space, and the third through the shadowy depths of his own mind. In "The Man Who Walked Home," the protagonist will destroy his Home by the very act of returning to it. In "Painwise," the protagonist will be the one destroyed by his homecoming. In "The Milk of Paradise" the protagonist returns Home and is both destroyed *and* liberated/transfigured by the experience at the same time. For in all these stories, the search for the Lost Home has become indistinguishably bound up with the quest for personal transcendence: transcendence can only be achieved by the finding of the Home, *is* the Homecoming. For these characters, Home is clearly the pearl without price: the protagonist of "Painwise," for instance, chooses to die rather than leave his Home again, even though it is the Home itself that is killing him, and he has the alternative of living elsewhere instead in comfort and pleasure. And even as far back as "Faithful" we are told that "beings without home planet do not long persist" (p.156, Ace ed.).

Interestingly, the Homes in these stories are seldom idyllic—in fact, they are often hurtful and ugly. The Home in "Painwise" is "not beautiful . . . jagged, ugly," a barren waste of rock, "pale sky and scrubby bushes"; the Home in "The Milk of Paradise" is a sodden, foggy mudhole full of slug-like creatures and "short, flabby trees"; the Home in "The Man Who Walked Home" is the same overindustrialized, dehumanized, psychotically-affectless 20th-century society Tiptree decries in stories like "I'm Too Big," "Dr. Ain," and "Beam Us Home," and seems much less pleasant than the future agrarian societies that, in the story, eventually replace it. But for most Tiptree characters, the issue is never in

doubt: in spite of logic, personal welfare, or comfort, the only important thing is to regain the Home that has been lost.

It is perhaps not unfair to compare this with Tiptree's own evident longing for the world of his youth, a longing and a regret that rings in every line when he speaks of "the things we've lost in the four decades I've been observing . . . Learning to swim in the pure water of—gasp—Lake Michigan in front of Chicago . . . The great bay of San Francisco before the bridges shackled it and the garbage poured in . . . Timber wolves singing where shopping centers are now in Wisconsin . . . The magic trolley-ride to Glen Echo, in ten minutes from the heart of D.C. you were clicking along silently (and fumelessly) with flowers and songbirds coming in the window . . . A very nice life, only a few years back."[29] The very phrase *only a few years back* seems to suggest that going back *is* possible, if *you only knew how.* Or perhaps if you just try hard enough, *will* hard enough. "I want to go home," insists the protagonist of "Painwise" in the face of all odds; "he was going home, home!" exults Major John Delgano in "The Man Who Walked Home." Both will reach Home, and both will be destroyed by it. "Man is an animal whose dreams come true and kill him," says Mysha in "On the Last Afternoon" (p.196, *Warm Worlds).*

In that story, "On the Last Afternoon," the characters have already lost one Home, and are in the process of having their new Home forcibly taken from them. Silverberg has called this a "flawed story," and it's true that its storyline is murkier and its pacing less headlong than usual. Nevertheless, "Afternoon" is a major story, and philosophically perhaps even a pivotal one.

"Afternoon" pits two of Tiptree's prime concerns against one another—the continuance of the race *vs.* the drive for personal transcendence—and the outcome suggests a far-reaching change in Tiptree's thinking. In the earlier "The Snows Are Melted," for instance, any hope for personal transcendence or even personal survival is sternly subjugated to the necessities of racial survival—once the protagonists have fulfilled their duty by capturing the healthy breeding stock needed for the continuance of the species, it becomes completely unimportant whether they themselves continue to survive as individuals: in fact, their major reaction is, "We can all go die, now." In "Afternoon," however, the issue is much more in doubt. Mysha struggles terribly back and forth between his intellectual acceptance of the need to sacrifice himself for the colony and his emotional desire to accept the personal transcendence and "immortality" the Noion offers him. Here, for the first time, a Home-obsessed Tiptree character finds something *beyond* the Home itself that is the transcendental pearl without price, and although Mysha ultimately resists the temptation and opts for Home and

sacrifice, in the end he bitterly regrets it, and rails against the "death that I did not need to die . . . useless death." In spite of the warm human concern Mysha manifests throughout, "Afternoon" is perhaps the bleakest and blackest of all Tiptree stories: transcendence is not achieved, the Home is not saved, the race is defeated and perhaps doomed, everything Mysha values is destroyed, and he dies with the bitter knowledge that his sacrifice was useless and meaningless, spiritually unreconciled to his death and far from any sort of peace.

Philosophy aside, "Afternoon" is far from a bad story, and is memorable for a riveting last scene demonstrating, in Silverberg's words, "one of Tiptree's special gifts: his ability to create a scene of sustained and prolonged movement, a juggernaut; when the aliens come ashore in all their monstrous unthinking bulk, he gives us a characteristic Tiptree specialty, *a sense of extended process*, that makes the scene literally unforgettable" (pp.xvi-xvii, *Warm Worlds).*

The girl Loolie in "Forever to a Hudson's Bay Blanket" is another Tiptree character obsessively searching for the pearl without price and crossing vast barriers of time and space to obtain it, although for her the Desired Thing is her lover-to-be Dov Rapelle. She too achieves her desire, and although she is not physically destroyed by it, she is certainly left far from happy at the end. A lively story of time-crossed love (containing my favorite quote from the entire corpus of time-travel stories: "Paradoxes of course were wrong. They shouldn't happen. But when one does—*who do you complain to?*"), "Forever" is a witty, incisive and smoothly-professional job that might easily have gone to *Galaxy* or *Analog*, except for, I would guess, the touching and zestfully-explicit sex scenes. Once again, the higher-paying magazines' loss was *Amazing*'s gain.

But Tiptree would increasingly turn away from the magazine market in favor of original anthologies, which offered both artistic freedom and decent remuneration. And the best of Tiptree's 1972 anthology stories was "All the Kinds of Yes," another very funny story with a bleak aftertaste, and with a good deal of sophisticated conceptualizing going on under its jazzy and irreverent surface. But the best part of "Yes" is the upsidedown Carrollian logic of our world as seen through alien eyes, and one of the most delightful bits of business anywhere in Tiptree is "Yes's" highly-advanced alien staggering around through the rush-hour traffic in Washington, D.C., taking deep breaths of the smog and saying things like "how primal. How unspoiled. Such peace!"

Tiptree's first short-story collection was published in paperback by Ace in 1973. The edition featured an enthusiastic introduction by Harry Harrison, but on first inspection seemed to have little else to recommend it: it was

a laxly-produced and shoddy-looking book with a garish cover, riddled with production mistakes (the Table of Contents was omitted, for instance), plagued by typographical errors and poor layout, with the stories run into one another so closely it was often difficult to tell where one story ended and another began. In spite of these flaws, which would be fatal for most books, it was soon hailed by critics as a landmark volume, and remains in print to this day; it is, in fact, one of the most important single-author collections in the history of modern science fiction, rivaled only by Cordwainer Smith's *Space Lords* (1967), Samuel R. Delany's *Driftglass* (1971), Keith Roberts' *Pavane* (1968), and R.A. Lafferty's *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* (1970).

If Tiptree's reputation ripened throughout 1971 and 1972, then the years 1973 and 1974 saw the harvest brought in.

The late Charles Fort once said, "When it's steam-engine time people invent steam engines." Similarly, it was now award-winning time for Tiptree, whether he liked the idea or not.

The chances are that he did *not* like the idea. Tiptree has said ". . . awards affect me like amalgam fillings, a queasy tickle of something extraneous and ill-omened."[30] But a historical process once set in motion is not easily halted or brushed aside. Of the two eligible 1973 Tiptree stories, both would be Hugo *and* Nebula finalists. "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (from Silverberg's *New Dimensions III),* would lose the Nebula but win the Hugo; "Love Is the Plan the Plan Is Death" (from Stephen Goldin's anthology *The Alien Condition),* would lose the Hugo but win the Nebula.

Tiptree's is not the art that conceals art, the deceptively "natural" style of a Hemingway or a Heinlein; nor does he have the mannered elegance of a Gene Wolfe or a Proust. Rather, Tiptree's is a big robust voice, jazzy, irreverent, exuberant, colloquial; Tiptree can mute it to a reverent whisper when needful, but he is not afraid to raise it again to wake the echoes, or to sing for the pure joy of singing, or to say outrageous things if that's what it takes to startle his audience into listening.

But like Samuel R. Delany, Tiptree always teeters on the razor edge between stylistic innovation and excess. Often he is successful in his balancing act, and able to pull off dazzling stylistic coups as a result, but sometimes he falls, and then the fall is swift and hard indeed.

"Painwise," for instance—a story to me reminiscent of Cordwainer Smith's "Three to a Given Star" with an odd added dash of Alfred Bester and Theodore Sturgeon—for me falls off into excess with the appearance of Tiptree's aggressively coy and anachronistic "cuddlesome empath," whose subsequent antics put my teeth on edge. Similarly, "Love Is the Plan" falls a good deal further into excess even

than something like "The Night-blooming Saurian," and is, Nebula Award notwithstanding, one of my least favorite Tiptree stories. A story of alien love supposedly written in "the style of 1920 porno,"[31] "Love Is the Plan" comes across to me more like Modified Sesame Street—I can never read Moggadeet's galumphing, ungrammatical, childishly-rapturous narration without hearing it in the accents of the Cookie Monster, and after a few pages of this I again become aware of the grinding of enamel against enamel, and put the story aside.

If I have reservations about Tiptree's Nebula-winner, I have none about his Hugo-winning novella, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," one of Tiptree's best, and certainly his best at this length.

Of all the new SF writers, Tiptree is perhaps the most aware that everything changes, that the future will be wildly different from either the present or the past, and that our descendants will not be ourselves in crome helmets and plastic tights—they will be creatures of their own times, shaped by those times in what they desire as well as what they fear, in their dreams and in their nightmares. As Tiptree has said:

> I realized this Spring that despite all the hype we—SF writers en lump—really DO NOT THINK MUCH. . . . I began to notice that my esteemed fellow-writers' stories did NOT have much genuine extrapolation in them. Maybe that isn't quite the word . . . I mean, signs of having thought out something new and different. Oh, they have plenty new and different, but it's on a rather free-wheeling emotional plane. Extrapolating single strands. Not, well, different aspects of reality.
>
> I've always been interested in how people think about the future. Mostly they don't. They're afraid of it, or looking forward to it, but they don't *think*. Sample: take a busy group chatting about politics. What should be, what's wrong with what is, etc. etc. And just ask, Forget who should win the election—Who is *going* to win? Mostly you get a dead silence and a nasty look. You can try that on a lot of topics, same result.[32]

Tiptree is clearly not afraid of thinking or extrapolation. "Girl" is a marvelous job of extrapolation and society-building, logically outlandish and elegantly strange. The story—an almost mythically-intense study of love, death, fate, and the inadequacy of good intentions, featuring Tiptree's most grittily-fascinating protagonist—arises organically and inseparably out of the very nature of the civilization in which it happens (rather than being a play acted out in front of a stage-set future society, as in much bad SF), and that civilization is a compelling and complex one, bizarre but self-consistent on its own terms, and as different from today as a 1930s forecast of 1970 is from our own eccentric and multifaceted world.

Tiptree's last 1973 offering, "The Women Men Don't See," was published in the December *F&SF*, making it eligible for the 1975 Nebula Award. It was perhaps the most

instantly-acclaimed of all Tiptree's stories, stirring up a cloud of comment and excitement almost immediately after publication. Silverberg has called it "... something of a masterpiece of short-story writing: structurally simple, but vivid in detail and overwhelming in psychological insight. The thematic solution is an ancient SF cliche—Earth-women carried off by flying-saucer folk—redeemed and wholly transformed by its sudden shattering vision of women, stolid and enduring, calmly trading one set of alien masters for another that may be more tolerable. It is a profoundly feminist story told in entirely masculine manner, and deserves close attention by those in the front lines of the wars of sexual liberation, male and female" (p.xvi, *Warm Worlds).*

Enough people shared Silverberg's enthusiasm for the story that "Women" seemed an almost certain Nebula-winner. Then Tiptree stunned everyone by withdrawing "Women" from competition, even though it was the front-runner in its category at the time—proving once again that there is no such thing as a sure-shot. Tiptree's reason for withdrawing reportedly was to spread the honors around by giving other deserving authors a chance to win, a charming and uniquely Tiptreeish reason if true.

It is interesting to note that in "Mamma" the man-hating heroine, faced with much the same situation and choice, ultimately "comes to her senses," is cured of her phobia, and settles down on Earth to be a happy housewife—in "The Women Men Don't See," Mrs. Parsons opts for the aliens.

For whatever reason—both personal and family illness have been cited by Tiptree, as well as the sheer press of business—Tiptree's production was slowing. In 1972, Tiptree published nine stories; in 1973, three stories; and between 1973 and the date of this writing, only two stories: "Her Smoke Rose Up Forever" in Edward L. Ferman and Barry N. Malzberg's *Final Stage* in 1974, a fine study of a chilling kind of afterlife, billed by the editors as the ultimate "After the Holocaust" story, and in 1975, "A Momentary Taste of Being" in Robert Silverberg's *The New Atlantis*, his longest story to date. 1975 also saw the publication of Tiptree's second short-story collection, *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* (Ballantine Books).

As far as I know, two stories are upcoming in 1976: "She Waits for All Men Born" in Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois's *Future Power*, and "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" in Vonda N. McIntyre and Susan Janice Anderson's *Aurora.* Tiptree is reportedly nearing the final stretch in the writing of his long-awaited first novel, tentatively titled *Up the Walls of the World*, so we have that to look forward to as well. And as the first few months of 1976 flow by, Tiptree is once again on the Nebula Final Ballot, this time with his novella "A Momentary Taste of Being."

And the best of Tiptree may be yet to come.

With his desire for a high bit-rate, his concern for societal goals, his passion for the novel and unexpected, his taste for extrapolation, his experimenter's interest in the reactions of people to supernormal stimuli and bizarre situations, his fondness for the apocalyptic, his love of color and sweep and dramatic action, and his preoccupation with the mutability of time and the vastness of space, Tiptree is a natural SF writer. Certainly he would not be able to realize his particular talents as fully in any other genre, and his devotion to science fiction is plain. "I love the SF world," says Tiptree ". . . Out of SF I wouldn't spare one, from the dimmest two-neurone dreamer to the voice from the heart of the sun." He has described science fiction as "a staggering, towering, glittering mad lay cathedral . . . Built like the old ones by spontaneous volunteers, some bringing one laborious gargoyle, some a load of stone, some engineering a spire. Over years now, over time the thing has grown . . . To what god? Who knows. Something different from the gods of the other arts. A god that isn't there yet, maybe. An urge saying Up, saying Screw it all. Saying Try."[33]

But Tiptree is a complex and contradictory writer, and neither of SF's two opposed philosophical camps—scientific positivism *vs.* subjective humanism—has been able to wholeheartedly lay claim to him. He has the much-vaunted "long view" of society, and is able to plausibly extrapolate cultural trends long years into the future—but he is also very aware that "There is something a little terrifying about a man with too long a view,"[34] and his fiction is passionately concerned with the value of individual lives, however humble. His characters strive constantly for personal transcendence, and yet they are almost always destroyed by it once they have achieved it: "all I write is one story. There's this backward little type, and he's doing some grey little task & believing like they tell him, and one day he starts to vomit and rushes straight up a mountain, usually to his doom."[35] Does that assert man's unconquerable spirit ("an urge that says Up"), or emphasize his helpless smallness ("to his doom")? Is Tiptree upbeat and optimistic, or the blackest of pessimists? A man with a dispassionate long view that spans centuries, or the champion of the underdog individual?

He is neither. He is both.

Tiptree will not be typed. He shatters the parameters simply by refusing to fit them. And then, like some gypsy tinker, he incorporates bits and shards of both broken philosophies into his own work, and reconciles them magnificently. As he does in "She Waits for All Men Born," a story that operates on a time-scale so vast that millions of years go by in a single sentence, a story that takes as its subject all of life from the first primordial slime to man and

then far beyond, and yet is focused throughout on vividly-drawn and closely-studied *individuals.*

Individuals.

Tiptree has said, "I'm trying to make contact with the prisoner inside, the voice wearily raised against the never-opening door, the one you hear in the middle of the night. The thing that's alive."[36] And again: "I want to look inside unknown aspects of people, plain complicated people."[37] People are Tiptree's passion, the focus of his work, his deepest study: "Life plunks you amid strangers making strange gestures, inexplicable caresses, threats, unmarked buttons you press with unforeseen results, important-sounding gabble in code . . . and you keep sorting it out, sorting it out, understanding five years later *why* she said or did whatever, *why* they screamed when you—"[38] People are Tiptree's touchstone, his talisman, his knowledge of them the thing that grants him both his immunity to parameters and his power, that lets him transcend categorization, that lets him break down the barriers.

> We all go around in disguise. The halo stuffed in the pocket, the cloven hoof awkward in the shoe, the x-ray eye blinking behind thick lenses, the two midgets dressed as one tall man, the giant stooping in a pinstripe, the pirate in a housewife's smock, the wings shoved into sleeveholes, the wild racing, wandering, raping, burning, bleeding, loving pulses of reality decorously disguised as a roomful of human beings. I know goddamn well what's out there, under all those masks. Beauty and Power and Terror and Love.[39]

As long as it keeps revealing what is under those masks, Tiptree's art will live.

Gardner Dozois
Philadelphia

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TIPTREE REVEALED

The person using the pen-name James Tiptree, Jr. has finally come out of hiding. She is Alice Sheldon, 61, a married, semi-retired experimental psychologist who has also written under the name Raccoona Sheldon. The Tiptree name was taken from Tiptree, England, a place famous for preserves. Her mother was Mary Hastings Bradley, a world traveler, member of the National Geographic and Royal Geographic Societies, and writer of such books as *I Passed for White* and *Alice in Jungleland.* Her mother's recent death at Bradley Lodge in Wisconsin is partially responsible for her decision to reveal her real name.

In a recent speech, Ted Sturgeon commented that nearly all of the top newer writers, with the exception of James Tiptree Jr., were women. The exception is now gone.

— *Locus*, Jan. 30, 1977

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

When the news of "Tiptree's" true identity became public (I had been privately informed by "Tiptree" several months before, but long after the writing of this critical study), I was tempted to go back over "The Fiction of James Tiptree, Jr." and tinker with it, revise it, take out a suddenly unwarranted assumption ("he is a man") here and there, make myself look better by the use of unadmitted hindsight in the time-honored critical fashion. After due consideration however, I've decided to let everything stand just as I originally wrote it—keeping in mind "Tiptree's" own dictum that "the story is the realest part of the storyteller."

Most of what I have to say about "Tiptree's" *fiction* is still valid, I think, or at least as valid as it ever was. About validity, all I can say is that since the original publication of this essay, I have received a long complimentary letter from "Tiptree" in which she said, among other things, "you understand everything." And with that, the defense will have to rest.

— Gardner Dozois, April 1977

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by Jeffrey Smith

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