

JAMES GUNN

The Academic Viewpoint

James Gunn, author and professor of English at the University of Kansas, who began his writing of science fiction in 1948 and has since done some seventy stories and sixteen books while editing three more, is a master of two difficult disciplines. One is writing and the other is teaching. For over twenty years he has successfully accomplished what many a writing teacher and many a teaching writer has found impossible, the harnessing of these two highly creative occupations in one working tandem.

With all this, he has found time to serve as regional chairman of the American College Public Relations Association, and on the Information Committee of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges. He has also won national awards for his work as an editor and a director of public relations. He has been awarded the Byron Caldwell Smith prize in recognition of literary achievement and has also been president of the Science Fiction Writers of America.

He has been a member of the Executive Committee of the Science Fiction Research Association, and was presented with the Pilgrim Award of SFRA in 1976. Also, he has been given a special award by the 1976 World Science Fiction Convention for his book *ALTERNATE WORLDS*.

He has written articles, verse, and criticism. He has done radio scripts, screen plays, and television plays. A number of his stories have been dramatized in both mediums. One, "The Immortal," was an ABC-TV "Movie of the Week" in 1969 and became an hour-long series, also titled *THE IMMORTAL*, in 1970. Meanwhile, his written work has been reprinted worldwide.

Consequently, if there is one writer in science fiction who is fully qualified in both areas, that of the writer and that of the academic scholar of science fiction, it is James Gunn. He is a professional behind the typewriter and equally a professional in the academic area, and as such, no one is quite as qualified as he to deal with the subject of the article that follows

When the dean of basketball coaches, the late Forrest C. "Phog" Allen, was asked by James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, what he intended to do with his life, Allen replied, "Coach basketball." Naismith responded, "You don't coach basketball; you just play it."

For many years a similar opinion existed about science fiction: you don't teach science fiction; you just read it.

As later events demonstrated, both opinions were incorrect. The first regular course in science fiction was taught at Colgate University in 1962- by Prof. Mark Hillegas, now at Southern Illinois, and Sam Moskowitz organized evening courses in science fiction at City College of New York in 1953 and 1954.

Since then science fiction has spread into thousands of college classrooms and tens of thousands of high schools, and even into junior high schools and primary schools.

This surprising interest of academia in science fiction has aroused suspicion and alarm among science

fiction readers, writers, and editors. Their attitudes have been summed up by Ben Bova's editorial "Teaching Science Fiction" in *Analog* (June 1974) and Lester del Rey's "The Siren Song of Academe" in *Galaxy* (March 1975), and symbolized by *Locus* coeditor and co-publisher Dena Brown's comment at the 1970 organizing meeting of the Science Fiction Research Association, "Let's take science fiction out of the classroom and put it back in the gutter where it belongs."

Part of what frightens science fiction people about academia is the danger that it will be taught poorly, dustily, inadequately, or drably. But even if taught with knowledge, skill, and enthusiasm, science fiction may be perverted by the academic viewpoint, some of them believe.

Teachers, they suspect, look at books differently from ordinary readers, and, like Medusa, their look turns things to stone. Science fiction readers point at their own high school experiences of hating Shakespeare or Dickens because they were forced to read them.

Even at the college level, professors encounter the frequent student attitude: "Why do we have to analyze fiction or poetry? It ruins them."

These are the concerns of the science fiction world. How does academia respond?

First, the notion that all science fiction teachers are alike is simply lack of knowledge about what is done in the classroom. Science fiction is taught for a variety of reasons, at all levels. In colleges, for instance, it often is taught for its content to help teach political science or psychology, anthropology, religion, future studies, or even the hard sciences. Anthologies for these specific purposes multiply in publishers' catalogs. Most objections to the teaching of science fiction, however, do not concern themselves with this use, although a bit of feeling adheres to the exploitation of science fiction for some other purpose than the one God intended.

Even within English departments, teaching approaches vary. Some professors teach the ideas; some, the themes; some, the history and the genre; and some, the great books. In general, all of these may be dismissed from the concerns of the science fiction vested interests; if any of the subjects are taught knowledgeably and capably, the judgments of their teachers about approaches, ideas, themes, definitions, history, and great books need not coincide with those of any held within the science fiction world, where there is, after all, almost as great a diversity of opinion as may be found outside it.

In addition to the approaches listed above, some teachers may include one or more science fiction books in a course in contemporary literature, popular literature, or the literature of women, or of children, or of some other area of experience. And some professors teach science fiction as if it were any other kind of literature, and apply to it the same critical concerns they apply to other books.

Here, perhaps, lies the greatest possibility for a break with science fiction tradition. What values do teachers of literature search out when they teach science fiction—or, for that matter, fiction of any kind?

Surprising as it may be to critics of the teaching of literature, the first consideration is story. Story is as appealing to professors as it is to lay readers. "Pleasure in fiction is rooted in our response to narrative movement—to story itself," Professor Robert Scholes wrote in his essay, "As the Wall Crumbles," in *Nebula Ten*.

But story is relatively unambiguous, at least in a work of fiction in which story predominates, and teaching at all levels tends to gravitate toward those works whose qualities teaching can enhance. This is not to say that these works are necessarily best in some abstract sense, but that they are teachable. Many persons outside academia suggest that at this point science fiction is in danger: qualities in a piece of fiction may be overvalued simply because they are less accessible.

The danger is real. In some academic circles, as among a certain group of avant-garde writers, story has been discarded as too obvious or too easy. Susceptible students and readers have been persuaded that story is a lesser art, if it is an art at all, and difficulty, ambiguity, and obscurity are essential to good fiction. The critics of academia suggest that if these aspects of fiction are highly valued in classes, authors will be seduced into such corrupt practices.

The danger is real, but it is not as great as the doomsayers fear. Authors are not as susceptible as all that (if they're not doing their own thing they aren't worth much as authors), and the teaching of literature is not as pernicious as all that. Story still counts for much in a literature class.

Witness the fact that the books most frequently taught by academics (as reported by Jack Williamson in 1972) were Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, Pohl and Kombluth's *The Space Merchants*, Herbert's *Dune*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, Silverberg's *Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, Wells's *The Time Machine*, and Asimov's *I, Robot*. Other books among those a bit less frequently taught would reveal none unfamiliar to the average science fiction reader; the total list represents, with a few arguments, a reasonable "best" list for any knowledgeable fan, and even the arguable, titles have been honored by science fiction critics and readers.

Admittedly, the list may reveal some bias toward what passes for excellence in writing, skill in characterization, or verisimilitude in description. Few teachers include "Doe" Smith or Edgar Rice Burroughs, from whose science fiction adventures a generation of readers were weaned (though I, for one, always include *A Princess of Mars*, and I would be surprised if some teacher somewhere does not teach *The Skylark of Space* or *Grey Lensman*).

What then do science fiction teachers look for in a work of science fiction?

They are concerned, of course, with teaching the art of reading and the skills of criticism (along with

the ability to communicate) rather than merely the specific work at hand. They apply principles to texts, both to make the piece of prose, poetry, or drama more accessible but also to enable students to apply similar principles to reading they may do in other classes or outside of classes. They want students to get more out of their reading, to read more alertly, more knowledgeably, more enjoyably.

Critics who complain that this kind of approach to literature kills enjoyment are restricting the enjoyment of literature only to those natural readers who understand intuitively what is not immediately observable, or to those works that have no depths.

What is not immediately observable to a casual reader of science fiction? The best way to answer that question might be to list the aspects of fiction that a good teacher looks for.

1. CONSISTENCY OF STORY
2. STORY PREMISES
3. APPLICATION OF THE PREMISES
4. CREDIBILITY OF THE CHARACTERS
5. CONSISTENCY OF THEME
6. IMAGERY
7. STYLE
8. TOTAL ARTFULNESS
9. CHALLENGE TO THE IMAGINATION

10. OVERALL IMPRESSION

1. CONSISTENCY OF STORY. A good reader continually adjusts his expectations of a piece of fiction as the author gradually reveals the directions in which his characters are moving, or are being forced to move. A well-written work handles the reader's expectations skillfully, confidently, neither changing directions nor disappointing expectations previously aroused. A careless reader may never notice inconsistencies in various parts of a work, and a casual reader may forgive them. An author should be held to the highest standards of accountability, both for the improvement of reading and the improvement of writing; an author is not at liberty to do what he wishes without accepting the consequences.

2. STORY PREMISES. A good reader picks up the clues an author plants about the foundations on which his world and his story rest. In a science fiction work, this includes the science and the sociology the answers to the question: how did we get there from here? In a skillfully written work, if the reader grants the author's premises, he must grant the conclusions, but part of the tension of the work always exists between the conclusions and the premises. The casual reader misses an important part of the dialogue in which the good writer hopes to engage him, and allows the lessable writer to pass unchallenged.

3. APPLICATION OF THE PREMISES. A good reader challenges the writer at every point, debating the working out of the author's thesis, his arrival at the conclusions, checking back continually against what he already knows, theorizing that any discrepancy must be significant. This is not a tedious process but one that, once recognized, becomes automatic with the alert reader.

4. CREDIBILITY OF THE CHARACTERS. Are the characters real people? Should we take them seriously? Are they meant to be realistic? Do they react consistently? It is my thesis (see my chapter in Reginald Bretnor's symposium *The Craft of Science Fiction*, Harper & Row, 1976) that characters in a science fiction work should be judged differently from those in mainstream fiction (often they are more important as representatives than as individuals), but characters should be understandably motivated. They should not act arbitrarily or inconsistently; they should act for their own reasons and not for the author's convenience. This is not because of any abstract literary morality but because the fiction is better if they do.

5. CONSISTENCY OF THEME. Does the story have a message? Not all fiction has anything to say other than to reinforce the assumptions basic to the culture from which the fiction springs, such as: good will prevail, or good will prevail only if men and

women of intelligence and character work at it hard enough. But some fiction attempts to say something more-about the nature or goal of life, the nature or difficulties of society, or the nature or problems of people. The good reader asks what the work means besides its obvious story line. Ursula Le Guin's *The*

Left Hand of Darkness, for instance, is about not only whether the world of Winter joins the Ekumen, not only whether Genly Ai is successful or even survives, but about the ways in which sex shapes our society and its institutions. Another question is how well the theme is woven into the fabric of the story, not appended to it like a sermon.

6. IMAGERY. One way in which meaning emerges from fiction is through the imagery implicit in the work, often without the conscious knowledge of author or reader-the literal images, the symbols, the similes, and the metaphors. Once teachers begin talking about images, symbols, and metaphors, the ordinary reader turns his mind off, and authors have been known to object to teachers reading something into their writing that they did not intend, often accusing teachers of falsifying what they were trying to do. As in most criticisms of teaching, there is some truth to the charge; some teachers and some critics build a mountain of interpretation out of a molehill of evidence, and many ignore the author's intention-indeed, it was a tenet of the so-called "new criticism" (now almost fifty years old) that considering the author's intention is a trap, called "the intentional fallacy." Nevertheless, images do occur in works of fiction, and they do influence the reactions of readers to the work. Examples abound, even in science fiction, from the power imagery of technology to the guilt imagery of the mad scientist in whatever his contemporary guise.

7. STYLE. Style is the manner in which words are chosen and put together. Complexity or uniqueness is not necessarily good. Sometimes simplicity or transparency are superior. What we term style is often mistakenly reserved for "high style," for individual mannerisms, for that which calls attention to itself, but what a careful reader notices is the suitability of style to subject and the appropriateness of language and sentence structure-whether what is said is enhanced by the way it is said. Innumerable would be writers have been misled by teachers who told them, "Before you can be a successful writer, you must find your own style." Fred Pohl is fond of quoting a French saying, "Style is the problem solved."

8. TOTAL ARTFULNESS. The different parts of a piece of fiction do not exist in isolation, though they often must be discussed in this fashion if they are to be understood. Few skills-from the golfer's swing to the dancer's routine-can be understood by watching them in their entirety. The separate acts must be broken down into understandable units that can be learned and then reassembled into the whole. All the considerations about fiction that have been discussed up to this point may in themselves be well done but they may not together form a coherent work, and then the good teacher points out why the whole is larger than the sum of its parts.

8. CHALLENGE TO THE IMAGINATION. A piece of fiction might have every virtue the teacher can describe and still be dull; and a piece of fiction can lack almost every virtue and still rise above its circumstances by the way in which it challenges the imagination. The teacher and the reader may wish that great ideas were matched by great execution, but it is not always so, and the good teacher recognizes the appeal of works that are otherwise deficient. This is not to say that the public is always right, but to recognize, as Professor Leslie Fiedler pointed out to an audience of science fiction writers a few years ago, "For too long critics have tried to tell readers why they should like what they don't like; they should be trying to discover why people like what they like."

10. OVERALL IMPRESSION. After a work has been analyzed which means, literally, separated into its constituent parts-it must be put back together. Students object to having what they like dissected as if it were something dead, almost

as much as they

object to being forced to study something they consider dead. After the good teacher has helped his students analyze any work of fiction, then, the teacher should help them regain their vision of the work in its entirety-its overall impression of readability, of narrative excitement, of fictional pleasure. The teacher should bring it back to life. It is a difficult task but not an impossible one.

Properly done, the study of literature does not diminish the enjoyment of reading; it enhances that enjoyment, just as a good critical article about a short story or a novel illuminates the work for the reader, who goes to it with new appreciation and understanding. To believe otherwise is to uphold the blessings of ignorance, to maintain that the individual's enjoyment of any complex art-and fiction is a complex art-depends upon how little he knows about it.

Science fiction has not achieved as much as it might because it has enjoyed few good critics. A critic is more than a reviewer; a reviewer discusses his personal evaluation of a work, while a critic relates his evaluation to larger principles and theories, to standards he or others have established for the greater body of work to which the piece at hand is related. Critics raise standards for writers as well as readers; we can be thankful for the work of Damon Knight, James Blish, D. Schuyler Miller, and a few others in its past, and the current work of Alexei and Cory Panshin, Lester del Rey, Joanna Russ, Barry Malzberg, the writers for Delap's F&SF Review, and A Budrys.

Their judgments have not always coincided-there is no reason they should-but science fiction is better because they have judged and made their criteria plain. The judgments of academia may not be the same as those of science fiction critics or its readers, but, without having read Budrys's contribution to this volume, I would hazard the guess that his criteria for judging a work of science fiction are not much different from those I have set down here.