



GORDON R: DICKSON

## Ten Years of Nebula Awards

Gordon Dickson is one of the few writers of science fiction to have earned a degree in creative writing; after two additional years of graduate work, he became a freelance writer in 1950 and has written, uninterruptedly, ever since. In that quarter of a century he has published more than two hundred short stories and won a Hugo (for "Soldier, Ask Not") and a Nebula (for "Call Him Lord"). He also published some thirty novels, of which the best known are those that belong to his Dorsai cycle, eventually to be composed of three historical novels, three contemporary novels, and an expanding number of futuristic novels. He served two years as president of the Science Fiction Writers of America. We have now had ten years' worth of science-fiction novels and shorter works which have been voted winners of the Nebula Award; and whatever else may be said about these stories, they cannot be denied the label of "representative." The winners as a group are the result of a decade of selections by those who themselves write in the field and who have endeavored annually to choose the best work that was being done.

This being the case, it is a temptation to examine these stories for evidence that the genre-as it has commonly come to be referred to in recent years-is developing and for further indications of the direction in which that development is headed. Unfortunately, ten years of winners, while representing considerable fictional wordage, cover too brief a time to show evidence of any really enduring trend. In addition, the word "genre" does not really tell the whole story about that part of the current literary map generally regarded as being held under the name of science fiction; and moreover, readers, critics, and in fact authors themselves tend to an instinctive parochiality in the matter of time. It is not only easy but tempting to believe that the historical currents with which anyone is concerned make a significant and sudden turn for the better or worse in that person's own professional lifetime.

Inhabitants of previous periods have entertained this same thought, and time has proved them mistaken. To guard against such error in the present instance, it might help to imagine a

bookshelf holding in book form all the Nebula-winning stories to date. Picture this bookshelf as containing ten volumes that are novels, three volumes that together contain ten novellas, two volumes containing ten novelets, and one volume containing nine short stories, \* all arranged on the shelf in no particular order.

On surveying and reading the stories in these volumes, the primary characteristic that surfaces is that, irrespective of their date of publication, they are all strong stories that do not fall easily into any specific groupings, temporal or otherwise. Story by story, they stand apart from each other-even when there is more than one winner by a particular writer-and the general impression they give is that they are works of fiction written by distinct and highly individualistic authors.

The effect, in fact, is not so much that of a "genre" as of a separate and developing current of literature, with a diversity of style and theme as large as that of the so-called literary mainstream itself.



To many critics whose knowledge and understanding of science fiction is cursory, such a statement about the diversity of the work by its authors may sound bold indeed. However, two factors make it at least possible that the statement has a basis in truth. One is that as the past ten years of Nebula winners show, and as knowledgeable readers in this field have long been aware, there has never existed a single "master" type of science fiction. Rather what has been considered science fiction at any particular time has been given its character by as many strong authors as were then appearing in print with it and who, by what they wrote, defined the field rather than adapted themselves to it.

The other factor is that beyond such independence of the authors concerned, a true and viable development in the field of literature has two requirements. One is that its examples must establish themselves in what, effectively, is the marketplace. They must create a supporting readership willing to pay to read them, not merely because this readership has been told science fiction is something everybody is reading or should read but for the sheerly personal pleasure of finding a piece of fiction that interests and entertains individually. Without such a real-life readership any literary development takes place, in effect, under

\*In 1970 there was no award for short story.  
laboratory conditions only; and no true estimate of its chances for survival in succeeding decades can be made.

The other requirement for a literary development is that the attitude of those creating the works involved be primarily occupied with the effectiveness of what they do and only secondarily with current praise and approval of it. It is a truism in art that the self-conscious artist is unlikely to be productive of great work. Certainly there has been considerable evidence that this is true both of literary art over the centuries and of science fiction in this past decade. The outstanding examples here being those of professional writers outside the field of science fiction who have tried to do a science fictional work and, failing, discovered that it is a type of literature that goes a great deal deeper than the display of a few surface characteristics and techniques.

The difference, in fact, between true science fiction and even expert imitations is a profound one, as those members of the Science Fiction Writers of America who have voted these Nebula Awards are professionally aware. The writers represented on our hypothetical shelf are those who have experimented successfully, and they have been successful precisely because they hoped to gain for themselves the name of experimentalist.

These two factors of individuality and responsibility have been visible in science fiction from the 1940s to the present. They are particularly visible in the winners of the award during the past ten years. Therefore, it seems entirely possible that even if the award winners of this decade do not cover a sufficient span of time to give us a certain picture of the direction in which science fiction is developing, they do present evidence from which, for the first time, we may try to paint a picture of what the field is, in present character and in its possible eventual relationship to the historical current of literature in general.



In the area of identity, three specific characteristics of science fiction show themselves almost at once to the inquiring eye. The first is that science fiction, as the Nebula winners themselves show from "He Who Shapes" by Roger Zelazny in 1965 to "Born with the Dead" by Robert Silverberg in 1974-is a literature of ideas and thematic argument. Secondly, that it is a literature characterized by experimentation with style-as in "Repent, Harlequin!" by Harlan Ellison, 1965, BABEL-17 by

Samuel Delany and "The Last Castle" by Jack Vance, 1966, "The Planners" by Kate Wilhelm in 1968, and a large number of others, moving forward down the years to 1975. Third, it is a literature remarkable for the existence of a community attitude among its practitioners, one that has avoided fostering a pattern of sterile imitation within the group while successfully encouraging ideational conflict among its members-with resultant benefit to the readers.

Unfortunately these characteristics have not been free of occasional misunderstandings. The word "ideas" has encountered; some semantic ghettoization. There is an argument to the effect that science fiction was formerly a literature of ideas but has, since developed into a literature of human values. While these, two terms do indicate a difference of a kind, they are still siblings of the same philosophical family. The general term "ideas" can be stretched to encompass them both. Ideas about things, which, were characteristic during the period of technological science fiction in the 1940s, have in fact generally given way to ideas about human relationships and potentials in the current literature. But these two patterns of science fiction are still brother and sister, as the definite kinship, even in the past ten years, shows in= the cases of such stories as "The Secret Place" by Richard McKenna, a 1966 winner, and "The Day Before the Revolution" by Ursula K. Le Guin, this year's winner in the short-story division.

The second point, that of experimentation, has occasionally been obscured by the fact that we have just recently gone through a period of experimentation in science fiction. In the past few: years a great many attempts have been made to stretch the effective limits of presently known writing techniques. Most of these, of course, were statistically doomed to be unsuccessful;. and unfortunately some of the unsuccessful ones, as older, readers, critics, and writers have occasionally recognized, duplicate earlier literary experiments in the mainstream. It is an' easy assumption that literary experiment is a periodic phenomenon, productive mainly of failures.

But the assumption is wrong. Literary techniques and attitudes are and have always been in a process of evolution, no matter how fast or how slowly, and the means by which evolution is accomplished is the actual enlargement of techniques and: literary limits resulting from successful experiments. It is beside' the point that the successes are in the small minority. An art is judged by its best examples, not by its worst.

The third point, that of community, sometimes has been considered only an idiosyncrasy of the field rather than an actual source of strength. A close look shows that at no time before in history has a group of writers this numerous been able to communicate so intimately to form in fact the community to which I refer. Such a community was a



physical impossibility before our present time. As Ben Bova, science-fiction author and editor of Analog magazine, has remarked, the long-distance telephone and the jet plane are what make it workable.

Traditionally, the conditions of existence for the professional writer and I do not hold the publishing industry blameless for a good many of these---have tended to keep him at a distance from his fellow professionals. In almost all fields of writing before 1950, at a social occasion attended by two or more established writers, the writers metaphorically, if not actually, eyed each other from opposite ends of the room with all the mistrust of natural enemies.

Since the 1950s, however, and specifically in the science fiction area, this situation has changed. Science-fiction writers nowadays are together on a number of occasions, professional, academic, and social; and accordingly they are able to compare notes over the whole range of their work and lives. This new-it is a temptation to call it futuristic-community interaction is one of the factors that have kept the field constantly renewed and alive.

A number of the stylized misconceptions of science fiction fail in the face of the science fiction written in the last decade. Dramatically so in the case of Nebula winners such as Robert Silverberg, Ursula Le Guin, and Gene Wolfe, but clearly in the case of any who have received the award since its inception. For many years outside communities have taken a single aspect of science fiction and run off with it, proclaiming the part to be the whole. Hollywood early seized on the concept of the monster and called that "science fiction" (or, more likely, "sci-fi") in some thousands of movie advertisements. Critics who could not be bothered to read more than the flap copy of the books they reviewed extracted the idea of future science and technology and made of this a buzzing, light-blinking piece of Rube Goldberg

hardware, which they pilloried in thousands of columns of newspaper type.

Meanwhile, the actual writers in the actual field, as these award winning stories show, were writing the full-fleshed, three dimensional works of literate art that historically have always been found near the heart of memorable literature. Not all the science fiction writers were doing this at all times, to be sure. Not even a majority of those writing science fiction at any, one time were doing it. But neither have a majority of those in any other area of writing ever done so at any one time. To repeat: what was said earlier, we judge an art by its best examples, not, by its worst.

Happily, in recent years with the serious attention of the much larger audience that has grown up into the future our earlier writers hypothesized, and with the attention of serious academics, the era of the monster and the hardware is finally, coming to an end. If anything further were needed to end it, the hypothetical ten-year shelf of Nebula winners does the task. 11 Since the commencement of the award in 1965, this shelf reveals: no monsters and no hardware. Instead, what is found on it are



stories of human beings under new and different life pressures, life pressures that may not yet have come to be but which can lie, within the bounds of some possible future or alternate present for any one of us.

It is not prophecy but freedom to entertain all concepts that is being celebrated here. The proof of its worth is in the endurance of the best things being written in this literary area. Their endurance and their translation into other media-into movies,' into radio and television, even into serious comics, often some' years after the original publication-are some evidence of their worth and the artistry of their authors. It is interesting to note that there are none without exception-among these writers who have won Nebulas to the present date who have not gone on to= gather an ever-growing audience and who are not now seeing f their earlier works collected or reprinted for a continually enlarging readership. I know of no other award, literary or otherwise,-: of which that statement can be made.

Finally, and this is the important point, the conditions that produced such consistently good and unusual writing are still at work. The instinct to experiment, the sense of responsibility, the fascination with the human spirit and its possibilities, the community attitude, all are currently being put to work by new people even as they are being kept at work by the old. As the awards for this year were being handed out, the next generation of science-fiction writers, with all the individuality, power, and vitality that is traditional in this literature, were in the field and being heard from. Their names are already familiar. Haldeman, Dozois, Bryant, Lanier, Eisenstein, Grant-the list goes on. And behind them in the further dawn a wave of even newer faces are taking on identity-Catherine Callaghan, Arsen Damay, Roland Green, and others. How soon will we see you walking toward the head table at award time in the years to come?