TO SEACON '79

by Fritz Leiber

It is a pleasure and a great thrill to me to be speaking to the world's science-fiction community.

I've been getting input from that community, both the knowing and the unknowing ~~emem~~ member, since my life began.

As when my grandmother showed me my first pictures of dinosaurs beside a wood-burning stove in the kitchen of a town-engulfed farmhouse in Pontiac, Illinois, with its dirt streets and wooden sidewalks.

As when my father explained submarines to me during the First World War.

As when my father and mother, rehearsing and enacting Shakespeare, poured the mighty lines upon me repeatedly. "If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not..." "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I am troubled by bad dreams..." "But here, upon this bank or shoal of time..." "We are

such stuff as dreams are made of..." "Light thickens, and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood; good things of day begin to droop and drawse, whiles night's black agents to their preys arouse..." "It harrows me with fear and wonder..." "The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, Yea, all which it inherit shall dissolve and like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a wrack behind..."

As when...I get a flash...It's December 1926. Through the plate glass window of a Chicago drugstore I spy a big red-framed magazine and am drawn inside. Its cover shows skaters cutting figures beneath the ringed planet Saturn which crowds the sky.

As when my friend Harry Fischer dreams up two swordsmen, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and shares them with me to play with.

As when Howard Lovecraft, responding to a letter from my wife, shares his last three months with us by correspondence, finds time to read and comment on my apprentice efforts, and introduces us posthumously to Robert Bloch, Henry Kutter, and August Derleth.

As when H. G.Wells and Olaf Stapledon first opened for me their vast philosophic panoramas of the future.

As when Farnsworth Wright accepted a story of mine for <u>Weird Tales</u> and John W. Campbell, Jr. first sent me a check for a

novelette in Unknown. (The latter triumph intoxicated me so that I gave up a thirty-dollar-a-week office job for a writing career. Three months later I went back to the office -- at twenty-five.)

As when Campbell showed me how to build the novels Conjure Wife and Gather Darkness! properly.

The thrill of pride at seeing Lovecraft's The Shadow Our of Time among the five Viking Portable Novels of Science.

Let's get the focus a little closer now...

It's late summer 1949 and 4:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning (or Friday night, as I still tend to think of it -- really, days should begin at dawn, not midnight) I'm in a darkened railway coach creaking through the American Midwest from Chicago southeast toward Cincinnati. The three or four other passengers are dim hunched lonely forms -- silent, except one of them snores. But I, strategically situated by the one light in the car barely bright enough to read by, am busily writing book reviews for The Chicago Tribune, a capriciously reactionary anti-British newspaper which in the 1920's had enthusiastically supported Chicago's sole Republic mayor, Big Bill Thompson, who wore a cowboy hat and was forever discovering British propaganda in the high school textbooks and promising to punch King George in the snoot if that monarch tried to come visiting -- Big Bill believed that professing such sentiments endeared him to Chicago's rather large Irish-American and German-American populations. From time to time while I ponder and scribble

I withdraw a flat bottle from my breast pocket and take a measured sip of brandy.

I'm writing the book reviews to supplement my modest income as associate editor of the magazine Science Digest. (Reactionary publications that back big business are more apt to pay for their book reviews than liberal or left-wing ones, I've found.) But I'm also doing it in a way to salve my conscience, for I'm engaged in an escapade, or so I hope. I've left my wife and my young son at home. Last Friday afternoon I brought my small suitcase directly from Science Digest to the railway station. For the next couple of days I'll be on my own.

The year's been a very busy one for me. After a couple of slow years following the war, which I spent at an aircraft plant to avoid military service, I've gotten back to writing stories again. Also, for the past eight months I've been publishing with meticulous regularity a rather small (some 8 to 12 single-spaced pages, circulation between 80 and 90 copies) self-mimeographed (my wife Jonquil cut most of the stencils) fortnightly magazine solemnly titled New Purposes. It contains stories, articles, essays, satires, and poetry by myself and a few choice friends (they help me collate pages, marching around a table) -- stuff perhaps not good enough to sell (most editors want trash, don't they?) but certainly much too good to waste. New Purposes is for spaceflight,

mental telepathy, psychoanalysis, sex, honesty, and all sorts of other high-minded sentiments. It's against stupidity wherever it's entrenched. It's devilishly clever and cutting, in fact, with a big dose of pessimism softened by a general frivolity. It's really a rather gentle magazine when you come down to it. It talks a lot about new purposes but does nothing to implement them. Robert A. Heinlein (whose works are the object of my adoration) would probably have called it "custard-headed," while A. E. Van Vogt, invoking Null-A general semantics, might have disposed of it as "very unsystematic."

You know the sort of 'zine I'm talking about. The first issue had type somewhat faint and blurry in spots--I didn't know you took the typewriter ribbon out when you cut stencils, and I was just learning to hand crank a duplicator and hand brush the right amount of ink into the cylinder. New Purposes began as solid pages of type, but progressed eventually to double column. There was a colored "NP" logo, hand stamped with a block covered with burlap to give it an interesting texture -- most arty indeed. Toward the end there was a rash of cartoons which I traced on the stencils with a stylus from the originals held against a window pane; they included a series called "Civilization on Trial," by one Harold Meigs.

NP cost a nickle a copy -- oh, I was anxious that people buy it; later that price rose to a dime, $1.75 for a year's 24 issues. At most about 25 people subscribed to it. There were 16 issues in all, and the first 13 of those came out on schedule: 1st and 15th of the first 6 1/2 months of 1949.

My fellow contributors included my Lovecraft friends, Hank Kuttner and Robert Bloch; a University of Chicago friend, Georg Mann (who did "The Salesman as a Culture Hero" and "The Future of the Lie," elsewhere a series of fine satires about a family of Central European geniuses named Wischmeier), two or three poets, of course, and a couple of over-enthusiastic taboo-breakers who embarrassed me with their vulgarities.

Whatever else New Purposes managed or failed to be, it did prove one thing: that I myself was bursting to write and be heard -- have an audience. Why, I was even writing a novel in NP by semimonthly installments, Casper Scatterday's Quest, a sort of a Voltaire "naive young man encounters life" thing with Casper being Candide and one Joe Brimstone his Dr. Pangloss. A few years later I resurrected those stumbling, talky episodes, gave them a science-fantasy background, and they grew into The Green Millennium.

But that's getting ahead of myself. Actually, I'm still in that nocturnal railway, coach, remember?, writing book reviews and sipping brandy -- and engaged in what I think of as an escapade.

(The conductor seems to agree from where he's seated across the aisle; he studies me speculatively between intervals of napping; I time my brandy sips to coincide with the latter.)

Now remember too, I'm not exactly a neophyte writer. It's been ten years since I sold, at a princely cent a word, my first magazine fantasy and eight since I sold, at half a cent, my first science fiction -- a dreadful mawkish melodrama about spaceships that crawled along (and sometimes fell off) the gravitation web or warps linking the worlds, not science fiction so much as pseudoscience. And now I'd just got out 13 issues of a mimeod magazine, without realizing that there are ~~such~~ somewhat similar publications called fanzines in my own field -- you'll have to take my word on my naïveté.

I think it must be clear by now that I'm a person who is rather slow in catching on to things, somewhat delayed in absorbing some of the finer nuances of my environment (a little like the legendary Englishman and the joke). I'm a Capricorn, you see, along with Marlene Dietrich and Edgar Allen Poe, and Stalin and Nixon, and

Mithra and Jesus too, and we Capricorns are all pretty cautious introspective people, slow to take action.) For here I am going to my first science fiction convention (the Seventh World Science Fiction Convention, to be exact, at Cincinnati, the "Cinvention" in fact -- that was what gave it a little spice and made me think of it as an escapade) and I ~~didn't~~ don't have more than the faintest idea of what I was in for.

The dim coach slowed and creaked more loudly as it wound through the dismal outskirts of a big city. I got off at the lifeless station, tramped through the bleak dawn to the convention hotel, got up to my small top-storey room where the elevator motor or the hot water pipes or something made a rhythmic pulsing, and collapsed for a couple of hours.

Now I'm not going to try to describe to you the Seventh World Science Fiction Convention, or any convention, for that matter. Most of you have attended such, and so you know what they're like. And it all happened thirty years ago. Moreover, I was a complete convention novice, remember?, and so would have missed most of the finer points in any case.

I'll only say that the Convention was bigger and brighter and busier, and friendlier and more talkative too, then I could ever have imagined. There was a big room full of science-fiction books and magazines and glittering displays and several hundred people (hundreds were big news then), including what seemed a remarkable

number of beautiful young women, one a tall blonde -- named maybe Lois Miles? -- who I'll swear was introduced to me as "Miss Science Fiction of 1949." An equally attractive brunette, a local Cincinnati fan named Bea Mahaffey, was circulating also, and before the con ended got herself a job with Ray Palmer of Amazing Stories; for a half dozen years she was the most beautiful assistant editor in science fiction. And that evening I met a most dramatic dark-eyed girl in a purple evening dress who had just startled the readers of Astounding with its first proto-feminist "woman's viewpoint," "woman signing her own female name to it, not just initials" story, "That Only a Mother": Judith Merril, who'd just been collaborating with Cyril Kornbluth on Gunner Cade and who turned out to have the finest critical mind for sf I'd yet encountered.

I met any number of fans, one or two of whom actually asked me for my autograph (incredibly flattering!), and a lot of writers and even some editors. I drank with George O. Smith. I bull-sessioned with Lester del Rey on all sorts of topics in science and the practical arts. I met for the first time in person my new agent (actually the first agent I'd ever had), a skull-faced young veteran who spent a lot of time playing poker: Frederick Pohl; he also turned out to be the husband of Judith Merril.

But names of individuals don't matter. What happened to me at the Seventh World SF Convention, what had a lasting and irrevocable effect on me, was that I met my readers at long last, met them en masse, my popular and critical audience both, and I was never the same afterwards.

Without the insights gleaned from such minds as Judith Merril's (with her profound understanding of the imaginative writer's full spectrum: scientific, supernatural, philosophic, religious, adventuring, technical, mystical) I don't think I could have written stories such as I did for the new magazine, Galaxy, that started next year, such stories as "Coming Attraction," "Poor Superman," and "The Moon is Green."

Nevertheless I have a confession to make. When I traveled back to Chicago Monday night from Cincinnati (I think I had a sleeper this time) my chief conscious thought was this doubtless over-optimistic one, "Gee, I wish I'd had all those people's addresses at the beginning of this year -- I could have tripled the circulation of New Purposes."

Frederick Pohl was my first agent and also the cleverest editor I ever had. I'd gone through a very bleak dry period after World War II -- that's when I was earning my living as associate editor of the science-

fact reprint magazine, Science Digest. Fred encouraged me to finish up somehow most of the half dozen or so story ideas and story sections I'd been working at for three years or so, and then he went on and sold them. Helpful to my pocketbook and very good for my ego.

Later on, in the 1960's, when Fred was editor of Galaxy, Worlds of Tomorrow and If, he assigned me several pieces of cover art to write stories around. Later on we'll have a closer look at this strange practice, which is sometimes criticized. For now I'll just say that it's not a bad way to get a sluggish writer going. Sometimes this happens because the picture is so outrageous -- so foreign to the writer's normal imagination -- that it makes him want to abuse it and gives him cunningly nasty ideas.

During the same period Fred gave me three of my catchiest story titles. Here's how it happened. I was still mostly aiming my stories at John Campbell's Astounding, and I knew John favored shorter titles, ideally one word. So I turned out "Grandmaster," "The Tickler," and "In the Dressing Room." Not very inspiring. What's more, it turned out that Campbell didn't want them. When Fred ultimately bought all three, he hunted through them for phrases and plucked out these titles which I'd had all along without knowing: "The 64-Square Madhouse," "The Creature from Cleveland Depths," and "No Great Magic." Correction: "No great magic" weren't my words, but Robert Graves', whose poetry I'd quoted in a chapter heading. Incidentally, his Seven Ways in New Crete is a wonderful novel of Science Fiction. L.C.

But the finest piece of cover art Fred let me write a story around was one he never showed me. At a Galaxy office party Fred sidled up to me, freshened my drink, and said, "Fritz, I've got a cover floating around I think would interest you. I can't lay my hands on it right now -- it was intended for a novel that didn't work out. Against a background of black night and stars, there's this big clock with its hands at midnight. Beside it stands a beautiful woman in black evening dress looking toward infinity. It keeps reminding me of your novel, The Big Time. I wonder...."

My imagination was fired. It took me no more than a week to write the novelette that became "No Great Magic." But when it came out in Galaxy, I looked in vain for my beautiful-woman-midnight-clock cover. Instead there was a rather repulsive, in fact downright disgusting picture of a scarlet-skinned, bug-eyed monster (he had four bug eyes) who seemed to be splitting in two beginning at the nose, illustrating something by Jack Vance (The Star Kings"?) in the same issue. Thinking it over later, I realized that almost certainly Fred had improvised the picture of the beautiful clock woman on the spur of the moment as bait for an unwary writer. That's why I call him the cleverest editor.

Speaking of nonexistent pictures, there are editors who appear to function invisibly. They often have lowly titles: assistant, associate, managing, something like that. They're generally modest. They don't write editorials or cause stirs. The nature and degree of their power is frequently obscure. Yet under their touch magazines flourish, new writers spring up, there is a growing richness and imaginative fertility. And when they depart, magazines wither. Such an editor was Cele Goldsmith for Amazing and Fantastic during the late 1950's and the early 1960's.

In my own case, it was the Land of Lankhmar that was made fertile by her acceptances. I was able to begin writing stories again of my sword-and-sorcery heroes, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, whom I'd pretty much had to ditch for 15 years (no market!) after their five-story career in the short-lived Unknown.

It was also from Cele Goldsmith that I learned the most about the practice of assigning an author to write a story around an arresting, strange or exciting-looking magazine cover. This generally begins with a publisher who feels that an exciting cover is the single most important item in selling the book. So get the most exciting possible cover first from the artist; dream up the subject of the "illustration" yourself or have the

artist do that. Then have an author write a story around it -- and incidentally explain fully whatever horrendous things are going on in the picture. Authors are supposed to be resourceful and imaginative, aren't they?

From Cele Goldsmith I received at various times without warning in the mail the following pictures: 1. a satanic-looking chap in a botanic laboratory gloats over a potted plant in the midst of whose bloom a tiny woman is growing with hair like cornsilk; 2. a similar customer, bald, regards a cushioned hot plate on which a large egg is hatching; from a crack in the egg protrudes a clawed animal foot; the foot and claws are blue; 3. In the foreground two men and a woman look up concernedly; overhead is the moon, zoomed close so we can see her craters; the moon appears to be exploding; big chunks are coming out; 4. A giant two-headed serpent rears from the sea; riding the smaller head is a mahout with a bull-prod; he wears a spacesuit colored orange, purple and red; in the background a small black vessel hovers above the waves; 5. A tarbooshed Arab loiters with a broom before a curio shop; within hangs a golden cage, inside which sits a slave girl; a yashmak conceals her face save for her urgent, enigmatic eyes.

I do not know what other men might do faced by these prodigies, these bolts from the blue post office.

Turn aside in revulsions? Drop to the floor, gibbering? I only know that they set my imagination working, and stories evolved. Somehow each garish picture managed to relate itself to a story-idea I'd been thinking about for a long while. Each lurid vision opened a door to my unconscious mind.

From the potted flower-women I got "Dr. Adams' Garden of Evil," a tale poking fun at Playboy-type magazines.

The bald man staring at the egg cracking from within became a story of modern covens in which witches' familiars are hatched from eggs.

Exploding Luna led to "Deadly Moon," a twisty tale of meteors and pseudo-science based on Hans Bellamy's book, Moons, Myths and Man, and in which the moon-blasts are warnings from a space-traveling alien race. But also, in searching for other reasons for ~~the moon~~ this cover-moon breaking up, I conceived my longest science-fantasy novel, The Wanderer.

The two-headed sea serpent recalled to my mind a long novel of Fafhrd and the Mouser which I'd tried to write -- and botched -- thirty years earlier. The outrageously crazy picture tempted me to try again, and I produced the novela "Scylla's Daughter," which in turn became the core of my first sword-and sorcery novel, The Swords of Lankhmar.

While the tarbooshed Arab got me thinking about curio shops as we'd really like to have them, curio shops with all our secret desires for sale -- and so touched off another Lankhmar tale, "The Bazaar of the Bizarre."

There's this to be said for writing stories around strange pictures: It forces the author to begin with or at least lead up to action and a situation. He's compelled to use his imagination at its fullest be~~s~~t from the very start. Whereas left to his own devices, he might decide to grow his story from some solemn and serious theme or even -- God help us! -- a moral.

Oh, there is room for stories with serious themes, all right, stories about the bare bones of life -- if the author remembers to disguise them sufficiently, dress them up in attractive costumes. But the seeming "whim of the moment" stories are good to write too.

Not all my Fantastic covers were such puzzle assignments. Four, by Ed Emsh, were the finest Fafhrd-Mouser illustrations any artist has as yet achieved, to my mind.

It is eminently fitting that Cele Goldsmith's modest anonynimity and concern won her the Invisible Little Man award given for signal contributions to science fiction by the Little Men's Marching and Chowder Society of Berkeley, California.

Since my move twenty years ago from my native Chicago with its mysterious smokes and elevated trains to the sunny (and sometimes smoggy) American Pacific Coast, and especially since my arrival ten years ago at San Francisco (Frisco, as I sometimes call her to myself, remembering Jack London), that other literary city besides London famed for her fogs, I seem to have found at last a modern metropolis I love -- and fully worth the time I lavish on her.

San Francisco's hills (There are far more than the Roman seven) have tempted me to endless walks; I've mounted most of them, but not yet all.

Her ever-changing skies have led me to the roofs again, to renew my acquaintance with the stars, to orient myself, and to watch daily the sun, the planets, and especially the moon as they march through the sky. She's even made me keep as meticulously as I'm able a lunar calendar along with the solar one. Did you know that by a most auspicious circumstance this Seacon began on the first day of the eighth moon to be born in 1979? That day Luna was one day old, a new beginning.

Also, San Francisco's central TV tower and numerous skyscrapers and high rises, rising like a modern Stonehenge around my rooftop star-gazing (and fog-watching on other nights, of course), have led me to an obsessive study of them, along with the sky they border. I promise you some articles about those activities.

San Francisco and her serrated strange high-rises have already drawn from me more than one short story and an occult novel, Our Lady of Darkness, and under her haunting, mesmeric influence there will be more of those--I'm on the track of them.

You know, there's one thing about all the members of the world science fiction and fantasy community that keeps us linked. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing with our lives, there are the same stars moving above us all, and all the aspirations and dreams and endless mysteries those stars evoke. I am tempted to close with those words of Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

> The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
> The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs;
> the deep
> Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
> 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
> Push off, and sitting well in order smite
> The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
> To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
> Of all the western stars, until I die.
> It may be that the gulfs shall wash us down;
> It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
> And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are,
    we are--
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
