

In Search of the Ontological Millennium: The True & Secret History of MH Zool (talkies version)

In 1988 I and a number of other people wrote a book called 'The Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide To Science Fiction And Fantasy', (pause for breath at this point) which was published in 1989, reviewed (as far as I know) exclusively in Interzone (of which more later), and, occasionally, even sold. This talk is essentially a long list of carping complaints about the publishers, so I should emphasize in advance that, in fact, Bloomsbury were really very good to us. They let us do pretty much what we wanted, occasionally provided information we needed, and even paid us for the effort. However, our editors did provide us with a few good excuses for some of the more, um, BIZARRE aspects of the finished work, and in self-defense I feel the need to offer some of these to a wider audience. ****

The story begins with Kenneth McLeish, author of a large number of non-fiction books including the Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide, which was an attempt to, well, help people become good readers. The book contained entries on all the writers commonly available in English who Kenneth McLeish considered to be 'significant', along with a number he regarded as 'entertaining'. Each entry included a brief description of the author's typical subjects, style (if any), dominant themes, and so on, along with a set of 'read-ons' which were supposed to guide you to other writers whose work you might enjoy, if you appreciated the books detailed in the main entry. I hope that's clear...:-) There were also a number of 'skeins', which consisted of networks of suggested titles radiating out from some 'core' work of literature. Thus, for example, one of the core works might be Ulysses, and one of the lines of development going out from it might be called 'Experimental Literature'. Along this line you might expect to find Tristram Shandy, William Burroughs and so on. Finally, the book included reading lists of 8 books on such classically literary topics as 'The Sea' or (this being an English book) 'Oxbridge'. Probably the most interesting thing about the whole structure, incidentally, is what you might call the covert pro-culturism***. Ken was apparently under the impression that people who regularly read, for example, Alastair Maclean, could probably do with having their minds improved a bit, and designed the read-ons to help with this. Thus (to stick to the same example), I vaguely remember that the reader is encouraged to go straight from 'HMS

Ulysses' or 'The Guns of Navarone' to 'Nostromo'???, an experience that I can imagine must have come as a bit of a shock to many people who settled down on their holiday beaches, pulled out the book they bought for a bit of light relief in the guns and gore ***mode, and found themselves confronted by The Problem Of Evil. Still, I trust their minds were much improved by it all.

Now, obviously, this was something of an ambitious project, the sort of thing that leads one to speculate about unpublished Borges stories called 'The Infinite Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide' or 'The Garden Of Forking Read-Ons'. Particularly as it all had to come in under 160 pages.

Since Ken, although very widely read, is not a walking incarnation of the British library, the original Guide was obviously more successful in some areas than others. The sf read-ons, for example, were very heavily prone to the 'all roads lead to Asimov' syndrome. Nevertheless, it's a good and useful book, as long as you don't put too much faith in any individual fact...something which I hope could also be said about our version:-)

The Good Reading Guide sold quite well, and Bloomsbury decided to commission a set of spin-offs for individual genres, with Ken as series editor. So, for example, there was going to be one on detective fiction, one on romance, and so on. Including, of course, one on science fiction and fantasy. This is where you get a glimpse of the sordid underbelly of the modern publishing business. Or at least, this is where those of you are not yourselves INVOLVED in the modern publishing business... As series editor, Ken was essentially in charge of choosing the people who would do the various spin-offs. So H R F Keating (a detective writer and friend of Ken's) was chosen for the murder mysteries book, while the sf one was handed to Simon McLeish, Ken's son. Simon then brought in the Oxford University Speculative Fiction Group, which is where I became involved. You may well regard this as a particularly dubious piece of nepotism, exactly the sort of thing which excludes most of the British population from the centres of Power. Certainly I would see it that way, if I hadn't benefitted from it myself:-)

So the nineteen of us assembled as a cooperative venture (later described as a vast amorphous thrashing jelly like animal in which Ivan Towlson was the forebrain and I was the little brain in the tail that handles eliminatory functions)

to actually write and produce the thing. Three of us (including me) stayed in Oxford over the summer to argue with Bloomsbury, set up bank accounts, and viciously mangle the lovingly crafted entries produced by everybody else (this last being the way things usually happen in cooperatives, I think. Though we did manage to get away without any open conflict). The rest went off to get jobs, and sent in entries on authors they were interested in as and when. And, occasionally, if. We managed to assemble a list of writers who should be included because they were a) popular or b) good (some people actually fell into both categories), concentrating on modern authors on the grounds that they were the ones most likely to be available, and hence the ones our supposed readers would most probably want to know about. Seizing on the concept of collective ****responsibility, we decided that none of the entries should be signed. We managed to get our word limit increased a bit (to enough to fill a whole 140 pages). And we began to write pieces and send them in. This is where we started to encounter what you might call differences in PERCEPTION*** between us and the publishers.

I think the initial signs began to manifest themselves when three of us went up to London to discuss the book. Although I was initially a bit disturbed to find that the Bloomsbury building was next to the British Bureau of Film Censorship, once I got inside the building everything seemed to be going quite well until we got to lunch. Now, I'm a vegetarian, so I said something terribly witty and entertaining along the lines of 'Err, I'm a vegetarian. I don't suppose any of those sandwiches are too?' Kathy Rooney, the Bloomsbury non-fiction editor gave me a shocked look and said 'Well, OF COURSE they are.' :-) Now, this was all very nice, but I must admit the idea that vegetarianism was NORMAL struck me as rather unsettling.*** I mean, if you can't be smug and morally superior, what's the point? Anyway...*** At around this point the conversation turned to the subject of psychic powers, as I'm informed is natural in publishing houses. Kenneth McLeish described the woman he had had in the house who had traced all the pipes of his plumbing system with a dowsing pendulum. Why he wanted his plumbing dowsed I'm still not certain, incidentally—I felt it best not to ask. So the Bloomsbury representatives kicked this impressive evidence

of Sewage From Beyond**** around for a while, and then Ms. Rooney turned to us and asked our opinion. 'Err...', I said, trying to buy time to find a non contentious** way of saying 'are you sure that British houses of a certain age don't all have their plumbing built along the same lines?' *** 'But I suppose you're all RATIONALISTS!', she said, investing the word with a degree of repugnance and sheer horror which I had previously only heard used for 'genocidal mass murderer'. 'Well, yes', I said, cautiously. She nodded, all her worst suspicions confirmed, and we got back to business.

The true problem, however, appeared to be that much of the time we didn't actually speak the same LANGUAGE. Now, all our entries were first ruthlessly mutilated by one of the three people in Oxford (usually me), so that they would conform to my tyrannical notions of style (mostly concerned with ensuring that the various reviewers' levels of hostility were brought on to some sort of common ground, so that Gene Wolfe would not be excoriated by a very demanding critic and John Norman gently criticized by a rather less demanding one), and then sent off to Ken McLeish for perusal. He would then send them back with comments, many of them very helpful (though I did become a little weary of changing things in line with his suggestions, only to get a note back that this was badly written and we should change it to a form that, surprise surprise, was pretty much the one we had originally. However, everyone who's done editing is probably a bit guilty of that, myself certainly not excluded). The strangest moments, however, were all connected with vocabulary. Thus, for example, Ken believed that 'utopia' described a form** of society, but emphatically NOT a type of novel. So all our original entries which said things like 'Read On: Ursula LeGuin's Always Coming Home is a similar utopia' came back red pened with the words 'Read On: a similar utopias is in Always Coming Home'. And, in the Howard entry, my immortal phrase 'Conan... hacks his way across a prehistoric world full of evil wizards and persuadable princesses' (itself toned down from a rather less polite initial draft by my colleagues in the cooperative on the grounds that Bloomsbury wanted a book that would encourage people to go out and read other books, even if they were by Robert Howard), was altered to 'Conan hacks his way across a prehistoric world full of evil wizards and PERSUASIBLE princesses', which I

still can't say trips lightly off my tongue. I also remember being a little surprised when he criticised my use of 'goes supernova' as in 'some star or other goes supernova'. 'Don't use science fiction jargon; restrict yourselves to real scientific phrases', he scribbled back. 'Well, I'm an astrophysicist, and that's what *I* say', I thought... ****

There were also one or two minor difficulties with ideology, centering on Bloomsbury's rejection of 'mankind' as an unsound word. Now, you may well have your own opinions about this, and I can see the point of view of anyone who objects to it. I'd just like to go on record, however, as pointing out that it's extraordinarily difficult to give a terse description of the works of some of the more, ah, grandiose sf writers when the only words available for people as a whole are 'humanity' and 'humankind' without descending to this sort of thing 'Gordon Dickson's Childe Cycle dot dot dot describes the splitting of humankind into many highly differentiated sub-groups, each of which expresses a component of humanity's essential nature and which begin to breed back with each other to produce a New Humankind'. (And no, that particular sentence isn't in the final book.)

To be honest, it must be said that we didn't always play entirely fair with Bloomsbury ourselves. The difficulty was that we were supposed to produce a book which was 'positive' about EVERYONE. This led to a number of entries which can, so to speak, be read in more than one way. Thus the L Ron Hubbard piece includes 'Battlefield Earth rivals EE Smith for characterisation, Norman for sensitivity, van Vogt for coherence and Howard for literary sensibility. It is set in Hubbard's vision of the year 3000, populated by Scotsmen who always wear kilts and aliens evocatively known as Psychlos...' and goes on 'Hubbard's imagination boils over on every page. A selection of forewords and prefaces, among them the translator's apology for his excessive use of Earth cliché, gets Hubbard awesome, ten volume rara avis Mission Earth: the Biggest Science Fiction Dekalogy Ever Written' off to a flying start...', 'with its unparalleled levels of style, invention and research, it must surely stand as one of the biggest dekalogies science fiction has ever produced, a truly gargantuan fictional erection.' Occasionally, the strain just became too much and Ivan Towlson's true feelings (it was usu-

ally Ivan) burst through his thin veneer of civilisation, thus 'Norman's seminal work is The Chronicles of The Counter-Earth dot dot dot later books become engorged with his theories on the true role of women, namely that they can find true happiness only as degraded slaves. This rampant obsession tends to obscure the virtues of his writing.' Sadly, the original two words of this sentence, 'if any', had to be sacrificed. In the interests of balance, however, we did occasionally allow ourselves not to be entirely fair with the reader EITHER. Thus the 'Read-on' to John Norman is Joanna Russ' 'The Female Man', while Hubbard receives Perry Rhodan 1: Enterprise Stardust, Captain Future and the Space Emperor and (perhaps a little more controversially) R A Heinlein, Friday.

Throughout this period, we were also trying to assemble the book, despite some rather awkward structural problems. These usually centred on the 'skeins', where the idea was to choose famous books, draw out their major themes, and suggest other stories that dealt with those themes. Occasionally this presented difficulties. An early attempt at the Dune skein, for example, left us with major themes of 'Soldiers', 'Galactic Empires' and 'Water'. Fortunately in the final version this last was changed to 'Harsh Environments', though I still wouldn't care to attempt a detailed examination of the thematic links between Dune and Poul Anderson's epic 'Virgin Planet'. ****native humans****

Eventually, however, we did come up with a final text, and sent it off for examination. At this point I should probably explain what happened to the dates. We had been told by Bloomsbury that we should supply any dates we could, and they would find the rest. So we put in a fair number (though, as John Clute later pointed out, the system of putting first publication date in English for foreign titles where we had a translation date and first publication date in the original language where we couldn't find the publication date was perhaps unhelpful. Particularly as the word limits meant we never quite got around to explaining that to the readers.) However, the system really broke down when (as you've probably guessed), Bloomsbury didn't actually put any more dates in, something we didn't know till we got the proofs back and couldn't do anything about it. The only truly horrific outcome of this was that Lin Carter, who had originally been listed as 1930-1987 question mark, on the understanding that we

weren't sure which year he died in and we'd be grateful if they could find out, ended up in the final text as not Lin Carter (1930-1987), or indeed Lin Carter (1930-1988), but, yes, Lin Carter (1930-1987 question mark), a fact which still occasionally brings me awake screaming in the middle of the night to this day.

At this point we had to decide what would go in the glossary, since obviously the general reader wouldn't be able to grasp all these peculiar science fictional terms. Initially we had assumed we would put in something saying 'hard sf: such and so', 'space opera: this and that, but sometimes such and so as well', and so on. But when we put this to the Bloomsbury people they said 'oh, but everyone knows what space opera is!'. Fine, we thought. 'So what DO you want in the glossary?' The eventual arrangement was that the copy editor would send us a note on anything she didn't understand when she read the manuscript disk, and Ivan would write a definition. This process produced a few definitions which I found intriguing (eg 'Telepath: a being capable of telepathy'), but I think the most bizarre one results from the fact that Sian Facer (the copy editor) didn't know what a symbiote was. So she wrote to Ivan saying so, and he replied that he was sure she would find a better definition than he could provide in any dictionary. Analysing things later, it seems that she must have done that, and found the definition (which she reproduced) 'A being living in symbiosis'. At this point it must have occurred to her that she didn't know what symbiosis was, so she copied out the definition for that too. As a result, we ended up with a glossary of 14 words, which doesn't include a number of words in the book that one might think would benefit from a definition, such as 'Hyperspace' (as in 'the woman whose orgasms guide their ship through hyperspace'), but does include 'Symbiosis', a word that does not appear in it at all. *****

In any case, we eventually got the proofs and sent them back. It was All Over. Or So We Thought. Until we got the Cover Design. Now, I don't know how many of you have seen this, and unfortunately I've only got one copy here, but essentially it consists of an alien landscape littered with large and very Freudian looking (at least to me) cup like objects full of sloshing liquids of unknown composition, with very small men standing on the lips. (So to speak). In the sky one can see what appear to be giant glowing radioactive alien sperms, flying up into

orbit. The back, by contrast, features a toy spaceman surrounded by mysterious white blobs that I suspect may be stars that have suffered some terrible accident. Now, under ordinary circumstances I'd have thought 'Well, what the hell...at least it'll stand out on the shelf on the bit...' However, when we initially talked about the book Bloomsbury had been very keen on having us help design the cover, since we were (as they put it) 'representatives of the yoof of today', and should be able to tell them what would sell to our fellow yoof. So I wrote to Kathy Rooney expressing some Doubt as to whether this was really the image we wished to project. By return of post, (pause) plus four weeks, (pause), I received a letter explaining that this cover 'had been discussed and agreed upon by both the marketing and art departments, and preserved the essential seriousness of the book while projecting a hint of levity'. At this point I gave up.

It now remained only to wait for the reviews to appear, pick up our royalties from the huge sales figures pouring in, and achieve worldwide fame. Unfortunately, all this rather fell at the first hurdle. When we went to London to see Bloomsbury for the first time, I had given them a list of suggested magazines to which to send copies for review (Interzone, Foundation, The Guardian—optimistically—etc). As far as I can tell, they lost it. So I spent some time lurking in W H Smith's in Manchester (where I had moved by that time), furtively opening the front covers of magazines and copying down their addresses, and sent the resulting information on. I have no idea what happened to THAT list, but they certainly didn't send out any review copies. In the end, we got a review (no doubt kinder than we deserved) from John Clute in Interzone, on the basis of a copy which I think David Pringle picked up (God knows why) at Forbidden Planet for his personal use.

We now move on to the massive sales aspect of the matter, and to what I might call the credible deniability factor. A member of the collective (**hi Penny?**) has an aunt (?), and this aunt wanted to have a copy of her niece's book. So she went round all the local bookshops, and they didn't have it. So she tried ringing up Bloomsbury direct. 'M H Zool? Never heard of him'. 'Well, have you got a book called dot dot dot?' 'Never heard of it, guv.' 'Well, could you check?' 'Sorry, luv, I've just checked and it's nowhere on my database. Afraid

you must have been misinformed. It just doesn't exist, luv.' So I think I might be justified in suspecting that our sales support was not exactly ideal...In any case, vast royalties singularly failed to roll in.

In any event, we did eventually sell somewhere between 9 and 10 thousand copies (depending on exactly what happened to all the remaindered ones). I was, however, disturbed by the line in our form explaining that five thousand of those had been sold 'on export' to a country which, despite several attempts, I could never get Bloomsbury to name. As a result, I am inclined to believe that if we have any great fame, it's amongst the penguins on the Falkland Islands.****

Finally. As is traditional, there are two deliberate errors in the final version. All the other mistakes are entirely our fault, but under the principle of collective responsibility I hold Ivan to be entirely to blame. If you are very unlucky there may still be a few remaindered copies available in the book room (there were last year), which, if they are anything like my copy, will have turned a particularly pleasing shade of yellow throughout. *** And, regardless of your feelings about the Guide as a guide, it's still very good material for parlour games (who can read on from Angela Carter to John Norman in the smallest number of steps...).

My thanks to everyone involved in Zool, particularly for putting up with my bloody minded editorial changes, and to anyone who actually reviewed the final product, no matter how small the circulation of their medium. And yes, there is a reason why it claims to have been written by one 'M H Zool', but it most definitely wasn't my idea and I categorically refuse to embarrass myself even further by explaining. Ivan (Towlson) will no doubt be in the bar, and only too happy to explain.