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Spacegirls, and some s-f soul-searching

By a Correspondent

The British Science Fiction Association annual convention, which was held in Gloucester this week-end, was distinguished by the presence of Mr Kingsley Amis; it also provided a vivid illustration of some of the best of the most pernicious influences at work in contemporary British s-f.

The programme ranged through talks at once well informed, instructive, and highly provocative to items which, to a mere reader of s-f like myself, were practically incomprehensible.

What, for instance, is a "combozine," a "fanzine," a "femizine" ? Amateur magazines produced by fen, of course. Fen ? Plural of fan or faan. Fan is ageneric term of s-f addicts, not to be confused with organised addicts like the Science Fiction Club of London, who compiled a bumper "fanzine," i.e., the "combozine" for this year's convention. This will perhaps give some indication of the private world, I should say "in-group," which has developed from the common interest in s-f.

It is not, however, as simple as that. Such groups are active all over the world. Take a young New Zealander to whom I was introduced. He was anxious to point out that, unlike me, he

knew practically all these talents in best s-f cover design people, and knew them before style. he came to England.

Private humour
He had read their fanzines and this was mutual since he had

circulated his fanzine amongst the fraternity both here and in the USA. The Faans indeed receive magazines from Sweden, Germany, and Italy as well as the States. Thus we perceive an odd. but cosmopolitan micro-cosm of individuals who have been drawn into a loose, anarchic but distinct community through their interests. Their private humour has a vocabulary hardly available to the outsider.

In fact, the most baffling characteristic of this vastly uninhibited convention was the peculiar mixture of juvenile delight in gimmicks and facetious humour (I hope the faans who listened very tolerantly to an "outsider" in s-f will forgive that condescension) with a great deal of serious discussion.

The highlight of the high jinks was undoubtedly the intergalactic space party. There were plenty of alien life forms, mutants and Bems (bug-eyed monsters to the uncultured) and few, alas, too few, spacegirls who had contrived to show their

The conference itself was a startling contrast to all this.

Its climax was a highly provocative address from Mr Kingsley Amis. "New Map of Hell" has already engendered vociferous controversy among s-f addicts. In a talk entitled "Anti-Science, Anti-Fiction" Mr Amis proceeded to demolish some of the favourite conventions (mumbo-jumbo some would call them) of the s-f fans. Time travel, interstellar space travel, psionics, extra sensory perception, and the universal translation machine all came under fire as being not merely fantasy but philosophic nonsense and thus fundamentally trivial.

Weaknesses

His lash then fell upon some of the literary weaknesses of s-f writers. He charged them with various degrees of incompetence, for instance inability to sustain a sense of wonder, inept treatment of good ideas, but most particularly downright feebleness in handling sex and human relationships, where the quality sometimes fell to the level of the third rate literary hack. S-F writers must increase their

depth and insight rather than I referred to. Fans have come to with s-f since the early thirties, their range of ideas, and be will- accept without thought the trap- and Mr Ted Carnell, the editor ing to devote more efforts to the pings of time travel and so on, of all three British s-f fundamentals of good writing which so often seem ludicrous magazines. At one time s-f ap- rather than rely on gimmicks. to the outsider.

This gave the fans considerable **Criticism accepted** food for thought. There were If they could grow out of this several dissentient voices, but they could exert their influence on the whole the criticism was to ensure that s-f is not diluted taken very seriously, despite the by its increasing popularity. fact that the convention hall The long discussion which fol- models, and coterie magazines lowed showed that for all their was a clear enough indication eccentricities they were not un- that they like the gimmicks and willing to accept criticism gra- ciously. The present position the clever ideas. was deftly summed up by Mr

And this seems to me to epi- David Kyle, an American, who tomise the pernicious influence has been intimately connected with s-f since the early thirties, and Mr Ted Carnell, the editor of all three British s-f magazines. At one time s-f appeared almost exclusively in pulp magazines. That is one reason why it has wrongly acquired a bad name.

Now that public demand for s-f is growing publishers are willing to put out more novels, many of which have not been previously serialised. Thus, as s-f reaches a wider readership, it must accept mature standards of criticism of literature in general. There is the challenge. I wonder if it will be met ?