

FOR POPULAR CULTURE,
SCIENCE FICTION MAY
OFTEN REPLACE
THEOLOGY

SCIENCE FICTION AND MORMONISM:

Sandy and Joe Straubhaar

Editors' Note

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SCIENCE fiction covers a lot of cultural turf in contemporary society, including pop science, pop sociology, and even pop theology—popular reactions to Mormons and Mormonism crop up remarkably often in the pages of science fiction novels. Science fiction provides a myriad of visions of what humans may become and achieve: it deals with technical gimmickry, social turnabouts, the development of men into gods, creative mythology, thinly veiled religion, and thinly veiled sex and violence. Mormons can read it, react to it, get insight from it, be provoked by it. Mormons have been known to write it, including (some might say) some of the most appalling specimens of it.

Recently, we became acquainted with two articles. The first one, by Michael Collings, cleverly titled "Strangers in Estranged Lands," maintains that since Mormon theology and science fiction extrapolate different specific futures for the universe, there can be no peace between the believers of the two doctrines, and this is why Mormons in science-fiction novels are often caricatured as dogma-ridden cultists. The second manuscript, a review by Gary Gillum of several of Orson Scott Card's books, claims that Card, a Mormon writer currently doing very well in the science-fiction field, imbues his works with a profound gospel-centered moral sense which may have missionary effects on the gentile readership. We disagreed more or less passionately with both theses. And so, out of countless lively dinner-table conversations, this article was born. We focus on three interrelated subjects: the overlap of science fiction and traditional religious concepts; Mormons as caricatured in science fiction; and the accomplishments of Mormon science fiction writers,

notably Orson Scott Card.

Hugh Nibley, according to Gary Gillum, has remarked that science fiction is today's popular eschatology, because it concerns itself with what is to come. This is certainly true but doesn't go far enough. Science fiction has become today's popular-culture theology in general. Science fiction fans who might be embarrassed to ponder or discuss traditional philosophical questions (Religion with a capital R) can be fascinated by the same questions when they are presented in science fiction form. Popular audiences have felt religious awe watching *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or suspended their possible disbelief in God long enough to believe in the Force while watching *Star Wars*. In fact the most insistent and common themes in science fiction are unashamedly religious ones. Here are just a few which can be found in written science fiction:

First Theme: Who are we, we human beings, and where are we headed? What are the possibilities of human progression and development? These questions are dealt with in Robert A. Heinlein's Future History series, in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001*, in Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human*, in Olaf Stapledon's *The Last and First Men* and *Odd John*, in A. E. Van Vogt's *Slan*, in Spider Robinson's *Stardance*, and in scores of other books. In fact human progression or advancement to some kind of new evolutionary level seems to be a kind of Article of Faith for prominent science fiction writers, particularly the classic authors of the thirties, forties, and fifties.

Second Theme: Who specifically am I, the individual? Do I have free will, or is someone or something else running the show? One of the most common science fiction and fantasy plots involves a heroic quest on the part of a single individual to recover or remember his or her true heritage and destiny, to seek out what ultimate truths can be found, to find whether one has free will. Two of these questers, Michael Moorcock's Elric (male)

and Tanith Lee's *Karrakaz* (female), hope to find their ultimate truths in sacred books for which they quest. Unfortunately, Elric's book, once found, dissolves into dust, and *Karrakaz's* book turns out to be completely blank. The messages of the gods are ambiguous, though the ultimate truth for the individual soul *can* be found, at least in a sense.

Third Theme, related to the Second: The emotion which C. S. Lewis has called "Christian joy," the homesickness of the exiled soul for its country of true origin and ultimate destination, is certainly a common feature of science fiction. Nowhere does it manifest itself more clearly, however, than in Roger Zelazny's *Chronicles of Amber*. The exiled and amnesiac Prince Corwin suddenly remembers his homeland with these words, which we believe are deliberately intended to remind the reader of Psalm 137: "Amber. . . I remember thee. I shall never forget thee again. I guess, deep inside me, I never really did, through all those centuries I wandered the Shadow Earth, for often at night my dreams were troubled by images of thy green and golden spires and thy sweeping terraces . . . Amber, immortal city from which every other city has taken its shape. I cannot forget thee, even now. . . ."¹

Fourth Theme: Are there gods? If so, do they deserve our worship? What happens when we leave our place of birth and find that not all people worship as we do or that our new knowledge of the universe outside seems to contradict or invalidate our beliefs? These are the themes of Michael Moorcock in virtually all of his works, of Poul Anderson in *The High Crusade*, of Joan D. Vinge in *Mother and Child*, of Ursula K. LeGuin in *The Tombs of Atuan*.

Fifth Theme: To what degree are we responsible for our actions? How can atonement be made for our misdeeds, particularly those which have affected others adversely? This is the theme of Tanith Lee's *Vazkor* books, of Ursula LeGuin's *The Wizard of Earthsea*, and of Joe Haldeman's futuristic espionage novel, *All My Sins Remembered*, as well as of many more.

Sixth Theme: Who is our brother? How should society be structured? How should we treat our fellow beings? This theme is well-nigh universal, but John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* and its sequel come to mind as excellent examples.

Science fiction is the perfect milieu for new explorations of these ancient philosophical and religious questions, precisely because the canvas is blank when the author begins. There are no givens of time or culture or location; the only givens are those which the author chooses to provide. He or she is free to fabricate worlds which reflect his or her philosophical hangups or sensibilities entirely, without the excess baggage of the familiar universe as we know it. Michael Moorcock, a prolific author whose works are racked with a peculiarly agonized search for the transcendental, has explained his creative urges in this manner: "The landscapes of my stories are metaphysical, not physical. As a faltering atheist with a deep irradicable religious sense (I was brought up on an offbeat brand of Christian mysticism), I tended, particularly in the early stories. . . , to work out my own problems through Elric's adventures. . . . I was writing not particularly well, but from the soul. I wasn't just telling a story, I was telling *my* story."² It is also obvious to anyone who has ever attended a science

fiction convention that not only the authors, but also the fans, are finding a kind of religious catharsis through the transcendental experiences which science fiction offers. (We went to two of them early this year, and the memory is quite fresh.)

Science fiction then has the capacity to reflect virtually any concept in traditional religious thought, even though that concept may not be couched in familiar Mormon Sunday School terminology. In this context, it is interesting to watch some of the science fiction writers and editors protest that they will have nothing to do with religion. Michael Collings tells us that George Scithers, editor of *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*, asks would-be contributors in a form letter to please omit gods and angels from their stories. And one of us can remember a speech by Harry Harrison at a Los Angeles science fiction convention circa 1967 in which he gloated that if Yahweh weren't dead, he was at least small enough and far away enough exiled on some mountain in the Middle East somewhere that we modern, broadminded types,

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enlightened by science fiction, didn't need to listen to him anymore. (Enough to make one swear off science fiction for a few years.) And indeed, though they may entertain religious ideas, many science fiction writers tend to be uneasy with God (with a capital G) or other traditional religious names and labels. Our own Orson Scott Card has maintained that "God cannot exist in science fiction," prompting Bruce Jorgensen's apt remark, "Of course, it has never been easy to get God into realistic fiction, either."³ At any rate, it is this sort of uncomfortable interface between traditional religion and science fiction which leads Michael Collings to conclude that the two cannot indeed coexist.

However, George Scithers and others notwithstanding, there are many popular works of science fiction in which God, gods, and angels do exist and do play parts. Poul Anderson constantly makes use of Christian, Nordic, Celtic, Greek, and other deity figures, not only in his fantasies but also in his hard-core science fiction (*The Avatar* for instance). In Stephen Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* trilogy, God himself, presumably the traditional Judaeo-Christian God, has a bit part at the beginning and end. An omnipotent God can even be thrown in as a "why not?" element of detail, inessential to the plot, as in Joe Haldeman's *Mindbridge*. An anthropologist investigates a planet formerly inhabited by an extinct race who had worshiped a god who dwelt in the center of that planet. She finds "the place where God lived. What she and other investigators had taken as myth and metaphor was actual fact: their God was an immortal, omnipotent creature who had descended from heaven to live under the earth and rule their lives and destinies. It was a representative of a race that had once ruled this corner of the galaxy with benign, but absolute, authority."⁴ In C. S. Lewis's space trilogy, on the other hand, Gods, heavenly messengers, and

archangels are central to the plot and also recognizable as the figures of traditional Christian worship. However, Lewis's work is an exception. Didactic in nature, it is widely read by Christians who have rarely read other science fiction and only selectively read by mainstream science-fiction fans. At any rate, there are authors who are not embarrassed to apply frankly religious labels when they write about religious concepts; and some of them continue to be popular with the hard-core, science-fiction fans.

Mormonism in Science Fiction

Suffice it to say then that science fiction authors are predisposed to be interested in religious or philosophical concepts, although their attitudes toward organized religions may vary from hostile to sympathetic. But although science fiction writers are interested in issues that have traditionally been the domain of religion, they

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often treat the adherents of particular traditional religions as interesting social beings and ignore their theology, preferring to reinvent a new, secular debate of religious issues

Michael Collings has examined a number of science fiction novels which mention particular religions and which use religious people as characters.⁴ He found, as we have found in separate researches, that Mormons and Mormonism are mentioned surprisingly often in comparison with other religions. Nevertheless, Collings finds, to his great displeasure, that Mormonism is treated most often as an interesting social phenomenon, not as a source of interesting theology or worthwhile ideas.

Collings notes that when particular religions are named in science fiction, most prominent are Catholicism, Judaism, and Mormonism—although we feel he underestimates the attention given to fundamentalist Protestantism. Collings is certainly correct, however, in pointing out that mentions of Mormonism in science fiction are out of proportion to our rather small share of the population.

Collings feels that Mormons are popular as literary "straight men," mainstream foils for a science-fiction dogmatism that wants to take over the turf of philosophical discussion and normative prescription. We demur somewhat from this conclusion. Although we agree that Mormons often play the role of all-American, upright straight men in science fiction and that the Church is sometimes viewed patronizingly as nothing more than an interesting social institution, we also find some interest in Mormon theological innovation.

Mormons as straight men do pop up in a lot of places where, statistically, one might expect Baptists, Methodists, or Episcopalians. As Collings notes, Ian Watson's novel *The Embedding* makes numerous comparisons regarding external appearances between two clean-cut young villains and Mormon missionaries; in Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Michael Valentine Smith is compared to Joseph Smith because both Smiths have founded bizarre religions which contradict

contemporary sexual mores; John Varley's *Wizard* contains a reference to Mormons in which we are coupled with the Catholics and Scientologists as "rich" religions, "rich" meaning well off monetarily.

Two lengthy, primarily negative, references to Mormons are also cited by Collings. The first occurs in Philip Jose Farmer's *Flesh*. Nephi Sarvarit, a member of a schismatic Mormon group of the future, is portrayed as a prudish, sex-starved evangelistic fanatic, whose church ironically disappears from earth while he is still proselytizing for it out in space and who is finally hanged for rape near the end of the book. In the second example, from Piers Anthony's *Planet of Tarot* trilogy, a descendant of John D. Lee is redeemed through a long process in which he becomes convinced that the church of his childhood is based on falsehoods. Neither of these books has exactly made it to the science fiction Hall of Fame, however, perhaps because they are so polemical. In any case, we don't think they are substantial enough to keep us Mormons awake at night.

Collings seems to have missed, however, perhaps the most favorable references to Mormons in all of science fiction. In Robert A. Heinlein's early story, "If This Goes On—," in which a corrupt fundamentalist Protestant prophet rules what used to be the United States, the Mormons are depicted as a considerable element of the underground which finally overthrows the false prophet. The awaited revolution finally occurs, and the narrator, in the middle of a paragraph about the various uniforms of the revolutionary troops, comments: "The Mormon Battalions had their own togs and they were all growing beards as well—they went into action singing the long-forbidden 'Come Come Ye Saints!' Utah was one state we didn't have to worry about, now that the Saints had their beloved Temple back." Heinlein's favorable attitude towards Mormons has stayed with him up to the present; his new novel, *The Mark of the Beast*, has two of its main characters living in Logan Utah, not because they are clean-cut Mormon types themselves, but because they like the kind of folks who live there.

Michael Collings gets quite miffed because science fiction authors, when they do mention Mormonism, most often focus on externals—polygamy, the black issue, the missionaries, the Book of Mormon, strict sex standards, the Church's wealth—rather than on any deeper theological elements. But since these externals are exactly what popular audiences are going to know about us, we contend that it is hardly surprising that they are emphasized in fiction.

Science Fiction by Mormons

Mormonism is rich in possible material to offer its member writers who turn to science fiction. Mormon ideas about the perfection and evolution of humans to godhood, Mormon ideas of agency and responsibility, Mormon views of mankind's origins, and Mormon experience as a peculiar people in social experiments in Utah all offer grist for speculative fiction. We are, however, aware of only three major examples of Mormon science-fiction production:

(1) Anyone who has seen an episode of *Battlestar Galactica* or the first season of *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* has watched science fiction conceived by a Mormon. His name is Glen A. Larson. As far as we can tell from our limited exposure (we've only seen one or two episodes

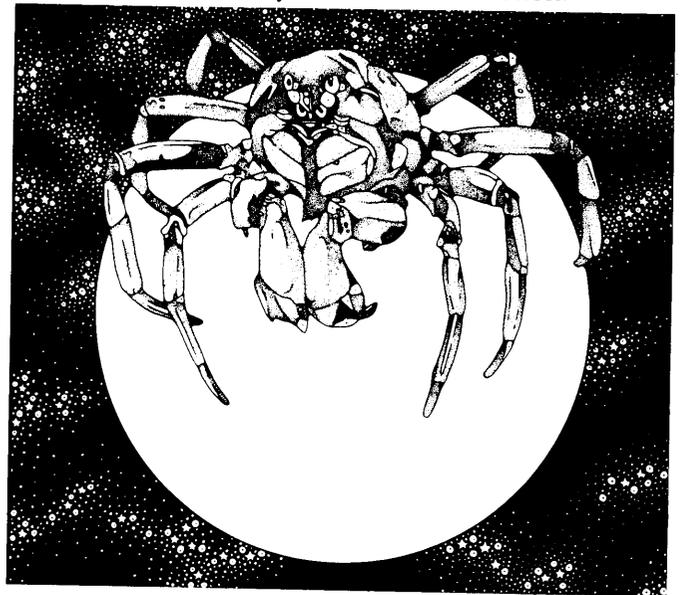
from either show), his scripts utilize few Mormon ideas except on the level of details. The government of the far future in *Battlestar Galactica*, for example, includes a Council of Elders and a Quorum of the Twelve, though the twelve are not religious officers of any kind. We are also told that there was one episode with a futuristic Adam and Eve story, but we haven't seen it.

(2) Scott Smith's Millennial Productions Press (out of Thousand Oaks, California), which recently reprinted Sam Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why*, is currently printing an anthology called *LDSF*—over twenty science-fiction stories by different Mormon amateur authors. This ought to be fun. Gary Gillum reportedly has a story in the collection which is a first person account of the adventures of a human sperm and its trip out into the Unknown. (Shades of Woody Allen.)

(3) The most noticeable Mormon science-fiction writer today, however, is unquestionably Orson Scott Card. Big names from the science-fiction establishment, notably Ben Bova of *OMNI* magazine, think highly of Card, and his first book, *Capitol*, won him the John W. Campbell award for most promising new writer of the year. To date, as far as we can establish, Card has published four novels (*Capitol*, its sequel *Hot Sleep*, *A Planet Called Treason*, and *Songmaster*), a book of short stories called *Unaccompanied Sonata*, and numerous individual short stories which have appeared in *OMNI*. Reviews have been mixed, both from the science-fiction writers' establishment and from Mormons. The *Washington Post's* reviewer for January 25 of this year says that "Card has been the victim of a curious critical whiplash; vastly overblown praise for his first efforts, followed within the blink of an eye by savage critical 'reassessments.' Neither verdict was justified." Among the Mormons, Karen Rosenbaum's view in a letter to the *Dialogue* office has been, "Well, it's hardly the sort of thing I would expect a former *Ensign* editor to write"; Gary Gillum laments Card's liberal use of hells and damns ("the language of Babylon") but praises everything else uncritically; Michael Collings finds some examples of Card's style "stunning." We are more of Karen Rosenbaum's mind but would state it even more emphatically. It is obvious to us that Card is a gifted and imaginative writer. However, his works are so deviant from what we would expect, considering both his Mormonness and the trends of contemporary science fiction, that we are not merely mildly surprised. We stand all amazed, in fact.

Particularly, we have noticed two disturbing themes which seem to permeate Card's works: gratuitous graphic violence and disregard for women. Graphic violence occurs in *Capitol* when one of the heroes is tortured to death and resurrected many times over, each instance more horrible than the last. *The Unaccompanied Sonata* story collection is similarly flawed, as the *Post* reviewer notes: "Card says all these stories have happy endings. If so, I pray I am spared Card's sort of happiness. Story after story deals with death, pain, mutilation, dismemberment, all described in graphic detail—Card is not one to look away. One story features a detailed account of a woman's breasts being cut off and eaten. A later tale has for a horror a thing that looks like a thalidomide baby, flippers and all. The protagonist drowns it in a toilet and cuts up the body with a knife. The hero of the title story suffers one mutilation after

another. Each of these tales might be powerful, read in isolation. Read one after the other, they are rather much." Until recently, this review was all we had to go on relative to this book, but we finally located a copy at the last sci-fi convention we attended. Perhaps because we were already expecting the worst, the stories in *Unaccompanied Sonata* did not seem as bad as they could have been. Card's afterword to the stories also gives us a clue to the reasons for his choice of themes: the grisliest of the stories, the one with the monstrous baby, is a deliberate imitation of Harlan Ellison (whom some of *SUNSTONE's* readers may know as the scriptwriter of *A Boy and His Dog*), whose fame (or notoriety) has rested for some fifteen years now on his use of deliberately shocking material. What puzzles us is that Card would choose the likes of Ellison to imitate (or even outdo) when there are so many more savory authors to borrow from. Graphic violence and grotesque detail are not necessary ingredients of science fiction, just as they are by no means necessary in mainstream fiction.



Card's disturbing attitudes toward women manifest themselves in two ways. First, most of his female characters are impossible to identify with. They are either embarrassingly weak figures or bitchy, heartless types who crave power but haven't the skill to acquire or manage it. (Before we go on, we should say that we can think of two exceptions to this—the self-sacrificing Batta Heddiss in *Capitol* and the brawny but illiterate colonist Sara in *Hot Sleep*.) Back to the weak characters, though. Mother characters in *Capitol* and *Hot Sleep* serve chiefly as millstones around the necks of their children; they are all either nervous or feebleminded creatures or awesome parasites. The protagonists of the stories are able to function only after Mother is disposed of somehow. The above-mentioned character, Batta, has to wait for her mother to die before she can be with her lover; Linkeree, also in *Capitol*, experiences his only moments of sanity when he is convinced that his mother is dead; Jason Worthing, in *Hot Sleep*, has to pack his mother off to a penal colony before the real action can begin. Wife characters suffer similarly. To give Card credit for trying to use sympathetic women, we should mention that two out of three wives in the *Unaccompanied Sonata* collection are more or less normal people with

families who love them; but the third is a bitch, who drives her husband from her own frigid bed into their daughter's. Wives in *A Planet Called Treason* and *Hot Sleep* are notable for spending most of the book in suspended animation and drugged sleep respectively. The hero's wife in *Hot Sleep* is graciously permitted by the hero to grow old at a faster rate than he does and never to be trusted with the full scope of his plans. (And then he complains of being lonely!) A recurring female type in Card's works is that of the grasping, insensitive woman with nothing going for her but her looks. She occurs twice in *Capitol*, as a social-climbing actress and as the mother of the insane man, Linkeree; once in *Hot Sleep*, as a school secretary whose mind is read by the hero during an examination, revealing no test answers but lots of sexy thoughts; and in *Treason*, as a society dame "without skills and abilities" exiled to a penal colony for political reasons. In sum, Card's female characters are largely so offensive that we found that the degree we enjoyed any of his stories was usually inversely related to the number of women in the story. The ones we liked best had no women at all or only a few.

The second disturbing element in Card's fiction is his apparent attitude towards female anatomy, specifically breasts, which seems to range from a peculiar nausea and loathing (in *Treason*; this has been described more fully elsewhere⁶) to uneasy voyeurism (both in the story "St. Amy's Tale," which appeared in a recent *OMNI*, and in the story "Killing Children" from *Capitol*, where a woman's breasts make a man nervous because she keeps "throwing her chest at him") to bald sadism (in "Kingsmeat" from the *Sonata* collection, where a pair of lactating breasts are chopped off, thinly sliced, and fried in a skillet).

Like the gratuitous violence in Card's works, these attitudes toward women and their bodies are quite surprising, considering the trends of contemporary science fiction. Although early science fiction may have been full of diaphanous blonds who swooned a lot and girls back home who faithfully waited, Penelope-like, for their hero, the science fiction of the last decade has featured scores of strong woman protagonists, who go on their own heroic quests, fight crime, kill their own snakes, and otherwise assert themselves. These women occur in books by both male and female authors, including John Varley, Elizabeth Lynn, Anne McCaffrey, Joan D. Vinge, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Poul Anderson, Tanith Lee, Joe Haldeman, Vonda McIntyre, Jack Chalker, Patricia McKillip, Roger Zelazny, Andre Norton, and a host of others. Even some science fiction of the "classic" forties and fifties contained some capable heroines, notably in the works of C. L. Moore and Leigh Brackett (both female) and Robert A. Heinlein (male). As for Card's peculiar attitudes towards women's bodies, we can find no precedent whatsoever in the entire science fiction corpus, with the exception of one early story by Piers Anthony ("In the Barn").

Is Card recognizably Mormon? Sometimes, but usually on the name-dropping level, rarely on any deep philosophical one. In *Treason* the motifs of footwashing and the Three Nephites (though not by that name) occur, out of context; three stories in the *Sonata* collection are set in the Wasatch Front, with specific references to Mormons; in *Hot Sleep* phrases from the

Book of Mormon pop out at us from a man's journal. Probably one of Card's most noticeably Mormon sequences is in that second half of *Hot Sleep*, where our hero, Jason Worthing, starpilot, sets up a new world populated by people he must educate himself because their memories have been destroyed in transit. This world becomes a new Eden, and Jason is its god. A Satan figure and a first murderer later come into the story. Jason gives his people laws; he weeps when they transgress; he watches them grow. It is a rather lovely parable, and there is much for Mormons to recognize and smile at, though there are a multitude of details one could quibble about. One other recognizably Mormon sequence is found in a vignette in *Capitol* in which a prophet speaks words reminiscent of the beginning of D&C 121 ("O God, where are you? Where is the wall which covers your face?") and a young man of the prophet's congregation tries unsuccessfully to pull up his own religious roots by submerging himself in fleshly delights. (In a beautiful twist of irony, this same young man later shows up as the Satan figure in the *Hot Sleep* sequence.)

Card is certainly capable then of using overtly religious ideas in his work, and though he may protest about mentioning a traditional God in it, he does break down and do so occasionally. However, we find it regrettable that a skillful author whom we would like to be proud of as a fellow Saint, who has chosen to write in an essentially religious genre, has not consistently written more that is recognizably religious and thematically "Mormon," especially considering what the good gentile authors are producing.

In conclusion we'd like to echo the sentiments of Dr. L. Marlene Payne, who, at the Mormon Letters meeting where this paper was originally given, spoke feelingly of the spiritual strength she has derived from the ancient myths. Science fiction, which is modern myth, can provide the same. At the very least it has afforded us a good many hours of harmless entertainment, sometimes mindstretching, sometimes not. At the most it has offered us some moments of transcendent spiritual joy—as well as more concrete food for thought in the transcendental vein. One of us remembers an Institute freshman seminar field trip with Gene England at Stanford to go see the film *2001* and reflect on the possibilities for human progression in the Mormon sense. Times may have changed just a bit since then; it was, after all, the eclectic sixties—but we still contend that most of us could use some of that romantic eclecticism. We personally turn to science fiction not only for escape (though that is certainly part of it, we have to admit) but also for inspiration.



Notes

1. Roger Zelazny, *Nine Princes in Amber* (London: Corgi Books, 1974), pp. 98-99.
2. Michael Moorcock, *Sojan* (Manchester, England: Savoy Books, 1977), p. 135.
3. *Dialogue* 13 (Autumn 1980):59.
4. Joe Haldeman, *Mindbridge* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), pp. 102-103.
5. Michael Collings, "Strangers in Estranged Lands," unpublished manuscript. Dr. Collings can be contacted at 269 Sarah Avenue, Moorpark, California 93021 for those wishing to get in touch with him.
6. *Dialogue* 14 (Spring 1981):115-116.

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