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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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"SKYLARK" SMITH:

An Appreciation

by Anthony K. Van Riper



IN THE WHOLE compass of science-fiction there are few men more controversial than Edward E. Smith, PhD. Thousands have called him "genius"; and other thousands have called him "hack".

But no matter what one's opinions concerning him, few will deny that E. E. Smith has been one of the greatest influences upon the entire field. He, with a select other few, may be pointed out by the critic as one who changed the entire pattern and conception of science-fiction.

He began his galactic career by writing space-opera; and when he wrote thirty at the bottom of "Children of the Lens", he was still writing space-opera. To all intents and purposes this is the main bone of contention concerning "Skylark" Smith.

It is now the fashion, among the *avant-garde* and the intellectuals of the science-fiction genre, to decry "space-opera" as trash, worthy of inclusion only in magazines featuring

hali-dressed females and leering BEMs on the cover...hardly worthy of even the name of science-fiction. This is certainly not so.

Granted that there has been—and is—a very high trash-content among the specimens of the space-opera story, there are also a good many items under the classification of "space-opera" that can be listed among the top science-fiction stories of all time.

Smith wrote space-opera. But let us list some of his contemporaries:

John W. Campbell, Jr., author of such space-opera as "The Mightiest Machine" and "The Incredible Planet".

Jack Williamson, author of "The Legion of Space", "One Against The Legion", and "The Legion of Time".

Edmond Hamilton, author of "The Star Kings".

George O. Smith, author of "Pattern for Conquest".

Malcolm Jameson, author of "Bulldog of the Space Patrol".

A. E. Van Vogt, author of "Black Destroyer".

This, I maintain, is distinguished company, and I assert that E. E. Smith is worthy of inclusion in the ranks—

if not in forefront—of the group. I believe that the above list also answers the next question: Does the writing of space-opera automatically relegate the author to the "hack" classification?

Certainly not... I doubt that the appellation of "hack" could be applied to any of the authors named above.

Then why is E. E. Smith called hack? Obviously because of the quality of his writing, rather than the mere fact of his writing space-opera. Here we have more justification. Groff Conklin, in a recent review of an E. E. Smith novel (*Galaxy Science Fiction*, March, 1952, p. 84), wrote that he felt Smith's dialogue and description were atrocious. In part he was correct.

THE FACT of the matter is that Smith was, and is, a spotty writer. His style meandered between that of H. P. Lovecraft and that of H. G. Wells, with Horatio Alger, on occasion, dragged protestingly on the scene. The modern reader has become used to shorter sentences, containing shorter words, embodied in shorter paragraphs. This, with the occasional exception of Ray Bradbury, is the style in general use today; in contrast, E. E. Smith's halfway-pedantic style reads like a period-piece, an unquestioned drawback.

On the other hand, Dr. Smith will occasionally come up with a gem of prose, such as the description of the fighting of the gladiators in "Triplanetary", part I, chapter 3. Another prime example is Conway Costigan's escape from the uranium mine in "First Lensman", a piece of narration that reaches out, snatches the reader, and holds him with a tight grip until the action is over. Still a third example might be the pursuit of the Fenachrone in "Skylark Three", or the capture of the Fenachrone ship in "Skylark of

Valeron". There are, of course, moments when the some readers would just as soon—and more readers would rather—turn a few pages to get back to the action; this brings us to what I believe is Dr. Smith's greatest fault.

It is a shame that all of his protagonists were not deaf-mutes, for the dialogue he puts into their mouths is atrocious, nine times out of ten. As a general rule, his Terran heroes speak as if they were an old-fashioned, wind-up phonograph, over-wound: stilted phraseology is common, as are words and phrases never been heard in social intercourse, and not likely to be heard in the future. For instance: "You're a blinding flash and a deafening report, Dotty Dimple, and I love you..."

At that point Richard Seaton, after just pulling their ship out of the maw of a dark star, is telling his wife that he loves her. Here, in my estimation, E. E. Smith reached his nadir—equalled, fortunately, only by some of the conversation between Kimball Kinnison and Clarissa MacDougall. One often has the feeling, when reading such dialogue, that one of the characters is bound to burst out with "...and twenty-three skiddoo to you, too!"

If Dr. Smith could have written dialogue as it is actually spoken between human beings, things would have been improved immensely.

On the other hand, dialogue can be one of E. E. Smith's assets, when put in the mouths (if any) of his extra-terrestrials. His villains, whether Terran or not, usually speak convincingly. Quite often the dialogue between a couple of heavies adds a great deal to characterization, giving them an aura of suave, intense evil.

For instance, much of the dialogue between Mentor of Arisia and Helmut, or between Eichlan and Eichmil, is extremely well-handled. Of course, since no one has any idea of

how an extraterrestrial would speak, there can be no valid objections to the words or the word order, that Dr. Smith puts in their mouths.

THE CHARACTERIZATIONS are occasionally very bad; not one of Dr. Smith's heroines stand out as anything other than a ridiculous paragon of the fair sex; his outlook on women is medieval, to say the least. An E. E. Smith heroine can do no wrong; she is upright, virtuous, brilliant, chaste and, as Othello puts it "... sings, plays, and dances well." In short, they are all superhuman, when not hilarious. The only half-way credible women in Smith's stories are his minor characters, like Hell-Cat Hazel, or Dessa Desplaines, the innocent (?) zwilnik.

The characterizations of his heroes often out-Iomer Homer; but, again, Dr. Smith's extraterrestrials stand out very clearly indeed. To them he had the knack to give a sharply delineated, well-etched outline... the reader can evoke a mental image of VanBuskirk without half-trying. There are others of his out-worldly characters who stand out as well, who are logically motivated, and clearly drawn; for instance, Tregonsee and Worsel; Sacner Carfon and Mentor; Bergenholm and Helmuth; and Blackie Duquesne and Grey Roger.

However good or bad his characters are, or their speech is, no one can deny that Dr. Smith—especially in the "Lensman" series—achieved in his work a scope and sweep that has never been surpassed, and seldom equalled. There are moments of the same glorious sweep in "The Star

Kings" or "The Incredible Planet", but E. E. Smith had it throughout his yarns, from beginning to end. And, most of the time, this scope is credible; the reader finds himself being caught up by it, and carried along with it, so that ten-day trans-galactic trips become nothing to wonder at. It can, of course, be argued that he tries to cover too much ground at once; but in chronicling the activities of a galactic patrol one must, of necessity, cover a deal of territory.

Perhaps Conklin is right when he says that science-fiction has grown away from Dr. Smith's type of stories; I think it has, in many ways. Today's science-fiction story tends to deal more and more with the personal equation in interaction with a changed or changing universe; but I don't think that E. E. Smith's trans-galactic point of view will ever be entirely lost. I don't think it should be. In any enterprise there must be someone—no matter how many men deal with the specific—to keep the overall picture in mind; this holds true as well, I believe, in science-fiction.

Dr. Smith's novels, then, still serve a purpose. Granted that they are not—except occasionally—up to the literary standards of a Heinlein or a Bradbury, nonetheless, they are competently-written, and will be read for a long time to come. Whether the reader is a modernist who enjoys "these quaint, archaic, novels", or a man who genuinely likes E. E. Smith for his content, there can be no argument he is one of the cornerstones of science-fiction. Let us accept him, enjoy him, and go on from there.

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