

"Edmund Cooper is one of the mystery men of British sf. He never attends the social gatherings of the sf world, and maintains that he'd rather make love, play chess or walk in the beautiful woods which surround his isolated Sussex home. He is also one of the most entertaining and philosophically constant writers producing sf in Britain today. In another way too, he maintains a pleasing constancy, for over the last few years he has published two novels annually, an output sufficient to keep him in the forefront of contemporary British sf writers, and sufficient to keep his many readers, if not satiated, at least moderately happy."

Hope For the Future

The Science Fiction Novels of Edmund Cooper by James Goddard

When I made the claim that Edmund Cooper was philosophically constant, it was no idle patter. A close look at his first novel, *The Uncertain Midnight* (1958), and his latest, *The Slaves of Heaven* (1974), and all of those in between, will show that his basic preoccupations and concepts as to 'things that matter', have stayed the same through the intervening sixteen years. This, to me, indicates a remarkable certainty as to the correctness of one's views, and an equally remarkable discipline of mind and sense of idealism, that few, if any, other major sf writers can claim. This is in no way meant to suggest that Edmund Cooper is a static novelist producing variations on the same theme or, in the *Dragnet* tv series sense, that 'only the names have been changed to protect the innocent'. Far from it. Each Cooper novel is a unique experience. Some are undoubtedly better than others, as is only to be expected, but not one of them even approaches near to being worthless or dismissible.

So what are these constants that make Cooper so remarkable? These things that have remained imbued in his nature from comparative youth to middle age? That's not as easy to answer as one might think; but having made this sweeping statement I'll try to set forth what I conceive to be the two major philosophical rocks on which Cooper's literary feet have remained firmly planted. The first, and most discernible of these Cooper qualities, is a loyalty to species. He is aware of his own participation in the organisation of human families, and tries to offer crumbs of comfort and support whenever he can. Therefore, in even his most pessimistic novels (and most of them are optimistic anyway), the story always closes with a suggestion of hope for the future of mankind. He doesn't usually deal in invasions from outer space by hideous aliens, or any of the other multifarious forms of otherworldly threat with which much sf expects the human race to contend. Instead, machinery and gadgetry, almost always of man's own creation, are equatable with these horrendous forces in the novels of other sf writers. Both *The Overman Culture* (1971) and *The Uncertain Midnight* feature insidious, near-human androids very prominently. In the former they are in loco parentis in a computer-initiated attempt to reintroduce the extinct race of man. The androids also provide a complete back-drop society in which the young humans they have raised are expected to live and develop. The only problem is that the computer which runs the scheme has made no attempt to recreate a single historical period, and the world in which the children come to self-knowledge is an amusingly confusing hodge-podge in which Queen Victoria rides in a hovercraft, and Zeppelins over London are attacked by jet aircraft. The children realise something is amiss when they discover some history books in a derelict library, and from then on it's an uphill struggle to re-establish mankind as the masters and the machines as servants.

In *The Uncertain Midnight* the purpose of the androids seems much more sinister. Introduced at first to help mankind after the devastation of an atomic war, they now control their own destiny and keep the few remaining humans in an idyllic state of near-utopia. They seem ultimately intent on superseding their creators. There are malcontents, of course, and when a pre-atomic-holocaust man is discovered in a state of suspended animation he becomes a focus for the rebels' intentions to show who the true masters really are. In the following passage from the book, Solomon, the android who all but runs the country, is talking to the survivor Markham about the possibility of his becoming a 'battle-standard' for the Runners - the rebels who want man to become dominant again:

Markham yawned. "Personally, I do not feel with like a battle-standard or an ideal. I feel like an ordinary human being - irritated by too much walking machinery!"
"Then I trust, sir, that you will not endanger yourself by allowing the Runners to idealise you?"
"But supposing I should?"
"Then, sir, it would be necessary to make slight changes in your personality - so that you would not be irritated by too much walking machinery."

But fear not, for later in the book, after a terrible battle in and around London with android forces, the rebels, by now representative of humanity, live to reach for glory once again.

In *Transit* (1964) and *Sea-Horse in the Sky* (1969), although the threat to the protagonists is not so obviously machine inspired, mechanical manifestations of a threatening nature are present. In both of these novels, a small group of people are displaced from Earth, and have to learn to live in and cope with a strange, new and hostile environment. That they ultimately come out tops, as in the previous two books discussed, is one of the main planks on which I rest my thesis of: **Cooper = hope.**

Transit, particularly, is representative of the Cooper philosophy. It contains all the ingredients. A group of four individuals is displaced from Earth by a device I won't bother to go into, it's only a convenience to aid the plot. We are shown them one by one inside a large machine, which turns out to be a spaceship, and they are probed and examined until we, and whatever force is behind the kidnapping, know something about them. Then quick change, they wake up to find that they have been deposited upon an alien planet, and quickly get themselves organised to make the best of the situation in which they find themselves. They gradually come to suspect that they are not alone, and eventually encounter a group of humanoid beings in a similar situation to themselves. It turns out that they and the alien group are taking part in a test designed to discover which of the two races is most worthy to inherit creation; and the conclusion is most satisfactory for mankind.

The issue involved is the ultimate domination of the second stellar rim sector in the second linear quadrant of the galaxy...there are two intelligent races at present on the threshold of spaceflight. To one of them must fall the ultimate responsibility for control of that area. Your own race and what you call the golden people are the two concerned. It was the object of the experiment...to determine which of the races possessed the most useful psychological characteristics. This has now been established...The results of the experiment are conclusive.

Seed of Light (1959), *The Last Continent* (1970) and *The Tenth Planet* (1973) all, to some extent, have a parallel theme. The Earth is dying or is dead, as a result of radio-activity, inter-racial warfare, pollution and overpopulation. In all three novels the race is left in the charge of a few survivors. In *Seed of Light* the chosen few are shot into space, symbolic sperm, eventually to return to Earth in the distant past. In *The Last Continent*, they survive on Mars and build a flourishing civilisation, and in *The Tenth Planet* they go first to Mars, and when that society collapses they travel further afield in search of a new home, eventually discovering the tenth planet of our solar system. I'm aware that, through lack of space, I've made these three novels sound very similar; I would like, however, to point out that the flesh of the books is as different as potato and plum. Representatives of all three groups ultimately return to Earth with visions of hope, as this short quote from *The Tenth Planet* shows; a group of volunteers is leaving *Minerva* the tenth planet - in a spaceship kept in mothballs by the founder of the colony:

Perhaps, eventually, the other ships that Garfield Talbot in his wisdom had preserved would follow. Perhaps not. But one, at least would discover whether Earth, the third planet, would bloom again. Suddenly, Idris had begun to believe in magic. When one flower dies, another is born.

Sunspots cause a planet-wide lemming instinct in *All Fools' Day* (1966), and a large proportion of the race commits suicide. The survivors are the crazy, the eccentrics and the oddballs, all of whom seem to be immune to the chemical imbalance produced in the human metabolism by the sunspots. They survive, and a black picture is painted of the struggles against deprivations caused by the collapse of society. Small disorganised groups of people come together, until, at the end of the novel, one of the chief characters remarks:

"We've got a new civilization going, Pauline. We're back to square one."

Edmund Cooper's finest novel to date, to my mind, is *The Cloud Walker* (1973). It's possible to draw thematic parallels between this novel and Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*; but this is not meant in any sense to suggest plagiarism. Cooper's treatment of the theme of the religion of anti-science is as distinct from Miller's as it is possible to get, and perhaps I'm doing you a disservice by even suggesting similarities between the two. In this finely crafted story of the rediscovery of heavier-than-air flight - symbolic of science in general in the context of the novel - we follow Kieron, a carpenter's son, from youth to old age and great honour in the post-atomic-holocaust world of the Luddite Church. Kieron is a rebel, in the Church's terms a heretic, and misfortune upon misfortune besets him as he struggles to free the mind of man from the heavy chains of superstition. As the novel progresses, he singlehandedly leads the world from the bigoted enslavement of Ludd's church and primitive physical toil, to a new enlightenment and

renewed hope for a better future. (It's interesting to note in passing, that this is just about the only Cooper novel which has a kind word for science: it's looked upon as an ally rather than an enemy, but in moderation.)

Five to Twelve (1968) is another fine novel which contains, apart from the obligatory degree of hope, the seeds of the other main Cooper constant that I wish to discuss briefly here. Dion Quern is a genetic freak born in a sexually unbalanced world. As the result of new forms of birth-control, the proportion of male births has decreased drastically, until women outnumber men by more than two to one. In this society, where men are chattels kept for the amusement of women, comes Quern, a man who is capable of passing on only the male hereditary factor to any woman who wishes to have a child by him.

He is another rebel who struggles valiantly against what he sees as an evil society, but eventually he is forced to submit to the domination of the women, and they take steps to ensure that their own futures as masters of the human race are not thrown into jeopardy. But they reckon without the disrupting force of a rebel within their own ranks, and the novel, which in the early stages presented a distressing picture for the male of the species, ends on an upbeat note.

"Dion," said Juno, "there was something they could not destroy. Something terrible, something glorious. They could not destroy the secret of your seed."
"My seed?"
"Your seed. The seed that is passed from generation to generation. You are a freak, Dion, a genetic miracle...you have double-Y chromosomes, and the pattern is somehow dominant. It is enough for you to know that you can only breed sons."
"Sons?" He gazed at her uncomprehendingly.
"Yes, sons. You gave me your seed, and the seed has produced nothing but sons... You have eight sons, Dion, tall and strong... And three of them have the dominant double-Y chromosomes. They too can breed only sons... So it seems that you have won the war... Your sons will breed more sons. And in the end, if we do not make any more mistakes, we can create a balanced world of men and women."

And there you have it, the other major concern featuring strongly in many of Edmund Cooper's books, the suggestion that the race must remain sexually balanced, and that men must retain their position of sexual mastery. The same message, tempered with a warning, is extant in *Who Needs Men?* (1972) though, unusually for this author, the book ends on a sadly poetic downbeat note. In the twenty-fifth century, the services of the human male have become sexually obsolete. Women have ensured the survival of the race by parthenogenesis and cloning. The few remaining men have fled for fear of their lives, and live in remote regions, such as the Highlands of Scotland, where much of the action of *Who Needs Men?* takes place.

The country is patrolled by highly trained bands of vindictive women exterminators, intent on nothing more than ridding the land of the remnants of this obscene and savage animal. One of the exterminators, apparently because of faulty training, falls prey to the charms of the chief of a wandering band in Scotland, and she becomes his woman. The rest of the story expands upon the idea that men and women are compatible and complementary, and not competitors. In the end, both the renegade woman, and the man, are killed by her former colleagues in what is the saddest, and probably most cynical ending in the whole of Cooper's writing.

"Well, sow. It has been a long chase. Was it worth it for the pig that lies in the snow?"
"Yes, hellbitch, it was worth it."

Someone else came out of the chopper. There was another laser rifle to worry about. But Rura was past worrying. She held Diarmid. She held him close.
She whispered tender words: "I will love you till - "
And then there was darkness. The darkness of forever.

And that, basically, is it. A brief look at the work and the moral concerns of Edmund Cooper by one of his readers. I make no claims for the statements in this article, they represent my own interpretation only, and Mr. Cooper is free to refute them if he will.

To summarise: I think two things are abundantly clear from reading the fiction of Edmund Cooper. One is that he feels that, ultimately, good sense will prevail. Man will see the folly of his ways, will cease to put trust in things that can easily turn from being boons to being blunders; atomic energy has two possibilities, either unlimited electricity, or the end of the species, which is it to be? And the second thing I read into his writing is that he is a great upholder of the status-quo. He likes things the way they are. He is against interchange between the sexual roles, he dislikes sexual

libertarianism, and thinks women's lib is ultimately bad.

Just one thing more would I add. Whether you agree with Edmund Cooper's philosophies, or whether you find his undoubtedly idealistic view of the human race and sexual harmony hard to swallow, he writes his message well, and entertains without burying his narrative in deep-rooted pretensions. What more can any reader ask?

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