

"We must love one another or die"

an interview with Edmund Cooper

By James Goddard

Second Chance

After *Almost Tomorrow* came out in *Book and Magazine Collector*, the next big thing we wanted to make available was the interview with Edmund by Jim Goddard. Most of this interview, in the form of a transcript, appeared in *Science Fiction Monthly* in 1973 (Vol. 4, part 2) along with an article by Jim about Edmund's science fiction, called *Hope For The Future* and also a short story of Edmund's, *Jupiter Laughs*. The full-length transcript of the interview was published in Jim's SF magazine, *Cypher* in November 1974.

The interview took place at Stammers and was recorded onto tape. At the time, it was one of the longest interviews Jim had ever conducted.

Here, we present the original full-length transcript of the interview, with Jim's kind permission. Also, it has here the original title that it had in *Cypher*.

As the interview is so long, the text has been divided into 'Parts' and, using these, a sort of rough guide or index to it has been given at the end.

Edmund speaks candidly and honestly throughout the interview. I don't personally agree with his views of women; but when you get to these sections, you need to read what he says carefully to get where he's coming from. As I've written elsewhere, I doubt that he was a woman-hater. One sentence has been omitted, because it was offensive - although I should add that it was not about women, or even the church.

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Part 1

Jim: You said in an interview published in the West Sussex Gazette that you'd worked out a formula for writing science fiction and intended to stick to it. Do you really see SF writing as a matter of formula?

Edmund: No, and I was mis-quoted. I haven't worked out any formula, and have no formula for writing anything. Also, I don't plot my books -- which may be apparent to my readers. I've met writers who do plot their books, and have talked over the problem with them. I know a writer, who shall be nameless, who says: 'I get an idea, Chapter 1 so and so, Chapter 2 so and so, Chapter 3 so and so, and on, then Chapter 30, climax, finish and out' -- and I say: 'Well, how dreadfully bloody boring. You'll be writing this novel for months, and you know what's going to happen all the time. You'll be bored stiff -- at least, I would.' So I go on, on a wing and a prayer. No formula -- total misquotation.

Jim: As individuals, the characters in many of your books lack the identity of singular people, and seem to be more representative of mankind in general. Why is this?

Edmund: Well, it's legitimate of you to say that they lack, as it were, a great deal of variety; most of them are similar types, though there are one or two who do have this variety.

Richard Avery in *Transit*; Matthew Greville in *All Fools' Day*; John Markham in *The Uncertain Midnight* - are all, basically, the same kind of character, the same kind of matrix. It's got to be perfectly obvious to anyone that the person he knows best is himself. I know myself best, so I'm afraid that these are all pseudonyms for myself. They're how I think I might react given the dreadful, intriguing, funny, banal, or bizarre situations these characters find themselves in.

It's easier to put my reactions down, than invent a character and put his reactions down. There are a lot of masquerading Edmund Coopers in my novels, which is why, frequently, American reviewers call me a male chauvinist pig.

Jim: A number of your recent books propound a point of view which is not only out of fashion with your fellow SF writers, but which is also in direct opposition to the way in which -- according to the media -- the world is going. With a few exceptions you have produced a body of work which is a fiction of optimism!

Edmund: I don't feel particularly optimistic about the state of society. As for being in or out of fashion, I've never even considered the prospect. I write the books and take the themes I feel I want to deal with.

For example, *All Fools' Day*, for me, is a failure. When I started out, my basic idea was to explore what we mean by the idea of sanity. Everyone talks about other people being sane, or insane, so I wanted to find out just what we meant by this. I hit upon the SF mechanism for knocking off all the demonstrably sane people and leaving all the people I call transnormals, who were really nutcases. I felt that if I analysed the behaviour of these transnormals, I would be able to arrive at some rough and ready definition of what was meant by the term 'sanity'.

I spent 65,000 words and nineteen months writing this novel. I think it had a little depth, but it was a total failure in terms of the original premise. I did not know any more about insanity or sanity at the end of the book than I did at the beginning.

This is the point, you see -- I take themes. In *Five To Twelve*, I took the theme of women's emancipation, taking it somewhat further than it's now gone, and reversed the roles by taking it to the point where, okay, we emancipate them, they get this and that, but it's in the nature of human beings to always want 10% more. Then I introduced a science fiction mechanism that reduced the number of men, and therefore reduced their effectiveness, thus giving women a chance to become more dominant. This was my theme; the plot was totally subsidiary -- I simply wanted to examine what sort of society and people we would get if the roles were reversed.

Jim: Does this not suggest that you are rather anti the emancipation of women? You think they have a definitive place in society, and should more or less stay in it?

Edmund: I don't think they should be kept in their places and I'm not anti the emancipation of women -- though I've been accused of this. I've been accused of being a reactionary fascist beast, by the Americans particularly because there are so many women reviewers.

The whole point is that the average cranial capacity of the human female is 125cc less than that of the average human male. What I'm saying is that on the whole they've got smaller computers, and -- granted that they are the same type of

computers -- the bigger computer is better than the smaller computer.

Let them have equal opportunity, I'm all in favour of it. I dislike this idea that they are blocked in the City. For example, if you are a woman, you just cannot get on the Stock Exchange unless you've been very lucky. In industry, if you are a woman you cannot rise above a certain level, unless you're very lucky. They're blocked for two reasons: one, because men are afraid of them; and two, a valid reason, because they consider that most women are going to get themselves impregnated and piss off shortly after they've mastered the job and got themselves a decent salary.

My point is, that in equal competition -- and let them have totally equal competition, let them compete against men -- they'll see that they can't make it. We have had free education in this country for a great many years, but where are the good female mathematicians? Where are the good female scientists? Where are the female Beethovens? They've gone back home to wash the dishes and produce children. And that, generally, is a very simplified version of what I feel. I'm all in favour of women, I love them, I do not want to subjugate them by penis or by restrictions or by anything like that, I just don't think they can compete on the same terms.

Jim: You mentioned cranial capacity, and, in analogy, said that in effect women have smaller computers than men. Isn't it possible to have a small computer better programmed than a large computer?

Edmund: Of course it is, but the programming of the computer is carried out in the family and at school. If you've got a big computer and a small computer in similar environments, with similar programming systems, the big computer is going to be able to store more data, manipulate more data, use that data, and generally produce more effective results.

Part 2

Jim: This question really stems from an earlier one to do with optimistic aspects of themes in your books. You seem to emphasize the nobler aspects of mankind: you don't find many murderers or rapists in your books -- with the possible exception of Kronk.

Edmund: With the exception of Kronk, with the exception of Five To Twelve, with the exception of All Fools' Day -- and that's three out of twelve of my published books. In those books you have murderers, rapists and cranks. I try to look for the good things in people, and to draw out the good things -- and this is not dwelling on the nobler aspects in any women's magazine sense: I try to do it in such a way that I'm not presenting bloody great goody-goodies who are going to march spotless through my books. Most of my heroes have a sense of guilt, for either something they have done, or something they have omitted to do. Most of the women are imperfect, again either for something they have done or omitted to do. So it's not as if I'm producing cardboard cut-outs: they are real people, but they are not necessarily as nasty as you could get. I'm not in the business of writing about nasty people. I am, I think, more in the business of manipulating ideas and, generally speaking, I can do this more successfully if I have fairly well balanced people to go at.

The odd crank creeps in. There are cranks enough in All Fools' Day: the Brothers of Iniquity score pretty superlatively as the nastiest people you could get, because anything that's nice they totally abhor, and anything that's nasty they think is bloody marvellous. A whole chapter is devoted to what they did in the village of Ambergreave. They raped, crucified, killed, disembowelled, shot to pieces. What more can you have?

Jim: Don't you think that sometimes, from a fictional point of view, the nastier a character is the more interesting it is to follow him through a fictional narrative?

Edmund: Yes, I do. But then I think if I were going to concentrate on characters to this extent, I would abandon SF and go into mainstream fiction. To me, SF is a literature of ideas -- it's a genre in which I can explore possible themes. I see myself -- and this is probably a bit grandiose -- as a kind of Cassandra: I'm pointing out possible dooms.

In Five To Twelve I'm pointing out a possible doom in terms of letting emancipation run riot. There is a little trigger mechanism that turns emancipation into domination and dictatorship. In Kronk I take much of what is already apparent in our very plastic civilization, look at it through a magnifying glass, bring it up to 2x or 3x, and see what kind of world it will produce. We have a problem with delinquent children; we have problems with people being programmed to buy things they don't need by the whole philosophy of consumerism; we have peoples' minds being controlled by T.V. to the extent that a popular face on T.V. will for so long dominate the minds, attitudes and reactions of people who watch -- the 'Alf Garnett' syndrome, things like this. These are the things I'm hitting at, because I dislike them, I see them gaining ground. I'm a sort of latter day frustrated messiah, perhaps a very poor one.

I'm not interested in characterization for its own sake, but only to the extent that it will advance the theme I'm currently playing about with.

Part 3

Jim: A scene in *Transit* shows the humans, who are marooned on a planet, being used by superior forces to find the most desirable master race, leaving their camp to destroy beings from another world in a neighbouring camp who have been attacking them; when they reach the enemy camp, they find it deserted. Then the mood changes, from one of aggression to one of pathos and mercy when the humans find a wounded alien. Here the nobility and kindness, sympathy and understanding begins to seep through, and the warlike intentions are forgotten -- it sounds as though you are saying that there is no such creature as mankind, and that humanity is the best. Would you agree with this interpretation?

Edmund: No, I don't agree with that. It may seem like that, and it may have come across like that, but if so, then it's a failure on my part. Basically, this book was intended to be an adventure story, full of suspense. We were talking of character just now -- it was also a book in which, because there were only four Earth people involved, I could explore their characters.

You may recall that these four people are transferred to this planet -- I think it's seventy light years away -- and we're given a picture of them. One is an advertising executive who has dirty pictures in his case; another is a gin-sodden failed actress; the third is a very timid mouse-like secretary; and the fourth is a failed artist who lost his first wife and more or less given up hope. Through this book, I wanted to evolve their characters. I preface the book with a quote from Auden: 'We must love one another or die.' Richard Avery eventually learns to love not only Barbara, with whom he mates, but Mary and Tom too. They learn to have affection for each other, they develop compassion, and, as you quite rightly say, when they are provoked into attacking the alien camp, their compassion for the dying alien woman dissipates their warlike intentions, and this comes across when, at the end, they are evaluated. They are evaluated not because they are a master race, they are evaluated as superior because they have compassion.

Coming back to your question, I am prepared to believe that there are other races in this galaxy and in other galaxies which are probably superior to mankind. I do not think we shall have any contact with them on a strictly scientific level, because of the time and space factors involved.

I don't believe in faster-than-light drive, it's a load of hooey, a convention that we use. And, what is more, the different time-scales involved can cause problems. You and I have personal time-scales; then we have a historical time-scale that covers the events of history; then we have a biological time-scale that covers the evolution of life -- each scale getting bigger and bigger. Then we have a geological time-scale that covers the evolution of the Earth; then we have a solar time-scale that covers the evolution of the solar system, and then we have a galactic time-scale and a cosmic time-scale. In all this, the order of magnitude as we jump from one scale to another increases so tremendously that the chances of one race from one galaxy contacting another race from another galaxy, are far less than that of one man standing in the corner of a field and firing a rifle, and another man, standing in the corner of a field five miles away and firing a rifle, and both bullets colliding. The order of magnitude of chance for this to happen is phenomenal, yet it is far less than for contact between us and an alien species.

So, this was simply a mechanism for exploring what I felt to be desirable in mankind. If something was desirable, and we could master it, then we would be fit, not to become masters of the galaxy, but just to order our own affairs and look after our own house.

Jim: Despite that, you've got this alien race -- the Golden People -- who, apparently, apart from their warlike intentions, have few or no failings as far as the novel is concerned, and you have the Earth people, who have a variety of actual failings, and yet still the Earth people, with all their failings, turn out to be the most desirable.

Edmund: This was sheer optimism. To tell the truth, the Golden People represent what -- for want of a better word -- I will call the fascist element, and the Earth people represent what I will call the liberal-democratic element. This may be wish-fulfilment, but I rather hope that the cultured and tolerant liberal-democratic has sufficient staying power to triumph over the fascist element, without being too distorted in the process. So really, it was an allegory -- a very small stage allegory -- between the forces of liberalism and the forces of autocracy.

Jim: You partly answered this question earlier, but I'll ask it again: what do you see as the role of women in your books?

Edmund: I'm afraid I can't say this for all authors, but many authors, I think, as I do, frequently reflect their own attitudes in their work. I like to think, probably stupidly, that I am intellectually superior to a woman I happen to be in love with. It could be that I'll eventually fall in love with someone who is intellectually superior to me -- and then have kittens all over the place! As things now stand, I've been around this world for 48 years, I've had a great deal of intimate

experience with -- I'm beginning to sound like Cassanova -- a number of women, and I have found, generally, that I am superior in intellect. They may be, and have proved themselves to be, more emotionally balanced, but I am superior in intellect. I think this is reflected in my work, and I think a sort of unconscious assumption of that comes across from all my heroes.

I'm sorry, but this is me. I have this attitude, it's been built into me; I don't really want to change it. It would be stupid of me to say that I would like to be totally different -- I wouldn't. This is not to say that I'm complacent -- I'm not entirely happy with myself as I am, but this assumption of male dominance is an integral part of me, and I don't think I'm going to change.

Jim: Will you ever write a novel in which a woman plays the dominant role?

Edmund: You haven't read this book, but *Who Needs Men?* is based in a society where women are capable of reproducing by parthenogenesis and by cloning, therefore they do not need men. In such a society, homosexuality is rife -- many meaningful and worthwhile relationships are developed by the women. The men are completely humiliated by this: they withdraw from society and become tribal characters, most of them hiding out in the highlands of Scotland. They over-compensate with their women by becoming over-aggressive, over-dominant, and over-possessive. The plot of the novel concerns the programme of extermination of these pigs, by the civilized society which is entirely run by and for women and in which they are all harmoniously happy.

One of the Exterminators, who is the central character of the book, comes across one of the last remaining highland chiefs, Diarmid MacDiarmid, who has all that is worst in male chauvinism in him. He literally is a highland chieftain, with a highland chief's attitudes. She gets raped, by the way, but this is really incidental: she survives the encounter, and comes to understand the motives that are driving him, just as he tries to understand the motives that are driving her. I'm afraid it descends somewhat into a sort of romantic idyll, but they do come together and learn to love each other, and she realizes that the woman dominated society is totally wrong. So she goes over to the side of the heathen.

The book ends tragically -- they are both killed. But it does postulate the question: Who needs men? And the answer is: women need men. Just as men need women! We're not competitors, we're complementary. If these people like Germaine Greer say we're equal, I'll say: okay then, you enter or select to enter a woman in the 1500 metres men's event in the Olympic Games. Or enter the weightlifting, or the wrestling, and so on. You can't compete! You are not equal! You are different! We need you, you need us, but you are not equal, you cannot compete in these areas.

Just as we cannot compete in childbirth, and various other areas, you cannot compete in the really tough stuff. That's my general attitude -- still male chauvinism.

Jim: This is the same message as you give in *Kronk*, really.

Edmund: Oh yes, and particularly in *Five To Twelve* -- because I'm very concerned. What is happening is that we're getting terribly democratic, in sexual terms, and I think in this age of libertarianism where anything goes and where women have as much freedom as men, in many respects, the sexual fulfillment of both sexes is getting progressively less and less. This is a disturbing factor. We're getting down to what Ballard, I think, once called 'sex in the head'; and I personally think the old fashioned sex is a damned sight better.

Part 4

Jim: In outlook at least, many of your books seem to suggest -- and I think this is borne out by something you said earlier -- that you are not only anti-religion but are humanist, that you celebrate the godhood of man. Any comments?

Edmund: I'm an atheist. God is an abstract noun, he's not a Father Christmas up there in Heaven, he's an abstract bloody noun who has been exploited by men in order to exploit other men, through the centuries. More people have been killed by internecine wars in the Christian church than in the First and Second World Wars together. There has been more destruction and more misery created by the brotherly love that is promulgated by this dreadful religion than by anything else throughout history; it really is appalling. We've got it now in Northern Ireland. Surely any thinking person must feel that if that's what Protestantism is and that's what Catholicism is, let any sane society outlaw both, because they are death and destruction.

And talking of male chauvinism -- for centuries the church has kept women in bondage: women are unclean when they have babies, they have to go and be 'churched' afterwards so that they are fit for human consumption again. They don't have rights, the church has kept women in total subjugation. So I, male chauvinist pig that I am, I want to grant them emancipation, because I think they can't compete. The church wants to keep them down, because they think a source of ill-paid labour for the males of this world useful to have.

I could go on and on about the church and its relations to sexual attitudes, but I won't. I'll merely say that those idiots, like the Archbishop of Canterbury and this fool who calls himself a Pope and sits in the Vatican, who say you can't have birth-control -- let's all die of starvation -- are doing far more harm than Genghis Khan, Attila, and Adolph Hitler all rolled into one. People like Attila and Hitler were benevolent despots compared to these idiots who utter and pontificate and say: this is the word of God, this you shall do, this you shall not do. When a war starts, the priests of England start praying for victory over the Germans, and the priests of Germany start praying for victory over the English.

Jim: All sides saying: God is with us.

Edmund: Yes: Got mit uns, Got strafe England, God is love.

Part 5

Jim: I also sense something of the Luddite in your work, as, apart from the godhood of man, one of the recurring themes is the triumph of man over the self-created monster of his own technology. When technology, in the form of very superior machines, such as the androids in *The Overman Culture* and *The Uncertain Midnight* are good examples, threatens man, then these machines must be smashed. Ned Ludd would have been proud of you -- but do you think man is really threatened by his own technology run amok?

Edmund: We're getting too bloody clever for words -- we're delegating more and more responsibility to machines: machines are allowed to make decisions, machines are allowed to make judgements. This was the theme I took in my first SF novel, *The Uncertain Midnight*. I took it to its logical conclusion: I went from computer to robot to android. I eventually gave the androids total electronic independence from man, and they therefore became competitors with man.

I think this sort of thing is already happening. You start out with a relatively simple thing like a computer, and the scientists who operate and programme this computer think: ah yes, if we link this computer with another computer we get better results. Eventually you get an entire network and it becomes very, very complex -- a great deal of data is fed into it. I think it was Arthur Clarke who said in a story that if you connected all the telephone systems in the world, you would have an electronic brain that could do something very peculiar. He was joking, but he got the general drift.

The point is, the more complex you make these machines, particularly when you get to where individual men cannot comprehend the complexity of the things, there you've hit danger level. Once they cannot comprehend it, they are at the mercy of the system. You get strange things, like people being credited £2,999,999 in their bank account, and someone else being debited. Gordon R. Dickson wrote an absolutely brilliant story about a man who failed to make a payment to a book-club -- I'm sure you've read this one -- and eventually he ends up under a death-sentence. Now this was a brilliant story -- I took my hat off to Gordon Dickson. It's not that he was predicting anything, but, by using that kind of distortion that is peculiar to science fiction he was showing the kind of danger we can expect by saying: okay, let the bloody machines do it.

Jim: Don't you think that this sort of basic idea of conflict between man and his technology can be read in terms of an almost religious struggle between good and evil? Good being mankind, and evil his technology run riot.

Edmund: You're the product of a Christian culture, aren't you?

Jim: We all are!

Edmund: Yes, and you're busy interpreting this in terms of a value system of a God who doesn't exist. No, it's a conflict between opposing forms. I don't say that man is good, or that machines are evil; but I say we have this right, in common with every species, to survive if we can and to survive as well as we can in a reasonable environment. Like the dinosaur, we are busy destroying our own environment. The dinosaurs multiplied to such an extent that they ate up all the foliage from the trees in their beautiful carboniferous forests, and eventually the swamps dried up -- end of the dinosaur. They lived for 140 million years, and they took 30 million years dying; they didn't do too badly. We have been around for a couple of million years, we have invented computers, and the hydrogen bomb, and all kinds of pollution; this is the dark side of man coming to the fore, saying: it's new, it's good, it comes in jars, let's have it. I am saying that technology, and these idiot scientists, advertisers and promoters, are getting away with far too much; and the rest of us are sitting back and taking it passively. We're getting a lot of things we don't want or need -- these things are putting us into tight little boxes.

The incidence of neurosis in all the major cities of the world is rapidly growing. Despite allegedly better medical and psychological care, the nuts are getting stronger, the thugs are getting stronger, cities are becoming unsafe. I submit that

this is, basically, because technology is putting too much pressure on man. It's a nasty little feedback, we can't control it; we have a tiger by the tail and it's got out of hand. What do we do? Shoot the tiger? I don't know. I only know that we're in a very dangerous situation.

Part 6

Jim: I'd like to ask a few more general questions now, if I may. Would you like to comment on any influences on your work, if there are such things?

Edmund: It's hard to say. There are obviously such things -- we are all influenced by our environment. I take it that you are basically referring to literary influences?

The great trigger mechanism occurred in my mind when I was ten years old and I was ill. I come from a northern cloth-cap culture. My father was a village shop-keeper. He had very few books on his bookshelf, but he was a 'dyed-in-the-wool' socialist, so he had lots of polemics, tracts and so on. Also, because Wells was a utopianist, he had the works of Wells. I picked up and read *The Time Machine* and that exploded in my mind. Then I read *The First Men In The Moon*. I was so hungry for Wells -- I just read and read and read and read. This was the formative influence, because this man was an absolute creative giant. He was a waymaker; we are all midgets in front of him. He was the one who blew it for me, just as he must have blown it for a great many others: Aldiss, Clarke, Asimov -- he was the big one.

The rest were comparatively subsidiary influences. Aldous Huxley - a significant influence. *Brave New World* I read in the Thirties when I was 13 or 14. I read Orwell's *1984* -- tremendous impact. These were the formative forces. These are all SF writers and SF novels, and they're so far ahead of the Clarkes, the Asimovs, the Coopers, and the Aldisses, and the rest of the world. We're all pygmies compared to them. We are walking in their shadows -- we have had doors opened for us by these people. These are the kind of influences that have triggered bombs between my ears!

Jim: I'd like to ask you about something that isn't really to do with SF. You said you were the product of a cloth-cap culture, which to many readers will suggest that your background is working-class socialism. How do you account for the changes between these origins and your present views?

Edmund: It's simple, really. My father was a village shop-keeper. We lived, literally, in the slums. Twenty houses had two shithouses -- there were no bathrooms. Many of the people were on the dole. This was the 1930s, remember -- three million people were on the dole. The dole then was very small. Frequently you had to beg, borrow or steal; and my father was constantly giving credit, and constantly losing because people couldn't pay, and so on. We were very much in a poverty stricken society. How the hell did I get out? It's bloody simple: I was a bright lad and got a scholarship to Manchester Grammar School. That opened doors to me. I saw that there was something else, something beyond this dreadfully constricting hopeless world of slum life and unemployment. I took the chance. I seized as much as I could from Manchester Grammar School. I got fed up when I was 15. By then, the war had come. I got out and got myself into the Merchant Navy. I saw a bit of the world. That was a great education too.

I came back, and thought: right, what can I do? Find a nice easy job, do something that would enable me to have a bit of lolly while I was learning to write, because by then I'd discovered that I wanted to write. At the end of the war, teachers were in short supply, and ex-servicemen who were not entirely stupid could get a grant to go to college for one year. So, not being entirely stupid, I got my grant, went to college, and discovered that teaching is damned hard work. I stayed in it as long as I could, which was for 5 years, then got the hell out and learned to starve while I was learning to write.

These are the kind of stresses and factors that took me out of my early environment and made me what I am. I'm not saying it's better, but different. When I go back up north and talk with the people with whom I used to live, I realize that I am speaking Russian and that they are speaking Chinese: we cannot now communicate. This does not mean I despise them; they're different, they didn't have chances. I did.

Jim: Do you think any of these attitudes or origins are reflected in your work?

Edmund: I don't think so, really. I'm hastily going through what I've written, and I don't think I've produced novels in which there is acute class-consciousness. I've certainly produced no literature in which I've tried to write about the working-class, or people escaping from the working-class. I can't really think I've committed any of this to paper -- although one needs time to think. I doubt very much whether any of this kind of background has crept into my SF.

Jim: *Transit* is a novel in which you wrote about the people from Earth going to what turns out to be a better world.

Edmund: From their point of view it was a virgin world because, at first, as far as they knew they were the only people

there. It was a Garden of Eden. Then they discovered that it had a serpent, in the shape of the fascist types. So they didn't really go to a better world; they went to another world where they had, basically, an opportunity to create a better world. This theme recurs in one or two of my books: mankind has a second chance. *Seed of Light* is a novel that postulates, at the beginning, the Earth being devastated by a nuclear holocaust. This was written at the time of the Aldermaston marches, when we were all getting kittens and whatnot because of the hydrogen bomb. The first part of the novel is devoted to how the Earth was destroyed, the second to how a few starships managed to be sent off in order that the seed of man would survive. We follow the journey of one starship, which travels for a thousand years -- and again this theme of a second chance occurs: I do a rabbit-out-of-the-hat trick and take them back to Earth in the end, 50,000 years before the devastation. It was an allegory: they came back to Earth and had a second chance.

In *All Fools' Day*, at the end of the novel, the transnormals are busy trying to build a bit of civilization down in Cornwall. I take a rather cynical attitude towards it, but it's still a second chance. This is not something I believe in, necessarily, or something I disbelieve in; it's something I rather much hope for because I think we've made a right mess of the first chance.

Part 7

Jim: Have you got any aspirations?

Edmund: Yes, I'd like to write better books. I'd like to write much better books. Every god-damned book is a bloody failure. It's not a failure in cash terms, and people have thought highly of them. But every book I've written is a failure to this extent: I start out with what seems to me a damned good theme, and I want to give this of my best. I know I have never given of my best to any of these themes, and I know, in many cases the theme has been cut to ribbons because I do not have sufficient technique, control of words, knowledge, discipline, and staying power to make a go of it. The best I can hope for is a near miss. I've had one or two near misses. I'm rather pleased about that. I've had no successes -- or none that I would personally regard as a great success.

Jim: So your masterpiece is yet to come?

Edmund: There is no masterpiece: I'm not going to make it, let's face it. I'm 48 years old, clearly my arteries are hardening, my mental flexibility is less than it was; theoretically I'm past my best. So what remains for me? The only card I have to play is experience. I think it possible that, by virtue of experience, I can write a book, or books, that can be even nearer misses than the one or two I think are pretty good from that point of view. I don't think I'm ever going to write one that satisfies me, and I think if any other author is perfectly honest with himself he will say the same.

Jim: Cypher carries quite a few book reviews. You review books for *The Sunday Times*. Could you say something about this aspect of your work?

Edmund: It scares me enormously -- to tell the truth. The real reason I do it, and this is going to sound egocentric -- it's not meant to be -- is it's a form of self-advertisement. My publishers don't advertise me too much -- as people may have noticed. It's not advertisement in the sense that I'm saying: look, here's clever Edmund yet again, dreaming up the bomb or assassinating this or building up that -- it's simply that the name appears over a column of reviews.

These reviews, strangely, I try to do as honestly as I can. It's relatively easy to review a novel by, say, Asimov, Clarke, or Aldiss, in that I know these writers intimately and can go through pretty quickly and say: oh yes, that's good, or that's bad. I know their idiom, I know their style, I know what they're trying to do. The books that really terrify me are first novels. I don't know Fred Smith, therefore I've got to read him from page 1 to page 195, because although the first 50 pages may be dreadful, it may be that on page 51 he starts pulling rabbits-out-of-the-hat. I know this guy has put months of his life into this work, and he deserves my time to go through and see whether he's made it. So I try to do these reviews very honestly.

I said that I know people like Aldiss and Asimov; this doesn't mean that I skip them, but when you are familiar with a writer's work, you don't have to give it the death-like concentration you have to with some writer whose work is totally unknown. If I pick up a James Blish, I know there is a certain level which, unless there's going to be a big surprise, he's not going to fall below. I'm going to look for the good things above that level. If he does fall below it, I'll say so.

Generally speaking, it's easier to review the well-known ones -- it's a damned sight harder to evaluate the unknown ones. I have discovered, during my 7 years reviewing, several unknowns who have made great names for themselves: they've had a rave review in *The Sunday Times*, and this has set them on the way. I'm happy about that. But, you know, it's a burdensome task, and I'm going to give it up as soon as I can. And as soon as I can is determined by when my book sales are high enough for me to say: right, I don't need to advertise myself, anymore.

Jim: You usually have to review 4, 5 or perhaps 6 books in four or five column inches: do you think that's enough

space to do the books justice?

Edmund: No, I don't; but I'm given a limitation. When I first proposed SF reviewing to The Sunday Times, they didn't review it at all. I said: look, The Observer is doing it, several other magazines are doing it. It's not just a dirty literature read by gents in plastic macs. How about me having a go? I happen to know a bit about SF, I've written one or two. So I got a pile of books, with the stricture: you can have 400 words, 500 if you must, but do half a dozen of these books. And you think to yourself: Jesus! I can't adequately say what I think about this book in one paragraph! But some notice for an author is better than no notice. It's a form of advertisement to him, and also I have a duty to the S.T. readers -- it's my duty to inform them, to the best of my knowledge and judgement, what I conceive to be the good ones, and what I conceive to be the bad ones.

The readers have learned to deal with my tastes -- they know how this strange character Edmund Cooper thinks, so they can make their own judgements accordingly. If I say this is terrible because I don't like New Wave -- as I have said many times of New Wave novels, and I've put down the reasons -- someone who likes New Wave and who reads this says: ah, Edmund Cooper thinks it's dreadful, therefore it's bound to be good. He's going to reverse my judgement because he's got used to my style. So I'm performing a service to both readers and writer: the writers are getting their books noticed, and I'm trying to do it honestly, and I'm trying to inform the readers honestly.

Space limitations I deplore, but they're there, they're the exigencies of publishing. I do the best I can, which may not be all that good, within those limits.

Part 8

Jim: You say you're a novelist, and that as a novelist you write SF. Why do you write SF?

Edmund: I've written romantic women's magazine stories, I've written mystery fiction -- I'm a novelist, I'm a writer: I know how to write things. It so happens that I like writing SF. I've written 15 SF books, now. There will be some more to come. I feel that, probably, I'm wearying my readers with many of my pet-themes. I can't help feeling that I shall have to branch out, and write other kinds of novels with other kinds of problems, in order to keep myself intellectually and emotionally alive. So, I am a novelist who, at the moment, happens to write SF; but I'm going to write other kinds of fiction, too.

Jim: Why have you written so comparatively few short stories?

Edmund: I wrote the short stories when I was learning to write SF. When I knew how to write SF, I knew I could express far better in novel terms than in short story terms, the things I want to say and do. There's another reason, too: novels are very much easier to write than short stories. There are some very good short SF stories, but most of them are gimmicky and dreadful. That's because of the limitations of length, and the limitations of the market. Magazines like Analog, for example, put a narrow limitation on their writers. F&SF and Galaxy impose a different kind of limitation.

Another thing that has bothered me, from a reader's point of view, is that far too many bad SF stories are being produced in far too many anthologies, and are being reprinted and reused over and over again, to the undying and eternal shame of the authors and to the benefit of their pockets. I don't want to get into this kind of money making race. I can make money out of writing the kind of fiction I want to write, so I'm not too bothered about the science fiction short story. If some good theme comes to me, and I think I can express it adequately in a short story, then I'll do it.

Part 9

Jim: Can you speak at all on any SF writers you admire?

Edmund: I don't admire SF writers, I admire certain books. Take the case of Brian Aldiss. Non-Stop, I think, was an excellent book. An Age was an excellent book. Report On Probability A was rubbishy, it wasn't even SF -- it was a worn out essay in metaphysical speculation. Barefoot In The Head was a psychedelic fantasy with no real value. Frankenstein Unbound certainly wasn't SF, it was a fantasy masquerading as SF, with a great many loopholes. I think he's only written two very good novels. So, do I admire Brian Aldiss or not? No, I admire two books of Brian Aldiss's.

In the cases of Arthur Clarke and Isaac Asimov, the same criteria apply. Asimov was very good when he was writing his robot stories, there he was an absolute waymaker. But twaddle like Elijah Bayley, and this idiotic crap that's supposed to be cult stuff, Foundation, really and truly has nothing to do with SF.

One novel that impressed me immensely was Earth Abides, by George R. Stewart. Another was A Canticle For Leibowitz, by Walter M. Miller; and there was one by Mordecai Roshwald, Level 7, which struck me as a very good

novel. I found these to be impressive novels; they set standards of excellence that very few other writers have been able to come up to. Vonnegut's *Sirens Of Titan* is a superb piece of satire. His later satire, I'm afraid, it not quite up to that level. That is the best of the Vonnegut books. Bradbury, of course, doesn't write SF, he never did write SF; he's a sort of poetic fantasist who has more or less played himself out. He now does pastiches of Bradbury, just as Hemingway, at the end, did pastiches of Hemingway. These are the outstanding things that come to mind.

Jim: Science fiction still seems to be striving for a definition. Just now, you mentioned Asimov's Foundation trilogy and referred to it as fantasy, whereas many would probably think of it as the epitome of SF. Have you a pet definition of SF, or a working definition of SF?

Edmund: I have some working ideas -- I'm not going to stand up and say definitions. Somebody once defined politics as the art of the possible. For me, SF has got to be the art of the possible. If it becomes impossible and absurd, if it involves concepts, ideas, gadgetry, and so on, that really offend all the laws of science and even offend human intelligence, then it's not SF, it's gobbledygook. A great deal of gobbledygook is passed off as SF, these days.

In *Five To Twelve* I'm talking about a possible future world dominated by women: far-fetched, but possible. Kronk is far-fetched -- computerised religion -- but also possible. In books like that, there was nothing that could offend a scientist or intelligent person; they were novels of the possible. But when you get faster-than-light drives -- and I've committed this dreadful thing myself -- it's impossible, it offends the laws of science, so it's not SF.

When Arthur Clarke stands up and says we're going to have matter transmitters, what he doesn't realize, brilliant scientist that he is, is that when you have two molecules trying to occupy the same space at the same time, you get an atomic explosion; so matter transmission is not possible. Arthur can argue, right, we'll have the matter receiver in a perfect vacuum, so that when we build the stuff up in it, two molecules can occupy the same space at the same time. My answer is that you cannot get a perfect vacuum -- not even in deep space; hence, out with the matter transmission, Arthur.

As far as I am concerned, SF is the art of the possible, not the art of the probable, not necessarily doomwatching, but just the art of the possible. Speculation on what is possible, on what could be.

Jim: What do you think offers the most, the novels or short stories, with pretensions to offering hard scientific extrapolation, or those more concerned with the soft sciences?

Edmund: The stories that deal with possible worlds, and the way they affect people, not the stories that deal with possible gadgetry. I'm not concerned that 25 years from now we will have an android that can perform X calculations per second, only uses so much current, will do all the washing-up and will mind your baby as well. I would be far more concerned with considering the impact of this android on society. What happens if you get an android that can wet-nurse the baby? What kind of babies do you build? This kind of thing.

Jim: So you would stress the soft sciences -- psychology, anthropology, things like that?

Edmund: Yes. The value of hard science is only in that it will produce a certain environment that's going to affect people. I'm concerned with the effect on the people.

Part 10

Jim: Could you be a bit outspoken about why you don't take part in the social activities of science fiction?

Edmund: I've had very little experience of them -- and people fling this back at me and say I haven't been to enough conventions. For them, it's a form of escapism: they want to escape from the real world. And this is a cult, it's assumed the proportions of a religion; they worship their various gods, and I don't want to be a part of this kind of set up. Another reason is it's very time consuming. A third is, when I'm not actually working hard writing, I'm a very lazy person, I like to enjoy myself: I like playing chess or making love, or getting drunk, or walking in the woods. But to stand up and be profound and learned doesn't strike me as a good way to spend a weekend.

Jim: The last question! Can you say anything about your plans, upcoming books, etc?

Edmund: This is going to sound very peculiar. How shall I put it? I don't want to say anything at all about the next six books I am going to write. I don't want to give any hints of anything at all. The number is precisely six, I've already contracted to write them, but I do not wish to say a word about them.

Jim: Do you yourself know what they are going to be about?

Edmund: I know entirely what they're going to be; I think they're going to be good -- not in the sense that I would think of them as being good, but in the sense that they will entertain a lot of people. So from that point of view, regarding myself as an entertainer, I think they will be very good; but I'm not going to say another word about them. Well, I will say one more word: none of them will be signed Edmund Cooper.

A rough guide to the interview

Part **Subjects**

1. Writing SF. Characters. Themes. All Fools' Day. Five To Twelve. Women's emancipation.
2. Characters. All Fools' Day. Five To Twelve. Kronk.
3. Transit. Aliens. Time and space. Women. Who Needs Men?
4. Religion.
5. Machines. Androids. Today's society.
6. Influences. Childhood. Learning to write. Transit. Seed of Light. All Fools' Day.
7. Success. Book reviewing. New Wave.
8. Other kinds of fiction. SF short stories.
9. Books by other writers. Definitions of SF.
10. Conventions. The next six books.