

Foreword

by ANDRE NORTON

THE GIRL AND THE B.E.M.

One needs only to look at the crudely bright jackets of some of the early pulp magazines (now rare collectors' items, by the way) to gauge the standing of feminine characters in the stories then appearing in practically the only market open to writers of science fiction and fantasy. More often than not an extremely lightly clad girl was either struggling with, or fleeing from, what was generally known in the trade as a B.E.M. (a bug-eyed monster). Though what salacious interest a crab-handed, eight-legged worm-spider (or something of like nature) might have in a human female was never explained.

The role of such a heroine was well defined. She existed to be rescued, to sustain the ego of the hero, to provide a decorative touch which really hardly affected the progress of the plot.

At the same time, the woman writer in the field lurked in disguise. She either assumed a pen name which could be considered masculine, or used initials, to conceal what editors maintained was the off-putting fact she was rashly invading what was considered to be a strictly masculine field of literature.

The proper protagonist was always, of course, male. Only C. L. Moore in those early days dared defy custom when she wrote her famous Jirel of Jory tales—fortunately recently again made available for the enjoyment of a new generation of readers. But she balanced these with the adventures of that superfighter Northwest Smith.

Leigh Brackett's haunting and beautifully visualized adventures on other worlds followed the approved pattern. The creations of Eric John Stark, as well as her accounts of the wonders of Mars and Venus, are just as readable today as when they were first conceived, and certainly stand equal to the present much-acclaimed characters and action created by Robert E. Howard or other "giants" of the period.

E. B. Cole, in the series of stories centering around the Philo-

sophical Corps, again followed the market's requirements of that time. But her ingenious intrigues were very well handled.

The presentation of a believable and important female character by a masculine writer of that same day must, however, require extensive research to find. Robert Heinlein, in the novelette "Magic, Inc.," gives us Mrs. Jennings, a notable example of a practical witch. A. A. Merritt's Snake Mother in *The Face in the Abyss* is a totally enchanting but very feminine alien.

It was left to Poul Anderson to develop the first equal partnership (and eventual marriage) in the three novelettes now appearing as *Operation Chaos*. His werewolf hero and witch heroine are so well matched that neither overshadows the other. They mesh instead into an important single force when there is need.

In *They'd Rather Be Right* by Mark Clifton and Frank Riley an unforgettable character, Mabel the skid-row drop-out, almost walks away with the book because of her courage and determination.

But when James Schmitz wrote *The Witches of Karres* and, later, the Telzey stories, a great step forward was taken for heroines. For he created girls and women who were independent of men, with powers and strengths all their own—who dared to challenge hero and villain alike.

Then came a new age of women writers who could and did, since the atmosphere of the times had changed, center on notable female protagonists. Ann McCaffrey produced *Restoree*, *The Ship Who Sang*, and *Dragonquest*, all landmarks for having heroines who not only fought for and rescued themselves, but gave the heroes more than just encouragement in times of danger.

Zenna Henderson's fine stories of the *People* alternated between hero and heroine naturally and realistically. While Ursula K. Le Guin's famous work *The Left Hand of Darkness* is almost wholly masculine in treatment, her priestess in *The Tombs of Atuan* stands by herself courageously.

Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, also a prize winner, shows the reader an unattractive heroine, prickly, unhappy, uncertain, but possessing a stubborn will which carries her to victory.

The Shattered Chain, Marian Bradley's latest novel, presents a detailed picture of feminine revolt in a masculine-dominated society, written with deep empathy.

Patricia McKillip has gone even farther into the field of subtle relationships between the sexes, using a new concept—that rape may exist on other planes than the physical and the trauma of such a violation can be even greater in an aftermath of wrath and despair.

The Forgotten Beasts of Eld will not be forgotten in a hurry by any careful reader.

Leath Lee's women, with their cruelty and lack of empathy, reflect well the degenerate alien civilizations of which they are a part. The heroine of *The Birthgrave* remains a startling and compelling portrait of an alien we cannot begin to judge by our standards at all.

On the other hand, C. J. Cherryh also presents an alien woman driven by the lash of duty—and wholly through the eyes of a very well-realized hero. But here the reader can identify with both, even when they stand at cross-purposes and there seems to be no way of resolving their difficulties. Ms. Cherryh (and many more women writers) can envision well-rounded male as well as female characters, to leave the reader well satisfied.

In my own case I began writing when the masculine name, the hero alone, was in primary demand. When I first worked on a heroine-oriented book (*Ordeal in Otherwhere*), the publisher was very dubious of success, saying my approach could well limit sales. But this gloomy prophecy did not prove true—after years of steady selling, the book is still in print.

Now I feel entirely free to present any plot from the point of view which seems to me in accord with the situation—either through a hero or heroine. Sometimes I alternate between them in a single book, giving different points of view of the same action.

One thing is true: I have become aware during the past ten years that my fan mail is changing in character. More and more of the letters I receive are written by girls and women. With science fiction classes now common in both high schools and colleges, the number of readers is increasing yearly—with, apparently, women readers well to the fore.

It is my hope that future writers will consider the point of “equal billing” for both hero and heroine. There is no reason why the separate abilities of a man and a woman, though differing somewhat in nature, cannot be fitted together, each to supply what the other may lack—to form a much stronger whole. This is a purpose I have been trying to follow for some time in my own work.

The girl with the B.E.M. is past history. Now let us have the girl who can take her own chances and stand shoulder to shoulder with any hero.