EDITORIAL - VAN IKIN - There were complaints about our review of Going, the Sumner Locke Elliott novel reviewed in Science Fiction 1. Some people attacked us for praising a book which they believed must be extremely boring: The heroine, you say, is "an ordinary woman". Her chief interests seem to be music, gardening (!), and psyching herself into a state that will let her go to her death with a minimum of fuss. How can that constitute entertainment? Expressed more bluntly: You're way off the beam. All literature is supposed to be entertaining, but from what you say, Going is dry. Dull! And, most pertinently: I thought sf was "the literature of ideas", but if it is, why do you praise this novel Going? It's true that it contains a speculative idea (the very tired clich►of a future society which regulates death) but the whole book has no message in regard to this idea. There's no proposal about what we should be doing to avoid such a future ... nothing concrete for the reader to act on. I describe this third comment as being the most pertinent because I believe it touches the real core of all the criticisms received. Though most people thought they were disturbed because we had praised a book which sounded "dry" to them, I believe the true cause of their dissatisfaction lay deeper than this. Deeper, in fact, than many of them realised. Our real "error" was made by praising a work which did not conform to the third critic's "functionalist" view of sf. I believe we stand accused not so much of having praised an isolated work of "dullness", but rather of having sanctioned a whole movement or trend towards "dullness". In short, people were afraid that in opening our arms to Going we were symbolically "opening the floodgates" to a kind of sf they would not enjoy. The "functional" mentality has dominated the sf field for decades. Robert "Heinlein is one of its chief apostles, and the philosophy itself is splendidly exemplified by his defence of sf: I claim one positive triumph for science fiction, totally beyond the scope of so-called main-stream fiction. It has prepared the youth of our time for the coming age of space. Interplanetary travel is no shock to youngsters, no matter how unsettling it may be to calcified adults. Our children have been playing at being space cadets and at controlling rocket ships for quite some time now. Where did they get this healthy orientation? From science fiction and nowhere else. Science fiction can perform similar service to the race in many other fields. For the survival and health of the human race one crudely written science fiction story containing a single worthwhile new idea is more valuable than a book-caseful of beautifully written non-science fiction. (1) In our first editorial I quoted Brian Aldiss's dictum that sf "is nothing unless it justifies itself as itself, just as a cat is its own justification whether or not it catches vermin" (2). Obviously Heinlein does not share or agree with such laudable views: he cannot see that if a book is "beautifully written" this quality alone gives value to that book. Stated simply, Heinlein (and his cohorts) seek material gain from sf. It's not even enough that an sf story should feature a "new idea", for Heinlein insists that it must also be worthwhile. Someone (usually a scientist) must be able to make ~ of that idea. And so sf is said to be of value because of the childish games it induces. Surely this is tantamount to saying that Star Wars can claim the "positive triumph" of having spawned a multitude of games, masks, stickers, and other "spin-off" gimmicks. Hardly the kind of "triumph" that one would wish to proclaim! Of course, it can be argued that Heinlein's views are at least grittily practical, and there is always merit in practi►cality. But it's fair to ask: are his views so very practical? In his inimitable dry manner, Kurt Vonnegut Jr has exploded the myth of a dawning "age of space": "The Earth is our cradle, which we are about to leave," says Arthur C. Clarke. "And the Solar System will be our kindergarten." Most of us will never leave this cradle, of course, unless death turns out to be

a form of astronautics. (3) - Perhaps sf has not "prepared" our youth for the future, but rather indoctrinated it with a myth about that future. And even if the "age of space" is to be accepted without question, who is to say that such "preparedness" really is a good thing? The youth of today is not "shocked" by interplanetary travel; but interplanetary travel is not yet an actuality, and there may well be danger in becoming blas◆about a feat before it has been achieved. Heinlein's views may in fact be intensely I!! Practical, even self-defeating. They are certainly not the views of a man with a high regard for literature in its own right. Worse, they have often tainted the opinions of those who do value good writing, for a number of eminent critics have succumbed to the "functionalist" mentality. Witness Peter R. Weston's misguided commentary on one of Heinlein's stories: "The Roads Must Roll" takes a concept popularized in Wells' When the Sleeper Wakes, and shows how a system of moving pavements can replace the motor car when petroleum starts to be in short supply. According to Heinlein the first of these roadways would open in 1960, and it was a fair guess. It still might happen in a very similar way in the near future. The mechanics of the system are fascinating, as the author shows how this new method of transport will revolutionize life in the same way as did the railways and motorways in their day. A closer reading reveals a lot more than that; the story is about people, the men who keep roadways rolling, and it demonstrates how organized labour can paralyse an industrial community. That theme, obviously, is as topical now as ever it was! (4) Surprise, surprise - the story is about people! But note where the critic's emphasis falls. The story is praised for its predictive value, and the damaging fact that the prediction has not yet come to pass must be "explained away" by the observation that it "still might happen". The concern with people is only a secondary matter, and is esteemed for topicality rather than universality. Thus Weston's attitude is similar to that of Heinlein, for both men seek tangible results from sf. The fallacy in this view is unwittingly revealed by Weston himself when he discusses the "predictive" nature of Heinlein's fiction: ... not only did Heinlein predict atomic power in considerable detail before any such thing existed but he also wrote a remarkable story called "Solution Unsatisfactory" which anticipated the ending of the then-current World War II through the use of atomic weapons. And further, he also predicted the subsequent nuclear stalemate between the United States and Soviet Union after the war - one wishes the politicians of the time had taken note! (pp.7-8) The point is, of course, that the politicians did not "take note". Similarly, the prediction about the way the war would end made absolutely no difference to that ending. If these stories were written purely to embellish a prediction, then they failed, and if anyone esteems sf for the value of its predictions, then they are wilfully deluding themselves. And worse, they are relegating sf to the status of an amusing footnote in the history of technology. The functionalists would even force sf to eschew all that is rich and human in literature: Much of science fiction is "origin-of-species" fiction, as Edmund Crispin called it, concerned with man "as just one of a horde of different animals sharing the same earth," with his survival as a species and sometimes with the survival of his cultural and ethical values. "In the act of dredging such people (as Madame Bovary or Strether or Leopold Bloom) out from the stupendous mass of their fellows in which they lie submerged9 their creators, however brilliant, convict themselves of disproportion: it is as if a bacteriologist were to become fixated not just on a particular group of bacteria but on one isolated bacterium," Crispin wrote in a 1963 Times Literary Supplement. Moreover, we want science fiction characters to be typical, in terms both of literary theory and story reality. The actions of idiosyncratic individuals reveal only the variety

of human behaviour; the actions of types reveal the characteristics of the group represented, up to and including the human race. And as human beings reading about times of decision that concern the fate of the human race, we hope to be represented well and fairly, perhaps by those who rise to the highest standards of conduct we hold up for our﹏selves, certainly not by those who cannot achieve what we accomplish every day. It may not be significant that an idealized human succeeds; but it is meaningless that an inferior human fails. (5) In short, the "Key Figure" syndrome once again - this time at the expense of Sidney Carton and Leopold Bloom. The functionalist outlook is a misguided and belittling approach to sf, and if. Going succeeds. in defying this stricture (as it does) then it should be given due credit for this achieve﹏ment. But this does not completely answer all our critics, for I have not explored the question of the novel's "entertainment value", and it was to this matter that most complaints were addressed. Let it be said that it is a very good thing if a work of literature is enjoyable. And a very bad thing if it is not. But let it also be said that we do not share the current narrow and restrictive concepts of the elements required to make a work enjoyable. According to popular notions, entertainment and enjoyment are associated with violence, derring-do, crime, intrigue, melodrama and sexuality, and are assumed to be incompatible with notions of seriousness, realism, and "literary" ambitions. Indeed, it is even assumed that the concepts of entertainment and enjoyment are directly opposed to the concepts of serious thought and literary excellence. It is coming to be assumed that if a work of literature should win the acclaim of serious critics, this can only mean that it will be dull and boring for the non-academic reader. Such an assumption is nonsense. It implies that enjoyment is an all-or-nothing phenomenon, and so ignores the crucial fact that there are different kinds and levels of enjoyment. No-one reads a steady diet of "the classics". The most august professor is likely to read Alistair Maclean in the dentist's waiting room, or on a long train journey. And though .he may conclude that the book is not of a high standard, this need not mean that he has not enjoyed it. Given the circumstances (and here I am assuming that even a professor must fear the dentist's drill) the kind of enjoyment offered by Alistair Maclean is more than enough for the reader's needs. But late that night, when his jaw is no longer numb and he's feeling like a hero, the professor may read a novel by John Le Carr~. Unlike the Maclean, which would have been fairly simple in terms of plot, theme, and characterisation, the Le Carre will demand a deeper involvement, both emotionally and intellect﹏ually. He will find it enjoyable, as before; in fact, he will probably find the Le Carre more enjoyable because it offers more to be enjoyed. Then, the next day, when he's back in top form, he'll spend his spare moments reading Patrick White. Not because he has to read White, but simply because he finds that White writes the kind of novel that offers the most to enjoy. Maclean's novels are slight, and make no attempt to engage the full range of a reader's thoughts, emotions, and sensibilities; Le Carre's works are pleasingly complex and serious in their outlook, but they still fail to offer the fullest delights of literature. It is only in the work of a writer like White (or Tolstoy, or Dickens; the list is long) that the reader can find the richest delight. This, then, is the argument. Not that certain books (such as Maclean's) are to be despised, but rather that they are to be seen as offering less in the way of enjoyment than many another writer's work. The difference between a "good" book and a best-seller is the difference between a slice of well-cooked steak and a chunky meat pie. Both are enjoyable, and it would be foolish to assert that either one is not; but the steak would offer richer enjoyment, and would offer greater nourishment as well. In short, the essence of our defence is this: we do indeed believe that literature should be a source of enjoyment. But we are greedy for the delights that literature can offer; like Oliver Twist, we will

dare to ask for more. Why accept thin gruel when there are banquets a-plenty? And why settle for less than a fine and enjoyable novel such as Going? Notes 1. Robert A. Heinlein, "Science Fiction: Its Nature, Faults and Virtues", in The Science Fiction Novel: Imagination and Social Criticism, ed. B. Davenport et al (Advent, Chicago, 1969), p.46. 2. Brian W. Aldiss, "On Being a Literary Pariah", Extrapolation, XVII, 2 (May 1976), p.169. 3. Kurt Vonnegut Jr, "Excelsior! We're Going to the Moon! Excelsior!" in Wampeters Foma and Granfalloons (Panther Books, Frogmore, U.K., 1976), p.93. 4. Peter R. Weston, Introduction to The Best of Robert Heinlein (Sphere Books, London, 1973), pp.8-9. All subsequent .page references are to this edition. 5. James Gunn, "Heroes, Heroines, Villains: The Characters in Science Fiction", in The Craft of Science Fiction, ed. R. Bretnor (Harper and Row, New York, 1976), pp.164-165. &#65533; &#65533;