



THE COLIN STEELE COLLECTION

In 2004-2005 Colin Steele donated his significant private collection of science fiction, fantasy, horror books and periodicals to Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Sydney Library. Built up over many years in England and Australia, this comprehensive collection includes complete works of leading overseas and Australian authors, anthologies, rare early journals and fanzines. The Steele Collection is in the process of being listed in the Special Collections Database.

COLIN STEELE ON SCIENCE FICTION

I began reading science fiction in the UK in the early 1950s. Like many other teenage readers in Britain at the time, I was influenced by the *Dan Dare* comic strip in *The Eagle* magazine, the television series of Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass* series, movies such as *Forbidden Planet* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the American comic books *Superman*, *Batman* and *Captain Marvel*.

My interest in the genre also grew from magazines, which have played an influential part in science fiction since the 1920s. My uncle, later Mayor of Hartlepool, worked for British Rail and from the early 1940s he arranged for the guards on non-stop trains passing through Hartlepool to throw magazines such as *Astounding* on to the platform for me. The Hartlepool Library, where the yellow Gollancz book jackets stood out like beacons and the Science Fiction Book Club editions were waiting, also provided me with a solid reading base.

While at Liverpool University in the early 1960s (a time enhanced by the success of Liverpool soccer and when groups such as the Beatles played at student dances), I became further involved in science fiction through helping the librarian of the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) with the Association's library. Authors such as Michael Moorcock and Charles Platt were regulars at BSFA meetings in London in the mid-1960s. Moorcock's *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy* magazines provided a literary jumping-off point for many authors whose names are well known today.

In Oxford in the late 1960s, I met Dr Tom Shippey, the science fiction reviewer for the *Guardian* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Brian Aldiss was also resident in Oxford at the time and regularly organised social gatherings with visiting authors such as Harry Harrison and James Blish. Through these contacts I arranged for the archives of Brian Aldiss and Michael Moorcock to be deposited in the Bodleian Library in the mid 1970s.

I had already written articles for *Vector*, the journal of the BSFA, when I moved to Canberra in 1976 to work at the Australian National University. There I began reviewing science fiction and fantasy books for the *Canberra Times*, following in the footsteps of Graham Stone, the noted Australian science fiction bibliographer and collector.

In 1981 along with Professor Ian Donaldson, Director of the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University, I organised the first academic conference on science fiction in Australia. As first Chair of the National Word Festival, I drew science fiction authors such as George Turner and Alan Garner into Festival programs during the 1980s. I have also arranged for many notable science fiction and fantasy authors to speak in Canberra over the last 20 years, including Terry Pratchett, Sara Douglass, Kim Stanley-Robinson and Brian Aldiss.

In 2005, science fiction and fantasy are booming, the latter perhaps overly so. Some Australian science fiction books still struggle to reach the same levels of popularity as fantasy books despite arguably higher standards in plot and characterisation. The current wave of quality British science fiction is perhaps unparalleled since the 1960s.

The addition of the Colin Steele Collection to the outstanding Ron Graham Collection ensures that the University of Sydney Library now has arguably the best collection of science fiction and fantasy in Australia. The Steele Collection adds significant collections from the 1970s onwards and is particularly strong in non-commercial magazines both from Australia and Britain in which many of the leading authors, such as J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick, began their careers or contributed significant critical commentaries.

It is hoped that further donations will be able to be made in the future to enable the University of Sydney Library to maintain its pre-eminence. It is also reassuring in an era when many libraries are focusing on the virtual environment (and appropriately so), that there is still a major research library willing to house and catalogue major book collections - to boldly go where few libraries now tread!