

33 Rippon Ave.,
Hillsdale, Mich.,
May 9, 1931.

Mr. Richard Dodson,
507 S. Davis,
Kirksville, Mo.

Dear Dick:-

Thanks for your letter of May 7th. I do get quite a bit of mail, but letters like yours are always welcome---it seems to me that any writer can do better work when he is patted on the back than when he is kicked in the seat of the pants. And yes, I am fairly busy, what with being chief chemist of the two flour mills of F. W. Stock & Sons for a living, and writing stories in most of my spare time: but I always try to answer letters from those who are kind enough to write to me. I cannot promise to maintain a steady correspondence with you, however, because, after all, there is only so much time on the clock.

I do not know exactly what kind of a letter you want or expect me to write, but assume that you want some of my ideas upon various subjects; as a man, as a reader, and as a writer? All right. I do not like the average run of stories, written by men who are writing for a living, with nothing but a typewriter with which to work. Stuff, you know, ground out on a mill, strictly according to a set formula, and with not an original idea in a thousand pages---and there is so much of it! I like Merritt particularly well for that reason---widely imitated, he himself never imitates. Scientific fiction should be scientific, and not pseudo-science.. I may write (in fact, in my lighter moments for some time, I have been writing a yarn that is the wildest kind of pseudo-science, with no real science in it at all. It isn't done yet, though, and I may never finish it; or, having finished it, I may never have the nerve to submit it to a publisher) pseudo-science myself, but it will never lay any claims to SCIENCE. Because, for us, as readers and writers of SCIENTIFIC FICTION, there are many very real and very definite realms of absolute impossibility. For instance, in a recent story there was postulated a second satellite of the Earth, which stayed always invisible, BEHIND THE MOON FROM THE EARTH---a direct violation of one of the fundamental facts of astrophysics and of observational astronomy. That kind of stuff is sickening, and there are all too many equally barefaced impossibilities printed every month.

However, do not get the idea that I want my stories plausible. Just the opposite---the wilder a story is, the better I like to read it; but it must be, by sufficient stretch of the imagination, remotely scientifically possible. Thus, I have no idea that the mechanisms of John W. Campbell or those of Nowlan; or the fantasies of Cloukeye will ever materialize---yet they cannot be proved impossible, and I read them with the keenest enjoyment. Still less, probably, will my Skylarks or Spacehounds ever come true; but they (particularly the Spacehounds) are absolutely sound, fundamentally. The Skylarks were weak in spots, since the first one was written a good many years ago,

but I will go to the mat cheerfully with anybody on the science anywhere in the Spacehounds.

I have read and thoroughly liked many stories without women in them. In fact, many stories whose authors have tried that feature would have been infinitely better without it; since in some of them the heroines have been dragged into the story in such a forced fashion that the very mechanism creaked under the strain. In still others interplanetary marriages are made---things which, in my opinion, are biological absurdities. However, I personally favor a love element---a real love element---provided it is natural in that story; and I try to write my own stories so that it belongs in them, without necessitating forced or unnatural situations. For even scientists are human, you know, and true love is the finest and most sublime of all human emotions. And I do not like, and will neither read nor write, anything smacking of sexual infidelity in any form. I believe that human nature is essentially and inherently decent and loyal. Old enough myself so that I have children in high school, I am still youthfully in love with my own wife. In all the years that we have lived together, there has been no thought of infidelity or wandering. Neither of us deserves any particular credit for virtue, as we see it---it is merely that we are so ideally mated that no temptations can exist. That feeling, that creed of loyalty, is, I believe, reflected in my stories. Also, I believe in the inherent decency of the younger generation. There are black sheep, of course---there always have been, ever since the first fish stood up on his rear fins and climbed out upon the primordial land---there were plenty of them when I was a boy---but you youngsters seem to me to be drinking less than we did, petting less than we did (although perhaps somewhat more openly); and becoming in general, better citizens than we did.

You have a right to be proud of that medal---I am ^{Physics contest} (R.D.) proud of it for you, too. It is a symbol of a real and actual accomplishment. I congratulate you sincerely upon its winning, and I hope and trust that it will be but the first of a long series of accomplishments. This is neither sugar nor oratory; it is a simple wish from a scientist old enough to know that his genius will never set the word afire, to a young one who may do so!

Perhaps you noticed the outburst in the May Astounding Stories, by one Russell, who declared that the Skylark was a super-rotten story, and a disgrace to any magazine publishing it? He is one of those who do not agree with you! Seriously, though, that kind of thing does pull my cork. I can understand honest criticism---I have received many such letters and appreciate the spirit in which they were written. I do not expect everyone to like my stuff---we are not all alike in tastes. Also, I really enjoy arguing the finer points of science with really competent critics, such as Campbell and a couple of the Englishmen. Eads was particularly sound, and I liked his style. But such a bitter and meaningless attack as Russell's, against which I cannot defend myself by a single word, just naturally breaks me off at the ankles. However, I imagine that maybe a friend or so may have rallied to my defense by this time.

This letter doesn't seem to amount to much---I am merely rambling along, putting down anything that happens to occur to me at the moment, like an unusually long-winded after-dinner speaker.

And that reminds me of one---maybe you haven't heard it yet? There are two kinds of speeches, letters, and girls' dresses---the old-fashioned kind, that go 'round and 'round and 'ROUND the subject, but never do touch it; and the modern ~~kind~~, which are short, cling very closely to the subject, but do not cover it!

This letter, I fear, resembles the former---although I do not know what the subject is that it rambles around.

Very cordially yours,



Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.