REVIEWS

SCIENCE FICTION

The Alien Novelist

THE SCIENCE FICTION OF ALGIS BUDRYS, WHO DIED IN JUNE AT THE AGE OF 77, SHOWED THAT THE GENRE CAN PRODUCE LITERARY ART.

By MARK WILLIAMS

If Algirdas Budrys—who signed his work "Algis Budrys" and answered to "Ajay" among the regular Americans with whom he lived—maintained an apprehensive watchfulness toward much of the human race, it wasn't without justification. To start with, as the small son of Lithuania's consul general in Königsberg, East Prussia, he had seen Adolf Hitler pass in full Nazi pomp, while the citizens of the city where Immanuel Kant lay buried whipped themselves into such frenzies of admiration that they soiled themselves and defecated in public.

WHO?
by Algis Budrys
1958

ROGUE MOON
by Algis Budrys
1960

MICHAELMAS
by Algis Budrys
1977

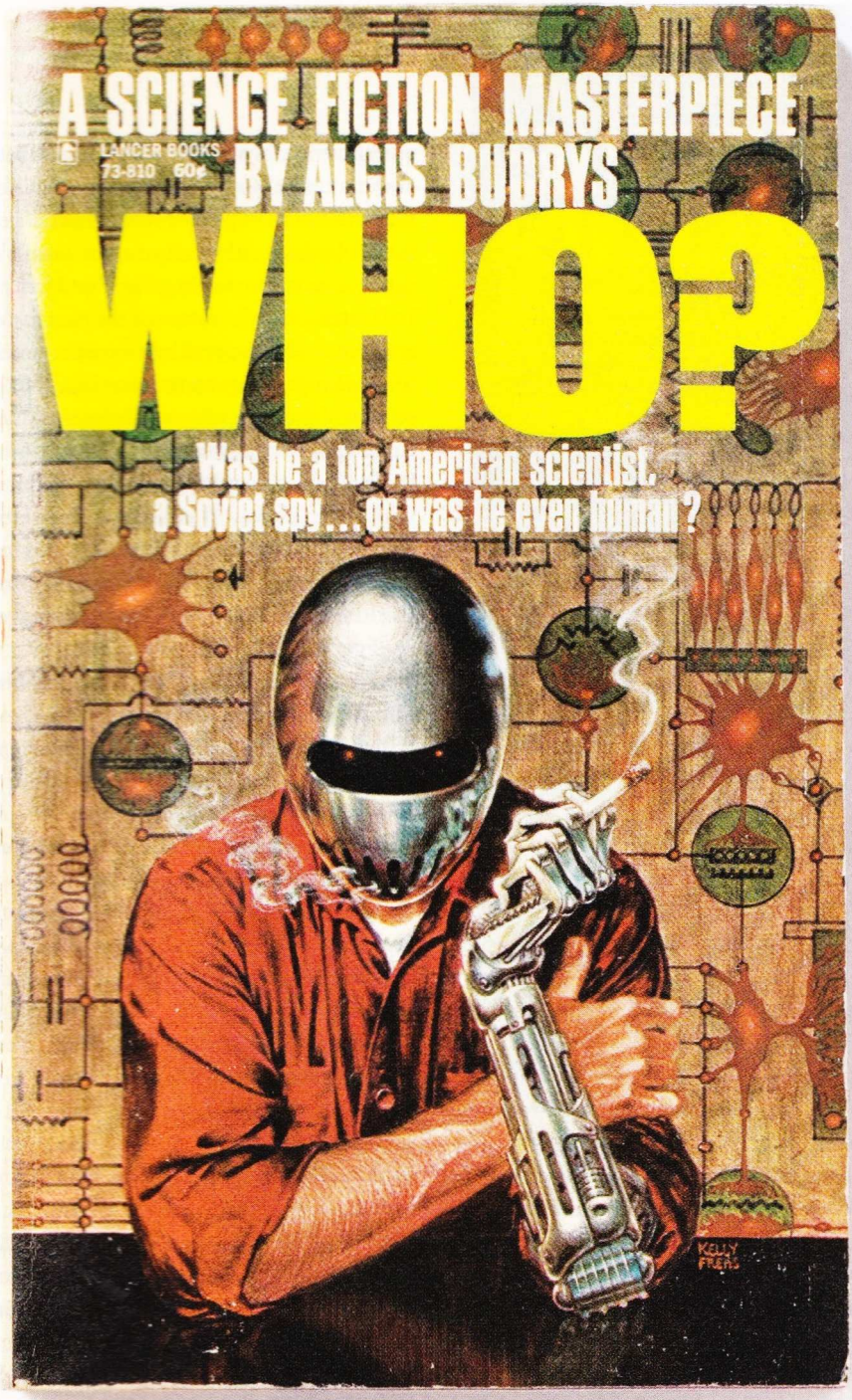
More than seven decades later, dying in a Chicago suburb, Budrys still remembered what he had seen from the second-story window of his parents' apartment on that spring day in 1936. He told me, "After the *Hitlerjugend* walked through, Hitler came by in an open black Mercedes with his arm propped up. I'm sure he had an iron bar up his sleeve, because he couldn't have kept his arm that particular way for so long otherwise." The Königsberg crowds produced an indescribable sound, Budrys recalled, and some individuals behaved as though experiencing epileptic seizures: men and women rolled on the ground, writhing and clutching at each other—or ran for the bushes as they pulled their underwear down, unable to control their bowels. "Some of them made it, some didn't," he said. "I was only five. It was quite a thing to see." Budrys had spent his earliest years amidst a people who his patriotic Lithuanian parents stressed were not his own; on some evenings, he'd sat on his mother's lap in their darkened apartment while his father sat beside them, holding a loaded pistol in case the brownshirts broke in. But it was on the day he watched the crowds' reaction to Hitler, he wrote later, that he understood that he had come into consciousness among a species of werewolf.

Similar early experiences have compelled others to become writers. Unlike most, Budrys insisted that what he had to say was best articulated in that literary tradition whose principal founding fathers are H. G. Wells, former draper's assistant, and John W. Campbell, MIT dropout and editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine.

This cultured man of Middle European origins—who was multilingual at five, went to university at 16, and as a literary critic was capable of reviewing works as diverse as the stories of the 19th-century German Romantic E. T. A. Hoffmann and a Robert Coover metafiction novel of the 1960s—became a passionate advocate for the view that, amidst all the dreck, great and beautiful work had been published in American science fiction magazines. The fiction Budrys himself began writing as a young man in the 1950s still provides as good evidence as exists that SF can be literary art; at the time, it led his fellow practitioners to regard him as the one among them who was most likely to transform their field into a fully adult literature.

"He was in some ways the best writer of his kind around," the writer, editor, and literary agent Frederik Pohl—at 89, almost the last man left standing from American SF's classical age—told me after Budrys's death in June. "He made sentences come alive better than most writers. I'm not talking just about science fiction writers." This esteem was not confined to his fellow SF authors. Kingsley Amis, the British novelist and critic, once wrote, "Algis Budrys, if all goes well, may become the best science fiction writer since Wells."

That didn't quite happen. In the 1950s and early '60s Budrys published a hundred-odd stories and a half-dozen novels, which reflected his own experience not least in tending to feature deeply isolated people and problems of identity. One novel, *Who?* (1958), had characters as developed as any in that era's serious fiction and compares favorably with work by Budrys's mainstream contemporaries, such as Graham Greene. Budrys capped the decade off with another book, *Rogue Moon* (1960), that knowledgeable readers consider one of the half-dozen



MAN OF STEEL The term "cyborg" wasn't coined till 1960, two years after Budrys published *Who?* Steel-cased prosthetics replacing skull and one arm render the identity of the cyborged scientist in this novel indeterminable.

BOOK PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER HARTING

SF masterpieces. Then he noted where the science fiction market was going and, because he now had a wife and four children, turned his energies to making money in publishing, editing, and advertising. Through the following decades he kept a foot in the field, mostly with book reviews (he's better known today as science fiction's best critic than as a writer), but his fiction appeared at increasingly longer intervals. Yet some is notable, particularly, the last great novel, *Michaelmas* (1977), which imagines a digitally networked world much like our own.

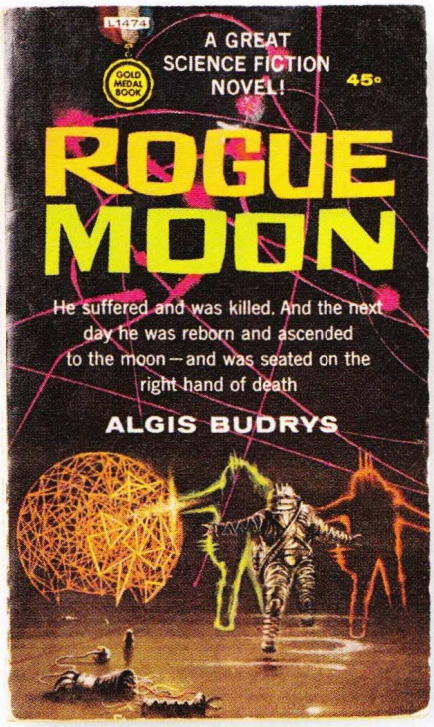
Arguably, there's little real science fiction. That's because drama made relevant by informed social and technological extrapolation and by a profound understanding of the human condition is hard to write. For anyone interested in the real stuff, Budrys was by some lights the best who wrote it. I ran this proposition by Fred Pohl, who has been everything it's possible to be in American science fiction publishing. "I think that's a fair statement," Pohl agreed.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCIENCE FICTION

That we have any Budrys books in English is a historical accident: in 1936, when his father failed to get the Paris posting he'd requested, he was assigned to New York instead. Then, in 1940, the USSR occupied Lithuania, which ceased to be an independent state. Budrys's parents, desperate to survive in Depression-era America, ended up running a chicken farm in rural New Jersey. Recalling that farm when I interviewed him this past spring, Budrys chuckled weakly and said, "It was godforsaken." He was enduring the final stages of cancer, a metastatic melanoma; the noises from his oxygen feed line as he struggled to breathe grew more obvious as we talked.

"My big breakthrough came when Miss Anderson, who owned the general store in Dorothy, New Jersey, gave me a bunch of unsold magazines, including *Astonishing Stories*, edited by Frederik Pohl," Budrys said. Having taught himself English at six by reading *Robinson Crusoe*, Budrys had already discovered comic strips like *Flash Gordon* and *Brick Bradford*, then graduated to H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and the few remotely science-fictional books in his local library. From *Astonishing*, he moved on to other SF magazines.

In the 1940s, short fiction in magazines constituted Americans' chief medium of home entertainment besides the radio. It was in the cheapest magazines, the pulps, that science fiction had taken root in the United States—most significantly in *Astounding Science Fiction*, which Budrys



MOON SHOT Budrys called writing this novel a "maximum effort." The title was imposed by the publisher, Budrys preferring either *Halt, Passenger*—an inscription he'd seen on a New England gravestone—or *The Death Machine*.

found belatedly, since its covers lacked ray-gun-wielding heroes and big-breasted heroines. "*Astounding* was the last magazine I picked up," he told me. "It didn't look like an SF magazine." *Astounding*'s editor, John W. Campbell, had assembled a stable of writers such as Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov—all those names who once *were* SF to its readers. Out in the New Jersey hinterlands, the magazine was a revelation to the 11-year-old Budrys: he determined that the vocation of science fiction writer was worth pursuing.

Why did he decide that? "I don't know," he told me. Though he answered my questions courteously, Budrys labored to construct his responses. "I was a writer. I wrote rather well. Like that." Didn't he know how bad the money would be? "I didn't care about the money." When he entered college at 16, had his ambition remained the same? "Yes." And at 21, having sold his first story to Campbell's *Astounding*, what was his creative agenda? Where Budrys had paused for seconds before previous answers, his voice now firmed: "I didn't have any agenda for SF. I just wanted to write it. I thought I was a hotshot." Whom had he thought the best writers? "Me," Budrys answered emphatically.

When I put the phone down I recalled a line near the end of Budrys's first fully achieved novel, *Who?* "For a moment his voice had depth in it, as though he remembered something difficult and prideful he had done in his youth." We had talked a couple more minutes, but it was painfully clear that though Budrys was struggling to behave in a professional manner—much as he'd taken pains to be a good husband and father, dependable friend, and reliable colleague—he was slipping as we talked, struggling to recall things about his own work and finding them gone from memory. Still, he had testified to the main thing: the absolute seriousness of his ambition as an artist who'd been, specifically, a science fiction writer. Three days later he died at home with his family.

To take any science fiction writer seriously is ludicrous, some say, since SF is an inherently juvenile form. Yet the urge to speculate about a technology that could allow us to reach the distant past or future isn't necessarily childish, although an eight-year-old can acquire it from reading *The Time Machine*. To contemplate the future or the past in the spirit of a scientist is to be aware that one's lifetime represents an infinitesimally thin section of the universe's possibilities. Sidney Coleman, the great theoretical physicist (and Budrys's friend and fellow science fiction fan), put it this way: "I assure you, one of the reasons for doing science, especially the kind I do, is that it makes your head feel funny, Goddamned strange. That's also the feeling I get out of SF."

The other main charge against science fiction is that it scants characterization. Here, critics are on firmer ground. The problem, Budrys pointed out, isn't merely that the SF writer must focus heavily on setting at characterization's expense, but also that when unique characters are presented in unique settings, the audience cannot assess what's normal for those characters and what, if anything, their behavior says about the human (or alien) condition. Nevertheless, Budrys said, a meticulous, artful SF writer *can* create fully realized characters.

WHAT SCIENCE FICTION SHOULD BE

Budrys mastered that trick. After a conventional start, his short fiction deepened: a story like "The End of Summer" (1954), for instance, considers the intrinsic limitations of immortality, memory, and identity; "Nobody Bothers Gus" (1955) portrays a lonely superman unlike any in previous SF; and "The Distant Sound of Engines" (first published in 1959, and reprinted on page 77 of this issue) presents a persistent theme: terribly damaged characters who will do anything to survive or leave a legacy.

Who? has a damaged figure at its heart: a scientist named Martino who has been appallingly injured in an explosion at his lab in Europe, near the Soviet border. The Soviets reach him first (the novel extrapolates the Cold War's high-noon years into

BUDRYS'S PORTRAIT COURTESY OF DAVE BUDRYS

the late 1980s) and rebuild him; when they release a man they say is Martino, cybernetic prosthetics have replaced his face and skull and one arm. Since Martino had been developing a strategically vital technology, why have the Soviets returned him? The problem for an intelligence officer, Rogers, is that if this enigmatic figure is Martino, he must be cleared to work again immediately; if he's an impostor, he must be kept away from the project. In chapters that alternate between Rogers's surveillance of Martino and scenes from Martino's earlier life, *Who?* unfolds in entirely character-driven ways. Budrys imported material from his own life into this novel: Azarin, the Soviet spy chief, is modeled on his father, a former military intelligence officer; the sections describing Martino's youth draw on Budrys's own experience as the son of immigrants. In the end, while technology accounts for the uncertainty about the identity of the man claiming to be Martino, it's his own character—his limited emotional development and his early isolation—that has rendered his claims impossible to corroborate.

Having proved a character-driven SF novel possible, Budrys took a radically different approach with *Rogue Moon*, which takes place in an alternate 1959 where a secret project sponsored by the U.S. government has reached the far side of the moon and found a large, nonnatural structure that kills everybody who enters it. The project of understanding this artifact has fallen to a scientist, Hawks, who has developed a functional matter transmitter—really a matter *duplicator*, since a human subject scanned by Hawks's machine on Earth is destroyed, and the resulting information is used to create one duplicate in the machine and another in a "receiver" on the moon. Crucially, before these duplicates' experiences diverge, they briefly share a consciousness.

Rogue Moon returns to Budrys's themes of identity and memory, adding death and love into the mix. But this brief description gives no sense of the singular flavor of Budrys's text, which conveys only what the

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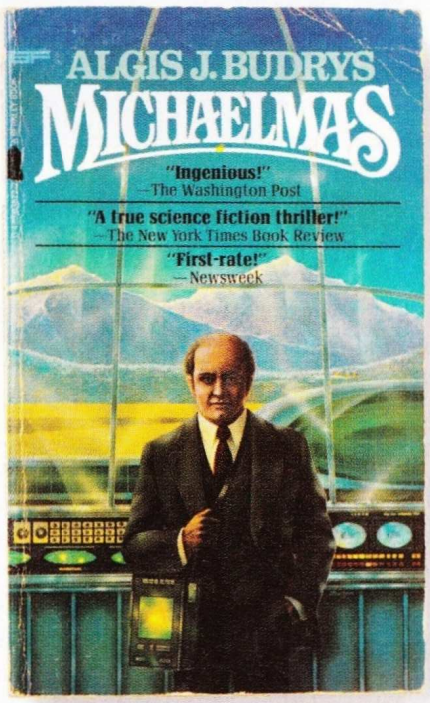

characters can see and what they say, without describing their interior mental states. The stylistic antecedents are in the hard-boiled prose of writers like Hemingway and Dashiell Hammett, but such prose had never before been applied to such strange subject matter. Hawks plans to map the lunar artifact by sending duplicates into it; when they die, their cognates on Earth will retain memories of what happened in the preceding moments. Hawks's difficulty is that enduring death by proxy has left each surviving duplicate catatonic. He decides that an abnormal individual might not be driven mad by the experience. A candidate is found: Al Barker, paratrooper, assassin, Olympic ski jumper, mountaineer, and all-around macho man.

As *Rogue Moon* proceeds, Barker remains functional as his duplicates repeatedly enter the lunar "formation," advance a few meters, and die. The artifact, which may be incomprehensible, isn't really the novel's point. Hawks tells Barker, "Perhaps it's the alien equivalent of a discarded tomato can. Does a beetle know why it can enter the can only from one end as it lies across the trail to the beetle's burrow?" The novel focuses on the aims and relationships of its characters, who are, the reader grasps, all psychopaths: Hawks will do anything to achieve his aims, Barker is hollow, and so on.

Hawks is capable of softer emotions, however, which provide the novel with its highly original conclusion. The scientist meets a young woman, with whom he opens up. At the novel's end, as a Barker duplicate undertakes the final trip that will reach the artifact's far side, a Hawks duplicate joins him. They emerge alive, but Hawks tells Barker that there's no life for them on Earth—that belongs to their duplicates—and walks off to die alone on the moon's surface. In the book's final lines, the Hawks on Earth finds a note in his hand "and read the blurred message with little difficulty, since it was in his own writing, and, in any case, he knew what it said. It was: 'Remember me to her.'"

Budrys wrote one more significant novel, *Michaelmas*. Its hero, Laurent Michaelmas, is ostensibly a wealthy, middle-aged news anchorman; 20 years before, however, he was a countercultural computer hacker who wrote a program, Domino, that's since grown into a sentient artificial intelligence distributed throughout the planet's digital networks. Domino empowers Michaelmas to be the world's hidden manager.

The theme of identity recurs. An astronaut believed dead is resurrected—he's a copy, of course—and Michaelmas, too, meets a replica of himself. Four features distinguish *Michaelmas*. First, it is the most polished example of Budrys's craft: the language is highly literary—striking metaphors and similes abound—and the narrative voice swoops imperceptibly from third person past to first person present; wonderful characters—an Ossetian cosmonaut, an aging newsman, a Turkish limousine chauffeur, and many others—are painted in quick, deft strokes; and the plot gallops across a single, eventful day and three continents. Second, there's Michaelmas himself: absolute power corrupts absolutely, in Lord Acton's phrase, and great men are nearly always bad men; yet Michaelmas is secretly a great man who remains benevolent and uncorrupted. Third, there's the persistent underlying note of melancholy: mourning his decades-dead wife, Michaelmas has no affectionate relationships other than the one with his creation, Domino; and our universe, it turns out, is just a fluke of information theory, tuned into existence by beings who themselves may be only drifting particles elsewhere in the multiverse.

Finally, there's the fact that *Michaelmas* depicts a near future that's now an alternative version of our immediate past. In many ways, it's a more attractive world, with a U.N. manned mission to the solar system's outer planets and less terrorism, war, and crime. In a similar way, it could be argued, Budrys's science fiction presents an alternative version of the genre—a promise of better possibilities that were never quite realized. Indeed, the bulk of Budrys's writing was published a half-century ago and isn't in print, though it's easily obtainable from online booksellers or brick-and-mortar secondhand stores. You should make the effort. This is what science fiction can be but hardly ever is. TR

MARK WILLIAMS IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR TO *TECHNOLOGY REVIEW*.

COLLABORATION

Wikipedia and the Meaning of Truth

WHY THE ONLINE ENCYCLOPEDIA'S EPISTEMOLOGY SHOULD WORRY THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF ACCURACY.

By SIMSON L. GARFINKEL

With little notice from the outside world, the community-written encyclopedia Wikipedia has redefined the commonly accepted use of the word "truth."

Why should we care? Because Wikipedia's articles are the first- or second-ranked results for most Internet searches. Type "iron" into Google, and Wikipedia's article on the element is the top-ranked result; its article on the Iron Cross is also first. Google's search algorithms rank a story in part by how many times it has been linked to; people are linking to Wikipedia articles *a lot*.

This means that the content of these articles really matters. Wikipedia's standards of inclusion—what's in and what's not—affect the work of journalists, who routinely read Wikipedia articles and then repeat the wiki-claims as "background" without bothering to cite them. These standards affect students, whose research on many topics starts (and often ends) with Wikipedia. And since I used Wikipedia to research large parts of this article, these standards are affecting you, dear reader, at this very moment.

Many people, especially academic experts, have argued that Wikipedia's articles can't be trusted, because they are written and edited by volunteers who have never been vetted. Nevertheless, studies have found that the articles are remarkably accurate. The reason is that Wikipedia's community of more than seven million registered users has organically evolved a set of policies and procedures for removing untruths. This also explains Wikipedia's explosive growth: if the stuff in Wikipedia didn't seem "true enough" to most readers, they wouldn't keep coming back to the website.

These policies have become the social contract for Wikipedia's army of apparently insomniac volunteers. Thanks to them, incorrect information generally disappears quite quickly.

So how do the Wikipedians decide what's true and what's not? On what is their epistemology based?

Unlike the laws of mathematics or science, wikitruth isn't based on principles such as consistency or observability. It's not even based on common sense or first-hand experience. Wikipedia has evolved a radically different set of epistemological standards—standards that aren't especially