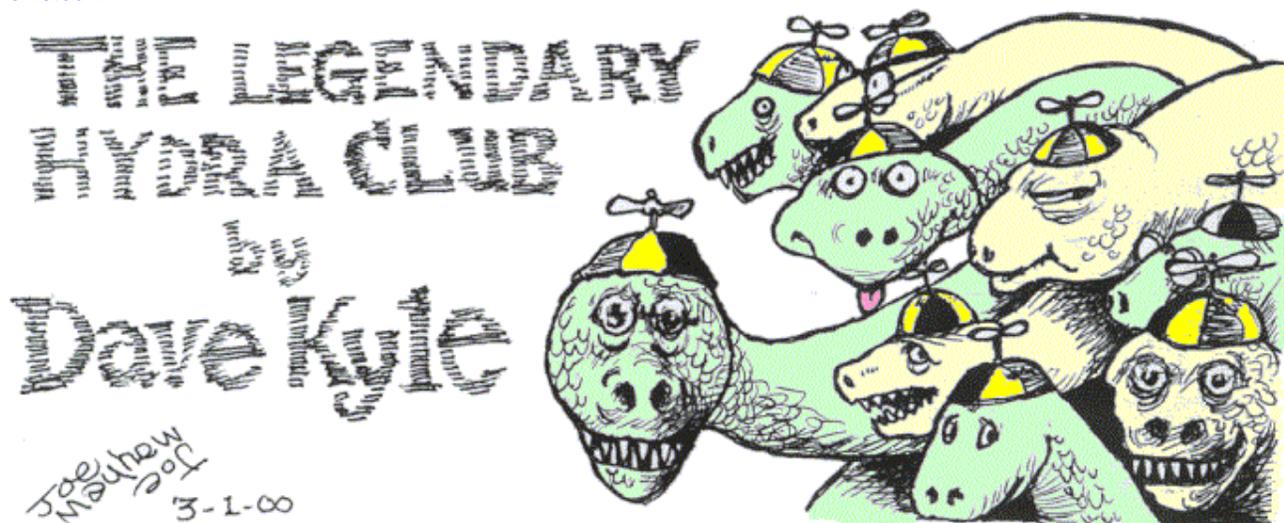


We mentioned in our Opening Comments that one of the fans we met at Aussiecon, Justine Larbalestier, was doing research for a new book on the New York Futurians fan group of the 1930s and '40s. New York City fandom has a very long and complex history, and the Futurians is one its most famous organizations. Many of its members went on, in later decades, to become famous as professional writers. This leads us more or less directly to the next article, another in Dave Kyle's series of autobiographical remembrances. The time of the late 1940s and early 1950s, when this article takes place, was when perhaps the most exclusive of all the dozens of New York fan clubs existed...



From time to time I've been asked to tell about my life around the famous Hydra Club of New York. But recalling events comprehensively from a half century ago requires much more than a good memory. There are two essential ingredients needed to accurately shape my recollections -- written records and an old fellow participant from those days of yore to chat with, preferably one who is still of sound mind. As a former Chairman of the club, I do have quite a few records. Unfortunately, in my search for them, I find many (maybe most?) are buried in my boxes of papers, accumulated in my years as a human jackdaw. Someday I will sort them out, but not soon enough for this article. As for former Hydrites (not my term), there are so few of us left. Would that I could sit with one or more and feed on our awakened reminiscences. I hope to do so in this new millennium.

A brief backward glance before World War Two will be helpful to explain the genesis of the extraordinary science fiction social group which existed in Manhattan for almost a decade from the late 1940s. The Hydra Club had as a member virtually every luminary in the professional sf world within the greater metropolitan area of New York City. One must understand that the newly named 'science fiction' was, pre-war, just becoming popular -- and fandom was even newer. I know, I was there. Scattered around America there grew science fiction clubs and gatherings. Then, in 1939, two historic events occurred that had a major effect on fandom -- the first World Science Fiction Convention and shortly thereafter, the beginning of the second World War. As war raged in Europe, worldcons moved through the American time zones, Eastern, Central, and Mountain. But in 1941, that progression was temporarily halted by Pearl Harbor. Sf and I lost each other for four long years.

My new era in fandom began in peaceful 1946, where chaotic 1941 left off -- the fourth Worldcon was held on the U.S. west coast. I overlooked it and didn't go. War veterans were straggling back into active fandom. But it took me more than a year to pick up my sf strings. Just as Forry Ackerman was the one who in the 1930s introduced me to the mysterious inside of fandom, it was Fred Pohl who, while I happened to be in New York city in the summer of 1947, enticed me back into the stream of things.

"There's a science fiction convention in Philadelphia this weekend," he said. "Feel like going?" Great

Ghu! I suddenly thought, that's right, it's time for a World Convention! My reply, of course, was an enthusiastic "Yes!" It was the first Philcon and it was a glorious reunion of 'old' friends and an awakening and reawakening also of so many others as lifelong friends, pros and fans alike.

At the Philcon I saw that cons had become an sf nursery, recognizing the practitioners, encouraging talent, creating an honored elite. The remarkable fact was that all the pros in those days were truly active fans and most of the fans aspired to be pros. The honored elite were ripe for banding together.

It was that exciting Philcon weekend that led directly to the birth of The Hydra Club.

My train ride back to New York with Fred was the time in which we savored the weekend. As Fred wrote in his *The Way the Future Was*, the con "left a delicious aftertaste" and we resolved to continue our contacts. Some kind of club was called for, an idea with which our mutual friend Lester del Rey wholeheartedly agreed. Thus, a gathering soon took place at the Pohls' apartment on Grove Street in Greenwich Village. Nine persons were present or accounted for. We had to begin with some kind of name. There were nine of us. Nine heads... Hydra... The Hydra Club! And so the club came formally into existence on October 25, 1947.

And who were the the original nine? The signatures on that initial constitution were Lester del Rey, David A. Kyle, Frederik Pohl, Judith Merrill, and Martin Greenberg. Added later were Robert W. Lowndes, Philip Klass, Jack Gillespie, and David Reiner. Also at the beginning were L. Jerome Stanton, Fletcher Pratt, Willy Ley, George O. Smith, Basil Davenport, Sam Merwin and Harry Harrison. J. Harry Dockweiler (Dirk Wylie), part of the original group of friends, was fatally ill at this time.

Fred Pohl and Lester del Rey are the two people I consider the real founders and shapers. Fred, a teenage friend, was a most prominent fan in the 1930s and '40s during the days of ISA and Futurian fan clubs, and is now a world-renowned author. Lester del Rey was also the closest of friends. I found him a cheap flat in my building on West 67th Street, almost in the middle of the current Lincoln Center. It was there that I saw my first home television set; built by Lester, it had a three or five inch screen and displayed hazy, shadowy figures moving in a ghostly fashion across the glass. Lester became a successful entrepreneur and founder of Del Rey Books, but then he lived alone on the East Side near Grand Central Terminal. The last person with whom I traded remembrances about Hydra was Lester, still brilliant in mind in his final days, when we wallowed in reminiscences around those gold years.

Martin Greenberg was the original Gnome Press partner with me -- not to be confused with the later, well-known Martin Harry Greenberg. Some people said that with his mustache, if he put on heavy glasses he would look like Groucho Marx, always grinning and full of vim. Hydra brought us closer together to become book publishers. I put up the money (my Air Corps savings) and used my family's printing shop while he supplied the contacts and the salesmanship. Hydra members gave us the necessary encouragement. We agreed that he should draw a very modest Gnome salary and that I should work for free because he had a family and I didn't. Later Marty struggled alone for years with Gnome Press when I went north to build my radio station, and he eventually declared bankruptcy. Marty's problems of non-payments with everyone, with the resulting bad feelings and lawsuits, caused him to drop out of fandom for four decades. We therefore lost touch, but I should locate him and get his Hydra perspective.

Robert W. Lowndes was another former Futurian, a close friend of us all from the 1930s, and like so many Futurians (that early sf intimate association of young men) became an sf professional. He was chief editor of many pulps for years at Columbia Publications. Everyone called him "Doc" -- they said he once worked in a Connecticut Hospital and that was good enough reason. When he was editor of *Smashing Detective*, I regularly sold him stories. The day came at Hydra, an infamous merchandising place, when he

asked for another and I told him I had none.

"Impossible!" he said. "Look in your files."

"I did that the last time," I said. "There are no more. I've sold you everything!"

"Look again," he said. "I'm desperate for a story to close my current issue."

"I only have one terrible one left," I replied. "I should throw it away. It's no good. Maybe someday I'll re-write it. It's entitled 'Fourth Floor, Murder'."

"Send it to me tomorrow," he insisted. I did. And he published it unchanged.

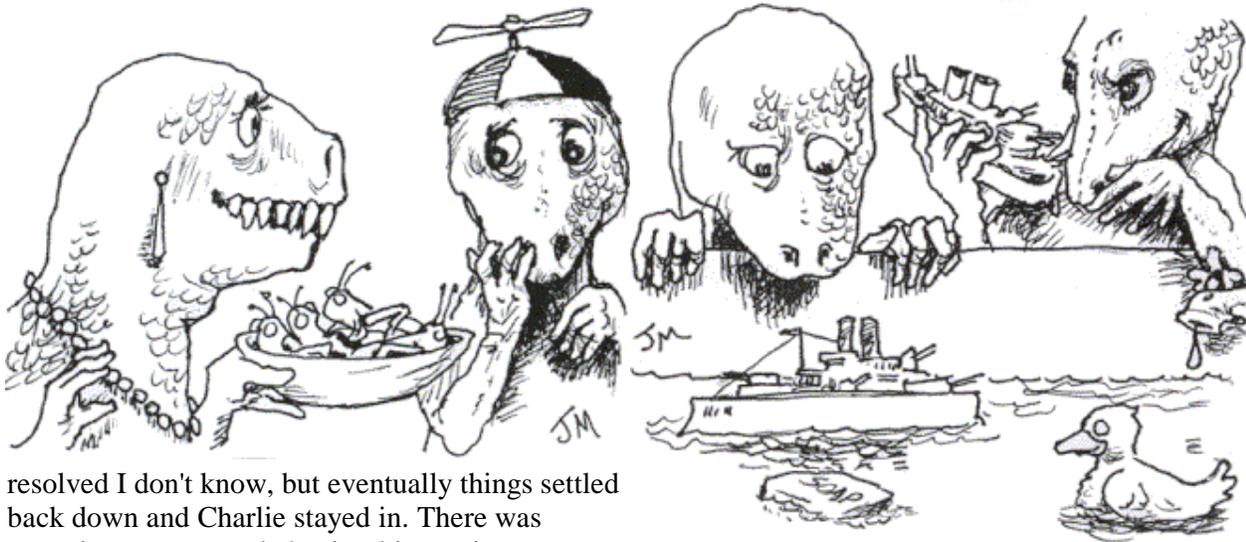
Fletcher Pratt and Willy Ley are still familiar names today, as is George O. Smith. Fletcher was truly a literary figure of imposing standing. He genuinely loved science fiction and was a font of wisdom and advice. He once gave me a friendly lecture on why Tom Jones should be studied by me for an answer to a literary question I posed. Because his work appeared in the early Gernsback magazines, with a portrait sketch of him to introduce his story, I considered him an heroic sf legend which I was privileged to know. That was equally true for his collaborator, Laurence Manning.

Basil Davenport was an editor at Book-of-the-Month Club. Sam Merwin, a popular editor for Leo Margulies' chain of pulps, later moved to Hollywood. Phil Klass was a short, black haired fellow with a huge sense of the ridiculous. One time he startled, even embarrassed, me with a tiny mechanical male doll which, when you pulled a string.... He used the nom-de-plume of William Tenn and became famous for his story, "Child's Play." Incidentally his younger brother, Mort, followed closely in Phil's artistic and animated wake.

Judy Merrill was one of the earliest of the woman sf authors. She was the premier female fan, talented and intellectual. No wonder that Fred Pohl made it a point to marry her. For years she was Chairman of Hydra's Permanent Membership Committee, which had the power of life and death over all members and wanna-bes. Judy had strong political feelings and eventually went to Toronto as a distinguished academician.

Charlie Dye, originally from California fandom, became very involved in the club and shared my West Side flat for some time. He replaced Doc Lowndes on the PMC in 1948. In 1955, when I was irregularly in New York City after I opened my radio station WPDM in Potsdam, New York, I had to resign as Chairman of Hydra. He took over the apartment as caretaker and Frank Belknap Long moved in. Charlie was the author of a futuristic novel, *Prisoner in the Skull*, which had a certain David Kyle as a Private Investigator, mustache and all, described as "distinguished, even dashing, in a washed-out sort of way." Ted Carnell, editor of the British *New Worlds*, published the novel convinced that I had written it, but I don't deserve much credit. Charlie was very gifted, although he was an alcoholic. He kept a jug of wine on the floor at the head of his couch bed there at West 67th Street. Tragically, he died later all alone, found slumped over his kitchen table, head in his hands, in his bachelor flat.

The Permanent Membership Committee had a strict set of written rules which guarded the group as if bestowing knighthood. All membership applications came up before it. Unanimous approval of the PMC was necessary, not only to be chosen but just to be considered. And under the no-nonsense provisions, just because you made it didn't mean you couldn't get booted out. One time Charlie Dye, love stricken, was accused of harassment. The PMC heard testimony and weighed the facts. It was a rough time for many members thinking this way and that, especially considering that Charlie was a valued officer. How it was



resolved I don't know, but eventually things settled back down and Charlie stayed in. There was sometimes a strange behavioral inconsistency which understandably confused people. Yesterday's spouse was somebody else's tomorrow. Some critics considered Hydra a Matrimonial Bureau with the style of Musical Chairs. Who was married to whom shifted smoothly. And, as far as I could judge, everyone remained good friends.

Hydra was famous for its end of the year parties, where prominent guests and other non-members were specially invited. The first was a Christmas Party in 1948, then a Holiday Party just before the 1949-1950 New Year. Through the good graces of Fletcher Pratt, the December 1951 event was held in the Lotus Club on Park Avenue with Harry Harrison as chairman. Lester del Rey chaired the ones in 1953 and 1954. The Lotus Club, earlier in 1954, was used for a special meeting with a special invitation to the members of ESFA, the Eastern Science Fiction Association in Newark, New Jersey -- Sam Moskowitz's fiefdom. SaM, not yet a recognized 'professional', was not a member of Hydra.

Fletcher Pratt was an extremely valuable member, not only for his importance, wit and intelligence, but for the marvelous apartment he and Inga Pratt made available to Hydra for meetings. It was just around the corner and down East 58th Street from the Plaza Hotel. (I investigated the Plaza as a site for the 14th Worldcon [NewYorkCon 1956], but decided it was a place far too posh, with its elaborate lobby/tea room and its glass elevators with gold-trimmed glass doors in an open shaft embraced by a winding, carpeted staircase.) The Pratt apartment was large, its main room extremely comfortable. Always on the coffee table were dishes of dried grasshoppers which guests were encouraged to eat as one would eat peanuts.

Fletcher had small cages of marmosets -- tiny, cute, fluffy monkeys kept as pets. With his sharp, bespectacled eyes, slight body and wispy beard, he looked remarkably like them. Fletcher was more than just a sf/fantasy writer (*The Carnelian Cube* with de Camp, Gnome Press's first book in 1948) and translator, he was a famous Civil War historian and naval expert. L. Sprague de Camp, although actually Philadelphia-oriented, was a regular Hydra attendee and close friend and collaborator with Fletcher. Sprague was tall, emaculately dressed, aristocratically distinguished with his dark hair and spade beard. Together they were a formidable pair, dedicated to naval affairs. Fletcher kept glass cabinets full of miniature naval warships and he and Sprague played seriously at war games. Other out-of-towners were Cyril Kornbluth, Dick Wilson, H. Beam Piper, and Ozzie Train.

L. Jerome Stanton was sort of the Chief Operations Officer of Hydra. For years he kept things moving as club chairman. He was also Associate Editor for Street & Smith's *Astounding*. For all of our club's years of existence. I can recall John W. Campbell, Jr.. attending only our special events. Jav Stanton was

frequently sending out special communiques. An example:

"NOTICE NOTICE NOTICE The next meeting of the Hydra Club will take place in the Hayes Studio, at 40 East 9th Street, NYC, beginning at 8:00PM Saturday, February 25th. This is the second of two experimental meetings conducted to determine the desirability of meeting in such rooms as we engaged for the February 4th meeting, and the coming one. Members are urged to attend the Saturday affair with open minds, and to bring such refreshments as they deem fit and desirable. Reinforcements to the stock of drinkables can doubtless be obtained in the neighborhood, but it will be well to arrive with at least a minimum stock of potables to start the evening. Just come in the hall, push the bell marked 'J. Hayes' with your elbow (your hands will be full, of course), and you will find yourself in the Hydran midst. -- Undoubtedly, Jay Stanton, Chairman." (I seem to remember Jean Hayes a student at NYU and the 'studio' her apartment in the Village.)

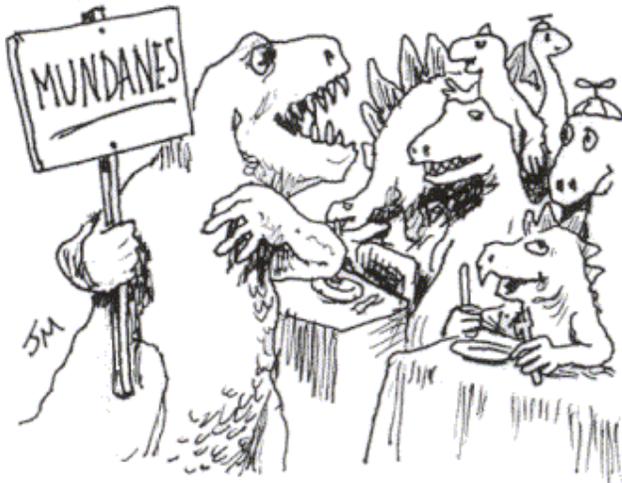
Jay (along with Larry T. Shaw) was also co-editor of the *Hydra Club Bulletin*, which was projected to be published as a quarterly. Volume One, Number One, dated March 1950, was ten printed pages and gave information, news and Hydra gossip. I have that issue, and for all I can recall, it was the only one printed.

At first, meetings were held at the Pohls' Grove Street apartment, but the membership quickly became much too large for it. The Pratts became our salvation. Later meetings were held at Basil Davenport's place, which was even larger. The spectacular view of the Empire State Building, its tower brightly lit at night and easily glimpsed through one of his huge windows, always impressed me. Basil Davenport himself also always impressed me with his bear-like frame, round pink face and cheerful disposition. He completely fit the part of an editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club, erudite and with a booming voice when he spoke in his sort of English accent. We had great pride in him, as he himself also had, for his efforts to get science fiction into the Book Club -- his first real triumph was getting an Arthur C. Clarke novel picked as an alternate selection.

Other meeting places, after the wonderful early evenings at the Pratts, depended on who was available with a large enough place. I came in one evening from upstate for a Hydra meeting at the apartment of Andy and Debi Crawford, also in the Village. Debi Crawford, then club secretary, was hostess, as she frequently was in the final years. Hans Stefan Santesson, magazine and book editor, was the self-appointed greeter and host for out-of-town visitors such as Arthur C. Clarke. I remember Olga and Willy Ley being there because I asked him if he would get to Potsdam, where Ruth and I came to live, for one of his lectures at State College. The day came that he did. The visit was extremely pleasant, for "Villy" was a very pleasant, dynamic man -- and not long afterwards we were shocked to learn of his death.

One Hydra evening that was especially dramatic was the night when Alfred Bester stalked out, greatly disturbed. The subject under discussion was the proposed Fantasy Writers Guild, which was to be formed by Hydra. Alfie was very supportive, because he envisioned the Guild as a union to fight for authors' rights. When he realized that was *not* the intent, and that it was meant to be a more instructional, educational, and technical co-operative organization, he emphatically objected to its undertaking for such simple, social goals. He was passionate about it: writers *needed* a union, he declared! So, if the FWG wouldn't be one, he was o-u-t, out. Goodbye, he said, and abruptly departed -- he went to Europe and stayed there a long time. As for the FWG, it never solidified into anything. But perhaps it had, however, struck a spark. Much later, not part of Hydra, the Science Fiction Writers of America was formed. So, actually, Alfie did triumph in the end.

A Hydra Club meeting was always a party, but there were special ones, too, mostly around the Christmas Holiday Season. Harry Harrison or Lester del Rey were usually in charge of our year-end affairs. The biggest and best, I recall, was held (I believe) in 1949 in the ballroom of the Gramercy Park



Hotel, an old line, sedate place. Jay Stanton was Commentator/Master of Ceremonies and the feature of the evening was a humorous one-act play written mostly by Judy Merrill. One detail sticks in my mind -- big Sam Merwin acting as Hugo Gernsback. (I also remember E. E. "Doc" Smith as a picketer with a cardboard sign reading: UP URANUS, a whimsical grin on his face -- but this memory could be from another time and another place.) There was plenty of theatrical talent in Hydra and that year; the performers included Ted Sturgeon and Jay on guitars, Mary Mair (Mrs. Ted) singing, Phil and Mort Klass, pianist Milton A. Rothman, and comments from Fletcher and Willy. I was in the play with many others but the parts have been forgotten by me. Well-known out-of-

towners came, and fans from the Queens Science Fiction League chapter actually paid admission, so the club treasury might even have broken even.

The most ambitious affair which the Hydra Club organized, later joined by members of ESFA, was the famous New York Science Fiction Conference of July 1-3, 1950, sometimes known as the 'Hydracon'. Hydra had thought of the idea, and in order not to offend, invited ESFA members to participate. As it was, Hydra was criticized as attempting to undercut that year's Worldcon, which was being held during the Labor Day weekend on the west coast after a New York bid to host the 1950 Worldcon had failed. The purpose of the Hydracon was "to discuss the problems of literary and publishing aspects of science fiction." Its site was the Henry Hudson Hotel at Columbus Circle. Over "300 authors, publishers, scientists, and interested spectators" attended. Celebrities Willy, Fletcher, and L. Sprague de Camp were featured speakers and the Hayden Planetarium gave a special showing of *Trip to the Moon*. The program was loaded with Hydra members: Judy, Sam Merwin, Jerry Bixby, Isaac Asimov, Harrison Smith (Publisher of *The Saturday Review of Literature*), Bea Mahaffey, Walter Bradbury (Doubleday), Groff Conklin, Frederick Fell, Robert Arthur, Dr. Tom Gardner, Dr. David H. Keller, Will F. Jenkins (Murray Leinster), and Phil Klass. The final Monday afternoon was a discussion of the "Procedure for the First Annual Science Fiction Literary Awards." The most exciting moments were the disturbances made by William S. Sykora (early ISA fan and Futurian hater) who protested the event as some kind of betrayal of fannish traditions, charging despicable commercialism. *Life* magazine covered the event and the spectacular result for the glory of all of fandom was published in the magazine -- a two-page spread of the panoramic picture of the assembled diners at the banquet.

I have that banquet picture somewhere. I also have that magazine in which it appeared. Now I must find them -- I want to see those faces again. I want to remember all those fan/pro friends who are gone. I want to rejoice that some are still with us today -- from the good old days of fifty years ago. 🌀

All illustrations by Joe Mayhew

