
THRILLING WONDER STORIES
PLANET STORIES
STARTLING STORIES
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ANALOG SF
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SCIENCE FANTASY
COSMOS SF AND FANTASY
SPACE STORIES
FANTASTIC STORIES OF IMAGINATION

JACK VANCE

PULPS

COVERS OF SHORT-STORIES AND SERIALIZED NOVELS

PUBLISHED IN US MAGAZINES

1945 - 1977

and :

The Early Fiction of Jack Vance, 1945-1950

Essay By Peter Close

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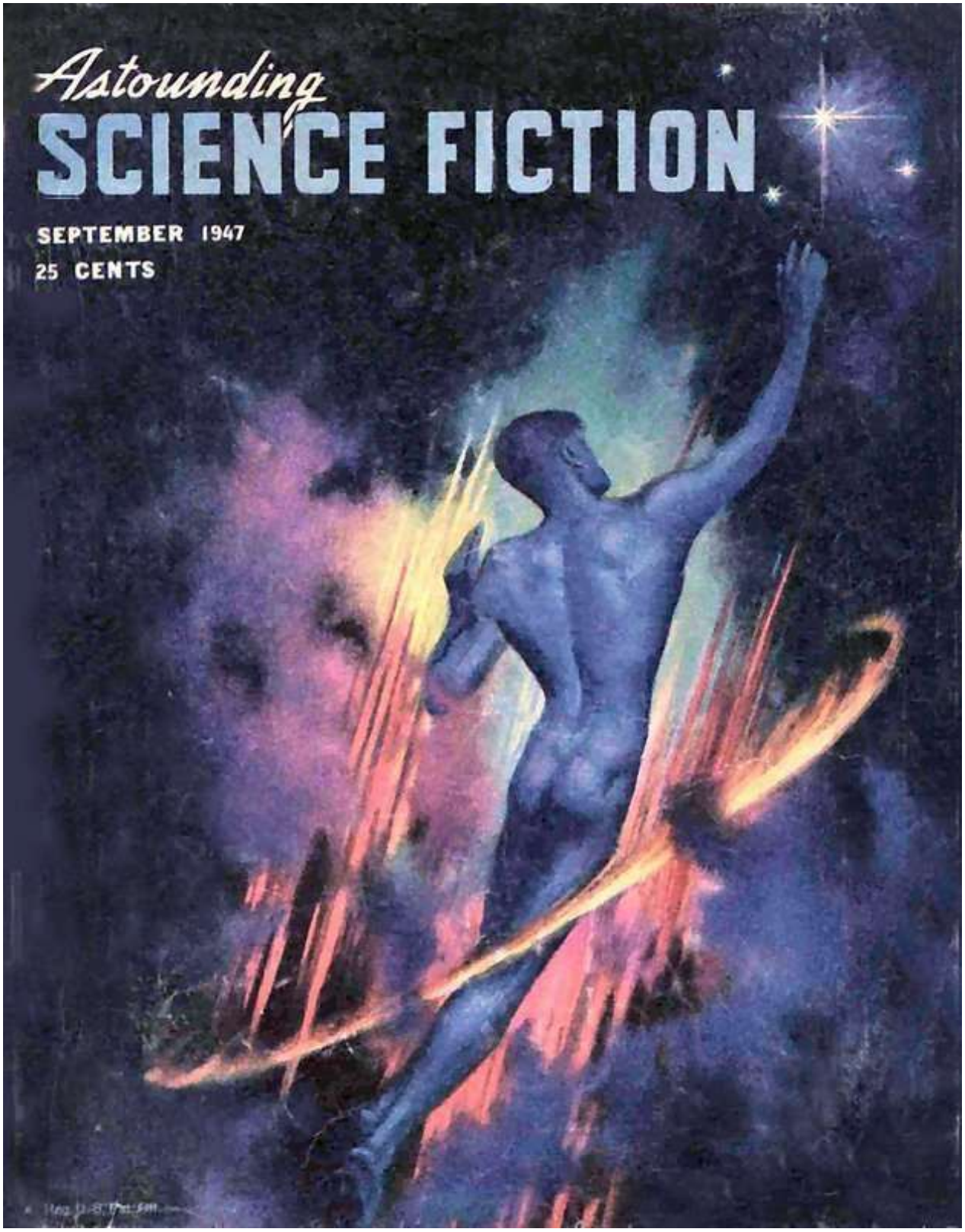

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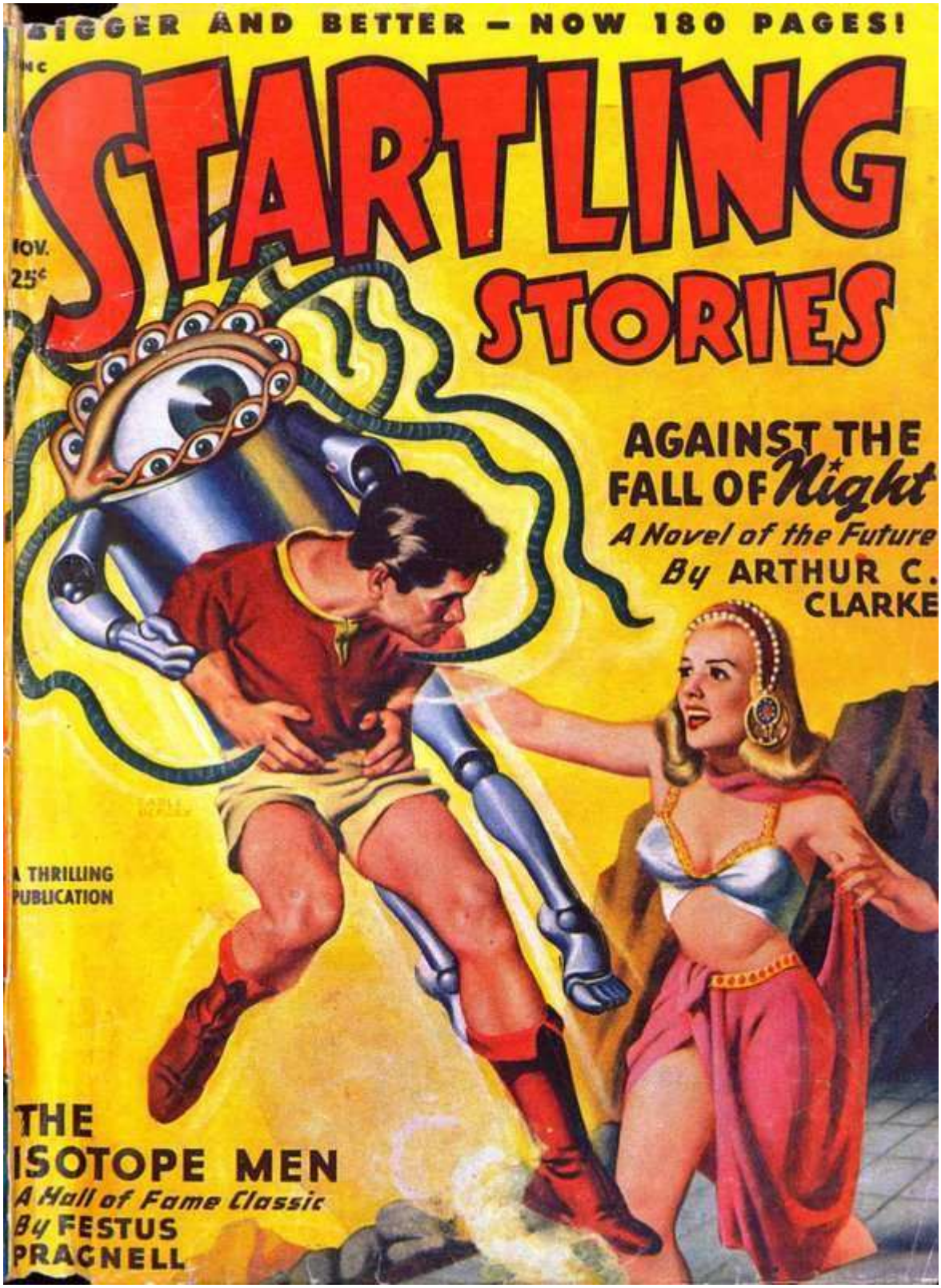

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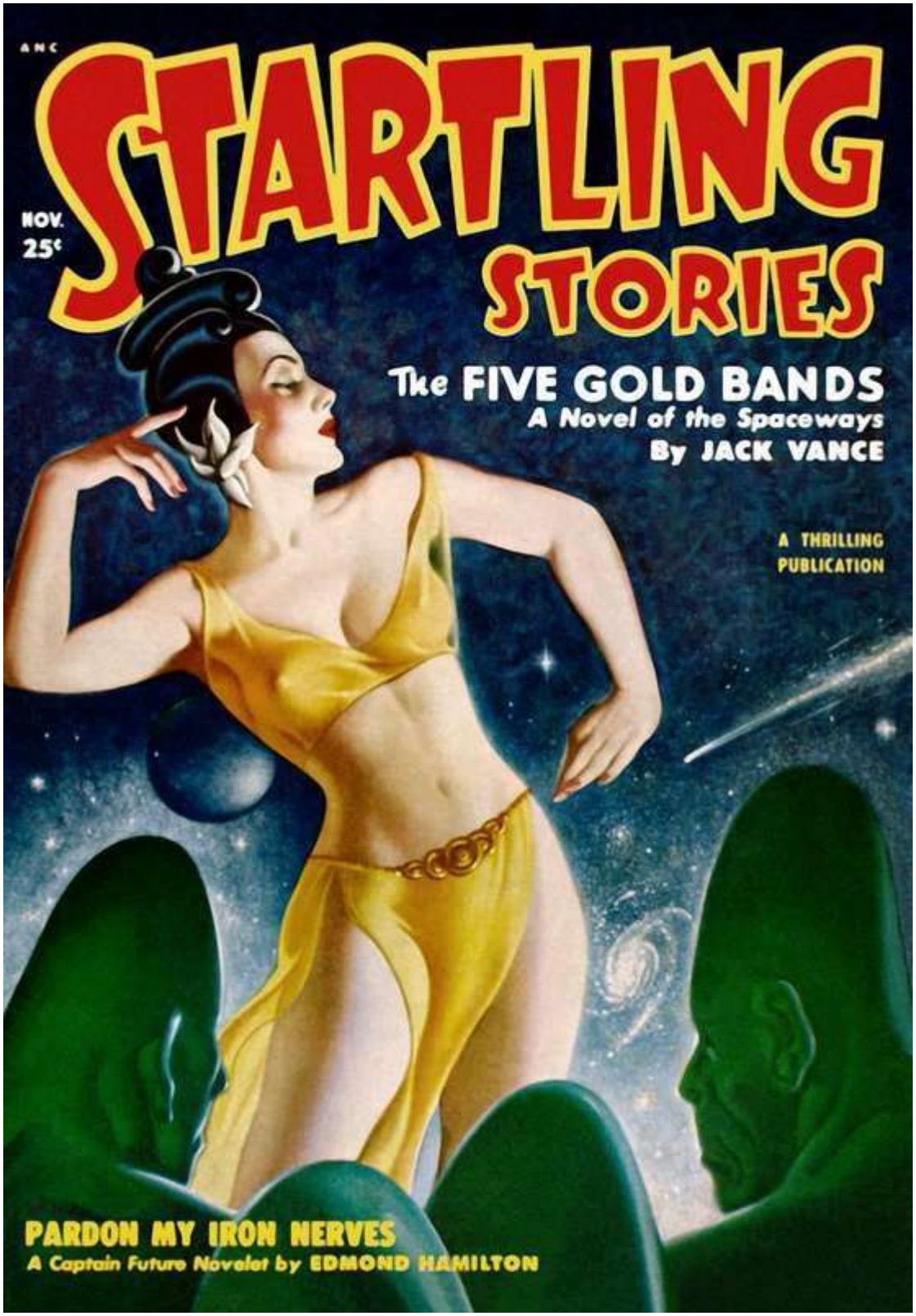

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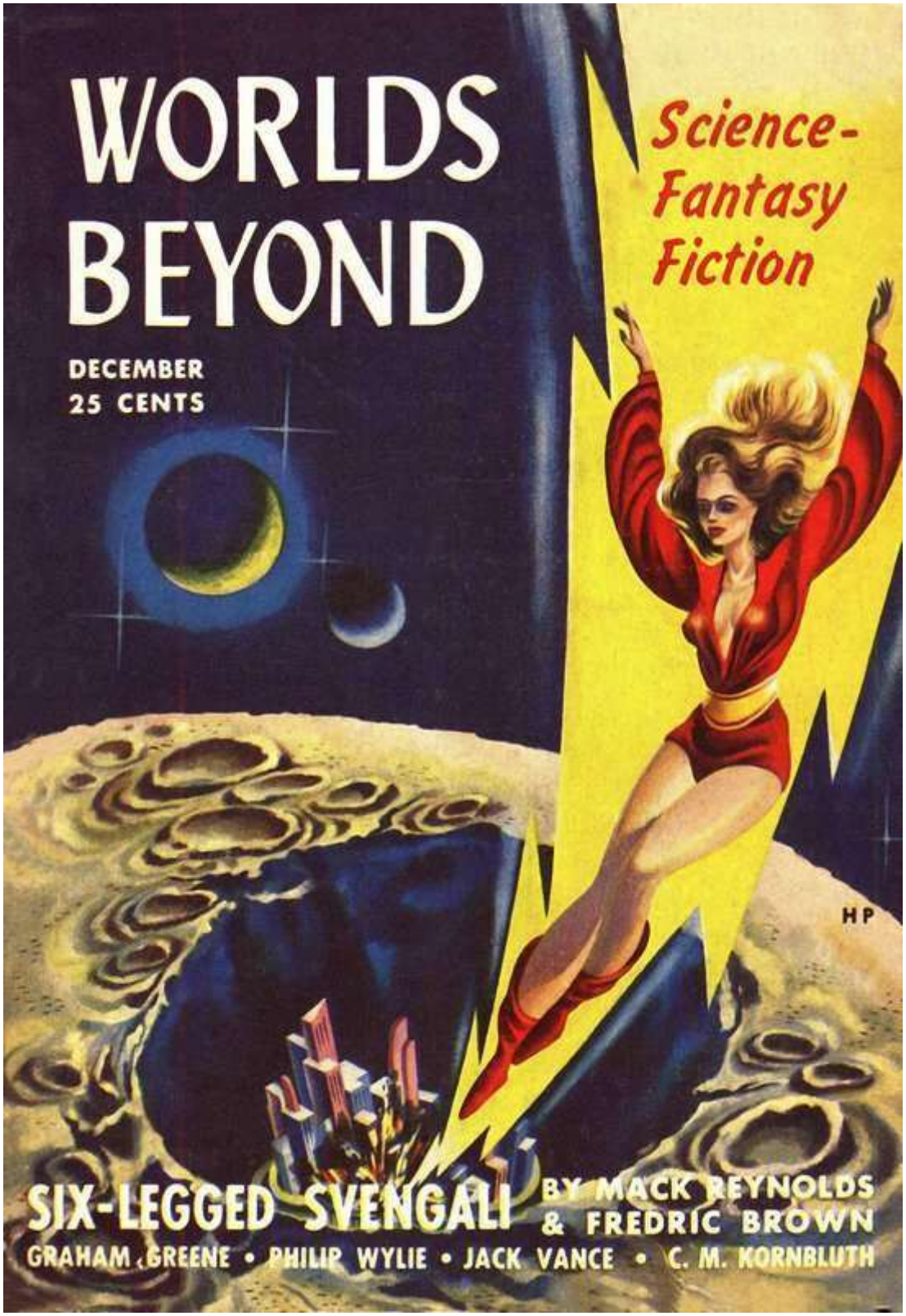

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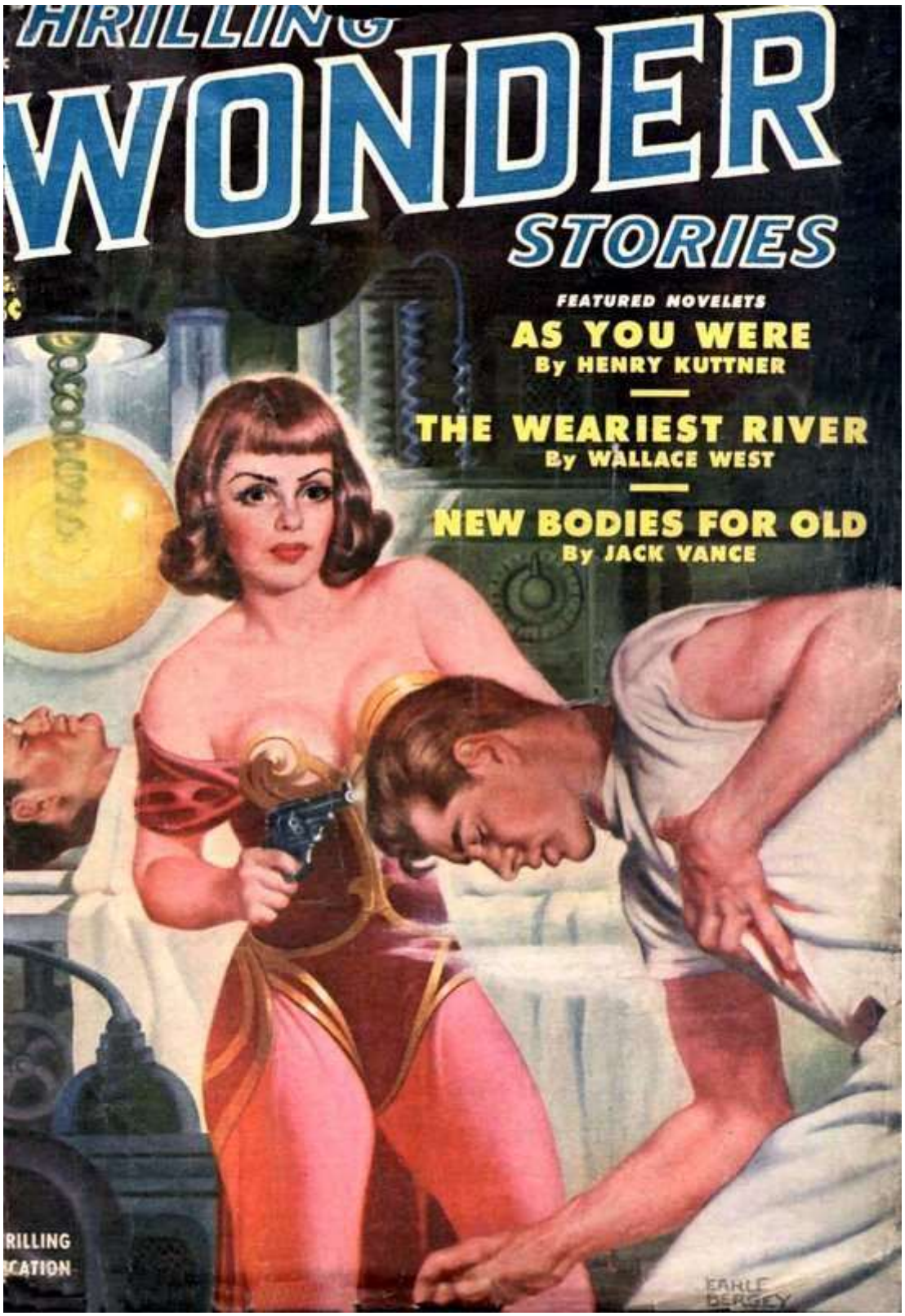

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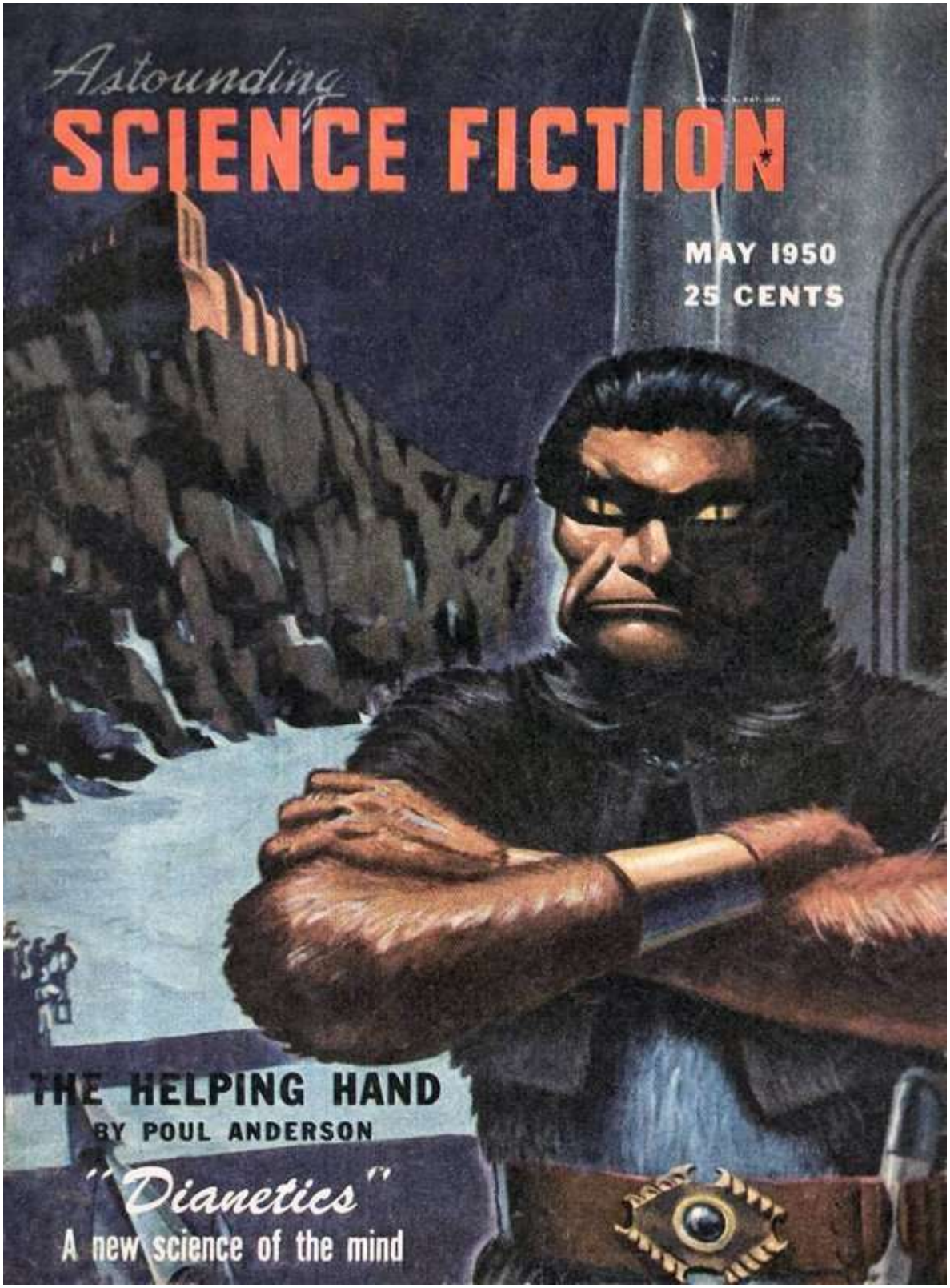

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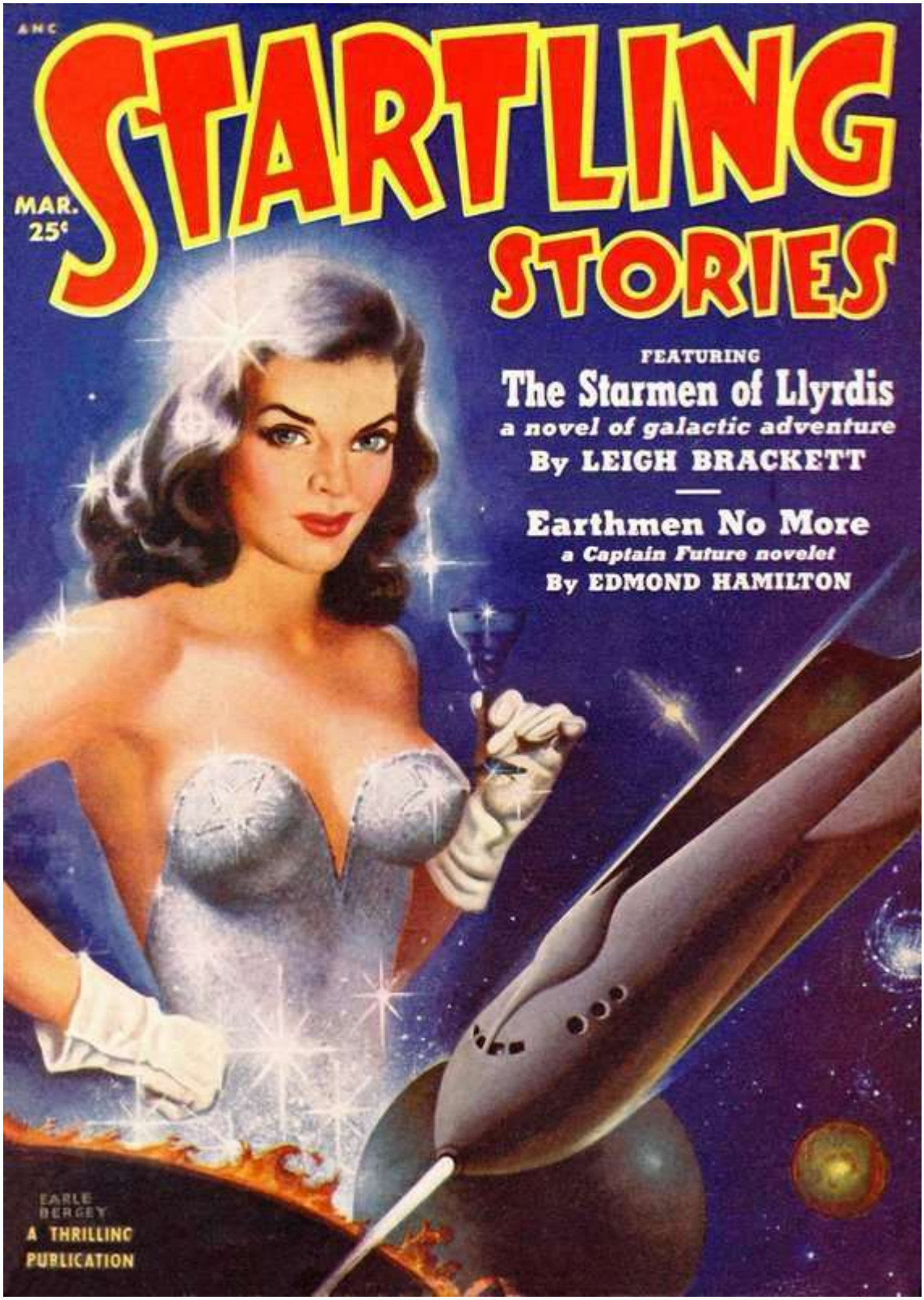

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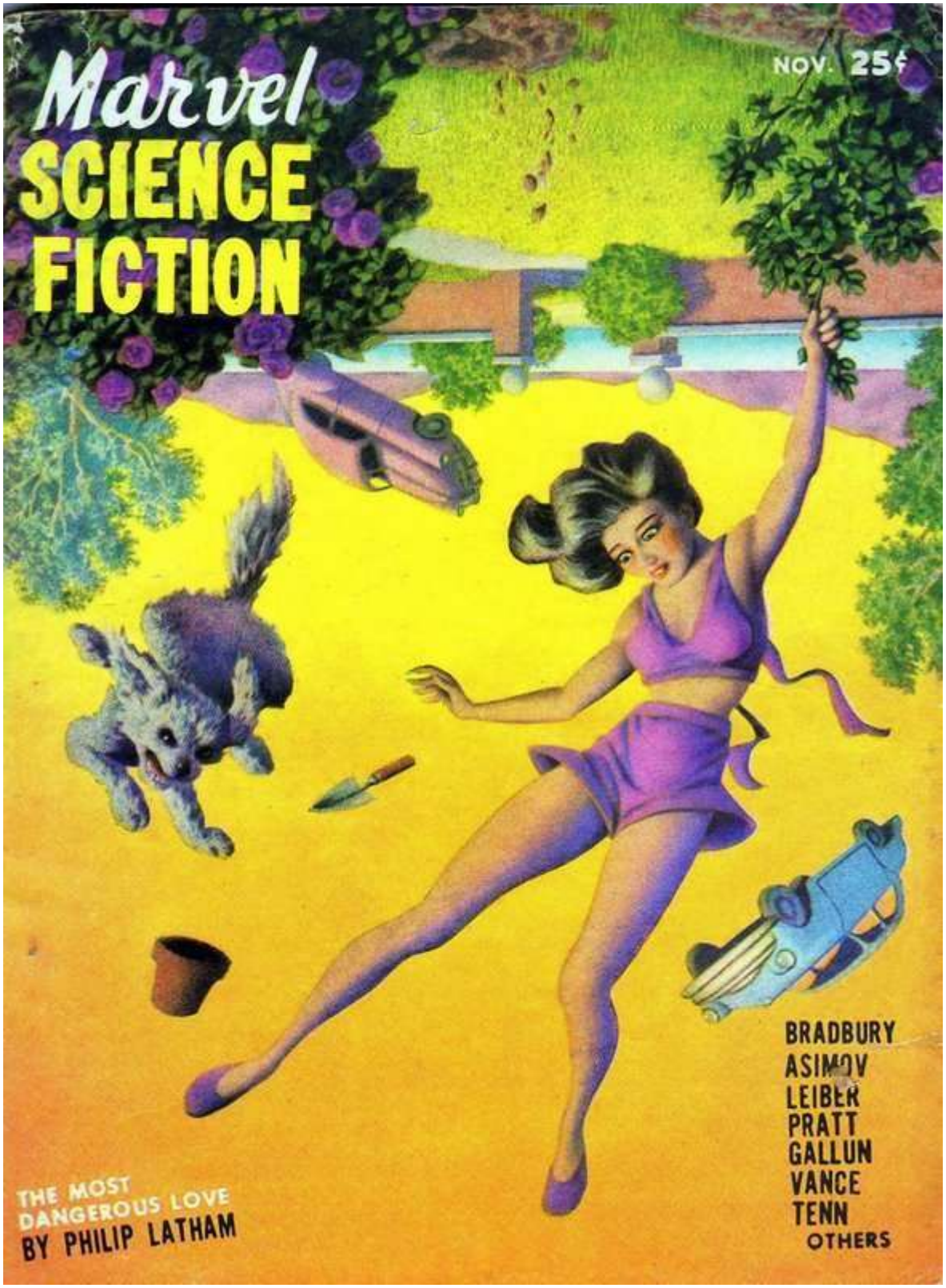

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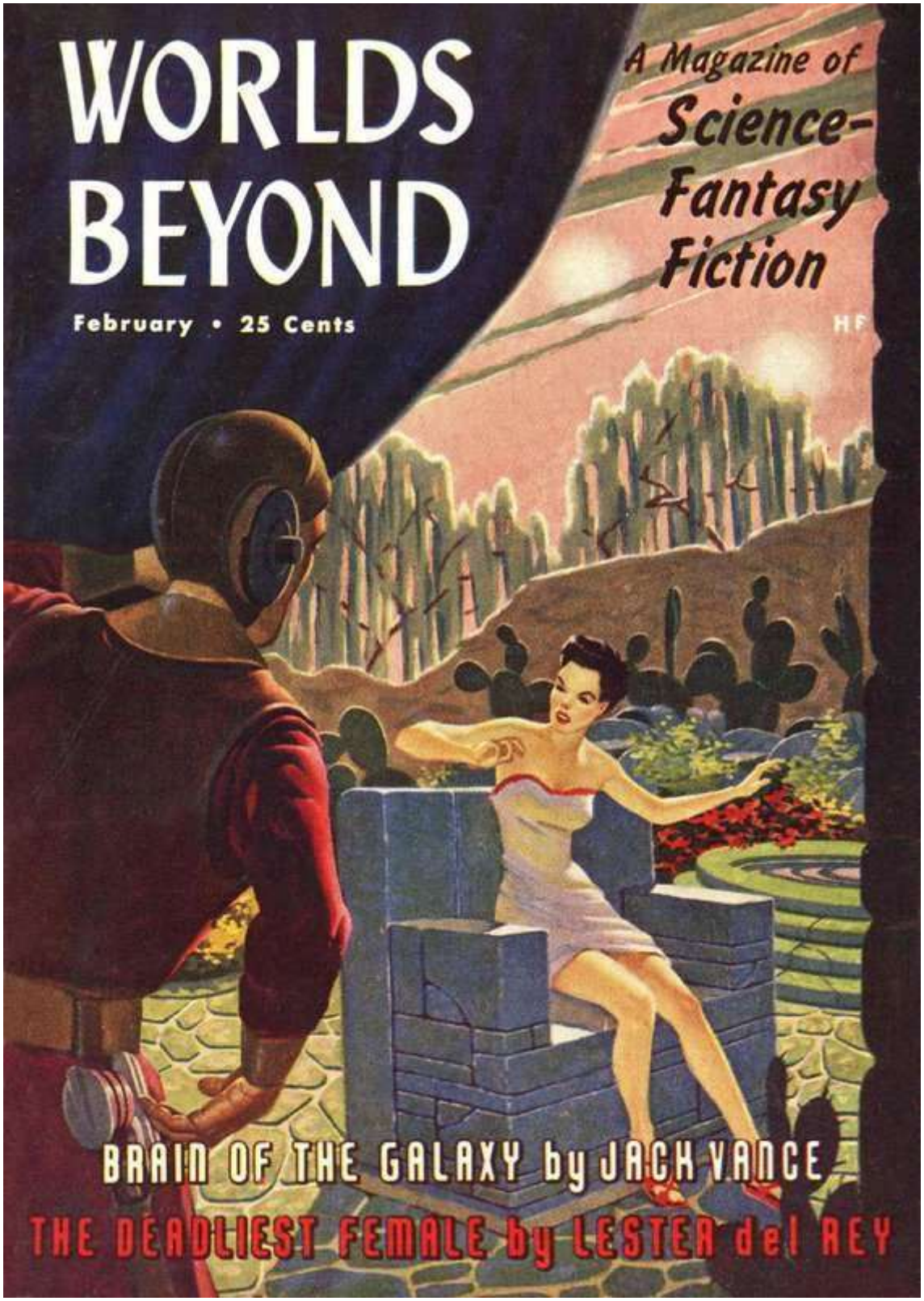

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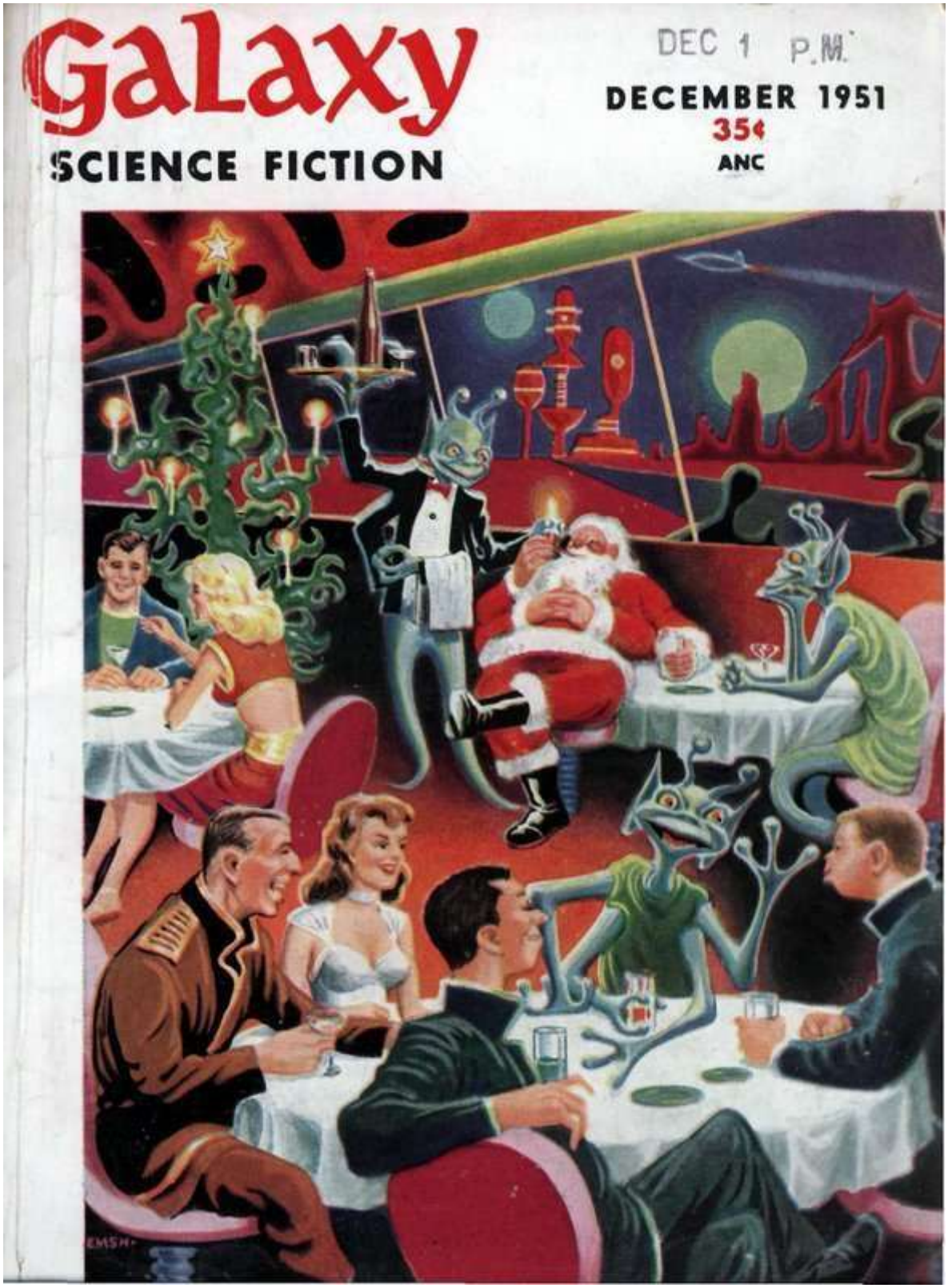

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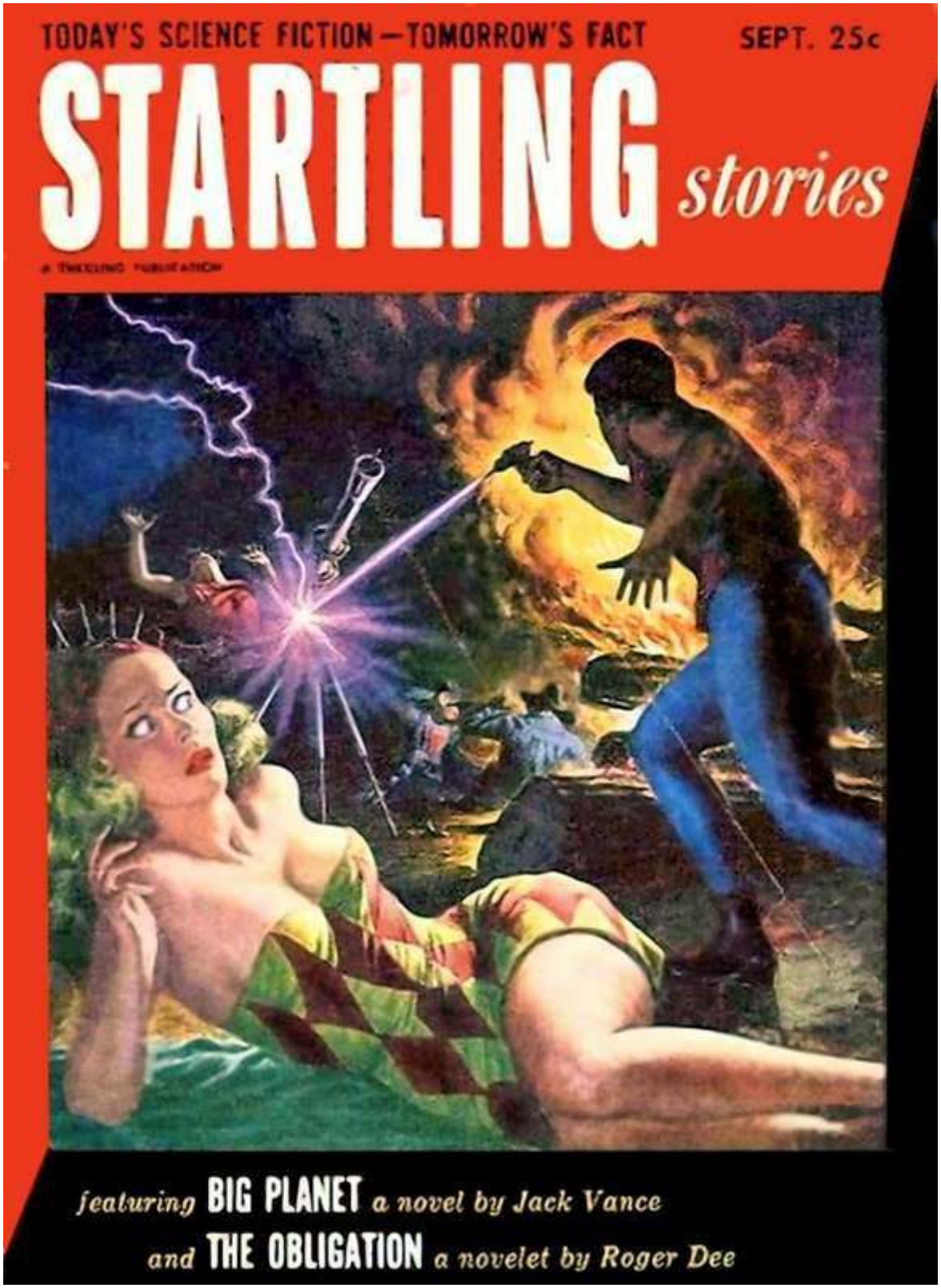

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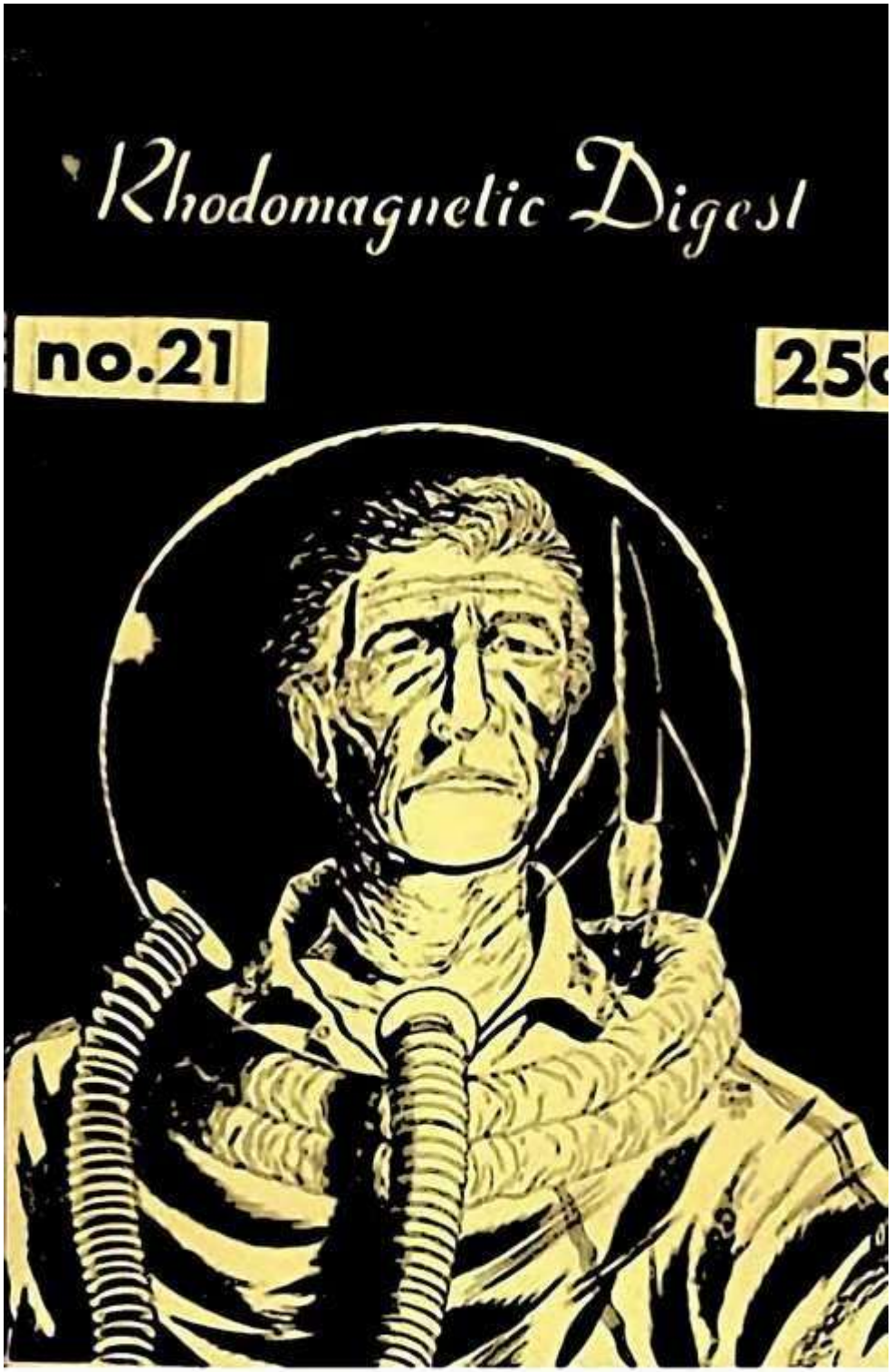

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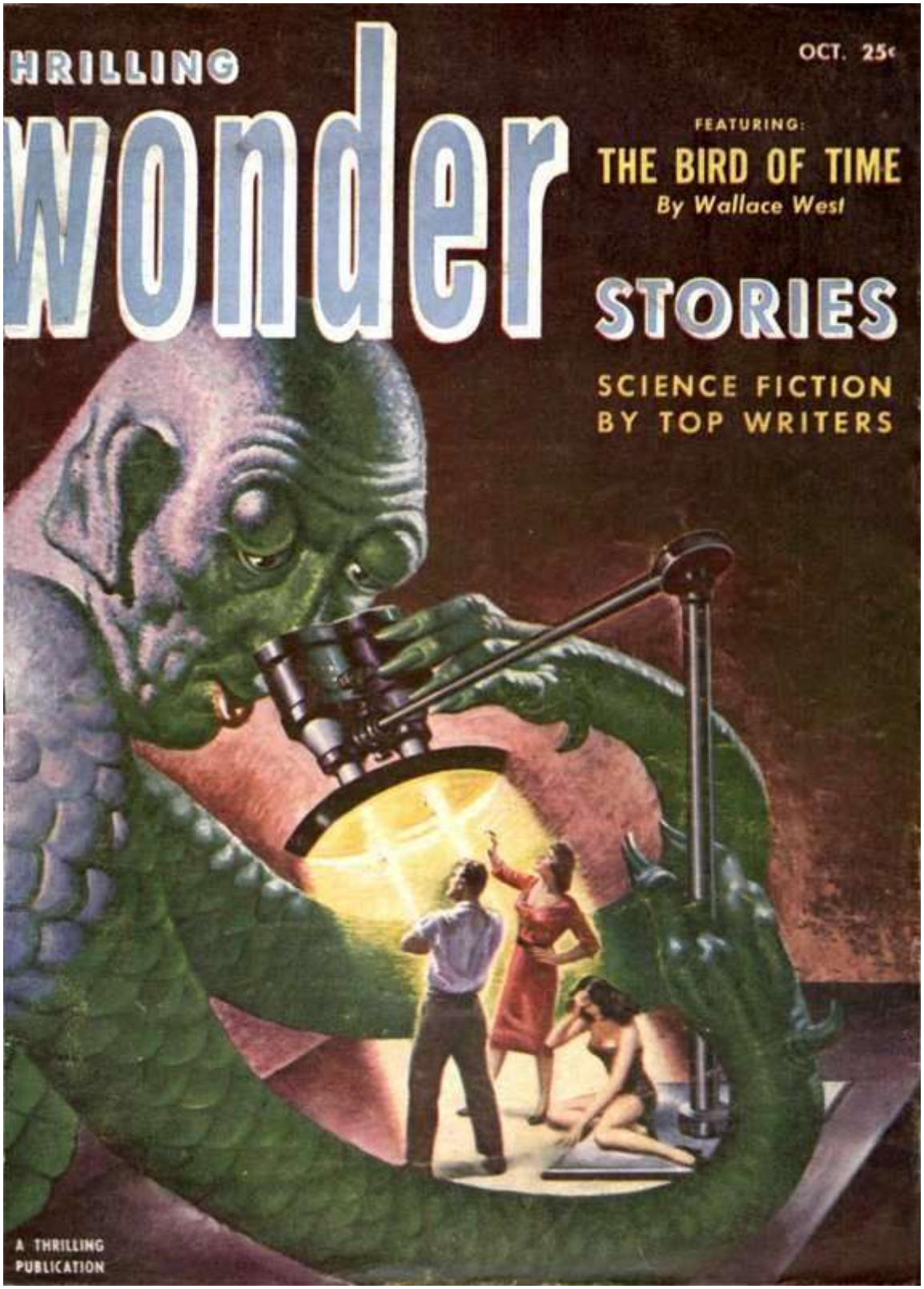

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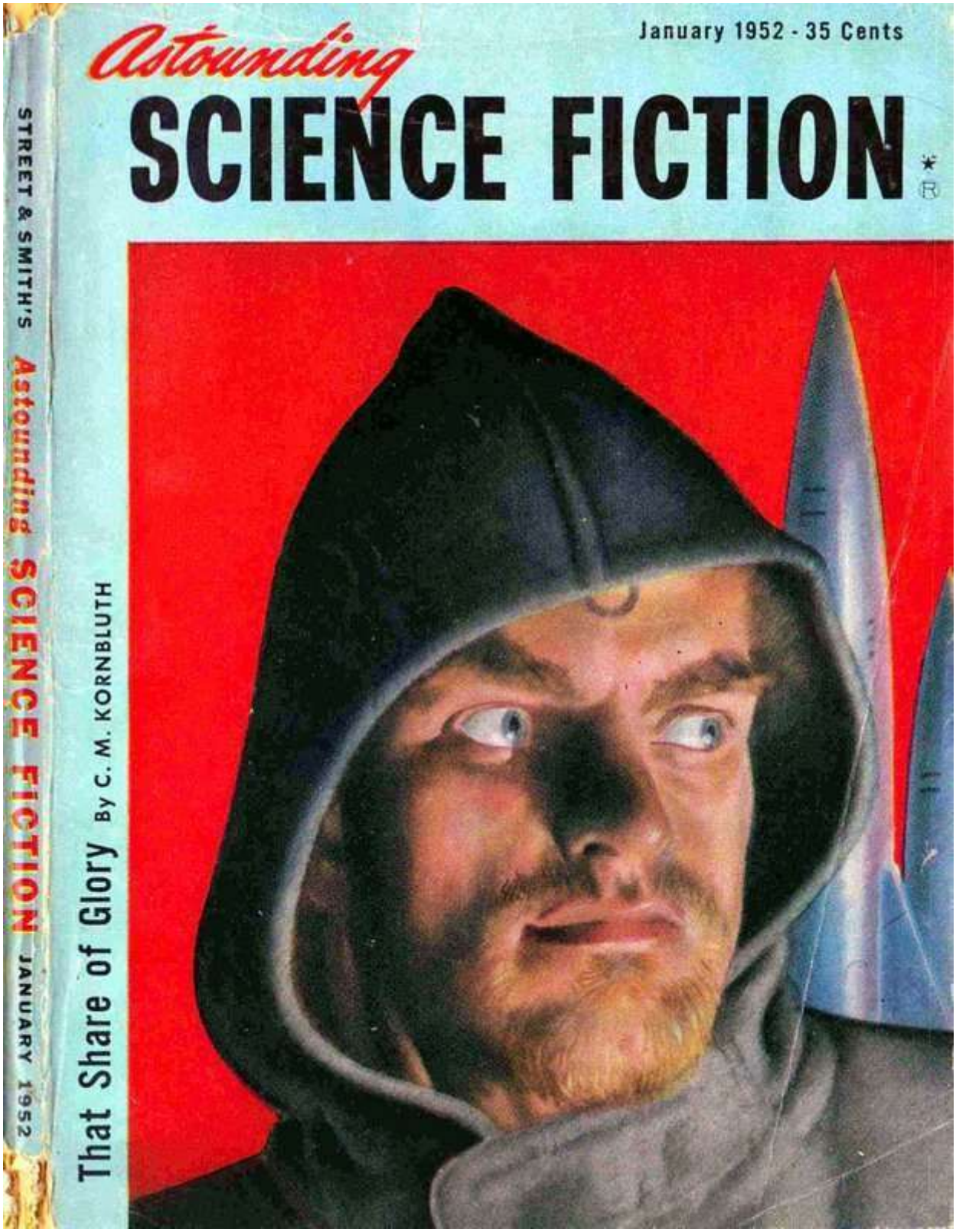

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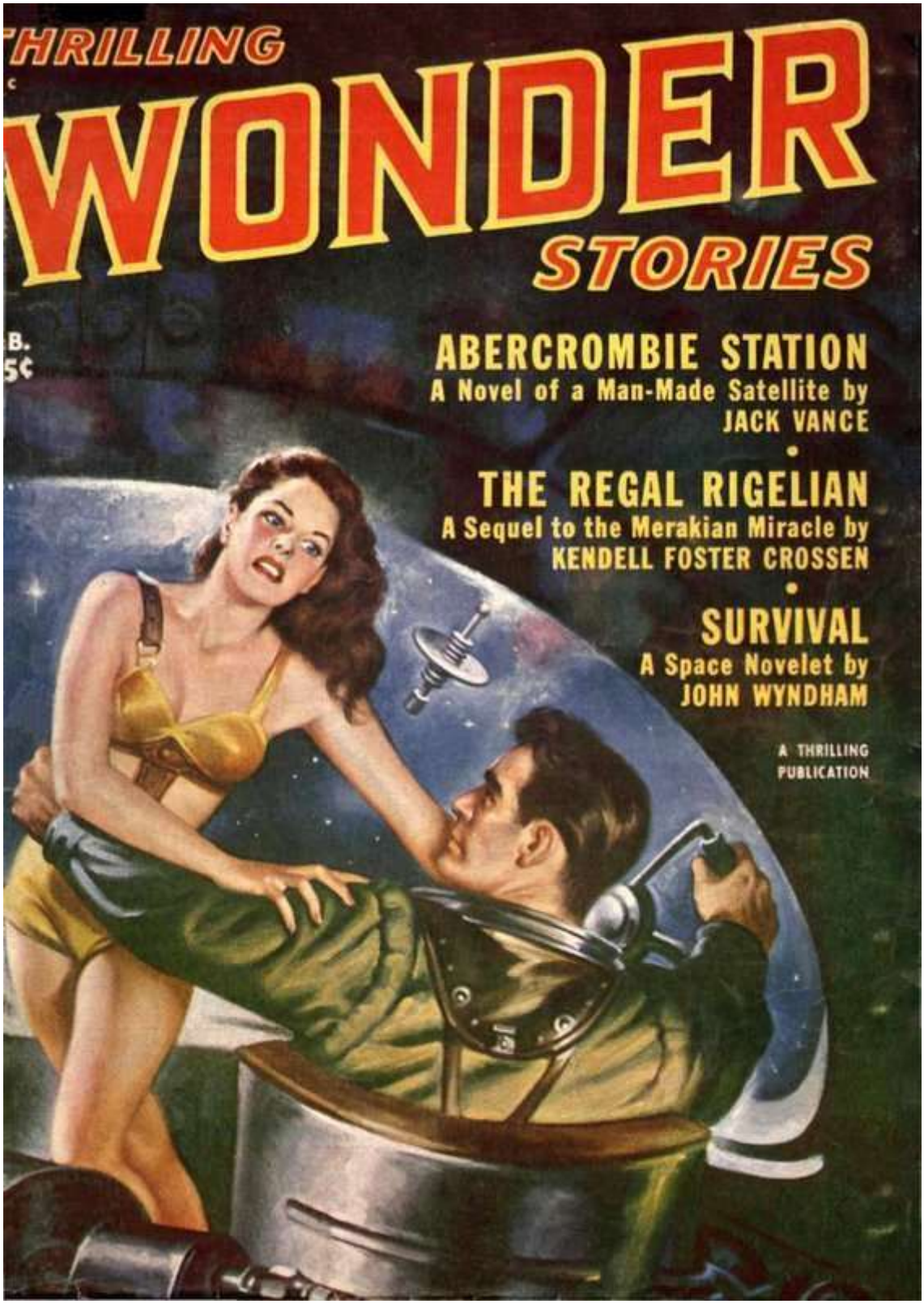

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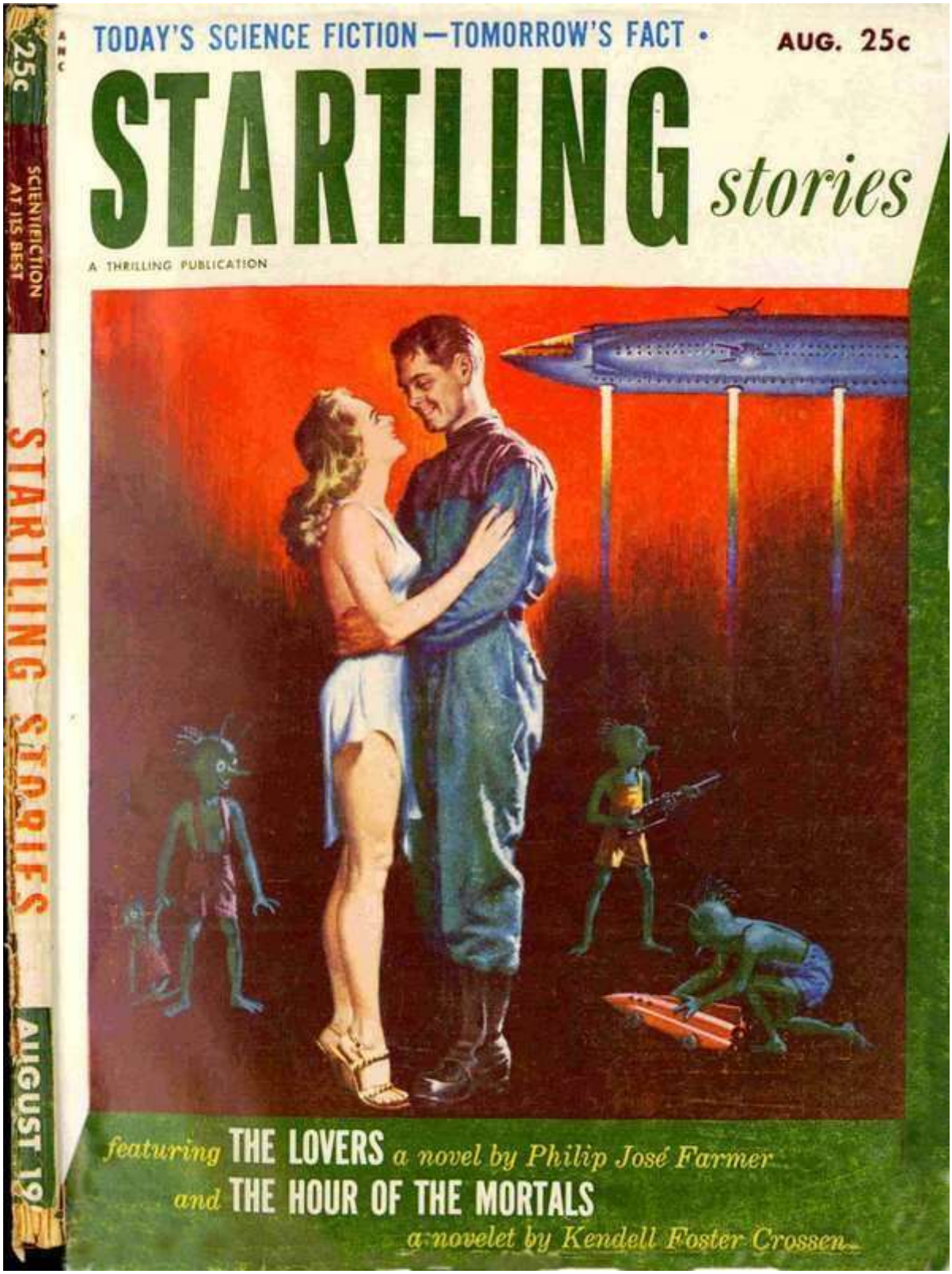

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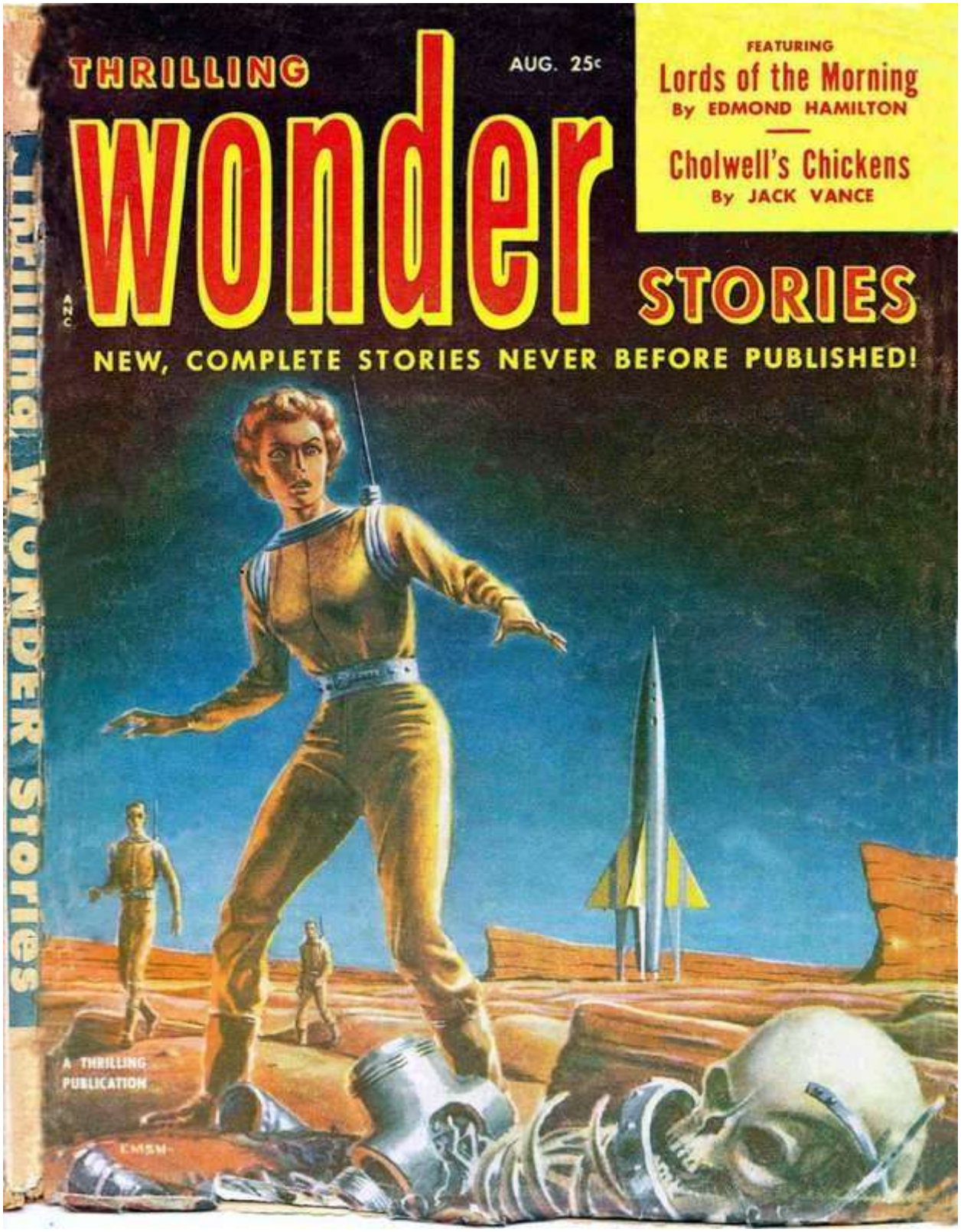

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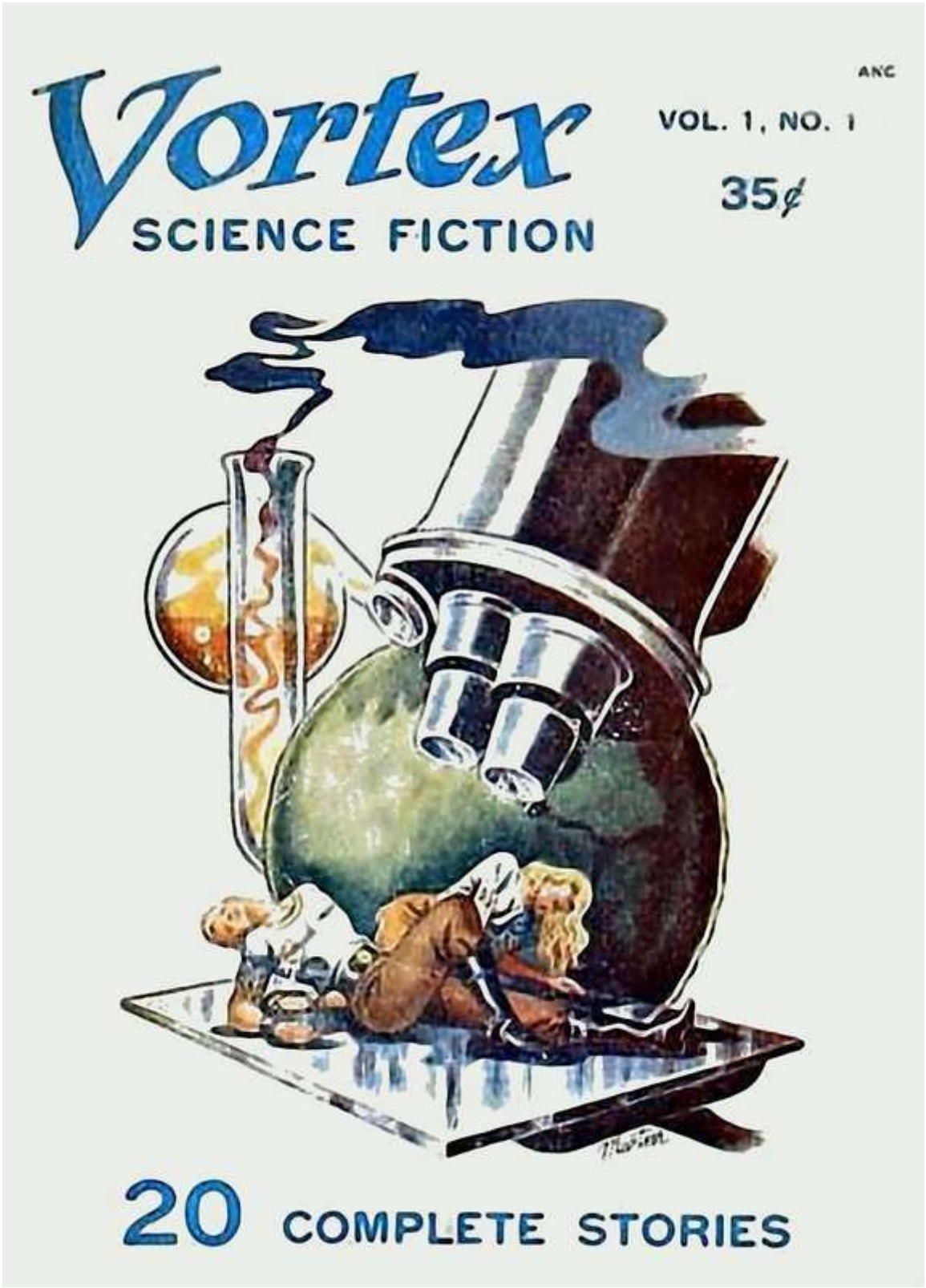

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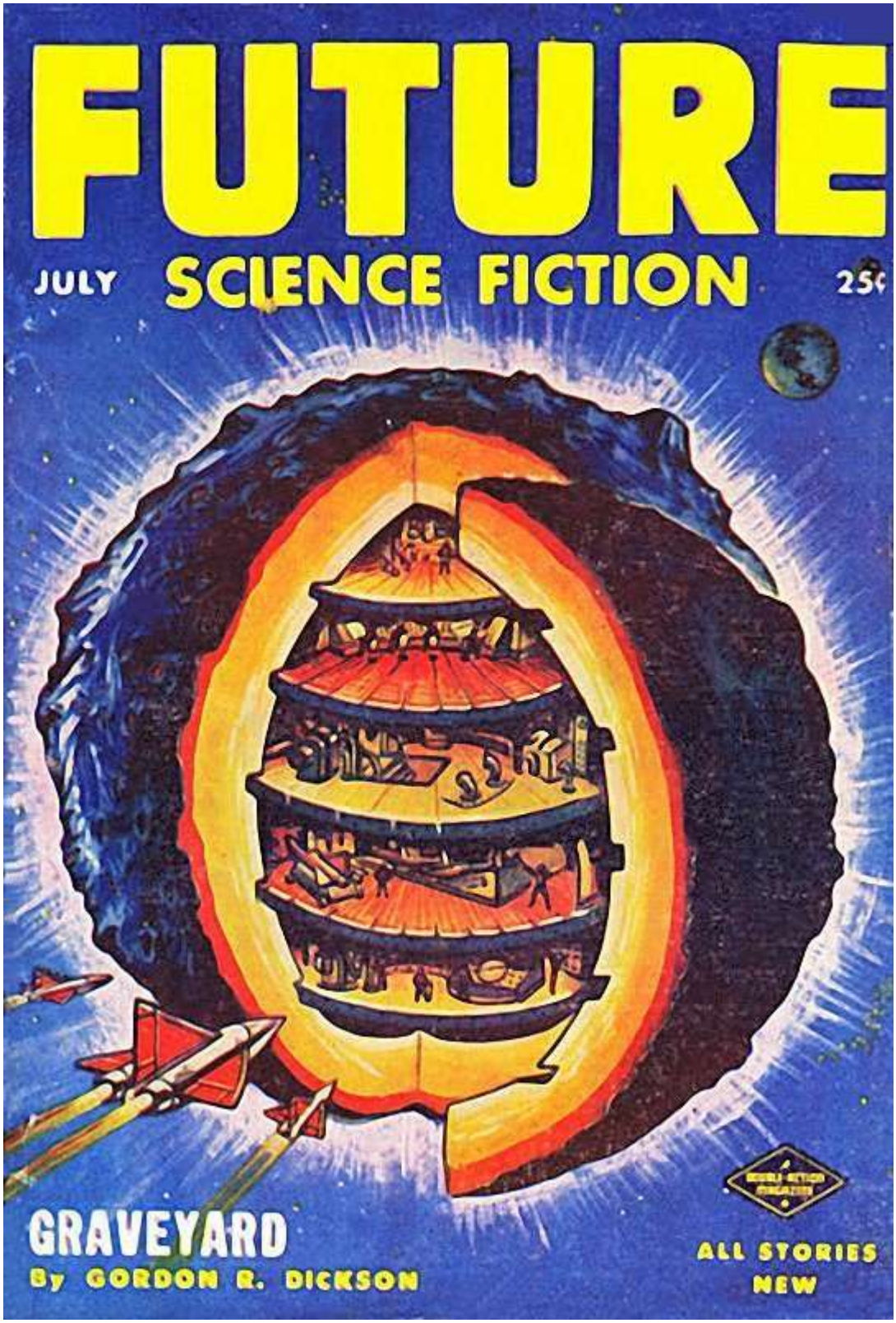

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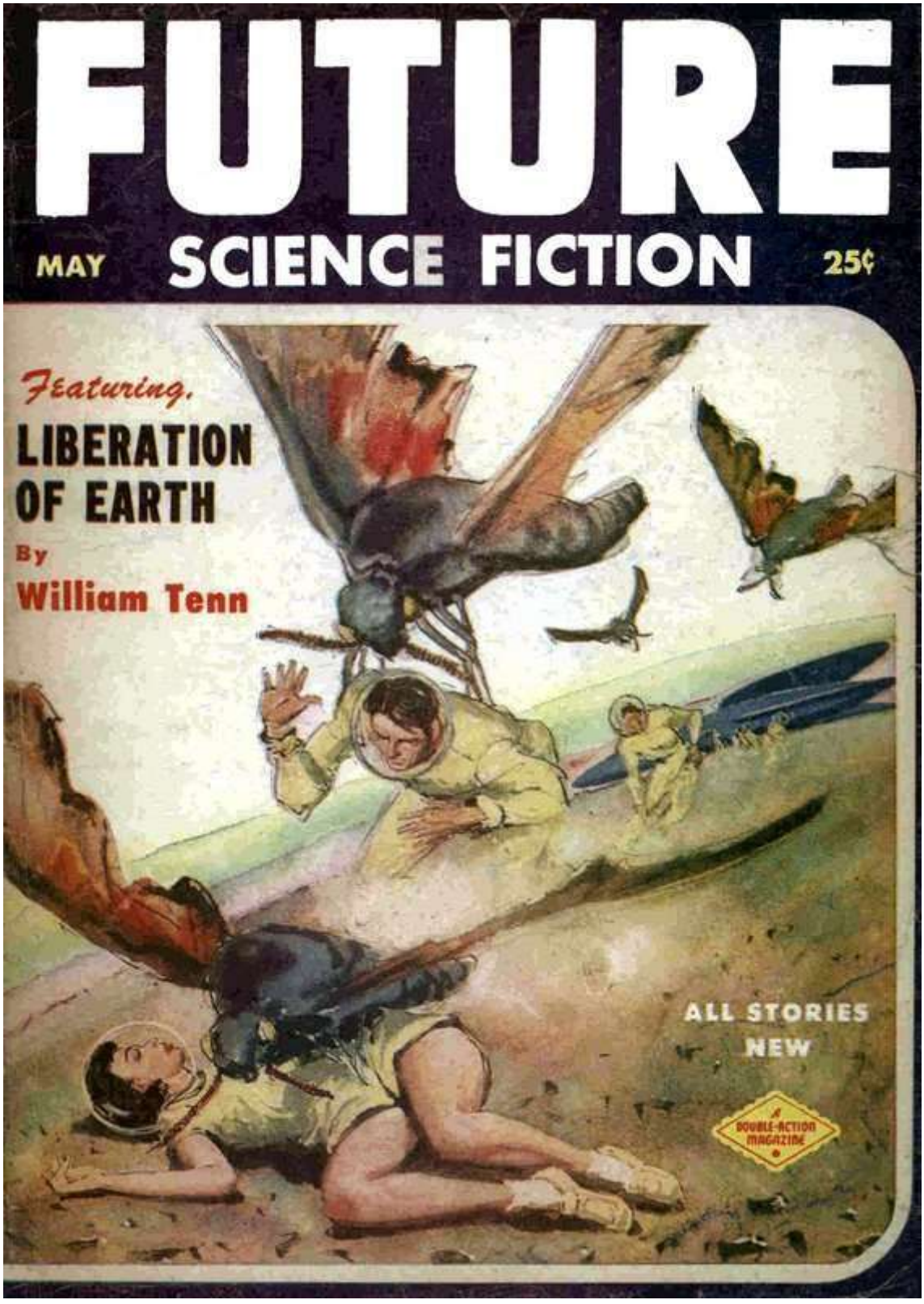

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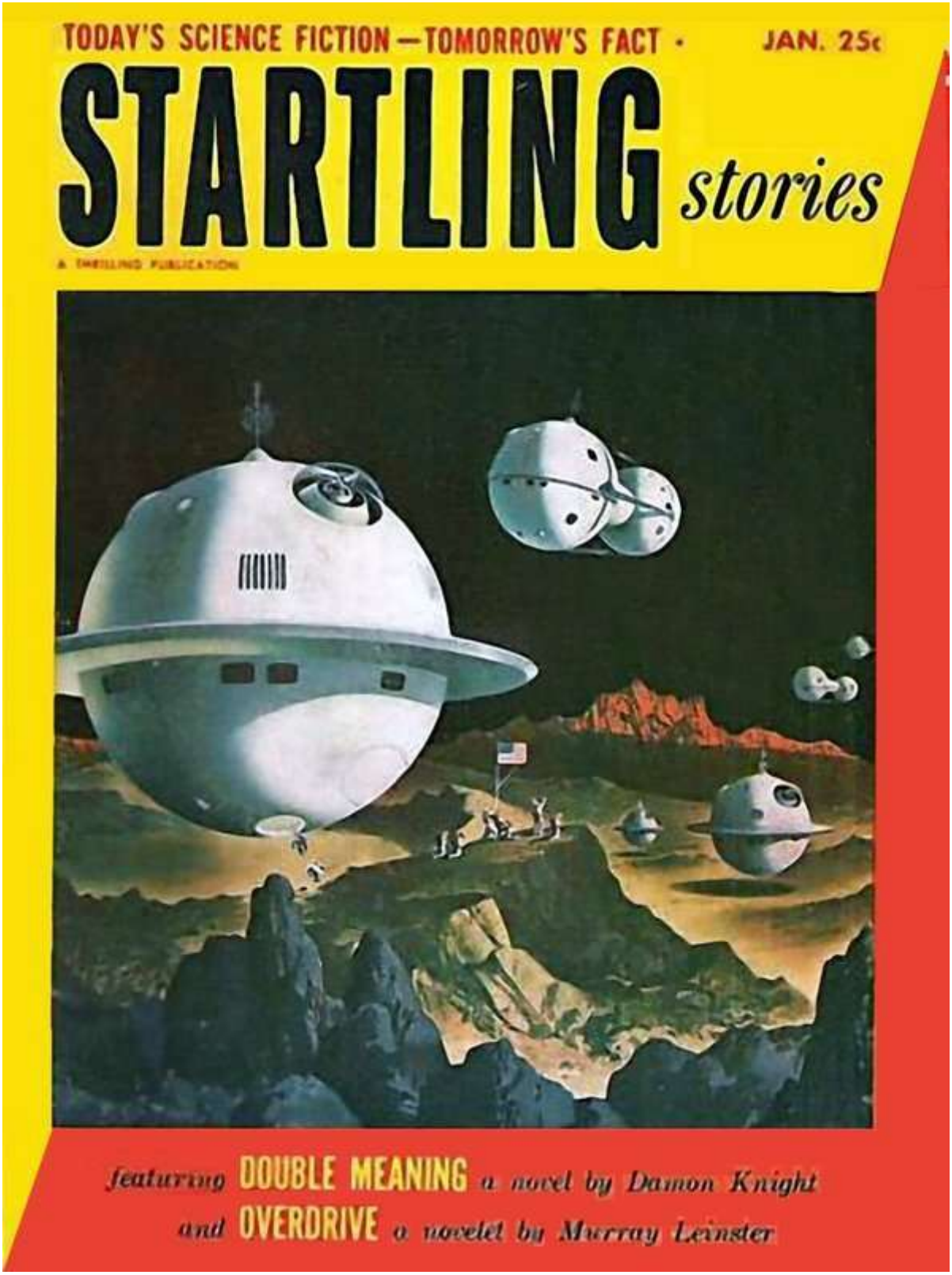

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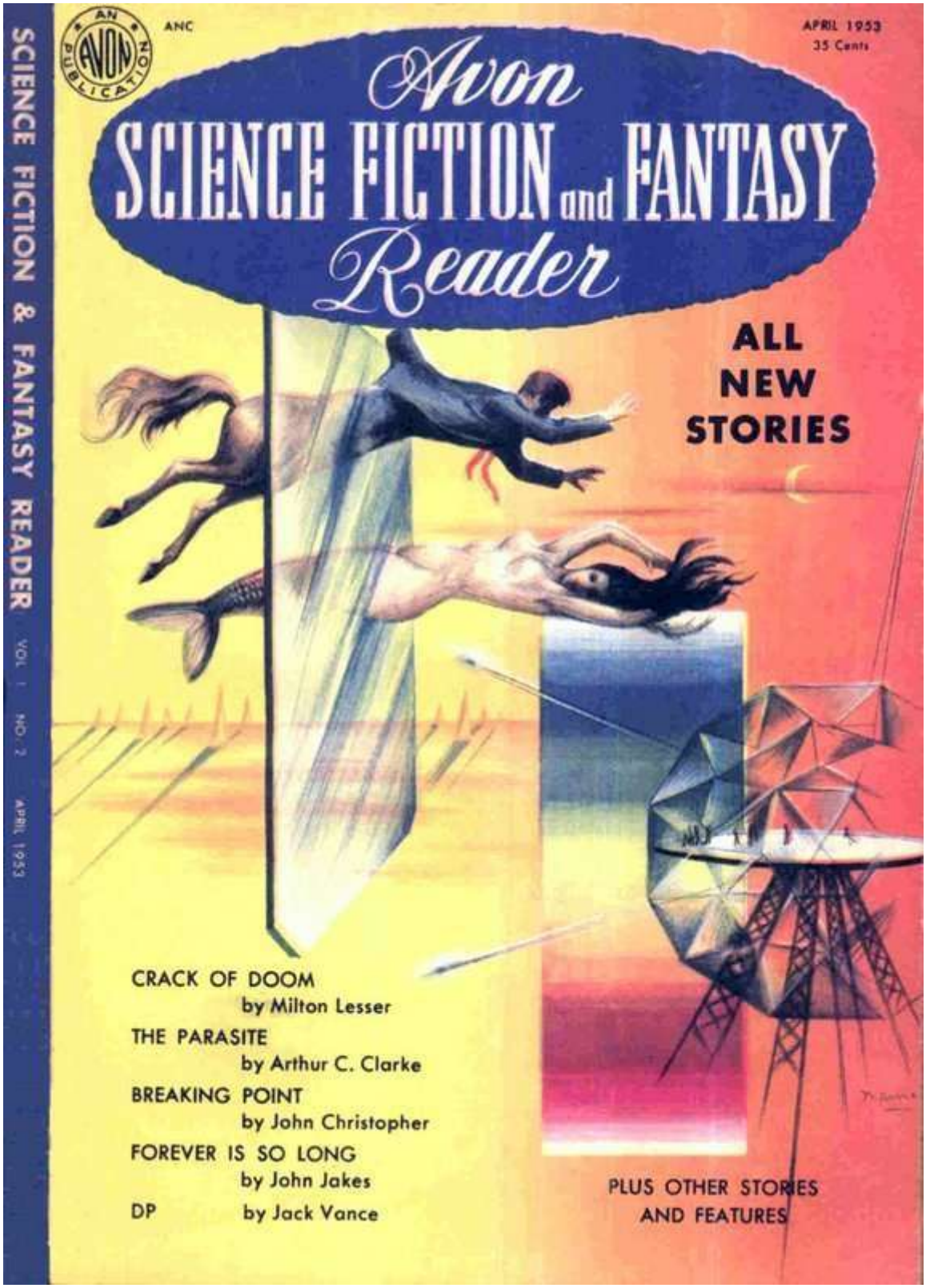

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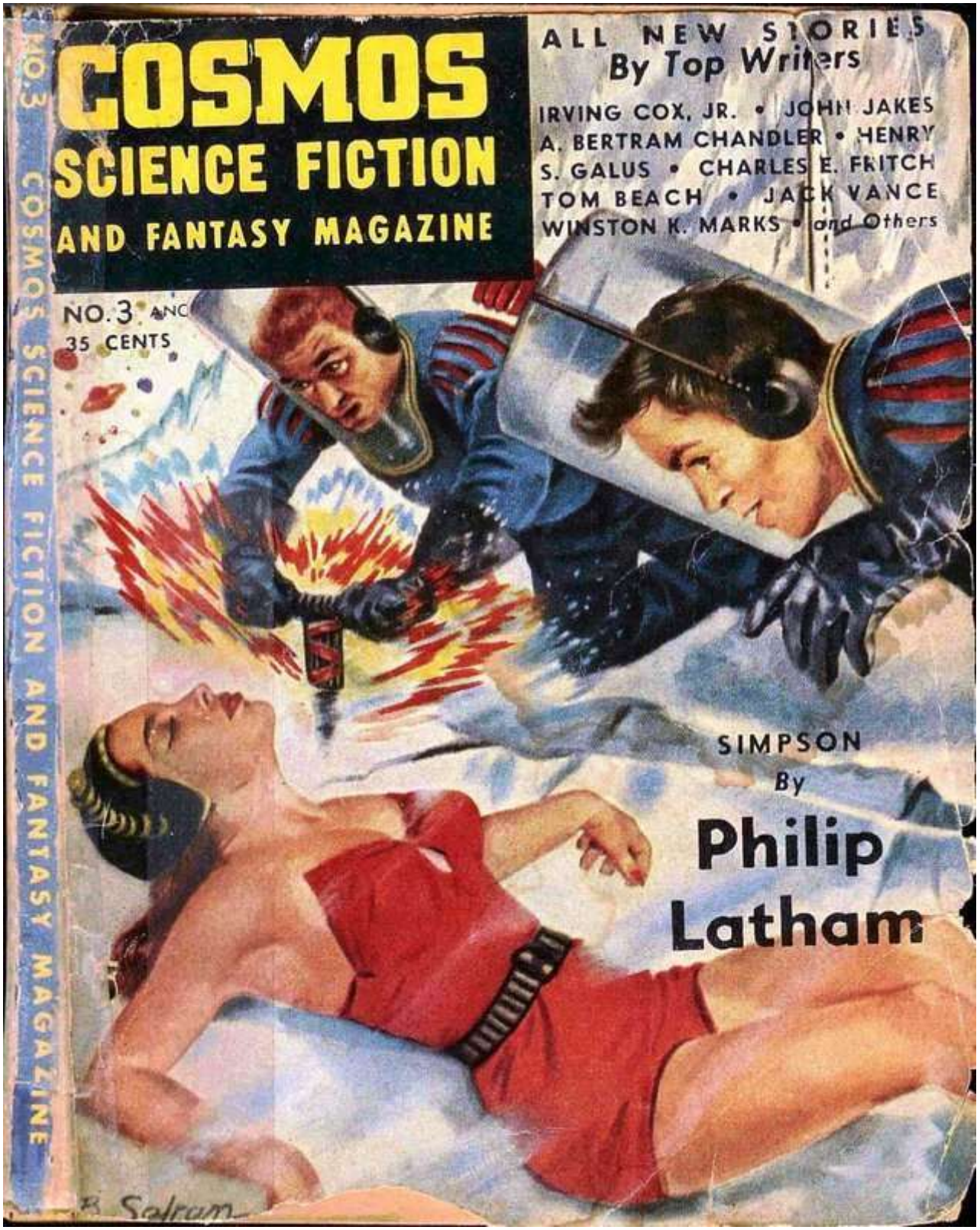

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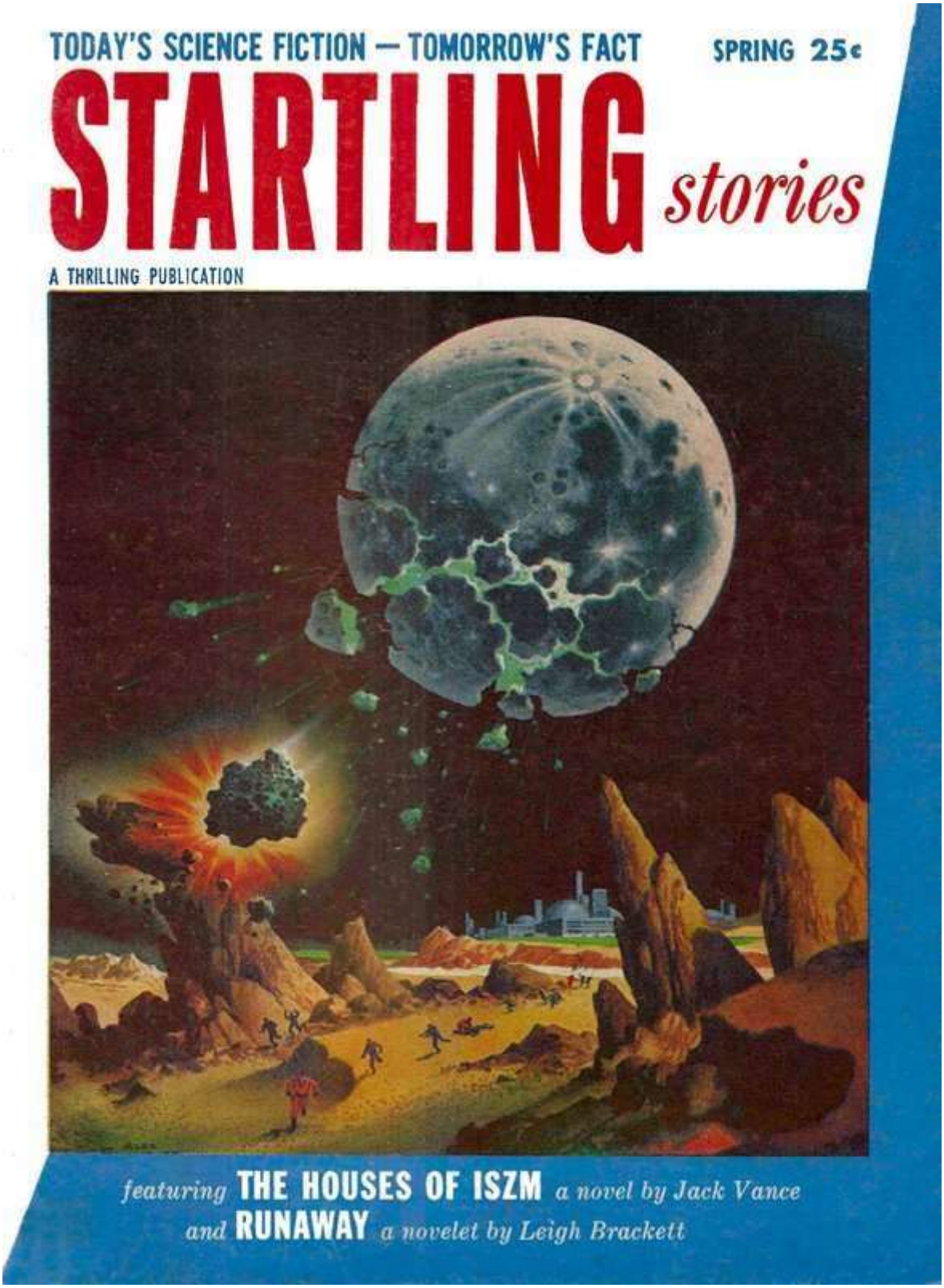

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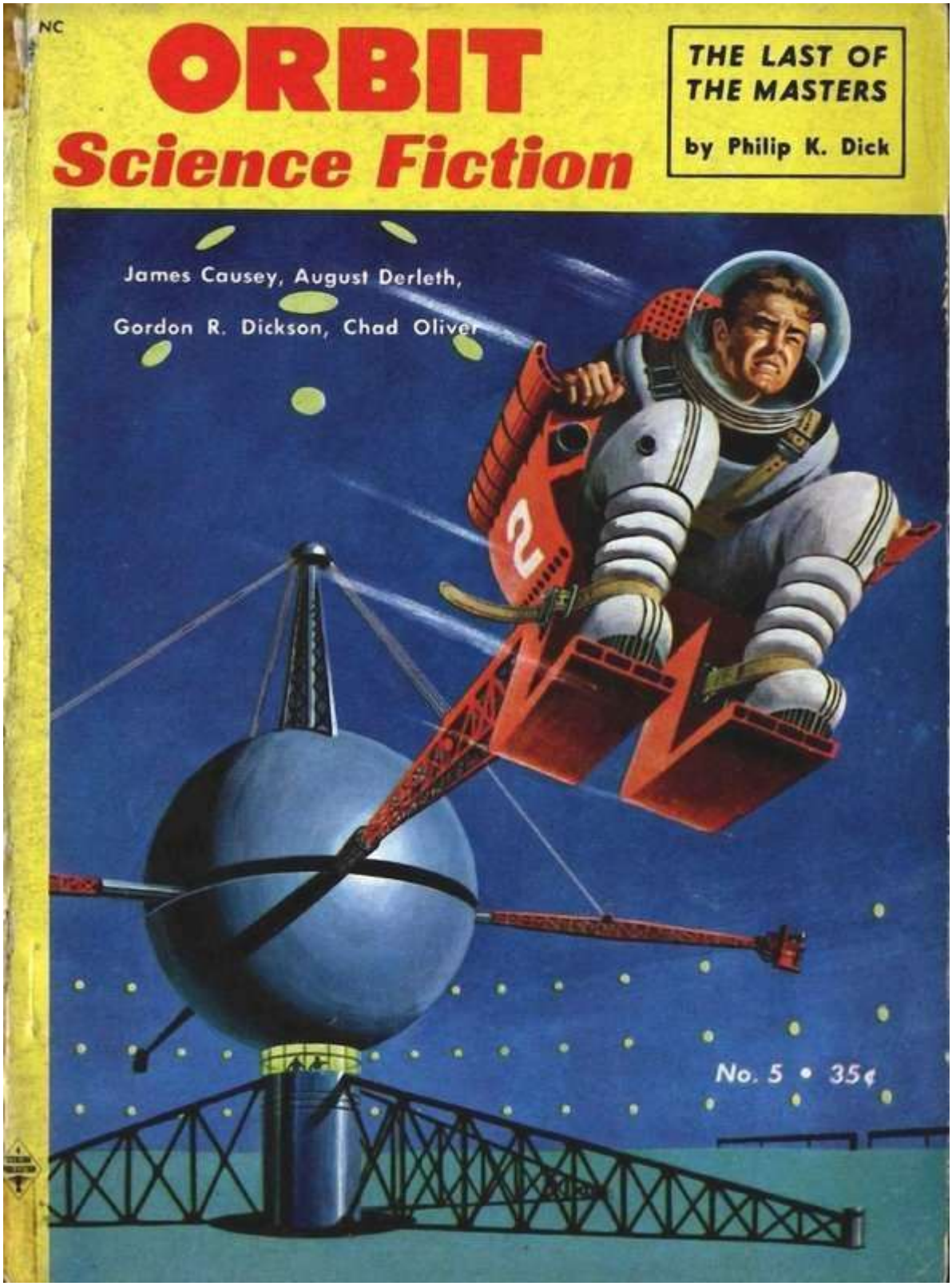

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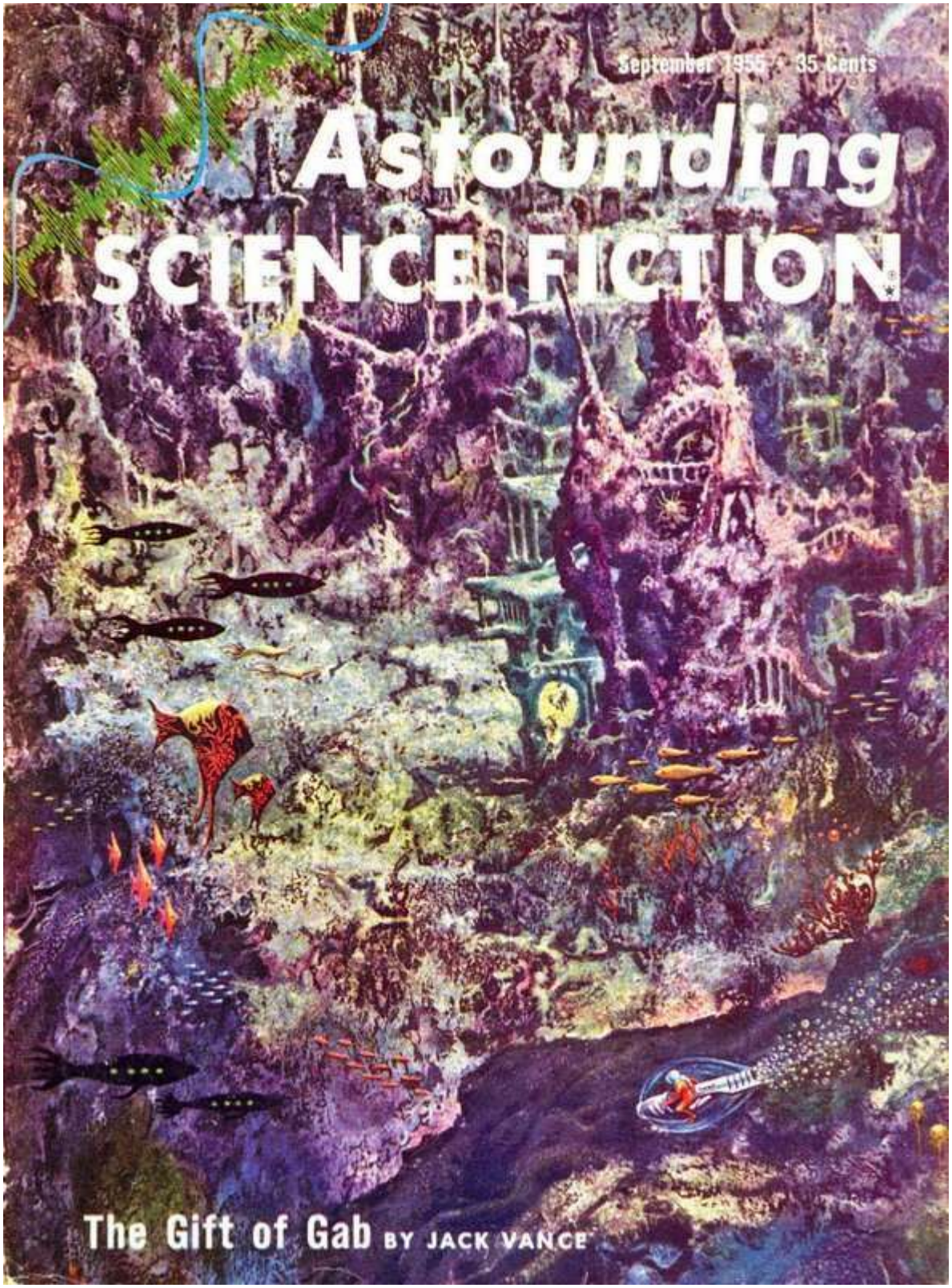

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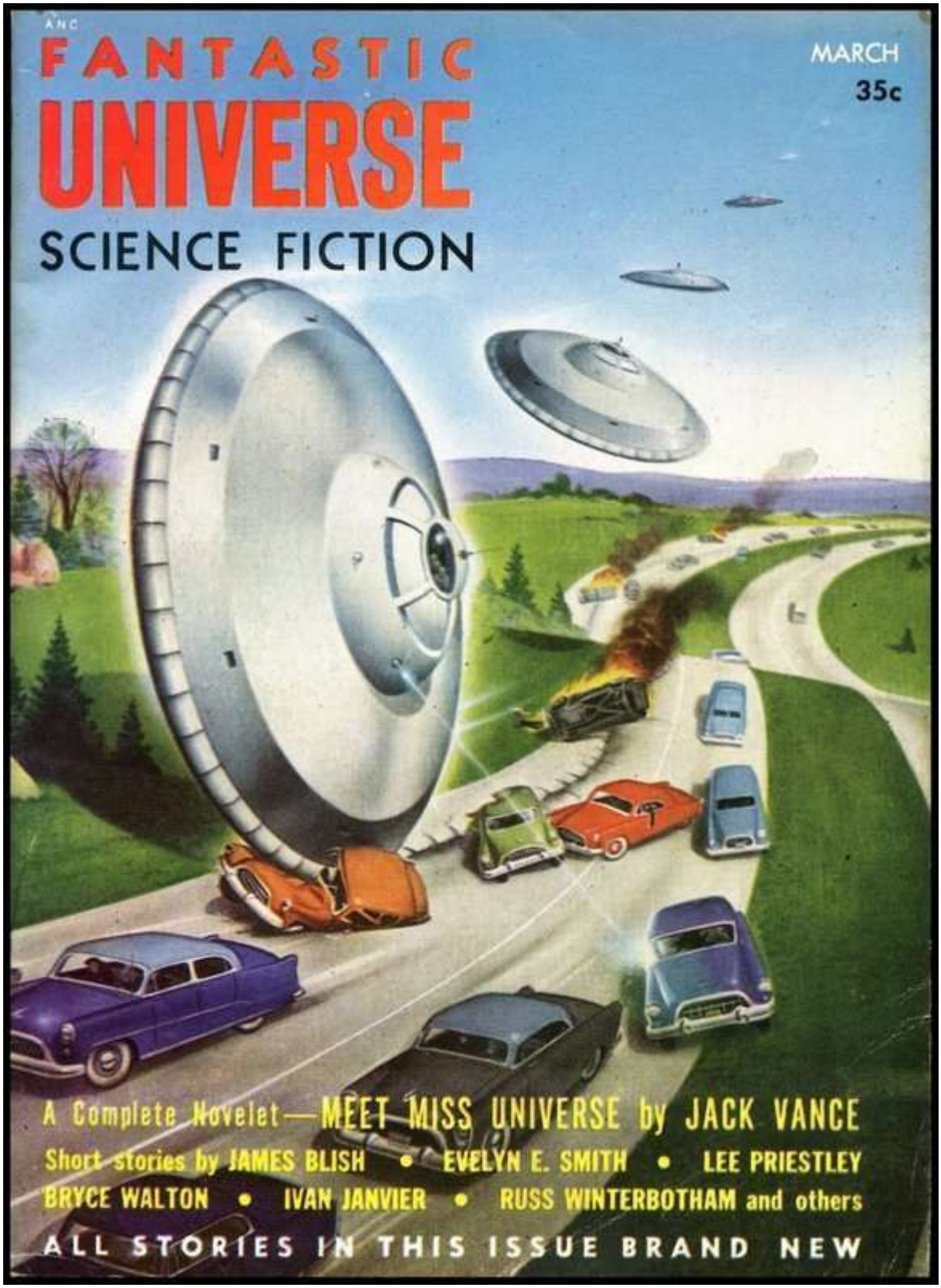

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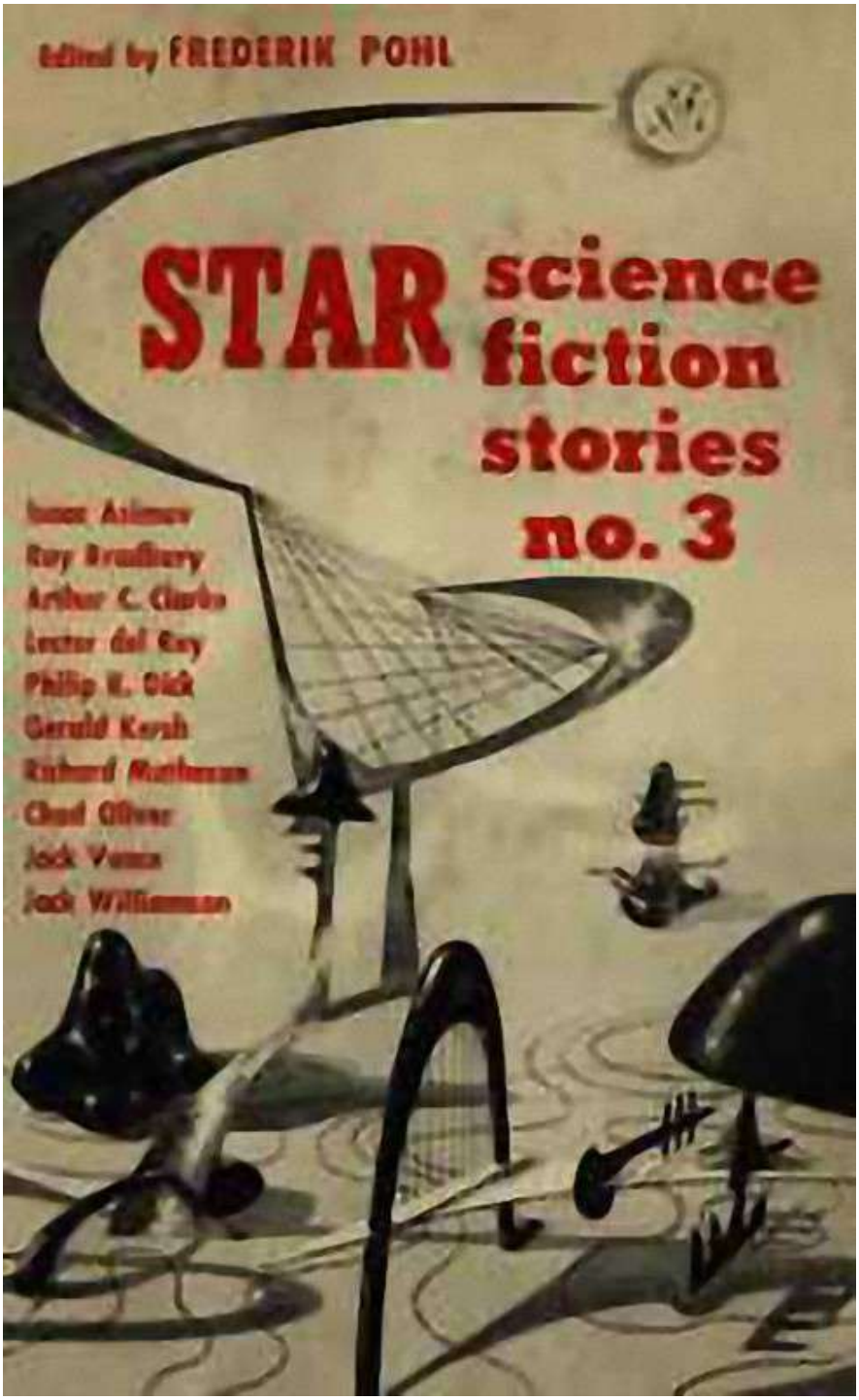

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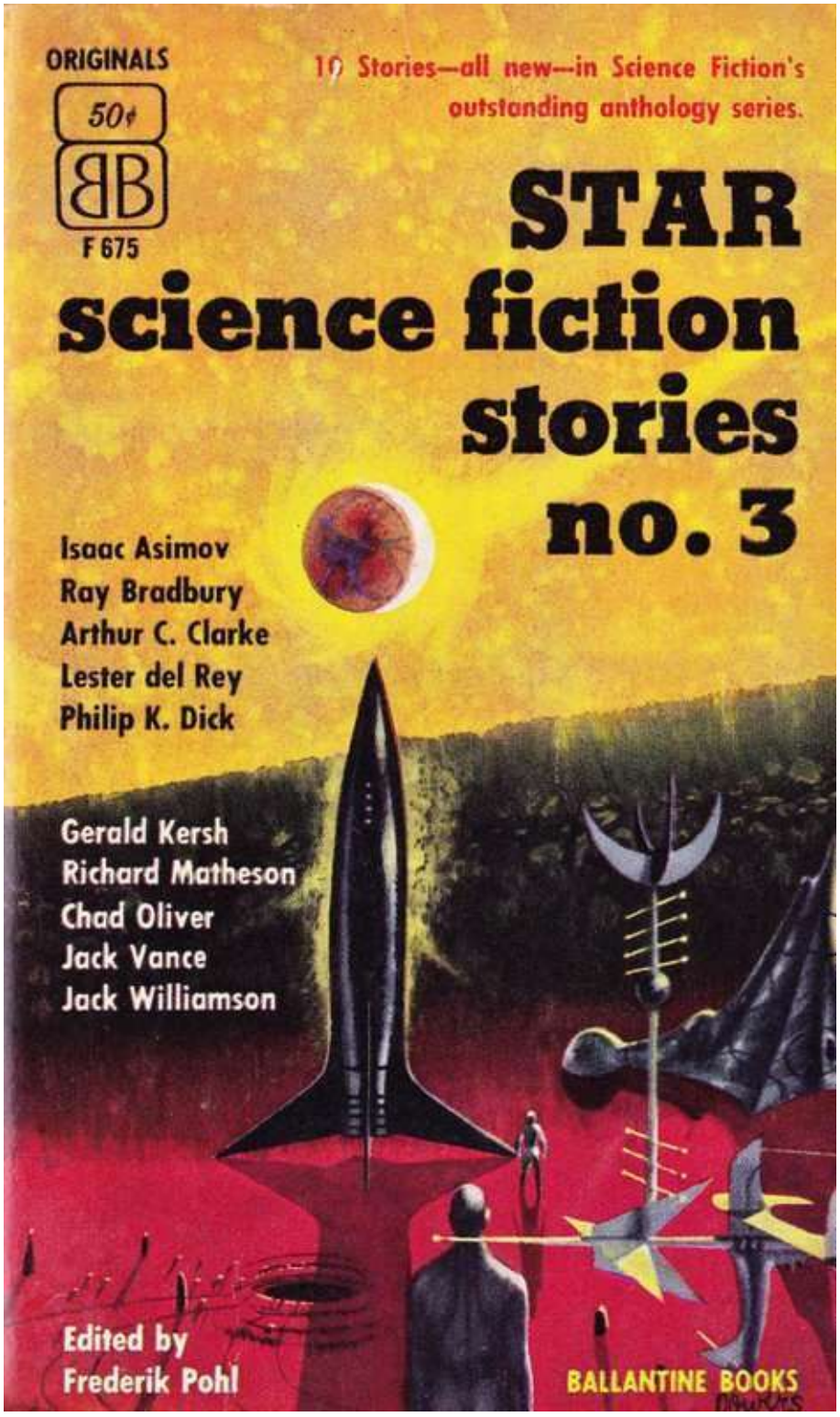

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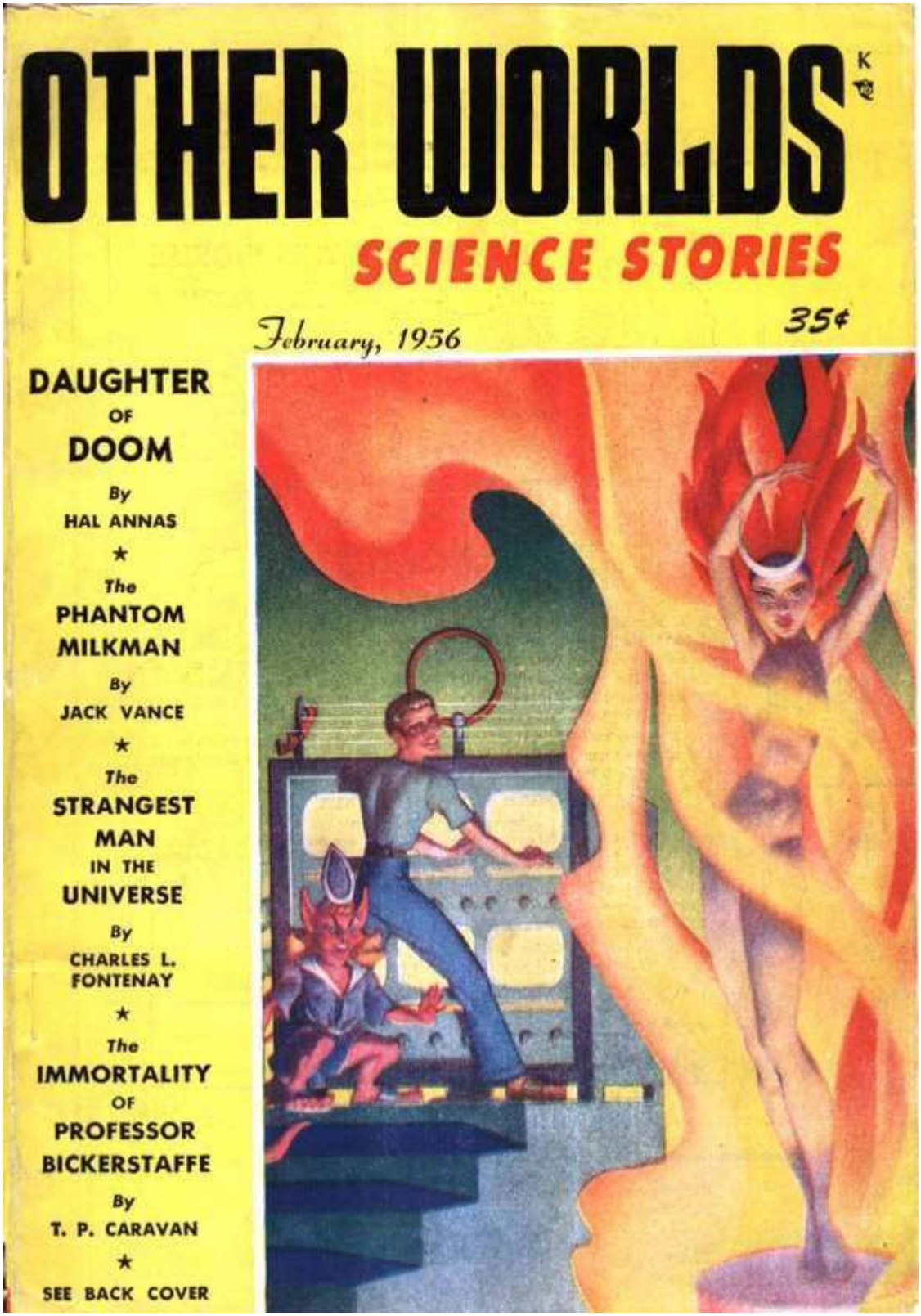

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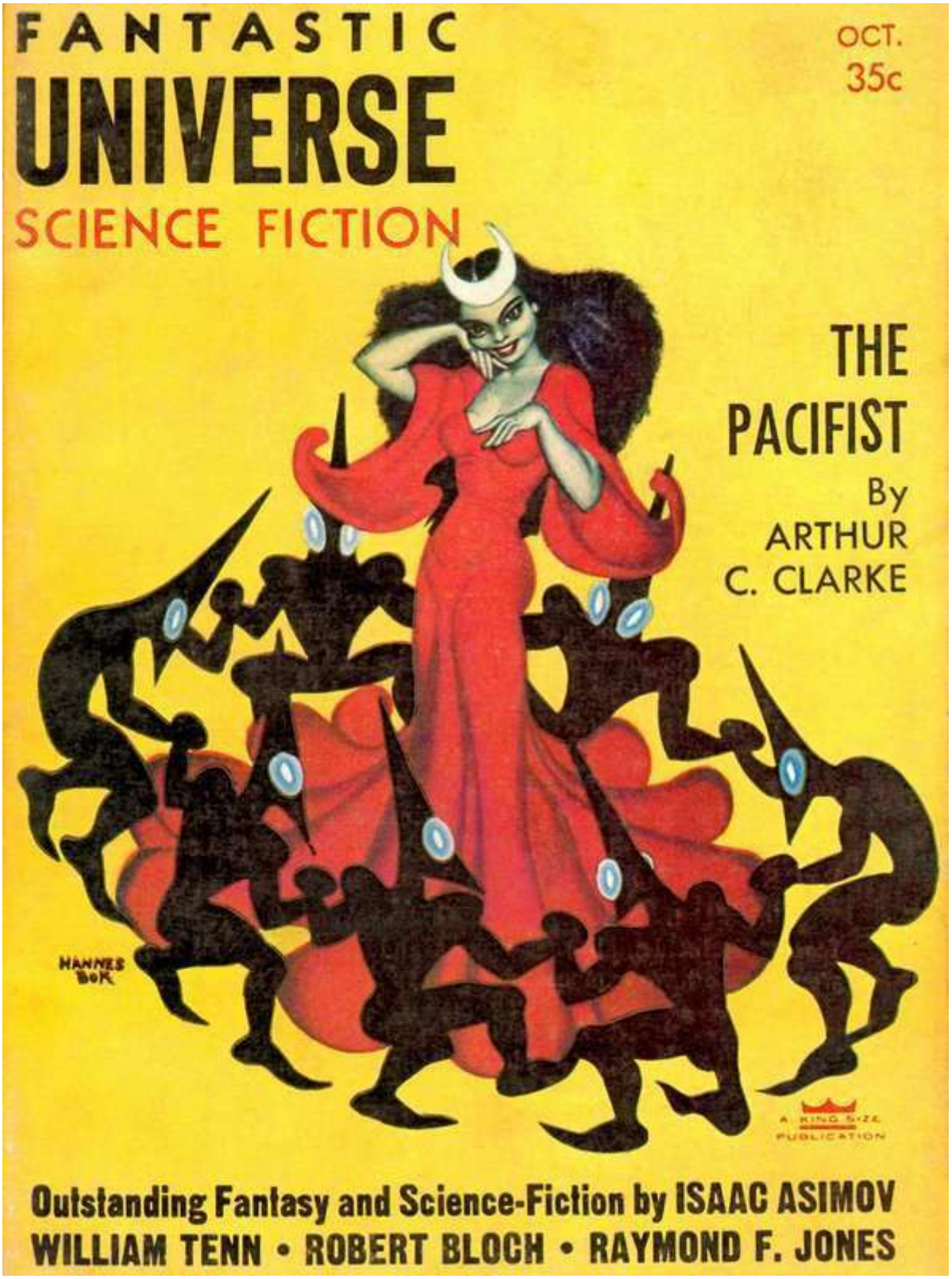

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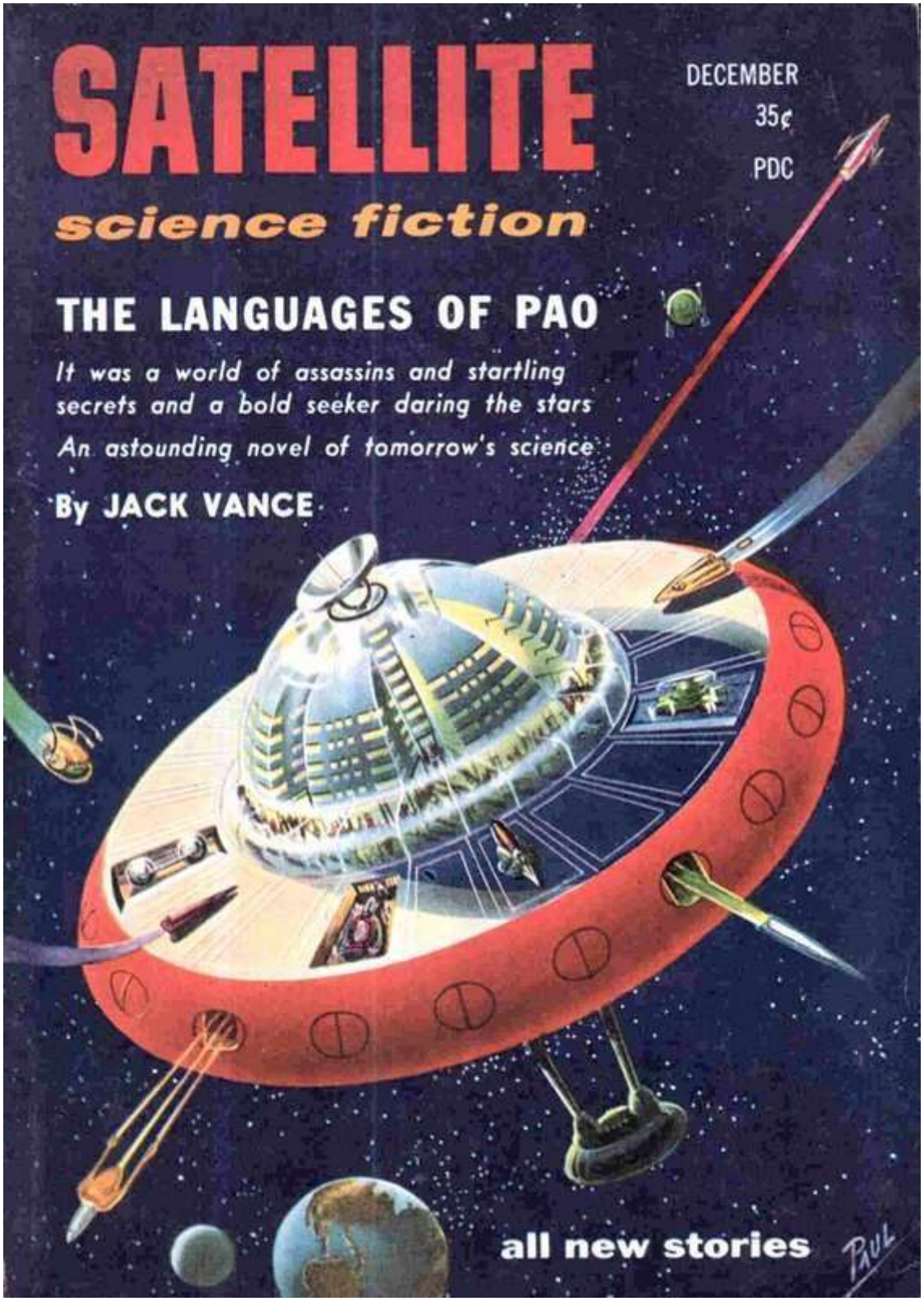

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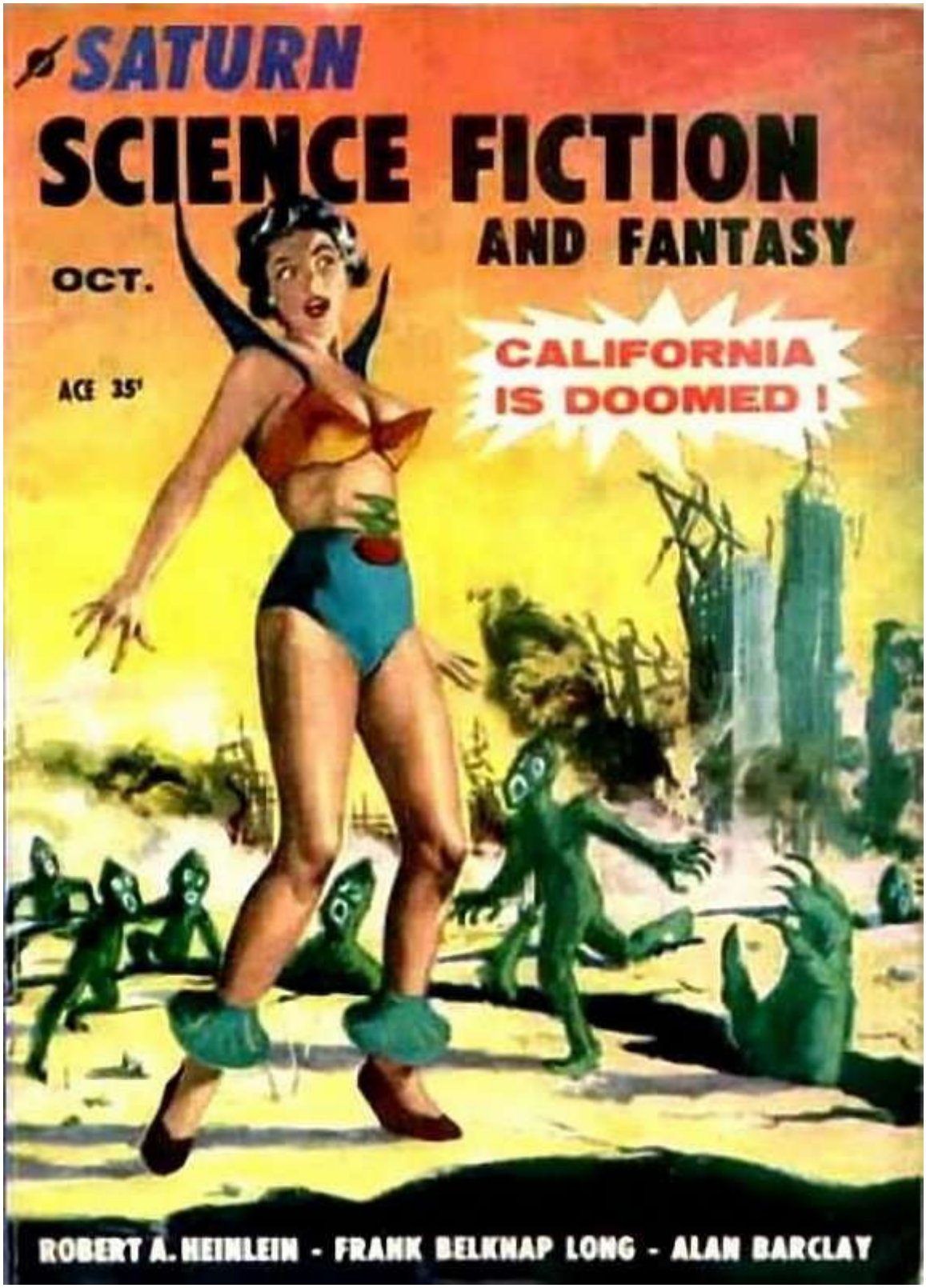

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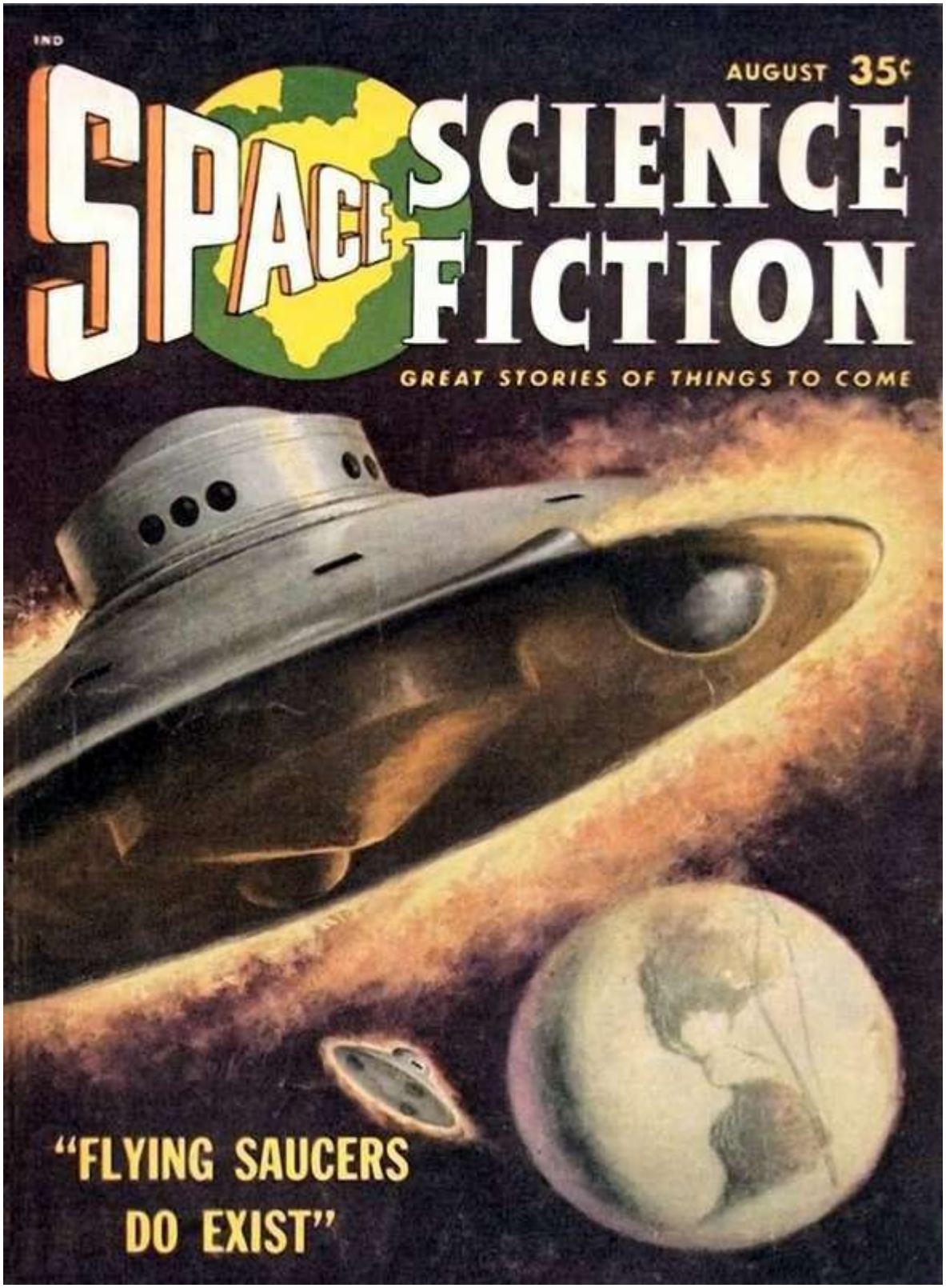

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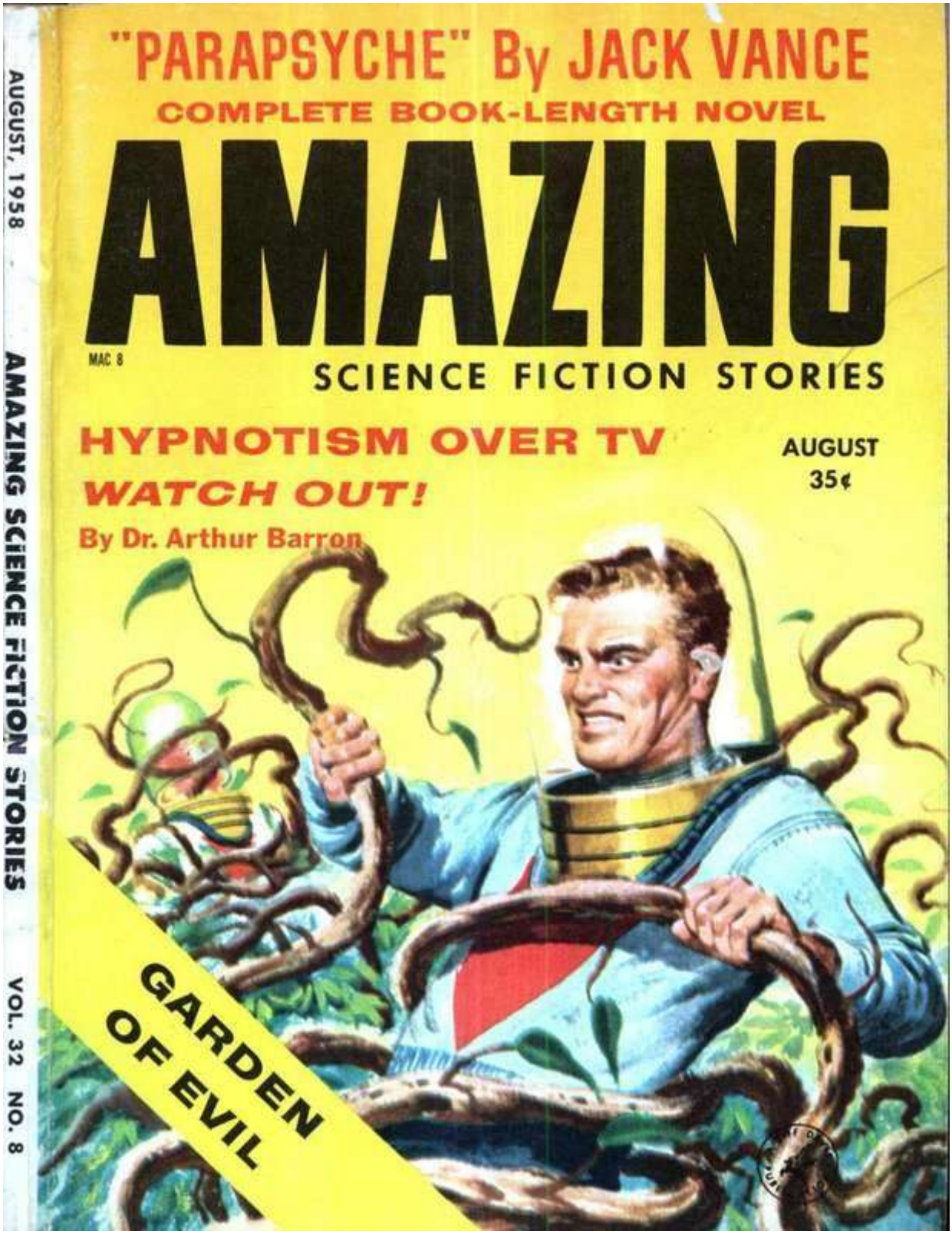

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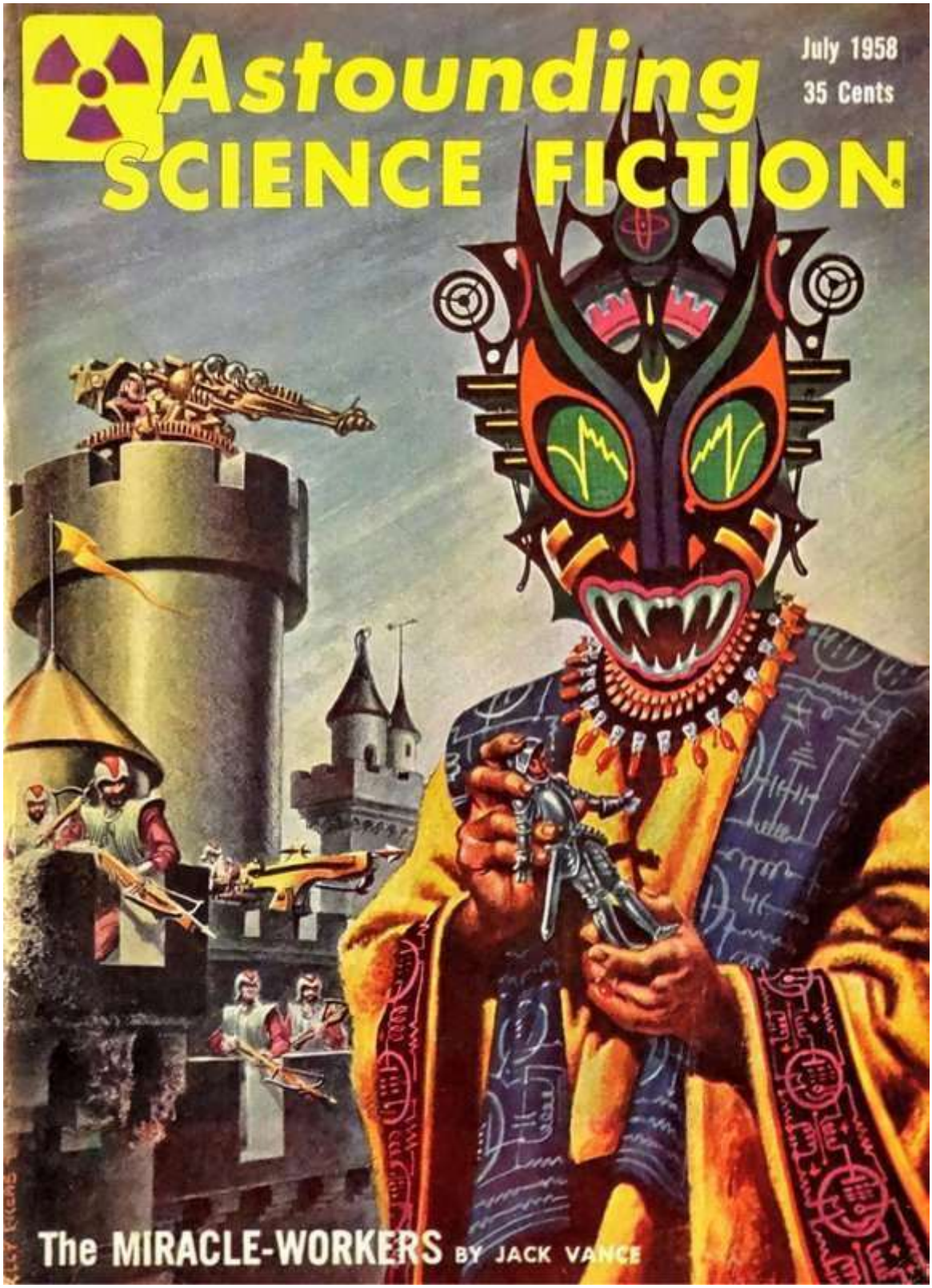

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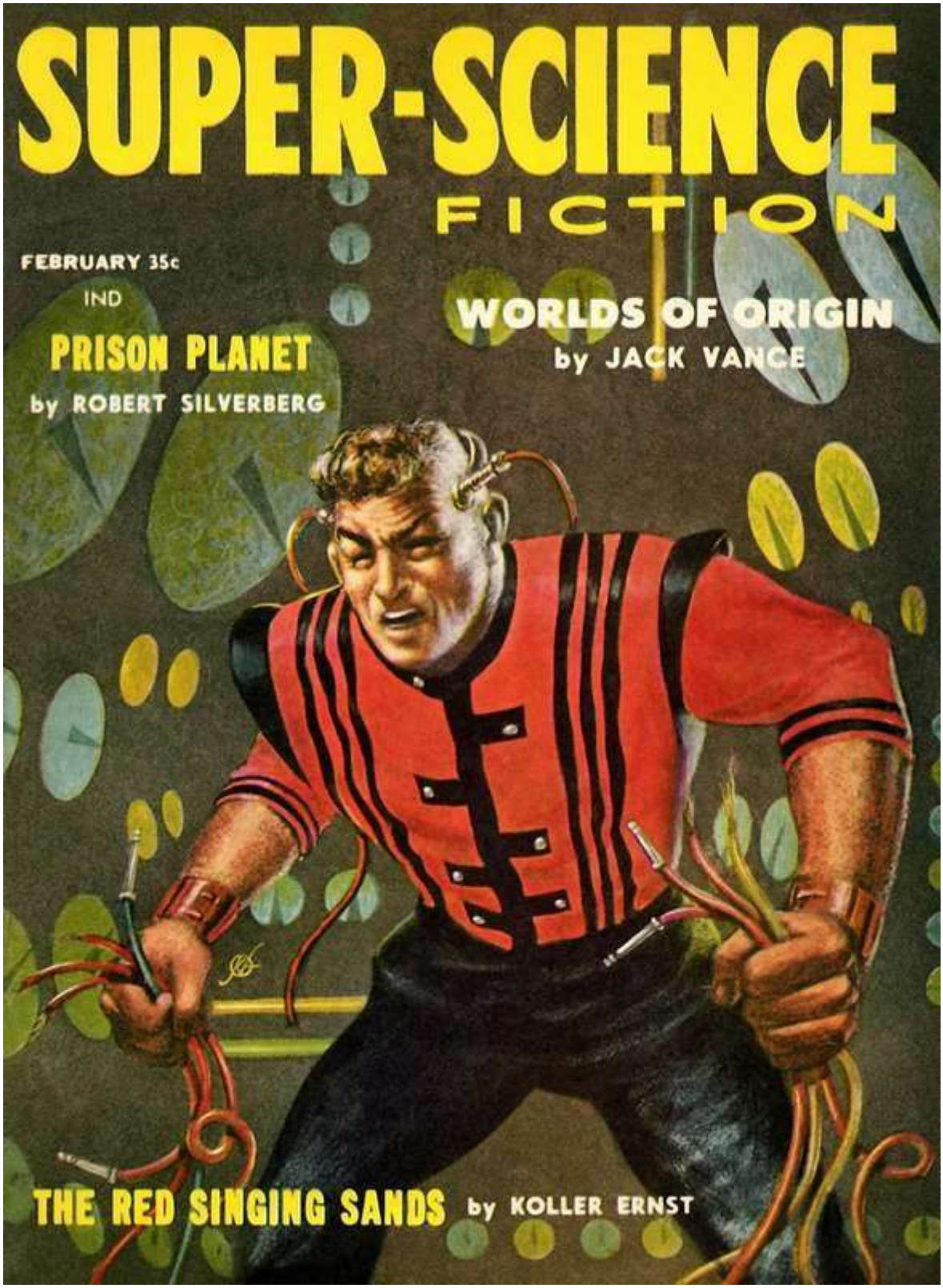

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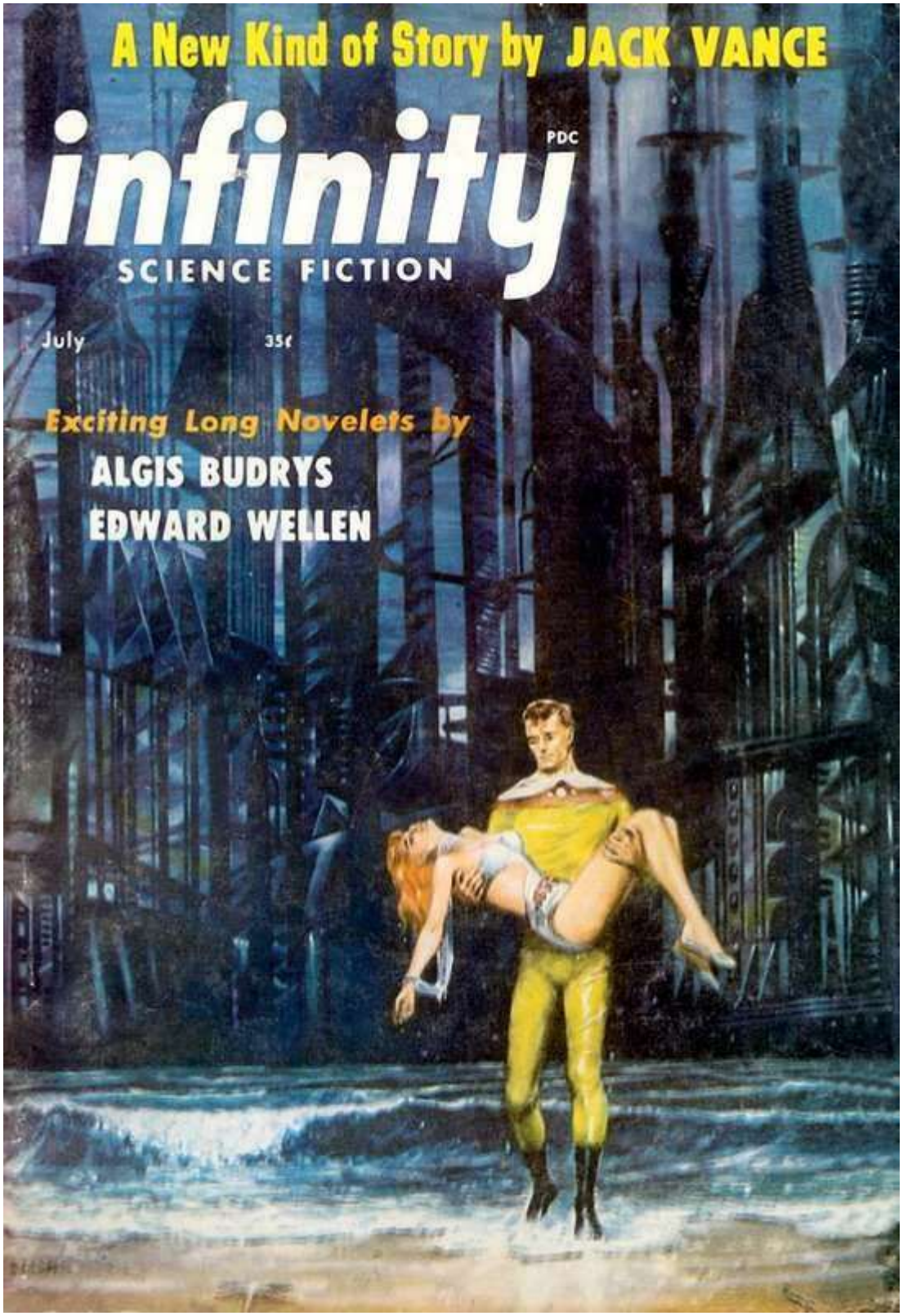

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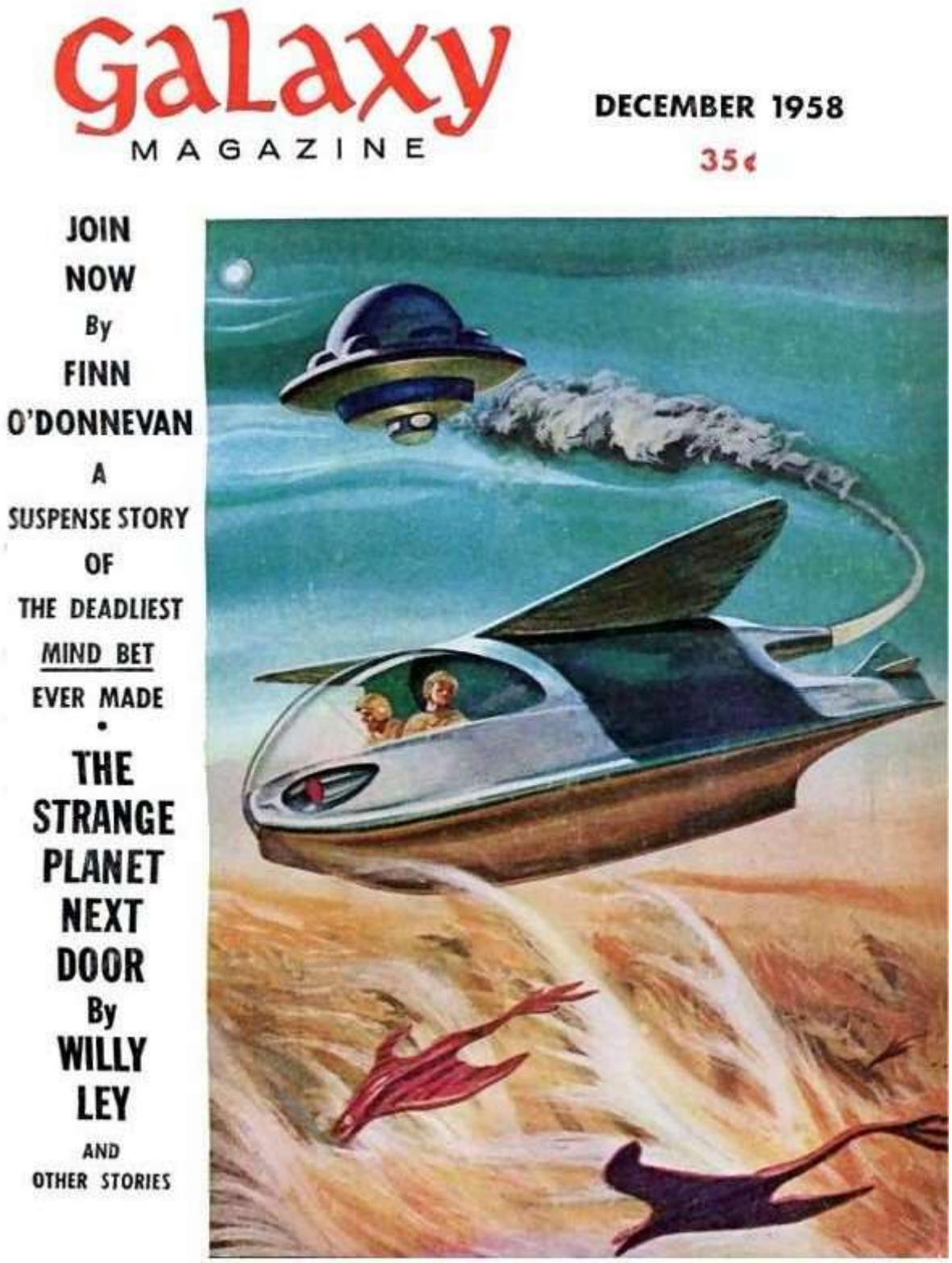

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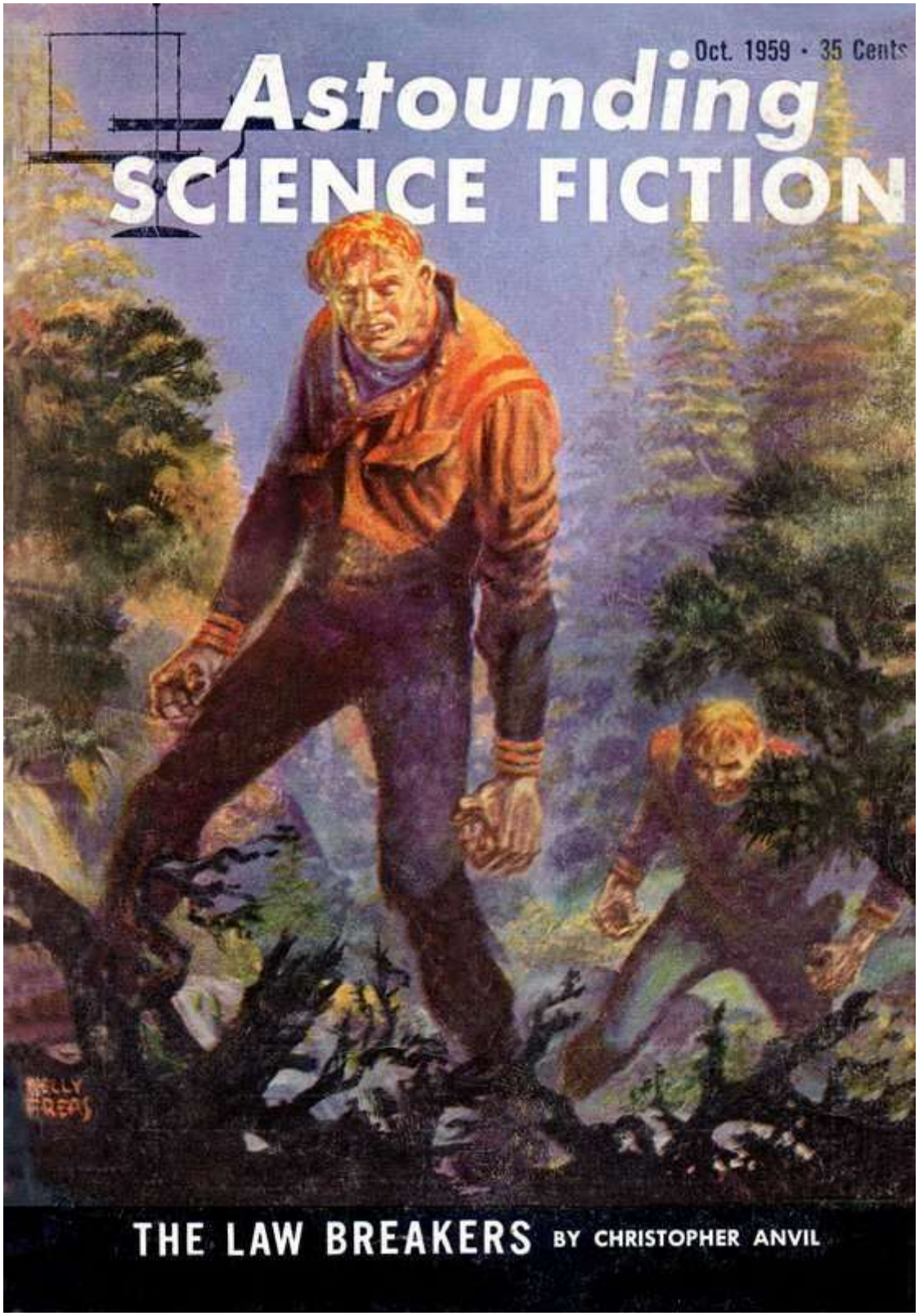

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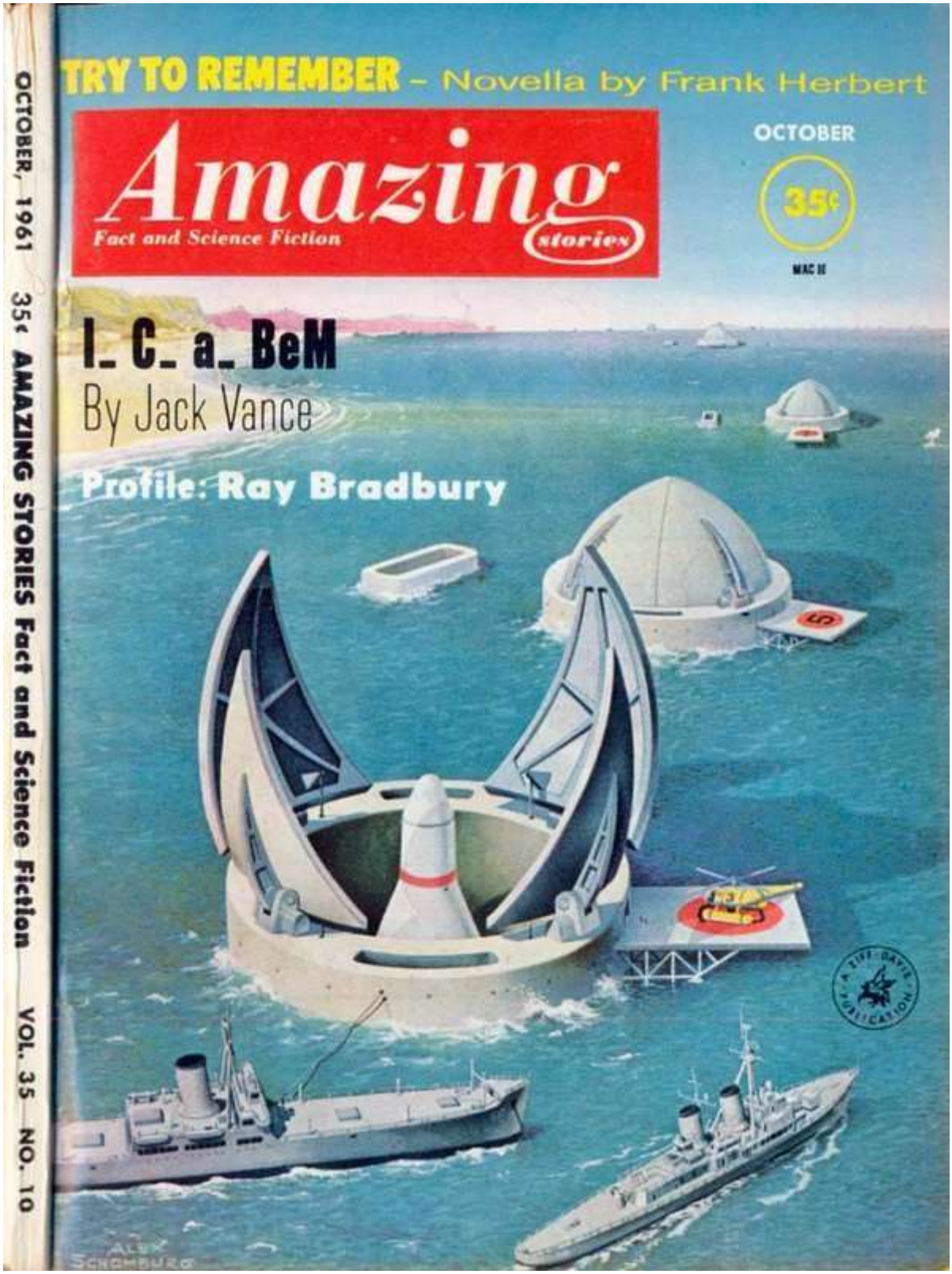

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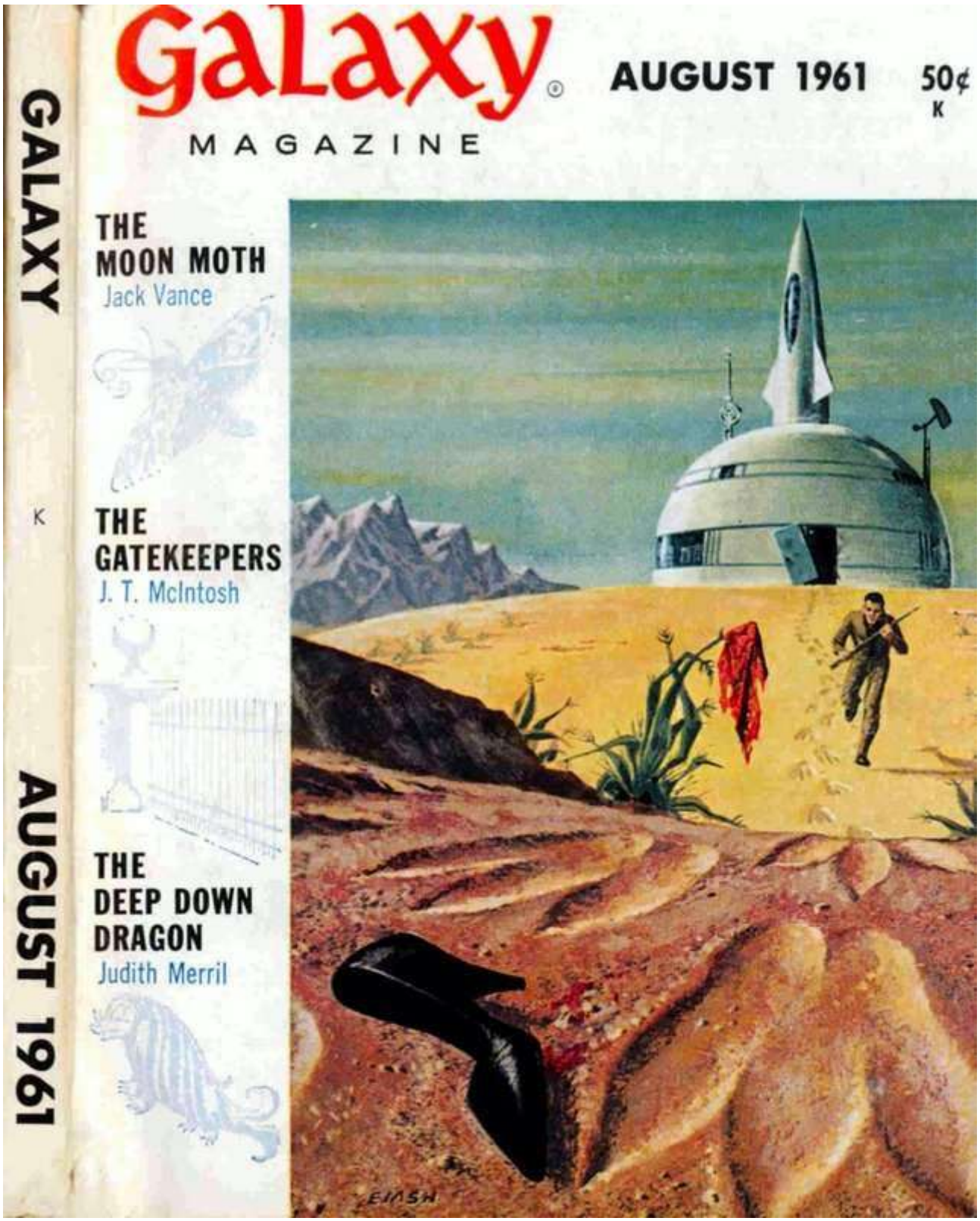

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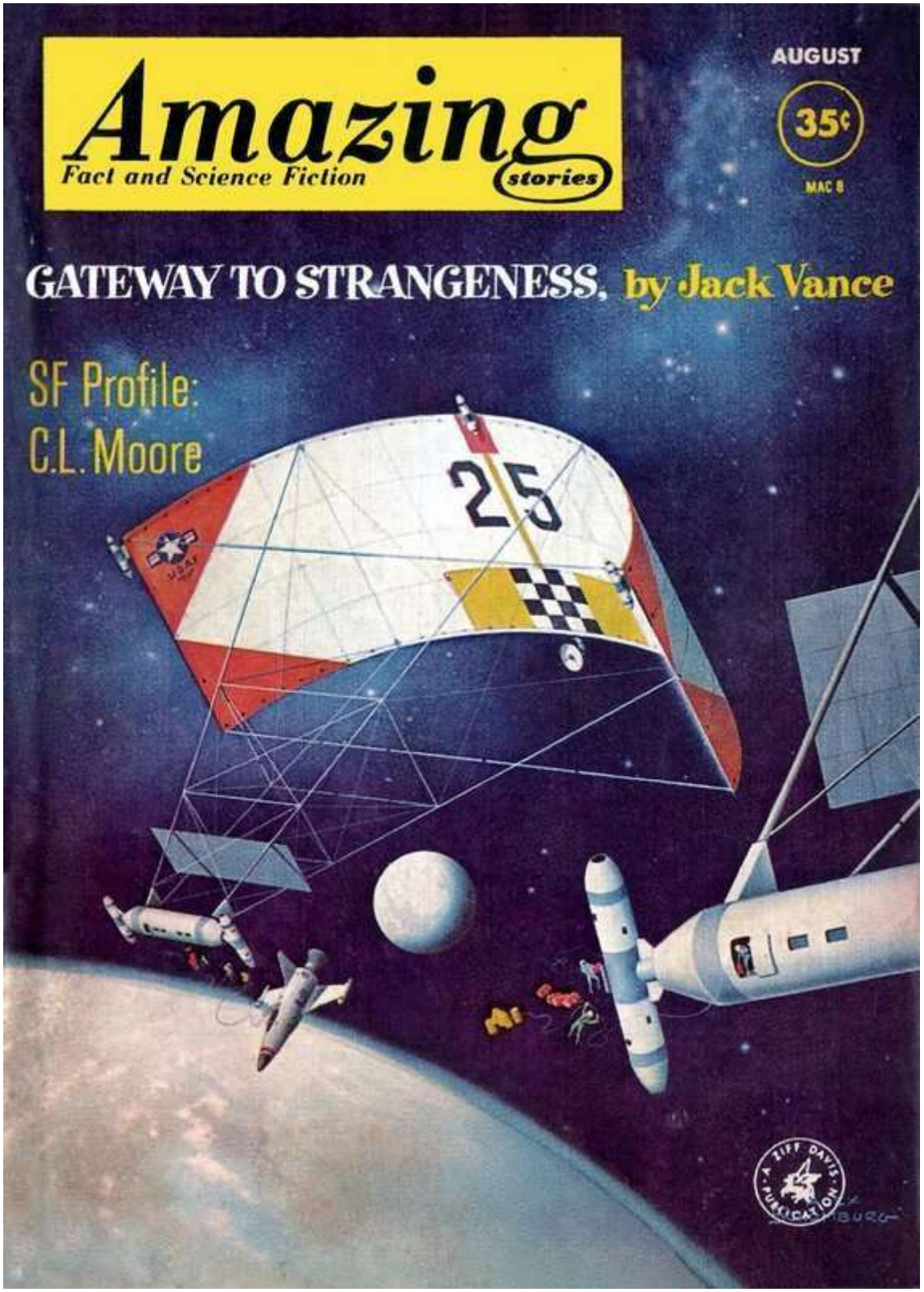

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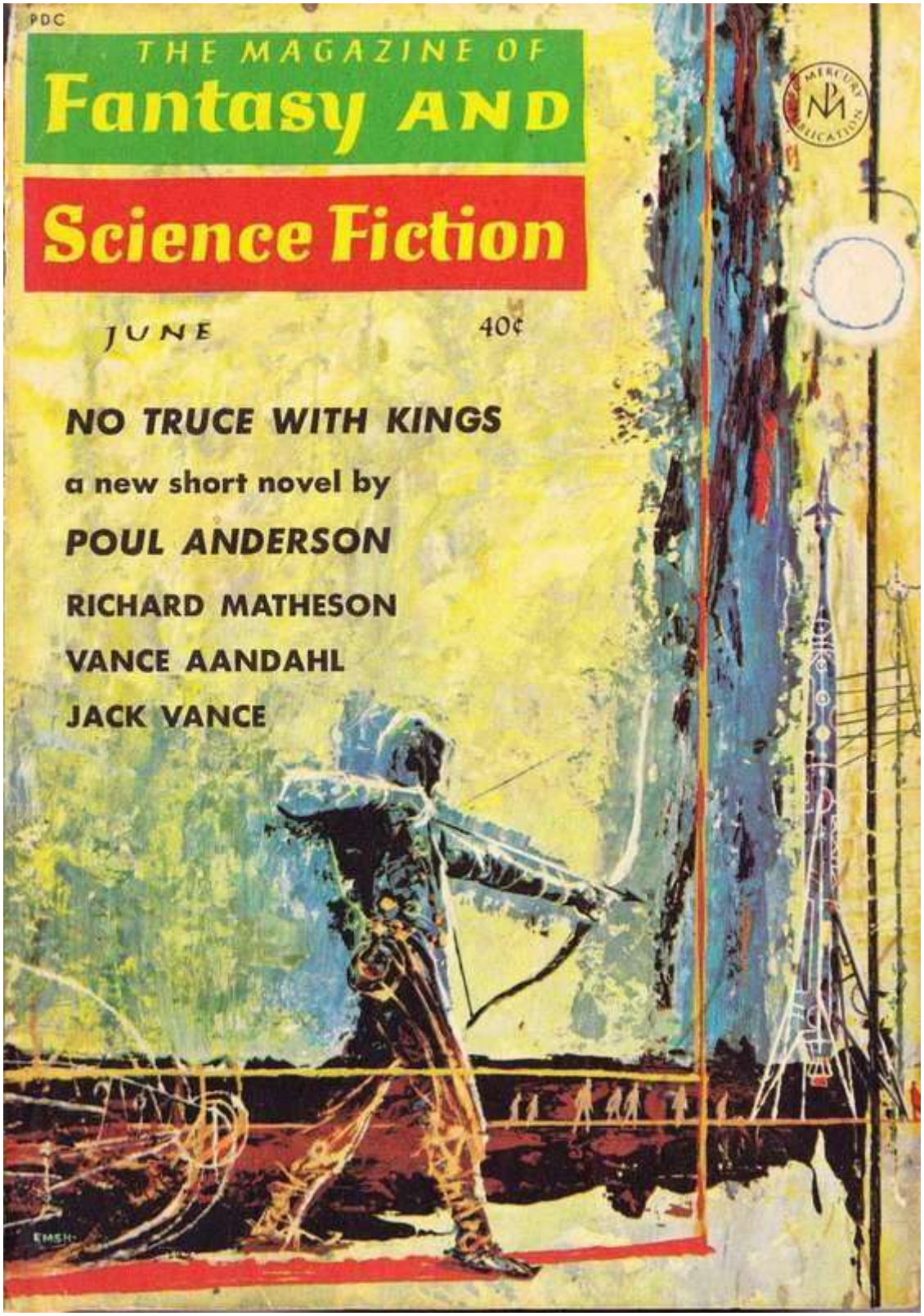

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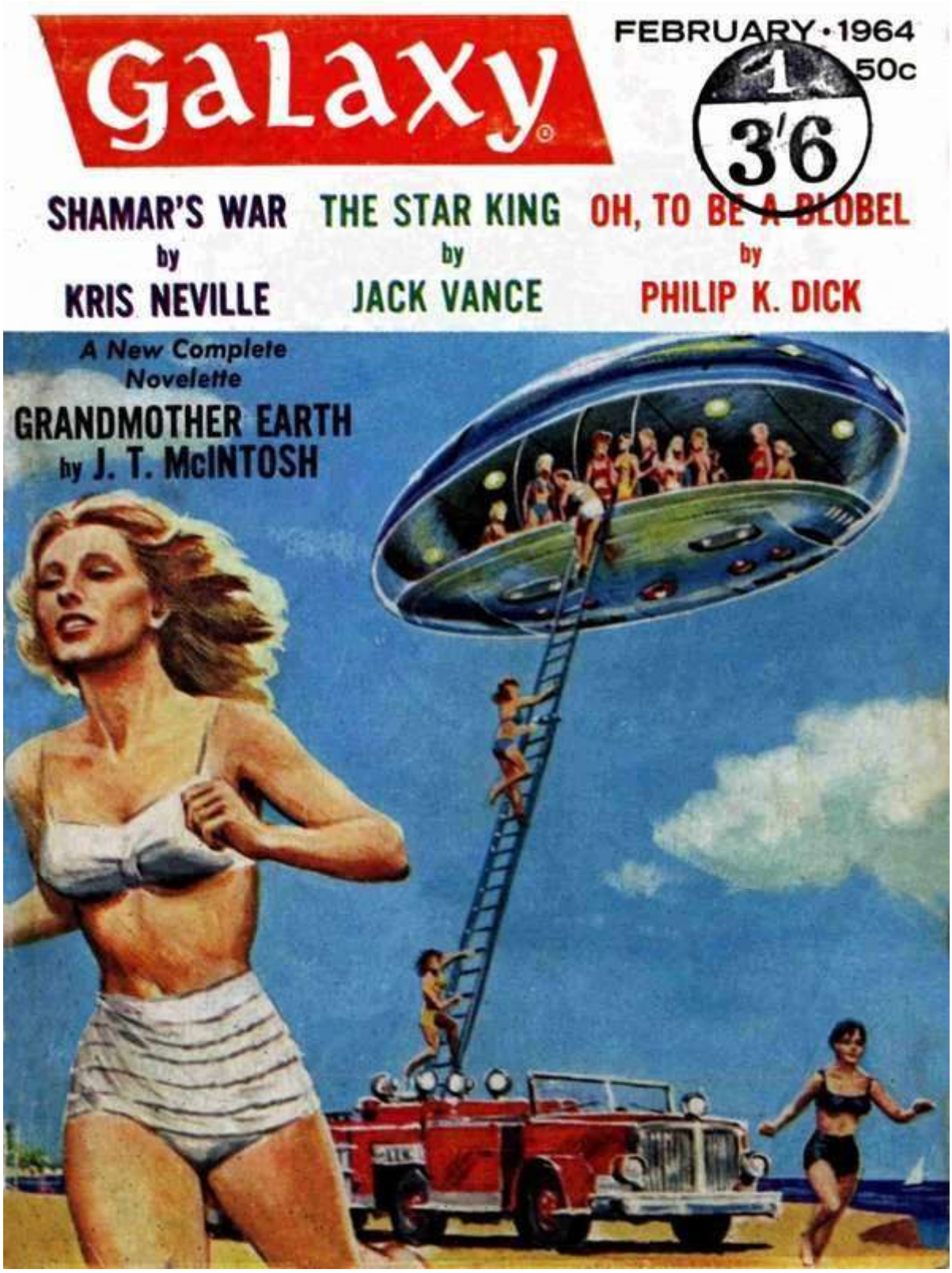

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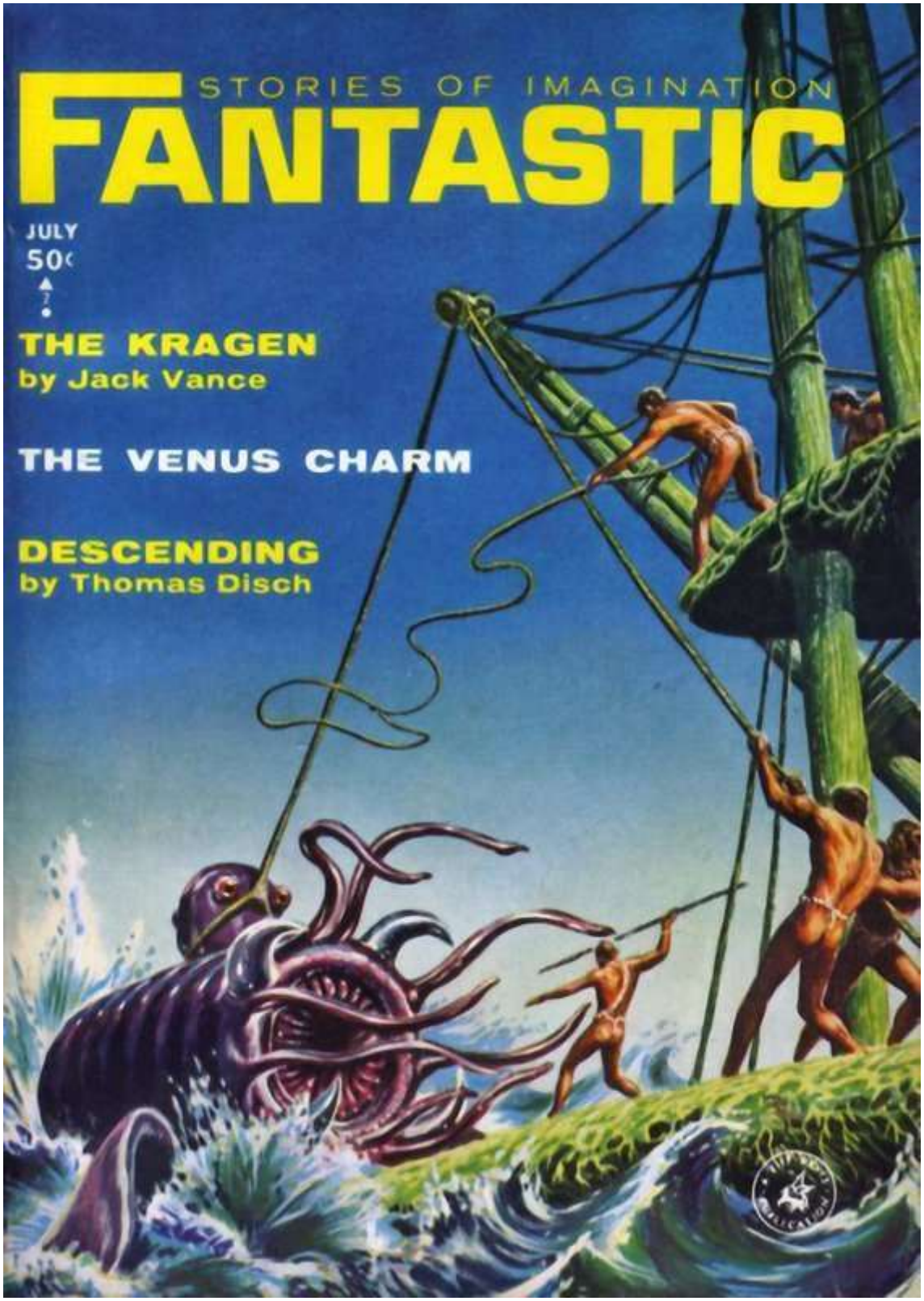

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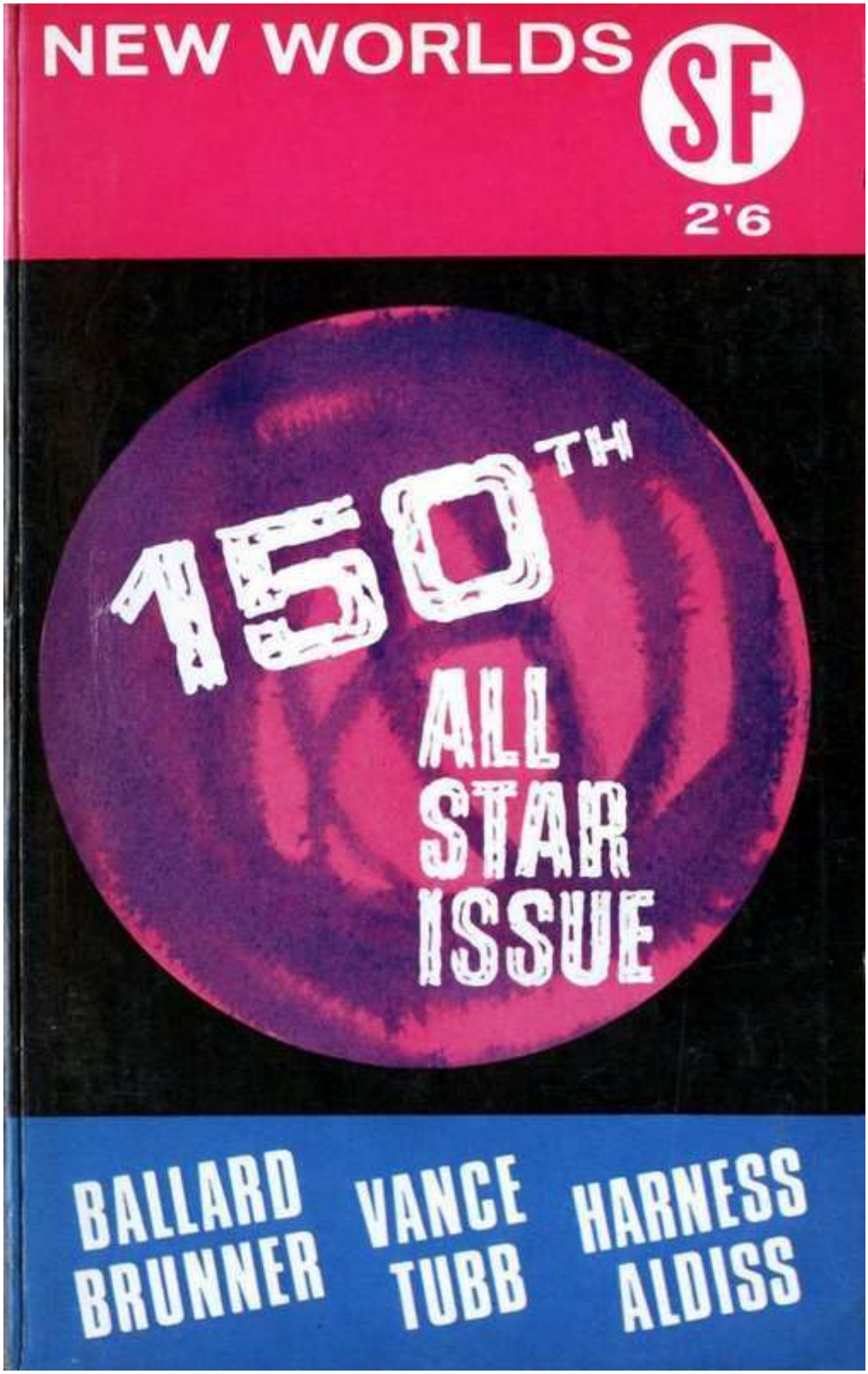

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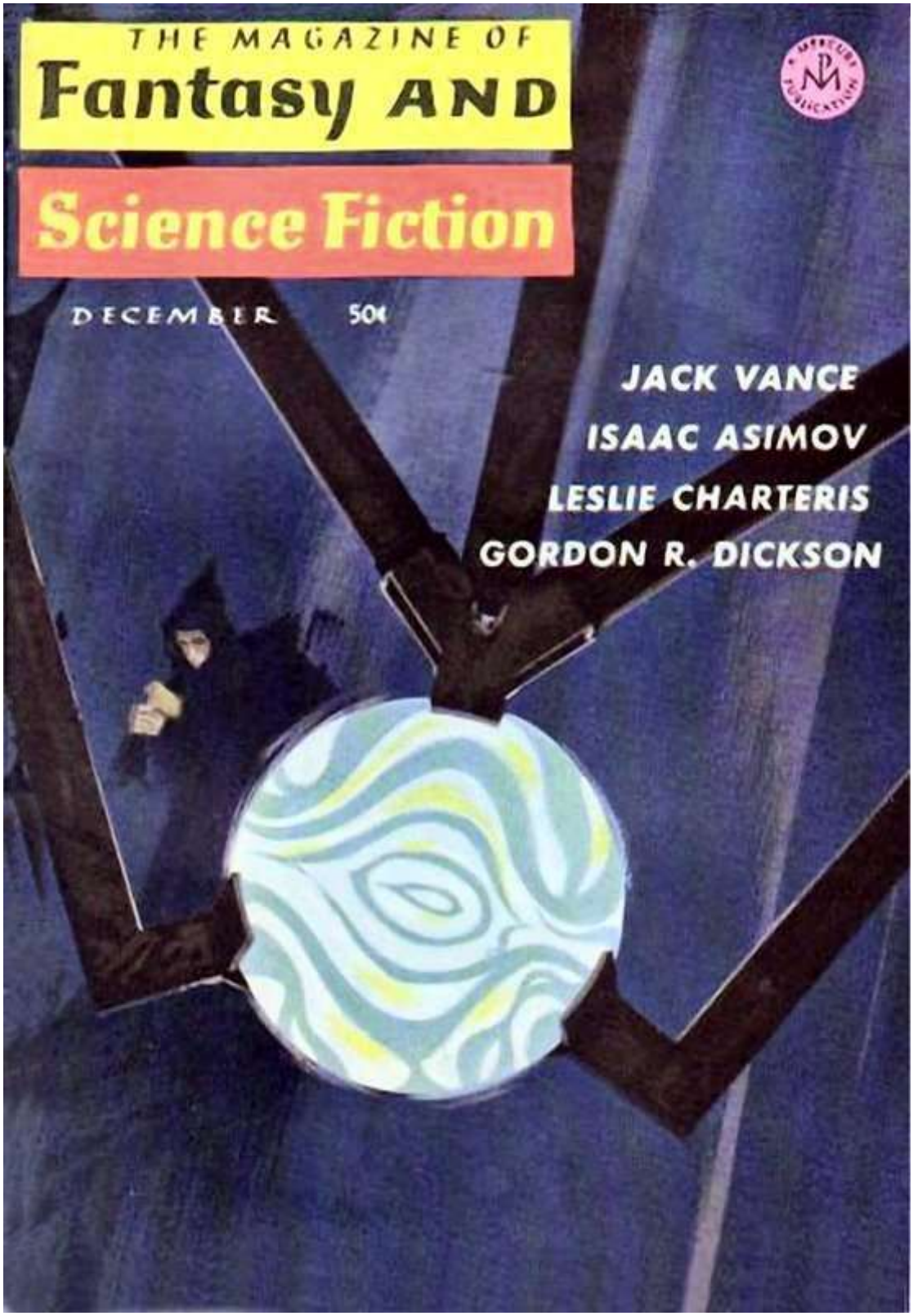

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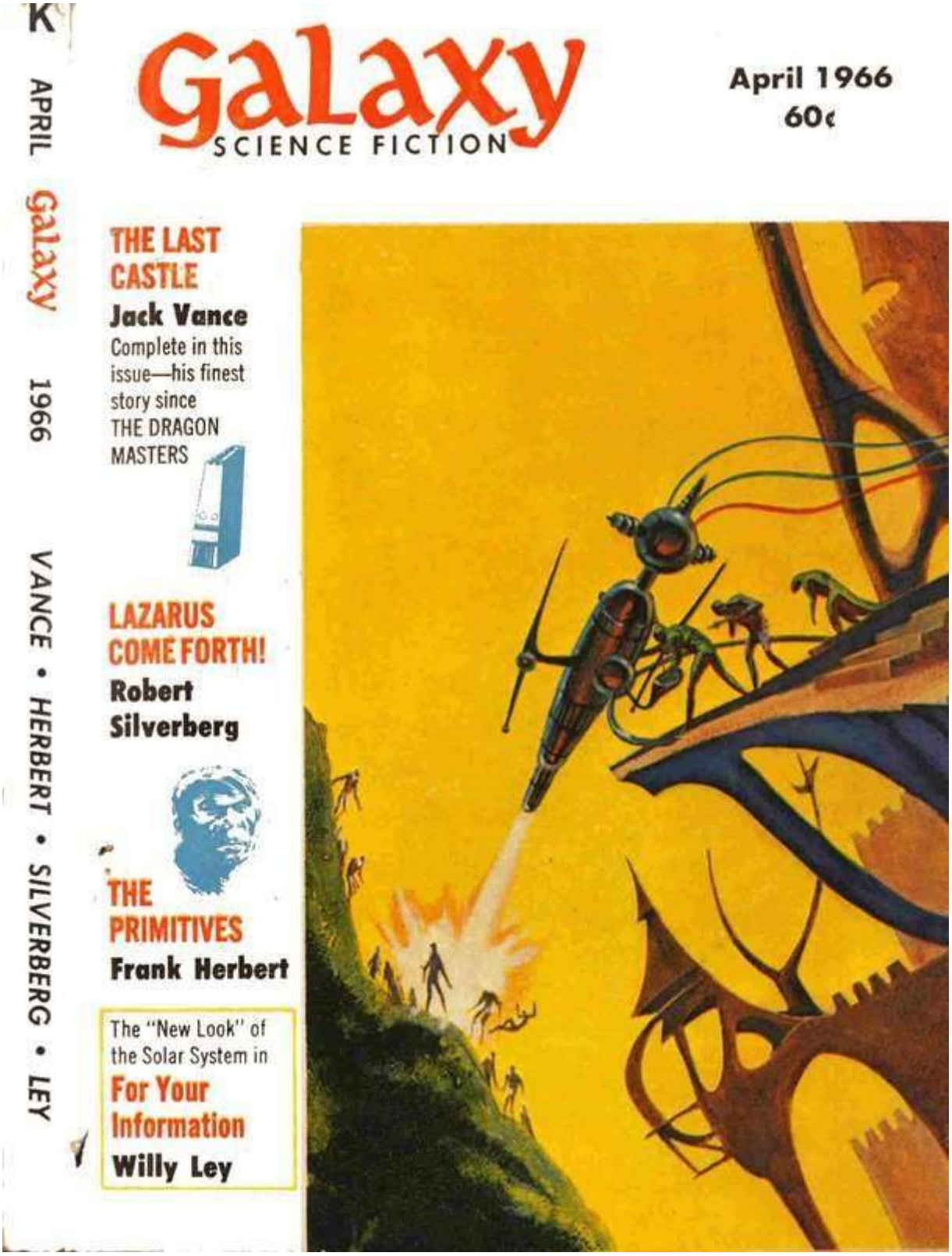

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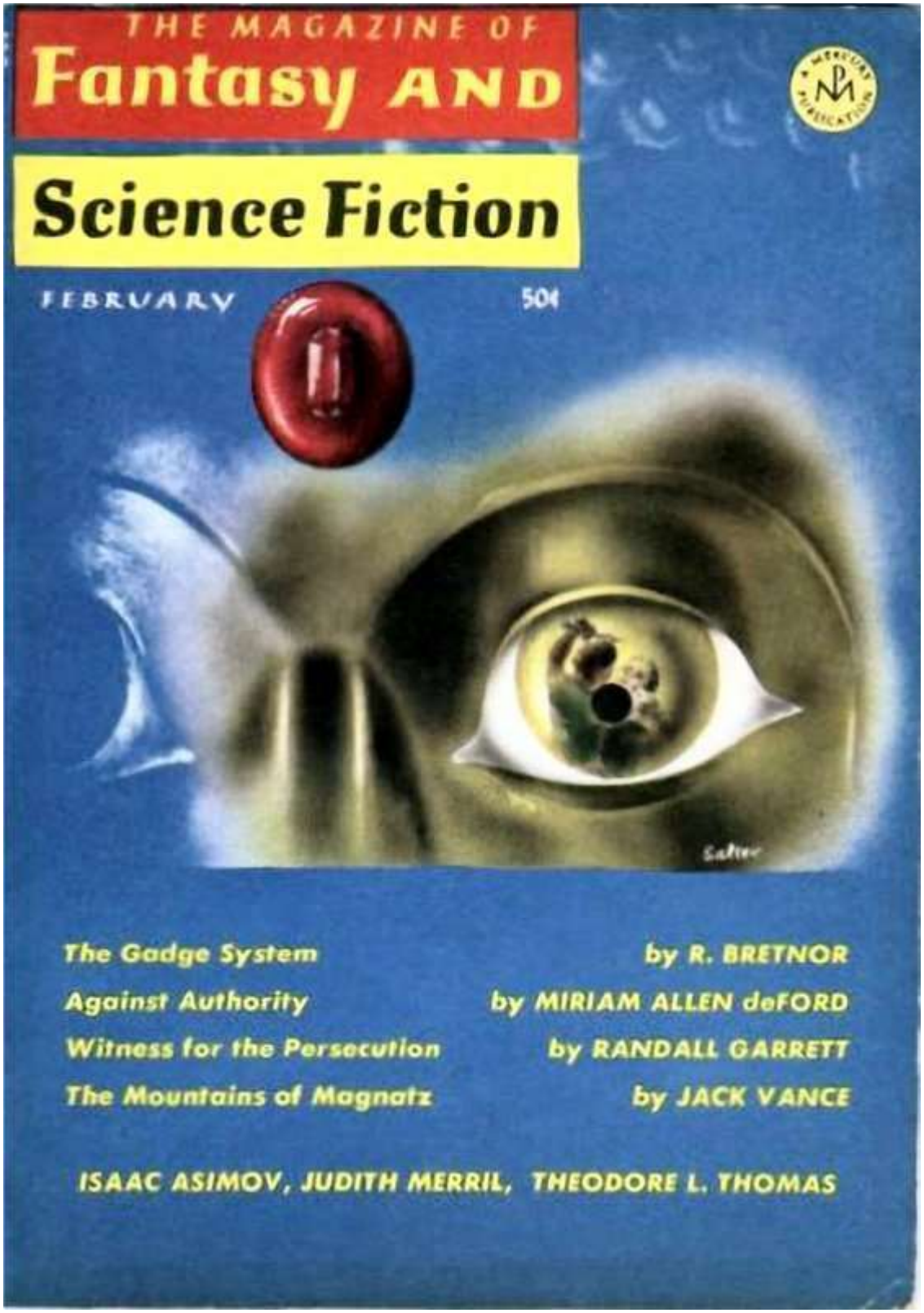

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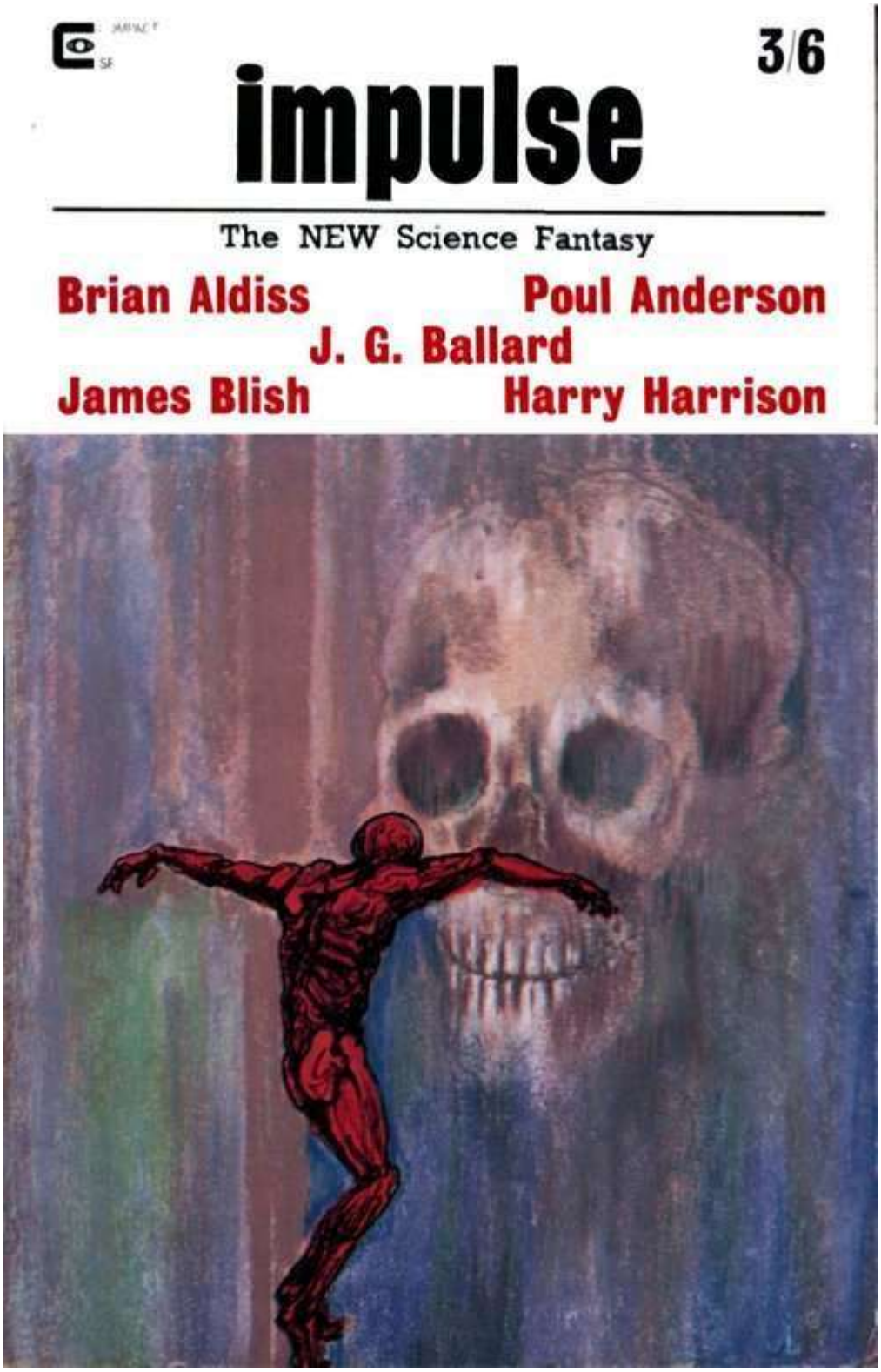
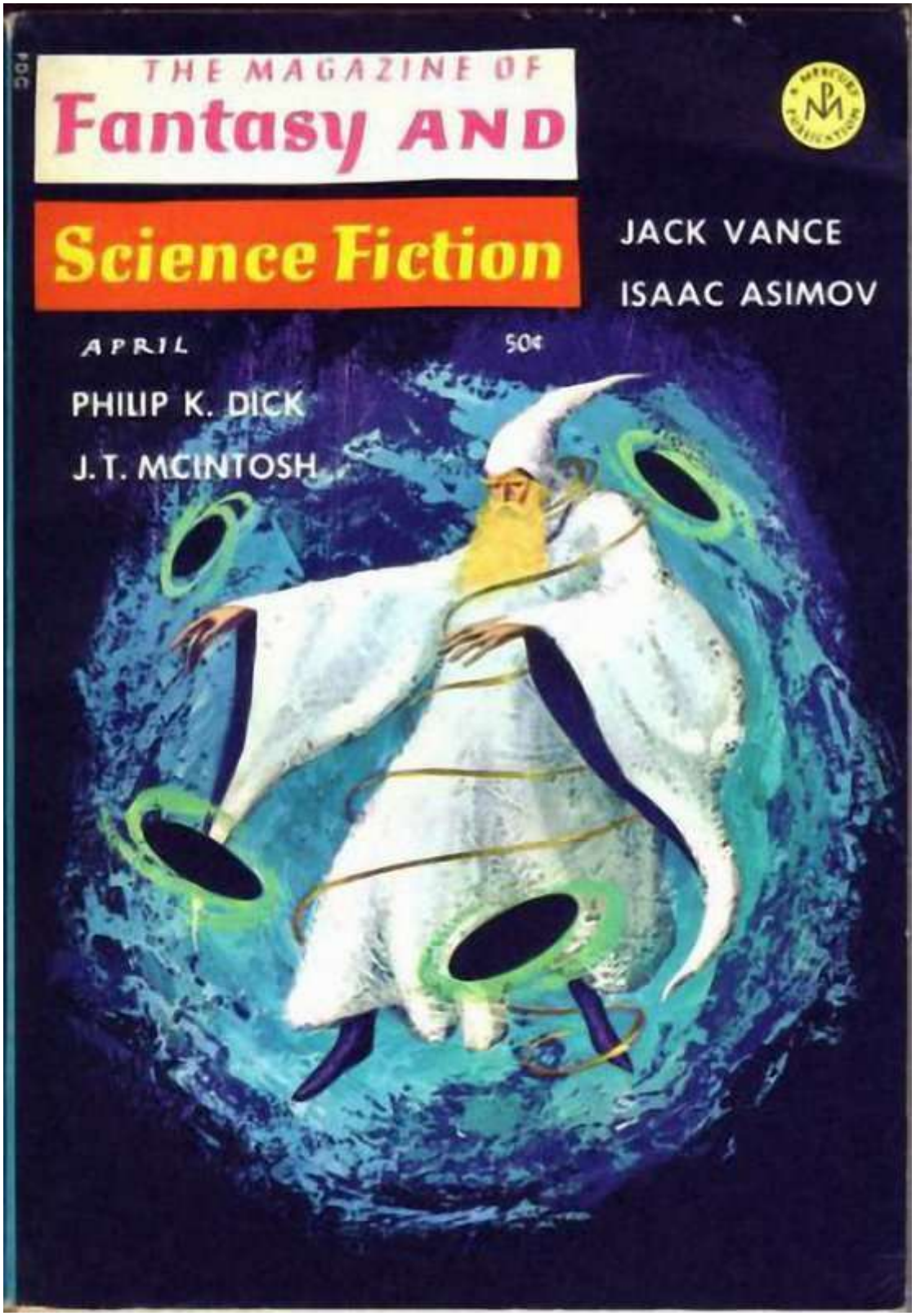


72 *1966-03 cover Judith Ann Lawrence IMPULSE The Secret*



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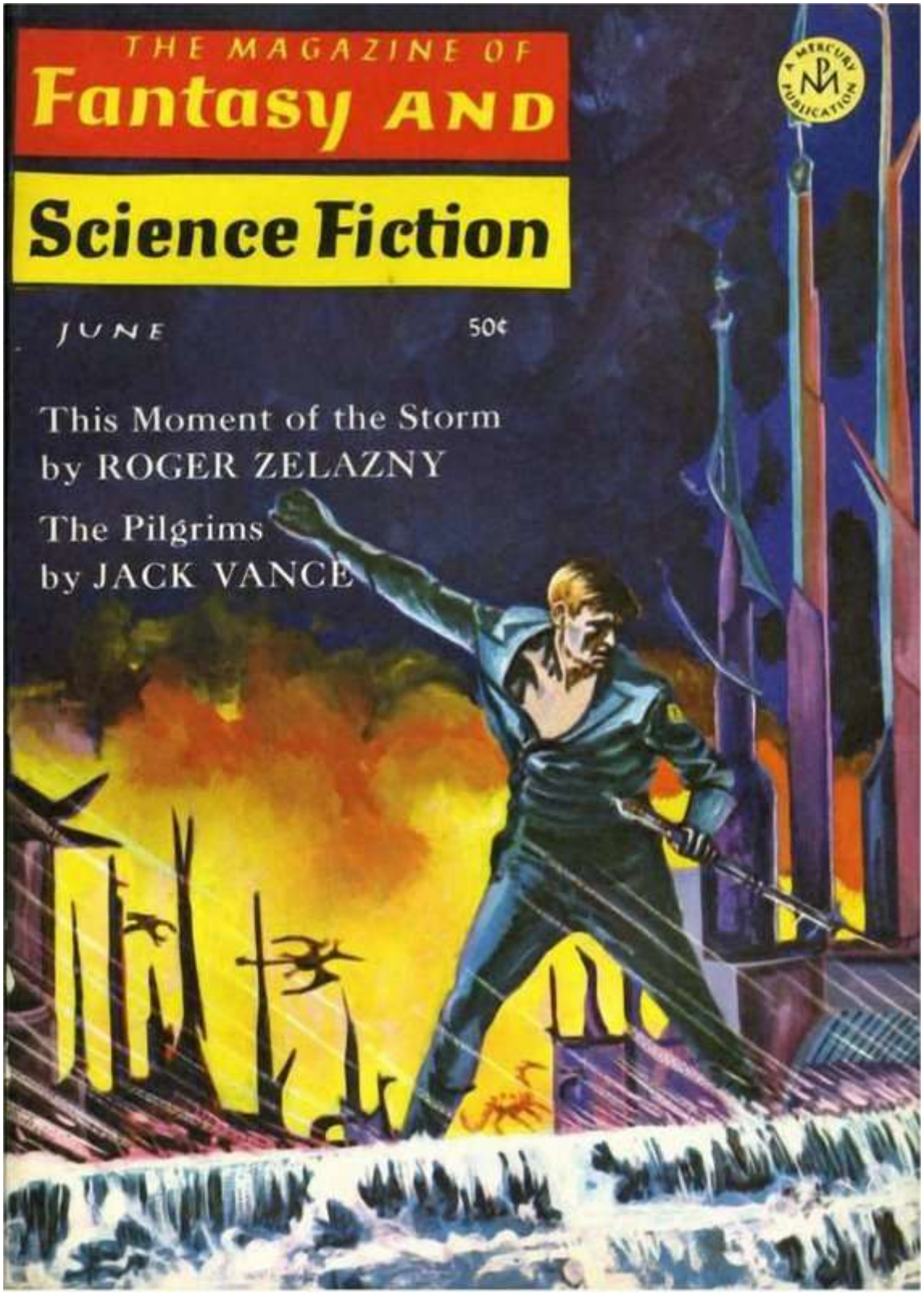

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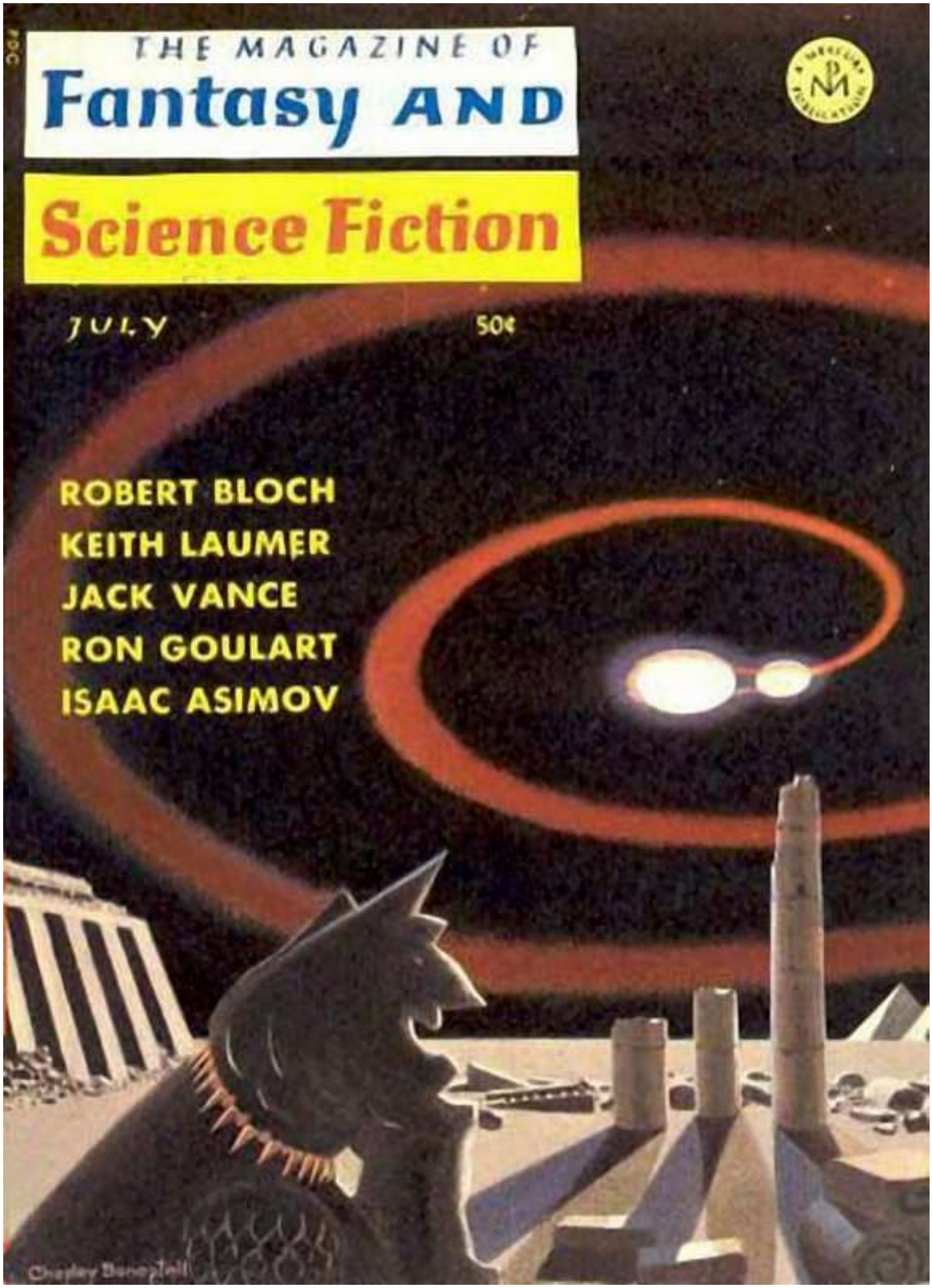

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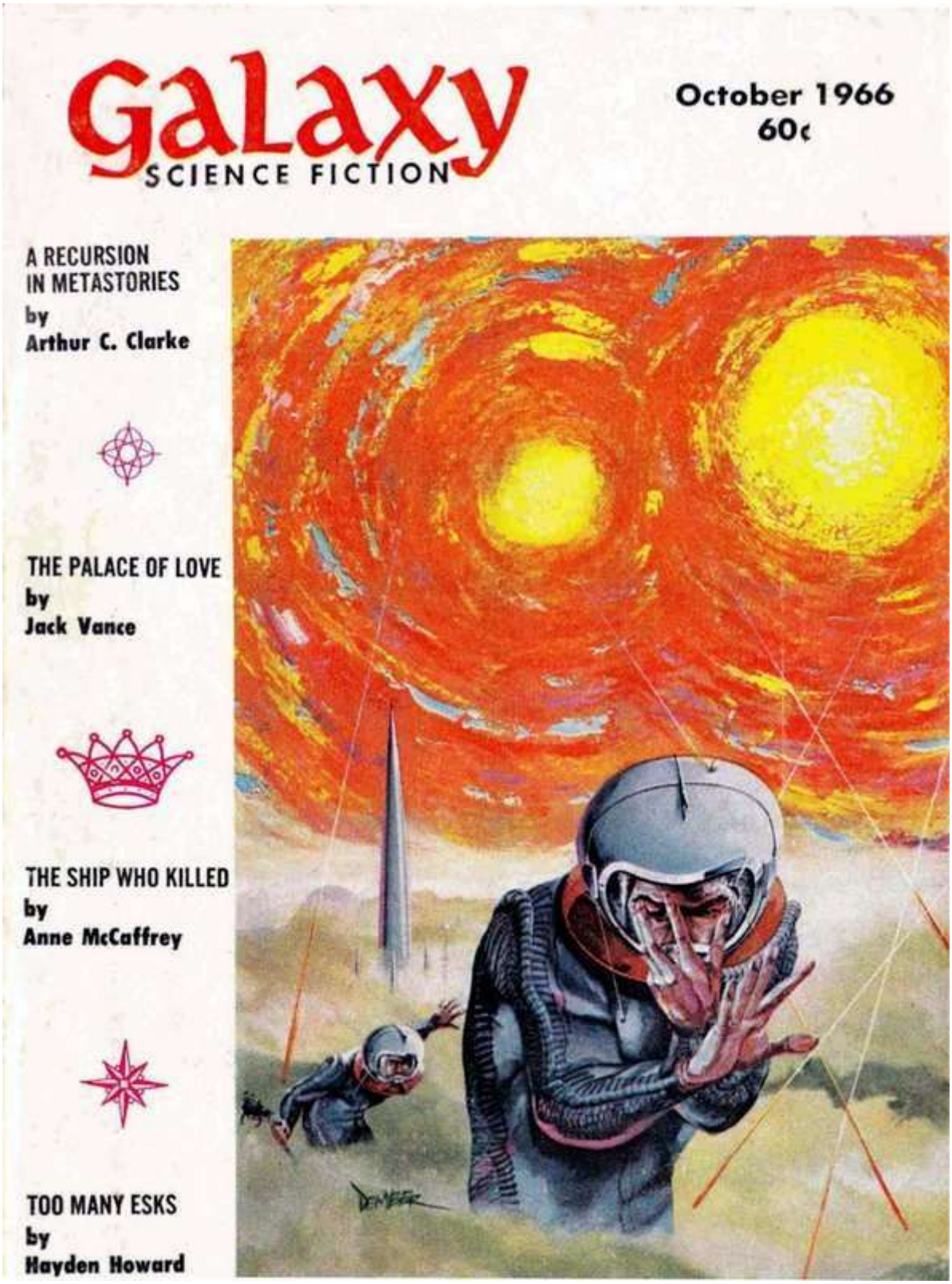

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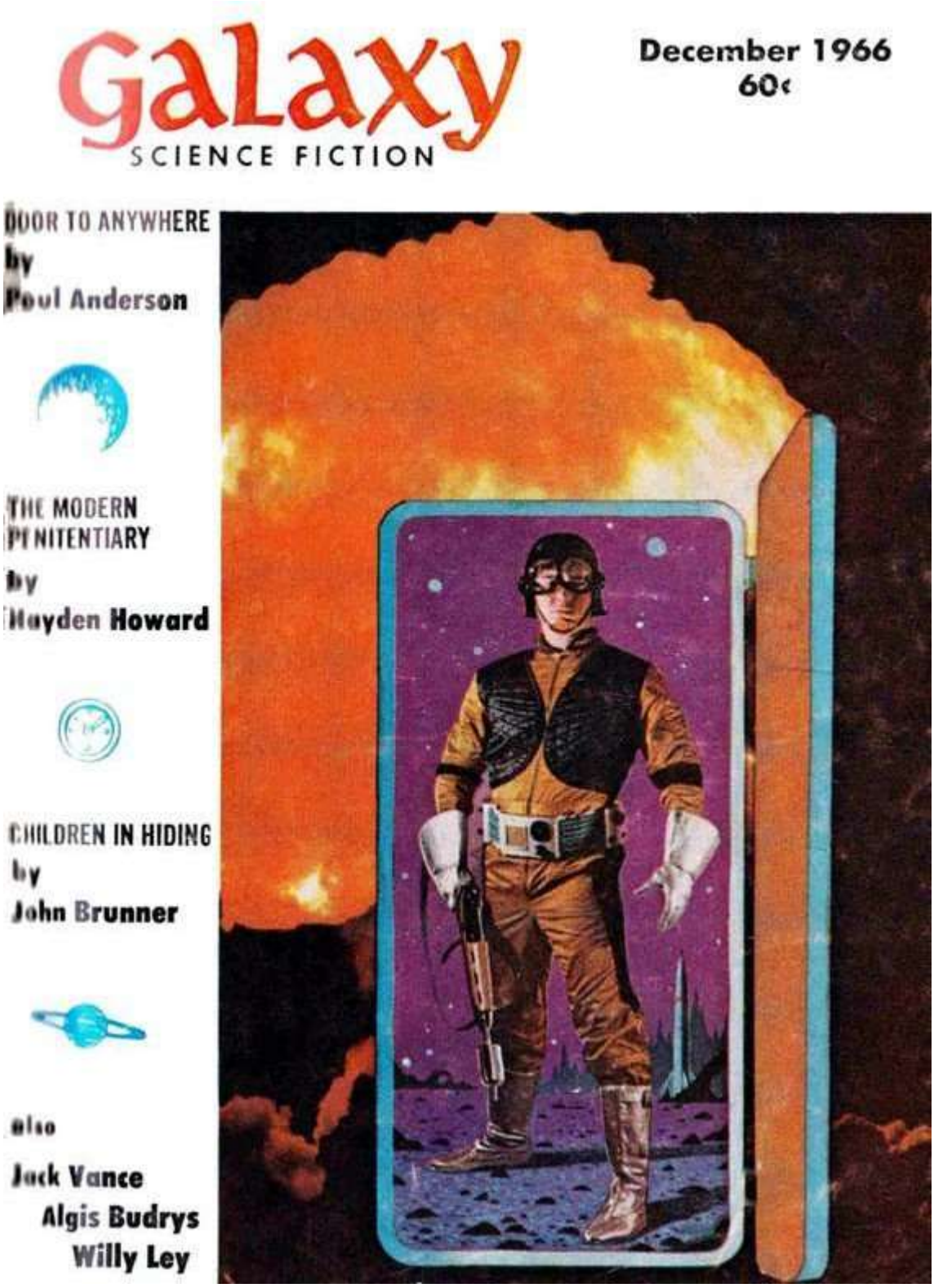

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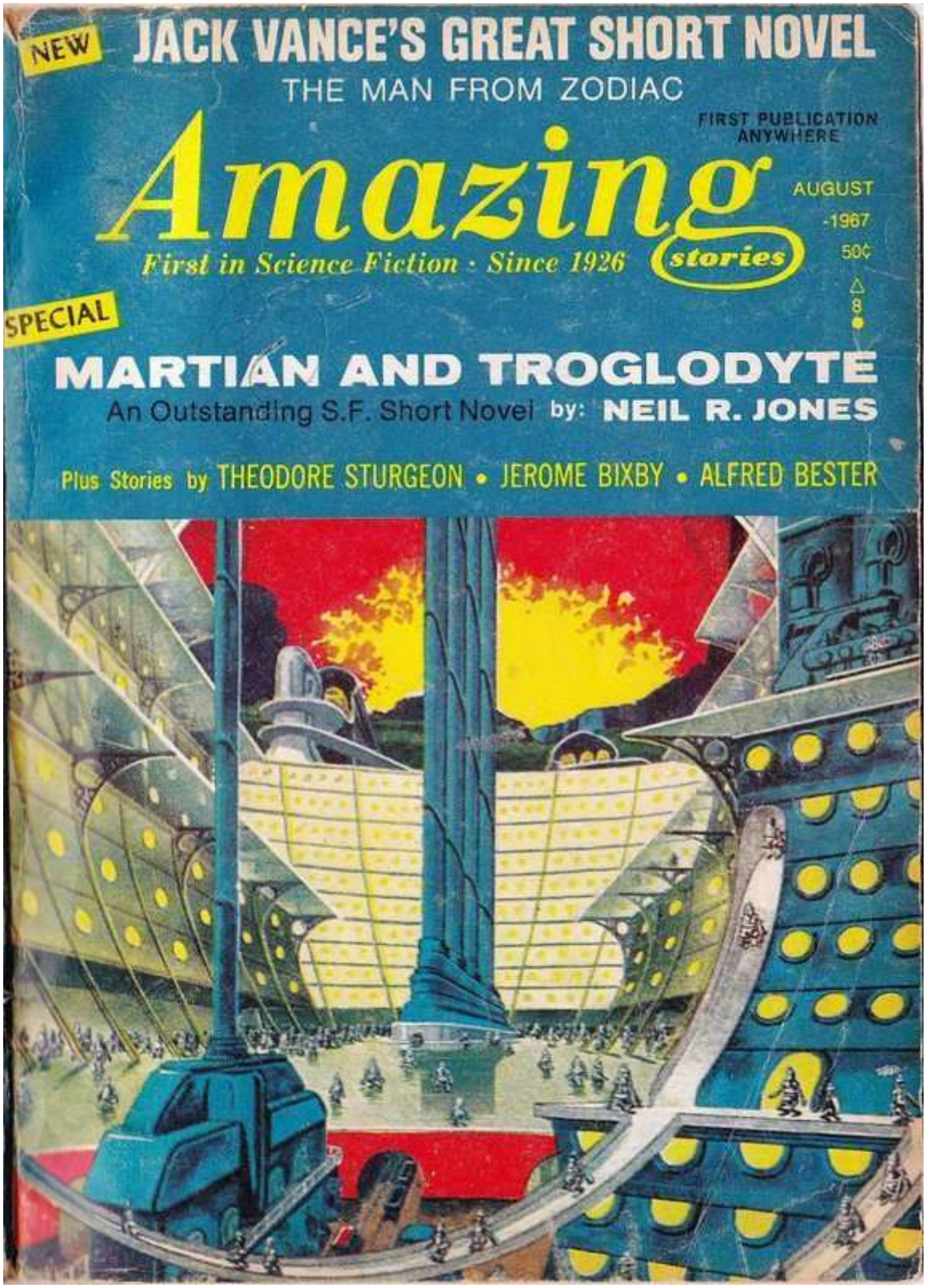
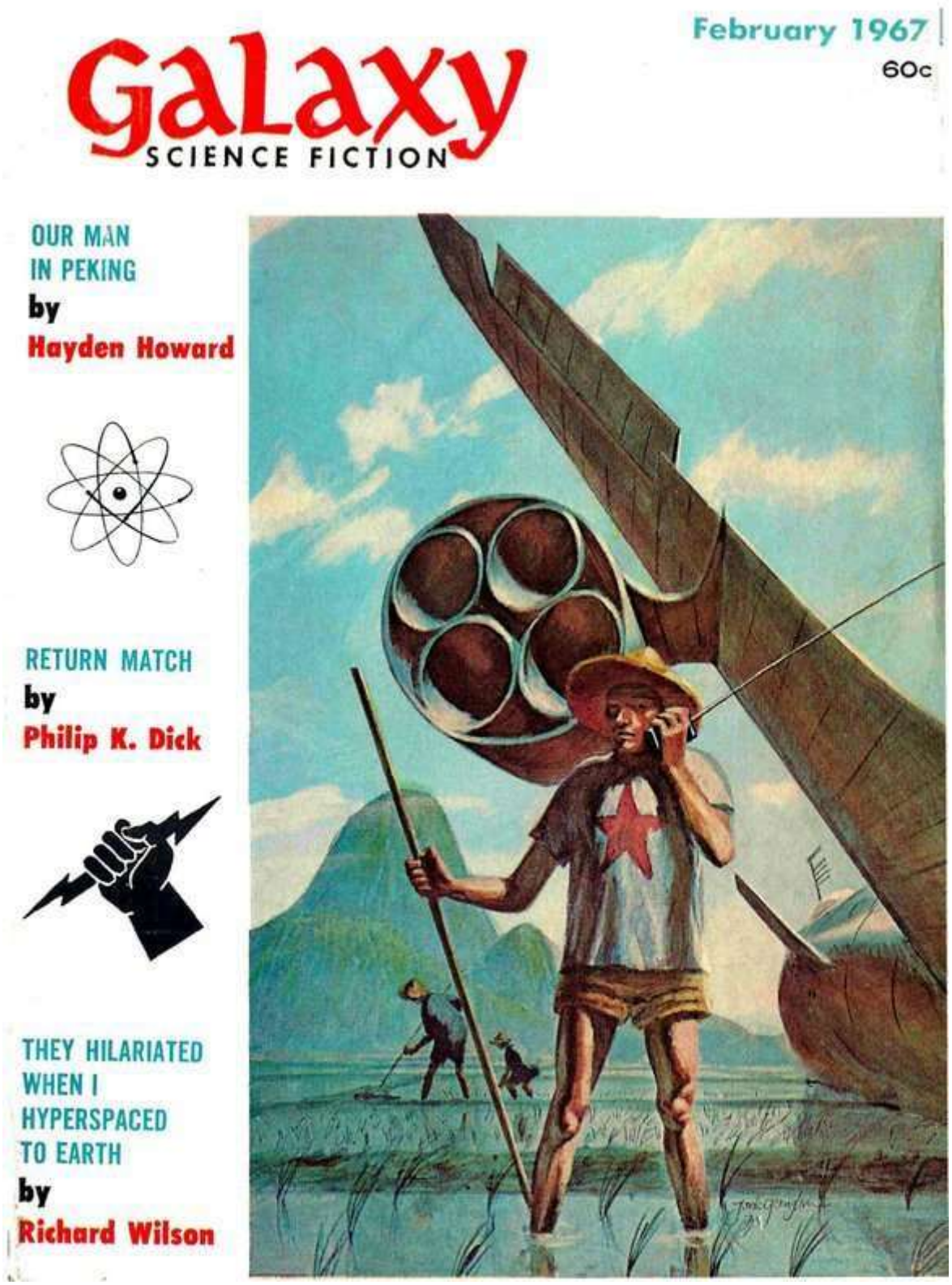


78 *1967-08 cover Frank R Paul Amazing Stories The man from Zodiac*



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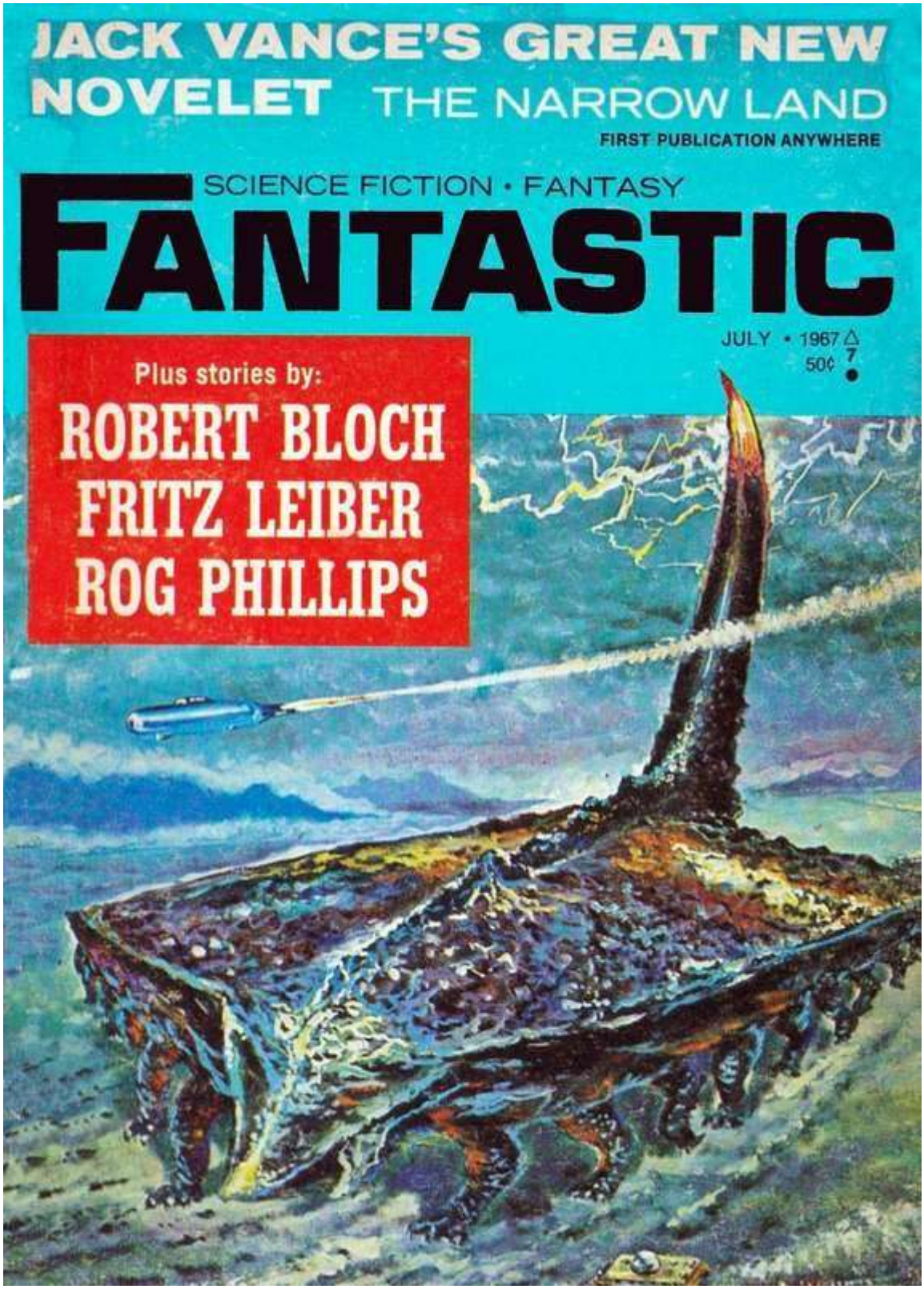
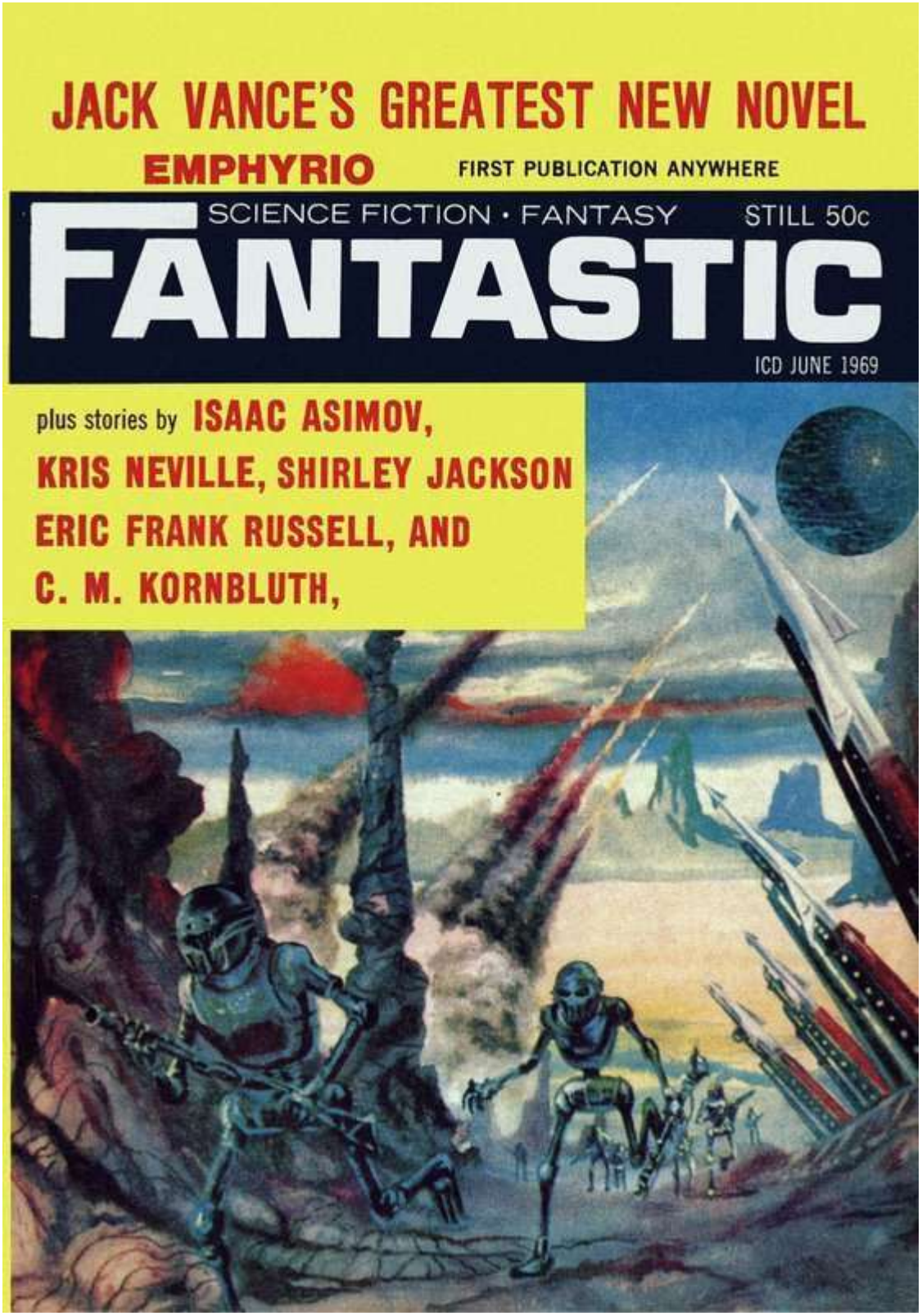
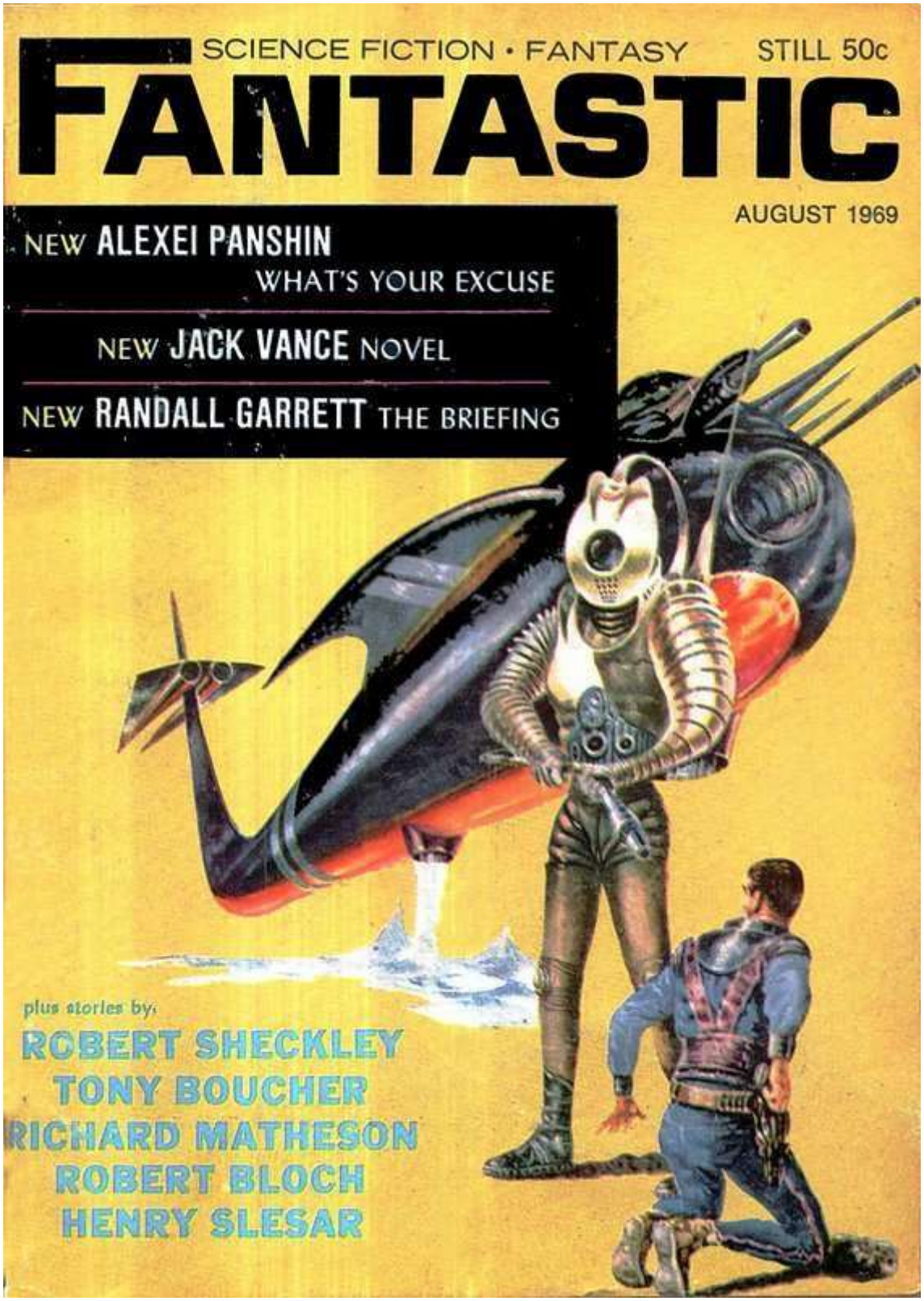


80 1967-07 cover Johnny Bruck Fantastic -The Narrow Land



81 1969-06 cover Johnny Bruck Fantastic Emphyrio



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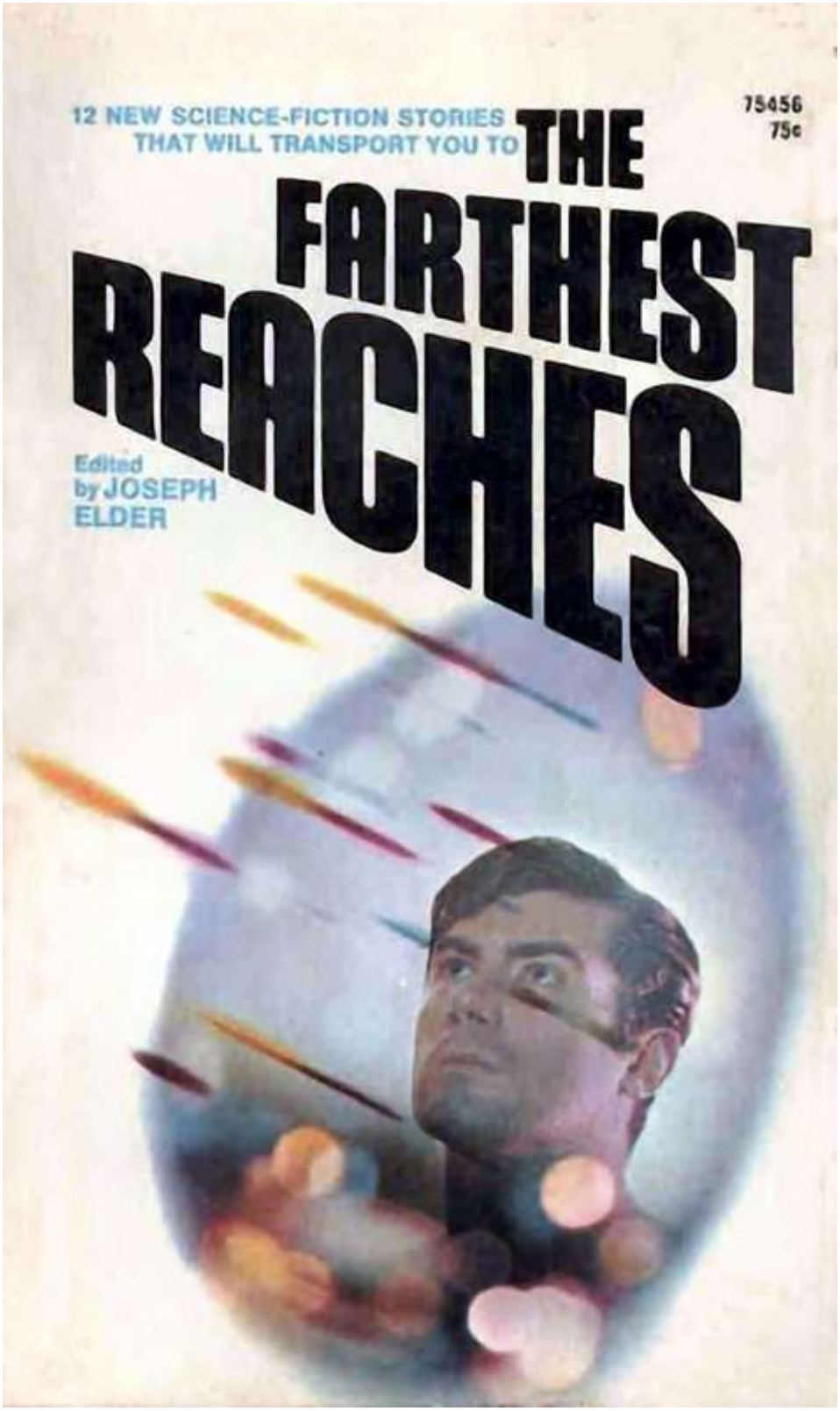

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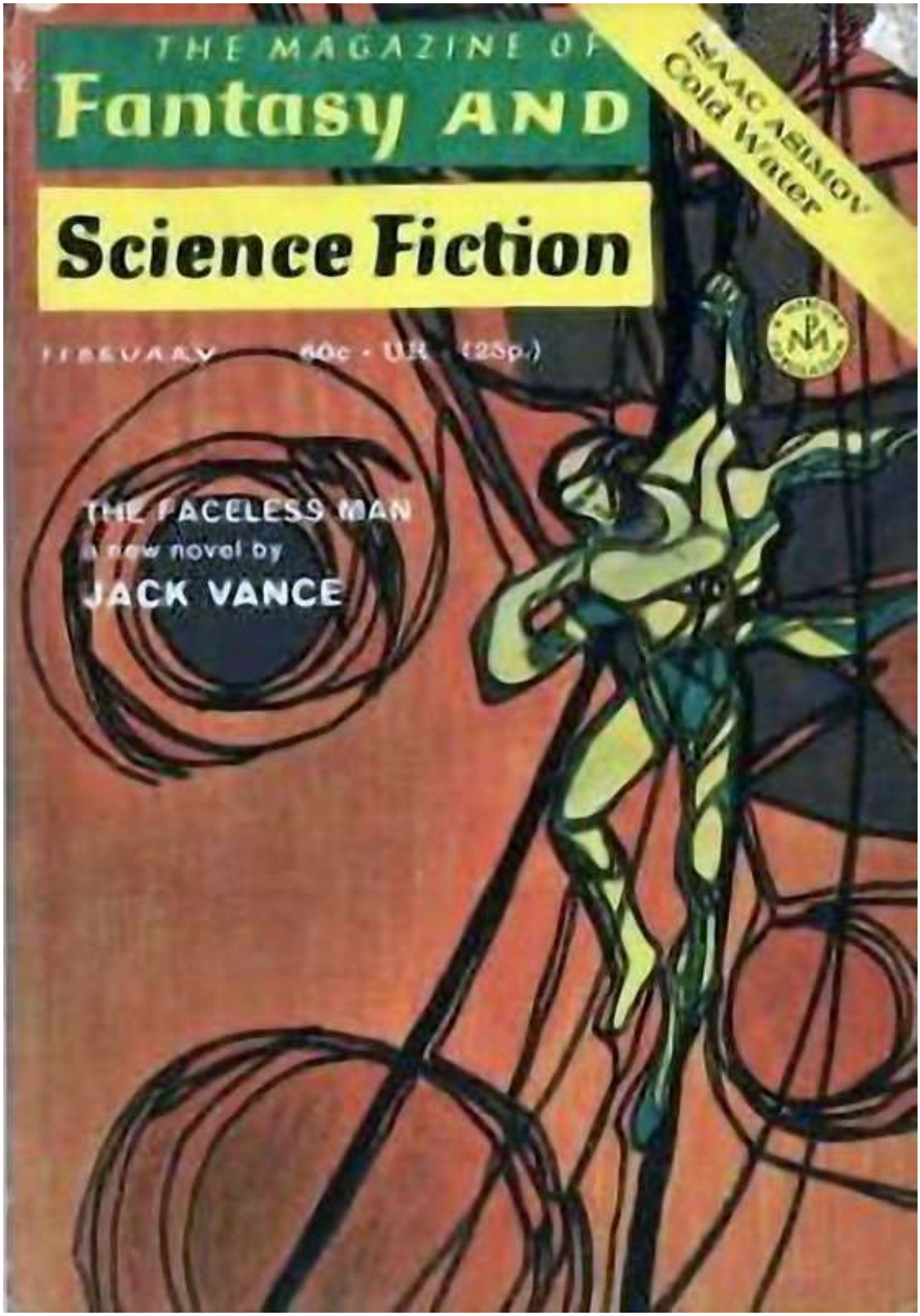
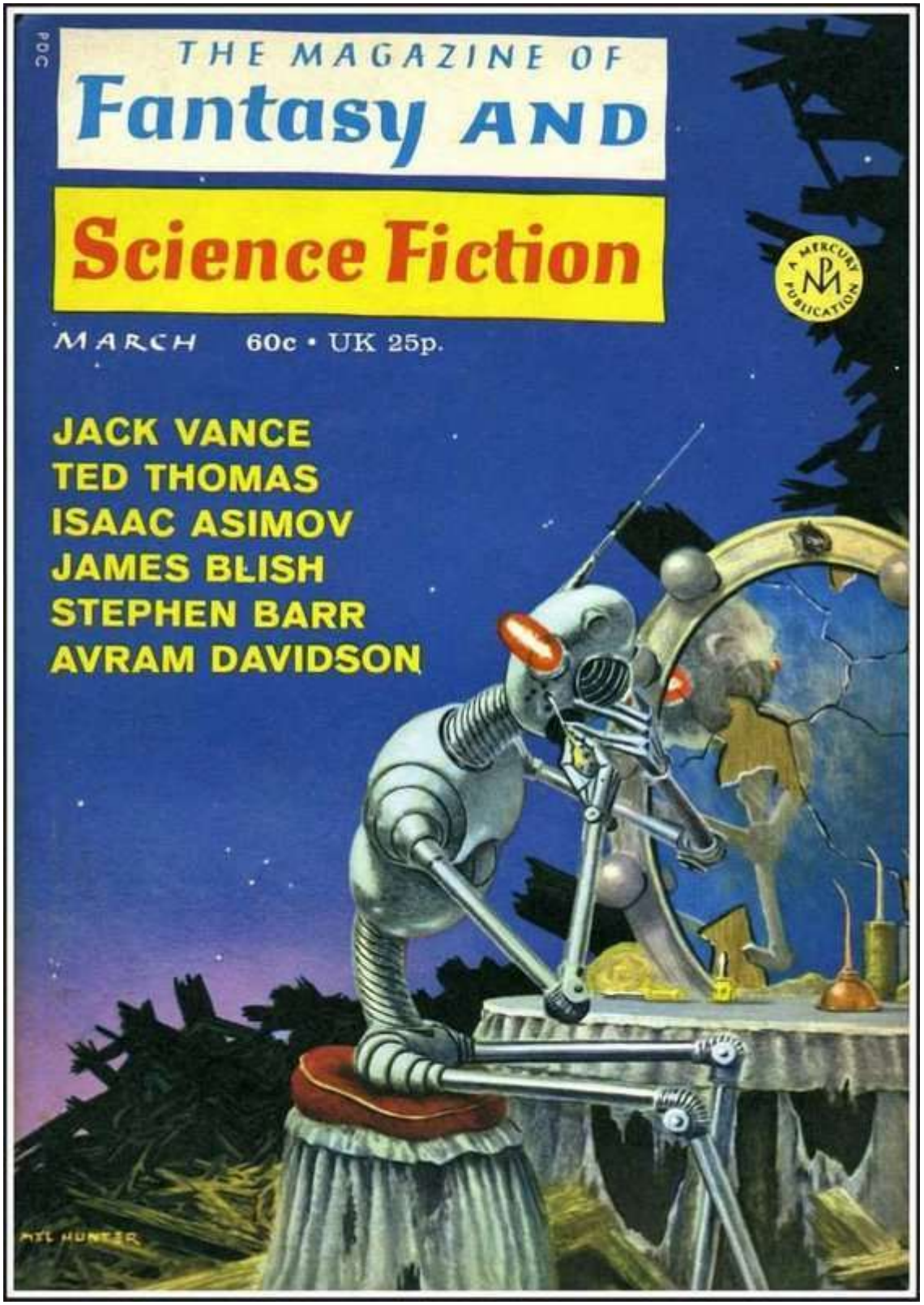
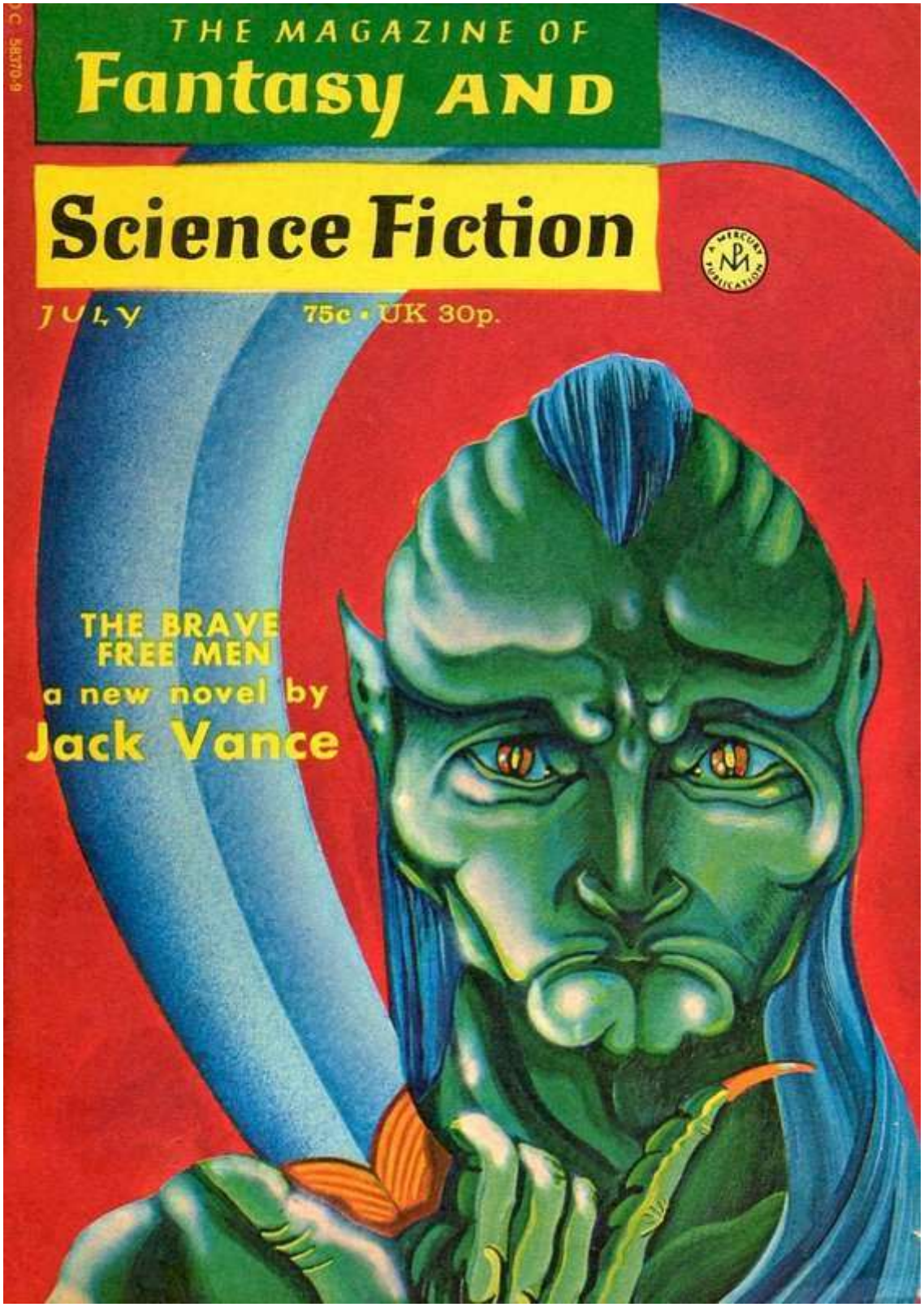


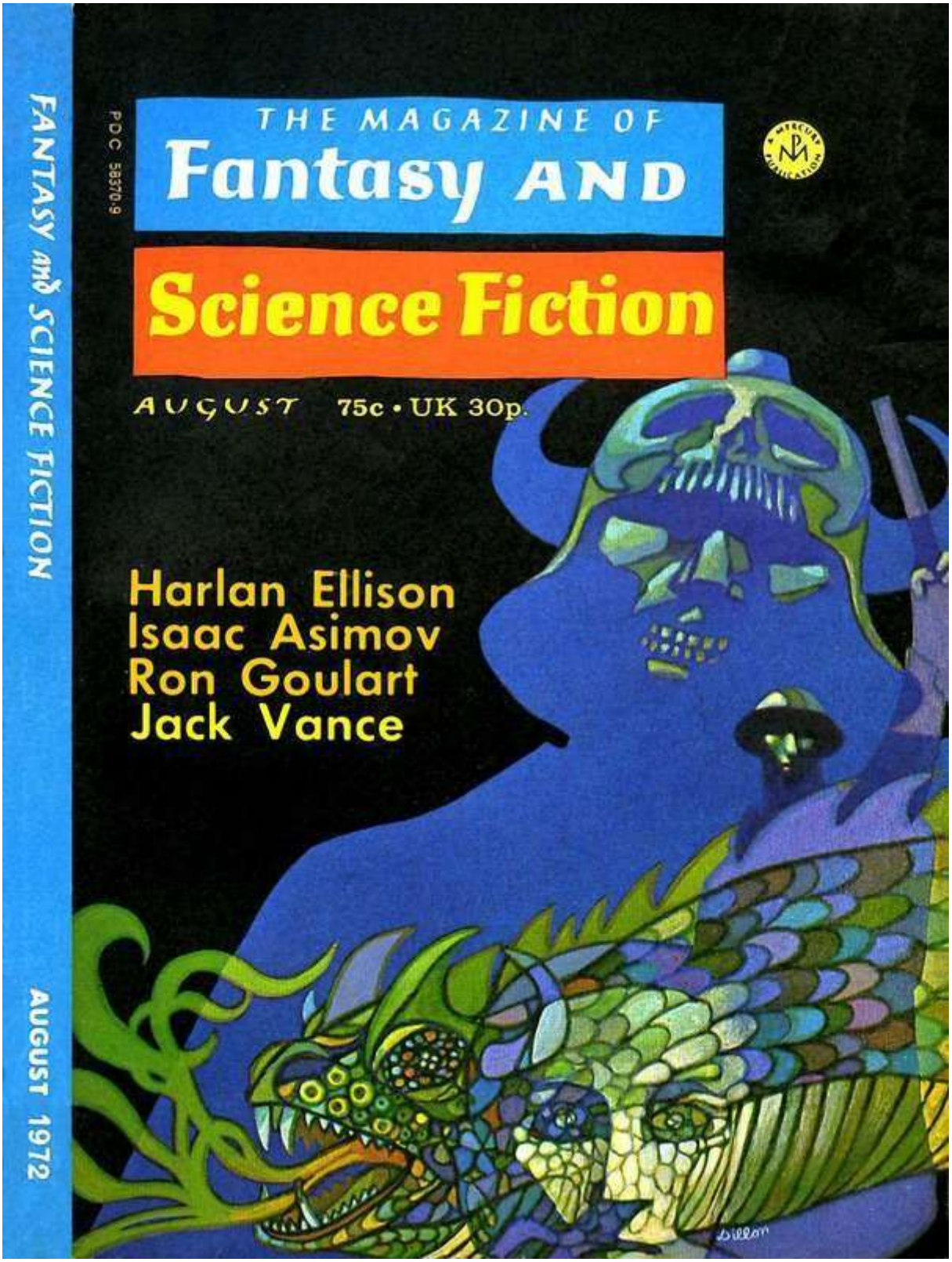
84 *1971-02 cover Jack Gaughan Fantasy and Sf mag- The Faceless man*



85 *1971-03 cover Mel Hunter Fantasy and SF mag The faceless Man 2*



86 1972-07 cover Ron Walotsky Brave free men



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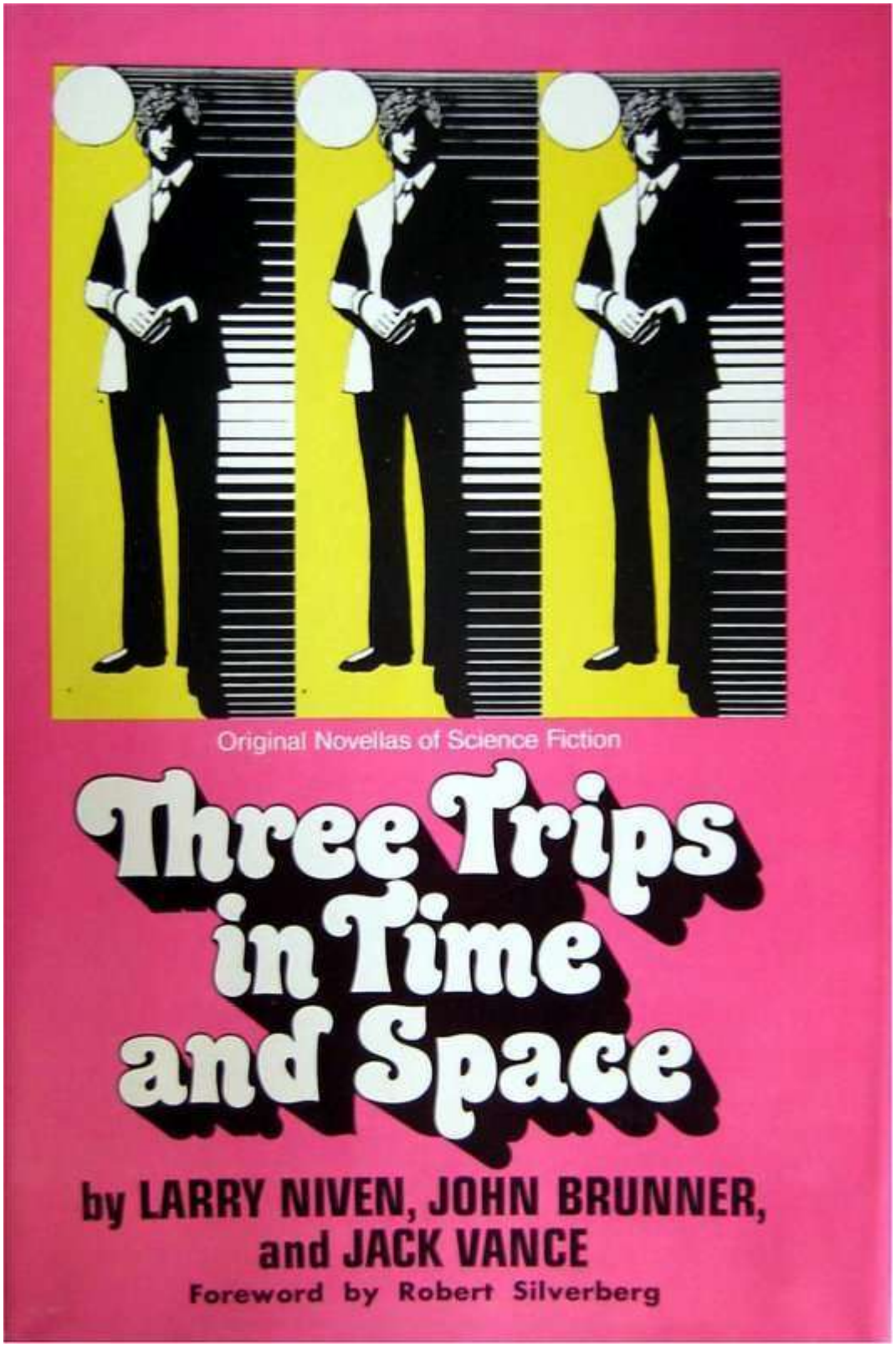
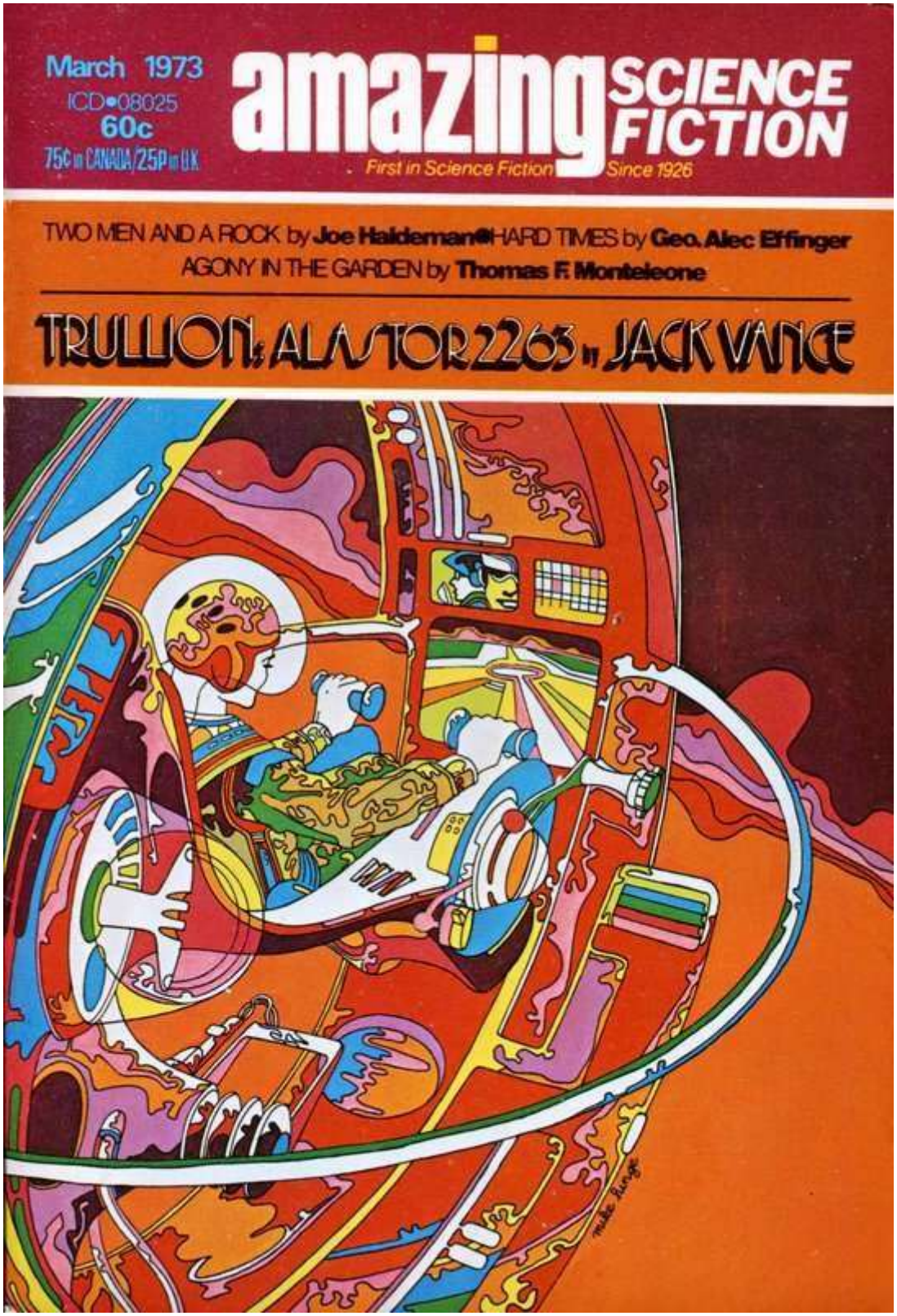


88 1973 Three trips in time and space - Rumfuddle



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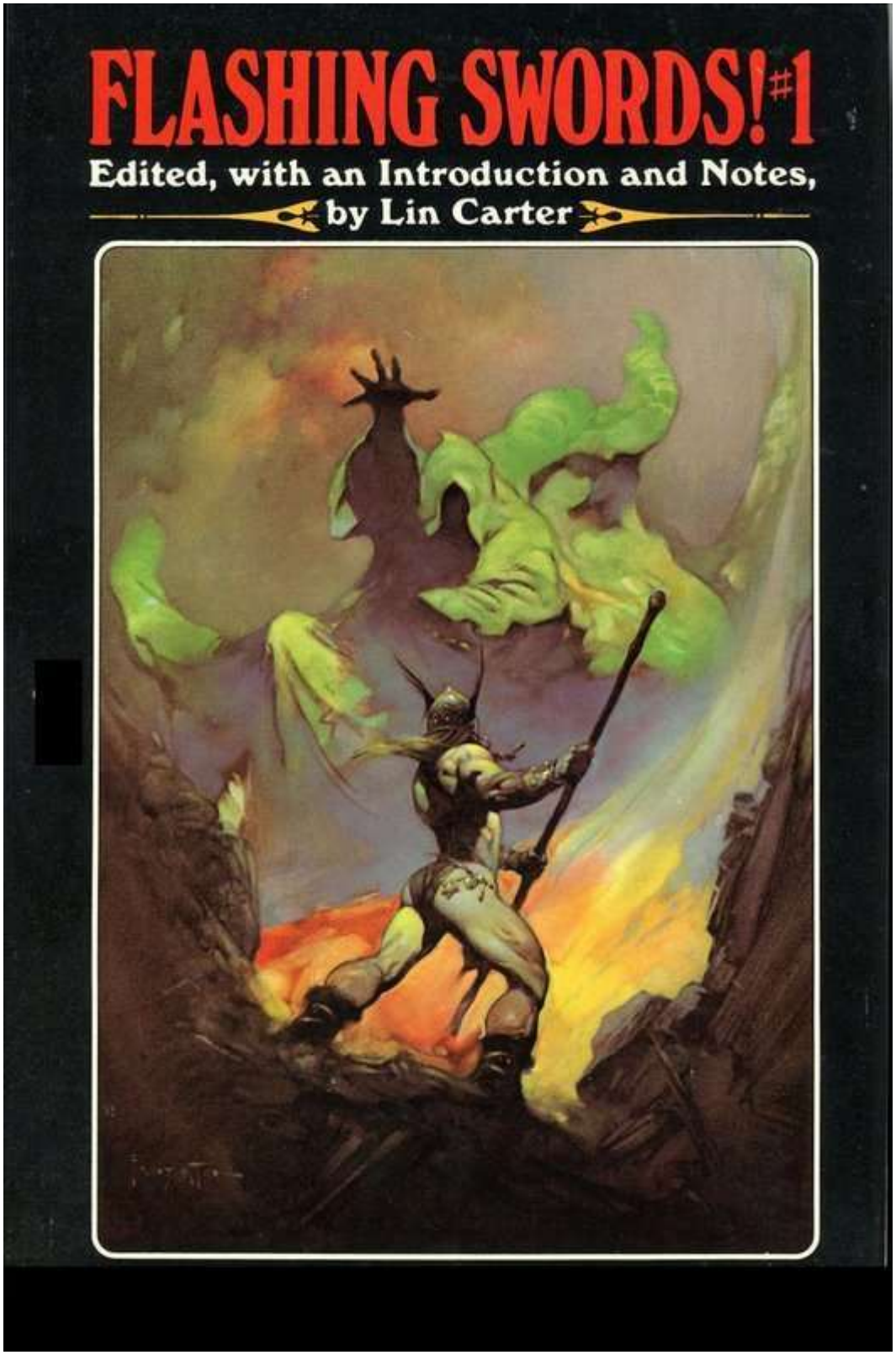

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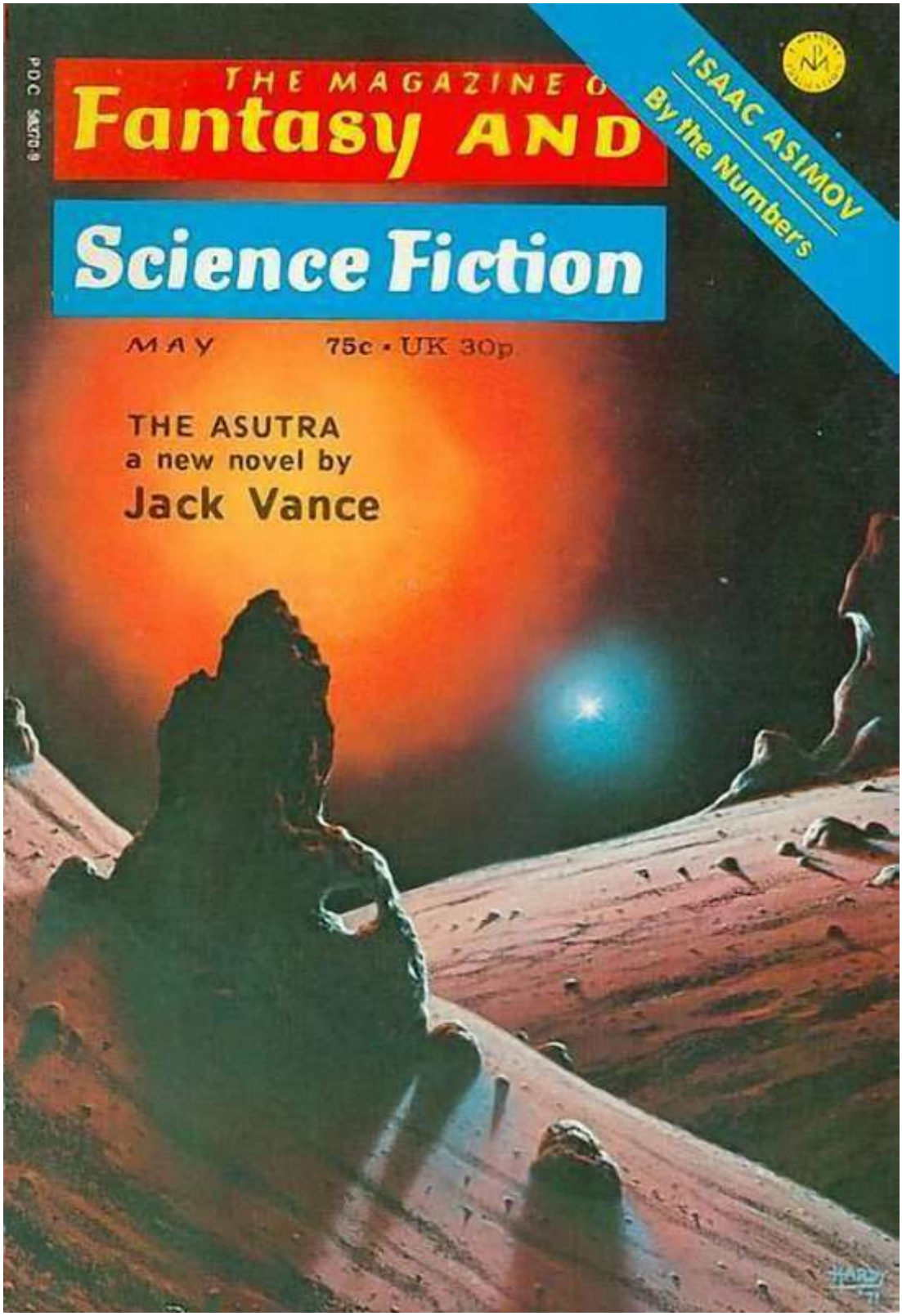
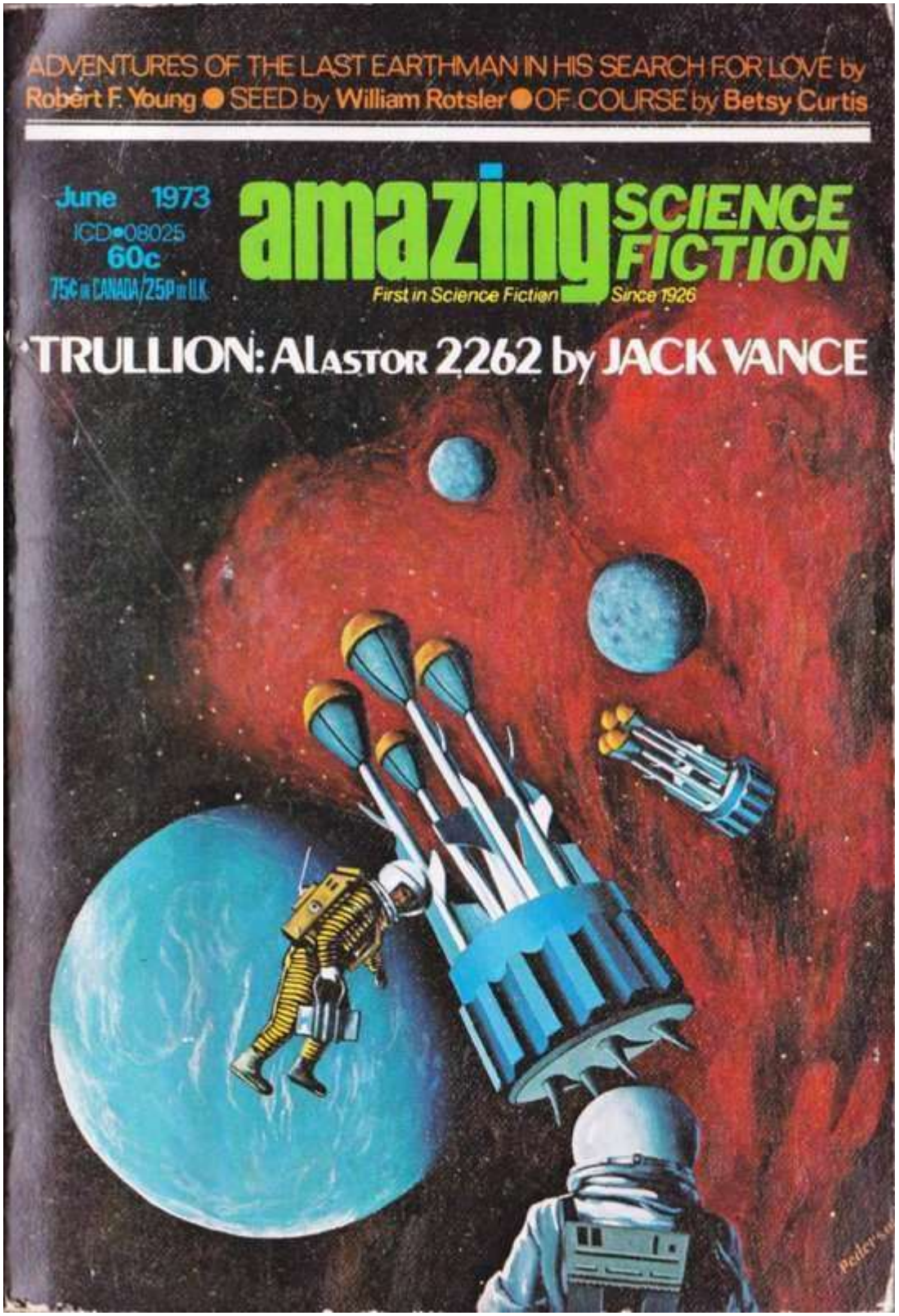


91 1973-05 cover David Hardy The-Magazine-of-Fantasy-and-Science-Fiction Asutra



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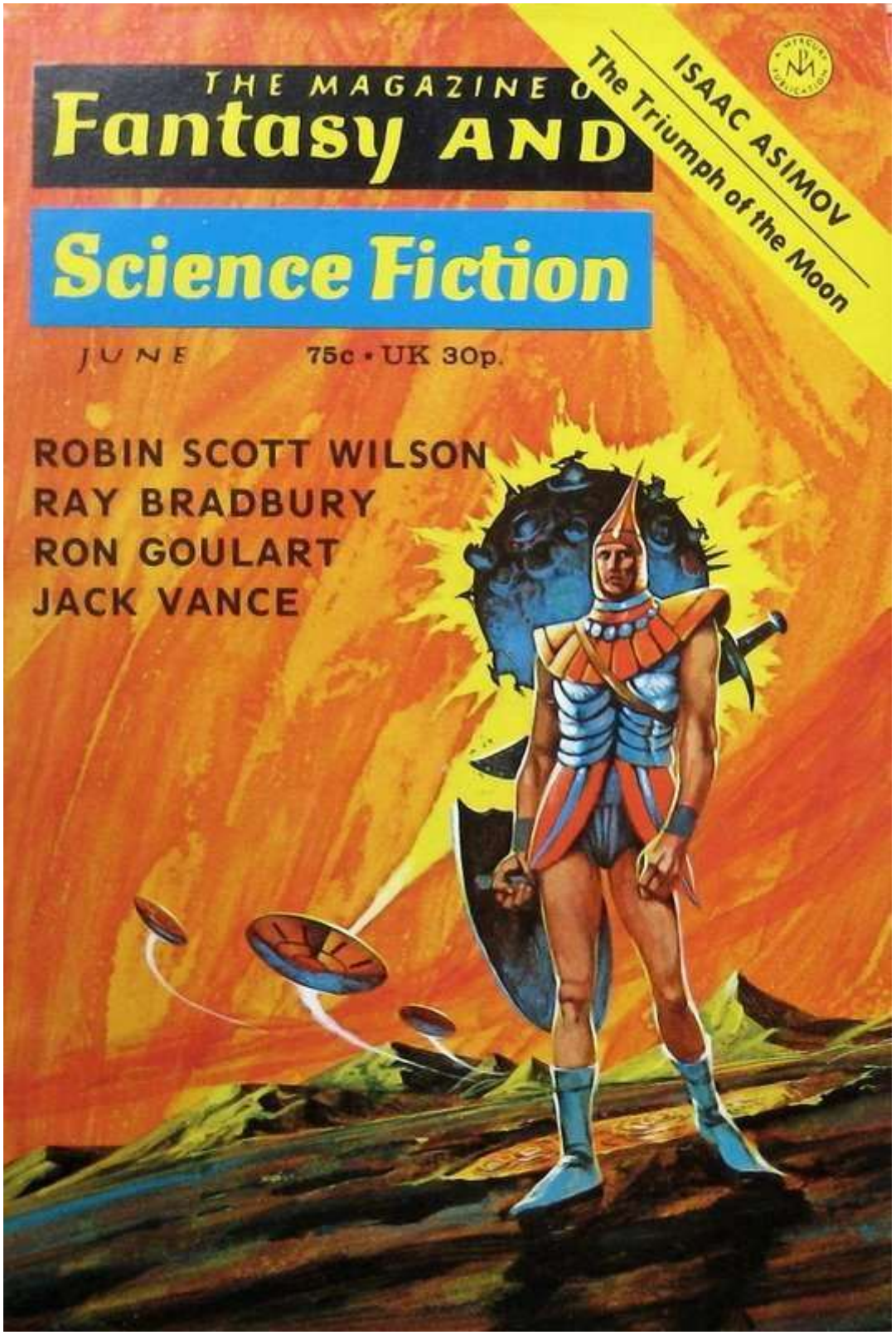

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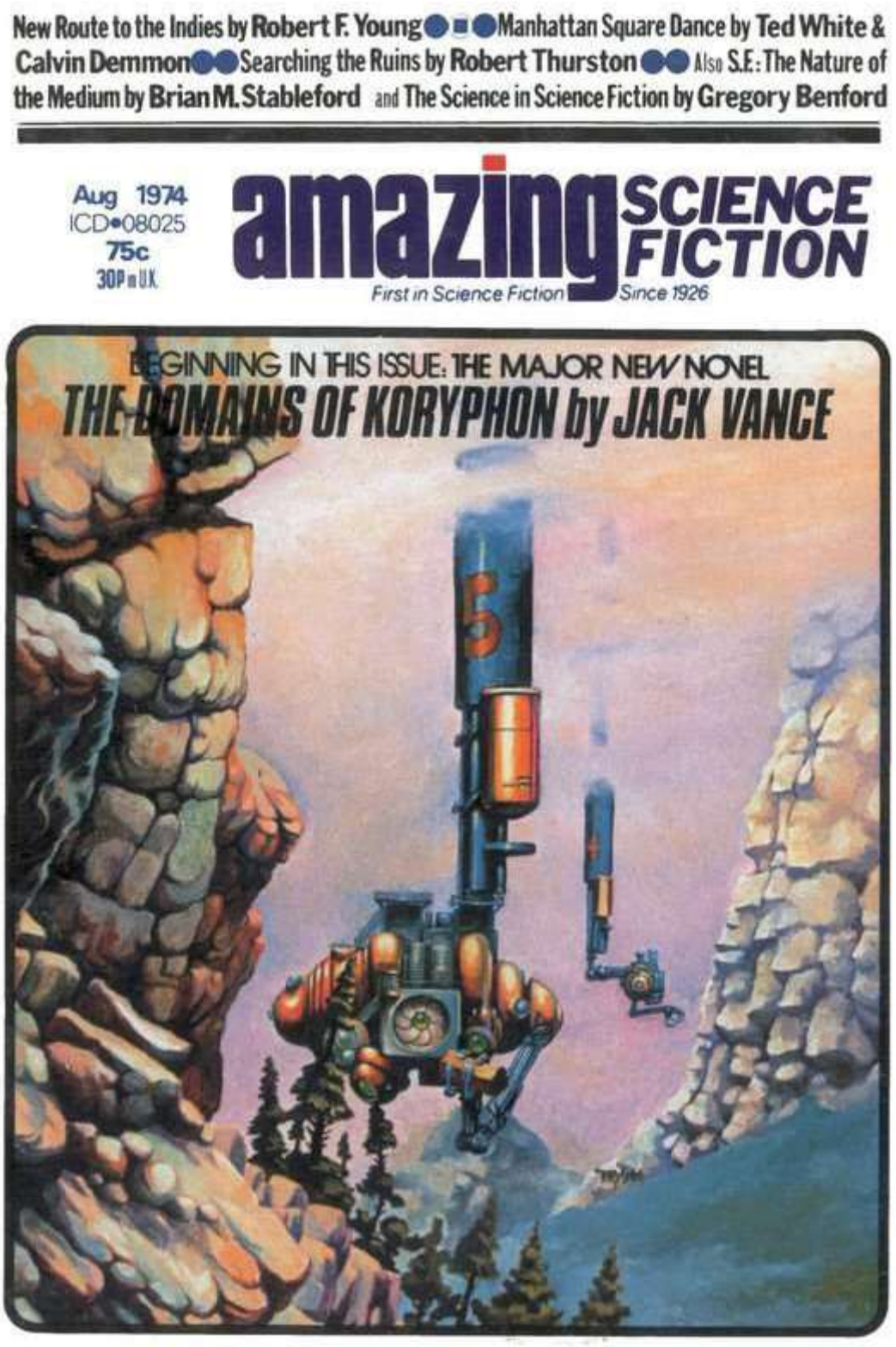

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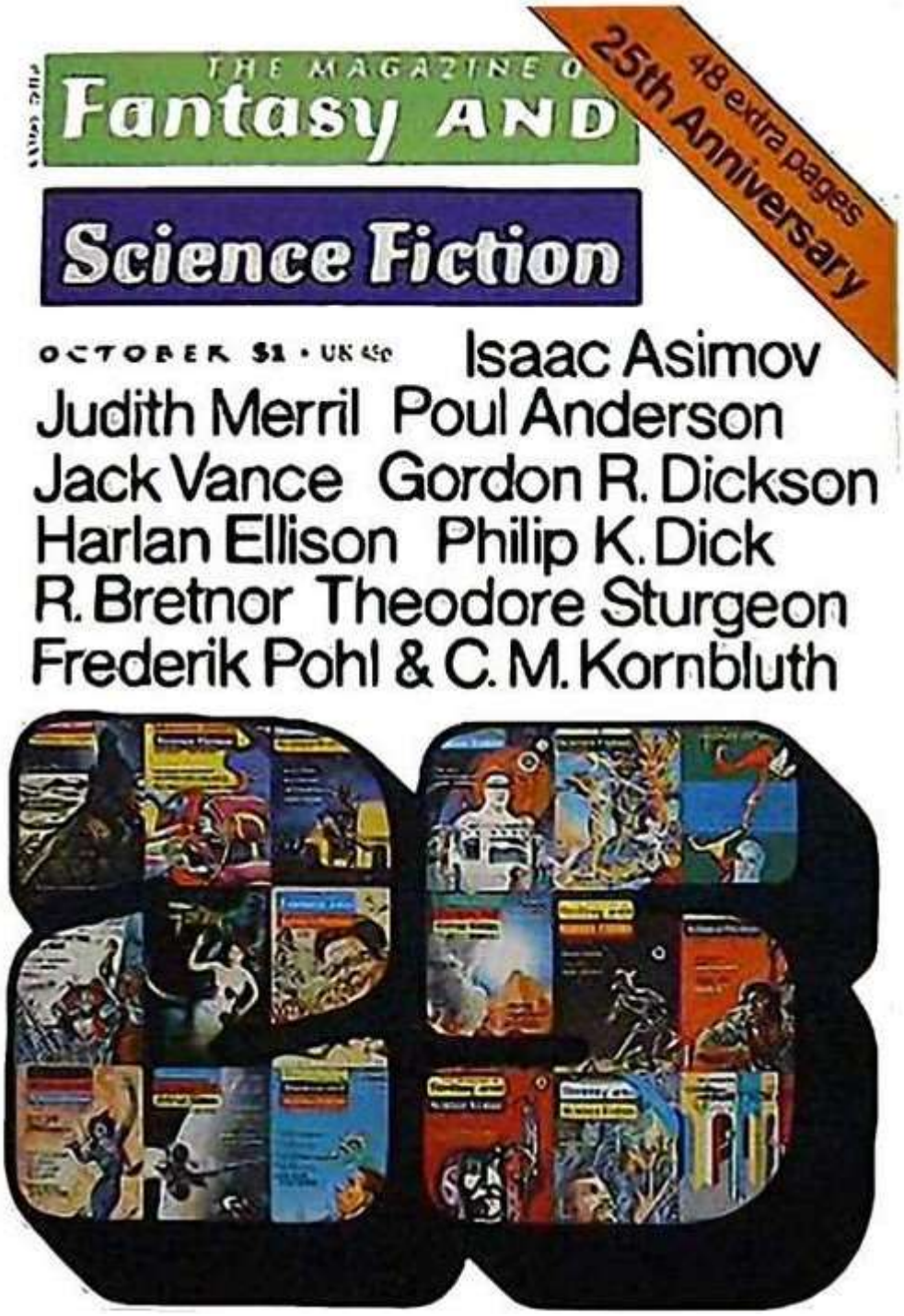

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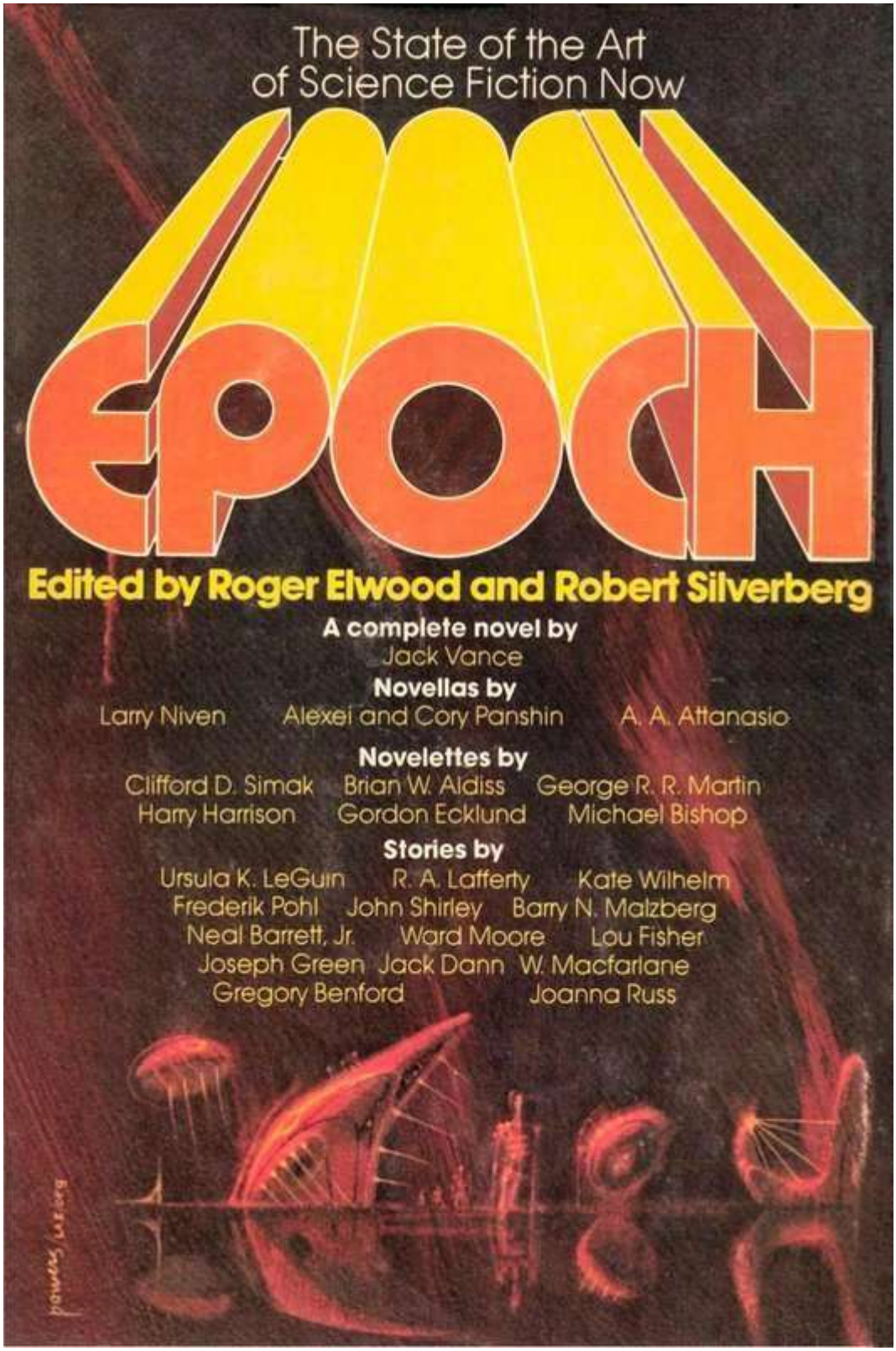

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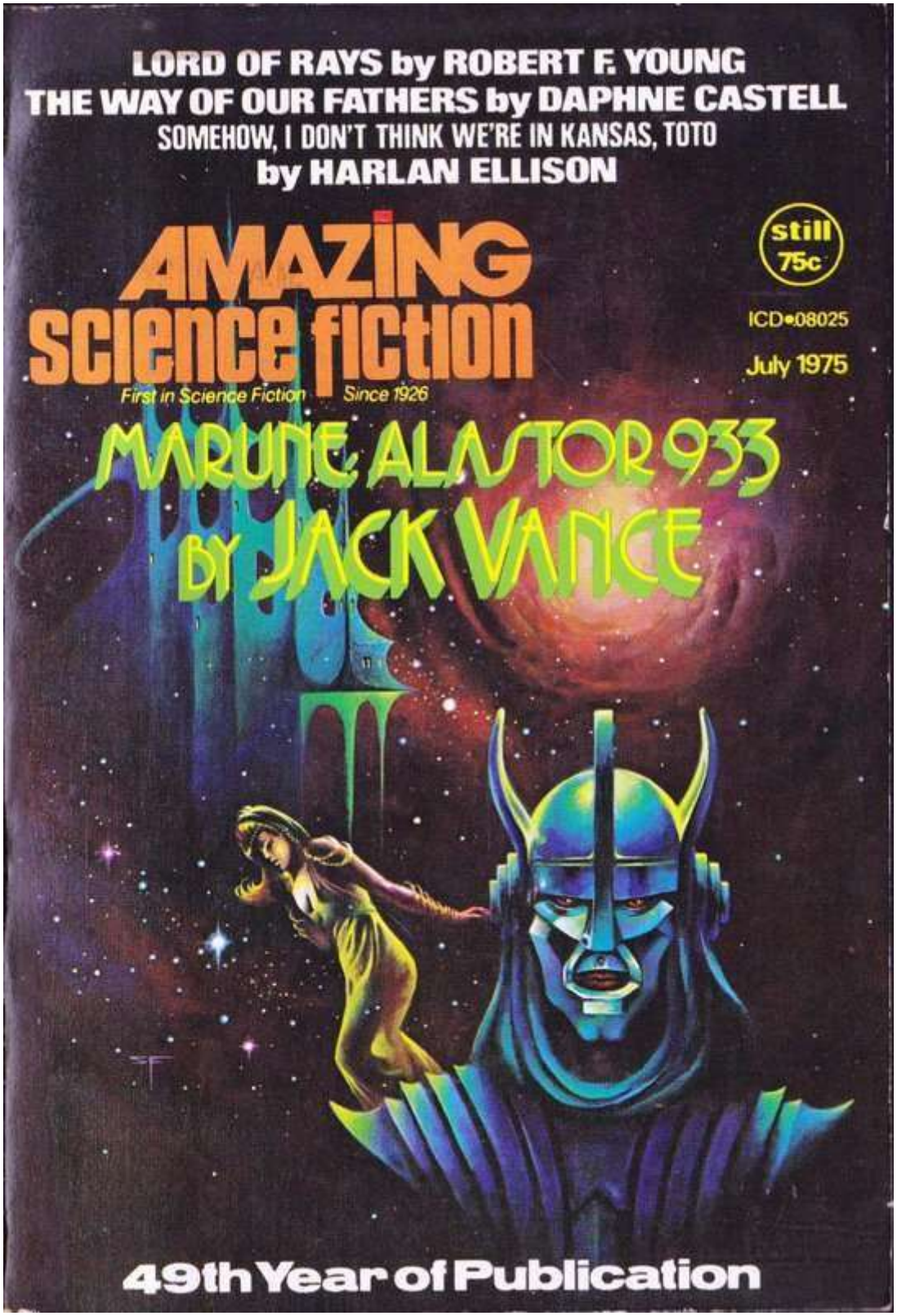

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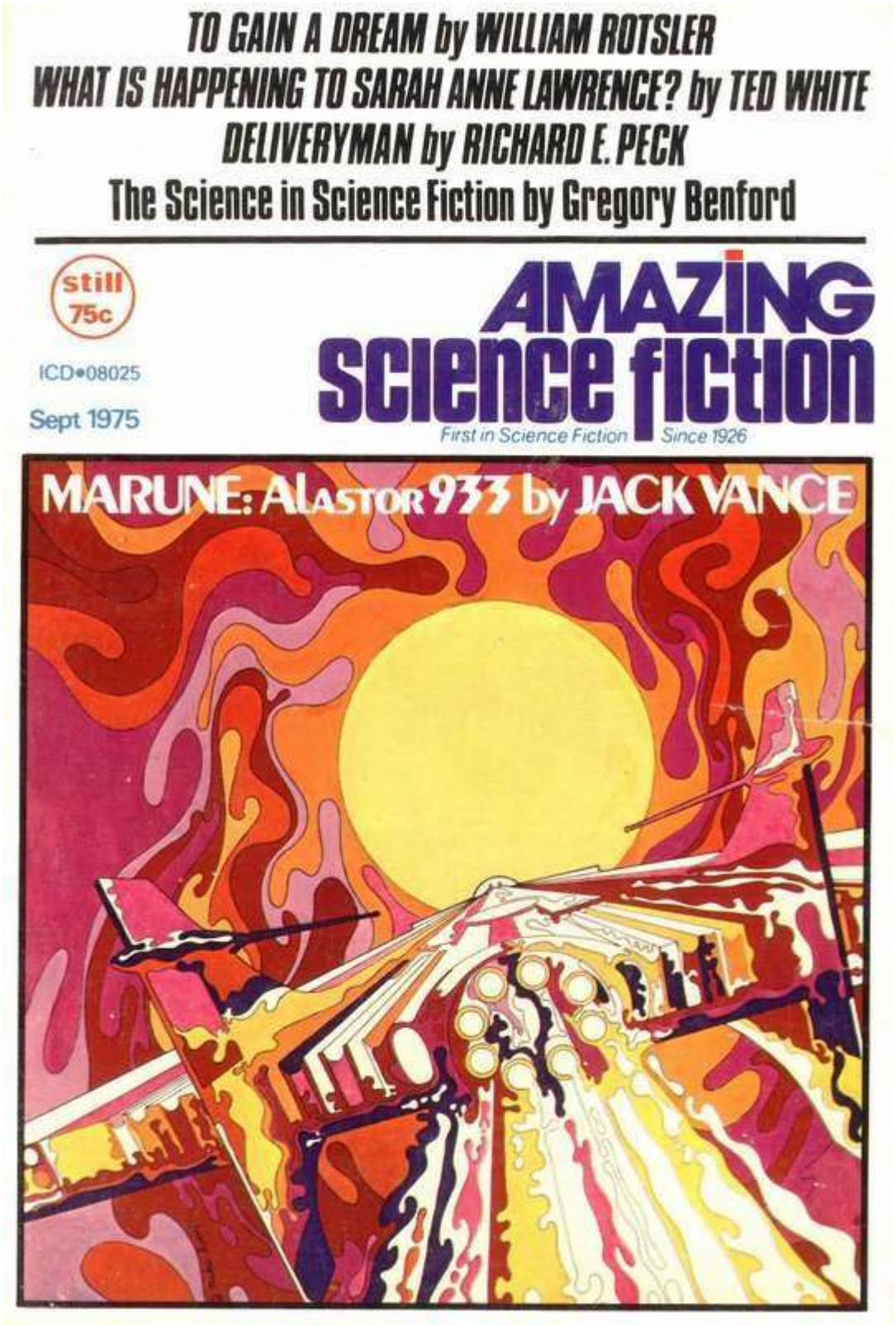

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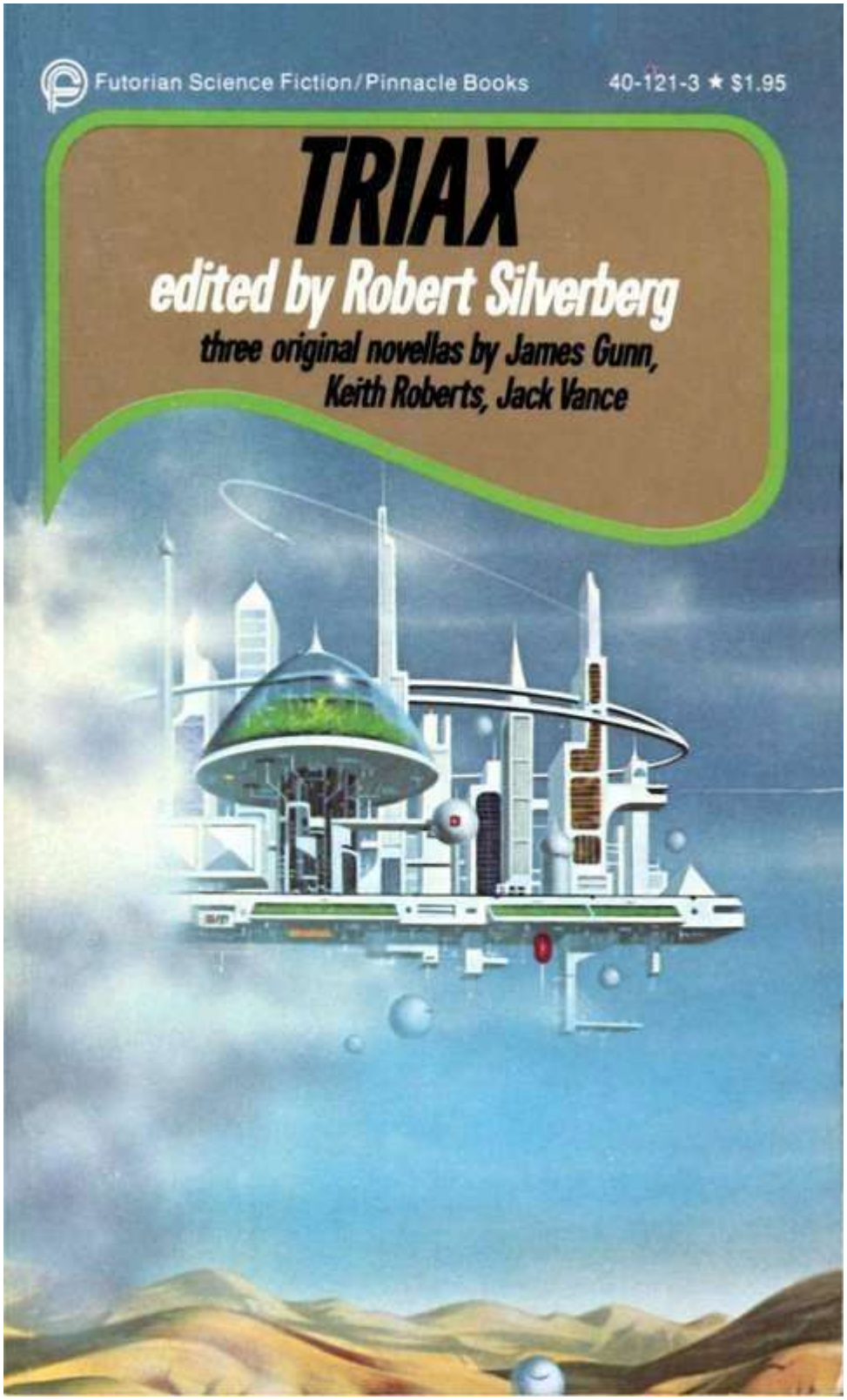

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Fantasms, Magics, and Unfamiliar Sciences
The Early Fiction of Jack Vance, 1945-1950.

By PETER CLOSE

In attempting an evaluation of the early work of Jack Vance, the first task must be to explain why the job is being undertaken at all. There are few writers who are proud of their earliest efforts, and although the current science-fiction boom has brought forward several collections of early stories from major names in the field, these are heavily freighted with apologia by authors, friends, critics, and editors. Vance himself has offered no encouragement to such a project. On the contrary, his only comment has been a courteous and laconic preference to forget all about it. In a 1976 interview he stated that he regarded his early stories, up to the publication of "Big Planet" in 1952, as an apprenticeship, and that he found it very embarrassing to look back upon them. So why should anyone else bother?

One reason, of course, is to see where Vance has come from. He has been in print since 1945, and his popularity has grown in mysterious ways. He is a writer who seems always to have been around, never quite rising from the known to the conspicuous. He did not write The Demolished Man or The Space Merchants or The Left Hand of Darkness ox The Forever War. Instead, he wrote The Dying Earth, To Live Forever, The Palace of Love, Emphyrio — all praised, all respected, but never quite reaching the wide vocal audience that makes the first rank of success.

Only in recent years has his work begun to appear in respectable editions, and it is ironic that some of his earliest novels, published two-at-a-time in those garish Ace Doubles, should now be reissued and resold on a par with his most recent and painstaking books.

He has suffered, too, from his early identification with the pulps (specifically Startling Stories and Thrilling Wonder Stories), with their associations of gaudy superficiality and adolescent preoccupation. Although he made several attempts

at publication before World War II (with the stories which eventually appeared as The Dying Earth), he first broke into print in 1945, at a time when John W. Campbell's legendary Astounding was the field's only standard of excellence. It was not until five years later that Galaxy and The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction offered fresh markets to those who did not wish to confine their work to Campbell's idiosyncratic boundaries of theme, treatment, and style. Although Vance has said that he sent all his early stories to Astounding and submitted elsewhere only on rejection, he was clearly never a "Campbell writer" in the sense that Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, and others were, despite the success of those stories which did crack the editorial barriers.

The first five years of Vance's writing career were thus spent almost entirely in the pulps. Much derided at the time, the pulps nonetheless represented a comprehensive apprenticeship for many authors. Always eager for material and unrestricted by literary pretention, the market demanded only that a writer should keep the reader reading. From the very first, Vance was able to meet this criterion.

He started with no technique except astonishing natural talent, and he learned quickly. In 1952, James Blish (writing as "William Atheling Jr.") said, in a comment on "Big Planet": "Vance himself is a fascinating study in the technical development of a freelance writer. He started with three apparently natural gifts — a free, witty, unmannered style; an almost frighteningly fertile imagination, and a special talent for the visualization of physical color and detail. Any one of these gifts in excess in a young writer can prove fatal, as they can be and often have been used to mask or substitute for the essential construction problems of story telling. Exactly this happened to Vance in his early work: he tossed off ideas, wisecracks, splashes of color and exotic proper names like a Catherine wheel, while his plotting remained rudimentary or nonexistent."

Vance had, in fact, entered the field at a time when he could learn as he went along. Free of editorial biases or constraints, he was able to develop a personal style which has evolved into one of the most distinctive and rewarding in the field. At the same time, however, his strengths, by overshadowing his weaknesses, offered him no incentive to correct his enduring problems of construction, plotting, and resolution. As a writer who has never yet found an editor consistently able to bring out the best in him, Vance has had to rely on his own commitment to his craft and his own capacity (often formidable) for self-criticism.

In consequence of this, Vance's early stories are unusually illuminating in respect to his technical development. Successive stories are almost didactic in their illustration of increasing skills in specific areas of writing technique; Vance may fumble as every beginner does, but it is nearly always possible to point to a later effort which shows that he has learned better. Some weaknesses, sadly, seem inherent. Vance will never be famous for his plotting (the meticulous precision of To Live Forever being almost the only exception) and, ironically enough, his problems in this area are least noticeable when he settles for an elementary plot structure rather than attempting sophistication.

In examining Vance's early work, then, I have chosen, perhaps churlishly, to stop just when he reached a plateau of competence. In other words, it seems to me more instructive to look at what Vance did wrong, how he stopped doing it, and also to examine the ways he has been able, despite his technical naivete, to produce work which, after thirty years, retains color, verve, wit, and excitement. In the five years elapsing between his first publication and the appearance of The Dying Earth in 1950, Vance built the foundations of a brilliant and woefully neglected career. It is no disservice to him to display the intelligence, talent, and sheer hard work which went into that critical first phase.

1945

Vance's first published story, "The World-Thinker," appeared in Thrilling Wonder Stories (Summer 1945), although an accompanying letter indicates that it was probably written during the early part of the war and delayed by Vance's eventful spell in the Merchant Marine. The story has a curiously uneven texture, in which episodes of unremarkable formula fiction alternate with extraordinarily vivid scenes of surrealistic imagination, suggesting a lackadaisical draft extensively embroidered. This was to be characteristic of much of Vance's early work.

The story opens as routine space opera. The dauntless Inspector Lanarck of the Tellurian Corps of Investigation blasts off in pursuit of Kenna Parker, who has inherited a set of equations describing a new form of energy. Having declined the compulsory purchase suggested by the Empire, she has broken jail and made a run for it with the equations. Within a couple of pages, Lanarck has tracked her space-boat to a desolate planet, where a single ancient building stands in the

desert. Inside dwells a mysterious alien, Laoome, who conducts a telepathic conversation. Laoome is capable of constructing entire worlds through mental effort alone, in alternate universes. In these created worlds, complete to the last detail, Laoome creates or destroys as he chooses, and he has chosen to create a refuge for Kenna Parker. He allows Lanarck to follow, leaving the two to resolve their conflict without intervention.

Laoome's motivations remain obscure, as does his background; he has been exiled from his home world of Narfilhet for milennia, although we never learn why. And he is aging; at one point, as he displays his powers to Lanarck, his control falters, with bizarre results to his created reality. With Lanarck's arrival on the created world, the story veers once more into formula: there's a shipwreck; exotic natives who worship Kenna Parker as a High Priestess; some slapdash action in which the only available "needlebeam" changes hands several times, etc.

There is little opportunity to carp, however; Vance suddenly takes off on a magnificent tour-de-force of imagination. In a splendidly ominous scene, a vast circular cloud erupts from the horizon; Lanarck realizes in terror that Laoome has once more lost control of his creation. Billions of tiny crimson animalcules rain from the sky, suddenly changing into blue manikins three inches high, which swarm singing over the horrified natives. Black pyramids sprout from the ground and shoot miles into the sky, which alters color to an unimaginable tint. The ground begins to dissolve. In an apocalyptic climax, the sun curdles into a segmented slug-like behemoth which crawls down the sky towards the planet. As gravity, matter, and light begin to mutate, Lanarck makes his escape with Kenna Parker (a routine impersonation plot-twist, preserving the romantic interest, goes almost unnoticed), and even as their space-boat turns into a living creature they reach the gate in space and return to Laoome's planet.

Only a few loose ends remain to be tied, strictly according to convention. Vance's explicit moral point, somewhat labored, is presented as an aphorism — "better that pins prick a million than that a sword be thrust into one" — and the story concludes abruptly with Lanarck's offstage killing of Laoome, justified by the pain Laoome has caused his created beings. Simultaneously, Kenna Parker, rather than to deliver such power to anyone, destroys the equations which originally caused all the trouble, and the story ends with the contrast of the two moral positions — her rejection of power and Lanarck's use of it to prevent a greater evil. Unsatisfactory and awkward though the resolution may be, the

relationship of power and suffering is a recurrent moral conundrum in much of Vance's later work and is at the heart of all his major novels.

The story stands as an impressive debut flawed by formula plot, characterization, and pacing, but it revealed Vance's extraordinary imagination, gift for dialogue, and narrative skill. Recurring themes and preoccupations are already here — the concept of private worlds, strong female characters, the sea, paranormal powers, the pursuit of a criminal. Studded with exotic detail and elegant dialogue, powerfully vivid and fast-moving, disappointing and flat in resolution, "The World-Thinker" foreshadows the best and worst of Vance's writing.

1946

A year later Vance published "Planet of the Black Dust" in Startling Stories. An atrocious farrago of space-piracy, raking over most of the traditional seafaring cliches in a perfunctory manner, it did nothing to confirm his initial promise.

The story could usefully be included in a course on fiction writing, containing as it does almost every technical blunder imaginable. Vance changes viewpoint characters several times (occasionally within paragraphs), to no purpose and with none of the cues normally used to signal such a shift. Crucial aspects of the plot are wedged into the action in clumsy passages of exposition. Motivations are abrupt and sketchy. Characterization consists of physical descriptions and sinister stage directions. On top of all of this, the pace is frenetically confusing.

The plot concerns a space-freighter, described and handled exactly as if it were a tramp-steamer, on its way somewhere with a cargo of rare essences. The captain and mate, stamped as blatant hoodlums by Vance's crude characterization, have conspired to deliver the ship into the hands of notorious space-pirate "Killer" Donahue (although the details are not made clear until much later in the story). The constant exchanging of meaningful glances, mysterious and unexplained activities, and various unsubtle maneuvers make it obvious to the eventual hero, Holderlin ("second mate and quartermaster"), that all is not well. As Vance wisely admits, "Even a child would by now have been warned by the happenings aboard the Perseus."

So Holderlin suspects chicanery when given the order: "Take her five degrees closer to the star, Mr. Holderlin. We're some what off course, and the gravity will swing us back around."

When the fake accident duly occurs — "Steering jets fused, Captain That cheap lining they put in at Aureolis has given out" — he allows himself to be maneuvered into a lifeboat with the "half-mad Callistonian cook," while the conspirators take the other one, which they believe is the only one with fuel and supplies (except that Holderlin has changed the fuel and supplies back, you see). In the next paragraph, the cook goes mad. Holderlin suddenly remembers a previous incident involving cannibalism in a lifeboat, which only this cook survived. The cook produces a knife and stabs himself "spasmodically" in the throat and dies.

After various nautical maneuvers (unconvincing in space), Holderlin disables the approaching pirate ship. He is able to do this because it happens to be identical to one of his former ships, and so he knows that it can be crippled by firing at "a small drain, the Achilles' heel of the heavy armor." Holderlin lands the Perseus by an unbelievable method which involves mooring his lifeboat to its "forward tow ring," then jockeying it down by means of two cords running from the lifeboat to the ship's controls. The planet turns out to be very black and dusty (hence the title) and also supports some silly-looking aliens, promptly filed away for future reference.

The pirates make contact by radio, bluster a bit, then retreat into the scenery. Holderlin goes off to find some clay (apparently the only raw material required to re-line those fused steering jets) and inveigles an alien into carrying for him. Enter the villains. After much chattering of needlebeams, Holderlin has them in his power. Both sides snarl away at each other in a remarkably juvenile manner, but eventually Holderlin blows up the pirate ship after a great deal of impenetrable scheming and a ludicrous scene in which one of the villains goes mad and attacks his crony with a cry of "You white-faced dog, you've ruined me!"

I have dealt with this story at cruel length to establish the level of Vance's technique at that time, although I am inclined to believe that this story possibly originated from an early stage of his pre-publication career. Occasional descriptive passages show some sparks of the later panache, but the dialogue is banal, the plot riddled with logical and motivational holes, and the style graceless, frantic, and wooden. The story also includes, disquietingly, the first appearance of a characteristic theme — the semi-intelligent natives who are moved hither and yon as the plot demands, with no suggestion of any moral

imperative. In this instance, Holderlin blasts them down casually for no comprehensible reason; the remark "Can't have any talebearers" is meaningless in context.

"Planet of the Black Dust" is a far worse story than "The World-Thinker" and probably represents the lowest point of Vance's early work; later stories, while hardly more accomplished in technical terms, were at least partly redeemed by imagination and color. Vance's next story, "Phalid's Fate," appeared in Thrilling Wonder Stories in December and was at least an impressive failure. Though crudely plotted and executed, it included some thoughtfully characterized aliens and an ecological ingenuity which has since become characteristic of Vance. The story suffers from a mismatch of theme and plot, the theme itself being defined by Vance, in an accompanying commentary, as the nature of love and of idealistic love in its limiting case. The "limiting case" is that one partner wears the body of a different species.

While this theme was to be used, six years later, to revolutionary effect by Philip Jose Farmer in The Lovers, Vance's plot followed traditional lines. Ryan Wratch is seriously injured in a clash with the alien Phalids, and his brain is transplanted into the body of a captured Phalid as part of a sketchily described stratagem which does not become clear until late in the story. Wratch is returned to a Phalid ship by subterfuge and succeeds in releasing some human captives, although a girl remains through accident (and the need to introduce some romantic interest). Wratch evades detection until the ship arrives at the Phalid home planet, and he makes his escape with the girl. It is now revealed that he carries a disassembled transmitter to broadcast the location of the planet to Earth and, after an ingenious subplot involving the Phalid biology, the "cavalry" arrives. On his return to Earth, Wratch (and the reader) are amazed to discover that the girl loves him, and that his body has, after all, been repaired and is waiting for him. In a final mawkish scene, Wratch, restored to his body, clinches the girl and both exit.

The story reads better than this summary indicates, mainly owing to Vance's careful exploration of alien perception (gradually eroding Wratch's memories of humanity) and the intriguing life-cycle of the Phalids. The alien psychology is less successful, being constructed to fit the convolutions of the plot and to allow Wratch to carry off the flimsy impersonation. The romantic interest is not developed enough to be convincing, largely because Vance had to spend too much time moving the crowded plot along. He acknowledges frankly that he had found the task of describing Wratch's experience of alien perceptions too

difficult and tedious and had given it up as a bad job. Certainly the story sags into unconvincing melodrama until Wratch discovers an ecological relationship between the Phalids and a forest which he has entered — having eaten of the "Fruit of Life," his body has become pregnant! The implications remain untouched, however, as Vance takes the easier option and produces Wratch's repaired human body.

On the whole, however, the failure of the story is due to in-experience and excess of ambition, and there's certainly no lack of imagination. The alien dialogue is elegantly bizarre, the action, while crowded and unconvincing, moves briskly enough, and the story indicates considerable potential.

1947

Perhaps in reaction to the failure of a major theme in "Phalid's Fate," Vance took a new direction in "I'll Build Your Dream Castle" (Astounding, September), a humorous minor piece which was to represent the course of his work for the following two years. Within its limits, it was highly successful, and its appearance in this demanding market at such an early stage of Vance's career was no mean achievement.

Vance has always been aware of the value of a strong opening paragraph, and this is particularly evident here:

When Farrero first met Douane Angker, of Marlais & Angker, Class III Structors, something in his brain twisted, averted itself; and, looking down at the curl on Angker's tough mouth, he knew the feeling went double. Angker, short and solid, had concentrated in him a heavy unctuous vitality, the same way a cigar stump holds the strongest juices.

Such characterizations — terse, vivid, and unique — have become one of Vance's major strengths; the passage also indicates the beginnings of Vance's crisp, elliptical use of punctuation and detached clauses.

The plot is straightforward, slight, and ingenious, kept within the limits of Vance's technique at this stage. Farrero, a bright young architect, develops a cheaper method of house construction and passes the saving on to his customer. Angker, a senior partner, would prefer to take a higher profit. Farrero is scandalized, but soon finds himself blacklisted and unable to set up business for himself anywhere on Earth, the moon, or Venus.

Almost at once, however, customers begin to sign up with Farrero for contracts of fabulous cost, although the locations of his houses remain secret.

Eventually a rival, posing as a customer, is taken out into nearby space, where Farrero has built gorgeous private worlds on tiny planetoids which, bewilderingly, have Earth-normal gravity and thus can hold a standard atmosphere. The plot denouement is intriguing and ingenious; Farrero has discovered a number of asteroids composed of collapsed matter ("star-stuff... matter crystallized at the heart of a star") and has established an unbreakable monopoly. However, in a final twist, he freely reveals the location of more of the collapsed matter — ten light years away in the dark companion of Sirius, at a temperature of twenty or thirty million degrees Centigrade.

By setting modest goals, Vance was able to produce a competent, entertaining, and colorful story which still retains charm today. The dialogue is crisp and authentic, while already elegant and witty; the plot moves briskly, with pacing and exposition well under control, in contrast to the breathless, meandering style of his previous efforts. The physics of the story is sound, if somewhat obtrusive, which may be the result of editorial pressure.

"I'll Build Your Dream Castle" is most notable for the exotic private worlds, meticulously worked out and described, and for the beginning use of Vance's personal technique for interaction; dialogue is interwoven with attitude, movement, and gesture to illuminate motivations, emotions, and responses. Such a technique — demanding skills of observation, description, and the construction of dialogue — far excels the multiple-viewpoint treatment of emotion and attitude generally found in beginning writers, and which Vance had attempted to use up to this point. In excess it can degenerate into meaningless details (as Hemingway and his imitators were to discover), and there is some slight tendency to this in the present story. On the whole, however, Vance displays a facility which has since become a cornerstone of his style, and this story set a high standard for his shorter humorous work which he has rarely failed to sustain.

1948

Having scored some success with his first attempt at this kind of story, Vance continued to develop his techniques within the framework of the short comic piece. For the next two years he was to publish only in Startling Stories, introducing the character Magnus Ridolph, an elderly dilettante detective with a sharp eye for the main chance. Ridolph is cautious, fastidious, and crafty; the characterization was highly unusual for the times. The heroes of pulp science fiction were, almost without exception, dense, fearless, upright young WASPs.

Such characters, when they appear in Vance's work, are generally figures of fun; his protagonists, while certainly able to look after themselves, are given depth and character by their susceptibility to human weakness, self-doubt, and compassion.

The Ridolph stories, according to Vance, represented an early attempt to become a hack, a "million-word-a-year man." At first they appeared in Startling as fast as the magazine could be printed; Vance remembers them as first-draft work and describes them as absolutely awful. However, for this sort of story, an elderly character is something of an advantage as personality, attitudes, and history are already established. Romantic interest can likewise be set aside; Ridolph, who has some resemblance to Jules de Grandin (hero of an interminable Weird Tales series by Seabury Quinn), is too old for such follies and devotes his energies solely to personal enrichment and the enjoyment of good food, fine wines, and elegant clothes.

The first of the series, "Hard-Luck Diggings" (Startling, July), was apparently written in one sitting and reads accordingly. It has a peculiar, uneasy style which suggests that Vance was uncertain of the prevailing mood. It opens with Rogge, an obtuse and impatient mining engineer on a distant planet, who is experiencing undefined difficulties apparently of long standing. There are various comic reactions to bad news, the chewing-out of hapless subordinates, and the like, before a spaceship arrives with an eagerly-awaited inspector. At this stage we learn that Rogge's problem consists of an epidemic of mysterious murders, with men being strangled at the rate of three or four a day. The appearance of the mild-mannered Ridolph—not at all the expected beefcake — should be comic; however, it falls flat, overshadowed by the grimness of the situation.

Ridolph immediately tours the camp, asks a few questions, and almost at once deduces the solution to the mystery. Of course, he refuses to reveal it, preferring, in traditional manner, to put his theory to the test by inviting a murder attempt upon himself. This duly occurs and is unconvincingly forestalled by some technical gimmickry. It turns out that the murders are being committed by mobile roots of sentient trees threatened by the mining activities. Ridolph negotiates a settlement and is rewarded, oddly, by one of the trees with an excavated ruby.

Most "single-sitting" stories have pacing problems, and "Hard-Luck Diggings" is no exception, breaking down soon after the opening paragraphs. Ridolph's nearly instantaneous solution of the mystery fails to convince, and the

attack on him, the climax of the story, is over in a few hasty paragraphs (and,logically, need never have happened). The final scenes are so crowded as to suggest editorial trimming for reasons of space (also implied by the layout of the magazine). In terms of the plot the story owes much to Sherlock Holmes, and an introductory quotation, attributed to Ridolph, is merely a restatement of Holmes's famous principle of eliminating the impossible until what remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth. The solution of the problem is contrived but consistent; in later Ridolph stories the emphasis was to shift from technical deduction to more active and ingenious strategies, usually revolving around Ridolph's efforts to turn the tables on various tricksters and con-artists.

The macabre tone of the present story is inconsistent with its comicintent, and its general lack of polish makes it a minor and forgettable piece; Vance did not include it in a 1966 collection, The Many Worlds of Magnus Ridolph. However, it's interesting to note an early appearance of a recurrent theme — the conflict of man and alien is resolved by intelligent compromise. In John Campbell's magazine Earthmen would have been obliged to come out on top.

"Sanatoris Short-Cut" (Startling, September) is an early example of the elaborate, self-contained verbal scrimshaw which has become a major element of Vance's style. One of his favorite excursions is into the invention of games: often intricate, always colorful. In later work, most notably in Trullion: Alastor 2262, the game is integral to the story. In this case the game is the story for half its length, the other half being an inconsequential and slapdash melodrama.

Ridolph is brought on-stage with characteristic bravado:

In the course of the years he had devised a number of money-making techniques. The first of these was profoundly simple. Surveying the world about him, he would presently observe a lack or an imperfection. A moment's thought would suggest an improvement, and in repairing the universe, Magnus Ridolph usually repaired his credit balance.

Short of funds, Ridolph visits a casino and takes an interest in a game called Lorango. The description of the game and an account of the factors involved in it occupy Vance for some five closely printed pages. Suffice it to say that the object is to predict which of twenty-four differently colored balls will bob to the top of a spinning globe full of water. Vance names every color with rare and evocative skill, lists the many physical parameters influencing the result, describes the calculation of the winnings, the house rules, the betting patterns, and so on.

Having analyzed the game, Ridolph promptly makes a killing, incurring the enmity of the casino boss, an obvious hoodlum named Acco May. Following some routine, if brisk, action and mayhem, Ridolph takes on the task of proving May guilty of a recent space hijacking, despite a convincing alibi. Much effort is expended by Vance on making the point that May's alibi can be broken if it is shown that a spaceship can travel from the distant planet Sanatoris in less than thirteen days. Even more laboriously, Vance resorts to a tiresome device which was to spoil several subsequent stories, as Ridolph inveigles May into a silly wager. If Ridolph can prove that the Sanatoris trip can be made in less than thirteen days, May will sign a full confession to the hijack; if Ridolph fails, May gets all his winnings back. Idiotically, May accepts the wager (even writing the confession in advance and lodging it with independent witnesses!), and Ridolph blasts off to prove his point. Far out in space, he zooms past waiting hatchet-men, apparently well off course.

In the next scene Acco May, duly convicted, is about to be marched off to "personality reconstruction." He confronts the complacent Ridolph, who has completed the journey in twelve days, sealing May's doom. Ridolph explains that:

"Classical space charts... are constructed after the manner of a Mer-cator projection. The co-ordinates meet rectilinearally, the grid components running perfectly parallel but to infinity. This is an admirable system for short journeys, just as use of the Mercator system results in little error in a voyage across Long Island Sound.

"However, on voyages of some duration, it is necessary to remember that the earth and — on a larger scale — space is curved, and to make the necessary correction."

This, of course, is balderdash. The errors of the Mercator projection are implicit in the mapping of a spherical surface upon a flat one and have nothing to do with the mapping of three-dimensional space or the curvature of space-time through the presence of mass. Even if the explanation meant anything, it still requires Ridolph to have noticed an astrogational saving never before suspected — a situation roughly comparable to having all major airlines route planes from Los Angeles to New York via Cape Horn.

"Sanatoris Short-Cut" exemplifies Vance's talents for invention, color, intricacy, and weak plotting, with a fascinating doodle that makes a feeble story. With the development of his skills at greater lengths, Vance has been able to

embellish and embroider as he wishes within the structure of a more involved plot, and the overall effect has been far more satisfactory. But I'd love to see a Lorango game in action!

"The Unspeakable Mclnch" (Startling, November) again failed to match a grim theme to lightness of touch and characterization, and was further damaged by maladroit plotting and a fundamental misapplication of the conventions of the detective story. The Mclnch of the title is a murderer, according to the first line. He is later described as a thief and a corrupt civic official who steals through graft, but it eventually turns out that he simply takes money at will from the municipal safe of Sclerotto City, a squalid township teeming with multifarious life and under the administration of the vaguely defined "Uni-Culture Mission," which commissions Ridolph to investigate.

Nobody knows who the thief is or how he steals; guards are invariably found dead of disease, with the safe rifled. Ridolph discusses the case briefly with the usual surly official, then proceeds to interview various suspects, a bizarre and fascinating collection of aliens (including a human Negro, a rare species indeed in pulp fiction, save as the protagonist of embarrassing parables). After a brief investigation, Ridolph deduces the identity of Mclnch and brings all the suspects together for the traditional confrontation. Mclnch, revealed, attempts to kill all present; foiled by Ridolph, he is torn to pieces by his enraged fellows in a grisly climax. It only remains for Ridolph to explain his reasoning and to depart with an appropriate snappy ending.

The failure of the story is mainly due to the excessive contrivance of the plot, and lapses of logic are evident throughout. Although Mclnch is said to steal through "civic corruption," there is no evidence for this — the safe is simply burgled. Mclnch could be anyone, in fact. Ridolph assumes that "Mclnch is one of the city officials; they would be the first to be exposed to temptation." This makes no sense but reduces the range of suspects to a manageable number. Although Ridolph deduces Mclnch's identity from his meetings with the officials, all the information which he uses is kept from the reader until the final exposition. Although it is imaginative and ingenious (based on the ways in which the various aliens spend their money), the problem has already been solved.

When Mclnch's identity is known, further problems appear. He is a huge alien creature resembling a sting ray, employed as a garbage-collector; in fact, the citizens bring their rubbish to him, as he wallows in organic refuse and absorbs it into his body. (The logistics of such an arrangement seem impossible. How much rubbish does a city produce? What do they do with their inorganic

refuse? etc.) Vance makes no attempt to explain how such a creature could carry out regular robberies unobserved, or even why nobody notices the appalling smell lingering around the safe afterwards. Mclnch supposedly kills his victims with a squirt of virulent bacteria (Ridolph evades an early murder attempt through simple germicidal precautions). There's no explanation of why the guards of the safe could not do likewise, or, indeed, why they could not simply shoot Mclnch, hit him on the head, stand out of reach in a narrow corridor, or write a detailed account of events while sitting out the incubation period of the disease.

The main interest of the story, then, is an incidental detail: the haphazard architecture of Sclerotto City, the eerie daylight of twin suns of different colors (a recurrent embellishment in subsequent work), the fascinating aliens. However flimsy Ridolph's deductions may be, his fastidious self-regard and urbanity are developed with skill and economy, and his elegant dialogue contrasts well with the bluntness of the straight man, Boek, and the various modes of alien conversation.

1949

By the time "The Sub-Standard Sardines" (Startling, January) appeared, the "Ridolph format" had become clear — an intriguing narrative hook, an exotic locale, a flamboyant puzzle, and a snappy ending, with Ridolph's fastidious habits milked for comic relief. Not much was different in this story, but Vance's developing skills in background detail often lifted it out of formula.

The title is nearly the plot. Ridolph is commissioned by a friend whose sardine business is threatened by mysteriously contaminated tins of the product. He assumes the squalid identity of a sardine eviscerator on the planet Chandaria and soon meets the shifty partner in the business, obviously up to no good in a suspicious laboratory. This proves to contain various mutated sardines, including one of high intelligence who is able to communicate with Ridolph. After some routine mayhem, Ridolph is pursued by the villains to a colony established by the intelligent fish, whose unexpected independence has put them at some risk of attack. Ridolph helps them to outwit the corrupt fish farmers, and the obligatory punch in the ending is provided by his revelation that the intelligent fish are now partners in the business, much to his patron's comic astonishment.

As always, much of the interest is in the details — the menu, furniture, and decorations at a dinner; the desolate red-lit marshes of Chandaria; the disparate aliens in the cannery; the charts of the Barnett Method for Establishing

Communication with Alien Intelligences. But it is also interesting to see traces of themes and concepts which Vance was to develop in later work. His interest in communication and language appeared again in "Gift of Gab" (1955), a more mature treatment of the theme, and was developed at novel length in The Languages of Pao (1958). In the present story, Vance's fascination with the sea is also apparent, as is his taste for moral paradox:

Banish Evil from the world? Nonsense! Encourage it, foster it, sponsor it. The world owes Evil a debt beyond imagination. Think! Without greed ambition falters. Without vanity art becomes idle musings. Without cruelty benevolence lapses to passivity. Superstition has shamed man into self-reliance and, without stupidity, where would be the savor of superior understanding?

The story also includes the first appearance of the Vance "footnote," later to become an art in its own right. Dialogue, pacing, and viewpoint are handled with unobtrusive competence throughout, although Vance fumbles exposition on a couple of occasions, once through a clumsy snatch of overheard recapitulation, and again, at the end, in an ill-judged switch from third-person narration to Ridolph's own account. Nonetheless, though trivial, the story remains entertaining even to modern tastes.

Now that Vance's appearances in Startling with the "Ridolph" stories were a regular event, attracting enthusiasm from readers, he was learning to deal with errors which had marred earlier stories. "The Howling Bounders" (Startling, March) is a more assured story than any previously published and can be seen as a turning point in the sequence. Subsequent stories appeared less frequently (as Vance tired of the limitations of the form), but were more skillfully constructed; perhaps more important, they displayed a matching of style, content, and mood far superior to earlier efforts. "The Howling Bounders" is the last of the early short stories in which this basic mistake was made.

The story begins in the middle — a standard device often used by Vance as a narrative hook. Ridolph has bought a plantation on a remote planet at a knockdown price; of course, there's a catch. A brief flashback sets the scene. Pleading urgent cash-flow problems, a meticulously shifty planter has sold Ridolph half his plantation of ticholama, source of the versatile elastic fiber resilian. No sooner has Ridolph committed himself and his funds, however, than he discovers the depredations of the Howling Bounders — semisentient marauding hu-manoids which subsist upon ticholama and appear both savage and invulnerable. Gradually Ridolph's crop is laid waste; the former owner affects consternation, offering to buy back the holding at a derisory price. Once

again, a pointless wager is made; the price of the plantation against Ridolph's projected profits, if he can defeat the Bounders.

After cryptic preparations Ridolph launches a campaign against the creatures, and here the problems of the story, so far constructional, become moral. The gimmick turns out to be the composition of the Bounders themselves; they are largely resilian, and so Ridolph traps them using a resilian bonding agent which glues them into a furious, unbreakable line. Fortuitously, they are rendered torpid by daylight, and so Ridolph goes out, kills them, and uses their corpses as sources of raw resilian.

The issue which arises here has been the theme of a number of good science-fiction stories; among the first that come to mind are Vercors' You Shall Know Them, Walter M. Miller's "Conditionally Human," Avram Davidson's "Now Let Us Sleep," and Robert Silverberg's "Sundance." Simply put, it is: how shall we decide what is human? If the Bounders are animals, Ridolph is ingeniously disposing of dangerous vermin. If they are intelligent, he is committing the atrocity of the Nazi death-camps — a genocide so efficient that it mines the bodies of the dead for raw materials. Some may say that this sounds like an excessive amount of significance to draw from a pulp science-fiction story, and a comic one at that. This, of course, is exactly the point. Vance, through inexperience, had written a humorous, lightweight story which happened to throw up a huge moral dilemma, and it became impossible for him to reconcile these elements.

As a humorous story, "The Howling Bounders" works well for much of its length. The opening scenes are thoughtfully laid out and carefully paced; there's an entertaining minor counterpoint involving the limitations of the native cook, tied up neatly in the last line; Ridolph's charged and circumlocutory encounters with the devious planter are excellently done. One may forgive the dubious chemistry of the scene in which Ridolph, in danger of suffocation during a fire, electrolyzes his water supply. However, the central problem remains. The Bounders may have language, are capable of organization, know the use of fire. Ridolph's band seems to be the only one on the planet, and by the story's end he has slaughtered 2,400 of them for the resilian in their flesh.

Nor is this the only occasion on which Vance's work has shown this disturbing blind spot. Many of his stories feature semihuman creatures whose sentience and status is never clarified—the mutations of The Dragon Masters, the puppets in Emphyrio, the merlings of Trullion: Alastor 2262, the mor-photes and erjins of Koryphon in The Gray Prince, the ahulphs of Durdane, etc. Only

once, it seems, has the issue been faced, in "Gift of Gab," one of Vance's best stories, in which the exploitation of the unhuman but eventually intelligent dekabrachs is uncompromisingly condemned. The omission of the problem in Vance's more ambitious work is disappointing; the fact that it occurs at all in "The Howling Bounders" shows clearly that, at this stage, Vance had not yet learned to keep control of his material.

"The King of Thieves" (Startling, November) is by contrast a mature and competent story which blends its theme much more satisfactorily with its mood and content. The theme is one of Vance's most pervasive preoccupations, and it is set out succinctly in an introductory epigraph: In all the many-colored worlds of the universe no single ethical code shows a universal force. The good citizen on Almanatz would be executed on Judith IV. Commonplace conduct of Medellin excites the wildest revulsion on Earth, and on Moritaba a deft thief commands the highest respect.

For Vance, morality is a function of culture, and much of his later work explores the moral conflicts inherent in access to a multitude of social systems. In this story the issue is explored, light-heartedly but with ingenuity, by placing Ridolph in two social systems — one is the culture of Moritaba, the primitive jungle planet where accomplishment in thieving is the prime determinant of social status, and the other is encapsulated in Ridolph's relationship with Mellish, a shady entrepreneur who has already swindled Ridolph and now happens to be in competition with him for valuable mining rights on Moritaba.

Ridolph, of course, comes out on top. He succeeds by playing each social situation better than its other members, rather than by imposing himself upon it. He soon progresses from guarding his own property to stealing everyone else's (by a contrived modus operandi which does not bear excessive scrutiny) and becomes himself the King of Thieves. He outwits his rival Mellish (by means of another illogical wager), and when the villain attempts to turn the tables by means of extortion, Ridolph promptly turns them back again by extorting more skillfully.

In each situation, in fact, Ridolph's conduct is scrupulously moral; he plays by the ground rules, and when they are broken he plays by the new ones as well. Mellish, however, personifies the rigid boor who is incapable of seeing the world in any terms other than his own. Ridolph wins his mining concession from the King of Thieves by becoming King himself; Mellish offers bribes — a five-and-dime store, a merry-go-round — that recall the cynical bargaining for Manhattan Island. This blindness to other ways of living or the insistence that others live in

one's own style is, time and again, the essence of evil in Vance's work and one of the major themes of his later story-cycles. Here, however, it is treated with a lightness of touch and a fine attention to detail; unlike "The Howling Bounders," the story never gets out of its moral depth. There are slipshod aspects, of course; Ridolph's method of theft is far-fetched and over-contrived, and the story piles up too many changes of direction in the closing pages. But generally it's an entertaining overture to much of Vance's more ambitious later work.

1950

"The Potters of Firsk" (Astounding, May) was Vance's second story in this prime market and represented a break from the amusing but eventually repetitive "Ridolph" series in Startling. There had been some tendency for Vance's work until now to include somewhat obtrusive chunks of science as turning points of the plot, and "I'll Build Your Dream Castle," his previous Astounding story, had suffered from this problem. "The Potters of Firsk," while less freighted with technology, was subsequently selected as representative of the science of chemistry in Arthur C. Clarke's anthology Time Probe. The chemistry content is slight but crucial; the main strength of the story lies in Vance's choice of subject — ceramics.

Vance has said that he and his wife were professional potters at this time; his expertise in the craft and his powerful visual sense were obvious from the opening paragraphs:

The yellow bowl on Thomm's desk stood about a foot high, flaring out from a width of eight inches at the base to a foot across the rim. The profile showed a simple curve, clean and sharp, with a full sense of completion; the body was thin without fragility; the whole piece gave an impression of ringing well-arched strength.

The craftsmanship of the body was matched by the beauty of the glaze — a glorious transparent yellow, luminescent like a hot summer afterglow. It was the essence of marigolds, a watery wavering saffron, a yellow as of transparent gold, a yellow glass that seemed to fabricate curtains of light within itself and fling them off, a yellow brilliant but mild, tart as lemon, sweet as quince jelly, soothing as sunlight.

The story is told by Thomm as a reminiscence of his youth in the "Department of Planetary Affairs," on Firsk. Entranced by the ware of the potters, he soon discovers that they exert a sinister control over the natives from

their colony in the hills, using bodies (killed as necessary) to yield essential bonelime. Substitutes are rejected, as "the spirit of the person is in the bones and this passes into the glaze and gives it an inner fire otherwise unobtainable."

Thomm, conciliatory, attempts to negotiate, but his coarse superior, Covill, decides to end the kidnappings of the potters by dropping an atom bomb on their volcanic kilns. Thomm, attempting to mediate (and also pursuing a kidnapped girl introduced earlier for romantic interest), is about to become bonelime, but at the last moment manages to win over the potters by synthesizing the previously unobtainable yellow glaze using uranium salts derived from the atom bomb. In a fairly neat resolution, the oafish Covill attempts to retrieve the uranium and fails to return. Some weeks later, the potters inform Thomm that Covill, enraged, had finally caused violence; evading questions about Covin's fate, they present Thomm with the yellow bowl: "The fiery soul of the madman has given luster to an already glorious glaze."

"The Potters of Firsk" is a neat, competent story, enhanced by the strength of its visual passages and the intelligence of its cultural argument; once again the hero succeeds through his sympathetic understanding of the social priorities of the alien culture. The major problem is one of construction. The opening scene, despite its intrinsic merits, drains much of the tension from the narrative. Vance sets up two plot problems—what will happen to Thomm, and will the potters succeed in making their longed-for yellow glaze? The opening scene has already shown us Thomm alive and prosperous, with an impressive yellow bowl on his desk.

The technique of "framing" a story in this way, although very popular in the nineteenth century, is now rare, largely because of the greater premium now placed upon plot tension in popular fiction. Vance has not generally been very successful with it; the use of a "frame" is virtually the only flaw in Em-phyrio, and the technique is also used to poor effect in the closing pages of Marune: Alastor 933 and The Gray Prince.

"The Spa of the Stars" (Startling, July) is something of a potboiler — a rather perfunctory lightweight piece which attempted to ring some changes on the "Magnus Ridolph format." Ridolph, offstage for much of the time, is not the viewpoint character. The two lead characters, partners in the hotel venture of the title, talk in the unlikely sub-Runyon argot attributed to the lower classes by writers such as Robert Arthur. Vance (who claims never to have worked in a white collar in his life) knows better than this.

The Spa of the Stars is a grandiose beach resort, on a distant planet, which is unfortunately beset by ferocious animals soon after receiving its first guests; many of them, in fact, meet grisly deaths as a result. While a brisk indifference to carnage is an essential element in, for example, the milieu of the "Dying Earth" stories, it does not blend well with the light farce of the present piece. Ridolph is hired to solve the problem but in fact contributes very little. The partners, on their own initiative, prepare a foul-smelling paste which they believe will act as an animal repellent; Ridolph is used to test this out. In a far-fetched sequence, he is drugged, smeared with the malodorous paste, and left upon the beach. When the paste fails to repel an attacking beast, Ridolph saves himself by means of a supersonic whistle constructed a few moments previously. The natives, it seems, are able to produce such vibrations in their own vocal apparatus, hence their immunity to attack. In a closing scene Ridolph exacts revenge for the shoddy treatment given to him.

Ridolph's urbane dialogue and precise mannerisms redeem most of the scenes in which he appears, but otherwise the story veers too easily into slapstick or predictable comic routines. There is an occasional touch of elegance, such as the reaction to Ridolph's crafty maneuvers:

Joe and Lucky had turned their heads simultaneously, staring. Their faces wore the expressions seen on small animals, who, tripping a baited tiger, snap their own flashlight photographs.

"New Bodies for Old" (Thrilling Wonder, August) was by contrast a story of major importance and represented a critical turning-point in Vance's career. It was his longest, most ambitious, most accomplished story to date, and it displayed, in one form or another, most of the themes and techniques Vance was to develop in successive work in the next two or three years.

The story is set in a future society of economic prosperity; five bored young men, seeking adventure, sponsor one of their number to test the expensive and mysterious services of the Chateau d'If, whose publicity is as attractive as it is cryptic. A volunteer goes, disappears, is seen weeks later enjoying a playboy lifestyle; he refuses to talk to them but indifferently returns their money. The eventual hero, Roland Mario, is next to go; unable to learn what goes on at the Chateau, he nonetheless cannot resist the urge to find out. Drugged, he wakes to find himself trapped in the body of an aging and unpleasant businessman whose personality is now enjoying a fresh lease on life in Mario's body. The rest of the story is concerned with Mario's attempts to recapture his own identity.

To modern ears this may sound like a very tired plot; however, a close reading indicates sound and sophisticated development. For its time and milieu the plot serves well enough, and Vance has obviously put some thought into buttressing its weaker joints. For example, the difficulty of getting a character into such a situation in the first place is dealt with by a careful opening scene in which the five men discuss the aimlessness of their lives, the chance nature of worldly success, the possible motives of the managers of the Chateau d'If, the rumors surrounding the operation, and the safeguards against misfortune or treachery. The pace of the scene and the interaction of the characters build to a point where it is inevitable that one man will decide to try his chances. In the same way, his "success," despite its puzzling aspects, is sufficiently seductive to encourage Mario; his interview at the Chateau, while revealing nothing in the way of hard fact, is provocative, aggressive, and confident. The decision to plunge ahead thus becomes more credible. In earlier work Vance would simply have pushed his hero through the front door, and to hell with motivation; later stories have sometimes followed the same path, although Vance has been much more conscious of his effects and has used caprice as a deliberate, disarming dynamic of the plot.

Similar ingenuity appears in the resolution of the plot problem. How is Mario to regain his body? He cannot succeed against the powerful Chateau d'If—whose body-swapping has recruited influential old men from every sphere of life — by direct action; nor can he place his body at risk by involving the police. Subterfuge is his only recourse. However, instead of sneaking his hero into the stronghold through a fortuitous secret passage, Vance sneaks his hero into control of the firm of architects which builds the stronghold. This building itself, the Empyrean Tower, is one of the most imaginative inventions of the story. There are also lively subplots involving a charged sexual relationship and the invention of an interstellar drive.

In a story of this length Vance was able to allow himself the luxury of baroque extravagance, and "New Bodies for Old" offers some extraordinary flights of fancy, such as the lobby of the Atlantic-Empire Hotel:

Here — if the guest cared little for expense—he could buy wrought copper, gold, tantalum; gowns in glowing fabric of scarlet, purple, indigo; objets from ancient Tibet and the products of Novacraft; cabochons of green Jovian opals, sold by the milligram; blue balticons from Mars, fire diamonds brought from twenty miles under the surface of the Earth; Marathesty cherries preserved in

Organdy Liqueur, perfumes pressed from Arctic Moss, white marmorea blooms like the ghosts of beautiful women.

There's a similar exultant extravagance in the description of the splendid Empyrean Tower, crammed with artifacts from every field of human culture and enterprise. There are less flamboyant devices, too — the venomous insults of a deranged, sick enemy; the ingenious techniques of personality exchange; the intense and ambivalent relationship between Mario and the girls at the Chateau: "Her will is for destruction, death. A bright thing only on the surface. Inwardly she is as dark and violent as a drop of hot oil."

Vance also conveys a rare and chilling insight into the horror of Mario's predicament — his repugnance at the gross body which he now inhabits; his revulsion at using his host's razor or toothbrush, attending to his physical needs, living in his home; the grim realization that the glandular make-up of the body will itself distort and change his personality more and more as time goes by.

The flaws of "New Bodies for Old" are mostly honorable — perhaps an excess of extravagance and detail, a couple of plot-threads too many, a crowding of action into inadequate length. But it's a well-crafted, intelligent story, laced with tight elegant dialogue, insightful, thoughtful, and distinctive. It is probably the earliest published story in which Vance demonstrated the depth of his potential as a major stylistic talent in the field.

In contrast, "Ultimate Quest" (Super Science Stories, September) is mainly of interest as a curio. It is the only story widely known to have been published by Vance under a pseudonym, appearing by "John Holbrook," a variant of his full name (John Holbrook Vance), which he has used exclusively for his mystery novels. Vance has used other pseudonyms (which he now resolutely claims to have forgotten). He has said that his intention was to reserve his own name for his better stories, but finding that differentiation hard to maintain, he abandoned the practice. He could hardly have considered the present story comparable to contemporary work accepted by other markets, built as it is on the ludicrous premise of an attempt to circumnavigate the entire universe by travelling very, very fast in a very, very straight line.

The idea is mentioned again (in the Sons of Langtry conference in "The Five Gold Bands," published in November). Vance may have found it entertaining to develop the notion in another piece. In his later work, small vignettes and anecdotes are scattered throughout the main narrative with confidence and finesse; at this stage he had not yet learned fully how to measure the worth of

an idea in terms of story length. This idea might work as a throwaway line or a paragraph; as a short story it runs into trouble very quickly.

Nonetheless, Vance tries his best. The opening sequence of "Ultimate Quest" is a press conference at which the project is discussed and all the obvious questions are asked. When the answers are weak or nonexistent — as so many of them are — the lead character's confidence, coolness, and disarming directness must suffice to leap the gap and keep going. Vance is aware of the problems involved in flying a straight course over inter-galactic distances at speeds of "six or seven thousand light years per second"; he knows about the horrendous effects of Dopplered head-on radiation; he is aware that it would be difficult to distinguish the original galaxy from several billion similar galaxies along the line of flight. However, he has no choice except to respond, through his laconic hero, with the recurrent admission: "That's a good question. I'm sorry to say I have no precise answer."

There is also a lunatic spaceflight system which reads like the sort of idea writers invent after a convivial evening with other writers. It involves two spacecraft (Nip and Tuck), the former cylindrical, the latter tubular. They align themselves by means of "destriation fields." Nip accelerates for a while, shuts off power; Tuck accelerates, slides over Nip, shuts off power; Nip accelerates, shoots through Tuck, shuts off power; etc., etc. By this method the straightness of the course is ensured to a ridiculous number of decimal places.

Vance valiantly throws in some distractions. There's a subplot involving a bumptious young crew member who eventually learns better, and the tensions and anxieties of the voyage are handled rather well. At the end, however, all is bathos; the crew stand anxiously on the bridge; the cherished gyroscope of the matured tyro ticks around to the 360° mark which will indicate the complete circuit of the cosmos (although Vance makes one of the irritating arithmetical errors which occasionally afflict him, momentarily putting 370° into a circle). The gyro keeps turning, at one degree per paragraph, and, at last:

360. "There! The big one! Golly, it looks almost like the face of someone you know!"... Ahead, like magic, the sky suddenly showed full of familiar patterns.

"Dead ahead!" cried Chiram. "See — that's the constellation Cygnus; that's where we started for And there — dead ahead — that yellow star..."

The story stops there, unfortunately; it would have been interesting to see how they managed to decelerate from seven thousand light years per second in the few milliseconds that appeared to be available. While Vance deserves some

credit for diligence, the story cannot be taken seriously. It is interesting, however, to note that the notion of the "destriation field" was later to emerge as the "Jarnell intersplit" in the "Demon Princes" sequence.

With "The Five Gold Bands" (Startling, November), Vance published his first competent attempt at the kind of story which has now become characteristic of him — the colorful action novel, moving through a variety of settings, with a strong female secondary lead, a conventional plot, and a sadly perfunctory ending. Vance was to publish many stories in this format, most of which were reprinted during the 1960s as Ace Doubles. His major novels have followed a similar structure, albeit considerably stronger in characterization, theme, and style, but even the least sophisticated are still entertaining.

The plot of "The Five Gold Bands" is traditional; a secret has been divided into five parts which have been dispersed for security. The story is the quest for them. The gold bands of the title are bracelets belonging to the five "Sons of Langtry," descendants of the inventor of space-drive, and which contain cryptic clues to the hiding places of the parts of the space-drive formulae. The Sons, with their unbreakable franchise on interstellar travel, wield immense power over multifarious races of their respective planets. Paddy Blackthorn, a burlesque Irish adventurer, is caught trying to steal the secret, but accidentally kills all the Sons while attempting to escape. Paddy, accompanied by "Earth Central" agent Fay Bursill, sets off to piece together the formulae, pursued by the inheritors of the Sons and their minions.

By now Vance had developed a number of techniques for camouflaging the flimsiness of his plotting. The characterizations, while crude to modern tastes, are well-developed. Paddy, although given a strong line in whimsical blarney, is a colorful and sympathetic character; cheerful, vigorous, and fast-talking, he remains somewhat ineffectual and often has to be pulled out of tight corners by Fay. She, in turn, is the prototype of Vance's female leads — cool, demure, humorous, resourceful, dark-haired, bright-eyed, well able to look after herself on equal terms with men. The light and constant sexual byplay between the two is one of the story's mainsprings.

Vance keeps his characters on the move and the pace rarely slackens. Exotic settings crowd through the pages, suspending disbelief to excellent effect. The story moves quickly from the Sons' business meeting on a tiny asteroid where Paddy is forced to act as interpreter — a role of purely diplomatic significance (and where the tension of the event obscures more critical evaluation of the plot dynamics) — to the various planets ruled by the Sons: the Thieves' Cluster, where

he meets Fay; the eerie planet of Alpheratz, where the secret is hidden beneath a multi-layered "ocean" of dense amber gas; the Badau planet where Paddy's pose as a travelling entertainer falls atrociously flat (and where Fay redeems the situation with an impressive striptease routine); Loristan, and the comic paranoia at the safe-deposit box; the tourist planet of Shaul, where intrigue, deception, and technology are all needed; and the grim Koton planet where the heroic pair are captured at last, and the dreaded nerve-suits are wheeled into the interrogation chamber...

Vance eventually loses control of his story, and the closing sequences strain credulity; the plot takes convoluted turns and motivations become flimsy. In a disturbing climax Paddy tricks his enemy into an error in the space-drive assembly, resulting in a huge explosion on his home planet ("... stupendous crater... millions dead," according to a fragmentary news broadcast). However, as it's already been argued that they weren't very nice people anyway, Paddy wastes only a sentence or two in regret, and the final paragraphs find him pursuing Fay amorously around the cabin (having, of course, committed himself firmly to marriage on several occasions).

"The Five Gold Bands" is a good early example of "second-order" Vance, displaying most of his enduring strengths and weaknesses: color, stylish dialogue and confrontations, elaborate bargaining scenes, exotic settings, bizarre folkways, imaginative characterizations, humor, pace, ingenuity, formula plotting, strained motivation, inadequate and disappointing resolution, the perceptive display of moral ambiguities and their slipshod disposal.

It takes a determined critical intent to resist the verve and extravagance of such a story and to look more closely at the weaknesses of structure. There is a marked incongruity, for example, between Paddy's sophisticated penetration of the space-drive factory in the story's enthralling opening sequence and his disastrous bungling once he gets inside. There is no real reason for the Sons to gather in one place at all; they supposedly hate each other, their business seems trivial and equally amenable to long-distance communication, and the purpose of the gathering is solely to get them killed by Paddy so he can steal the five gold bands at his convenience. Despite the vigilance of the entire galaxy, Paddy and Fay evade capture at half-a-dozen space-ports; at one stage Paddy escapes detection by the "psychograph" because, as he happens to mention afterwards, he has a surgical plate in his skull. At the close, Paddy is able to outwit an enemy who holds both of them entirely within his power, only through their captor's

consistent refusal to take obvious and safe courses of action which would accomplish everything he wants.

Vance's subsequent space operas rarely escape such pitfalls, although the continued development of his style and narrative skills redeems the story in all but a few extreme cases. In his mature work, novels such as Emphyrio, the "Demon Princes" books, The Anome, Maske: Thaery, and The Gray Prince conceal a formidable depth of speculation, social comment, character development, and exquisitely crafted prose beneath an apparently superficial space opera. He has never been able to work comfortably at novel length in anything other than conventional structures, although some of his more obscure experimental work, published in the early 1950s, remains breathtaking even at this time.

It was at this stage, however, that Vance published his most famous and influential work and stepped at once to a leading rank in the field of postwar fantasy. The Dying Earth appeared in the autumn of 1950 in a shoddy paperback edition, abominably distributed, and it must represent one of the least auspicious debuts of any modern fantasy writer. A muddy cover depicts a woman clad in a vague gauzy robe and a troubled expression, while men in the foreground look on, and an owl-like creature hovers clumsily above. The back cover lists other titles in the series, of no great distinction. The paper is dingy pulp, the binding poor, the typeface without distinction. But the reader who persevered to the first page was met with one of the most exquisite opening paragraphs in the genre:

Deep in thought, Mazirian the Magician walked his garden. Trees fruited with many intoxications overhung his path, and flowers bowed obsequiously as he passed. An inch above the ground, dull as agates, the eyes of mandrakes followed the tread of his black-slippered feet. Such was Mazirian's garden — three terraces growing with strange and wonderful vegetations. Certain plants swam with changing iridescences; others held up blooms pulsing like sea-anemones, purple, green, lilac, pink, yellow. Here grew trees like feather parasols, trees with transparent trunks threaded with red and yellow veins, trees with foliage like metal foil, each leaf a different metal — copper, silver, blue tantalum, bronze, green iridium. Here blooms like bubbles tugged gently upwards from glazed green leaves, there a shrub bore a thousand pipe-shaped blossoms, each whistling softly to make music of the ancient Earth, of the ruby-red sunlight, water seeping through black soil, the languid winds. In this waning

hour of Earth's life no man could count himself familiar with the glens, the glades, the dells and deeps, the secluded clearings, the ruined pavilions, the sun-dappled pleasances, the gullies and heights, the various brooks, freshets, ponds, the meadows, thickets, brakes and rocky outcrops .

This is pure Vance dazzlement, one of the most identifiable passages in all his work. Every element of his style may be seen here — the overpowering visual imagery; the flood of exotic inventions; the mannered, elegant, incantatory phrasing; the absence of redundant conjunctions; the rich vocabulary; the deep empathy for landscape and weather; the unerring sense of mood and atmosphere.

The book is replete with similar passages, and the quality and elegance of the writing are almost unfailing. Vance is, in fact, a born fantasy writer; his talents are so appropriate to the field that it was inevitable that this early attempt should be a landmark. Once again, however, it is the magnitude of his talent which allows him to publish work so lacking in basic technique, and there are few books in the field at once so stylistically excellent and so technically crude.

The Dying Earth probably took at least ten years to write, on and off. The stories that constitute the book were, according to Vance himself, written at sea (presumably in the early 1940s) and failed to sell. Sam Merwin, then editor of Startling and Thrilling Wonder, recalls some "fascinating, but, alas, unpublishable, pseudo-Cabell [James Branch Cabell] fantasies" submitted at this time. They were subsequently rewritten into book form and eventually published by Hillman Books, who concurrently were publishing the excellent and foredoomed magazine Worlds Beyond, with Damon Knight as the editor. Worlds Beyond published part of The Dying Earth under the title "The Loom of Darkness" in its first issue (December) and was to publish a splendidly constructed short story by Vance ("Brain of the Galaxy") in its third and last issue two months later. Knight had also got another story from Vance, "The Secret," which seemed accursed, being lost twice and eventually reprinted in England in 1966 without Vance's knowledge. With the demise of the magazine, Vance lost probably his best chance to form a creative relationship with Knight, one of the finest and most intelligent editors in the field.

It seems likely that, in publishing The Dying Earth, Hillman and/or Knight were hoping to foster an obvious new talent. The book represents a recapitulation of Vance's entire writing career up to that time, from his earliest

efforts, when he was simply incapable of telling a story, to the relative sophistication and competence of stories such as "New Bodies for Old" and "The Five Gold Bands." As such, it is sometimes excellent and sometimes very bad indeed.

It is inconceivable that there should be any reader of Vance who does not own a copy of The Dying Earth, and so a detailed treatment of the book can omit much expository detail. The texture and language of the work are, in any case, so seductive that a general overview offers more chance of evaluating it critically.

To begin with, the book has no structure. While Lin Carter has described the stories as opening into each other like intricate Chinese boxes, in fact there is no unifying theme and the overlap of characters is inconsistent and apparently virtually fortuitous. Even the time sequence of the stories is confused. "Maz-irian the Magician" opens the book, but in fact takes place some indeterminate time after the event of "Turjan of Miir," which follows it (an order Vance thought useful at the time, with some justification in terms of exposition, but which has been reversed in subsequent editions). "Turjan of Miir" generates the central character of the first part of "T'sais," in which a parenthetical episode introduces the central character of "Liane the Wayfarer." "Ulan Dhor Ends a Dream" includes only the minor character Prince Kandive from earlier stories, while "Guyal of Sfere" is related only through some geographical references (and, of course, the common background of all the stories).

The background of the Dying Earth itself has few antecedents. In the far future of Earth the sun is growing dim, the moon has departed the sky, science has fallen, and magic, itself a declining and half-understood technique, is the only power in the world. There are similarities here to Clark Ashton Smith's "last continent" of Zothique, and, although Vance acknowledges Smith as an exemplar, the style and mood of his work have taken a different direction. Certainly Vance shares Smith's taste for elegant syntax, rare words, and sardonic humor; however, there is a cynical, misanthropic flavor to Smith's work which is rarely found in Vance without a compensating empathy and compassion.

The rationale put forward for the magic in the setting is initially physical; spells work by twisting space into appropriate distortions when certain sounds are uttered. The outlandish and difficult nature of the sounds is what makes magic hard work (a fantasy author must place some restriction upon his effect, otherwise no story is possible). Later in the book magic is discussed as an ultimate branch of mathematics, and the wizard Pandelume, mentor of Turjan

of Miir, is a "Master Mathematician." In "Guyal of Sfere," we encounter a desolate and dangerous area which appears to be a radiation crater, and "Ulan Dhor Ends a Dream" is a science fiction story with no real fantastic elements.

"Guyal of Sfere," however, also includes a more Jungian explanation of the origins of demons and other monstrous creatures; they appear to be tangible manifestations of the accumulated dark side of the race's unconscious. The book abounds in magical devices and artifacts whose origins remain vague to good effect; in Vance's world, magic, like science, is decaying from a peak of accomplishment, and the book is steeped in a twilight sense of decline and decadence. Everything is left over from long ago; history has become so vast and impenetrable that nothing but trivia can be drawn from it; the hopeless cold future pins Vance's characters into the frantic present, day by day, like struggling butterflies.

Magic and wonder, however, are only the backdrop (at least in the present work) for the struggles of the human characters, and the problems of the book's construction arise in part from Vance's tendency to forget this. With no consistent protagonist or viewpoint character, the book sags into an uneasy compromise between a novel and a collection, and there was to be some argument as to what Vance's intention had been. While Vance has always maintained that it is a collection, I think it likely that he was, at that stage, simply not aware of the reading problems which he had generated. In contrast, his later The Eyes of the Overworld is a firmly unified book with the circular plot which has generally represented Vance's greatest sophistication in this area of technique.

There is a corresponding limitation in Vance's plotting for The Dying Earth, which eventually becomes tiresome as the same plot is repeated in every story. Everyone in the book is looking for something: Mazirian pursues a mysterious woman, Turjan seeks the secret of artificial humanity, T'sais looks for love and beauty, Liane the Wayfarer tries to find Chun the Unavoidable (ironically enough!), Ulan Dhor seeks the lost city of Ampridatvir, and Guyal of Sfere is curious about everything. In some cases Vance drops one quest and picks up another, as when the crowded adventures of T'sais are suspended in order to follow the career of her rescuer Etarr (who is trying to get his own face back), and when both of these characters then go off in search of a fortuitous god who can give them both what they want.

The construction of individual stories improves steadily throughout the book, although Vance tends not to notice when one story is over and another

has begun, creating a broken-backed effect which is most intrusive in "Guyal of Sfere." "Mazirian the Magician" is so enthralling in its furnishings and atmosphere, and advantageously placed as the first story in the book, that its disintegration in the closing pages goes almost unnoticed at first reading. After the duel in the lake, the viewpoint shifts abruptly to the fleeing woman T'sain, forcing a change of outlook and orientation upon the reader at an awkward moment. Improbabilities come thick and fast after the death of Mazirian, as the fatally injured T'sain returns several leagues through the deadly forest, at night, walks into Mazirian's mansion without magical hindrance, finds his keys in a cabinet, locates his most secret room several floors underground, throws Turjan's glass prison to the floor without harming him, and happens to have a magical rune on her wrist which will restore him to normal size. Turjan's mawkish soliloquy, while explaining T'sain's origins, does not reveal how this elaborate and improbable scheme was arranged. Nor does the reader stop to reflect upon the perfect fit between Mazirian's magical preparations and the circumstances which he encounters.

"Turjan of Miir" also succeeds through style alone, with particular strengths in dialogue and confrontation. While the plot lurches from one encounter to another, looking very aimless in between, the set pieces themselves hold considerable excitement. Unfortunately, the central problem of the story (Turjan's quest for the secret of artificial life) is solved several pages before the end, and another abrupt change of viewpoint is needed to bring T'sais on stage and focus attention upon her problem. The naive conversation between T'sais and T'sain at the end of the story, while forced upon Vance by previous developments, carries little conviction.

The third section, "T'sais," is technically the weakest in the book and is completely shapeless, badly paced, infuriatingly and rewardingly discursive, grossly reliant upon happenstance, and resolved by a literal deus ex machina. The power and imagination of individual scenes make these faults all the more frustrating, like a necklace of exquisite jewels whose string has broken. The story is over-packed with detail, and scenes follow each other too quickly for full effect, like a hastily told fairy tale. The quest of T'sais begins the story but is dropped after she finds safety with Etarr (and after suffering three horrific encounters over eight pages in the time frame of a couple of hours). Etarr's quest then becomes the theme, while T'sais' problem is resolved slickly on the last page. The story throws off entrancing fireworks in all directions: the mesmeric evil of Liane the Wayfarer's atrocities, the murderous politeness of the

confrontations, the deodand's pursuit, the ancient massacre on Modavna Moor, the Green Legion of Valdaran the Just, the fantastic revels of the Sabbath, the ancient god of justice. Unfortunately, all these things are more interesting than what happens in the main plot of the story, such as it is, and Vance had not yet learned how to embroider his stories without concealing their form altogether.

By contrast, "Liane the Wayfarer" is much more soundly constructed, and Vance moves the plot smoothly through to resolution with unusual assurance. There is an intriguing opening hook in Liane's discovery of the talisman of invisibility, and Vance establishes the motivation of the plot (vanity and lust) with extravagant panache, in a delightful confrontation between the arrogant Liane and the competent witch Lith. There is a straightforward plot development pinned to Liane's journey to the lair of Chun, and the colorful scenes attached to it (in particular, the tour de force of displayed magic at the inn) are not allowed to obscure the direction of the story. The appalling and unforgettable climax, and the final twist, are strokes of mastery.

The only real flaw of "Liane the Wayfarer," in fact, is the continuing obtuseness of Liane in the face of unmistakable warnings that Chun is a powerful adversary. Liane fails to ask Lith why she cannot recover her own tapestry, or what has already been done to retrieve it. He seeks no information about Chun from the wizards at the inn, although they obviously dread Chun despite their magical skills. Even when surrounded by seven eyeless corpses, he neglects to ask what sort of creature Chun is, or how he defends himself so competently.

Vance makes this as credible as he can, however, by endowing Liane with a magical amulet and a gigantic conceit; without such foolhardiness there is no story, and a certain simplification and inflation of motives is permissible in the genre, and is in fact a consistent feature of the "Dying Earth" stories. Indeed, lunatic motivation, always intensely personal, is one of the most rewarding and individual aspects of Vance's work.

"Ulan Dhor Ends a Dream" is a long, closely plotted science fiction story that is one of the best in the book, and in some ways it represents a change in direction. The theme moves to another level of sophistication, from the elementary conflict of two characters to the development of an exotic social situation. In later years this was to become the major direction of Vance's fiction.

Some lengthy initial exposition is well-handled by framing it in a prickly and closely observed dialogue between Ulan Dhor and Prince Kandive. Vance, for once, exercises some self-restraint in allowing Ulan Dhor to reach the scene of

the story proper without having several distracting adventures on the way. The bizarre social order of Ampridatvir is competently detailed through direct and reported exposition, dialogue, action, Ulan Dhor's own reflections and deductions; Vance shows here that he is learning how to present a strange and wonderful setting without boring the reader or lecturing him. The story moves smoothly to a resolution, avoiding the meandering subplots which occur so frequently earlier in the book; and although the overblown super-science ending becomes far-fetched and over-paced, the vigor of the conclusion goes a long way towards redeeming this. The style at times carries a little more atmosphere than the narrative can support, but generally Vance achieves a competent matching of form and content.

"Guyal of Sfere" is the longest story in the book and the best, in my opinion, moving firmly into the area of exotic sociology which Vance has now made his own. Richly detailed, atmospheric, sharply characterized, and splendidly inventive, it ends the book on a sustained and near-flawless peak of excellence. (It is unfortunate that the story, as reprinted in Vance's 1969 collection Eight Fantasms and Magics, has been trimmed in a number of passages, and some of the names have been altered. Occasionally this is for the better, as in the substitution of the fictional Lost Book of Caraz for the extant Book of Kells. More often, passages are elided or shortened to worse effect — for example, the splendid entrance hall of the Museum of Man is stunningly described in the original and dismissed in an abridged paragraph in the later version. Vance has said that he made the changes himself, wishing to "eliminate overblown expressions and extravagance"; such an excess of misplaced self-criticism underlines his need for a sympathetic and skilled editor.)

The story follows the quest of Guyal for the source of all human knowledge in the fabled Museum of Man; his motivation is simple curiosity, and he is sustained throughout by his purity of intent. While he keeps to the trail, no harm can befall him, thanks to his father's blessing (one might almost argue that, at this stage, Vance was in need of a similar restriction upon his plotting and story construction!). On the whole, however, the simplicity of the story's direction enables Vance to avoid foundering in side issues, and the wealth of subsidiary scenes is controlled by a meticulous sense of atmosphere which never loses touch with the central theme.

The misfortunes which befall Guyal have all been echoed and redeveloped in subsequent work: the villainous ferryman, the baroque bargaining scene with the raffish and pretentious augur, the unctuous, sinister villagers and their

brutalized oasts, the dreamlike musical interlude in the bewitched empty city, with its strange and terrible occupants, and the long ordeal of Saponce, where Guyal is tricked into captivity and subjected to the eccentric formality of a cynical trial, with legal arguments of the most perverse logic. Similar fates, or course, were to be encountered by Cugel the Clever in The Eyes of the Overworld, but Guyal is too sympathetic to be consigned to the mortifying reverses which befell Cugel in the last scene of that book. From this point on, however, the plot comes under pressure, and successive events seem ever more hurried. The restoration of Kerlin the Curator to sanity, the over-elaborate stratagem used to defeat Blikdak, and the last-minute revelation of the mode of operation of the memory-banks — all seem excessively contrived, as if Vance had been in a hurry to get the story over with. The ending has now become standard for Vance: the two protagonists, their preoccupations resolved, now find their future directions open and experience a disconcerting sense of aim-lessness. In this case, at least, the white stars overhead indicate an obvious future, but many of Vance's later novels end on a note almost of foreboding, as their leading characters realize that they may now have nothing left to aim for, and that they have been changed for better or worse and can never return to the lives they left. "What shall we do?" is a question which recurs time and again, and in later work there is often the disturbing implication that morality is no longer available and that characters have lost forever their innocence and their certainties.

The Dying Earth thus remains a chaotic, shapeless, uneven book — often brilliant, occasionally crass, bejewelled with splendid descriptive passages, exotic invention, polished dialogue, vivid metaphor, rare vocabulary. In its range of themes and settings, it displays almost all of Vance's talents and weaknesses. In the ten years which elapsed between its inception and its publication, Vance developed (entirely through his own efforts) from a gifted amateur totally lacking in technique to an accomplished freelance writer. The plotting and resolution of his stories have always presented major problems, and it is one of the most saddening aspects of his career that he should have been unable to find an editor who could work with him at this time to overcome these weaknesses.

Perhaps, however, these flaws are unimportant when set beside the accomplishments of his talents and meticulously crafted style. It's only to be expected that his first book should reflect the development of his craft — here he loses control of pace, there he stumbles from one viewpoint to another, now the plot becomes nonsensical, this or that character is drawn too boldly for his place. But always Vance gives us color, imagination, splendid language, rich

words, an unerring and perceptive eye for wonder, beauty, and strangeness, an enduring and sympathetic fascination with the varieties of human adjustment. By the end of 1950, five years after his first publication, the brilliance of his talent was beyond doubt.

Peter Close - 1980