

Auburn, Cal.  
Dec. 31st, 1933.

Dear Dick:

I'm trying to clean up all my arrears of correspondence and meet the New Year with ~~empty~~ files--if not with a clean slate. Your letter is one of the first to be answered. As usual, I am surprised to note the date--Nov. 17th. You needn't have apologized for your own delay--I understand clearly the time-filling nature of your scholastic program.

First of all, thanks for the bright and amiable-looking snapshot of yourself. I like this. Hope I can send you one of myself, in return, next time I write.

I am glad you were enjoying The Worm Ouroboros, and hope that the remainder of the book was equally, if not more, to your taste than the opening chapters. My own favourite chapters are the one about the conjuring in the iron-tower, and the part about the climbing of Kosktra Pivrarcha. It is a gorgeous book, and I doubt if many modern authors could equal it if they tried. As to the vocabulary--well, I am still vainly seeking in dictionaries some of the words employed; but must protest that my enjoyment was heightened rather than diminished by the verbal "orotundities". The general archaic flavour delighted me; though to me, as to you, the placement of the tale on Mercury seems a little arbitrary, not to say unnecessary. The whole atmosphere is so much that of European legend and epic that it might just as well have been staged on earth. However, this is a mere detail.

also

his style /  
Re this whole matter of diction, on which you touch in criticizing Revenant, I think that it comes back, like everything else, to one's personal taste. As Lytton Strachey remarks, in an article on Sir Thomas Browne, some people naturally admire and dote on the ornate, and others naturally abhor it. Personally, I can see the advantages and beauties of both styles. I agree with you that Dunsany is beautifully simple, being based partly on the King James Bible; and I think that about the only similarity between my style and his lies in the coinage of exotic nomenclature. As to my use of rare words, it may be that I sometimes overload my stories and poems with such; but it is only because I love or value the words for their own sake and find in them some unique shade of tone or meaning. I like to see the neglected treasures of the language put to use, and think the average writer's vocabulary is lamentably word-bare and limited. I do not believe that I have ever used a word for which there was not some particular reason, some special and cogent defense. However, I perceive that this forms a stumbling-block to many readers; and of course I grasp your argument about the direct emotional appeal of common familiar words. The point I wanted to make is, that the rarer words have an emotional appeal for me, and they seem appropriate when one is dealing, as I often deal, with strange and *r  cher  * themes. When it comes to conveying to one's reader "the maximum impression with the minimum effort on his part"--well it all depends on the reader. No man could devise a style of presentation that would do this universally. I do not doubt, however, that my tales would be more widely read and liked if written with more regard to the prejudices or verbal poverty of the main public. For this reason I do not think that I shall again, in a magazine



story or poem, permit myself any piling up of obsolete and rarely used words.

I have read, lately, a book which I believe you would enjoy: The Dark Chamber, by Leonard Cline. It is weirdly and beautifully atmospheric, with implications that are even more terrible than the direct action. In this book, I note a sprinkling of rare and jewel-like words; "meeching famulus," "dulcitony of May," "in orpiment and filemot the pageant woods," etc. It seems to me that they heighten the outre mood and stylistic enchantment. Some if not all of the prose is carefully cadenced too. The only fault I can find is a slight hint, in places, of "artiness" and smart modernity. I recommend it strongly to you. I am sorry to learn that the author is dead.

I know nothing about the author of The Worm Ouroboros. I should think the best thing to do would be to write him in care of the publishers, Albert and Charles Boni. I meant to drop you a card suggesting this, but can't be sure whether I did or not.

Ackerman seems to have stirred up a regular witch's brew in The Boiling Point! Wolf's-bane, horned toads, prussic acid, the chemicals of pseudo-science--everything goes! "Fire burn and cauldron bubble." And it looks as if the dispute would go on till the day of Armageddon.

I too hope that Unusual Stories will be able to establish itself. There have been delays, owing to the tardy response of subscribers. Crawford now intends to try for newstand distribution: copies for subscribers will be printed on bookpaper, those for the stands on pulp similar to that used in Argosy. If the magazine runs at all, I shall illustrate my contributions (following The White Sybil). You will note, in the Jan. W.T., that The Weaver in the Vault is self-illustrated. I have also done a drawing for The Charnel God (March W.T.) and hope that Wright will approve it. I am sick of Wilcox's inane atrocities.

I'll try to do that requested "thumb-nail biography in my next--when I have a picture for you. It won't take very long!"

I don't blame you for getting tired of hack-written weirds and conventional science fiction. But all magazine fiction runs, it would seem, to stereotypes. I don't think there is much to be said for the so-called "better magazines." I have just read, in Colliers, a supposedly imaginative story (At Cinders Lake, by Wetjen) which could not possibly have made the grade with W.T. or even with Wonder Stories. In fact, none of the humble pulps would have printed anything so poor.

All best New Year wishes.

Cordially yours,

Clark Ashton

for the first story!