

NOVELIST WHO DRIVES A HARD BARGAIN

An interview with Edmund Cooper

In a charming old house tucked away up a muddy lane in rural surroundings near Arundel lives Edmund Cooper with his wife and four children. He is a prodigious writer, mostly of novels. He once completed one in only two months and in the next two years wrote five more.

Edmund Cooper is an exciting person. He positively oozes ideas, and discusses them fluently and with enthusiasm. You go away feeling you have been with someone of wide vision and a powerful imagination; a man who is awake to what is going on in the world, and who has the courage to attack the evils of our society wherever he comes across them.

Often referred to as a writer of science fiction, this is not a true description. He is interested in ideas and social aspects, and these he projects into the future, often as a warning of the possible results of the greed and apathy of our society.

He is frequently likened to George Orwell, H.G.Wells, Aldous Huxley, and his picture of life on earth in the 21st Century could be an extension of David Attenborough's series, for who knows how Man will evolve in the centuries ahead?

An extremely successful author now, Edmund Cooper recalls that in his early days he wrote for himself, and was rewarded with a bathroom papered with rejection slips. He then realized that he must write for people, and his purpose in each novel is to entertain and give pleasure, to give people something to think about, and to earn a living for himself and his family.

The critics can say what they please about his books, it doesn't bother him. "I do the best I can,"

he told me, "and what matters is how I feel about what I write. If I myself am satisfied, that is what matters to me."

To date, this author has written 20 novels, published in ten different languages. Many have run to several editions, and throughout the world four million copies have been sold. He has a large fan-mail and sets aside part of each day to reply, for he considers that anyone who takes the trouble to write deserves an answer.

Recently he was tremendously pleased to get a letter from a young Australian, confined in an iron lung, who had just read one of his books. "It made my week," the young man wrote. And it made Edmund Cooper's, too.

Worried about the direction in which our society is drifting, he wrote "The Cloud Walker" as a wry comment on the future -- it is the novel he likes best. And, again looking ahead, he wrote "The Slaves of Heaven", first published in 1974. Centuries in the future, Man still inhabits the earth, but it is a wretched and primitive society, preyed upon by the Night Comers who, provided with laser beams and other scientific equipment, carry off the earth women to Heaven Seven, the Night Comers' home in the sky. Only through the courage of Berry, the earth chief, are both worlds eventually saved from destruction.

An example of the way in which he attacks the stupidities of our society is "Five to Twelve", a novel in which he ridicules "Women's Lib", a movement which he had seen developing years before it became common knowledge. Reversing the roles of our long traditional man/woman establishment, he made the male subservient to the female

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to point up the fallacy of the idea. He is no chauvinist; he believes whole-heartedly in equal opportunity for all, but he sees no future for a society dominated by either.

His latest novel, "Merry Christmas, Ms. Minerva!" is set in the 21st Century and depicts a Britain carved up by the tough powerful unions who control everything.

Edmund Cooper is convinced that the alarming politics of today can only result in total disaster and the destruction of our country. Published last October, the book is in his opinion so horrifying that he actually advised me (but with a wry smile) not to read it! It has received good notices, and I shall certainly do so.

Son of a North Country shopkeeper, Edmund Cooper achieved a matchless record when he won four scholarships in the same year; he subsequently attended Manchester Grammar School, completing his schooling by the time war broke out in 1939.

Debarred by a heart complaint from joining the forces, he went into the Merchant Navy and was present at the first Normandy landing. He left the sea some 15,000 miles later, took a teachers' training course, and taught in a school for the next three and a half years. But he found it gruelling work and felt that if he were ever to become a full-time writer, this was the moment.

Penniless, he retired to East Anglia, and with hunger as a spur began writing short stories, learning his trade while earning. All kinds of outlandish titles were thought up, and he even competed with a fellow writer to see who could produce the most startling.

Moving to London in 1960, Edmund Cooper worked in public relations for over four years, writing all the time, but with his 40th birthday looming he felt he must get back to full-time writing and make a name for himself. This he achieved, and soon had a high reputation in many countries, his novels getting better and better.

He married for the second time, came to live in Sussex, and taught for a year at Chichester College of Further Education. This he found rewarding, and was gratified that, of his 26 students, six managed to achieve publication of their work.

Edmund Cooper is forthright, honest and a hard worker. So great is his reputation now that he has only to complete a book to have it snapped up by a publisher. He is a good businessman, can drive a hard bargain, and no longer uses an agent.

When not in his study, he walks, listens to music, and enjoys watching television. He is his own sternest critic. "A writer must never lie to himself, he must believe in his own ideas, and he must be able to look critically at what he has written." That is his philosophy. Birmingham recently paid him a tribute by choosing his work as an O-level examination subject.