
The Nuclear War Fiction Collection at Washington State University

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A unique popular culture collection that circulates.

Robert P. Sewell recently presented a rationale for the collection of popular fiction which discussed the importance of so-called ephemeral literature to the researcher.¹ His thesis is well illustrated by my own experience in working with the subject of nuclear war in fiction.

For almost six years I have been working on a comprehensive study and bibliography entitled *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984*, to be published this spring by Kent State University Press. In the course of working on the book I encountered many difficulties. I found I could not rely on the standard reference works to tell me whether or not a particular piece of fiction in fact depicted a nuclear war. Reviewers and scholars often avoid specifying whether a plot culminates in a nuclear exchange because they do not want to give away surprise endings. The terms "holocaust" and "postholocaust" are used very loosely, and may or may not designate a nuclear war. I found that there was no substitute for examining the texts themselves, and so have had to obtain and read virtually every title listed in my bibliography.

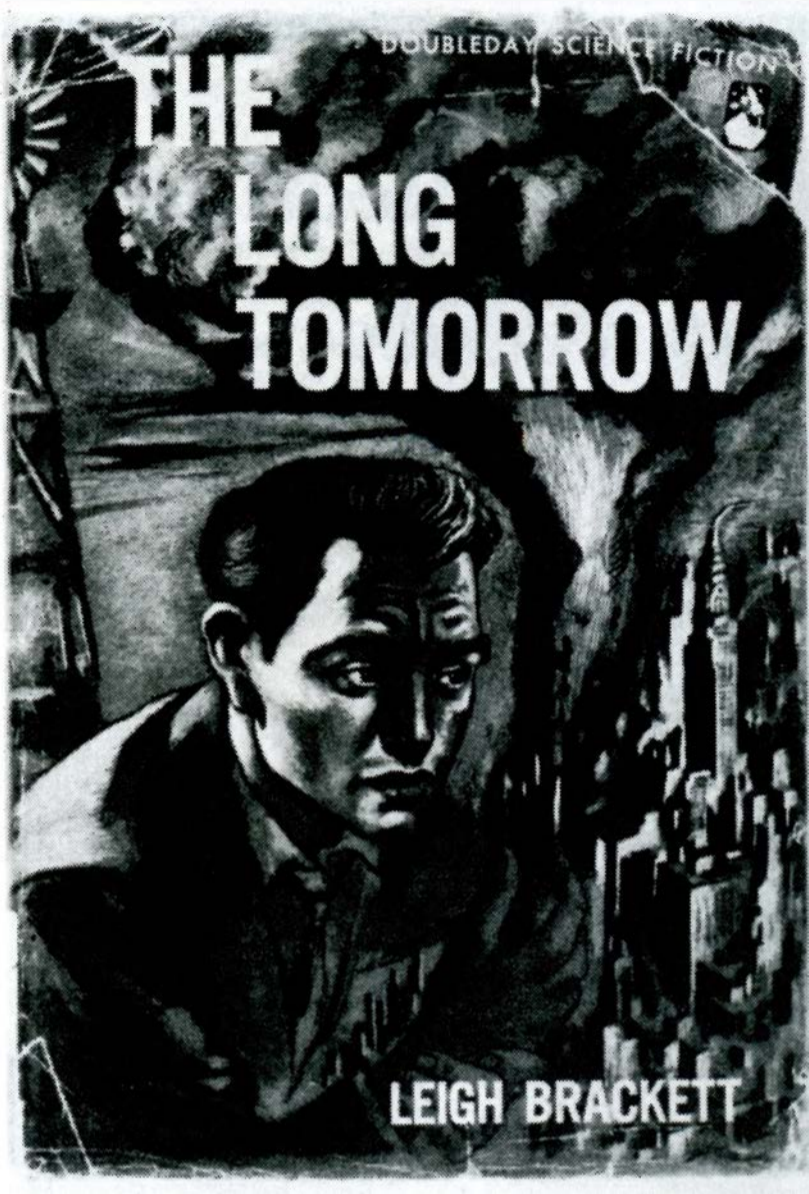
Finding the titles not already held by Washington State University's Holland Library was not easy. The more common science fiction stories and

novels were readily obtainable through interlibrary loan, although less often from academic libraries than from public ones. The difficulty of obtaining popular mass market fiction through libraries is well illustrated by the story of my search for a sleazy paperback by George H. Smith entitled *The Coming of the Rats*. Extensive searching by ILL failed to turn up a copy in any library in North America or Britain. The book was decreed unobtainable. By ordinary standards, that would make it a valuable rarity.

In fact, however, I found a copy for 95 cents in a local used bookstore. Despite the extensive, sometimes heroic, often expensive, efforts of ILL, many times I found science fiction collectors a superior resource for identifying and providing titles unobtainable through regular library channels.

Even when ILL could locate copies of various obscure paperbacks in other libraries, such as the well-known Eaton science fiction collection in the library of the University of California at Riverside, they often were not available for either circulation or photocopying. Although I had three small grants which made possible my extensive use of ILL (at WSU the minimum charge per book is \$1.00), paying hundreds of dollars for travel expenses to read a 25-cent paperback when there were hundreds to read was beyond my means. I resolved that if a collection of nuclear war fiction were to be established at WSU, it must circulate through ILL to scholars at other institutions. With the support of the De-

¹Robert G. Sewell, "Trash or Treasure: Pop Fiction in Academic and Research Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 45 (1984):450-61.



Left: Leigh Brackett, *The Long Tomorrow* (Doubleday, 1955). Right: Pelham Groom, *The Purple Twilight* (T. Werner Laurie, 1948).

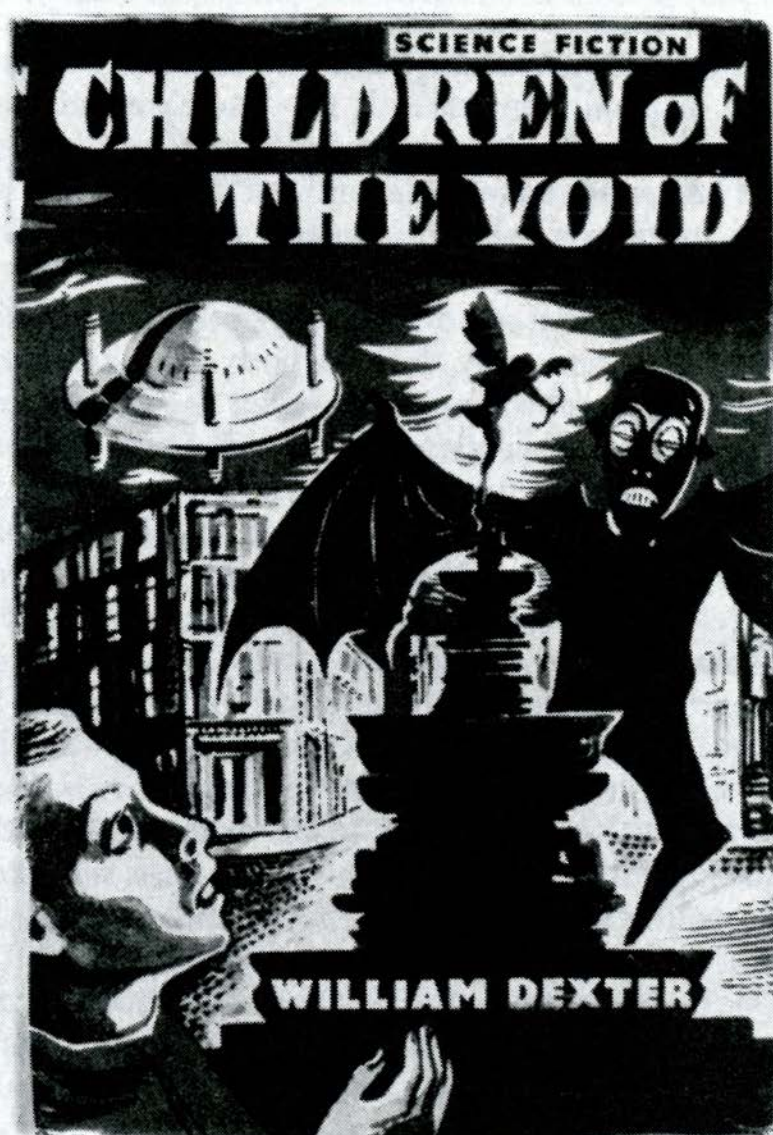
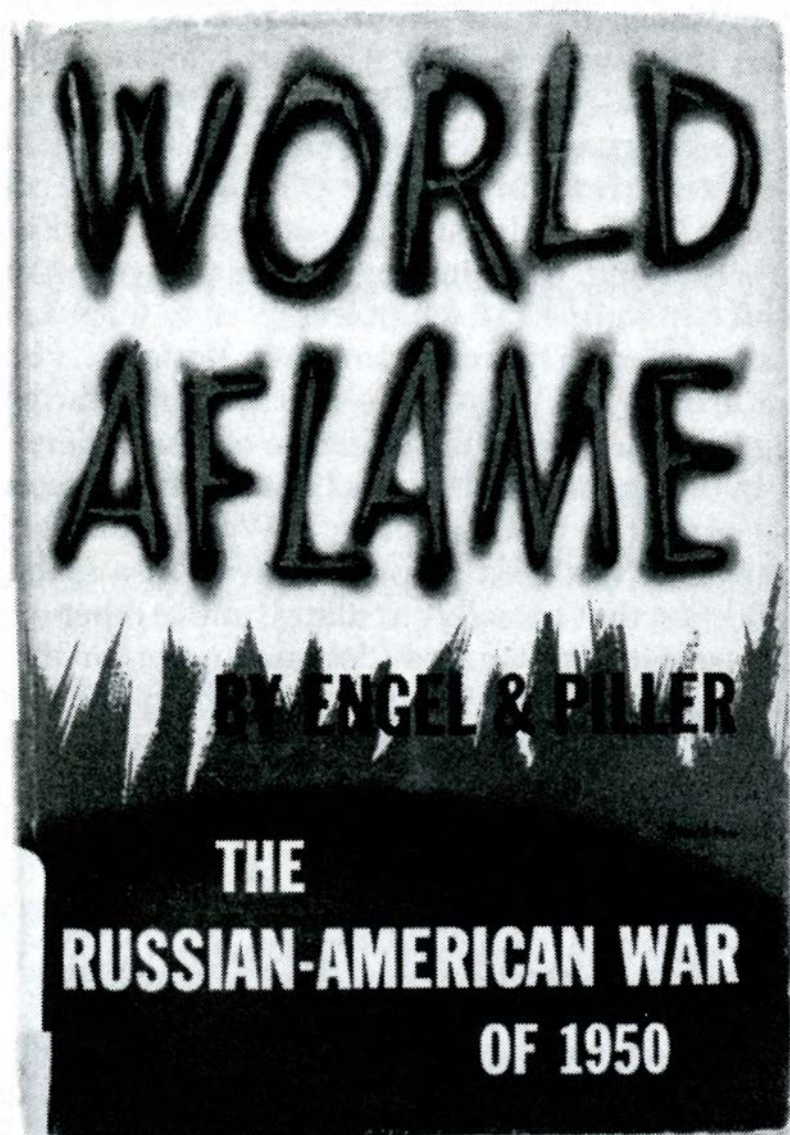
partment of English Library Committee, the head of humanities collection development at Holland Library, Ann Wierum, took on the task of creating the collection.

The Nuclear War Fiction Collection aims at being a comprehensive collection of novels, short stories, and plays depicting nuclear war or its aftermath, plus selected works depicting nuclear crises that narrowly avoid war. Many of them are straightforward tales of probable nuclear wars, such as *On the Beach*; but the majority are science fiction, set in more or less distant, more or less fantastic postholocaust futures. A significant category is novels about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by both Japanese and Western authors. Only works either originally published in English or translated into English are included, but since this represents the overwhelming majority of such works, the stipulation is less restrictive than it sounds. It is intended as a working collection rather than an archive: when first editions are available they are acquired, but reprints are often purchased instead. A large number of short stories are represented by their inclusion in science fiction magazines such as *Astounding*, most of whose run is held on microfilm (the remainder is in ordinary paper form). Many of these are duplicated in various short story anthologies also held by the library.

The period covered is defined by the subject matter, but not as narrowly as one might expect.

There are many items before 1945, when the atomic bomb was perfected, because as early as 1895 the concept of using atomic energy in weapons was featured in fiction, as in Robert Cromie's *The Crack of Doom*. The earliest pre-Hiroshima novel collected so far is George Griffith's *The Lord of Labour* from 1911. Harold Nicholson's 1932 atomic war novel, *Public Faces*, was already in the Holland Library in another special collection: the Virginia Woolf Collection. What we have is Woolf's own copy of the book. Perhaps a third of the titles in the collection so far were already held by the library before the project began. As of the end of 1986 there were already over 750 items in the collection, with more arriving constantly. Another 390 titles have been requested and more are added to our want list as they are published: between ten and twenty-five a year.

One of the first decisions to be made was where to locate the books. The bulk of the items already held were in the special science fiction collection, classified in the PZs. Reclassification was out of the question; besides, many of the items we would be buying would be in great demand by science fiction fans as well as nuclear war researchers. Therefore most of the titles continue to be classed in PZ and shelved with the science fiction. This has occasionally led to odd mistakes, as when a copy of Masuji Ibuse's moving account of the Hiroshima bombing, *Black Rain*, was temporarily placed with the SF.



Left: Leonard Engel & Emmanuel Piller, *World Aflame* (Dial, 1947). Right: William Dexter, *Children of the Void* (Peter Owen, 1955), featuring fire-extinguisher battles with giant, land-going, telepathic jellyfish.

However, the science fiction collection is one of the most heavily used areas of the library, and is subject to a heavy rate of pilferage. It seemed wise to put the rarer and more valuable volumes into a less accessible area. Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections was ruled out for several reasons. MASC didn't want any more high-acid paperbacks crowding their already cramped space (I had previously inflicted upon them the beginnings of an underground comics collection that had become one of the largest in the country). MASC was out of the question so far as I was concerned because of their policy of not allowing materials to circulate. The solution was a rather unconventional one: the valuable items were placed in compact storage. The closed stack compact storage area, from which books can be obtained only with the written permission of a librarian, is much more secure than Holland Library's regular open stacks.

Since the collection was scattered throughout the library, it was necessary to identify volumes belonging to it. One concern of mine was that some future librarian, unaware of the purpose behind the acquisition of such items as *The Survivalist*, no.6: *The Savage Horde*, might discard them or fail to replace tattered or missing books. The solution was straightforward: a simple bookplate identifying each volume as part of the Nuclear War Fic-

tion Collection. No separate catalog of the collection is maintained by the library, although I maintain and share with the staff my own checklist. My book, when published, will serve as a fairly comprehensive guide to the items published before 1985.

Although many of the mainstream works such as Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age* come to the library through its regular approval program, most of the rest must be identified by myself and specially ordered. I use as my main source for new titles *Fantasy Review*, which covers new and forthcoming SF and fantasy comprehensively. Local book dealers and fans frequently tip me off to others.

For out-of-print books we rely on Bob Brown, a Seattle collector and part-time used book dealer who specializes in apocalyptic fiction and who has provided us with an amazing number of obscure and rare titles. He has invested large amounts in books—some of them on a recent trip to England—without guarantees that we would be able to purchase them immediately. Again and again when the budget pinched, we have had to freeze the ordering process. The stop-and-go approach to collecting imposed upon us by budgetary constraints must be frustrating to a small dealer, but Brown has continued to provide outstanding service.

Unfortunately there is a considerable backlog of

new items to be ordered as well, partly because of lack of funds, partly because the number of items needed has turned out to be considerably larger than originally envisioned. In some cases this has meant that a fugitive paperback goes out of print and becomes unavailable before it can be ordered, or a hardcover edition vanishes and we must be content with a softcover reprint.

The collection serves several purposes. It is an archive of a narrowly defined body of fiction not readily accessible elsewhere (even the Imaginary War Fiction Collection at Colorado State University lacks a large number of these titles). Although the library was unable to obtain books rapidly enough for them to be available for my own research, it is a resource for my own continuing scholarship and that of the increasing number of researchers investigating nuclear war in fiction. It is also a tool for the students who take my course in the English Department on "Nuclear War in Fiction." Each of them has to do extensive outside reading for class assignments. This past semester the collection was heavily used and resulted in some excellent research papers.

Support for the collection has been strong, both inside the library and in the English Department. Only one person—a non-faculty library staff member—has raised any objection to the collection, on the grounds that the library should not be buying ephemeral popular material. Most librarians at WSU seem to recognize that popular fiction can be basic research material. The classics simply do not tell us all we need to know about our culture and its hopes, fears, and dreams. In this specific

case, well-established mainstream authors have rarely touched on the important subject of nuclear war; if we want to study its impact on the public consciousness we have to turn to popular fiction.

In February 1985 librarian Paula Elliot mounted an extensive exhibit of items from the collection, both in Holland Library and in the Fine Arts Building, coordinating it with a traveling exhibit of painting and sculptures relating to nuclear war entitled, "Disarming Images." Notices in various articles and reference works are slowly bringing the collection to the attention of researchers.

In this age of tight budgets I am deeply appreciative of the fact that the library at Washington State University has been willing to invest in a special collection that actually circulates, unlike other special collections that seem designed more for their prestige than their usefulness, forcing the rare scholars who can afford to use them to travel thousands of miles to do so. The experience of helping to build this collection has convinced me that idealism is still healthy in libraries, as shown by the Washington State University Library staff. ■■

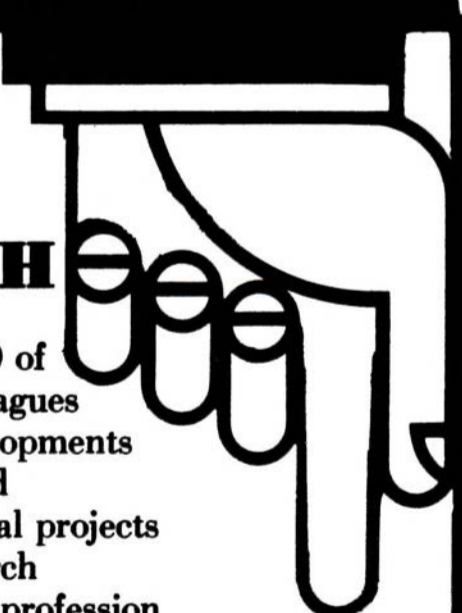
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