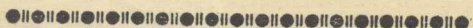


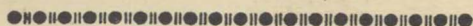
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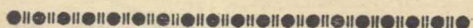
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To the memory of my friends and colleagues

Larry T. Shaw (1924–1985)

and

Theodore Sturgeon (1918–1985)

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Introduction

This is a companion piece to my book *The Best Mysteries of Isaac Asimov*, both being published at about the same time.

I must admit, however, that *The Best Mysteries* was prepared by me with a lighter heart. For one thing, I had never before published a collection of mysteries from various sources and of various types, all written by me. On the other hand, I *have* published a number of science fiction collections and, in 1973, I even published one entitled *The Best of Isaac Asimov*.

Why then another? Why, especially, another "Best"?

It's not as though I'm the only one who noticed this. As long as twenty years ago, there were those in the science fiction world who commented (not exactly favorably) on my penchant for "recycling" my stories.

That I recycle my stories is true. I don't deny it. However, it's not primarily my idea; it's my busy and efficient publishers who more or less insist on it. Their reasoning is as follows:

A book has a natural lifetime as a hardcover. The libraries only buy so many and then have all they feel that they need. The bookstores only buy so many and then see no reason for stocking it when the sales are diminishing and newer books are pressing for the limited shelf-space. After a year or so, then, a hardcover book may go out of print. It doesn't necessarily stop earning money, of course, for there are bookclub editions, soft-cover editions, foreign editions and so on—but the hardcover is gone.

There are, however, new readers of science fiction

constantly arising, as children turn into adolescents. I have heard it said that the science fiction readership produces a new "generation" every three years. The new "generation" can't get hold of a book that is out of print. The softcover, itself, may be out of print, and even if it isn't, there are always some readers who would want a hardcover for their permanent libraries.

Why, then, not put out a new hardcover edition of a book that is out of print? That's quite possible, but risky. An old book so reissued has to compete with fresh new books, and, all things being equal, a new book has the advantage, naturally. There are some authors, nevertheless, whose old books can successfully compete. They may not do as well as a new book by those same authors would do, but in default of a new book by such authors, an old one will do. Publishers have to be able to tell which authors and which books can stand reissuing, and they seem to be pretty good at it. (If they weren't, they wouldn't stay in business very long.)

Fortunately for me, Doubleday seems to think my books can withstand repeated exposures and you can be sure that, even though I am noted worldwide for my astonishingly intense modesty, I don't try to argue them out of this.

Not only do they reissue a hardcover version of a book of mine on occasion, but they also like to introduce something new. They will put out two or three of my books in an omnibus volume, or produce a new short-story collection that varies from earlier ones in theme even though most or all of the stories in the new collection had appeared in one or another old collection. Apparently, it then turns out that there are a number of readers who haven't seen the old collections and who are willing to invest in the new one. (There may even be a few amiable souls who buy the new collection, even though they have read all the stories in older collections, simply because they know that sales please me and they wish to give me pleasure.)

Nor is there any large chance that my publishers or I will cheat a customer by palming off an "old" book on

some naïve reader who thinks he or she is getting a "new" one. In the first place, readers know me by now and they are sure to be wary and to study the front of the book for telltale copyright notices. You can bet that any story that first appeared in 1932, for instance, has already been collected—perhaps several times. You may be certain that I don't allow stories to lie about not earning any money if I can help it.

And besides that, Doubleday is very generous in allowing me to write introductions to my books, and if the books are "recycled" you can bet I tell the reader all about it. Partly it's because I am honest, and partly because I am chatty.

But why am I putting out a "Best of" book, when back in 1973, I already put one out?

There are a number of reasons. In the first place, the earlier book was comparatively small. It contained twelve items, whereas this book you are now holding contains twenty-eight—some of which were published after the earlier book appeared.

Secondly, I did not have complete control over the earlier book. The original choice of stories was made by the editor in a British publishing house, and while I modified it to exclude some I didn't want and include some I did want, the modification was only partial and I wasn't able to overcome some of the original scheme insisted on by the publisher. In this book, however, I have had full control and the choice of stories is entirely mine.

This means that I have chosen the stories *I* consider the best and not necessarily those that critics or readers do. For instance, my story "Nightfall" has often been voted not only the best of my stories but the best of *any* science fiction short story. However, I don't think it's the best SF story ever written, or even the best SF story I have written. Therefore I have left it out of this book. If any one else had arranged the collection, he or she wouldn't have dared leave it out, but I can do it easily.

Then, too, I have not included any robot stories at all. To begin with, I recently published all my robot short

stories in *The Complete Robot* (Doubleday, 1982) so that I suspect they've been read by most of my present-generation public. In addition, my Robot novels and my Foundation novels have received so much attention, that I am rather anxious to prove to those readers, who may possibly be unaware of it, that I have written a number of stories that concern neither robots nor the Foundation, and all twenty-eight stories in the present volume are examples.

It stands to reason, incidentally, that a particular reader may not necessarily enjoy every story in this book and may think, "Good heavens, does he think *this* thing is one of his best." Or, he may even think, "But he left out such and such a story, which I enjoyed enormously when I read it as a kid. What's wrong with his taste?"

Well, people do differ. I like my own writing so much that it was with great difficulty that I left out anything at all. Please believe me when I tell you that it would have given me the greatest possible pleasure to have shoveled in everything. I dimly felt, though, that I couldn't stick Doubleday with more than a certain number of words and so I have had to be rather more selective than I would like to be.

Furthermore, some stories I have written, which I particularly liked, did not seem to make much of a mark on the outside world. No one ever comments upon them, no one writes to tell me that he or she particularly enjoyed them, no one ever nominates them for an award, or invites them into some anthology or other. This all bothers me. Naturally, then, you can be sure that I put all the stories that I liked, but no one else did, into this book. It's my stubborn streak.

But fear not, I shall be completely honest and when those stories appear I will tell you about it for I will put a little introduction in front of each story to tell you why it's included (assuming I have some reason I can put into words).

All the Troubles of the World

It's hard to think up a really new idea. I'm not even certain that a new idea can exist. Even modern technology doesn't give you really new ideas; only new variations on old ideas.

The ancient Romans spoke of "sibyls," very old and wizened witches who could answer all your questions, solve all your problems. Aren't modern computers merely high-tech versions of the ancient sibyls?

In any case, I knew of a touching story told of an old sibyl and it sounded good to me. I made the story much longer, much more intricate, much more modern (of course), but I led up to a final punch line, and that punch line is exactly the one found in the ancient tale. It couldn't be improved upon.

So when I'm asked where I get my crazy ideas, the answer is, "Sometimes from the ancient Romans." And it worked so well for me, I had to include it here.

The greatest industry on Earth centered about Multivac—Multivac, the giant computer that had grown in fifty years until its various ramifications had filled Washington, D.C. to the suburbs and had reached out tendrils into every city and town on Earth.

An army of civil servants fed it data constantly and another army correlated and interpreted the answers it gave. A corps of engineers patrolled its interior while mines and factories consumed themselves in keeping its reserve stocks of replacement parts ever complete, ever accurate, ever satisfactory in every way.

Multivac directed Earth's economy and helped Earth's

science. Most important of all, it was the central clearing house of all known facts about each individual Earthman.

And each day it was part of Multivac's duties to take the four billion sets of facts about individual human beings that filled its vitals and extrapolate them for an additional day of time. Every Corrections Department on Earth received the data appropriate to its own area of jurisdiction, and the over-all data was presented in one large piece to the Central Board of Corrections in Washington, D.C.

Bernard Gulliman was in the fourth week of his year term as Chairman of the Central Board of Corrections and had grown casual enough to accept the morning report without being frightened by it. As usual, it was a sheaf of papers some six inches thick. He knew by now, he was not expected to read it. (No human could.) Still, it was amusing to glance through it.

There was the usual list of predictable crimes: frauds of all sorts, larcenies, riots, manslaughters, arsons.

He looked for one particular heading and felt a slight shock at finding it there at all, then another one at seeing two entries. Not one, but two. *Two* first-degree murders. He had not seen two in one day in all his term as Chairman so far.

He punched the knob of the two-way intercom and waited for the smooth face of his co-ordinator to appear on the screen.

"Ali," said Gulliman. "There are two first-degrees this day. Is there any unusual problem?"

"No, sir." The dark-complexioned face with its sharp, black eyes seemed restless. "Both cases are quite low probability."

"I know that," said Gulliman. "I observed that neither probability is higher than 15 per cent. Just the same, Multivac has a reputation to maintain. It has virtually wiped out crime, and the public judges that by its record on first-degree murder which is, of course, the most spectacular crime."

Ali Othman nodded. "Yes, sir. I quite realize that."

"You also realize. I hope," Gulliman said, "that I