



The 31st Golden Age of Science Fiction MEGAPACK®: Sam Merwin, Jr.

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Sam Merwin, Jr. (1910-1996) is one of those great "lost" authors. Equally adept at mystery and science fiction, he produced a significant body of work in both fields. In fact, this volume adds as a bonus two of his classic mystery stories, in addition to a selection of 7 science fiction stories. Included are:

JUDAS RAM

THE AMBASSADOR

THE FINAL FIGURE

REEL LIFE FILMS

A WORLD APART

IT'S ALL YOURS

TESTING

AMY STOPS THE CLOCK (Bonus Mystery Story)

DEATH FROM A FAMILY TREE (Bonus Mystery Story)

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Isidore says

I was vaguely aware that Merwin had been a prominent editor of sf pulps in the 1940s, but had never encountered his fiction. It turns out he's not bad---at any rate, he's less stylistically and ideological repulsive than many American sf writers of the 1950s.

Merwin wrote much more hardboiled detective fiction than sf, although the two specimens from that genre which are included in this collection aren't particularly stunning. As I see it, though, his being a relative outsider in the world of sf is all to the good, since he doesn't fall into the traps which make so much sf of the period tedious reading. For one thing, his interest in hard science is slight, and his stories are not about unravelling a problem primarily of interest to engineers. He also displays an unexpected and pleasing sweetness and warmth that sets him apart.

The best story here is "A World Apart", a time-travel story which is more fantasy than sf, and which poignantly ruminates on life's disappointments and compromises. "Testing" is also good, and is in some ways very prescient: the background to the story, which has a democratically elected leader seeking to evade international (okay, *interstellar*) law and embark on a militaristic rampage, is still all too topical, and the primary indication that the story was written sixty years ago instead of last week lies in the unabashed sentimentality with which the beleaguered peace-lovers are portrayed. It manages to be both kindly and inspiring.

The other stories are less memorable, although "The Ambassador" has wonky charm: the all-powerful mega-computer of centuries hence speaks "in a pleasant voice specially geared to resemble the voice of the greatest of twentieth-century troubadours, Bing Crosby"; most people wear disfiguring makeup or humps and padding as part of a campaign to level the playing field for ugly people; and one of the female characters evades editorial censorship by regularly swearing, "Night soil!"

Indeed, one sometimes senses that Merwin missed the greater freedom of expression which he had found in hardboiled fiction: "Judas Ram" is unexpectedly salacious for a sf story written in 1950, but then Merwin had one foot in the world of sf puritanism and the other in the world of Mickey Spillane.

"Reel Life Films" offers some Hollywood satire, presumably based on Merwin's occasional work in movies and television (incidentally, he wrote the novelization of blacklistee Abraham Polonsky's classic *Body and Soul*). The story itself is nothing much, but its subject matter is unusual for 1954: the stereotyping of ethnic minorities in movies. Once also notes the casual, offhanded mention in "Testing" (1956) that the interstellar human civilization of which the protagonist is a member is the creation of a dark-skinned race.

It's hard not to like Merwin, at least on the basis of the contents of this collection. He's seems a decent fellow who provides at the very least good entertainment. This isn't great art, or even great genre fiction, but it's better than a lot of 1950s sf.
