

Science Fiction

YEARS AGO I was working in Schenectady for General Electric, completely surrounded by machines and ideas for machines, so I wrote a novel about people and machines, and machines frequently got the best of it, as machines will. (It was called *Player Piano*, and it was brought out again in both hard cover and paperback.) And I learned from the reviewers that I was a science-fiction writer.

I didn't know that. I supposed that I was writing a novel about life, about things I could not avoid seeing and hearing in Schenectady, a very real town, awkwardly set in the gruesome now. I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled "science fiction" ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.

The way a person gets into this drawer, apparently, is to notice technology. The feeling persists that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works, just as no gentleman wears a brown suit in the city. Colleges may be to blame. English majors are encouraged, I know, to hate chemistry and physics, and to be proud because they are not dull and creepy and humorless and war-oriented like the engineers across the quad. And our most impressive critics have commonly been such English majors, and they are squeamish about technology to this very day. So it is natural for them to despise science fiction.

But there are those who adore being classified as science-fiction writers anyway, who are alarmed by the possibility that they might someday be known simply as ordinary short-story writers and novelists who mention, among other things, the fruits of engineering and research. They are happy with the *status quo* because their colleagues love them the way members of old-fashioned big families were supposed to do. Science-fiction writers meet often, comfort and praise one another, exchange single-spaced letters of twenty pages and more, booze it up affectionately, and one way or another have a million heart-throbs and laughs.