

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Allen Mueller August 2019

Allen Mueller is an expert on Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore. He wrote his MA thesis on them and has published several articles about them.

Øyvind Strømsvåg: What was the reason for using so many different pseudonyms as Kuttner did?

As with many authors, the Kuttners started using pseudonyms in situations where they had more than one story in a given publication (in a few cases, the Kuttners had up to 4 stories in a given magazine) and also as a way of distancing themselves from weaker stories published in less prestigious magazines. In a letter to August Derleth, Kuttner spoke quite frankly about, "sending (Leo) Margulies my W. T. duds." Sam Moskowitz claimed that Kuttner was forced to publishing under pseudonyms for a time due to the negative criticism he received for publishing "The Time Trap," with its (tame by today's standard) sexual content. I also believe that, after a time, the pseudonyms took on a life of their own, in a sense. Fritz Leiber relates an appropriate anecdote after Kuttner's death, "(Kuttner) and Bob (Bloch) had just been amusing themselves by formulating the personalities of a few pen names. As I recall a few of them, Lewis Padgett was a retired accountant who liked to water the lawn of an evening and then mosey down to the corner drugstore to pick up a quart of ice cream and whose wife collected recipes to surprise her bridge club. Lawrence O'Donnell was a wild Irishman who lived in Greenwich Village with a malicious black cat who had an infallible instinct for check letters and generally managed to chew up their contents before his master had shaken loose from his latest hangover. Keith Hammond was a Lewis Padgett fan, newly broken into the pro ranks, whom Padgett loathed..."

Øyvind Strømsvåg: Did Moore, like her husband, write any stories based on Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos?

None that I'm aware of.

Ed Newsom: I've read that Kuttner was working on a degree in the 1950s. In what field?

He was working on his Master's degree in English literature at USC, Moore was also a student and they lived right off-campus. Kuttner's thesis was on certain aspects of H. G. Wells' novels. Moore taught a writing class at USC in the late 1950s. To my knowledge, neither completed their advanced degrees.

Ed Newsom: There's a fatalism in so many of the short stories. Did this come from a love of classic tragedies, or did one of them suffer from depression? Or perhaps it was simply a dramatic device?

Agreed, particularly as they matured and developed as writers (and as they began to write more for themselves than for a specific market). As one reads Kuttner's correspondence, in particular, a picture emerges of a somewhat melancholic and pessimistic man who put on a wry, sardonic smile to meet a world that often disappoints. This dark humor is part of what makes his and Moore's mature work so rich, nuanced, and entertaining.

John Grayshaw: How did you become interested in researching them?

I was introduced to Kuttner and Moore at the age of 12 by my brother, who loaned me the Ballantine “Best of” anthology. I devoured it in one day. I was at a local used bookstore the following week and someone had sold them all four of the Ace F titles, which I bought and devoured nearly overnight. Within a week of that, a local bookseller offered me a stack of pulps with several Kuttner stories. I was blown away by the sheer variety and quantity of their work, and the challenge of obtaining it.

Eva Sable: What was the subject of your master's thesis?

“Psychological Themes in the Kuttners’ Horror, Science, and Detective Fiction.” My thesis is that there is a clear line of development in their work, a deepening and maturation of style and concerns that can be charted throughout their careers and that their mature work reflects a breaking-down of genre restrictions, moving them more towards what we consider to be “mainstream” authors.

Eva Sable: Was there a particular work of theirs that got you interested in them?

Probably “The Proud Robot.” The Kuttners’ wry sense of humor really appealed to me at first and I remember really being floored by those stories which combined that humor with horror “When the Bough Breaks” is a good example of this, or “Compliments of the Author.”

John Grayshaw: How did you research them? Is there an archive of their correspondence or manuscripts?

Since my interest pre-dates the internet, I did it the old-fashioned way, by writing to people who knew them. The high response rate was a clear sign that they were beloved friends and writers’ writers. This was pretty heady stuff for a young obsessive and I still have a sizeable file with letters from a host of writers from Matheson, to De Camp, to Leiber sharing their memories about Kuttner and Moore. Bloch and Bradbury were particularly generous and I exchanged letters with them for a few years. There is no dedicated archive of their work, but clutches of letters exist in the collections of other writers: Heinlein, Blish, Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett, etc. Most of the Kuttners’ papers, however, have not survived, to my knowledge. Even after actively searching for their letters and papers for over forty years, large gaps still exist in the biographies I have tried to put together.

John Grayshaw: What are some fun anecdotes about your research? Like quirky, unexpected or amusing discoveries?

Receiving a lovely “fan” letter from Ray Bradbury, whose letters came typed on stationary with gorgeous Joseph Mugnani artwork, reacting to an article I wrote on Kuttner. Julius Schwartz sending me tons of material related to the Kuttners and to his own work at DC comics. Delivering a paper at Science Fiction Research Association conference in Minneapolis in the nineties and being shouted down and verbally attacked by a well-known science fiction writer balking at my contention that it was difficult to locate biographical information on the Kuttners. He stood up during my presentation and shouted out the names of writers he believed would have this information—all dead ends already thoroughly-explored.

I'm still not sure, twenty years later, why he was so worked up, but I had a lovely conversation afterwards with Frederik Pohl, who was charming and extremely helpful

John Grayshaw: What information did you find that really surprised you?

How little Kuttner prized his earlier work as he aged. He was a perfectionist and rarely granted reprint rights in his final years. He claimed to be able to spot the flaws in his earlier work and always planned to go back and revise and improve his earlier work. How much comic book writing he did. As he said in a 1949 letter to James Blish, "I made the error of staying in it too long, so that whenever anybody spoke to me, I saw their words in balloons."

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the authors that influenced Kuttner and Moore?

Lovecraft, early on, Merritt, Thorne Smith, and Wells to name a few. Moore loved the Oz books. Kuttner loved, loved, loved Lewis Carroll and references to Carroll abound in their stories.

Ed Newsom: Who did they enjoy reading outside the FSF genres?

Richard Hughes's *High Wind in Jamaica*, Charles Jackson's "The Lost Weekend." Kuttner loved Gresham's "Nightmare Alley." Kuttner and Moore were bookworms who read fairly widely in psychology, sociology and philosophy of their day, both for enjoyment and for self-enrichment. Kuttner enjoyed discussing the ideas he found in these books with others. He read and discussed Kafka, Pound, and Sartre with fellow writers. Kuttner enjoyed Wallace Stevens; he did not care for Ayn Rand.

Ken Riehl: A number of authors mention the influence he had on their careers. Can you talk about how he discovered and mentored Leigh Brackett. His relationship with Marion Bradley, Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson and others.

The Kuttners were highly respected as "writers' writers," always working on their craft and improving. Kuttner also worked for years for the D'Orsay literary agency and gave advice to new writers in the mornings while he wrote his own material after hours, so was predisposed to mentoring and giving professional advice. I don't have any information on-hand about Kuttner mentoring Brackett, though she and her husband were Kuttner and Moore's close friends and travelling companions. When Richard Matheson struggled with "a 760-page novel which my agent (my agent at the time) did not like and which, subsequently, I was most distressed about. Hank's immediate reaction was to ask to read it—and read it he did shortly after, sending me six pages of single-space typing analyzing the novel as if it were his own. Nothing ever came of that book, but if for no other reason, I'm glad I wrote it because it helped me to realize what a thoughtful and considerate human being Hank was." Later, while Matheson was writing "I Am Legend," he became "hopelessly mired in technical troubles, not to mention story troubles. Hank, single-handedly, helped me out of them, guiding me (Hank never pushed, never dogmatized) step by step with suggestions and discussion until all the problems were met." "I Am Legend" is dedicated to Kuttner. Bradbury has gone on record a number of times about Kuttner's mentorship. They were not close personally, being of different generations and different temperaments. Shortly after Kuttner's death Bradbury wrote, "I remember him as an honest critic and a kind but firm

teacher who kicked hell out of me when I needed it. He tolerated me intruding on his life, he forced me to read every issue of *Amazing Stories* for an entire year, so I would learn the bones of plotting (a terrible job, but I did it!) and he beat the “purple writing” out of me with a few words one afternoon in 1942. Over the years he wrote me 8 and 9 page letters concerning certain stories I had shown him. The last two hundred words of my story *THE CANDLE*, which appeared in *Weird Tales* many years ago, are Hank’s. He rewrote the ending and I left it that way.”

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the writers they were friends with? And did you come across interesting stories about those friendships?

They were intensely private people, even reclusive. Early on Kuttner was extremely close to Robert Bloch and, to some degree, Fritz Leiber. He was close to Jim Mooney, primarily known for his silver age work on *Supergirl*. He was close friends with Julius Schwartz. Kuttner was in the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society with Fred Shroyer and Russ Hodgkins, who were part of the “bad boy” LASFS contingent, “the Moonrakers,” along with Mooney and Arthur K. Barnes. The Moonrakers were not afraid of a drink or two (or three), apparently.

Moore and Kuttner vacationed together with Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett. They were also close friends with the (Virgil) Finlays. Poul Anderson relates a charming story about dropping in on the Kuttners for cocktails in 1958 and bumping into Brackett and Hamilton there.

John Grayshaw: What are some of your personal favorites of their works?

My favorite stories are probably “Home is the Hunter,” “Year Day,” and “A Wild Surmise.” “The Twonky” is also a favorite. I prefer their style in their later works, but in some cases the plotting suffers at the expense of style.

John Grayshaw: Did they have favorites of their works?

Whatever they were working on at the time, I believe. They were always working on honing their craft and improving themselves—they did not look back.

John Grayshaw: What were some of their hobbies other than writing?

C. L. Moore enjoyed drawing. Kuttner enjoyed movies. Most of all, however, they appeared to enjoy spending time together, educating themselves, improving their craft, researching, reading and discussing what they read, learned and wrote. Those who knew them well remarked that it was hard to imagine one without the other and that they were always talking about and working on their writing with one another.

Ed Newsom: I recall someone describing Kuttner as the idea factory and Moore as the stylist. To what degree is this accurate? Those are certainly the two qualities I most associate with their work. The wide variety of styles and ideas are truly impressive.

That rings true, to a degree, but is an oversimplification. The complexity of their work comes in great part from the synthesis of their styles and plotting preferences. In a letter to Blish, Kuttner says that Moore does not write crackling dialogue and he does not create dream-like atmosphere, so they rely on each other to supply these things. The element I look for and identify as uniquely Kuttner's is a certain oddball, quirky sense of humor—I don't see this in Moore's solo stories, though she was not without humor. Moore was a master at creating an enveloping dream-like atmosphere that is missing from Kuttner's solo work—his descriptions focus more on people and his settings can be thin. Their best stories blend these two elements (Year Day, Mimsy).

John Grayshaw: Did they have a writing routine that they stuck to?

As a young writer, Kuttner worked at the D'Orsay literary agency all day and wrote all night—I am not sure he slept much. He often relates in letters that he wrote all of the time and found it to be a grind. In later years they resisted writing to editorial order and tried to write only what pleased them personally. Either one of them might start a story and the other would take over when the first was tired or stuck. They would go back through drafts and punch up the dialogue or add atmosphere.

John Grayshaw: When they wrote together what was their process?

See above. By their own admission, Kuttner usually got things going, and they would take turns, one jumping in when the other flagged. By her own admission, in later years Moore was unable to identify which stories, or parts of stories, were written by whom, though she was having memory issues later in life. She did go through their story file and assigned a percentage of authorship to their published stories, including which were written solely by whom. As they aged, they tended to collaborate more often (and more evenly) on stories.

John Grayshaw: Why didn't C.L. Moore continue writing after Kuttner's death?

She still wrote a bit, just in different markets. She scripted several television shows including episodes of "Maverick," "Sugarfoot," "The Alaskans," and "77 Sunset Strip." She did actively manage their story portfolio, but with a few fine exceptions ("Doomsday Morning," for example), she did stop writing fiction. I would suggest that the obvious answer is most likely the true answer, that Moore and Kuttner had spent a lifetime developing their craft together and that this resulted in a delightful symbiosis that was impossible to perpetuate after Kuttner's death in 1958. Each was less than the sum of their parts and it was most likely difficult to carry on in a diminished fashion.

Gary Denton: I read that she was going to be the first female Grandmaster of science fiction but her last husband declined the honor for her and said her dementia prevented her from going out in public. Can you shed more light on this?

I can't add much. She developed dementia in the early eighties which was found to be Alzheimer's. Forrest J. Ackerman, claimed to have remained close to her through these years and told me that she grew more and more reclusive and neglectful as time passed. Ackermann claims to have written the

autobiographical sketch published under Moore's name in Patti Perret's "The Faces of Science Fiction" in 1984 as she was no longer able to write on her own.

John Grayshaw: Have all their unfinished/unpublished works been published?

Some of their fanzine work remains unpublished in pro- or book-form. There is at least one Saint story Kuttner ghosted for Leslie Charteris that has never been published under his own name, same with the two Phantom Detective novels he wrote, though the latter are pretty well-known.

John Grayshaw: What is their legacy?

Beyond the body of work they produced, which is notable in quantity and quality, and which appears to be rediscovered every generation or so, they still stand as one of the best examples of collaborative synthesis in fiction. The best way to assess their legacy is to look at the sheer number of outstanding authors who have claimed, at one time or another, to owe a significant debt to Moore and Kuttner: Brackett, Bradley, Bradbury, Matheson, Zelazny, Dick, the list goes on and on. They exerted an enormous positive influence through their art, an influence that is still felt today.