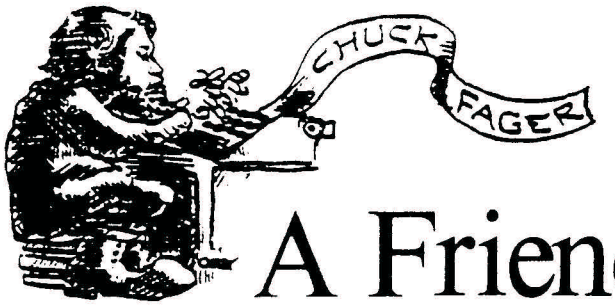

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Three

Fifth & Sixth Months, 1981

Dear Friend,

First a note on dates: the first three issues of *A Friendly Letter* were written late in one month and mailed early in the following month, producing a lag in cover dates that is corrected in this issue. This is not a double issue, nor am I skipping a month; I am just getting adjusted to the exigencies of the postal system.

Last month's issue on the problems of Quaker unity faced by Iowa Yearly Meeting has produced several lively letters. I appreciate all such letters, and answer as many as I can. I think of you who write in as an informal committee of oversight for this venture, and only regret there is no space for a formal letters section.

The comments on problems of Quaker unity ranged from a startling diatribe on the need to maintain white supremacy and eliminate Jewish influence among us, from one who claimed a 300-year Quaker ancestry. More interesting was the admission of a young, new Friend that she had no idea such tensions existed, because she was unaware that there were any conservative Christian Quakers. The comments I found most instructive, however, came from a former member of an Iowa Meeting which had grappled, successfully he felt, with such tensions while he was there. The Meeting's formula was a simple one, which offers a striking example of Quaker bridgebuilding: it involved common work projects, worship, frank discussion of differences, and frequent fellowship gatherings. The outcome was not agreement on all issues, but rather a spirit of tolerance and no little love, which for my money is about as close to heaven as we can expect to get this side of the Second Coming.

This month we turn to a different topic, one of my favorites: the flowering of Quaker culture, in this case the work of two Friendly writers. I hope you enjoy it.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

SEEKING TRUTH BY WRITING FICTION

What would you do as a Quaker if your family were taken captive, assaulted and threatened with violent death?

Can a committed scientist maintain a real religious faith, such as Quakerism?

These are old questions, which Stanley Ellin and Joan Slonczewski, like many other Friends, have long pondered. As part of their struggles with the issues involved, each wrote a book--not a weighty treatise, but a gripping novel. Stanley Ellin produced *Stronghold*(Penguin paperback, 1977), a suspense thriller in which a Quaker family is taken hostage by murderous thugs. Joan Slonczewski's story is science fiction, *Still Forms on Foxfield*(Ballantine paperback, 1980), about a planet colonized by Friends who escaped World War Three on earth, only to face new threats from an interplanetary

Please turn the page

empire which has even more sinister weapons at its command.

I visited these two Friends recently and talked with them about their work.

Stanley Ellin: Restoring the Moral Order

Stanley Ellin is in his mid-60s, lives in Brooklyn, New York and has had a long and distinguished career as a writer of mystery and suspense fiction. He and his wife Jeanne have been active members of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting for almost 30 years. In fact, he says, "I based many of the characters in *Stronghold* on people in Brooklyn Meeting. But surprisingly enough, no one ever recognized themselves."

The story is set in upstate New York, and centers on the members of a small rural Meeting. These Friends' lives, hitherto quiet and steeped in pacifism, are devastated by the sudden coming of raw, uncontrollable violence among them.

"What will a Quaker do in such a situation?" Stanley Ellin wondered. "Well, the truth is that *you don't know* what to do." And his characters don't know: they agonize, quarrel, pray and strain to live thei faith in a life and death situation.

Stronghold's violent climax does not resolve into a simple happy ending. "I've gotten letters from Quakers who thought it was *too* violent," he says, "too violent to be in their Meeting library. But the violence was a necessary part of the story. If it was to be credible, the threat had to be real and inescapable."

How does a peace-loving Quaker come to make a profession of writing about violence, real and inescapable?

Stanley Ellin first shrugged at the question. But he has been asked it before, and has given it some thought. "It's close to the truth to say that we believe in a universe which has a moral order, which crime and violence upset. In this kind of fiction, this order is eventually reestablished. But whatever the reason, there have been a number of well-known mystery writers from Quaker backgrounds. Rex Stout, Raymond Chandler and Helen McCloy, for instance, all came from Quaker origins."

"But why shouldn't Quakers be interested in mysteries?" he asked. "After all, don't we *live* in a mystery?"

Excerpts from Stronghold:

Madness. There is a madness in the world around me.

And what of you, Friend Marcus...?

Look deep into your heart, Friend Marcus. At this moment, if you faced Flood with a gun in your hand...would you kill him?

I don't know. I'm not sure. Besides.... There are others with him.

We are talking only about James Flood, Friend Marcus. A cold-blooded murderer who threatens the lives of your wife and daughter.

How can I know? ...How can any of us know until we face the moment?

The truth, Friend Marcus. The truth.

Yes, I think I would kill him.

The madness is in me too.

Joan Slonczewski: Science and Faith

Can science solve all of life's mysteries, making faith an anachronism? This is the question which haunts Allison Thorne, the protagonist of *Still Forms on Foxfield*. On the answer hangs the fate of the Quaker planet, Foxfield. This is also a question which Joan Slonczewski confronted as a student at Haverford College in the mid-70s.

"I grew up in a scientific atmosphere," she told me, "where physics--my father was a physicist--was almost revered, as the ultimate science. I started out studying and working within the scientific 'establishment,' sharing this outlook. But finally I had to face the fact that science was not solving all our problems. Instead, it has made possible the destruction of the world in the space of 15 minutes. Once I started dealing with that," she said, "many formerly abstract issues of meaning and faith came to have a very personal dimension."

Haverford proved to be the right setting for sorting out these issues. "The undergraduate science departments were outstanding," she recalled. "In addition, I found a remarkable sense of community and openness, especially in the administration, to the concerns of students and others involved in the College. Yet even with all the openness, the place functioned well as an institution."

Quakerism was the glue which held this unique mix of community, openness and functioning academic excellence together. Exploring this tradition, especially the writings of Haverford's Rufus Jones, helped her find a basis for resolving, or at least living with, the science/faith tension.

Joan Slonczewski brought this evolving outlook with her to Yale University and graduate work in molecular biophysics. She has also applied it in New Haven Monthly Meeting, particularly in teaching First Day School. It has led her to work with peace groups against the arms race. And not least, she has expressed it in her writing. "I've had a compulsion to write for a long time," she explained. "Once my novel was published, I began to think of my writing as a way to educate people through entertainment."

Her novel hasn't earned her much money yet, she said, partly because science fiction publishing is stacked against authors. "But don't get me started on the scandals of this business," she warned. Still, there are rewards. Like the fan letter from a "real gun-toting libertarian in the Midwest. He said he enjoyed the book and even got into many of the ideas, which I'm sure he hadn't considered before." As an educator though entertainment, Joan Slonczewski appears to be on her way.

Excerpts from Still Forms on Foxfield:

Allison's interest pricked up. "A 'documentary' program on us?"

"This," said the narrator with a sweep of the hand, "is Foxfield....What sort of people are these Quakers? Why did they leave Terra during the 'stone age' of space travel, and how did they survive on an alien, albeit hospitable, planet?...Friends show initial resistance to the concept of UNI systemization, as have other populations. But change is coming to Foxfield....Board Flagship UNIS-11 reestablished contact...."

"Lanesbridge Meeting," said Christine,"approved this motion last night....'We ask Friends of Foxfield to consider whether to secede, or in some manner withdraw ourselves, from the jurisdiction of United Nations Interplanetary.'" She looked up....

"The truth is," he said..."Clifford's right about how well UNI seems to work--but perhaps it works too well. It's swallowed every other religion, so far, as surely as the whale got Jonah. What will become of us, in the long run?"

Allison grew cold. Judged by past experience alone, their chance of survival as Friends looked infinitesimal.

From: Chuck Fager, *A Friendly Letter*
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INSIDE: TWO QUAKER WRITERS SEEK TRUTH THROUGH FICTION

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Early in Sixth Month 1675, Friend Nicholas Easton, Lieutenant Governor of the Colony of Rhode Island, set out by rowboat with four companions to find the wilderness camp of the Wampanoag Indian chief known as King Philip. Tensions between Philip's tribal supporters and the whites, especially the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth, had risen close to the flash point. Friends were generally respected by the Indians, however, and Easton hoped to use this influence to prevent the outbreak of war.

On Sixth Month 17, Easton and his unarmed companions found Philip and a band of warriors. The Quaker spent the whole day pleading with the chief to consider some peaceful way of settling his conflicts with the whites. Easton proposed a form of outside arbitration. Philip seemed interested; but before Easton could take this proposal to the other colonies for consideration, Indians attacked the village of Swansea south of Plymouth, slaughtering several whites, and the war was on. The raid may have been carried out by angry warriors against Philip's wishes, to pre-empt any peaceful solution. In any event, fighting spread like grassfire in a droughtwith massacres on both sides.

Before the war ended over a year later, the Rhode Island Quakers and other colonies had been put through severe trials because of their Peace Testimony, and the death knell of Indian culture in the region was sounded. The story of the Quaker witness in King Philip's War, as it is called, has never been adequately told.

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR?

The Charge of the Drab Brigade (London Yearly Meeting, circa 1850)

Broad-brimmed their helmets were,
Linen was marked with care,
Collarless coats they wear,
Noble Eight Hundred.
Matrons and maidens there,
Some dark and others fair,
Caps worn to keep back hair
Somewhat in subjection....
Sessional committees too,
Guarded this chosen crew,
Apprehending that some few
Might frequent taverns.

Theirs not to reason why,
Useless it were to fly,
From the keen piercing eye
Of the Committees....
Committees to right of them,
Committees to left of them,
Committees behind them,
On to the Yearly Meeting
Rode the Eight Hundred.

--Adapted From
More Quaker Laughter
(with apologies to Tennyson)
