

The selling of a blockbuster

Scientology's Hubbard launches a sci-fi comeback

By Jack Searles
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At first glance, the double-page ad in Daily Variety looks much like all the other congratulatory messages that routinely appear in Hollywood's trade press.

"Our Dear Friend Has Done It Again!" the headline proclaims. Then: "He has given us another incredible reason to make a fuss over him!"

It's on second glance — on recognizing "our dear friend" 's name and face — that you realize how different this ad is. Instead of praising the latest effort of some show-biz functionary,



L. Ron Hubbard

this one celebrates the first novel by one-time sci-fi whiz L. Ron Hubbard since "Vengeance Is Mine" in 1950.

That's right — L. Ron, who quit grinding out science-fiction and screenplays 30 years ago to establish Scientology, is spinning intergalactic adventure once again.

And the ad campaign in the movie industry's trade press — admittedly, it's partly aimed at whetting the interest of some producer in this era of sci-fi success at the box office — is only the opening salvo in a drive to make Hubbard's "Battlefield Earth — A Saga of the Year 3000" a multimedia blockbuster.

The campaign, orchestrated by Hubbard's agent, Hollywood-based Author Services Inc., and the book's publisher, St. Martin's Press, involves spending an estimated half-million dollars on radio spots, publicity stunts and other hoopla.

Only the other day, New Yorkers were startled to see a Styrofoam model of Terl, "Battlefield" 's 12-foot-tall villain, led in chains down Fifth Avenue and Broadway by actors portraying Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, the book's hero, and Tyler's two Scot fighting companions. Weather and the authorities permitting, the stunt is scheduled to be repeated in Los Angeles in a couple of weeks.

In Hubbard's 819-page adventure, Terl represents an alien race that has conquered Earth and other planets in order to rip off their mineral resources. Jonnie Goodboy Tyler leads an insurrection by the few surviving humans.

Writing in Locus, a well-known science-fiction publication, reviewer Dan Chow describes "Battlefield" as an entertaining pulp thriller whose main drawback is that it makes the

reader feel he's back in the 1940s or '50s. "The characters are great except for the villain, who's fun," Chow adds.

Everyone connected with the book insists that it's intended as pure entertainment and has nothing whatever to do with Scientology.

The bible of Scientology is Hubbard's "Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health," published in 1950. It outlines procedures for curing psychosomatic disorders and dispelling human aberrations by the application of, among other things, Freudianism and computer science. The centerpiece is an E-Meter, a lie-detector-like device that measures resistance to electrical currents. The function of the E-Meter is to rid a subject's mind of "engrams," which Hubbard described as the contents of a "memory bin" of painful experiences recorded during past moments of unconsciousness.

Once a believer has disposed of these nasty engrams, dating from one's months in the womb, he's on the road to psychological well-being and from then on is known as a "clear." "Clears do not get colds," Hubbard wrote. "Arthritis vanishes, myopia gets better, heart illness decreases, asthma disappears, stomach function properly, and the whole catalog of ills goes away and stays away."

Not surprisingly, the claims for dianetics outraged the psychological and medical establishments. Such a controversy swirled around Hubbard that he took a crucial defensive step. In 1955 he founded the Church of Scientology — a move that has protected his movement under religious-freedom laws. But it has by no means stilled the controversy.

One can't help wondering, therefore, whether some parallel is intended in "Battlefield Earth" between Jonnie Goodboy and L. Ron Hubbard, whose followers expect him to lead their struggle against the forces of hypocrisy and evil. In short, is Jonnie the ultimate "clear," gussied up in intergalactic garb?

One thing is clear: "Battlefield" 's royalties will go directly to Hubbard, who has indicated he'll use them to finance "research," a vaguely defined activity to which he's devoted much of his time in recent years.

"Battlefield Earth" even has a sound track — sort of — that depicts some of its major incidents. L. Ron, who was something of a musician in his youth, has composed an album based on computerized sounds of dogs and other animals. The score, which hasn't been recorded yet, was previewed at the recent US Festival.

And all this is just part of a literary onslaught being launched by the prolific, 71-year-old Hubbard. On Monday, he's coming out with another new book, "Self Analysis," a sequel to "Dianetics." A fledgling publisher, Bridge Publications, says it too will spend a half-million dollars promoting not only "Self Analysis," a paperback, but also a new printing of "Dianetics," which, it's claimed, has sold 5 million copies in the past 32 years.

It's hard, of course, to separate Hubbard's return to fiction from his controversial religious activities. Though he officially resigned his position in Scientology in the '60s, he's still revered by the faithful as "the founder." In New York, Mary Anne Manzoni,

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Hubbard

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of Hubbard's in Scientology, "the founder" is returning to writing fiction with a vengeance.

"He'll probably do 20 more novels," Starkey says. "Battlefield" is going to be part of what will be at least a trilogy. Ron's already at work on the sequel, "Mission Earth."

Starkey learns these things at a distance. He hasn't seen Hubbard in 2½ years, but says he knows for a fact the author is "traveling around the United States, doing research and writing."

That's one version of Hubbard's whereabouts. At St. Martin's Press, Mary Anne Mazzola says she understands Ron is "on a yacht somewhere in the Mediterranean." Another report has him secluded on a ranch in Southern California.

Notwithstanding allegations that Hubbard has at times urged his followers to conduct smear campaigns against his critics, Starkey insists Ron is "a wonderful man — a regular fellow with a great sense of humor."

The reports from sources connected with Hubbard and Scientology may not always agree, but there's unanimity on one point. "The founder" and his followers are convinced he and the church he founded are the targets of a conspiracy.

"Do a nice story about him for a change," they invariably urge an interviewer. "Don't pay any attention to the lies you've been reading about him."

There is, in short, an otherworldly aura about L. Ron Hubbard and those who serve and admire him. Maybe that's the perfect celestial background against which to launch an all-out, megabucks campaign that's designed to turn "the founder" into a sci-fi comeback into a multimedia success story.

a spokeswoman for St. Martin's Press, acknowledges that a "special sale" of 35,000 copies of "Battlefield" (it costs \$24) has been made. "I'm pretty sure it's going to Scientology people, but I'm not positive," she says. Mazzola describes the public's response to the novel as "unbelievable" — so far exceeding St. Martin's expectations that a revamped marketing approach has been devised to exploit it. Norman F. Starkey, head of a team of agents handling the book at Author Services, says he's never seen such excitement over a book.

Starkey says all major producers of sci-fi movies have been approached about making a film based on "Battlefield." But an aide to Gene Roddenberry, creator of "Star Trek," says her boss hasn't yet heard from anyone connected with the project.

Inexplicably, St. Martin's was conservative in its original publishing plans for "Battlefield." The first printing, 7,500 copies distributed in the first week of this month, sold out immediately. So did the second of 12,000. Now the house has ordered its first really major run — 50,000. These, along with the special sale of 35,000, bring the total copies in print to just over 104,000.

At the Waldenbooks store in downtown Los Angeles, assistant manager Michael Makinney says he's received only five or 10 copies, which sold out almost as soon as they came in. In Westwood, meanwhile, both the E. Dalton and Crown Books stores say they've had many requests for "Battlefield," but haven't yet received a single copy. "The distributor for this part of town told us he's about to get 650," reports a source at Crown. "We'll take whatever he can get us."

Author Services, which placed the ads for "Battlefield: Earth" in the Hollywood trade papers, says they

were paid for by "a mysterious donor." But Lisa Crundall, a Scientologist who wrote the copy for the ads — which makes no mention whatever of Scientology — says there's no mystery at all about who paid the tab.

"Several people, including myself, got on the phone and made a lot of calls," she reports. "We told fellow church members we wanted to acknowledge Ron's latest accomplishment. We had no trouble at all raising the money."

A total of 82 true believers in Scientology signed the message, which says, among other things:

"(Hubbard) can look at life as it is, and what it really could be, and he uses his amazing communication skills to not only excite, enchant and totally enthrall, but also to rekindle dreams that may have seemed too far out of reach to come true...."

Placing ads acknowledging Hubbard is nothing new to Lisa Crundall. She and fellow Scientologist Severine Zito, who lays them out, have framed a couple of other such tributes. The one before the "Battlefield" encomium saluted both "the founder" and the Fourth of July.

Whether you view Scientology as a legitimate religion or, as its critics describe it, as nothing more than a pseudo-scientific cult, you have to admit that Hubbard has turned out an awful lot of books, even apart from his Scientology treatises. His public-relations firm says he's published more than 100 sci-fi novels, including the now-classic "Final Blackout," "Fear," "Typewriter in the Sky," and 138 short stories. Over the years, the firm claims, his fiction has sold close to 22 million copies.

Now, according to agent Starkey, who happens to be a onetime associate of Hubbard, Hubbard/D-24, Col. 1 1/2 1/2 1/2 1/2