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introduction

discovering the future in my grandmother's back closet

james gunn

The science fiction magazine was born three years after I was, but I didn't discover it until I was eleven. My first encounter with fantastic literature was in the second grade when I read my way through Andrew Lang's books of fairy tales—red, blue, and gold. Then I graduated to Hugh Lofting's Dr. Doolittle novels, with some Altsheller juvenile historical novels thrown in for seasoning. In 1933 my father brought home the second issue of *Doc Savage*, and I got hooked on the hero pulps, including *The Shadow*, *Operator #5*, *The Spider*, and (that historical element again) *G-8 and His Battle Aces*.

The next year I discovered a used-magazine store in downtown Kansas City, and in the back, dusty stacks of magazines with names like *Amazing Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, and *Astounding Stories of Super Science*. Eight years after the creation of *Amazing Stories*, I came across these adventure stories that had the added quality of sense-of-wonder ideas. I liked these best of all, and traded two of my hero pulp magazines for one of these marvelous magazines while the old man in the green eyeshade at the front of the store, surrounded by all that fabulous reading material, grumbled that he couldn't live on old paper.

Five years later *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* began reprinting the old Munsey pulp scientific romances and fantasies, and my imprinting was complete. I recorded all that in *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*, which was not so much a history as a record of my love affair with science fiction. I have always felt that the truest critical approach to a literature was the analysis of one's responses to it. Interviewers ask me why I started writing science fiction, and the

answer seems so obvious that I feel like answering: "What else could I have written?"

My approach to the study of science fiction (SF) was not as predestined. Clearly I thought I should share my own love of SF with the world. I wrote under a pseudonym (Edwin James) for my first ten stories because I wanted to save my full name for critical writing, and I wrote an article about SF for the *Kansas City Star* in 1948. The editorial page editor said I was "overenthusiastic," but he published it. That article got me a thank-you letter from Hugo Gernsback and a series of his Christmas mailings in the form of a small magazine of prophecies. But my critical writing took a back seat to my fiction until 1969, when I taught my first SF class and discovered that the students had no critical apparatus to bring to the discussion of the ten SF novels they had selected. When I taught another class, I told myself, I would organize it historically.

That opportunity came the next year when I left my public relations position to teach full-time, and the School of Journalism and the English Department offered a course that drew 165 students. In preparation I drew up eleven lectures dealing with the development of science fiction from its earliest SF-like stories to its (then) contemporary expressions. In the spring, when I was teaching another SF class to 105 students, an editor from Prentice-Hall came to my office and asked whether I'd be interested in writing a text about fiction writing. I said, "No, but I have these lectures that might make a book about science fiction."

He took the manuscript back to New Jersey with him and reported in a couple of months that he'd shown it to several people in the area who were teaching SF, and they weren't interested in using it. But, he continued, what would I think of a lavishly illustrated coffee-table book? That book, *Alternate Worlds*, led to a telephone call from Barry Lippman, editor at Mentor Books, who asked if I had an idea for a book I might do for them. And that led to *The Road to Science Fiction*, which progressed through half a dozen editors and three publishers before it reached its present six-volume Scarecrow Press anthology covering the evolution of science fiction from Gilgamesh to Effinger.

And so it has gone after 1970, half science fiction stories and novels, half articles and non-fiction books, all of it symbolized, perhaps, by the presidency of Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) followed by the presidency of Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA). The study of science fiction has expanded in many directions since then, and this volume is a testament to the strange and wonderful places into which it has wandered, and, one hopes, shed some enlightenment.

Every one of the contributors to this volume, including the editors, had a different experience with SF. Some are authors, and their understanding is conditioned by their struggles to create it; others are scholars, who approach science fiction from a dozen different directions.

It is our hope that this book will illustrate the many ways of reading science fiction and by illuminating its variety and practice will encourage and deepen its appreciation. What we all want, when we deal with a genre like this, is to allow new readers to share our experience of falling in love with this literature of change.

what's a nice baby boomer literary scholar like me doing reading fiction like this?

marleen s. barr

Why do I read science fiction? First, a word about who “I”—a.k.a. the female Baby Boom generation *Reading Science Fiction* co-editor—am.

My colleagues know me as a pioneering feminist science fiction scholar. More personally, I love to say that I am a feminist science fiction scholar married to an alien. No, this sentence is not articulated in terms of what James Gunn calls the “language of science fiction.” Even in my wildest imagination—and I have a very wild imagination—despite the notion that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, I don’t for a moment think that my husband is an extraterrestrial. I mention him, an “alien” French Canadian who is not an American citizen, because he told me a story which relates to reading science fiction. He describes living in 1940s rural Quebec before telephones had arrived. His family responsibility involved hand carrying his mother’s notes to his elder sister’s house. I was incredulous. The person who turned our apartment into an electronics store facsimile replete with internet telephone service and a television wide enough to rival Captain Kirk’s starship *Enterprise* viewing screen had once lived without telephones?

“You come from a different world,” I said to him. This comment is at the heart of why I read science fiction.

Although people often ask me why I read *feminist* science fiction (feminist science fiction scholarship, after all, does not constitute a usual career path), I have never been called upon to discuss reading science fiction in terms of my generation. When I consider why I read science fiction particularly as a Baby Boomer, I must answer in terms of how different worlds encroach upon my reality.

More specifically, I refer to the different world I encountered once upon a time in the back of my father’s closet. Don’t worry. Just as I am

very well aware that my husband is definitely not an extraterrestrial, I don't claim that I met a lion and a witch in a C. S. Lewis Narnia-esque wardrobe. Circa 1955, when I became old enough single-handedly to open my father's closet door, I found a box containing a sari, an ivory chess set, and a green wool jacket emblazoned with a "China/Burma/India" patch. I had, in other words, located the remnants of my father's life as an American soldier stationed in India during World War II. The objects were as alien to me—a kid growing up in a Forest Hills, Queens, New York City apartment building—as such science fiction accoutrements as ray guns and metallic bras. I can no more equal my father's World War II experience than I can become Wonder Woman. I still own the objects that I found in his closet and I respond to them with the exact awe and wonder I felt when I laid eyes upon the original *Star Trek* captain's chair (located in Seattle's Science Fiction Museum). I can never be Staff Sergeant George Barr boldly going where no Barr has gone before—to what was to him a new life in a new civilization called India—any more than I can ever be Captain James T. Kirk's female counterpart boldly going to seek out new life and new civilizations in galaxies far, far away.

I read science fiction because I was born into a world which contained remnants from World War II. For me, learning about the real world entailed constantly colliding with a past realm—a world not a world of my own—which often barged in upon my present. While being plopped down in the family car during a Sunday drive, for instance, I had to wonder exactly why a seemingly endless line of giant grey battleships was parked in the Hudson River. War vestiges lurked around every corner.

More positively speaking, I read science fiction because Forest Hills provided proximity to the 1964 New York World's Fair (held in Flushing Meadow Park). The futures depicted in the Ford and General Motors pavilions were almost located in my backyard. I saw the flying saucer shaped New York State Pavilion almost every day. I read science fiction because I was so impressed by the future-infused World's Fair.

And, oh yes: seeing all those space flights on the small black and white television in the elementary school auditorium impacted upon my reading choices too. I also cannot fail to mention the science fiction and fantasy television shows which will always hold a prominent place in Baby Boomers' hearts: *The Jetsons*, *My Favorite Martian*, *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, *Mr. Ed*, *Lost In Space*, *Bewitched*, and *I Dream of Jeannie*.

Oh no! I have run out of space and my narrative has only reached the mid 1960s. At this time I was, like, twelve. But as a Baby Boomer, I am supposed to talk about sex, and drugs, and rock and roll. I know

that you students are just dying to read about reading science fiction in terms of sex, and drugs, and rock and roll. But *Reading Science Fiction* is, after all, a *textbook*. Whew, saved in mid chronological narrative which stops at the time of echoing the sounds of silence.

Whew, back to writing science fiction criticism language. The point is that literary criticism is a community dialogue about reading. Generationally ensconced between my co-editors—young scholar Matthew Candelaria and Greatest Generation member science fiction Grand Master James Gunn—I invite you, students who are members of the next new generation in relation to Candelaria, to join us. Enter a wonderful conversation. Make friends. Read science fiction.

Enjoy!

the medium that time forgot

matthew candelaria

I always tell people that my introduction to SF was Heinlein's *Have Space Suit, Will Travel*, but it's an invidious lie. Truth is, I can't remember a time when I wasn't aware of SF. Since my mom is a *Star Trek* fan, I probably was exposed to it in the womb.

I used to love it all, unconditionally. I was especially into dinosaurs and I loved any stupid old thing that threw in a prehistoric monster. Except for the lizards and caimans with pasted-on fins and horns. I could not imagine that anyone might confuse *The Land that Time Forgot* with *The People that Time Forgot*. The first one was awesome, the other one dumb, with only two good things: the pteranodon attacking the biplane and the nodosauroid that attacks in the dark dungeon of the troglodyte king. *The Land that Time Forgot* also imprinted indelibly on my mind the image of Tyler and Lisa clad primitively in skins throwing their hopes in a bottle, off the lonely and desolate edge of their world, into the sea below.

I was pretty young when *Star Wars* came out, so young that I don't remember it. I do remember *Battlestar Galactica*, whose spacey music and monologue hooked me, "There are those who believe that life here began out there" That and the premiere movie/mini-series worked, from the destruction of innocent cities, including the word "Peace" written in flowers, to the blind flight through the red heat of densely packed protostars to the horrific insect aliens who secretly kidnapped people from the night club to use them as fodder for their young.

My environment was supersaturated with SF. I loved *Thundarr the Barbarian*, which also had an intro monologue. I replayed the scenarios of

this cartoon over and over again, although the hero was not Thundarr, but a little rubber monster I called “Buggie,” a hemipteroid with huge mandibles, pincers for hands, and tiny flightless wings.

While these things kept me highly entertained and active, there’s no way they’d ever prepare me for becoming a serious critic. They inspired me to draw, like all the kids in my elementary school. Drawing was closely regimented by peer pressure. Boys and girls drew separately, drawing the same thing in iteration after iteration to replicate the Platonic form of a flower, a cholo, or a hotrod. Since I’d transferred schools and hadn’t been taught how to properly draw a cholo or a hotrod, I was exiled. I mostly drew dinosaurs, but some boys drew space ships, so I started learning. Then *The Empire Strikes Back* came out and we drew asteroid fields and worked together to fill the fields with action. My dinosaurs became reptilian aliens, and suddenly I began creating narratives that went from week to week, month to month. One of my drawing friends had a brother who taught us Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), and I started reading the rule books.

We got a Commodore Vic 20 computer, and I started playing SF video games, like *Gorf*. We upgraded to a Commodore 64, and the games got better, including *Nonterraqueous*.

My mom introduced me to two books: the aforementioned *Have Space Suit, Will Travel* and *The Gryphon’s Eyrie* by Andre Norton and A. C. Crispin. I read them again and again, and read through everything by these authors that the public library would let me check out. They were justifiably reluctant to let a ten-year-old read *Stranger in a Strange Land*, but sometimes they were overzealous. My dad had to check out *Seven Science Fiction Novels* by Wells, including *War of the Worlds*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Time Machine*, and so on, but he was obliging.

Then we moved and I changed schools. My schoolwork remained (to my teachers) distressingly SF-related, and then came the assignment I’d been waiting for: a five page story in seventh grade. Mine turned out to be fifty, a post-apocalyptic quest epic focusing on robots. I was hooked.

But I never would have become a critic of SF if I hadn’t read *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez as a senior in high school, and decided that mainstream literature was where it was at. These people were much better writers than Heinlein and Wells and Norton, and I turned my back on the genre, although I would occasionally wander through the SF section of bookstores, gazing at covers.

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When I came to Kansas, I didn't know there was an SF program, but I began to notice that my literature classes seemed limited. Their perspective was very narrow. They neglected perspectives that embraced the biology, physics, and chemistry that shape the human consciousness; perspectives that I felt were represented only in SF. I began writing essays on SF. My professors, almost as frustrated as my seventh-grade teachers, shunted me off to Jim Gunn, who proved to be not only a great teacher, but also an excellent model of the ethics and responsibility of unlimited humanity. Without his influence, I would have achieved only a fraction of my still-limited success in this field, and I feel toward him a gratitude I have not yet found the words to articulate. There is no way I can repay his help, but I hope in some measure to do so by telling all the people of my generation and beyond that, for all the pleasure we may derive from cartoons, movies, television, and video games, the true font of science fiction is in the writing, and it opens up unlimited vistas to those who learn to read it properly.

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