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Submissions
The *SFRA Review* encourages submissions of reviews, review essays that cover several related texts, interviews, and feature articles. Submission guidelines are available at [http://www.sfra.org/](http://www.sfra.org/) or by inquiry to the appropriate editor. Contact the editors for other submissions or for correspondence.

The *SFRA Review* (ISSN 1068-395X) is published four times a year by the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA). Individual issues are not for sale; all issues after #256 are published Open Access to the SFRA’s Website.
TO QUOTE A CLICHE, Autumn is a season of changes. That truism is holding forth at this very moment. As I type this, the US midterm elections are underway and many of us are hoping for changes. Utopian hopes aside (insofar as putting just a few more Democrats in office is utopian), there are many other changes afoot.

As Keren points out in her "President’s Message," SFRA elections have been decided and the winners have been notified. Shortly, we will all be hearing about the future movers of our awesome organization. Please join me, in the mean time, for thanking Keren, Gerry, and David for their service so far.

On an SFRA Review-related note, in addition to maintaining the retrospectives from last issue (this one on Marie Severin), the regular article (here, by J.P. Telotte on the 1940 film Dr. Cyclops), as well as the "SF in Translation Universe" column written by Rachel Cordasco, I have added a new column to the Feature 101 section, "Meet the Future," which I will use each quarter to feature interviews with grad students, postdocs, and recently hired professors all working in sf studies. The purpose of this column is to shine a spotlight on the brilliant work being done by the youngest in the field, to introduce those who are most vulnerable in the academic marketplace, and to share the voices of folks who represent the future of sf studies.

I’ve also had some personal changes, namely that I’ve taken a so-called #alt-ac position. I am now the journals coordinator at Michigan Publishing at the University of Michigan, a position in academic publishing adjacent to the University of Michigan Press, and for which I will make real-world adult money. Sort of. Beats my old grad student salary, that’s for sure! This means I will be stepping down from my position as book reviews editor of Foundation, but I will happily remain the editor of SFRA Review. You can’t get rid of me that easily!

Until next time, be seeing you!

BY THE TIME you’re reading this, our VP & Treasurer position elections will have been decided. I want to send warm thanks to all the candidates who put themselves forward for the two positions and my congratulations to those who have been elected. And thank you all for putting the time into casting your votes.

Further thanks go to those of you who completed the Future Conferences questionnaire we sent around to our members. It has given us a much better understanding of who the SFRA is these days, where and who our members are and what are some of the main concerns, in particular with respect to the annual conference. So here, for your pleasure and information, are some of the numbers:

The framing caveat lies in the fact that out of 301 active members, 150 members completed the survey. Any of the insights we may glean are based solely on our analysis of the 150 submitted responses.

Of the 150, the biggest group of members is composed of tenured or tenure-track academics (37%). The next largest group are, as we might expect, graduate students, at 24%. I find this particularly gratifying as it suggests our ongoing relevance and impact for both experienced scholars and for newcomers entering the field of SF research. 19% of our members are full-time, non-tenured academics, 11% work outside of academia, and 9% are part-time academics or academically employed under different circumstances. Put differently, we can see that two-thirds of our voting members work in academia, and over a third have either chosen alternative career paths for their SF research or have yet to begin one within academia.

The second main topic the survey covered had to do with geography. Here too, some surprises and some confirmed assumptions. Of the 150 voting members, 80 currently live in North America, 60 in Europe, 7 in Asia, 2 in Australia/New Zealand, and 1 in South America. (When compared to the numbers generated from the general member data we see
some significant differences but the order remains the same.) As might be expected, each location expressed a significant preference to stay in their home continent for the annual conference, with the exception of members living in Asia who showed a minuscule preference for attending conferences in the US or Europe, over Asia itself. What is even more interesting, however, is to determine the willingness of our members to travel some distance for the conference. Here too, the Asian contingent stood out, expressing the highest relative support for travelling outside to attend a conference. At a reasonably close second were the North American members, who after the US/Canada, strongly preferred European locations to other continents, with a 54% level of support to holding a European conference. This went down to 44%, 43%, 39%, and 38.6% for South America, Australia/New Zealand, Africa, and Asia, respectively.

European support for attending conferences at home was one of the highest, at an 83% (compared to 74%, the level of support by N. Americans to stay in the US/Canada). Alongside this, European desire or ability to attend conferences in the US or Canada fell far lower, at 42%. From there, in descending order, are Asia, Africa, South America, and then Australia/New Zealand.

One fascinating lesson from these numbers teaches us that if we combine our two central blocks of members, the European and the North American, then we see that there is a small but palpable preference to holding the conference in Europe and no severe objection by members from the other continents. (Although this is somewhat belied by concerns about cuts in university funding and environmental anxieties about travelling long distances.)

Finally, it might also be worth noticing that of the 150, 48 attended the 2018 conference in Milwaukee. When we put the numbers of those either likely or planning on attending next year’s conference alongside the column for last year’s attendance, we see a whopping 46% of members who came to one conference planning on coming to the next, versus 19% of those who could not attend, who are already determined to come to 2019. This is currently merely correlative. For this to be scientific, we would need to run a broader analysis of attendance across the years, something for which we do not currently have the resources or data, but it does suggest the heartening conclusion that coming to an SFRA conference makes you want to come back. With that in mind, I look forward to seeing many of you in Hawai‘i in 2019!

VICE-PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Goodbye, for Now

Gerry Canavan

IT’S BEEN AN incredible two years serving SFRA as vice president, including being lucky enough to host the 2018 conference at my home institution of Marquette. But with the VP and treasurer elections wrapping up and preparations underway for the 2019 conference in Hawaii, there’s no question that I’m on my way out. Good luck to the new executive board! I look forward to finding new ways to serve the organization in the future.

I’ll still be promoting sf-related happenings on social media for the foreseeable future, though, so, as always: if you have a CFP or other event you’d like me to promote, please send it to me at gerry.canavan@marquette.edu, or send me a message on Twitter. See you all soon!
MARIE SEVERIN was born in New York in 1929, the youngest of two children. Like most creators involved in the so-called “Golden Age” of the comics industry (1938-1954), she was the child of an immigrant and grew up in New York City. Unlike most creators in the comics industry during the Golden Age and well into the 1980s, Marie Severin was, well, a woman. Severin was not the first or only woman involved in the early comics industry—take, for example, Tarpé Mills who created Miss Fury in 1940—but she was there at a time when women were exceptionally rare. More than that, she remained a part of the comics industry until her retirement in the mid-2000s.

Despite this impressive feat, there is a high likelihood you are not familiar with her name. This isn’t entirely surprising; fandom tends to have a short memory. Sometimes, this forgetfulness has been encouraged by companies seeking profit: Were it not for the concerted effort of comics artists like Neal Adams and Jerry Robinson in the late 1970s around the release of the first Superman movie, the names of Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster might have faded into obscurity. More commonly, though, fans are distracted by new talent and titles, and without any malicious intent, all but the biggest stars are forgotten to the annals of history. Still, Marie Severin’s relative obscurity in this regard is a crime—she is the definition of a trailblazer, a luminary figure who worked at the epicenter of at least two of the most important moments in twentieth century American popular culture.

Speaking of crime, Severin began her comics career in the early 1950s with the publisher EC Comics, encouraged to join the company by her brother, artist John Severin. She quickly took over coloring duties for Harvey Kurtzman’s war comics titles (Two-Fisted Tales and Frontline Combat) (see Cronin for an account of her start at EC Comics). Soon, she was contributing to EC’s entire line of comic books, including their now-infamous horror and crime comics. In her work at EC Comics, Severin stepped into the middle of one of the most important moments in American comics history: the moral panic against comics and EC Comics was at the center of this controversy. Marie had frequently been described as “the conscience of EC” because she would use her skills as a colorist to soften the blow of some of the gorier scenes by coloring them blue. In a 1986 interview with The Comics Journal, Marie laughed this off, claiming the blue often made the gore easier to see. She told interviewer Steve Riggenberger that though she thought some of the illustrations were “kind of icky,” she “didn’t see any harm in it” (Riggenberger). Her main concern with the coloring choice wasn’t a moral one, but a desire to keep the company out of trouble: “I did that, yes. Mostly out of pure sheer terror that we would be arrested and sent up to Kaufau to have our fingers smashed or something” (Riggenberger).

After the 1954 Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency and the subsequent creation of the Comics Code Authority, EC Comics suffered. Its line dwindled down to Mad, which changed from a full-color comic book to a black-and-white magazine. Marie followed her brother to Atlas Comics (the company would eventually become Marvel) in 1956, where she continued coloring a wide range of titles. In 1957, the comics industry was in freefall, and Severin—along with virtually all of Atlas’s staff—was fired. She left comics for a time—doing promotional graphics and artwork for the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, until 1964.

In June of 1961, Atlas Comics rebranded itself as Marvel Comics but was still struggling. In November, Kirby and Lee’s Fantastic Four #1 hit the stands and the company had a bona fide hit. By 1964, Marvel was publishing comics featuring the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Iron Man, the Hulk, Thor, Ant-Man, the X-Men, Doctor Strange, Daredevil, and a rebooted Captain America. The “Marvel Revolution” was in full swing, and Marie Severin walked right into the middle of another touchstone of American popular culture. This time, in addition to coloring, Severin took on many more tasks including touch-ups, promotional art, and inking. By 1967, Severin was a frequent artist for Strange Tales (penciling the Doctor Strange stories) and Tales to Astonish (penciling the Hulk stories). When Marvel launched its satire comic Not Brand Echh (ironically, perhaps, to compete with Mad), Marie penciled at least one story in every issue. She penciled eight whole issues of Kull the
Conqueror in 1972-1973. She helped create Spider-Woman and designed her costume.

Despite these achievements, it appears Severin was often viewed as the ultimate “pinch hitter,” rather than as a talented artist in her own right. Her cartooning and visual storytelling holds up well against the other so-called “greats” of the age. One wonders how history might have changed with a regular assignment, whether her work might have grown even more with constant time spent on a character and a single title, her reputation solidified further with the fans. Her inking and often significant touch-ups frequently went unattributed. She was an excellent cover designer, too, even helping Kirby come up with compositions. For now, her immense skills in this regard are only evidenced by sketches and stories.

Speaking of stories—there are many. Her Marvel nickname was “Mirthful” Marie; plenty of pictures shared online show her playfully “flipping the bird” at the camera or playing with Hulk toys. Regardless of the image, she’s always smiling. From her EC days she drew scathing, hilarious caricatures of her co-workers. When Jack Kirby left Marvel in the 1960s, she made a sarcastic plaque of one of his cigar butts to keep in the office in his memory. Perhaps my favorite story is a complete rumor: some of the most valuable original art in the world of comics are the original pages of Amazing Fantasy #15—the first appearance of Spider-Man. The pages disappeared from Marvel storage some time after the after Steve Ditko had renounced the character…only to show up anonymously donated the Library of Congress. It’s long been whispered the anonymous donor was Marie Severin. I have no evidence one way or another, but considering she sat at the center of the American comics world during two of its most consequential moments, I can’t help but feel she had a sense for the historically significant…and the guts to give it a go.

This makes me wonder if she ever understood her own importance. I imagine not, despite her 2001 induction into the Eisner Hall of Fame and 2017 Comic-Con International Icon Award. But in our current moment, women are simply a part of the comics industry, and at all levels. There are significant and important women artists, writers, inkers, colorists, editors, and more. This is not to say the industry is without its problems—indeed, as I write this, comics creators and fans alike are embroiled in their own #GamerGate-like fight for the soul of the community. Still, things are better for women in comics than they were when Marie started in 1949, when she rejoined the industry in 1964, and even when she retired in the mid-2000s. It is better precisely because she stayed and fought and created despite a lack of recognition—of her art form, of her own work in its time, and of the memory of her work as time passed. The least we can do for her is remember her name.

Works Cited

Portrait of Marie Severin by Michael Netzer.

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FILM AND SF literature have a long-standing relationship, one that can be traced back at least to the late-nineteenth century when the British-American film pioneer Robert Paul approached H.G. Wells with a proposal to combine the strengths of both the famed writer’s fiction and the filmmaker’s new technology by creating a composite device to simulate time travel after the fashion described in The Time Machine. While film historian Raymond Fielding suggests that the project’s “excessive cost” probably prompted Wells and Paul to abandon this plan for a “motion picture spacecraft” (117), the concept reminds us that from the relative infancy of both forms there was a recognition that they shared certain characteristics, particularly a potential for visualizing new ideas in keeping with what Miriam Hansen has termed the “new visuality” of the late-modernist era, and that these shared characteristics might be marketed in ways that would appeal to the age’s visual appetite. Despite these shared elements and potentials, though, and despite too John Rieder’s argument that the “keystone” of a “mass cultural genre system” such as sf is “the commercial advertisement” (46), there was, throughout the genre’s early pulp embodiment, almost no effort to package and market the sf literature/film connection.

This essay opens a door onto that troubled link by considering the first ambitious effort to exploit these potential connections while directly addressing the sf pulp readership. Following Rieder’s emphasis on “the centrality of commercial advertisements” to genre formation (46) and the ways in which those concerns might ultimately “impose themselves” on sf products (47), I want to consider an early effort by Paramount Pictures to reach a specifically sf consumer base at a time when the genre was for the film industry a largely unspecialized hybrid form. While Paramount had demonstrated an early interest in sf-type material when it acquired the rights to film Wells’s War of the Worlds in 1925 (Williams 138), produced Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in 1932, adapted Wells’s Island of Lost Souls the following year, and started—and then stopped—pre-production work on War of the Worlds in 1935 (Idwal Jones), it undertook little else in a sf vein until 1940 when the studio released the first sf film to be shot in the still new—and expensive—three-strip Technicolor format: the mad scientist story Dr. Cyclops (1940). The film became the subject of a large-scale publicity campaign that reached into the sf world of the pulps, specifically involving Thrilling Wonder Stories and “imposing” itself on the genre by commissioning an ambitious novelization by popular sf author Henry Kuttner, already known for his fascination with the movies through his popular “Hollywood on the Moon” stories.

While Dr. Cyclops is clearly a legitimate work of sf, it also seems a difficult match for the usual SF readership. A pre-release article in Motion Picture Daily, for example, described the film as aimed at “the unsophisticates of all ages,” and as “so bizarre that it inevitably will create much word of mouth” (King 4). And while praising the film for its special effects work, as offering moviegoers “the latest and best in camera magic,” a later review in The Film Daily still termed it “a decided novelty” (“Dr. Cyclops” 8). David Skal’s more recent description of the movie as “a distillation of all the Depression decade’s suspicions about experts and intellectuals and runaway science” (167) clarifies this difficulty by pointing to the film’s explicit strike at science and scientific interests, an attitude at odds with the usual promise—and appeal—of sf and the sf pulps. But the expensive Technicolor process, the film’s elaborate special effects work, and its direction by famed King Kong (1933) director Ernest B. Schoedsack all point to the ambitious nature of the project, which prompted Paramount to mount an elaborate exploitation campaign. That campaign would involve special test runs of the film in six cities, the hiring of additional “exploiteers,” as they were termed, to energize the film’s promotion (“Para. Adds” 2), and partnering with Thrilling Wonder to help build a large audience.

Generally, an advertisement in Thrilling Wonder Stories might tell us very little about the film industry’s sf consciousness. As David Earle explains, much pulp advertising was supplied by a service that was “either an in-house or out-of-house advertisement agency that specialized in low cost and often low
culture but mass-market products,” and that typically placed ad packages with publishing groups rather than with individual magazines (202). One result was a sometimes jarring “continuity of ads across the spectrum of genres,” and at times some “discontinuity” between a magazine’s subject matter and the advertising it contained (202). We can see evidence of such “discontinuity” with the Dr. Cyclops material, as at least one other pulp member of the “Thrilling Stories” (or Better Publications) family of magazines, Thrilling Ranch Stories, also contained a notice for the film. Headlined as “The Sinister Dr. Cyclops!” the brief piece included a close-up of the title character and a note that the Paramount film would soon be playing in theaters (“This Month’s Cover,” 8). However, in a dual thrust, the Thrilling Ranch Stories announcement, while promoting the upcoming film, gave equal space to urging readers to buy Thrilling Wonder to read that magazine’s version of the movie story.

More noteworthy, though, is the fact that Thrilling Wonder’s contribution to Paramount’s campaign was far more than a simple movie ad. Framing the film’s novelization as the featured attraction of its June 1940 issue, the pulp’s cover reproduced a scene depicting the film’s mad scientist, while an editorial piece by Mort Weisinger on “This Month’s Cover” described—in what is termed a “confidential lowdown” (119)—how both the illustration and the story came into being. The editor explains that artist Howard V. Brown painted the cover after seeing a special preview screening of the film. And in what was probably a first for the pulps, the feature story was adapted from the original Tom Kilpatrick screenplay by Kuttner, who was also, we learn, invited to the studio during the film’s shooting. Moreover, in addition to a lead sketch by Brown that, like the cover, reprises a shot from the film, the piece was illustrated with Paramount-supplied production stills showing Albert Dekker as the mad scientist, along with one of the film’s more striking special effects compositions, involving outsized props and a rear projection process shot. The payoff to Paramount for this “exclusive” information, studio access, and the visual tease provided by the film’s production stills was a two-page banner announcing that “This Sensational New Scientifiction Thriller is Soon to be Released by Paramount Pictures,” and a headline urging readers to “Read It Now—Then See It at Your Local Theatre!”

Thrilling Wonder’s access to the script, production, and publicity images, along with the cooperative approach to marketing—and fictionalizing—was hardly common, and none of the other sf pulps would, during the pre-war era, undertake anything similar. But it is a singular reminder of just how widespread the new concern with consumerism and with identifying specific groups of consumers was becoming at this time, along with a growing sense that sf was an inherently visual medium, complicit with the broader “new visuality” of the age. That sensibility might account for Kuttner being assigned this story, and it seems to filter into his treatment of the film narrative, which is strikingly visual and even a bit movie conscious, as when he describes the lone female character as having “a face that belonged on the silver screen” (16), the shrinking device the story’s scientist Dr. Thorkel uses as resembling “a projector” (20), or the power of changing perspective, as one of the story’s shrunken characters notes “the wonder and strangeness that we never quite realize—until we’re small” (25).

With Dr. Cyclops we can see both the publishing community and the film industry staking out some common ground between sf consumers and general film audiences, all seen as part of that “mass cultural system” Rieder describes and thus able to be reached across multiple media platforms emphasizing the new visual regime. While this case is more complex and dramatic than other sorts of film-related advertising to be found in the pre-war pulps—such as the ads for film jobs, script doctoring, collectibles—it shows the film industry beginning to recognize sf readers as particularly appropriate consumers, invested in both the future and the thoroughly modern medium of the movies, while the pulp editors in inviting such ads and pursuing, as they did with Paramount, a more complex connection to the film industry, apparently sensed similar and mutually profitable possibilities—possibilities more elaborately explored in the postwar period.

In that period, when the sf film was also bursting into prominence, Paramount would again take the lead, although with a different approach than with Dr. Cyclops, as it partnered with another pulp, Amazing Stories, on a series of major publicity pieces. Independent filmmaker George Pal, working with Paramount, produced a series of big-budget sf films in this period: Destination Moon (1950), When Worlds Collide (1952), The War of the Worlds (1953), and
The Conquest of Space (1955). Each became the subject of a “making of” feature in Amazing, employing Robert A. Heinlein as the author of the first piece, and all describing in a heavily illustrated style unusual for this pulp, the care that Pal and his various collaborators—Heinlein, Chesley Bonestell, Willy Ley—had taken in trying to achieve a new level of sf film realism, or as the unnamed author of the Conquest of Space piece puts it, an “as-close-to-the-facts-as-they-are-believed-to-be as possible” film (“Conquest” 94). Rather like extended advertising posters, these pieces would employ numerous Paramount production stills, with the last of these efforts “The Conquest of Space” (May 1955) little more than a set of fulsomely captioned images, suggesting the key role of the visual regime in selling this sf movie.

Behind this consumerist relationship is a more fundamental link that had developed between the sf pulps and film throughout the pre-war era—a link in which film, largely because of its modernist sensibility, was coming to seem a natural companion to this new sort of fiction, as if it constituted the necessary visualizing or real-izing of the products of the sf imagination, as if the two might even be composite voices or a realized version of that early plan for a “motion picture spacecraft,” allowing viewers to travel into the realms dreamt of in sf literature. Advertising of the sort noted with Dr. Cyclops was just a small part of a complex film-sf relationship that began developing in this era, but a part that reminds us that sf was embedded in a commercial culture that also relished film’s attractions, that sf, while not yet fully embraced as a distinct genre, was already being shaped and sold by the film experience, and thus that sf was on its way to becoming much like modern culture, as Paul Virilio has described it, “cinematized” or “mediatized” (59), with its readers/fans being invited to inhabit a world that, as the Dr. Cyclops campaign and the studio invitations of Kuttner and Brown hint, increasingly seemed to resemble an extended movie set. On this set many of our sf imaginings—and nightmares—including mad scientists, rockets, and fantastic conveyances—would soon be vividly realized by the war and further explored in the pulps. But in the pre-war era that visual relationship was just starting to be negotiated, as the film industry took its first steps into the world of the sf pulps, as it finally began to construct its “motion picture spacecraft.”

Works Cited
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The SF in Translation Universe

Editor’s Note: “The SF in Translation Universe” is a regular column appearing in the Feature 101 section of SFRA Review (beginning with issue #325).

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WELCOME BACK to the regular SFT column here in the SFRA Review. I’ll continue to use this opportunity to keep you up to date on upcoming novels and collections, as well as recently-published short fiction, though I may veer off into SFT-related digressions from time-to-time. You won’t mind, right?

October didn’t offer us as much SFT as some earlier months (I’m looking at you, May), but what we did get is worth checking out. Black Coat Press released two collections of French early/proto-SFT (as they do each month), both translated by Brian Stableford. The Tyranny of the Fays Abolished (1702), by Comtesse D.L. includes more than a dozen stories, with the title piece veering away from the traditional prince-rescues-princess-from-ogre plot to a best-friend-rescues-princess-and-a-fay-protects-them plot. Unusual for a story produced at Louis XIV’s court, indeed. The other Black Coat title, The Murdered City, was written two centuries later and explores what happens when a scholar succeeds in creating the Philosopher’s Stone and uses its power to reign over a fantastic city. You can read excerpts of many Black Coat titles on their website, where you can also marvel at the unbelievable number of French proto-SF novels and stories that Stableford has translated.

The six novels/collections out in November, though, more than make up for the dearth of October titles. With a German sf collection and novels translated from the Korean, Russian, Hebrew, Slovenian, Icelandic, and Spanish (Dominican Republic), you won’t know what to do with your TBR stack. Since we don’t get much German SFT these days, a collection like Science Fiktion by Franz Fühmann (translated by Andrew B.B. Hamilton and Claire van den Broek) is a welcome addition to the SFT universe. Here we have seven linked stories that offer a steampunk-infused political critique of the Cold War. Ads that literally grab you on the street, mandatory mind readings, and other bizarre happenings offer Anglophone readers a unique East-German perspective on the tensions between the US and the Soviet Union.

The six novels in November represent the exciting diversity of plot and style that we can expect from SFT: a young woman undergoes a terrifying re-education in order to break through the constraints of physical laws (Vita Nostra); a nameless character gets sucked into a vortex of paranoia and fear in an apocalyptic world (City of Ash and Red), the book of Jeremiah is retold as a dizzying mashup of the ancient and modern (Muck), folklore, myth, comic strips, and genetics are brought together in a three-part Icelandic saga (CoDex 1962), the collapse of the global communications network makes three childhood friends long for the world they once knew (In/Half); and a young woman must travel back in time to save humanity by saving the ocean (Tentacle).

The final month of the year brings us volume eight (translated by Matt Tretyaud) of the Legend of the Galactic Heroes series, Yoshiki Tanaka’s popular space opera. Both volumes six and seven came out earlier in 2018, and this latest installment continues the story of the battle between the Galactic Empire and the rag-tag band of ex-Free Planets Alliance forces under the command of the brilliant strategist Yang Wen-li. We’re now just two novels away from the series finale!

For those of you always on the lookout for SFT available online, look no further than Clarkesworld, which published "The Facecrafter" by Anna Wu (translated by Emily Jin) in October. They publish at least one work of Chinese SFT in each issue, so don’t miss them. You can also read an excerpt from Sjon’s CoDex 1962 on the FSG “Work in Progress” site.

Also of note is the American Literary Translators Association conference (November), which includes a panel on translating the work of Carmen Boullosa. Her 2017 novel Heavens on Earth (translated by Shelby Vincent) includes three narrators from different historical eras, each engaged in preserving history and able to contact one another across time and space.

I’ve just thrown a lot of exciting SFT news at you, but here’s a little more. We now have three sf magazines that either focus on or reliably include SFT: Clarkesworld, Samovar, and Future Science Fiction Digest. Plus a couple of new SFT publishing projects are in the works (more on that when I find out more).

One more thing: can we please place a moratorium on the term “Kafkaesque”? Thanks.

Until next time in the SFT universe!
Meet the Future

Editor’s Note: "Meet the Future" is a regular column appearing in the Feature 101 section of SFRA Review (beginning with issue #326). It is an interview series conducted by the SFRA Review editor that highlights the work of up-and-coming sf scholars, typically graduate students, postdocs, and recent hires.

Ali Sperling
Postdoctoral Fellow
ICI Institute for Cultural Inquiry Berlin

Hi, Dr. Sperling, could you tell us a bit about yourself? As much (or as little) as you’d like!

Hi, sure. And thanks so much for inviting me to do this. Maybe I’ll just give you a sense of my academic path because it has included a lot of uncertainty (and still does). I’m from all over the Bay Area in Northern California, mostly Oakland. After college in Florida, I came back to live in San Francisco for awhile where I worked at restaurants and bars and made my way through a MA in Literature at San Francisco State University. I had no idea what I was doing really, intellectually speaking, like I didn’t yet understand who I was or what I wanted to be as a scholar or thinker (still working this out a bit!), especially when I applied to Ph.D. programs in English. I got into University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2010 where I was until I finished in 2017. I really think I came a long way in those seven years; I had a far way to come! I didn’t get a lot of theoretical training before arriving at UW, and I was just feeling way behind for a PhD student. At the same time I was just loving everything I was reading in my seminars. I was also unfunded for the first two years, working full time at a bar to pay tuition and totally immersed in my coursework. It was really hard, but so fulfilling.

I did my dissertation on Weird Modernisms (which maybe I will talk more about later), and after I defended I got a one-year lecturer position (the only position I was offered after about 55 job applications) in Women’s and Gender Studies at Santa Clara University (about 30 minutes south of home) where I spent the 2017-18 academic year. I got to develop all of my own classes, “Sex, Science, and the Body” and “Queer Science Fiction” being two of my favorites. I was also really happy to be near family after being in Milwaukee for seven years.

I still feel like it’s a dream to have ended up here at ICI Berlin this year. I am one of twelve international fellows here for two years, working on individual projects under the group’s theme “Errans/Evirons.” I’ve only been here since September, but it’s a really amazing place and I’m lucky to have such generous and fun colleagues to learn with, and from.

Since, with few exceptions, most of us don’t have jobs as professors of sf, how do you describe yourself professionally?

Hmm. I guess it depends on what is meant by “professionally.” As someone relatively new to sf, but who actually came to it through theoretical questions (as opposed to say, the other way around, beginning with a love for sf), I have tried to position myself on the job market in particular theoretical fields. So if professionally means “the job market,” I generally describe myself as an Americanist working on 20th and 21st century literature, feminist and queer theory, and ecocritism, or, studies of the Anthropocene. This changes depending on the post, as we all morph into whatever absurd things that job market posts ask us to be, but generally speaking these are my descriptors. If I am being more specific I may add that my research interests include theories of embodiment, studies of the nonhuman, weird fiction, and disability studies.

Why does sf matter to you?

So many of the sf authors I love have answered the question of why sf matters so beautifully and convincingly that I’m not sure anyone reading this interview will find anything I say to be especially illuminating. For me specifically, it keeps me imagining. It challenges me by continuously projecting possible futures, outcomes, for the world, or warning against others in ways that often seem eerily predictive retrospectively. It keeps many questions open, rather than foreclosing them. In my work on culture and ecology, I find this potentiality especially alluring. It is easy to lose hope, and many sf texts are not especially hopeful about the future of humanity, or the future of the planet either. But in sf narratives we experience characters finding ways of ongoingsness, of scheming, planning, building, plotting towards better futures, even if they fail, of loving, healing, being intimate, finding connection in the thick of ongoing devastation.
What brought you to sf studies?

Maybe here is where I just say a few quick things about my dissertation, because it was really through that project that I came to science fiction, which I did not anticipate at all before I began the project. “Weird Modernisms” is a manuscript that interrogates “the Weird” as a historical-theoretical category in canonical Modernist literary texts, locating weirdness outside of its horrific, fantastical, tentacular iterations most notably from the work of H.P. Lovecraft. My dissertation begins with a chapter on Lovecraft, attempting to situate his work in the twenty-first century in a way that is especially mindful of his really troubling racism and xenophobia. What does it mean to take up a theoretical category that is rooted in these oppressive positions and politics? Can or should “the Weird” do some kind of work now, and how might feminism help? In that project, Lovecraft is the only real sf author there, if you even feel comfortable calling him that, but it was precisely through the otherworldly that I was able to make conjectures about this world, or the more conventionally ordinary worlds of the other authors in question: Carson McCullers, Djuna Barnes, Zora Neale Hurston.

It was somewhere in the middle of writing the dissertation that I kind of realized that I had always loved speculative fiction broadly speaking. I only decided then that it was actually really important to me, and that I would pursue it for my next project. It turns out the the theoretical questions I was invested in about the body find a particular depth of exploration and attunement in science-fictional narrative forms, and so I have since turned towards educating myself on a literary genre that I had really only played with a little bit before graduate school. I have a lot to learn from the sf community and have found my experiences at SFRA and ICFA to be especially crucial and super generous as I develop my own sf scholarship.

What project(s) are you working on now, and how did you get there? What question(s) really drive your work?

Currently I am working on a new project which I have tentatively titled “Nuclear Afterlives.” After thinking for years about what “weird embodiment” might be in my dissertation work in American Modernist texts, I started to think about the stakes of weirdness in the current eco-geological moment, the so-called Anthropocene. The dissertation ended with questions about the Weird in the 21st century, questions like “Why has the weird been resurrected in this moment?” and “What are the through-lines between the Modernist Weird and the contemporary Weird?” The new project continues to think about questions of the boundaries of the body and how these are changing in the Anthropocene.

Around the time I was finishing my dissertation, I noticed over the course of a few weeks a huge number of articles coming out about radioactive animals, particular wild boar, at nuclear disaster sites like Chernobyl and Fukushima. Reading and collecting these dozens of articles published from The New York Times and The Atlantic to The Huffington Post and IFL Science, I was really interested in how the media was framing the “radioactive sanctuaries” (to borrow from Ursula Heise) as places of flourishing, places where nonhumans can finally thrive once the human is evacuated. I’m interested in these “exclusion zones” not only because of their weird, airy, and mobile boundaries but because of the ways in which life inside these zones seems unanimously to be framed as frolicking, wildly reproductive, and therefore as a form of flourishing. The project has a lot of issues to work out still, but right now I am thinking about science-fictional texts that include weird pigs as well as texts that imagine weird spaces, like Jeff VanderMeer’s Area X, for example, where its boundaries are fluid and unknown, and which thinks about bodily mutation at the molecular level. One marker of the start of the Anthropocene is the start of the Atomic Age, I want to think more about the residues of the nuclear in bodies that have been most affected.

There are some important ethical considerations I’m working through at the moment, and I need to look to other disciplines like Anthropology, perhaps, to think more about the methodology of the project. I don’t want to be yet another researcher to absent-mindedly mine the tragedies and catastrophes of entire populations, communities, and spaces for the sake of an interesting study. I’m working through a lot of already existing literature on nuclear culture and the history and science of atomic energy. So I’m still working out the stakes and method of the project and how to deal with the fact that it necessarily involves difficult transnational histories, individual and collective loss, and trauma on a grand scale.
What do you envision for the future of sf studies and sf scholars? What do you want to see us accomplish?

What a big question! If I could answer this it wouldn’t be quite as exciting as it will be to see the field grow and deepen in unexpected ways. On a practical level, I’m really hoping that the academic sf community will continue to become more inclusive and diverse, will reach out to more scholars of color, scholars from historically marginalized communities, and of diverse intellectual backgrounds. This may mean simply ensuring that when one organizes a panel they are thinking about the representation of scholarship on that panel, when organizing a conference that the invited speakers are not all white men, and that sf scholarship pushes even more to be interdisciplinary with scientists and anthropologists, poets and performers. There is so much possibility in the field of science fiction studies, and still a lot of room for improvement regarding what that looks like in the academic world.

If you could write a dream book, or teach a dream course, what would it/they be?

The book I am dreaming about is my dissertation manuscript on the Weird, which may or may not be the same as my dream book! I am really eager to get the revisions done and resubmitted. As for dream course, I was lucky to teach it last year at Santa Clara University, “Sex, Science, and the Body.” It was so awesome. We got to read many of my favorite authors that I have never gotten the opportunity to teach, and it was really fun to teach what was really a theory course to advanced undergraduates who had never encountered work like it before. They were so smart and so into it! We read a lot of historical feminist science studies scholarship, read Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*, discussed questions of genetics through contemporary Indigenous scholarship by Kim Tallbear, read about Eva Hayward’s queer experience of jellyfish and Anna Tsing’s mushrooms, and discussed the ethics and stakes of toxic embodiment through texts by Mel Y. Chen and Alexis Shotwell. I remember one day in class I played John Huling’s “Jellyfish Music” that Hayward talks about in her work, turned down the lights, and projected videos of jellyfish jelly-ing about while the class worked in groups on Hayward’s article about affect and immersion. The students’ reflections said that they loved the different ways, atmospheres, styles, with which

we approached knowledge-building together. It was fun, yes, but they also taught me so much about texts I thought I knew like the back of my hand.

My favorite assignment which I piloted with them was their personal “body-log,” a weekly entry about some experience they had with (in) their bodies. Students wrote the most provocative entries about their developing understandings of their own embodiment, sensations, feelings, enmeshment with the nonhuman world. They wrote entries respectively about the way their birth control changes how they understand their body, their life-threatening peanut allergies and how this changes every encounter they have with the world, about their relationship to running, about their antidepressant medication, about their relationship with their family pet, about grief over the loss of a parent has changed how they see colors! I mean, it was really stunning work. About half of the students were choked up on the last day of class while sharing their reflections of the term (as was I!). It was so emotional, learning and thinking is often really emotional, you know? It was such an important class and group of people to me.

Thank you, Dr. Sperling! Your labor and thoughts are valued and appreciated, and we look forward to seeing all the amazing things you will contribute to our growing community.
Now and Then We Time Travel

Carl Abbott


The COVER image gets us started: Christopher Lloyd frantically dangling from the face of the town clock in Back to the Future (1985). I opened this book expecting to find Planet of the Apes (1968), Terminator (1984), Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure (1989), Midnight in Paris (2011), “City on the Edge of Forever” (April 6, 1967), and other popular favorites. They are there, along with hundreds of other films and television series made in the United States, Canada, the UK, and Japan. Now and Then We Time Travel is a very thorough annotated catalog of a wide range of stories of time travel told through moving images.

Fraser Sherman's analytical reference book should interest libraries, film buffs, popular culture specialists, and science fiction scholars. Sherman groups his examples into thematic chapters, often with subheadings, and offers one-to-three paragraph synopses with key plot elements, leading characters and their actors, and sometimes a quick judgment (he is quite willing to apply adjectives like “poor,” “bad,” and “cheesy”). Appendices list the basic credits (studio, director, writer, cast, duration) for all the films and series discussed in the text. There are additional appendices for Television Specials, Films and Television Series with Minor Time Travel Elements, The Rest of the World, Interesting Short Films (e.g. Elmo Saves Christmas [December 2, 1996]), Movies about Parallel Lives (e.g. Run Lola Run [1998]), and Time Travel Porn Films (e.g. Tits a Wonderful Life [1994]).

The first two chapters deal with multiple versions of two mother texts of time travel fiction: The Time Machine and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. For the latter I was delighted to learn that, in addition to classic versions in which Will Rogers (1931) and Bing Crosby (1949) played Sir Boss, the role has also gone to Keshia Knight Pulliam (1989), Bugs Bunny (1978), and Whoopi Goldberg (1998). And as readers may remember, H.G. Wells himself goes time traveling in Time After Time (1979) and in several episodes of Lois and Clark (1993-97). The author continues with densely packed thematic chapters that group his cases along logical lines: visiting the past; being visited from the future; going back to the past to reshape the present and or future, whether for personal interest or to prevent apocalypse; time cops; and time loops of the Groundhog Day (1993) variety. Some of the examples are fully realized and self-contained stories of time adventure and time paradox; others are cases in which TV writers use time travel as a gimmick to generate episodes to keep a series going (Charmed, Sailor Moon).

There is a lot of food for thought. I write this review in May 2018, having just watched the opening episodes of The Crossing (2018), in which refugees from the future trigger a basic thriller plot. Having been a history professor myself, I am always interested when members of that guild appear in fiction. So I spent some time last year with “Lucy Preston” and Timeless (2016-), in which a small team repeatedly hop into a time machine that looks like a giant cement mixer to prevent Bad Things from happening in the past. In The Crossing, time travel is a device to kick start a plot about government conspiracy. In Timeless, it is an excuse to juice up random stories with settings from the American past (a bit like the old black and white TV series “You Are There” that Walter Cronkite hosted from 1953 to 1957). Also note that Preston, introduced as a hotshot Stanford professor, is largely valued in the first episode for her knowledge of 1930s fashions—even in 2016, television had a way to go. Both shows, too recent for treatment in the book, strike me as typical of many of Sherman’s examples in their subordination of interesting time travel problems to easy plot development.

The book ranges so widely across disparate cases (Dinosaur Valley Girls [1996] v. Interstellar [2014]) that substantive generalizations are difficult. However, the aggregate suggests a limitation on film as an imaginative medium. The majority of the live action shows and movies are set in the present (we are visited by terminators and time cops) or in a costumed past (The Three Stooges Meet Hercules [1962]). Both types of setting are easily within the range of normal Hollywood production. Haul out the Roman togas for one film and the Victorian wardrobe for another, use the backlot of Twentieth Century-Fox for one and shoot another in British Columbia. In contrast, animation is perhaps more powerful for imagining...
compellingly different futures, and the written word freer and most powerful of all. The imaginations of Connie Willis and Octavia Butler are preferable to most of the films that send protagonists to experience earlier times, and Ursula Le Guin’s original *Lathe of Heaven* (1971) outshines its two adaptations.

Sherman has put in lots of hard work and produced a very useful reference that is fun to sample—open it to page 125 to find *Here Comes Peter Cottontail* (1971 stop motion television special with the voices of Vincent Price and Danny Kaye) followed by *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). There are many similar delights of juxtaposition. After a brief introduction, Sherman categorizes and comments on 398 films and 149 television series, which together include 45 titles prominently featuring the very useful word “time.” As in any field, there is shlock, hackwork, enjoyable but unmemorable productions, and enduring classics. The effect of reading through *Now and Then We Time Travel* is similar to reading through year after year of a science fiction magazine from the 1950s or 1960s; there are plenty of good stories, and plenty that you’d be just as happy not to bother with, but the journey is still a lot of fun, and this book is an easily used roadmap that points out the whole array of wonders of nature, roadside attractions, and tourist traps.

**The History and Evolution of Green Arrow**

Steven Mollmann


THE DC COMICS superhero Green Arrow has been in near-continuous publication since 1941 but has not had much wider cultural impact until 2012, when he became the focus of the CW television series *Arrow*. Richard Gray’s book chronicles the history of the character, from his debut in an issue of *More Fun Comics*, to his co-starring with Green Lantern in the 1960s and 1970s, his graduation to his own title in 1983, and up through his current ongoing series, as well as the use of the character in *Arrow* and other adaptations. Green Arrow is popular enough to have never faded into complete obscurity, but enough of an also-ran that writers, editors, and illustrators are always trying to reinvent him to keep him relevant to the times, and as a result, Gray’s book tells not just the history of one character, but also of a genre.

Gray’s book argues that, as created, Green Arrow was a “blank slate” (10), beginning as a pastiche that was “[p]art Batman, cowboy, vigilante, Robin Hood and soldier” (9). But as time went on, writers were able to use that blank slate to their advantage: “what makes Green Arrow unique is precisely that he is so malleable in the hands of an assortment of writers, but consistently human in all of them” (6). The book provides a comprehensive overview of the character; Gray divides his history into a number of eras, overviewing and analyzing the character’s development in each one.

The book is at its best when Gray has a strong angle on a particular era and highlights aspects of the character that move beyond fan truisms. For example, many dismiss the character in his early years as a mere Batman rip-off, and there is an element of truth to this—but as the quotation in my previous paragraph shows, Gray identifies other aspects of the character’s early formulation that often go unnoticed, especially Westerns. At some point, “blank slate” transitioned into “everyman” (119), and this became the basis for most interpretations of the character from the 1970s onwards. In writer Denny O’Neil and artist Neal Adams’s 1970-1972 run, the former millionaire became a social crusader, standing up for the oppressed of America alongside Green Lantern. The “Hard Travelling Heroes” era has been much discussed because of O’Neil’s social commentary, but Gray provides a close reading of the underappreciated realistic art style of Neal Adams, who used “photomontage and similar pop-art influences” (83), and provided the character with a sense of movement and humanity that grounded the social commentary.

As a long-time reader of the character, I also appreciated Gray’s focus on the often-forgotten appearances of the character in various back-up strips from 1972 to 1986, which Gray argues cemented the character as an ordinary person with ordinary problems, such as employment and relationship woes. Gray’s discussion of Elliot S. Maggin, whose story “What Can One Man Do?” was a significant step in redefining the character as an “everyman” contending against larger social forces, is particularly strong. Gray discusses a succession of stories in which Green Arrow runs for political office, but to no avail: “with the defeat of the everyman hero trying to do his best as ‘nothing but a man’, Maggin deftly represents the
death of the American Dream as well” (135). Gray continues from there to the celebrated 1987-1993 run of Mike Grell, and again, he provides a sharp reading of the era’s themes and concerns. The comics novice will find in Moving Targets a strong overview of the changing ways of superhero comics embodied in a single character, but the Green Arrow aficionado will appreciate Gray’s new angles on old material.

That said, the parts of the book covering Green Arrow’s 2001 revival onwards lack the close attention to detail that marked Gray’s discussion of the work of Adams, Maggin, and Grell, largely providing history only. There is an attempt to discuss Kevin Smith’s 2001-2002 run through the lens of “Catholic guilt,” but Gray’s point doesn’t quite hit its target here, and he barely discusses significant eras of the character such as his 2007-2010 co-starring role in Green Arrow and Black Canary and the character’s 2011 “New 52” reboot beyond the bare fact of their existence. It seems strange that what was obviously a very tumultuous era for the character provided less for Gray to say.

The organization of the book is mostly chronological, but occasionally it jumps backward and forward in awkward ways, such as when a thematic chapter about Green Arrow’s role as “the conscience of the gods” that ranges from 1968 to 2010 is included between chapters on 1958-60 and 1970-72. For the scholar, there are also times that Gray’s approach fixates a little too much on fan interests at the expense of deeper analysis; for example, Gray charts how Green Arrow’s origin has changed over time, from the angle of continuity alterations, not touching on the thematic or cultural concerns he emphasizes elsewhere in the book.

One highlight of Moving Targets is the inclusion of interviews with a number of creators who had significant influence on Green Arrow: Neal Adams (artist, 1970-1973), Mike Grell (writer/artist, 1987-1993), Chuck Dixon (writer, 1995-1998), Phil Hester (artist, 2001-2005), Brad Meltzer (writer, 2002-2003), and Jeff Lemire (writer, 2013-2014). All provide some level of personal insight into the character, but I found the interviews with Neal Adams, Phil Hester, and Jeff Lemire the most valuable. Adams gives a detailed look into a long-ago era of comic book history; Hester’s art is an often-neglected component of the character’s 2001 revival; and Lemire is surprisingly candid about what he sees as the shortcomings of the way the character’s 2011 retooling was handled.

Sequart’s approach is analytical, but not necessarily academic. The book contains footnoted references, but most of its secondary sources are from the comics press, popular histories, and blogs. For those who are interested in comics studies and the history of the superhero genre, Moving Targets is a useful overview of the shifts in the genre from the perspective of what one man—or perhaps one character—can do.

Discworld and Philosophy

Bruce Lindsley Rockwood


THIS LATEST collection of essays revolving around the philosophical ideas embodied in the works of Terry Pratchett is Volume 101 in the series Popular Culture and Philosophy. The editor has grouped the collection into five sections: I—Rewriting Your Chem; II—Truth, Logic, and Law Are Nice, but Someone Still Has to Do the Wash; III—Some Things Are Necessary, Not Personal; IV—Ye Canna’ Ken What Ye Canna’ Ken; and V—Probably Quantum. The labels suggest an easy familiarity with Pratchett’s language and style, and an expectation of a similar understanding in the essayists’ audience. Each essay has a distinctive voice, and the contributors deploy informal footnotes throughout to inject humor and informal nods to the characters and tropes of Discworld, with frequent comments by DEATH in his usual font. References are “From the Ephebian Library” (303-305), contributors are Ephebians (307-309), and there is “A High Magical Index” (311-316).

Vanessa Fröhlich’s lead-off essay “More Golems around Than You Might Think” is also one of the strongest. Starting with a discussion of the Golems’ instructions written on a piece of parchment inside their heads to guide their conduct, she closely assesses the role of the words in everyone’s heads: “your life and your behavior are determined by texts, by the words in your head, just like the lives and behavior of the golems and all the people on the Discworld” (4). She uses the conflict from Witches Abroad over imposing stories on unwilling subjects in Genua by Granny Weatherwax’s sister Lily (5) as a lead in to a discussion of postmodernism.
modernists, she notes, are suspicious of metanarratives because they can easily be “manipulated by people who have the power to do so” (7). Examples in Pratchett include Lily’s imposition of a fairy tale destiny for Ella in *Witches Abroad*, and the manipulation of genealogy and the creation of coats of arms by Dragon King of Arms in *Feet of Clay* to imply that Nobby should be made king (7). Fröhlich argues that Pratchett “doesn’t like this human tendency to fall for stories one bit,” citing Sam Vimes’s anger at the people in Ankh-Morpork who fall for the idea “their long-lost king will return to rule over them all” (8). Lily and Dragon believe they are authors of stories that control others, while Granny realizes “that evil begins with seeing people as things” (9).

The remaining essays introduce similar analyses of Discworld texts in the context of particular philosophical approaches. Matthew Skene explores the ideas of philosophers Peter Singer and Immanuel Kant in evaluating the choices people make in their personal lives. In politics and in our careers, we make decisions that impact the lives and jobs of others, so Golem morality entails that we “have an obligation to care about those effects” (20-21). Michael Kugler explores anarchism and the tension between moral law and positive law as portrayed in *The Wee Free Men*. Libertarian ideas expounded by Michael Huemer in *The Problem of Political Authority* and Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* provide a template for Kugler’s analysis of Tiffany Aching’s struggle with the Fairy Queen and the Baron (26-27). One of Kugler’s insights is that “Pratchett’s Discworld advances the wisdom of people who know the laws but realize that no law, however carefully written, covers all the possible challenges of our lives together” (28-29). He concludes that “Pratchett’s work” implies that “any decent society [...] require[s] a minimum of creative anarchists and malcontents to speak out against the likely injustices or abuses of human dignity and rights by agents and authorities of the state” (37).

Vanessa Fröhlich’s second contribution uses Nanny Ogg’s behavior to explore the contrast between high and low culture portrayed in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* through a reading of the Genua city carnival in *Witches Abroad*. Jamie Carlin Watson evaluates the arguments for and against censorship in a reading of *The Truth* and *Monstrous Regiment*, noting Lord Vetinari’s insight in *The Truth* that “Pulling together is the aim of despotism and tyranny. Free men pull in all kinds of directions” (61).

Brandon Kempner’s “The Absurdity of the Luggage,” the first essay in Part II, uses a reading of Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* to argue that Pratchett uses the character of the Luggage to inoculate the Discworld against becoming ordinary. The nature of the Luggage grows over time in the novels, and Rincewind learns to accept it and find his place as “the true hero of the series” (66-67). In “Pratchett’s *Republic*” Kempner contrasts Plato’s Philosopher Kings with the messier rule of the Patrician and Guards in Ankh-Morpork.

Other essays in Part II contrast the commonsense philosophy of Sam Vimes over cleverness; compare the con artist Moist von Lipwig in his role as postmaster and banker with John Law, famous for the Mississippi Bubble; and humorously portray the mental tricks of the Patrician in a series of hypothetical letters-to-the-editor of the *Ankh-Morpork Times* that debate the proper role of government with reference to Hobbes and Bentham.

The remaining essays range widely in topic, from whether Rincewind is a coward, or if character traits exist at all; to the nature of personal identity, using the arguments of Locke, Leibniz and Reid to assess Pratchett’s treatment of Cosmo Lavish in *Making Money*, the transformed Librarian, and Lobsang Ludd in *The Thief of Time*. Daniel Molloy explores identity politics in the species-diverse city of Ankh-Morpork, noting “There is identity that you claim for yourself—Carrot and Cheery Littlebottom both claim to be dwarfs. [...] Then there is that identity as it is understood by members of that group. And finally there is that identity as it is understood by people outside the group” (161). This is a particularly timely essay in light of the global refugee crisis and attacks on immigration in the US and many EU nations.

John V. Karavitis suggests that the many Discworld novels are collectively a history that “chronicles the events of that wondrous, fictional world” (187) and that by exploring it we can learn about our own history, not as a set of random facts and dates but as a collection of stories from different points of view (188). He uses the plots of *Wyrd Sisters, Guards! Guards!, Small Gods*, and *The Thief of Time*, to illustrate his point.

Topics addressed in the remaining essays include the nature of truth, sin and fate, and the attempt of an Unseen University lecturer to explain the physics and philosophy of Roundworld, Discworld and Flatland to a mixed group of student wizards and flatlanders, in Christopher Ketcham’s “The Alchemy of
Flat Worlds.” Daniel Miori explores Terry Pratchett’s personification of, and approach to, Death in “Cocking a Snook at Death and Getting Away with It: Does the Personification of Death Make it Less Scary?”

The concluding essay, “I’d Rather Stay an Orangutan” by the editor Nicolas Michaud, presents Michaud as drawn magically into the Discworld out of his shower, to be charged with proving that Discworld exists to the satisfaction of Lord Vetinari. He does so by arguing that “words we use actually create reality. [...] There is no real difference between words and reality because the only way we can conceive of reality is to think in words! [...] And that [...] is why the Discworld is real” (301).

Collectively these essays are very readable and interesting for any Pratchett fan. This collection is recommended for any academic library. There are a few typos and corrections I would recommend if there is a reprinted edition, and I would suggest more annotation if it were to be used as a resource in a philosophy class. However, this is a popular culture collection rather than an academic treatise, and should be accepted and enjoyed on its own terms.

J.G. Ballard

Jerome Winter


FROM ITS disputed inception to its contemporary crisis of signification, sf, even as the most loosely conceived and informally heuristic critical term, seems to be doomed to perennial bracketing. No exception to this rule of thumb, J.G. Ballard had his own agonistic relationship with the uses and abuses of sf as an ambiguous conceptual category. Ballard in 1962: “Science fiction must jettison its present narrative forms and plots” (qtd. in Wilson 4). Ballard in 1968: “I don’t consider myself a science-fiction writer” (qtd. in Wilson 10). Ballard in 1969: “I’m the greatest possible defender of the traditional virtues of science fiction” (qtd. in Wilson 48). Ballard in 1979: “I still call myself a science fiction writer” (qtd. in Wilson 111). Ballard in 1991: “By the time I got to The Atrocity Exhibition in the late sixties [...] I had left science fiction behind completely” (qtd. in Wilson 71). Ballard in 2000: “[Science fiction is] re-seeding itself in the mainstream novel” (qtd. in Wilson 128).

Wisely refraining from squaring the circle of these diverse, seemingly contradictory rhetorical gestures, D. Harlan Wilson’s monograph study of Ballard’s fiction and prose nonfiction is the first to focus primarily on “how the fiction operates within the science-fiction megatext” (10). Wilson blazes new scholarly trails here—while nonetheless demonstrating a deft command of the extensive amount of existing exegetical commentaries on Ballard’s fiction—by tracing a multiplicity of affinities between Ballard’s rampantly cited work and the collection of all tropes, memes, and conventions that nominally constitute genre-sf, vast and unwieldy as this megatext may be in practice. This accessible but densely researched book commends itself to the attention of general and novitiate readers as well as long-term scholars of the sf field or postmodern fiction alike, in addition to anyone who desires a concise but comprehensive acquaintanceship with the trajectory of Ballard’s career-long themes and concerns.

Disregarding Ballard’s flip-flopping, the introduction incisively asserts the contentious thesis that “Ballard began as, and always remained, a science fiction writer” (3). For Wilson, the major giveaways of Ballard’s semi-covert sf bona fides include the following megatextual elements: Ballard’s abiding interest in exploring the impact of discoveries and inventions, whether these cognitive novae be futuristic, historical, or merely conjectural, on large-scale societal trends; Ballard’s persistent representation of media, consumerism, and technology and its “soft” or “psy-fi” intersection with the innermost lives of characters in his fiction; Ballard’s exploration of incorporating the cognitively estranging aesthetic techniques of surrealism and pop art in literature; Ballard’s pervasive interest in sublime natural or cultural landscapes that swallow up the vanishingly unimportant individual; Ballard’s consistent use of technical, medical, and scientific discourse and diction at the prose, thematic, and characterological levels; Ballard’s clinical, neutral tone and the poverty of affect in his narrative voice; Ballard’s interest in technological advances of automobiles, aircraft, skyscrapers, television, and nuclear weapons—to name only a few—as cyborg-like extensions of the human sensorium; Ballard’s vanguard preoccupation with dystopia, apocalypse, and catastrophe as the ever-more-closely approaching endpoint of
human civilization. While downplaying the supposedly transgressive or experimental elements of Ballard’s fiction as not as extensive or thoroughgoing as such elements in William Burroughs or even Alfred Bester, Wilson periodically reasserts Ballard’s deep ties to sf mainstays such as H.G. Wells, Philip K. Dick, Kim Stanley Robinson, and William Gibson. Such adept critical moves are convincing interventions into Ballardian scholarship and science-fiction criticism, as well as literary and cultural history. Less successfully, in this introduction, Wilson also seeks to forecast his larger project of bridging the gap between Ballard and the high-theoretical discourse of figures like Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. While fascinating, these aside merely tantalize, if only because the scope of this wide-ranging study did not permit a more thorough articulation than what seemed like token genuflections and a litany of unelaborated terminology.

The first chapter offers a brief critical biography. For other writers covered in the Modern Masters of Science Fiction Series, such interludes have seemed more or less gratuitous; yet for Ballard, who wrote explicit semiautobiographical fiction and who frequently returned to personal idiosyncratic obsessions even in his less realist fiction, such a starting point is warranted. Contra John Baxter’s The Inner Man: The Life of J.G. Ballard (2011) that Wilson describes as tantamount to “chintzy celebrity gossip” (26), Wilson’s overarching perspective is that from 1964, when his wife Mary died of pneumonia, to 1984, when his children grew up and moved out of the Shepperton suburban home, Ballard led a quiet, hard-working existence as a single father lovingly caring for his children. The formative experience of his life seems to have been the one fictionalized in Empire of the Sun (1984), surprisingly adapted in 1987 into the fairly faithful Spielberg-helmed film, in which the thirteen-year-old Ballard was interned with his parents by the Japanese forces during World War II. Riffing on Ballard’s own retrospective personal testimony, Wilson describes the atrocities Ballard witnessed in the camp forming the “traumatic kernel for the alienation, violence, dehumanization, and psychological terror that flares up again and again in his fiction” (18). Based on the insight and inquiry of Ballard’s own late-life autobiography, Miracles of Life (2008), Wilson also concludes that Ballard viewed his eventual return to postwar, post-imperial England through a numbed disilluisonment and disgust, especially over the class warfare that he saw as a shell-shocked reconsolidation of bourgeois power.Nevertheless, despite his enfant terrible status as a cultural-literary provocateur, Wilson argues that Ballard “led a peaceful, uneventful adult life, riding the wheel of monotony in his day-to-day affairs. And he liked it that way.” (20).

The second chapter turns its attention to Ballard’s short fiction and nonfiction. Wilson acknowledges the contribution of Peter Brigg’s Starmont Reader’s Guide for its detailed interpretive overview of Ballard’s specific short stories and instead gives analytic synopses of the five short-story collections, all eventually collected, along with other unpublished or uncollected stories, in The Complete Stories of J.G. Ballard (2009). Wilson contends that Ballard’s work emerged remarkably fully formed with his signature voice and trademark concerns in his first collection and never significantly deviated from this instantly recognizable style and substance. Nevertheless, Wilson follows Ballard’s own remarks, as well as the critical consensus, to suggest that the titular “Voices of Time” (1962) and “The Terminal Beach” (1964) stories are the crucial literary-historical landmarks, “a vital organ in Ballard’s body of work that depicts a concerted journey into inner space” (35). Contending that the actual extent of Ballard’s stylistic experimentations has been overblown, Wilson suggests that the three innovative discursive themes that make these stories so powerful are their uncanny registering of the atomic age, the space race, and what Wilson labels “the perceptual implosion” of the 1960s, i.e., “the blurring of reality and fantasy, of subjective and objective worlds” (37). Regardless, in his discussion of the dynamic treatment of this inner space in Ballard’s fiction, Wilson cites Ursula K. Le Guin’s assessment that Ballard’s “reversals of expectations and the extrapolation of trends” should be viewed as “mainstays of science fiction” in contrast to what Ballard castigated as the “human-interest stories, of a banal and pointless kind, an encyclopedia of mediocrity” (qtd. in Wilson 44) that dominates the prestigious history of mainstream mundane fiction. Wilson is less sympathetic to Ballard’s nonfiction output, which he charges with being self-indulgent and tendentious, notwithstanding occasional gems. The bulk of Wilson’s study then focuses exclusively on Ballard’s prolific achievement of nineteen novels.

The third through sixth chapters are therefore split respectively into a chronologically structured
survey of Ballard’s novels consisting of concise analyses and plot recaps, interwoven with quotations from scholarly commentary and critical reviews on the natural disaster novels, the cultural disaster novels, the autobiographical novels, followed by his later novels—*Hello America* (1981) through *Kingdom Come* (2006). Wilson laces his pithy discussions of all these various, dense novels with their deep connections to the evolving sf megatext.

The sf project that Wilson convincingly elucidates remains at the core of Ballard’s fictional enterprise is the paradoxical nature of a psychological liberation to be had by coming to terms with the dehumanizing “technologies of the present” (80).

Energetically written and deeply informed, Wilson’s study is a highly recommended resource for readers needing either a convenient refresher of Ballard’s entire oeuvre or a singular entry point into Ballard’s fascinating life work.

**The Freeze-Frame Revolution**

Dominick Grace


UNSURPRISINGLY, perhaps, whether Peter Watts’s latest book, *The Freeze-Frame Revolution*, qualifies as a novel or novella is a matter of debate. His publisher insists it is the former, while Watts insists that it is the latter. Given the centrality of questions of ontology, identity, and epistemology to Watt’s work, that even what category, never mind genre, of fiction this belongs to is debatable. The book even has embedded into it a link to another story, if one is patient enough to transcribe the letters that are printed in red (or takes the short-cut—as I did—of searching online), that further blurs the status of this book as a stand-alone work. Some of the mysteries raised by the book, and the reason for one two-word phrase otherwise unexplained and easy to overlook, are addressed by this semi-embedded text. As is evident, Watts’s work requires work of the reader.

*The Freeze-Frame Revolution* is space opera with a decidedly dystopian bent. The book tracks the voyage of a vessel called *Eriophora* (Watts almost certainly expects readers to look this up—along with many other terms and references he drops) the function of which it to create what amount to stargates. Rather than giving us a universe in which humans discover the gates conveniently created by long-vanished aliens, he imagines humanity itself setting out to create gates that will allow instantaneous travel across space. However, he focuses on the crew who spend most of their time—literally millions of years—in deep hibernation, thawed out only occasionally to work on constructions that exceed a certain threshold of complexity that the AI—“the Chimp”—that runs the expedition can handle. This is the first extended work in Watts’s “Sunflower Cycle” (three stories to date, including the 2010 Hugo winner “The Island,” all available on Watts’s website, rifters.com). One need not have read the other stories to understand this novel, but it would not hurt.

Indeed, an unstated but key element here is that this novel is set prior to events covered in the pre-
viously-published stories, which means that readers familiar with the earlier works will already know how key plot elements turn out here. This makes for a rather clever instantiation of Watts’s recurrent interest in questions of free will and determinism, not only on the diegetic level of the text but also in terms of readerly knowledge about what is and is not possible, given the already-established chronology.

As the title makes clear, the focus of the novella (I will follow the author’s preference regarding classification) is the attempt made by several of the crew of the ship to mount a revolution against the AI that runs the show. This is of course familiar territory from numerous earlier SF works, perhaps most famously 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). Watts, however, explores complex questions about agency and responsibility, as he refuses to fall into simple the simple binarism of human=good/machine=bad that often dominates stories in which plucky humans try to overthrow their machine overlords. Anyone familiar with Watts will expect the deliberate blurring of the line between machine and human that is one of the traits that gives Watts’s work its distinctive tone, so the Chimp is a far cry from HAL or Frank Herbert’s OMC (Destination Void, 1966) or the myriad other horrifying sentient machines in SF. Watts’s human protagonists are also typically Wattsian in their essential lack of traits that might make them sympathetic or relatable. More than many SF writers, Watts is alive to how human nature and psychology might change in profoundly alien environments. He wastes little time explaining his (post)human characters, instead requiring readers to infer their nature from the casual references to their implants, their new cultural groups, even their changing sexual nature (via the admittedly not terribly inventive new pronouns he applies to some). Whether the revolution will succeed or not (and anyone conversant with the earlier stories will know the answer already) is less important than is the exploration of the existential question of what one might (or might not) be driven to on a literally eternal and possibly pointless if not self-destructive (despite millions of years of building gates, the expected call home has never come, and at times horrors emerge from new gates and try to destroy the ship) mission. Depicting humans breaking under intolerable stress if of course Watts’s métier, but he does so here more compactly than in his novels. One might describe The Freeze-Frame Revolution as a SF novella of existential despair.

The book offers fruitful grounds for consideration of the implications of the development of artificial intelligence, as well as an unconventional take on space opera at a far more compact length than is typical of that genre. It also offers hard science, a challenging narrative that requires close readerly attention, and clever plot complications. Consequently it could be discusses from multiple perspectives in a SF course.

If Tomorrow Comes

Thomas J. Morrissey


REVIEWING the second book of an unfinished trilogy is kind of like assessing a restaurant meal before the dessert. However, based on the quality of book two, If Tomorrow Comes, book three, Terran Tomorrow, which is scheduled for release in November 2018, will be a fitting final course. Kress has garnered six Nebulas, two Hugos, and other accolades. She is a major voice in contemporary sf. What distinguishes her is her aptitude for writing hard sf, her consistently strong prose, and the extent to which her fiction connects with important issues of our times and questions the very nature of humanity. The current trilogy is a first-contact story (even though the aliens are human) as well as a portrayal of utopian limitations.

Yesterday’s Kin, book one of the trilogy, is a necessary precursor to the text under review. In it, a spacecraft full of beings first called Denebs lands in New York seeking human assistance in developing a vaccine against a space-borne pathogen that threatens to wipe out humanity. The aliens are actually humans who were for some reason taken from Earth by unknown beings 70,000 years ago. These cousins—called Kindred in book two, in homage to Octavia Butler—belong to the fictional thirty-first human haplogroup, L7, descended from a particularly non-violent mitochondrial mother. The visitors are peaceful, but human xenophobia results in violence, and the travelers leave without a vaccine. The principal character is Dr. Marianne Jenner, one of whose sons who carries L7 DNA and who leaves Earth with the aliens. She and her son Noah are also

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central to Book 2. When the space farers gift human beings with plans for a starship like their own, I assume that most readers raised on Earth reacted as I did—what a big mistake!

Like all of Kress’s fictions, this unfinished trilogy interrogates the question of whether our most important adaptive advantage—our intelligence—will result in our creating physical tools and social institutions that will prolong our species’ existence or lead to extinction. Perhaps this is the central issue that underpins sf in general. If Tomorrow Comes takes us to the home world of our L7 cousins, people who clearly have no idea just how dangerous we are. Though not technophobes, the Kindred measure the potential gains of manufacturing against the environmental costs. They built the starship in which they came to Earth from what was essentially a model kit left by whoever transported them to their planet. They do not know how the ships work. Those on Earth who fear that the Kindred are far advanced technologically and therefore pose a threat to humanity are entirely mistaken.

The circumstances under which humans come to Kindred are all too familiar to readers of first contact fiascoes. The vessel built by the US is called Friendship, while the Russian ship is Vengeance. Americans good, Russians bad, right? Not necessarily. Although deaths from the spore cloud are limited in the US, fully 30% of ethnic Slavs die, a catastrophe that they choose to believe was a biological attack from the Kindred. Despite American sacrifices in WW2, our losses were small compared to the perhaps 80 million Russians who perished. Is it any wonder that the USSR did not want to see Germany reunited or why Russians are concerned about the expansion of NATO to include three former Soviet Republics? Context is everything, and historical hangovers can be long and powerful. Vengeance also blows up the US starship leaving only seven survivors from the American diplomatic mission.

The Kindred have no defenses against the Russian attack that kills one in five and vaporizes all of the planet’s major population centers. It is a nightmare they would never have dreamed since they have evolved an extraordinarily peaceful and egalitarian society. They have also failed to develop a vaccine against the spore disease and face possible annihilation. Their plight brings to mind both H.G. Wells and Ray Bradbury. The Russians attack with weapons descended from Wells’s heat rays. With large eyes and copper skin tone, they bear a distant resemblance to Bradbury’s Martians, and like them they are unprepared to combat the worst that Earth and pathogens have to offer.

However, the Kindred are human. They learn quickly to make pipe guns and primitive bombs as they struggle to maintain sovereignty over their world in the face of increasingly hostile actions of pill popping Lieutenant Lamont and his Rangers. It is all too easy for soldiers who engaged in counter-insurgency missions in Iraq, Afghanistan and, in this novel, Brazil to be suspicious of the locals and want to control them. Some Kindred do take up arms, but that number is small because Kindred society is built on extended family ties and cooperation and is governed by older women called Mothers. Whether or not Earthlings could ever live this way, enough dreamers have explored the possibility so that the idea is within the bounds of human imagination.

In fact, one possible direction for the novel is utopian. Kress’s admiration for their society is clear, but the book is not a tedious travelogue through yet another nowhere. Some of the humans who came to Kindred with the aliens adapt well; others do not. Dr. Jenner’s son Noah thinks World is a new Eden, while a woman named Kayla cries every day and will not learn the language. Kindred society is millennia old: is it something we could build or merely an aberration resulting from genetics and a benign climate? This book’s resolution relies on a plot twist that is a bit shaky, but, hey, the Kindred could use a break.

Kress is a writer who has in the past retold the story of Adam and Eve and explored the posthuman future. She thinks big. She also thinks deeply as evidenced by this unfolding trilogy with its intertextual connections and its human aliens who serve as the control group for a fictional experiment in search of our nature and potentialities.
Dirty Computer

Jessie L. Cortesi


DIRTY COMPUTER is Janelle Monáe’s third studio album. Like Monáe’s previous albums The Electric Lady (2013) and The ArchAndroid (2010), as well as her 2007 EP Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase), this album is set in fictional Metropolis, a dystopian cityscape heavily inspired by Fritz Lang’s 1927 Metropolis. However, Dirty Computer marks Monáe’s first release of an accompanying full-length video—what Monáe calls an “emotion picture.” The music videos for the four singles were incorporated into an almost 50-minute-long short film with a cohesive sf narrative. This is not the singer’s first foray into filmmaking; she starred in the 2016 critically acclaimed movies Moonlight and Hidden Figures, in addition to appearing in Amazon Video’s 2017 anthology series Philip K. Dick’s Electric Dreams.

Monáe’s alter-ego, android Cindi Mayweather, who first appeared in the songs and music videos for Metropolis, returns as Jane 57821. Marked by the state as a “dirty computer”—an android who shows individuality or opposition to the status quo—Jane is sent to a facility for “cleaning.” Also described as a debugging program, cleaning entails the deletion of memories with the forced inhalation of a gas called “Nevermind.” As two white male technicians remotely erase her memories, the story intermittently enters the recollections, filling in how Jane arrived in the facility. Through these memories it becomes clear that Jane ended up in the facility and labeled as a dirty computer because of her forbidden romance with another female android, Zen (Tessa Thompson). As the memories progress, Zen and Jane are joined by a third android, Ché (Jayson Aaron), in a polyamorous relationship. Together, they flee from their pursuers, members of the police state, that eventually capture and deposit them in the facility for cleaning.

In 2010, Monáe told the Chicago Tribune that she uses androids as a representation of “the Other” in society; a metaphor for blackness, queer identity, etc. This is a well-worn tradition in sf that Monáe reimagines. Ursula K. Le Guin wrote about it in Science Fiction Studies in 1975, except she pointed out how aliens, as opposed to Monáe’s androids, have been used to depict the Other. Le Guin goes beyond sf to explain how sexual, social, cultural, and racial othering a facet is not only of the sf industry, but American life broadly. Dirty Computer follows in this vein, as a critique of othering in American culture.

The Nevermind program is reminiscent of Aldous Huxley’s soma in Brave New World—both are tools of population control intended to keep workers docile and compliant. Nevermind reflects what the totalitarian state takes away from those who are different: their memories, dreams, and feelings. In other words, it deletes their history and their future, anaesthetizing them to a life of labor in service of the state.

On the issue of totalitarian oppression of women and homosexuality, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale is the clearest reference point. Atwood uses The Handmaid’s Tale to call attention to unjust real-life treatment of women and Monáe is no different. Explicitly political throughout, one scene in “Pynk” depicts a woman in underwear which bears the text “I grab back”—referencing Mr. Trump’s remarks which surfaced during the 2016 election. Dirty Computer is timely in other ways, too. Monáe embraces her sexuality openly for the first time with this release and came out as pansexual shortly after the record dropped. Unlike Atwood’s bleak outlook, Monáe counters dystopia by reveling in the utopian vision of celebrating Black womanhood and, on “Django Jane,” “Black girl magic” specifically. Challenging their status as Other in American society, Dirty Computer is an assertion of the humanity of Black women, from joy and love to fear and vulnerability.

Afrofuturism has been a cornerstone of Monáe’s work since she got her start in music. Monáe participates in the radical act of imagining a future for Black people while also critiquing their treatment in the present, following in the footsteps of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Nnedi Okorafor. Like the most resonant sf, Dirty Computer is about the present. Monáe’s unique genius is in the way she uses the dual mediums of music and film to get her message across. In doing so, she opens up the sf genre to a wider audience.

The influence of Philip K. Dick is most prominent. Monáe takes Dick’s replicants in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? and twists their motivation; Dick’s replicants seek to become more human
while Monáe’s androids seek to maintain their humanity. In the end, Dirty Computer, like Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (and to go back even further, Frankenstein), asks how different from humans can creations made in their image truly be? This is always followed the question of whether or not to extend equal rights to those creations. These are quintessential sf questions about humanity’s future, but it is imperative to not lose sight of the fact that Monáe’s androids represent Black and queer experience in the United States today. The country proclaims equal rights for all, but the reality has always been and continues to be a different story entirely. Monáe highlights that disparity through sf with her sight set on shaping a more just future.

Beyond Mars
Dominick Grace


THIS VOLUME in IDW’s impressive Library of American Comics series presents an integral run of the relatively obscure Beyond Mars comic strip. Previously available only in an out-of-print black-and-white two-volume set, Beyond Mars is here presented at its original size and in color, and it is lovely to look at. The strip was created specifically for the New York Sunday News, a tabloid-size paper that was looking for something to add to its comics offerings to compete with the visual allure of television. Unusually, rather than turning to cartoonists, the paper recruited the well-established sf author Jack Williamson to come up with and script a series. Lee Elias, already also well-established as a cartoonist (best-known for his Black Cat character—used by Fredric Wertham as an example in his notorious attack on comics as causing juvenile delinquency in Seduction of the Innocent [1954]), was brought on to provide art, and the strip ran from 1952 to 1955, as a full-page strip for most of the run. Sf readers—and Williamson fans especially—will be interested to know that the strip ties in, loosely, with Williamson’s Seetee series; according to the introduction to this collection, a review of Williamson’s Seetee Ship (1951) prompted the paper to seek him out, and seetee does have a brief role to play in one continuity. Williamson fans should also know, however, that Williamson’s scripts were consistently meddled with by the paper. The extent to which editorial interference rather than Williamson is responsible for the generally unexceptional plots and dialogue cannot be determined, but regardless, Beyond Mars qualifies as one of the many interesting failures of comics history.

The premise is similar to that of Williamson’s seetee stories: in the late 22nd century, humans have a new frontier, the asteroid belt—hence beyond Mars. The protagonist is the stereotypical rock-jawed (his name is Mike Flint!) tough guy, who runs an asteroid-mining company with his partner, the verminiform (and metallic/metal-eating) Venustian Sam—or “Tham,” as he is usually called, given that he has a lisp due to learning English from a lisper—who is also the only alien with any significant role in the strip. The “frontier” setting is explicitly invoked, with much that is reminiscent of Westerns or prospecting stories and films recurring across the various narrative arcs. While there are occasional nods to more science-fictional ideas (e.g. a character who wants to be able to explore Jupiter sets up a centrifugal station that rotates fast enough to simulate heavy gravity, or the more whimsical use of fire extinguishers and even seltzer bottles to rocket around in a zero-gravity environment), most of the plots are not heavily reliant on plausible science but could function almost as well as straight westerns, with only minor adjustments. Minimally-justified “scientific” elements such as a man rendered fireproof via scientific experimentation, or giant lobsters (the 1950s was of course rife with giant creatures in sf) prevail. In short, this is more science fantasy than science fiction.

That said, there is occasionally room for discussion of familiar sf tropes or devices (there is a first contact story, for instance, though it largely offers the typical split between the scientist who wants to study/communicate with the alien, and the hero, who wants to destroy it) and for consideration of how the science-fictional trappings allow Williamson and Elias to engage (perhaps) in occasional social commentary. Despite the sf trappings, characters look and dress pretty much as if they lived in the 1950s, and contemporary attitudes occasionally inform or at least occur in the stories. For instance, the first narrative arc includes a character whose knee-jerk response to Sam is to reject him for his otherness, a readily-apparent comment on racism, espe-
cially given Sam’s pedigree. Elias’s art owes a debt to the work of Milton Caniff. Indeed, many characters look as if they could have been lifted from Caniff’s Terry and the Pirates or Steve Canyon (itself a popular adventure strip in the 1950s), and one of the first villains, The Cobra, is obviously Beyond Mars’s version of Caniff’s Dragon Lady. One of the significant secondary characters in Terry was Terry and Pat’s bald-headed, buck-toothed, semantically-challenged Chinese sidekick, who functioned mainly as comic relief, though he could also play important plot roles. Sam is similarly bald, buck-toothed, semantically challenged, and predominantly comic, but as a non-human, he becomes (potentially, anyway) a less problematic vehicle for commentary on rather than perpetuation of racism. However, given that a later storyline has a circus entrepreneur offer to buy Sam from Mike, and Mike’s only response is to say that Sam is not for sale, perhaps Williamson and Elias are not so much commenting on race and otherness as they are avoiding addressing such topics seriously.

It is perhaps too much to expect a space opera comic strip offering the equivalent, essentially, of short stories to address topics of contemporary relevance with any seriousness, but by the time the strip winds down and is reduced to a half-tab size, Williamson and Elias seem to be losing enthusiasm. Though there are still some arresting visuals (the giant lobster may be silly, but it looks good), Elias’s layouts become more perfunctory, and Williamson seems to rely increasingly on silly devices (a violin that emits ultrasonic signals that can control the listener’s mind; an “atomic” dagger that causes someone stabbed with it to disintegrate, etc.) and thin plotting (the final villains are a literal femme fatale and a run of the mill mad scientist whose name I have already forgotten). The strip was not even afforded the dignity of a proper ending, with the final continuity stopping with significant plot points unresolved. One can admire Beyond Mars as a failed experiment, but a failed experiment is all that it is. Given the cost of the book and its relative brevity, coupled with its indifferent narrative quality, it is unlikely to be a good investment as a required course reading, but those specifically interested in sf newspaper comics should give this book a read.
The Science Fiction Research Association is the oldest professional organization for the study of science fiction and fantasy literature and film. Founded in 1970, the SFRA was organized to improve classroom teaching; to encourage and assist scholarship; and to evaluate and publicize new books and magazines dealing with fantastic literature and film, teaching methods and materials, and allied media performances. Among the membership are people from many countries—students, teachers, professors, librarians, futurologists, readers, authors, booksellers, editors, publishers, archivists, and scholars in many disciplines. Academic affiliation is not a requirement for membership. Visit the SFRA Website at www.sfra.org. For a membership application, contact the SFRA Treasurer or see the Website.

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