correspondents abroad

Oh No, Not More Sci-Fi!

BRIAN W. ALDISS

LIKE THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY, THE SCIENCE FICTION INDUSTRY OVERPRODUCES. INCREASINGLY, THE SCIENCE FICTION LABEL is intended to fit every model. "Any color as long as it's colorful."

In the 1960s, science fiction in bookstores moved to the front of the shop. Science fiction was in the air, part of the message of an expansive postwar ethos. It had a function. Now you have to look back behind the cookery shelves for it.

True, the almost science fiction is doing fine. The Harry Potter books and Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials books live in big dump bins. They are read by adults and kiddie adults. But what is good for J. K. Rowling is not good for other writers: there are only so many bucks to go around.

Reasons for writing science fiction initially were several: among them, the opportunity to give the imagination free rein and the fact that it was an Outsider's literature. Fifty or more years ago, there seemed to be no financial incentive to write science fiction. One worked from conviction. And one worked alone.

I had been an avid reader of science fiction—particularly John W. Campbell's magazine *Astounding*—for many years before I ventured on my first science fiction novel, *Non-stop* (also known as *Starship*). I had little depth of knowledge of science, despite having studied chemistry and physics at school. However, I had read a lot of literature. I viewed my story in two regards: as an engaging and ingenious tale and as a metaphor for the difficulties I was then experiencing in life.

A metaphor can be interpreted in various ways. When *Non-stop* was translated and published in Poland in 1975, the story was popular there because it was read as a metaphor for existence imprisoned in a totalitarian state going nowhere. Such metaphoric qualities of science fiction are often neglected.

Non-stop was published around the globe. Perhaps it was read most eagerly by those who felt themselves in some way outside society. Clearly there was a need for this kind of fiction, though it appeared to be despised—or, rather, ignored—by the higher echelons of literature. I have always read Thomas Hardy and A. E. van Vogt, Philip K. Dick and Jane

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Austen. These are different fruits from different trees, but one does not exclude the other, as eating an apple does not preclude enjoying an orange.

Times change and, with them, circumstances. I managed to settle down in England after many years abroad. I made a satisfactory marriage. My wife and I had four children. I became established, even fashionable. In the days of Project Apollo, I appeared regularly on BBC TV to comment on the various launches. I spoke on literary occasions. Life was varied and enjoyable. But when I found myself becoming less of an Outsider, I began to question what I had been inside.

When my history of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree*, was published, I found there were plenty of ordinary people who read science fiction now and again, who had no attitude toward it, who never attended science fiction conventions. It seemed that much of the defensiveness about science fiction—though by no means all of it—was generated in groups of science fiction fans: they valued their difference, their lostness; they had a fear of the world beyond their defenses. Touchingly, a well-known fanzine was called *The Cry of the Nameless*.

There is some difference in the cultural environment between the United States and the United Kingdom. What at one time was known as scientifiction in the States emerged from the pulps. It is apparent that many of the early readers of the pulps believed that science fiction was born in those very pages. They had no clear perspectives, little cultural background—among them, one could claim Homer as a science fiction writer without provoking ironic laughter on all sides.

In Britain, as in Europe in general, there was no pulp phenomenon. Many well-known authors occasionally wrote futuristic or satiric or surreal tales that could be construed as science fiction. Authors known for such stories—Frigyes Karinthy in Hungary, Karel Čapek and Josef Nesvadba in Czechoslovakia, Yevgeny Zamyatin in Russia, Kurt Lasswitz in Germany, Italo Calvino in Italy, Voltaire in France, Jonathan Swift and Aldous Huxley in Britain—were in general issuing correctives, castigating the various follies of humanity for relatively sophisticated audiences.

The two most famous and famously enduring writers of what we now label science fiction are Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. Yet of the many novels both worthies wrote, surprisingly few enter the science fiction category.

Both writers, together with Hugo Gernsback and John W. Campbell, Jr., were named in an anxious mid-twentieth-century scramble by adolescent science fiction fans for a Father Figure. Considerable antimaternal disturbance was caused when *Billion Year Spree* named instead a Mother Figure, Mary Shelley.

In the early 1950s, something like fifty science fiction and fantasy magazines came and went in the United States. Only six survived into the 1960s, with some British magazines (most notably an acerbic *New Worlds*). Technology was supplying the world with paperbacks, drowning out the story magazines. And already television was spreading, telling its own brand of story.

By 1975 Project Apollo was mothballed, and the space race was over. With it went a substantial reason for the existence of science fiction, for which space travel was an article of faith. Another considerable influence for change was the trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, by Professor Tolkien. It will forever remain a mystery to me why and how this conservative view of life came to be so popular with the young trendies of the 1960s and—almost half a century after publication—comes dressed as three costly blockbuster movies, the third film sweeping all before it in the 2004 Oscar ceremonies.

The Lord of the Rings opened the floodgates to a tidal wave of fantasy worlds, where a single idea could be stretched to six or more novels of a series. Science fiction as such was melting into various subgenres: fantasy, romance, horror, medieval. Someone let in the dragons, the fairies, the wizards. Well, it's easier stuff to write than anything particularly intellec-

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tual. "Good-bye, cruel world, I'm off to join the circus . . ." was the song of the day. It is now possible to make a living from writing in these fustian categories.

Science fiction is stuck in its fin de siècle phase. A parallel case is what some see as the end of pop music's creative phase. That faithful reporter of the science fiction scene *Locus: The Magazine of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Field* shows what has happened. In every issue we are treated to people roistering, writers, fans, artists, publishers, editors, all mugging together for the camera. Here are the stars of a cut-rate culture, attending more and more conventions, clutching more and more awards.

A recent issue of *Locus* consisted almost entirely of a celebration of "graphic novels," a fresh oxymoron (Vess). One celebrity declared he was proud of loving comics. This mode of exaggeration—why couldn't he just "enjoy comics," without the swagger?—is endemic. Do none of these *Locus* folk work? Are they forever having a Wonderful Time? Is there no place or time where a writer sits alone and attempts to find a way to convey plausibly the hard truths of existence? Or can partying and adulation occupy a whole lovesome lifetime?

Something disarmingly adolescent is represented here, as indeed it is in most of the genre, to judge by the publishers' advertisements. The first novel of a new series, volume 3 of *The Runelords*, the fifth novel of the Sun Sword series, the Next Exciting Installment, the first novel of King Arthur's quest for the mayorship of New York City . . . What will they think of next? Winnie the Pooh on Mars, perhaps.

So what are science fiction writers like? Happily, they are really sweet men and women, boys and girls, carrying the innocence of early youth into middle age. One of their number speaks for many: "I have to write books that are going to be readable, not preachy tracts. . . . Readers deserve a compelling story. I also believe in hope. . . . There are tons of wonderful things in the world as it is . . ." (de Lint 74).

Speaking as an undeserving reader, I understand that the term *scientifiction*, later *science fiction*, was coined for deserving teenagers almost a century ago. The unprivileged and unlettered took it up immediately, perhaps unaware of the gulf separating science from fiction. No wonder those snooty higher echelons of literature smelled a rat! Now we are stuck with the label and its even more demeaningly downmarket *sci-fi*.

Writers who abandoned these appellations and ceased to attend conventions were successful and honored beyond the reaches of our tribe: Kurt Vonnegut, J. G. Ballard, and more recently Margaret Atwood. They are no longer associated with the aura of adolescence that lingers like a fog, obscuring our vision of the obstinately real world beyond. They also have sussed out that there are tons of nasty things in the world as it is.

How do we determine what is meant by good science fiction? We can use the kind of reasoning Aristotle employs in his *Nicomachean Ethics* to get us part of the way. Popularity is no guarantee of worth, nor is its opposite; there is general agreement on this. Nor can what is popular or what is designedly obscure be condemned as entirely worthless. One is therefore ill advised to aim for either obscurity or popularity. To achieve clarity presents problems enough.

So we proceed to function. A story may amuse us, but we will come to that later. A story may give us knowledge or fresh perception. Science fiction does not infallibly give us knowledge, for often it is based on an assumption contrary to what is known. But it can thereby occasionally give us a perception by which to conduct our lives.

However, this seems to rule out fantasy and horror from the possibility of goodness. Much fantasy depends on the assumption that one group of beings is totally good and another, opposing, totally evil, and hocus pocus with rings or a grail or crowns or lakes or virginity is involved; seldom, if ever, is this found in actual experience. An example here might be that when our nation declares war on Iraq, we think or are told to think

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of our nation as good and Iraq as evil, while in truth a number of evil people live here and many good people live in Iraq—as we acknowledge when we set out to rescue them from bondage. Another false belief is that magic works, when in fact it does not. Swords never turn blue in the presence of orcs. Much horror depends on the dead returning physically to vex the living—another misrepresentation of reality. It is undeniable that such stories may entertain some of us, but probably only the idle or the immature.

An exception to the above caveats must be made for a kind of deliberate fantasy, where we are offered something preposterous as an intellectual tease. Many stories in this category used to be featured in the magazine *Galaxy*. Sometimes the title of a story would warn a reader of this strategy; thus, Frederik Pohl's "The Day the Icicle Works Closed" (Feb. 1960).

So a good story must alert us in some way, not sedate us. It may offer us a contradiction, where one set of perceptions clashes with another. An example of long standing here is Arthur Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God" (1953). Unfortunately, this trick becomes more difficult to pull off as we enter a world of confused perceptions. If our societies have become more surreal, there is less distinction in being a surrealist.

All the same, it may be better to think of oneself as a surrealist (since surrealists were influenced by various sciences) than as a writer of that tired old oxymoron *science fiction*. Although both terms are slightly dated, the former offers more latitude than the latter.

Will being surrealists make us as happy as the celebrities in *Locus*? We know that celebrities are not really as content as we and they like to think. Writers achieve contentment only if they are truthful and create stories that they deeply hope will contribute to the wisdom and happiness-in-reflection of others. Aristotle says that people find pleasure in what they are fond of. A horse gives pleasure to one who is fond of horses. Happiness is not an end in itself but a by-product of goodness or good work. What is meretricious produces only transitory contentment.

No longer am I content to be labeled merely a sci-fi writer. No longer can I greatly enjoy the literature that was once all in all to me, that formed me. I find I have become an Outsider again.

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