

# The Science Fiction FAN







# The Role of Science Fiction

by  
Jack Roberts



Fans are now once again asking "What is science fiction?" An entire Conference at Philadelphia was devoted to this question in the Fall of 1938, although no concrete definition of science fiction was worked out by it. About the only interpretation that everybody at the Conference seemed to agree upon was that science fiction is that type of fiction which is based upon speculative science. Things that are little known to science, like the origin of the universe, the limits of space, the exact composition of an atom, anything in science that lends itself to speculation can be used to make up a science fiction story. The question of whether or not there have been civilizations of men in the age when only reptiles were supposed to have existed is occasionally exploited in science fiction stories. Anything not definitely known to science, not definitely discovered by science, anything that might be discovered by science, can be used to make up a science fiction story.

The main fault of this definition agreed upon practically by everyone at this Conference in Philadelphia is, that it is not complete.

The fans at the Conference failed to go deeper into the definition to make it more complete. They failed to analyze science fiction on the basis of the different types of science fiction stories that have been written. Any analysis of the different kinds of science fiction stories gives an entirely different and very significant picture of science fiction.

We can separate most science fiction stories into two general classes: "The utopian civilization" type, and the "build a new civilization upon the ruins of the old" type.

In the "utopian civilization" type of science fiction story, one or more persons in making use of some scientific invention or of some scientific principle, reach a civilization very much better than our own Western European civilization in many ways. This "utopian civilization," for instance, may have no unemployment, no wars, no crises, no slums, no poverty, and its inventions may be far superior to our own. These better civilizations are discovered when heroes: cross time (using time machines), cross space (using space ships or, using the force of their own wills), transfer themselves into other dimensions, infra universes or ultra universes. The story usually revolves around the adventures of the heroes among the people of the new civilization, and in describing the experiences of these heroes, the story gives enough detail to enable the reader to compare or contrast this new civilization with our own.

In the "build a new civilization upon the ruins of the old" type of science fiction story, we find the earth, or some particular civilization, about to be destroyed by some agency, while a group of people, the heroes, strive



valiantly to prevent this destruction, or, if this is impossible, attempt to preserve the human race. The agencies of destruction take many forms:

1. A new invention may fall into the hands of an unscrupulous individual who decides to use it in order to gain control of the world.
2. A new invention may get out of control of the inventor and may, thereby, threaten to destroy the entire world.
3. A straying planet, comet, star, galaxy, or supergalaxy may be about to collide with the earth.
4. An alien civilization may invade the earth, in some stories, only to conquer and enslave the members of the human race, and in other stories the invasion is conducted with the aim of eliminating the human race altogether, so that this alien civilization can live on earth in place of the human race.
5. A ruling civilization may be so oppressive that the conquered civilization attempts to rebel against the ruling civilization. (Venus may rebel against imperialist earth. Earth may rebel against a dominating alien civilization).
6. A dictator's rule may be so oppressive that his people organize to rebel against his rule.
7. An unearthly creature may have such tremendous destructive and defensive powers that it is able to threaten the destruction of our entire civilization with almost complete certainty of success. (As in "Discord in Scarlet", by A.E. Van Vogt.)

These stories (the "build a new civilization upon the ruins of the old" type) deal with the problems the heroes have to face and the ways by which they try to solve these problems. The heroes represent the civilization that is

being threatened with destruction. In some stories there is only one hero, and the burden of "saving civilization" falls entirely upon him.

Few of these stories show mankind (that is, the heroes of the stories) losing out in the end. Most of these stories end with the final triumph over the agency of destruction. What the "build a new civilization upon the ruins of the old" type of science fiction story seems to preach is that: no matter how big a problem mankind has to face, it (the problem) will eventually be solved.

All science fiction stories taken as a whole, seem to complain that our present civilization is not good enough. The stories present various diverse civilizations which are superior to our own. As the reader reads about these new civilizations, he momentarily "lives" in these new civilizations and immediately has a taste of how one might feel living under our civilization with all problems, like unemployment, starvation, crises, wars, etc., solved. These "utopian civilizations" are, after all, nothing more than our own Western European civilization without its problems.

Science fiction stories, in other words, help us escape from our problems in such a way that we imagine our problems solved. The escape is only temporary since reality returns to the reader as soon as he comes to the end of the story. The stories serve as a sort of "wishful thinking" or "wish fulfillment" for the reader, who wishes that something happens to solve the problems of our Western European Civilization.

The more the reader reads about "utopian civilizations", the more he mulls over the best kind of society one might live in, and consequently wonders how our civilization can be improved. There is not a fan who does not have a blueprint, more or less worked out, as to how our society ought to be. Many fans have joined organizations which claim to work for the betterment of our society. A number of American fans have joined up with Technocrat Societies, which hold the view that the ultimate salvation of society is in the hands of technicians and scientists. Many of the English fans have joined Socialist Societies, which claim that as long as our civilization remains a capitalist civilization, its problems will never be solved. The socialists hold that if the workers owned all the factories, if the peasants as a whole shared all land used for farming, without at the same time being forced to pay rent for the land, and if production were carefully planned and regulated, the problems our civilization faces, (unemployment, war, etc.) would no longer exist. In America, Esperantist societies have sprung up here and there. Ackerman, a leading science fiction fan in California, is one of the leaders of the Esperantist movement, which holds that one of the chief reasons for the antagonisms between countries, (which causes, some of them to go to war against each other) is the differences in language between them. If a common, universal, language were in use, the Esperantists' say, the antagonisms between nations due to the differences in language between them, would disappear, and wars would then be practically unknown. Esperanto is the common, universal language offered to all the people in the world by the Esperantists to eliminate the differences in language between nations.



The first fans to realize the escape role of science fiction were Clifton Amsbery and David Lasser.

A fan, as recognized in this article, is any reader of the science fiction pulp magazines who tries to communicate with other readers. He may do this by writing letters to the editor, of a science fiction pulp magazine, or to other readers of science fiction, in which he comments upon the stories appearing in the magazines, the authors who wrote them, the people who read them, or the ideas expressed in them. He can also communicate with other readers of science fiction by issuing "fan magazines" in which he comments upon common things of interest. A fan cannot be elected into his position. A person becomes a fan because his interest in science fiction is great enough that he tries to communicate with others who read science fiction regularly.

Clifton Amsbery was one of the first fans of Science Fiction. He was responsible for the organization of the Science Correspondence Club, (the first fan organization) where the members communicated with each other by sending letters to one another. Clif was about the first fan to understand the message of science fiction (that our civilization ought to and can be bettered). Unfortunately, for us, he left the ranks of the science fictionists. Today, however, he is in the front ranks of the general progressive movement.

David Lasser was another of the early fans who discovered the message of science fiction. He, too, left the ranks of fandom; he gave as the reason for his leaving the field of science fiction, the statement that he felt he could do



more for the world of tomorrow by fighting to improve the world of today. David Lasser is now the President of the Workers Alliance, an organization of the unemployed fighting to improve the conditions of people out of work or on WPA.

Some of the later fans who have come to realize what role science fiction plays in their life, are: J.S. Michel, D.A. Wollheim, F. Pohl, J. Robins, R.C. Lowndes, and L. Perri. These have formed an organization which attempts to unite in a fraternal way, all individuals, who are interested in improving society, whether by Technocracy, by Esperanto, or by any other method. This organization is called the "Futurian Society of New York."

For a long period of time, a number of fans had developed an erroneous notion of the role of science fiction. These fans held that science fiction propagandizes science and, therefore, encourages people to study science in order to become scientists. When anybody is asked to name a scientist who had become interested in science because he (the scientist) read science fiction, and who, because of science fiction, went four to seven years through college to become a scientist, he (the person asked) becomes quite silent. It is true that a great many fans had intended to become scientists when they started to read science fiction; for some reason or other, after having read science fiction for a number of years, the interest of these fans in pure and practical science declined while their interest in speculative science increased. What science fiction does seem to do is to encourage fans to become authors and writers. The list of fans who have become authors and writers of science fiction because of their interest in science fiction is quite great, and includes such well known fans as: John W. Campbell, Jr.; Fred Pohl; Robert W. Lowndes; Isaac Asimov; Ross Rocklyn; and Milton A. Rothman. The theory that the reading of science fiction leads to the pursuit

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of a scientific career has never proven to be true.

The second International Scientific Association, a famous fan organization, was organized on the basis of another erroneous theory, which held that science hobbyists and fans can cooperate with each other in the same organization. Science hobbyists were that group of people, fans or otherwise, who were so interested in practical science that they built up small laboratories to perform experiments on an amateur scale. The theory on which the ISA was based, stated that fans, because of their greater imagination, could imagine all sorts of inventions, while the Science Hobbyists, because of their training, could go ahead and invent what the (real) fans imagined.

The club invited into its membership, "amateur scientists" who were not interested in science fiction, and science fiction fans who were not interested in practical science. The club did not succeed in recruiting "amateur scientists" but was quite successful in recruiting real science fiction fans. The differences in interests between the two groups, instead of leading to cooperation between them, led to greater antagonisms between them. The conflict between these two groups in the ISA came to a head when the club, because of its work in organizing the first two Science Fiction Conventions, came to be generally known as a science fiction club, pure and simple. The club broke up not long after the second Science Fiction Convention proving pretty conclusively that Science hobbyists and real science fiction fans cannot get along together in the same organization.

Science fiction, then, is nothing more than escape literature which makes its readers interested in improving our society; it does not make scientists out of its readers, but instead makes radicals and authors out of them. This is the role science fiction plays in our society today.



WHAT OF H.P. LOVECRAFT?

or

A commentary upon J. B. Michel

By

Autolycus

I, too, never knew Lovecraft. Though I have read his masterpieces of darkling fantasy, abhorrent evil and loathesome cults, though I have followed his gigantic strides toward the goal he finally reached - genius -, though I have been a humble admirer since his works first appeared in *Weird Tales* some fifteen years ago, (I had already been through the First World War and three other campaigns when the first issue of *Weird* startled a realism weary world, - and that should date me as one of the oldest fans), yet I admired from afar and could not summon up courage even to write to one of the most amazing phenomena ever to enter American literary history.

Perhaps it was best that way. At times I deeply regret not having met Lovecraft face to face or to have had the honor of receiving one of his inestimable letters, yet perhaps it is best that I can view his writings dispassionately, as literature, without being dazzled by the aura of his personality. In this way, I can tilt a lance with J.B. Michel without a feeling of personal rancor. I am no sycophant, no Boswell.

To what does Michel object in his article on Lovecraft, appearing in the November FAN? Let me quote in part:-"Lovecraft was the deadly enemy of all that to me is everything--gazing with suppressed hate upon a great new world which placed more value upon the sanitary condition of a bathroom fixture than all the

greasy gold and jewels, etc.---".

As I read it, Michel is disturbed and angered, not by Lovecraft the master of fantasy and horror, not by Lovecraft the alchemist who made words glow with a supernal light, but by a Lovecraft whose interest was in the past, in the imagination, rather than in the present or in the (we hope) glories of the future. In other words Michel condemns Lovecraft for not taking his place in the hurly-burly of today, and thus we are brought face to face with the most discussed, most troublesome problem of modern literature. Shall all writing be class conscious, or shall the occasional man of letters be permitted to remain in his ivory tower and send out to the world below words of beauty and glamor? Shall all feel toward the recluse as Auden does toward Housman in his famous (or infamous) poem beginning "No one --not even Cambridge -- was to blame". Or shall we permit the poet, the wizard of words, a leeway not granted other mortals?

There are two answers. The first is obvious, that is, the man of genius will write what his inmost being generates and impel outward his deepest thoughts, without regard to the clamor or disdain of the crowd. Villon from a dunghill sang of purity and truth. (Of course he sang of other things too). Poe from madness gave forth unsurpassed words of mystery and terror. Cervantes from prison sent forth his romance of the simple but lovable knight. Yes, the man of genius will write as he chooses; neither contempt nor fear will persuade him to be false to his urge.

The second answer, though, not so obvious, seems to me to be equally true. I maintain that no reader should attempt to influence the course of a writer's thought or output. We can criticize a writer's ability, we can condemn his



his failure to preserve high artistic and aesthetic standards, but we cannot be permitted to dictate what he writes, his topic, his subject, his mode of treatment. We can depreciate his use of tools, but not the object he is trying to make. As well criticize grass for being green, the stars for twinkling. Those are in the nature of things, and so is a writer's creative urge. He must say certain things. If they are expressions of class consciousness, well and good. If they are imagery, illusion or hallucination, equally well and good. I emphasize, we can criticize how an author uses words, but not why he uses them.

As a matter of fact, if all writing, were to become class conscious we would lose a universe of beauty, of grandeur, of exquisite aesthetic satisfaction. The same is true of music. Heaven knows Handel and Brahms, Palestrina and Bach (who were other-worldly conscious) Ravel and Stravinsky were not, in their music, class conscious. Suppose all writing were to become class conscious. We would, if differences of opinion were allowed, (and this is hardly likely in a totalitarian State), have an unending quarrel, an everlasting polemic that would weary and bore to stupefaction the unlucky reader. God forbid that literature should ever be restricted to one subject. On the other hand, if (as is most likely in a totalitarian state) no differences were allowed, we would be driven insane by the iteration and reiteration of one topic. I like a clarinet, but I don't want to hear only one note on it ad infinitum and ad nauseam.

To repeat, writers of the highest skill will write exactly what they please (unless restrained by force and that, of course, would spell the end of genuine literature), and we, as readers should be grateful at the bounteous repast set before us - not a one dish diet, not

a Barmecide feast, but a sumptuous banquet of divers dishes. Who would always dine on ice cream only -- or tripe?

Lovecraft was a man of genius - I daresay no one will dispute that statement. He was also a solitary. In his ivory tower (though it was but a couple of rooms in a Providence house) he sat dreaming. His mind traversed immeasurable distances in time and space, he saw vistas of magnificence as well as of horror which are forever beyond the visions of most of us. We see reflected only in words - magic words though they be - what he saw in dazzling brilliance. Who would deny him the right to dream and to record his dreams in imperishable pages? Who would stultify his skill by diverting it into unwanted channels? Who would dare demand an earthly <sup>class</sup> consciousness of one who, in spirit, was not of this earth. Who would insist that Cthulu speak the language of Karl Marx - or of the Union League Club?

I have no quarrel with Michel or with the class conscious writers. A Steinbeck, A Dos Passon, a Spender, they are invaluable in these days of travail and searching query when clouds darken the earth, and the future is bleak. We need writers to clang their hammers of words on the anvils of our minds, to drive home the dire necessity of setting our house in order so that civilization will not perish. Yes, we need such men to send out glowing, angry words to goad us to peace, security, and happiness for all and not only for the few.

But we need the others as well. We need a Robert Frost who sings quietly of a New England countryside as well as we need a Robinson Jeffers whose lightning illuminates -- and cleanses -- dark places. We need the gentle humor of a John Holmes, the historical aloofness of a Neil Swanson, or the detachment of a Santayana, just as much as we need the biting,



fiery language of the reformer or the radical.  
Balance sustains sanity. Variety means richness.

And we need Lovecraft just as he is (I refuse to think of him in the past tense, for his writings will always be alive). He lived in a world of his own, a world of past and future, a world of other dimensions, an alien, unreal world where unhuman entities prowled. He was set aside from the hustle of today, from our social and economic problems. He took no part in present struggles. Why not? Surely in this world of ours there are enough warriors to fight in the cause of justice and righteousness to permit an occasional faery mind to roam as it will in space and time. We need "bathroom fixtures in sanitary condition", yes, we need a thousand things to better the unhappy lot, the desperate plight of countless millions who are now downtrodden or outcasts. You and I, all of us, can strive to improve the world, to provide the "freedom" and "Equality" which our founding forefathers wrote into the most matchless social document ever produced. But I, for one -- and I am confident the majority of fans are with me, -- will not agree with the magic, the glamor, the fantastic genius of a man like Lovecraft should be distorted or diverted into strange channels. We have too few human beings who can penetrate the unknown realm of unreality and faery. Let us cherish and preserve them.

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Confucius says:  
American's funny people. They put whiskey in glass for strong drink. Then add water to make it weak. Then add lemon to make sour. Then add sugar to make sweet. Then say "Here to you!"-- and drink it themself!

## WHAT SCIENCE FICTION DID FOR ME

OR

WHY I FAILED PHYSICS

OR

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WIGGINS ASKS ME TO RUSH MATER-

ials

OTHERWISE PART II

BY

Jack Gillespie

It was about then that I Joined the Queen's S.F.L. which had at the time five other members including Sykora. This was the first time I really met Sykora and I didn't like him. The only fans I didn't like on first meeting were Sykora and Wollheim.

The CPASF had been formed. The NYFA changed it's name and didn't do much else, and Sykora and Goudket formed the scientificinema club.

About this time the Moskowitz-Wollheim feud was on in full swing. It was started by an article Moskowitz wrote about Michel's resolution and went on from there. The result being that two of the present New Fandom trio got together for the Newark convention. Taurasi was still amiable to both sides.

By this time I had dropped my correspondence and had lost a good deal of interest in science-fiction, fan mags, the Science Fiction and instead had joined another league--but then that is another story.

The Newark convention was to say the least an interesting affair principally because Sykora taught everybody present what an able man could do with parliamentary law. Sykora then after getting a motion passed that the chairman appoint a committee to take care of the World Convention in 1939 appointed his committee and promptly forgot about it. Strange are the ways of man.

Along about then at a Queen's S.F.L.meeting,



who should turn up but Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and some others, and who should happen to be absent but Sykora. As a result no blackballs were cast and they all became members. The name was changed to the Greater New York S.F.L. Sykora tried to get Moskowitz and Osheroff into the organization but four blackballs were cast. Mine was one of them and as I look back I don't think it was the wisest thing in the world we could have done.

However, that was the last meeting Sykora attended, and two meetings afterward a motion was brought up for his expulsion. Taurasi refused to recognize the motion on the grounds that Sykora was not present, nor had he been notified. Taurasi was forthwith impeached, and a trial was held at which visitor Claire Beck (and a very likeable fellow, too) was prosecutor. Taurasi was found guilty, and was no longer director. He then refused his house as meeting place, and it was only a matter of days before another name was to be found on the door of Sykora, Moskowitz and Co.

The GNY folded up and within a short time the Queen's SFL was reorganized.

The FUTURIANS were formed, first as a communist front organization and two meetings later the constitution revised to remove all the political trappings from the club, and as a result the Futurians became an organization of those who liked us more than them, with a few straddlers such as Thompson, Goudket, and Oshinsky.

The Philadelphia Conference came sometime in October with no Futurians represented, which didn't help our prestige any.

From October till July nothing of any importance happened, except that a very confused FAPA election was held and I think that the FAPA has just about pulled out of it at the time of this writing. At any rate a mailing is promised. At the end of June people began coming into Heaven (as we villagers call New York) for the convention and were invariably met by Futurians.

the balladry of science fiction  
by john michel

(This is printed exactly as received. Michel asked us to insert necessary caps and punctuation, but we, also, know little of grammar and prefer the virgin writing).

all great movements have a habit of getting their outstanding events, occasions and historical occasions recorded in the language of the muse coupled with the harp whose sweet sound resounded through tara's halls. Science fiction, no less than any other organizational growth on the face of the planet has accumulated to itself a goodly quantity of robust lyrics more often than not set to a popular song of the day. most of the ballads were born in the heat of struggle and righteous indignation. others saw the light of day during quiet moments of contemplation round the tables at meetings and still others were spawned in tribute and in memory to some great figure or event whose impressive bulk filled for that moment and in its sweet lines, the lore of all science fiction, past, present and future.

the composers of these lyrics and tunes are names well known to the world of stf. william s. sykora; donald a. wellheim; john b. michel; frederik pohl; robert w. lowndes and others. For unknown reasons most of science fiction's balladeers have been those whose lives in stf have been outstanding. this, no doubt is analogous to the historical curiosity that leaders of great movements and movers and shakers have also many times been poets and jongleurs, pouring out upon a breathless world the working of their loves and hates, fears and aspirations in the form of plaintive lullabies, resounding odes and crooning mush. the leaders of science fic-

tion have played true to this historical rule. this is the first of a series of the song of science fiction. let it be remembered that all of them were born of inspiration and in the midst of great wrack and stress and that they apply only to the times for which they were written. let no one take offense. readers are invited to contribute to this series any song relating to stf they may have written or heard. off-color balladry of which a good deal exists is naturally barred, but will be added to the private collection of your author with glee. from the pieces in my collection I can only say that those who quail at the thought of risqué writing in the balladry of stf. know nothing of the past life of the field. good taste prohibits both publication of these particular items and revelations of their authorship. they were honest but rough.

taurasi's swan song:  
 composed by robert w. lowndes and claire beck  
 on the impeachment of james v. taurasi, director of the gynsfl.  
 tune: the road to mandalay.

in a little flat in flushing  
 looking gloomy at the marsh,  
 there's a little boy a sighing  
 for he thinks we done him harsh.

for he is no longer chairman  
 of the good old gny;  
 they have thrown out poor taurasi  
 and he cannot figure why  
 and he cannot figure.

o! he cannot figure why  
 and a tear is in his eye  
 for no longer he's dictator  
 of the dear old gny.



no he cannot figure why  
 there's no sun up in the sky  
 nor more joy for poor saurasi  
 for he's quit the grey

Hail to selikowitz:

composed by john michael and frederik pohl in  
 honor of arthur l selikowitz, founder of mentoc-  
 racy, a scientific utopian movement.

tune: god save the czar  
 Hail to selikowitz!  
 lord of our fate,  
 master of science,  
 long may he reign!  
 through him we'll gain the world  
 mold it with knowledge,  
 rule it with reason,  
 build it anew!

the accolade to gernsback:

composed by william s. sykora, arthur l.  
 selikowitz and other members of the nybisa  
 during the period of the sfi-isa conflict.  
 tune: the battle-cry of freedom

We will gather from the outhouse  
 and rally from the cell  
 shouting an accolade to gernsback  
 to cheer for dear old wonder  
 and the good old sfi  
 shouting an accolade for gernsback.

the sfi forever!

let rockets light her way  
 to fight for science fiction  
 with a multi-colored ray;  
 with edh to lead us  
 through constary hell  
 shouting an accolade to gernsback.