

# The Three Golden Ages of Science Fiction

by Gary Westfahl

To members of the science fiction community, the phrase "the Golden Age of science fiction" describes the 1940s, and more specifically, the science fiction published during that decade by editor John W. Campbell, Jr. in his magazine *Astounding Science-Fiction* (and, to a lesser extent, its sister magazine *Unknown* or *Unknown Worlds*). Certainly, there are many good reasons to regard these works, and their successors in the 1950s, as particularly significant and admirable, justifying the decision of most science fiction historians to make them their focus of attention. But other bodies of science fiction texts in the 1940s and 1950s, often neglected by historians, are arguably just as significant, even if their literary qualities are not quite as admirable; and, as a scholar who frequently defies conventional attitudes, I would also like to draw attention to these contemporaneous works that were outside, sometimes far outside, of the Campbell tradition.

However, before discussing what I am not expected to discuss, I will first discuss the science fiction I am expected to discuss. The standard story of the Golden Age begins with Campbell, who assumed control of the magazine *Astounding Stories* sometime in 1937 or 1938 (scholars debate precisely when he actually started editing, though the March, 1938 issue was the first one officially credited to Campbell, and first bearing the new title *Astounding Science-Fiction*). Campbell as a writer initially had specialized in expansive space adventures, but by the time he became an editor, he was better known for the more variegated and sophisticated stories he was writing using what was widely known to be his pseudonym, Don A. Stuart, such as his evocative vision of a future humanity in decline, "Twilight" (1934), and the unusual mystery of a shapeshifting alien found in Antarctica, "Who Goes There?" (1938), which inspired three films entitled *The Thing* (1951, 1982, 2011). As a result, he had a reputation for seeking to innovate that might attract writers seeking to move beyond the formulaic space epics then featured in science fiction magazines. Thus, Clifford D. Simak, who had previously abandoned science fiction, began writing again when he learned that Campbell was editing *Astounding*, telling his wife, "I can write for Campbell ... He won't be satisfied with the kind of stuff that is being written. He'll want something new" (cited in Moskowitz 273).

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For those unfamiliar with his reputation, Campbell announced in early editorials that he wanted new types of stories; he labeled exemplary departures from convention as 'Nova' stories; and he published a special 'Mutant' issue devoted to purportedly innovative works. But it was more happenstance than design that soon brought him, in 1939, precisely the contributor he craved in the form of Robert A. Heinlein, who sent Campbell his first story only because another magazine had launched a contest for new writers and Heinlein shrewdly thought he would face less competition from other neophytes if he submitted his work someplace else. Heinlein's stories immediately stood out for several reasons: as a man in his thirties who had worked as a United States Navy engineer, real estate agent, and aspiring politician, Heinlein could bring a knowing attitude and real-world experience to his stories, unlike the science-obsessed nerds and professional pulp writers then dominating the genre; he hit upon the idea of developing a common background for many of his stories, as displayed in his famous 'Future History' chart, which conveyed his unique concern for careful extrapolation and the maintenance of consistency in creating science fiction worlds; he mastered the art of conveying this background information by means of casual comments and indirect references, in contrast to the didactic 'infodumps' that slowed the pace of other science fiction stories; and perhaps most significantly, he resisted all of the common patterns of pulp storytelling, offering readers a stimulating variety of characters, settings, and adventures that grew from many stimulating ideas.

One of Heinlein's early masterpieces, "The Roads Must Roll" (1940), employed the background of massive, moving highways to describe an administrator who employs canny psychology to thwart a workers' strike, but even more dazzling was "By His Bootstraps" (1942), a *tour de force* in which every character is the same person at different times in his life, brought together by journeys through time; and this hero's evolution from bewildered newcomer to the future's dictatorial ruler represents a fascinating critique of the notion of the 'self-made man.' (As a variation on this theme, his later story "'All You Zombies –'" [1958] involved a similar time traveler who, by changing his gender, not only interacts with himself, but has sex with himself and gives birth to himself.) Other Heinlein stories raised provocative questions about our perceptions of reality, like "Universe" (1940), where a man learns that his world is actually a generation starship, and "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag" (1942), about a man who discovers that as part of his true job, a critic of worlds, he has been assigned to evaluate the Earth, constructed as a work of art.

While he became Campbell's most popular and influential contributor, Heinlein was hardly the only major writer who first appeared, or matured, in his magazines. A young Isaac Asimov, patiently nurtured by Campbell, developed his 'Three Laws

of Robotics' in the stories later collected as *I, Robot* (1950), used one of Campbell's ideas to offer a striking picture of a world where nighttime only came once every thousand years in "Nightfall" (1941), and garnered praise for a series of novelettes about the collapse of a future Galactic Empire, later assembled as his Foundation Trilogy (*Foundation* [1951]; *Foundation and Empire* [1952]; *Second Foundation* (1953)), which emphasized sociological as much as technological speculation. Simak developed his signature style of pastoral science fiction in a series of stories assembled as *City* (1952), describing how humans gradually surrendered control of the Earth to robots and intelligent animals; the most famous of these stories, "Huddling Place" (1944), features a future man who is so paralyzed by agoraphobia that he cannot bring himself to leave his home to save the life of a friend. Another writer, Theodore Sturgeon, offered his own sort of sensitive, character-driven science fiction in notable stories like "Microcosmic God" (1941), involving a scientist who creates a race of miniature beings who worship him as their god, and "Thunder and Roses" (1947), wherein a compassionate man saves the human race by refusing to retaliate after a nuclear attack.

The oddest writer in Campbell's stable, A. E. van Vogt, briefly rivaled Heinlein in popularity with dazzling, fast-moving adventures like *Slan* (1940, 1946) and *The World of Null-A* (1945, 1948) which, following a pattern van Vogt had learned from a how-to-write book, strived to introduce a brand new idea every 800 words. Some of his stories for Campbell are still remembered today, like "Black Destroyer" (1939), one of many precursors to Ridley Scott's film *Alien* (1979), and "The Weapon Shop" (1942), describing a future world where the sale of weapons becomes a tool against tyranny. Yet closely examined, van Vogt's frenetic improvisations never made any sense, as first noted in a scathing review by Damon Knight in 1945, and he soon faded from prominence, his helter-skelter approach eclipsed by the superior methodology of Heinlein. Still, a later writer would figure out how to offer readers van Vogt's sort of strange, unsettling ideas in a somewhat more controlled manner, eventually earning recognition as one of science fiction's greatest writers; his name was Philip K. Dick. As one sign that Campbell's writers were indeed the best that the decade had to offer, when the Science Fiction Writers of America voted on the best science fiction stories of all time to include in the anthology *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame* (1970), nine of their ten stories from the 1940s had first appeared in Campbell's *Astounding* (and I have mentioned five of them).

A conventional history of science fiction, then, after focusing almost exclusively on the Campbell writers of the 1940s, would proceed to discuss the 1950s as the era when these writers fully matured and blossomed, escaping from Campbell's increa-

singly idiosyncratic control to write for other magazines, as well as lucrative new markets like hardcover and paperback books, juvenile fiction, and film and television. During that decade, veterans of Campbell's magazine produced some of their best works, like Heinlein's *Have Space Suit – Will Travel* (1958), Asimov's *The Caves of Steel* (1954), Simak's *Ring Around the Sun* (1954), and Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (1953). These were joined by memorable texts from other noteworthy authors, like Dick, Alfred Bester, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, and Cordwainer Smith, who in their own distinctive fashions continued to fulfill Campbell's agenda with unique and innovative works of science fiction even though they had not emerged from Campbell's magazines. Unfortunately, by this time Campbell himself had largely abandoned his original enthusiasm for groundbreaking science fiction to instead prefer stories that promoted his own, peculiar scientific and political beliefs, most notably the posited emergence of psychic powers as society's dominant force, and it was left to other editors to further expand the boundaries of science fiction: in magazines, H. L. Gold's *Galaxy* focused on a satirical approach, while Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas's *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* emphasized literary quality. In the field of books, small presses like Martin Greenberg and David Kyle's Gnome Press led the way in republishing the science fiction classics of earlier eras and some new material, to be succeeded by mass-market publishers like Ian and Betty Ballantine's Ballantine Books, which among other works first published Clarke's thought-provoking *Childhood's End* (1953).

However, anyone researching science fiction can find many detailed histories of science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s which will emphasize Campbell's influence and Campbell's writers, rendering further discussion of them superfluous. Furthermore, I believe that this standard picture of science fiction history is unfairly neglecting other traditions of this era which are just as important, and which might be cited to make an entirely different argument about why the 1940s should be considered science fiction's Golden Age.

In standard histories, the type of science fiction that Campbell purportedly replaced was the routine, melodramatic adventures set in outer space or on other planets that were sarcastically christened by Wilson Tucker in 1941 as "space opera," or "the hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn" (Tucker 8). As an aside, one should note that Campbell did not entirely abandon such stories, since he continued *Astounding's* policy of publishing the Lensman novels of E. E. 'Doc' Smith, generally regarded as the progenitor of the form. But even if Campbell was otherwise declining to publish the sorts of exciting space stories that previous editors had preferred, they did not vanish from sight in the 1940s. In fact, they were readily

available in a magazine launched in 1939 that was expressly devoted to space opera, *Planet Stories*.

Though it was a successful magazine that lasted for sixteen years, students will be hard-pressed to find much information about *Planet Stories* in most histories of science fiction. If it is mentioned at all, it is solely because the magazine published a number of stories by two excellent writers, Leigh Brackett and Bradbury, whose works were ill-suited for Campbell's *Astounding Science-Fiction*. And one should indeed celebrate a magazine for publishing Brackett's haunting planetary romances, like "Thralls of the Endless Night" (1943), wherein descendants of a spaceship crew and the pirates who attacked them unknowingly carry on their ancient feud on a barren planet, or "The Jewel of Bas" (1944), featuring a pair of thieves captured by a bored immortal and his robot. Bradbury's contributions to the magazine include "Mars Is Heaven" (1948), a tale of explorers on Mars who incongruously encounter old friends and relatives, later incorporated into *The Martian Chronicles* (1951), and "Frost and Fire" (1946), a stunning tale of mutated humans on another world who only live for eight days, bizarrely retitled "The Creatures That Time Forgot" for its appearance in *Planet Stories*.

But everyone acknowledges that such polished, original creations did not represent the usual contents of the magazine; for a picture of what its readers were typically getting, one might more fruitfully examine the contents of one randomly chosen issue, the one dated Fall 1942:

- "War-Gods of the Void" by Henry Kuttner
- "Space Oasis" by Raymond Z. Gallun
- "Vampire Queen" by John Russell Fearn
- "Stellar Showboat" by Malcolm Jameson
- "City of the Living Flame" by Henry Hasse
- "Quest of Thig" by Basil Wells
- "The Thought-Men of Mercury" by R. R. Winterbotham
- "Prison Planet" by Wilson Tucker

To be sure, a few authors appearing in this issue, like Kuttner, Gallun, and Tucker, have been praised for other works, though not for these stories, and the example of Bradbury illustrates that one cannot always judge a pulp magazine story by its title. Still, it seems evident that *Planet Stories* will not offer contemporary readers a treasure trove of undiscovered science fiction classics, but rather a mostly dreary series of outlandish, juvenile adventures.

Even worse, from the standpoint of literary connoisseurs, the magazine quickly spawned a sister publication, *Planet Comics*, which offered its younger readers comic book space adventures that were even more outlandish and even more juvenile. Its standout series, *The Lost World*, chronicled the endless efforts of heroic Hunt Bowman to resist the alien Voltamen who had conquered the future Earth, but its other series usually featured adventurers in outer space. Some were male, like the *Space Rangers* and *Star Pirate*, while others were voluptuous women, like *Mysta of the Moon* and *Futura*, probably the most fondly remembered character from the comic. As one needn't say, their melodramatic stories foregrounded handsome men and beautiful women battling against ugly villains and loathsome aliens, employing weapons ranging from fisticuffs to atomic blasters.

At this point, my exasperated colleagues might ask, why are you wasting your time on such material, when you could be saying more about Heinlein, Asimov, and Bradbury? But my interest here, I would respond, is the history of science fiction, and one primary purpose of history, after all, is to study the past in order to better understand the present. And if one wishes to understand the books on display in the science fiction section of a modern bookstore, or the innumerable manifestations of science fiction now found in films, television, and video games, *Planet Stories* and *Planet Comics* are far more useful than Heinlein, Asimov, and Bradbury.

I am dissatisfied, then, with the conventional view that space opera was entirely created in the magazines, comic strips, and serials of the 1930s, only to be temporarily suppressed by Campbell's more mature science fiction until it later sprang to life again in the form of countless works inspired by the earlier classics. Instead, one must recognize that after its initial emergence, space opera never really went away, and while Campbell's writers understandably command more critical attention, it actually remained the dominant variety of science fiction in the 1940s. In this respect, *Planet Stories* and *Planet Comics* are only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, because even if their titles did not announce a focus on space opera, all of the other science fiction magazines of the decade, like *Amazing Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Astonishing Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Super Science Stories*, *Fantastic Adventures*, and *Captain Future*, were dominated by adventures in space. Comic books as well regularly provided space opera: *Superworld Comics* and *Target Comics* featured space heroes like those in *Planet Comics*, and when science fiction editor Mort Weisinger assumed control of the DC Comics characters Superman and Batman, even those iconic superheroes began traveling into space and encountering alien visitors on Earth.

While all these stories built upon examples from the 1930s, the larger number of space adventures in the 1940s, and their usual focus on continuing characters, meant

that the previously incohesive conventions of space opera were now being honed and polished to perfection, so that by the time new markets opened up for science fiction in the 1950s, a reader-tested model was available to be successfully shifted into new territories. Thus, with the sex and violence toned down for younger readers and inquisitive parents and librarians, space opera became a staple of the new field of juvenile science fiction; led by Donald A. Wollheim's Ace Books, recycled and new space operas became the main genre of paperback science fiction; the early days of television brought several series for children featuring intrepid space pilots battling human and alien villains, like *Space Patrol* (1950-1955) and *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet* (1950-1955); and while small budgets and crude special effects limited most science fiction films to planet Earth, there were occasional films like *This Island Earth* (1955), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *The Angry Red Planet* (1960), and *Journey to the Seventh Planet* (1961) telling stories that could have easily appeared in *Planet Stories* or *Planet Comics*. Later, of course, would come the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* franchises, along with countless imitators, and ubiquitous space operas in films, television, computer games, and video games, while the spectacularly popular series of *Star Trek* novels, soon followed by the equally popular *Star Wars* novels, brought space opera back to its original home, the printed word, where it has since become, again, the most common form of science fiction literature. And all of these works cannot be properly appreciated without an understanding of the role that the innumerable space operas of the 1940s played in inspiring and shaping their contents.

Still, since I am perfectly happy to upset my colleagues, and since this discussion so far has probably not been upsetting enough, I must now take this argument even further to examine a third form of science fiction in the 1940s and beyond that is even more neglected, and even more reviled, than the colorful space operas of the era. Indeed, most people would say that I will be describing a body of works that is not really science fiction at all. But their attitude, as I will discuss, reflects only their preferences, not the true nature of these texts.

Since Campbell's high-paying magazine consistently attracted the best writers of the 1940s, one would assume that his *Astounding Science-Fiction* was the most popular science fiction magazine of the era; and for much of the decade, that was the case. Yet in 1945, another science fiction magazine actually started to sell more copies by introducing another new approach to science fiction which was able to attract even more readers than Campbell's stable of writers. I am referring to *Amazing Stories*, once the flagship of Hugo Gernsback's science fiction empire before declining in the 1930s under the control of his elderly successor, T. O'Connor Sloane. But in 1938, a new editor named Ray Palmer revived its fortunes with a diffe-

rent group of writers based in Chicago and, predictably, an initial emphasis on thrilling space adventures. But the magazine's contents soon changed because in 1943, Palmer began receiving letters and manuscripts from a man named Richard Shaver, who had a very unusual story to tell.

According to Shaver, Earth had once been inhabited by members of an advanced alien civilization who had retreated either to other worlds or to underground cities, where these now-degenerate entities, termed "deros" or "detrimental robots" (though they were organic, not mechanical beings), caused various problems for humanity by means of monitoring devices and telepathic projection. Considered as science fiction stories, Shaver's writings had little merit as literature, and even their ideas were not particularly remarkable, bearing a vague resemblance to the Cthulhu Mythos of H. P. Lovecraft; the novelty was that Shaver, unlike Lovecraft, insisted everything he said was absolutely true. Whether Palmer believed him or not is still debated today, but he shrewdly discerned that his readers might find this material very interesting indeed, and after some extensive revision, Palmer began publishing Shaver's stories about this "Shaver Mystery," beginning with "I Remember Lemuria!" in 1945. All of them were said to represent true accounts, though they were being promulgated in the form of fiction. Soon, other writers began making their own contributions to the evolving mythos of Shaver's deros, so much so that they almost took over the entire magazine.

As evidenced by the critical letters that Palmer published and heated discussions in fanzines, most members of the science fiction community utterly despised the magazine's new emphasis on these absurd concoctions, presented as fact, and they even organized letter-writing campaigns demanding an end to all Shaver-related publications in the magazine. Yet the circulation of *Amazing Stories* was also rising dramatically. The only possible explanation was that Palmer was discovering an entirely new audience of readers outside of the science fiction community, people with a unique interest in fantastic stories that might be true, fantastic stories that might provide more appealing explanations for aspects of the real world that conventional beliefs could not satisfyingly address. Thus, a man experiencing a number of personal setbacks might begin to discern a pattern: these misfortunes were not mere happenstance, but rather the work of those devilish deros. (As it happens, Shaver had been treated for psychological problems, and as many have noted, it is easy to discern signs of paranoid schizophrenia in his elaborate theories.)

In any event, if material like the Shaver Mystery stories was popular with many readers, but not with science fiction readers, there was only one logical response to the situation, which played out in this series of events: *Amazing Stories* stopped publi-



shing Shaver stories in 1948, Palmer resigned as the magazine's editor a year later, and he then launched a new magazine, *Fate*, expressly devoted to supposedly factual articles about various paranormal phenomena; now, Palmer could profitably appeal to the new audience he had discovered without alienating science fiction readers, who would never pick up a magazine like *Fate*. The magazine's first issue, unsurprisingly, featured a cover story involving the variety of science fiction purporting to be factual that was becoming far more popular than Shaver's peculiar scenario: a report on the 'flying saucers' then being observed in Earth's skies, usually regarded as the vehicles of advanced aliens who were secretly spying on human civilization, occasionally kidnapping people, and engaging in other mischief. Soon, many other magazines, books, and documentaries would appear that presented alleged evidence of these mysterious visitors, a tradition that has continued to the present day.

Granted, as long as such writings restricted themselves to eyewitness accounts of flying saucer sightings, and learned consideration of possible explanations, one might justifiably regard them as nonfiction; but some examples of the form were unquestionably science fiction being published under another name. Consider the book *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953), by Desmond Leslie and George Adamski, which I encountered as a child at a time when libraries would sometimes mistakenly place such items on their shelves of science fiction. It begins soberly enough, with a history of sightings of strange objects in the sky, but it then turns its attention to Adamski's account of how he was driving down a highway one day and just happened to spot a flying saucer coming to a landing nearby. He approached the vehicle and met its passenger, a friendly humanoid from Venus who proceeded to engage Adamski in a long conversation in English about the foibles of humanity. Even at the age of ten, I realized that I was reading a work of fiction, and from later encounters with works of a similar nature, I know that such transparent fabrications are still being published.

Decades later, for example, while visiting a bookstore, I glanced through a book, whose title I do not recall, that purported to contain translations of captured alien documents; in one passage, the alien author scornfully noted that we primitive humans were still seeing the world in terms of dualities, having not yet recognized that, in reality, everything breaks down into threes. I'm sorry, but if you want to persuade me that you are presenting the wisdom of an advanced alien civilization, you'll have to do better than that. Yet when such material does not extend to such outright fraud, it can serve as palatable entertainment, like another book in that section that I actually bought and read, Don Wilson's *Secrets of Our Spaceship Moon* (1979), which earnestly argues that our Moon is actually an enormous alien spaceship, parked in Earth orbit and abandoned many millennia ago.

What Palmer launched with his Shaver stories and later magazine, then, has grown into a vast body of writings about secretive aliens now monitoring our planet and other, related subjects – the Bermuda Triangle, Bigfoot, the lost continent of Atlantis, Erich von Däniken's ancient aliens, and so on – which are effectively forms of science fiction, since no reasonable person can believe what they are saying, yet present themselves as factual accounts of real, though officially unacknowledged, phenomena. Since most readers of science fiction abhor this dubious pseudoscience, such texts cannot be placed alongside science fiction books, where they arguably belong, so they must be shelved in another category – 'New Age,' perhaps, or 'Paranormal Literature' – along with books about more venerable but similarly discredited subjects like astrology, palmistry, and witchcraft. Granted, none of this material has any literary value, but if one attraction of science fiction is its myth-making power, any observer must admit that this extensive body of works is collectively presenting an intricate and fascinating portrait of a world much like our own which is inhabited by various strange beings, lurking just out of sight, prominently including intelligent aliens who have covertly shaped human history and continue to influence our destiny. The television series *The X-Files* (1993-2002), one of the few works of science fiction that draw on this constructed mythology, provides one small sign of its evocative allure, and suggests that these works merit more critical scrutiny than they have previously received.

We find, then, that there are actually three reasons to regard the 1940s as the Golden Age of Science Fiction: there are the noteworthy writers of Campbell's *As-tounding Science-Fiction*, who crafted the form of science fiction that remains most admired by connoisseurs and critics; the lesser writers of 1940s space opera, who perfected what has now become the most popular form of science fiction in all major media; and the even lesser writers like Richard Shaver, purporting to reveal hidden truths, who engendered another, very popular form of science fiction that happens to go by another name. Only works in the first tradition are likely to be praised in histories of science fiction, or assigned as readings in a science fiction class, which is perhaps as it should be; but I still feel that the other two traditions are important as well, and will reward those few people who choose to examine them.

It is interesting to consider, for example, the very different attitudes toward human abilities and proclivities that are embedded within these three traditions. In classic works of science fiction, one typically finds that humans in the future can both control and change their worlds, which is simultaneously uplifting and disturbing. It is exciting to imagine, for example, that a person might create a tiny race of beings who

would look up to their creator as a god, as in Sturgeon's "Microcosmic God," or that a man might leave behind his mundane job and instead employ time travel to transform himself into the dictator of a future world, as in Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps." But if people are someday able to completely transform themselves and their world, the results may also be disquieting and disheartening, as is perhaps best conveyed by Clarke's *Childhood's End*, wherein alien overseers help humanity evolve into a form of group intelligence which a surviving human perceives as repugnant and incomprehensible. (Another Clarke story from this period, "The Sentinel" [1951], later inspired another unsettling tale of future human transformation, Stanley Kubrick's film and Clarke's own novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968].)

Second, in the space operas that have dominated science fiction from the 1930s to the present, humans are easily able to control their future worlds, but they seem unable to change those worlds; they may have faster-than-light spaceships, force fields, and ray guns, they may travel to other solar systems and interact with various aliens, but they still seem to talk, think, and act precisely the same way that people talk, think, and act today, and they face the same sorts of problems that people face today, like cunning criminals, violent assailants, unsympathetic bosses, impetuous youth, malfunctioning equipment, and natural disasters. By taking typical conflicts from westerns, detective fiction, war stories, and romance novels, and transplanting them into futuristic settings, space opera thus provides a very comforting and familiar form of entertainment, which helps to explain why it is always the form of science fiction that is most appealing to a mass audience, if not to critics and scholars.

Finally, in the literature of flying saucers and related paranormal phenomena, we observe an anticipated future world which humans will be both unable to control and unable to change. Rather, as in the past and present, humans will always be subject to the unseen aliens, and their human co-conspirators, who covertly dictate all important developments. After all, as various books solemnly testify, these aliens helped the Egyptians build the pyramids, destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, erected the statues on Easter Island, and killed Marilyn Monroe; they meet with every new American president to ensure his complicity in their secret mastery over the Earth; and with their magically advanced technology, they will surely maintain their grip on humanity for decades or centuries to come, which may after all be for the best, given our uneven track record in managing our own affairs.

Indeed, perhaps it is not the crudity and absurdity of these theories, but their assertion of essential human impotence, that is most offensive to readers of science fiction; for they, like Heinlein, would rather believe that ornery humans will always be able to prevail in any conflict, and they therefore are destined to conquer the

universe, overcoming any obstacles in their way, including mischievous deros or domineering aliens. They embrace, in other words, the doctrine most delightfully expressed at the end of Heinlein's *Have Space Suit – Will Travel*, when a boy defiantly tells the advanced aliens who are threatening to destroy Earth's sun, "All right, take away our star – You will if you can and I guess you can. Go ahead! We'll *make* a star! Then, someday, we'll come back and hunt you down – *all of you!*" "That's telling 'em, Kip!" his friend enthusiastically responds (237), and most science fiction readers, I suspect, would echo her enthusiasm.

As it is interesting to contemplate what divides these three forms of science fiction, it is equally worthwhile to consider what they all share, which I believe would include the following: a belief that humans are not alone in the universe, that there exist countless other intelligent species that we will someday interact with; a confidence that human technology, if not human nature and human society, will keep advancing to higher and higher levels in the future; and a conviction that things are going on right now, and things will be going on in the future, that most people today are unable or unwilling to discern, imbuing all science fiction readers with a slight sense of superiority over those people who opt for more mundane diversions. For now, at least, I have given up the game of trying to define science fiction, but I have criticized other definitions for focusing exclusively on the works of science fiction their creators admire, that is, texts that fulfill Campbell's desire for provocative, innovative science fiction. Yet while one might reasonably describe the works of Robert A. Heinlein and Philip K. Dick in Darko Suvin's words as a "*literature of cognitive estrangement*" (4), this appellation is nonsensical when applied to, say, the contents of *Planet Stories* or *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, which are cognitively reassuring, not estranging. Some critics are perfectly happy to assert that such texts, and others not meeting their high standards, are not really science fiction at all; but it is surely more reasonable and productive to instead seek a broader definition of science fiction which would apply to all of its texts.

So, while my own scholarly pursuits keep moving in peculiar directions of their own, I hope that this survey might inspire some scholars and students to examine not only the works of science fiction they are expected to examine, but also the works of science fiction they are not expected to examine. Like other explorers who stray from the beaten path to go where no one has gone before, they are likely to be surprised, and enlightened, by what they might find.

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