Science Fiction: A Literary History

Edited by Roger Luckhurst (The British Library, 2017, 256p. £19.67)

Reviewed by David Seed

In his 2005 study of science fiction Roger Luckhurst defined the latter as a “literature of technologically saturated societies” and the present volume broadly follows this same approach. We are offered eight chapters, each focusing on a particular theme, period, or aspect of SF. Thus, although plenty of big names feature in the discussions, the latter’s strength lies in the many connections suggested between writers and their cultural contexts. First in the sequence, Arthur Evans considers how heliocentrism and voyages of exploration helped shape narratives, building up to the broad polarized opposition between holistic and analytical approaches to Nature exemplified in *Frankenstein* and the fiction of Jules Verne. Roger Luckhurst next homes in on the surge of literary production made possible at the end of the nineteenth century by an explosion of popular print. Here a number of further strengths to this collection emerge. Firstly, Luckhurst draws our attention to neglected figures like Charles Howard Hinton (an important influence on Wells) and Marie Corelli. In the process he argues against any hard and fast separation of SF from the Gothic, among other genres. Indeed, one of the main themes of the whole collection is that SF is a diverse mode, constantly moving across generic boundaries. It is also a strikingly ambivalent mode, as Luckhurst shows, in including fiction following a grand narrative of progress being offset by “fantasies of decline and fall” (p. 69).

Utopias make up a familiar sub-set of SF and Caroline Edwards addresses these, taking her material from the first half of the twentieth century, taking her bearings from H.G. Wells to consider how the utopias operate as a mode of social criticism. Predictably figures like Charlotte Perkins Gilman figure here, but a particularly valuable section of her discussion focuses on African American utopias like Pauline Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* (1903) and W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1920 story “The Comet.” In the latter an apocalyptic gas cloud kills off New York, the only survivors being a black messenger and a young white woman, who, under the impact of the cataclysm, comes to recognize her companion’s humanity. Race, specifically eugenics, also features Edwards’ account of the debate over fascism in the thirties. This same period is the subject of Mark Bould’s attempt to redress a neglect in histories of SF who traces through the interwar years the rise of pulp and finally the emergence of a new generation of writers rising to fame after World War II. He demonstrates how this fiction engaged with central issues of the period like race, colonialism, and fascism. Bould explains how the pattern of colonial adventures from the previous century was transposed into a whole series of planetary romances, which he then connects with the weird narratives of Lovecraft and others. Once again neglected writers like Nat Schachner are rescued from obscurity, but Bould also argues forcefully against the exclusion of weird by critics like Darko Suvin, who saw it as incompatible with a rationalist agenda. On the contrary, Bould declares, “even such signature forms of 1930s pulp SF as the planetary romance and space opera are frequently under the influence of the weird” (p.124).

Melissa Kurtz opens the post-war sections of this volume by surveying the two decades following 1945. She follows Edward James in stressing how a boom period of magazine and book publishing gave US material dominance of the world market and briefly considers a number of characteristics of the period, such as the emergence of “Hard SF,” where supposed scientific accuracy might be offset by social conservatism. The rather dispersed contents of this chapter, which includes nuclear fiction and “Women’s SF,” contrasts with Rob Latham’s discussion of the New Wave, which stresses the changes to the publishing infrastructure as one factor hitherto under-rated. The decline in magazine publishing correspondingly reduced the role of editors and Latham rightly points out that a generational factor played itself out in the controversy over *New Worlds* and related fiction. Apart from SF authors engaging in a debate over the nature of SF, he could also have considered how his two key exemplars – J.G. Ballard and Harlan Ellison – branched out into other media with their film scripts, montages, and exhibitions, among others. Sheryl Vint picks up on the New Wave to extend the discussion onwards beyond the eighties, which she describes pithily as “a time of the big” (p. 182). She reads the closing decades of the twentieth century as a period of rediscovery shown in a resurgence of utopian SF. One of her prime examples here is Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy with its complex blending of ecological and historical concerns, another area being second-wave feminist SF by Joan Slonczewski, Marge Piercy and related figures. In the course of discussing the corporate futures of Cyberpunk Vint tacitly draws our attention to another facet which runs throughout the whole collection, namely SF’s recurring re-branding of itself. Labelling like “Mundane SF” or “New Weird” has become an extension of the fiction itself in its constant revision of local genres and subject areas. For instance, however strongly the New Wave might have challenged the scientific presumptions of Hard SF, the latter tradition persists in the fiction of Greg Egan. Gerry Canavan concludes this volume with a discussion of 21st-century SF, which insists on its own provisional nature and which strikes a balance between old and new. When he declares that “we live in science-fictional times” (p.209), few would dispute this, but it would have been helpful to get some pointers as to how SF managed to achieve such cultural centrality. In the course of his discussion Canavan cites Michael Chabon, who has repeatedly moved in and out of SF through ironic pastiche; Paul Auster, who has more often been placed in a context of existential absurdism; and Jeff Vandemeer, frequently linked to the New Weird. In a sense the very inclusion of such figures supports Canavan’s argument that we are living in a time of shifting paradigms.

This volume describes itself as “A Literary History,” but it is also constructed as a guide to the interested reader. Thus each chapter concludes with a bibliography of references followed by a brief list of “What to Read Next.” Finally, supplementing the printed text we are given a generous selection of graphics – illustrations and cover images from the late nineteenth century to the present. These supply a parallel visual history to the volume and further increase its already impressive breadth.