
FAST
FORWARD

FAST FORWARD 1

FUTURE FICTION from the CUTTING EDGE

Edited by LOU ANDERS

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For my son, Arthur
Our Once and Future King

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Does the story tell me something worth knowing, that I had not known before, about the relationship between man and technology? Does it enlighten me on some area of science where I had been in the dark? Does it open a new horizon for my thinking? Does it lead me to think new kinds of thoughts, that I would not otherwise perhaps have thought at all? Does it suggest possibilities about the alternative possible future courses my world can take? Does it illuminate events and trends of today, by showing me where they may lead tomorrow? Does it give me a fresh and objective point of view on my own world and culture, perhaps by letting me see it through the eyes of a different kind of creature entirely, from a planet light-years away? These qualities are not only among those which make science fiction good, they are what make it unique. Be it never so beautifully written, a story is not a good science fiction story unless it rates high in at least some of these aspects. The content of the story is as valid a criterion as the style. —Frederik Pohl

SF is what I point at when I say "SF." —Damon Knight

INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THE FUTURE

Lou Anders

The science fiction genre has been home to many landmark anthology series in its illustrious history, often a staple source of groundbreaking work. The saying goes that we see so far because we stand on the shoulders of giants. In this case, the idea behind *Fast Forward*—that of presenting a new, unthemed science fiction–only anthology series of original material—owes its inspiration to the late Damon Knight and his prestigious and influential Orbit series, which ran twenty-one volumes from 1966 to 1980. Orbit itself took inspiration from Star Science Fiction, the first SF anthology series of them all, which ran six volumes from 1953 to 1959 and was edited by the great Frederik Pohl, whose wonderful definition of science fiction—which serves as close to a theme as this anthology has—opens this book. Damon Knight's definition, by contrast, is the better known, more humorous; and while it points out the problems inherent in definitions of any kind, it is of lesser use in this context. If I may offer my own definition, it is this: Science fiction is a tool for making sense of a changing world. It is *the* genre that looks at the implications of technology on society, which in this age of exponential technological growth makes it the most relevant branch of literature going. We've lived through at least one singularity with the birth of the Internet, and the way this technology has transformed everyone's lives in just a few

short decades cannot be overlooked or downplayed. But this is only the start—we have a biotech and a nanotech boom still to come—and the close of the twenty-first century will look absolutely nothing like its inception. The future has overtaken the present, and things are speeding up. This hasn't ever been true in history before to the extent that it is true now. As Bob Dylan wrote, "The times they are a-changin'."

Theodore Sturgeon defined science fiction's strength as its ability to "ask the next question" in an ongoing dialogue that takes us from the present into the future. The future, as the saying goes, exists first in imagination, then in will, then in reality; and the types of dreams we dream today will determine the world we and our children live in tomorrow. Our world is dreaming some dark dreams now. We need to dream better, as if our life depended on it. Because it does. To a very real extent, we live today in the science fiction of the past. The nanotechnological research going on today was first envisioned in Philip K. Dick's 1955 story "Autofac," which introduced the concept of micromachines able to construct duplicates of themselves. We walk around with Bluetooth-enabled earclips that look like nothing less than the Borg implants of *Star Trek*, talking on communication devices deliberately modeled on Kirk's communicator, and while our music is increasingly digital, the compact discs that have yet to give up the ghost were actually modeled on the big silver discs that Mr. Atoz and his clones used in the library from the episode "All Our Yesterdays." Asimov gave us the word "robotics" and Gibson the word "cyberspace." Our communication satellites were dreamed up by Sir Arthur C. Clarke in 1945, and our personal computers were first envisioned by author Murray Leinster back in 1946 in his short story "A Logic Named Joe." (Not only did Leinster envision the PC, but he understood that it would be used for television, news, horoscopes, dating, stock trading, weather, and all the "junk" that fills up so much of our inboxes. As has been said before, anyone could have predicted the automobile, but it would take a science fiction writer to predict the traffic jam.)

"Science fiction is critical to progress in science," says geologist Robert Peckyno in an interview posted on the science and science fiction blog *Meme Therapy* (June 15, 2006). "Visionaries who radically change the world are often thought of as crackpots, and fiction has been the inspiration for many

great ideas. Tsiolkovsky, Goddard, Oberth, von Braun, and Korolev are collectively the foundation of rocketry today—every one mentioned being inspired by the Jules Verne story 'From the Earth to the Moon.' Go to any NASA facility and you will find desks with models of the *Enterprise* and *Starfury*. Science fiction helps to provide the dreams and puzzles that today's engineers and scientists try to bring to life."

But it is the future of science fiction itself (and that of science fiction publishing) that some have called into question, and lately it seems as if the very idea of the future has been under threat. Certainly, respect for science and the scientific method has come under attack in recent times. In his essay "The Omega Glory," Pulitzer prize–winning author Michael Chabon writes:

> I don't know what happened to the Future. It's as if we lost our ability, or our will, to envision anything beyond the next hundred years or so, as if we lacked the fundamental faith that there will in fact be any future at all beyond that not-too-distant date. Or maybe we stopped talking about the Future around the time that, with its microchips and its twenty-four-hour news cycles, it arrived. Some days when you pick up the newspaper it seems to have been cowritten by J. G. Ballard, Isaac Asimov, and Philip K. Dick. . . . This is the paradox that lies at the heart of our loss of belief or interest in the Future, which has in turn produced a collective cultural failure to imagine that future, any Future, beyond the rim of a couple of centuries.

Chabon is talking about the imagination of the wider world, not the community of science fiction writers who have always labored to create a myriad of tomorrows. But it's no secret that our field is changing, that the most popular books today are works of epic fantasy, or that we're inundated with post–*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tales of werewolf detectives and sexy women who battle the supernatural. We hear talk about the graying of the field as the readership for the "good stuff" ages and dwindles. We worry about the shrinking of the midlist, as many deserving practitioners who sell in respectable numbers are squeezed out of their publishing houses in the pressure to produce another Stephen King or Laurell K. Hamilton. We wonder if the inundation of high-tech gadgetry in our society makes our potential readership proverbial

fish that cannot see the science fiction waters all around them. And always, it is harder to be brilliant than it is to be merely competent.

Recently, I came across another explanation of our genre, again on *Meme Therapy*, from the wonderful Robert Charles Wilson (July 2, 2006):

> The one compelling idea that recurs constantly in science fiction from H. G. Wells onward is human contingency—which boils down to three statements: The world in the past was a very different place than it is now; the world we live in could have been a very different place than it is; and the world will inevitably become a very different place in the future. These assertions may seem obvious, but I believe they're counterintuitive, like the idea that the earth revolves around the sun. Our lives are simply too short to give them real visceral meaning. So we have to use our imagination, we have to literalize the possibilities, we have to engage the truth that dinosaurs really did once wander over the prairies, that the Confederacy really might have bargained with England and won its independence, that human activity really might change the climate or sterilize the seas.
>
> Internalize this deeply enough and you do end up with a slightly distanced worldview. You learn not to trust appearances, which is always a valuable lesson, and you realize that no human institution, good or bad, secular or religious, cultural or technological, is for e-ordained or guaranteed to last.

There you have it. Science fiction *is* skepticism. Science fiction *is* rationalism. Science fiction is the notion that there *are* other perspectives out there, other modes of thinking, other ways of being than those in front of your nose, worlds beyond your current understanding. Science fiction opens the mind to the notion of change. Science fiction is enlightenment packaged in narrative.

And why is this in itself important? What makes this agenda—and it is an agenda—relevant beyond that of other genres or mainstream works? As Gardner Dozois wrote in the introduction to his anthology *Galileo's Children: Tales of Science vs. Superstition* (Pyr, August 2005):

> Even today, the pope interdicts cloning, the president of the United States pushes to make stem cell research illegal, mention of the theory of evolu-

> tion is banned from textbooks and explanations of "creation science" are inserted instead, and politicians of both political parties vote against money for space exploration or any other kind of research where the instant up-front financial benefit to the bottom line is not immediately evident.
>
> The battle of science against superstition is still going on, as is the battle to not have to think only what somebody else thinks is okay for you to think. In fact, in a society where more people believe in angels than believe in evolution, that battle may be more critical than ever.
>
> One of the major battlefields is science fiction, one of the few forms of literature where rationality, skepticism, the knowledge of the inevitability of change, and the idea that wide-ranging freedom of thought and unfettered imagination and curiosity are *good* things are the default positions, taken for granted by most of its authors.
>
> . . . [S]cience fiction provides one of the few places in modern letters where the battle between science and superstition is openly discussed and debated, and that makes those who write it, as well as those brave characters they write about, embroiled in the age-old struggle to prevent the control of the human mind and the suppression of the human spirit, "Galileo's Children" in a very real way indeed.

I don't think there could be a clearer case as to why our "escapist literature," as it is so often called, is so important, or as to why it is never *just* escapism—not even at its most embarrassing levels. Even absurd cinematic blockbusters like *Star Wars* (for all it has to answer for) have their part to play in turning on the minds of people everywhere to the wonders of the universe and the possibilities of technology.

Despite fears to the contrary, I see a rise in science fiction as a long-term trend, aided by the pace of technological developments in the real world. At the 2006 Winter Olympics, US and Canadian skiers were wearing "smart armor" inside their normal clothing. Known as d3o, a futuristic flexible material that hardens into armor on impact, the skintight outfits look as much like a superhero's pajamas as anything Tobey Maguire or Christian Bale ever donned. And the Net itself is nothing if not science fiction realized. It is with much irony that I note that now, decades after J. G. Ballard proclaimed that the Space Age was over, it is the children of the "inner space" his own

New Wave writings ushered in—the dot-com billionaires who first crafted William Gibson's cyberspace in reality—who are now leading the charge to privatization of the race to the heavens. Space Adventures, who previously sent three space tourists with extremely deep pockets to the International Space Station, has announced plans to build a $265 million spaceport in the United Arab Emirates, with help from Texas venture capital and a Russian aerospace firm. And Richard Branson is building a (slightly cheaper!) $225 million spaceport in New Mexico for his Virgin Galactic. Virgin Galactic? The very name sounds like something out of *Barbarella*. Long-term, the real Space Age is only beginning, and the literature that charts our future there can only benefit.

While back on the ground, our increasingly technological society is making it increasingly hard for the mainstream to deny that we do in fact *live in the future*. Who better to explain this accelerated age than the science fiction writers, those who have tools honed over a century of experiment and experience for examining the ramifications of change?

It is to this end, and in this spirit, that *Fast Forward* is offered. As author and critic John Clute says, "SF accustoms us to looking; it does not, in the end, tell us what we are going to have to see. SF is the window, not the view." Here, then, are twenty-one windows on the future, as seen through the imagination of twenty-three different talents. Their collective visions take us from the far future to the day just after tomorrow. In their hands, science fiction is indeed a tool for making sense of a changing world. It's not the only such tool, but it is an amazingly effective one. Who knew enlightenment could be so much fun?