

Science Fiction

October 3. Reading SF in the *Astounding* era.

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last time

“Golden Age” sources of SF legitimacy and authority

Campbell and the atmosphere of argument

“Reason,” debate, social disembedding

After the Bomb

Campbell “yawns”: predicting *or* planning
democratizing the knowledge *or* establishing an élite
technical authority *or* moral authority

the unimaginable scenario:

how to represent it? (Smyth report)

how to avert it? (Sturgeon)

challenges to liberal selfhood (Sturgeon...)

prose technology

“And the world was a place of light!” ... (206)

What is Sturgeon’s technique like?

prose technology

association by image (rather than: logical sequence)

“a place of light...Blue light, flickering”

the fragment (inner worlds)

“The red-topped lever. Bonze.”

faux-naif

“Had humanity anything of Starr Anthim in it? Starr was a human being.”

ambiguities of focalization: magnify or diminish?

“No planet, no universe, is greater to a man than his own ego, his own observing self”

prose technology

the bomb as narrative structure

We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. (Henry James)

restriction to subjective anachrony

“That was a while ago, before all those people were dead...(Liberty had been one of the first to get it...)” (190)

“power”

What, then, is a **better** story? The **Analytical Laboratory** has analyzed and summarized the direct reactions as shown by your letters. Naturally, I'm keenly interested in what you thought of stories I thought were good. But the important thing is the future, not the past. The **Analytical Laboratory** is designed to help me, and the authors, to know what you **will** like even more than to know what you **did** like.

What is **power** in a story, in your estimation? Is it the human power of **The Master Shall Not Die!** or the power of scope and of dynamos in **Galactic Patrol?**

For that is another—an author's—meaning of **power**. That they—and I—may know better something of your viewpoint, your outlook, the **Analytical Laboratory** contains a new data sheet this month. Two items in that data sheet alone are of paramount importance in defining what is to you—and hence to **Astounding**—the meaning of **power** and **better** stories. Age group and occupation I particularly need to know.

[Campbell], *Astounding* editorial, August 1938: 111

“THERE WILL COME SOFT RAINS”

(War Time)

THERE will come soft rains and the smell of the
ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering
sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum-trees in tremulous white;

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

[89]

“THERE WILL COME SOFT RAINS”

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

[90]

Embedded text

“Since you select no preference, I shall select a poem at random.” ... “Sara Teasdale. As I recall, your favorite... [ellipsis original]” (238)

Here, as in a photograph, a woman bent to pick flowers.

Embedded text

“Since you select no preference, I shall select a poem at random.” ... “Sara Teasdale. As I recall, your favorite... [ellipsis original]” (238)

Here, as in a photograph, a woman bent to pick flowers. Still farther over, their images burned on wood in one titanic instant, a small boy, hands flung into the air; higher up, the image of a thrown ball, and opposite him a girl, hands raised to catch a ball which never came down. (236)

gender / domestic

old-maidenly preoccupation with self-protection (236)

“Mrs. McClellan, which poem would *you* like...” (238, emphasis mine)

hysterically hissing!

animal

the small cleaning animals (236)

the tables folded like great butterflies (237)

animals took shape (237)

the fire backed off, as even an elephant must at the sight of a dead snake (239)

“power”

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**MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION
STORY.** Edited by Leo Mar-
gulies and Oscar J. Friend.
Merlin. \$3.95.

SCIENCE fiction seems to have a host of new converts—a congregation that has been growing ever since its wild-eyed tales of the '30s came to pass at Hiroshima. For such, this 556-page omnibus should be a feast. It contains the best short stories of 25 top science fiction writers, as chosen by themselves. They range from the slightly delirious "Nothing Sirius" by Fredric Brown to that horror masterpiece by Paul Ernst, "The Thing in the Pond," and "Zero Hour," by Ray Bradbury. But even the old-timers who think they've read everything in SF—and maybe have—could stand a rereading of Theodore Sturgeon's "Thunder and Roses," probably the most powerful treatment of ultimate atomic doom ever packed into 25 pages. The editors are to be complimented on this entire anthology.

Washington Post,
January 15, 1950

readership: discussion

What oppositions—or surprising overlaps—do you discover between the mainstream newspaper readings of SF and the readings in *Astounding's* columns?

blogging: group 1

How do images of the insider work in American SF at mid-century? Thinking about—for example—ideas of inside knowledge, expertise, secrecy, subculture, the elite, the code, the jargon, or the club, describe and analyze a connection between one of the texts we have read this past week and the opening chapters of Pohl and Kornbluth's novel. The texts to think about include the newspaper excerpts as well as the three stories from the anthology. The connection can be microscopic, nanotubular even—or macroscopic, nebular.

Essays forbidden. Stop after paragraph number two.

next time

Pohl and Kornbluth: focus on the first eight chapters.

Think also about how the novel (as opposed to the short story) works as an SF genre.