



The Secret History of Science Fiction

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This ingeniously conceived anthology raises the intriguing question, *If Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow had won the Nebula award in 1973, would the future distinction between literary fiction and science fiction have been erased?* Exploring the possibility of an alternate history of speculative fiction, this literary collection reveals that the lines between genres have already been obscured. Don DeLillo's "Human Moments in World War III" follows the strange detachment of two astronauts who are orbiting in a skylab while a third world war rages on earth. "The Ziggurat" by Gene Wolfe traverses a dissolving marriage, a custody dispute, and the visit of time travelers from the future. T. C. Boyle's "Descent of Man" is the subversively funny tale of a man who suspects that his primatologist lover is having an affair with one of her charges. In "Schwarzschild Radius," Connie Willis draws an allegorical parallel between the horrors of trench warfare and the speculative physics of black holes. Artfully crafted and offering a wealth of esteemed authors—from writers within the genre to those normally associated with mainstream fiction, as well as those with a crossover reputation—this volume aptly demonstrates that great science fiction appears in many guises.

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The Secret History of Science Fiction Details

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From Reader Review The Secret History of Science Fiction for online ebook

John says

Despite the awful title, this collection is full of great short stories. One of the goals of the collection is to question our conventional understandings of science fiction as a "genre," challenging the traditional division between literature, mainstream fiction, and science fiction, and many of the stories do an exemplary job of demonstrating the power and artistry of well-written science fiction. The introductory essay is also one of the best I have read about the status of science fiction as a genre, a question that has become increasingly important for many authors writing within this tradition. It is an illuminating read for those interested in the politics of genre labels, and the stories are great fun for those who enjoy not just good science fiction, but great fiction.

Justpassingby says

I had forgotten about the Short Story.

I studied English as a 3rd language at school. My teachers loved short stories and poetry because they fitted into the sparse hours allotted to them more easily than novels. Therefore the blame is entirely on me: nearly all the fiction I have ever read since school consists of book-length stories. One notable exception that should have woken me up but didn't, is the marvellous bundle *Vizio di forma* by Primo Levi.

The Secret History of Science Fiction is an anthology of unusual science fiction short stories. In their introduction the editors convincingly argue that science fiction deserves to be shed of its pulp fiction image among the mainstream literary audience.

The selection is highly varied, the only apparent linking theme being negative: they do *not* represent the traditional 1930s fare of spaceships, distant planets and aliens, as reinforced by the *Star Trek* TV series and the *Star Wars* film franchise.

My current favourite, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas", reflects on poverty and responsibility.

I may one day revisit this review to discuss the individual stories in more detail. For now, I solemnly pledge to start paying more attention to short stories, a form particularly well suited for imaginative fiction.

Bonnie Stufflebeam says

Originally posted on Short Story Review:

After reading John Kessel and Jim Kelly's *The Slipstream Anthology*, I was sold on their taste in stories, so when I found *The Secret History of Science Fiction*, I picked it up with the expectation that their taste in science fiction would also mesh well with mine. I was mostly right.

There are nineteen stories included in this collection as well as an introduction by the editors in which they discuss the “genrefication” of science fiction and its status as a lower form of literature ascribed to it by readers and critics unfamiliar with it. Throughout the course of the book, before each story, quotes are included by famous science fiction writers and writers who dabble in sci fi but would otherwise be considered “literary” writers as well as those who straddle both lines regularly, such as T.C. Boyle and Ursula K. Le Guin. The quotes continued the introduction’s discussion and were just as good as the stories, and I found myself eager to read them as well.

(view spoiler)

The Secret History of Science Fiction introduced me to a wealth of writers I would like to check out more of. I would certainly recommend this to any reader skeptical of the worth of science fiction.

Mscout says

This was a collection of stories that set out to examine the boundaries between "literature" and "genre". What makes a story science fiction? Why does that label automatically devalue the story in some circles? The authors chosen for the anthology are mostly not generally associated with scifi, so it may be an eye-opener for a lot of serious lit folks. Overall, the collection is very solid and highly recommended.

Mike says

This is a collection interesting short fiction. The co-editors created it to illustrate how SF might have been seen had the genre been "absorbed" into the mainstream - at least for literary critics, reviewers, and devotees. To that end, most of these tales are different from the "classic" space opera, hard science, and even the SF-fantasy crossover stories that are so common.

Personally, I liked the individual tales and the snippets of interviews with authors (cut up and scattered throughout the book). I think that the caliber of work included is quite high. Where I disagree with the editors is in their title. This is no "history" of the genre, or its practitioners, or even a series of stories showing how authors develop from concepts and plots of earlier works. So, if you like the title, be forewarned.

In a sideways sort of way, the tales in this anthology remind me of stories from "The Twilight Zone" series. While there is far less overt "SF" in the collection, there is the same elevation of plot, character development, and drama over techno mumbo-jumbo and BEMs. Not that there isn't a bit of science/technology or aliens scattered here and there. But these elements take a 2nd priority to rich story-telling and ultimately that is the

point of the collection: SF could have (should have?) grown past the "traditional" at a moment in time when new authors were trying to bring it back into "respectable" literature.

This sounds so reasonable and yet it is flawed, too. Yes, publishers and rabid fans and critics pigeonhole authors who write genre types of fiction. But, the strength and size of such publishing has also done good for the niche. The late Issac Asimov was brashly unapologetic about how SF and SF fans were like any other mainstream activity. True he was a larger-than-life presence within the community, but he made the point even without needing to. While we may never lose the taint of the "pulp" past of SF we can and should embrace all of its facets. I for one like a good space opera now and then along with more intricate and nuanced fiction.

Dan Slimmon says

I don't think that this compilation of stories lives up to the editors' ambition of laying out the "secret history of science fiction." Or maybe I didn't understand the critical point of view they were arguing against.

In any case, it's a pretty good collection that plays with the gray area between science fiction and Respectable Literature. I especially liked the Molly Gloss and Gene Wolfe stories.

Kend says

I'll be honest, I mostly picked up this anthology to lay my hands on Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" in the wake of her death, as I'd never read it and was roundly admonished for that fact. And boy, Le Guin did not disappoint ... and happily, neither did the collection as a whole! With selections from Atwood and Willis and a number of other authors I love—as well as many I'd avoided, or hadn't heard of—this anthology quickly proved its value to me. If I were still teaching college composition courses I would have found a few here to use in the classroom. I appreciated the introduction as much as anything, too, and I think it would make a *perfect* introductory reading to any course on science fiction; after all, it examines important questions we tend to gloss over when nerding out over SFF, like "What *is* science fiction, anyway? What makes it different from other kinds of books? Is it even a genre? Or is it something else?" Of course, James Patrick Kelly seems to have been anthologizing SFF for forever (I've seen his books all through my growing up years) so it's perhaps not a surprise that he's more or less perfected the form and the questions which shape any collection.

I'm not one who goes for anthologies as a whole, especially the yearly ones, but this is a great collection of works from those post-"Golden Age" authors which have shaped the current epoch. If I ever spot it on the shelves at my local(ish) bookstores, I'll be picking up a copy for keeping. Dark libraries and their due dates

Kristen Nace says

Not the best anthology I've ever read....some interesting selections, but on the whole my reaction was mostly "Meh"

Cristian says

A nice collection overall. Unfortunately, many of the stories feel lacking, even amongst the better ones you might find yourself at a loss at the end of the reading, not sure if it succeeded in delivering its point across or not, while a couple others just feel plain gimmicky.

Nonetheless, the couple of gems sprinkled in here will more than compensate for the few duds and the mediocrity of the rest.

pax says

This is one wonderful anthology. If you are into science fiction: read it. If you are not into sf but into literary fiction: read it.

It stands exactly on the edge there, show-casting all the things that New Wave and its heirs have introduced into sf and let slip from sf into mainstream, navigating the sea gate between genre and literary, where the most interesting things grow, though often either overlooked (because people who read literary will not read anything with an sf label and keep insisting that Margaret Atwood does not write SF) or discarded (because a lot of hardcore sf fans are guarding their little corner against the stink of what they think to be literary pretence). But if you are willing to open the door just a bit and let the other in or, like me, honestly enjoy this mixture most of all, you'll love this book.

I knew only one of the stories before - Ursula K LeGuin's classic "*The One Who Walk Away from Omelas*" - and the rest is well chosen. Chabon's and Millhauser's are too much Steampunk for me and were slower reads (but then again, Steampunk is just not mine, being more fantasy than sf to my physicists' eyes, and the stories are definitely needed to be in the anthology as a whole), but the rest I could not stop reading. Books by George Saunders and Carter Scholz are not my reading list now; I definitely need to finally read Gene Wolfe, even though - or perhaps because? - I had to google up some reviews of his story to come up with a proper interpretation that would satisfy me.

Added to the 19 actual stories is a wonderful introductory essay and, before each story, a few citations, usually juxtaposed opinions on the role and rules of science fiction, both as a genre or as something that can facilitate or ruin a writer's career. I would like to cite pretty much all of them, but I'll go for one only:

For my generation, the New Wave people, the big disappointment is that they did not find an audience large enough to sustain their work and their careers.

-- Thomas M. Disch --

This is true and this is still one of my biggest disappointments in sf. Certainly, pearls like this anthology would have been more often otherwise ...

Christopher Stormer says

Great collection of Science Fiction stories that confound, extend, and ultimately bring to question ideas about Sci-Fi as a genre that is necessarily separate from mainstream literature. All are good-- my favorites are "The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas" by Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Nine Billion Names of God" by Carter Scholz, and "The Hardened Criminals" by Jonathan Lethem.

Roger Mexico says

Lots of interesting stories, some of them a little too dry/dense. Definitely liked the Saunders one written like a lab report. This collection makes a good case for taking science fiction "more seriously" (or viewing it as less of "pulp"/"niche" genre and more of a "literary pursuit") which is one of the editors goals, so, "kudos to you!", editors!

Drunken_orangetree says

Kelly, and John Kessel, pull together a collection of stories by both writers associated with SF--Kelly and Kessel for instance--with other writers more associated with the mainstream--T. C. Boyle or Margaret Atwood.

The ordering is more or less chronological and I would consider the selection very good.

I think the hard and fast division between the literary ghetto and the mainstream has been breaking down for some time anyway. Writers like Michael Chabon or Joy Williams, widely respected, use tropes and images far removed from the realist novel, the novel that dominates the pages of the NYTimes Book Review.

Best stories by my lights: Maureen McHugh's "Frankenstein's Daughter," Jonathan Letham's "The Hardened Criminals," Don Delillo's "Human Moments in World War III."

Nathaniel says

I got this book for my birthday in May, 2013 but I set it aside initially because I had expected it to be a non-fiction historical account of the literary development of science fiction. Instead, it's a collection of short stories that bridge the gap between science fiction and literary fiction. Which, actually, is a really cool collection. So pretty soon I picked it up and gave it a read.

Now, I'm an avid defender of genre fiction as a general rule. Part of this reflects weakness of character on my part: a lot of the great works strike me as incredibly nourishing to my soul on a page-by-page basis, but don't have enough novelty to attract my attention. That's been true ever since I was a kid: I crave escapism in my fiction.

Part of this, however, reflects what I think is an accurate perception that "art" has become to some extent sterilized as a result of snobbery and specialization. I believe that a lot of works of genre fiction are also

works of legitimate artistic merit, such as *Dune* or *Ender's Game*.

So what about the stories in this collection? Well, they run the gamut. This was the first time that I'd actually had a chance to read Ursula K. Le Guin's legendary "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas". It was brutal to read, and just as powerful as its reputation suggests. Others, like "The Hardened Criminals" (by Jonathan Lethem) struck me as more of a miss than a hit but--and this is important--even the misses were *interesting* misses.

It's been a couple of months since I finished the book (I'm catching up on my Goodreads reviews), but some others that stuck with me are:

Descent of Man, by T. C. Boyle

This is the second sci-fi story I've read about the convergence of chimpanzees and humans. In the other one (title escapes me) a scientist moves the consciousness of his dead child into a chimp. In this one, a man finds that he is suddenly unable to compete for the affections of his girl-friend with a hyper-intelligent chimpanzee. It sounds like the stuff of farce, but is told with unrelenting grimness, such as when the viewpoint character eats the brain of a small, live monkey with the his girlfriend and another couple on a double date. Fun? No, but--like I said--it sticks with you.

The Zigguraut, by Gene Wolfe

This was an incredibly odd story about a man living in an isolated cabin when he is visited by his ex-wife, their two children, and--soon thereafter--mysterious, stranded time-travelers. There are heavy undertones of gender relationships and the plot is just slightly surreal, but I haven't thought through it enough to have a coherent idea of what I think it is about.

Salvador, by Lucius Shepard

I think the only reason I remember this one is that I had read it before: it's the story of a young American soldier who is traumatized by combat experiences and hallucinogenic drug use in a fictional near-future war in El Salvador. It's historically interesting, given that it was written in 1984 and so clearly references Vietnam when, in 2013, readers are more likely to pair it with images of Iraq or Afghanistan.

Schwarzschild Radius, by Connie Willis

This was probably my favorite story, and it reminds me very much of Pamela Zoline's legendary 1967 short story "Heat Death of the Universe", in that it contrasts an apparently normal narrative of everyday events (the daily activities of a housewife in "Heat Death" vs. trench warfare from World War I in "Schwarzschild Radius") with a meditation on science (entropy in "Heat Death" and black holes in "Schwarzschild Radius").

There's something existentially satisfying and richly creative in the act of identifying the events of particular individual lives with the abstractions of ultimate scientific reality. I would really encourage everyone to read both short stories.

In any case, I don't recommend this as a "fun" book because (like a lot of the sci-fi that I love) it's not very accessible. But if you're at all interested in science fiction as literature, then this is basically an absolute must-read.

Nicholas Whyte says

<http://nwhyte.livejournal.com/2696038.html>

This is an anthology of stories and writers which supposedly straddle the boundary between mainstream fiction and sf. I confess that I didn't really see the point of the question ("What if sf didn't exist as a genre, but was being written anyway?") but I did enjoy most of the stories. One or two I already knew ("The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas", "Salvador") but the one I particularly enjoyed, contra my own expectations (also contra other reviewers who I've read) was "Ziggurat", an interesting and convoluted short by Gene Wolfe, who I've tended to bounce off in the past.
