

Impact of New Wave Science Fiction

a radical re-evaluation

Rich Dana (Ricardo Feral)

2022

a review of

Dangerous Visions and New Worlds: Radical Science Fiction, 1950–1985 Edited by Andrew Nette and Ian McIntyre. PM Press, 2021

In the last several years, Science Fiction, or SF as it is known among fans of the literary genre, has been the subject of several excellent critiques.

In 2018, Alec Nevalla-Lee's *Astounding: John W Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction* presented an in-depth analysis of the cultural impact of pulp magazines and the purveyors of the genre's myth of "the competent man."

Last year, *Representations of Political Resistance and Emancipation in Science Fiction*, edited by Judith Grant and Sean Parson, brought together essays by historians and social theorists examining the speculative politics of SF.

The latest entry is a new release from PM Press, *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds*, in which editors Andrew Nette and Ian McIntyre take a deep-dive into the highly influential and equally underappreciated works of the SF New Wave, whose more famous members included Ursula K Le Guin, Octavia Butler, William Burroughs, Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delaney, J.G. Ballard, and Philip K. Dick.

The book's title is drawn from Harlan Ellison's anthology *Dangerous Visions* and the UK SF magazine, *New Worlds*, edited in its heyday by Michael Moorcock. The subtitle of the book references the years 1950–1985, which in SF are the period between the decline of the so-called Golden Age and the rise of the Cyberpunk era. The book focuses primarily on the period from the late 1950s to the early 1970s known as "the long sixties." During this period of worldwide cultural upheaval, art, film, literature, and science were all rocked from their foundations. Science fiction (or speculative fiction as its more literary purveyors sometimes describe it) played a significant role as a testbed for exploring potential political scenarios while testing the boundaries of cultural norms.

The SF New Wave of the long sixties was influenced by the Beats' literary experiments, the Situationists' tactics, and psychedelia's aesthetics. In turn, it continues to influence both popular culture and fine art to the present day. In the introduction, the editors write:

"The impact of New Wave science fiction has, in turn, extended long beyond the heyday of the 1960s and 1970s. Although an explicit and heavy focus on technology returned with cyberpunk in the 1980s, the literary, thematic, and stylistic challenges and innovations presented in the preceding period were largely absorbed and refined rather than removed and rejected. While broader society has significantly changed and moral attitudes shifted, many of the social issues addressed by New Wave authors either remain or have been intensified, giving this body of work continued relevance."

The book is visually stunning and graphically rich. In the introduction, the editors point to the changes in publishing that brought about the decline of pulp magazines and the rise of the paperback novel. The role that paperback cover art played during this period cannot be overstated, and the plethora of illustrations are a joy to experience.

From classic 1950s commercial illustration to full-on psychedelia, Italian Futurist-inspired abstractions to medieval heraldry, the cover artists of the New Wave era drew readers to the revolving wire bookracks at newspaper stands across the world. The selections are excellent, and the full-color reproductions are good. They are so good that if I have one criticism of the book, it is that there isn't an essay dedicated to the cover artists, without whom many paperback masterpieces would have never caught the eye of the novice reader.

For the SF fan, the scholar, or the casual reader, the relatively short and very entertaining essays in the book cover all the bases and introduce most of the significant players of the era. Butler, Moorcock, PKD, Delaney, and Le Guin are featured prominently, but so are less mainstream talents like R.A. Lafferty, Judith Merrill, Hank Lopez, and the Strugatsky brothers.

Race and gender, nuclear holocaust and environmental catastrophe, pop culture and technology, sex, drugs, and rock and roll all receive thoughtful discussion. Among the highlights for me were Cameron Ashley's essay "The Future Is Going To Be Boring," or J.G. Ballard's "Speculative Fuckbooks: The Brief Life of Essex House" by Rebecca Baumann, and Ian McIntyre's unexpected "Doomwatchers: Calamity and Catastrophe in UK Television Novelizations."

The editors note that while some of the writers of the New Wave "...took part in public demonstrations and political action, most opted to undertake activism and sedition via literary expression. In keeping with the anti-authoritarianism of the counterculture, visions for real-world reform and revolution were either fuzzy or aligned most strongly with anarchism and radical forms of feminism."

No one in the movement was more closely aligned with anarchist thought than Judith Merrill. Kat Clay does an excellent job of introducing readers to this underappreciated writer and anthologist in her entry, "On Earth the Air Is Free: The Feminist Science Fiction of Judith Merrill."

On a personal level, I'm grateful for the inclusion of Mike Stax's essay on Mick Farren, the iconoclastic British prankster, gonzo journalist, SF writer, and frontman of the protopunk band the Deviants. In the mid-1980s, I became friends with Mick during his time in New York, and later, when I started OBSOLETE! Magazine, Mick was OBSOLETE!'s most consistent contributor.

His last SF short story "What is your problem, Agent X9?" appeared in my magazine shortly before he died (onstage, performing with the Deviants.) Stax does an excellent job of placing Farren in the historical context of the New Wave. Farren's collaborative nature and lack of mainstream success could lead some to mistake Mick for a dilettante.

But one only needs to read Farren's autobiography, *Give the Anarchist a Cigarette*, to understand that, more than anyone else, he was a quintessential chronicler of this brief, but essential moment, when art, literature, politics, and technology slammed together in a high-speed freeway pile-up, and post-modern popular culture rose from the wreckage.

Rich Dana, aka Ricardo Obsolete, is a writer, artist, and independent publisher. His most recent book, *Cheap Copies! The Obsolete Press guide to DIY Mimeography, Hectography and Spirit Duplication* examines the role of analog copy machines in the rise of the Avant-Garde and Radical Underground. Available at obsolete-press.com. [See review **in this issue.**]



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