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SCIENCE-FICTION REBELS: THE STORY OF THE SCIENCE-FICTION MAGAZINES FROM 1981 TO 1990 (2020) BY MIKE ASHLEY

Review by Derek Johnston

Ashley, Mike. *Science Fiction Rebels: The Story of the Science Fiction Magazines from 1981 to 1990*. Liverpool University Press, 2020. 473 pp.

Mike Ashley's monumental history of the Science Fiction magazine reaches its fourth volume with this, *Science Fiction Rebels*, covering the 1980s. The series began nearly 20 years ago, with *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines from the Beginning to 1950* (2000).¹ In the Preface to volume three, *Gateways to Forever: The Story of the Science Fiction Magazines from 1970 to 1980* (2007), Ashley states that the volume was originally supposed to conclude his history, but that the sheer amount of material necessitated its extension into further volumes. On the back cover of *Gateways to Forever* volume four of the history was listed as *The Eternal Chronicles*. However, it is clear that the mass of material covered in this volume necessitated splitting out the decades yet again, with the next volume already announced as *The Rise of the Cyber Chronicles*.

As the series has developed, it has increasingly engaged with a wider range of material. This is partly as Science Fiction expanded into other areas of the media and their associated press, with particular interest in this volume in how magazines such as *Omni* mixed science fact and fiction or how fiction was included alongside the articles and game scenarios of magazines mainly focused on film, TV, and tabletop role-playing games. The series has also expanded its international engagement, increasing its coverage of non-English language magazines, where Ashley acknowledges the assistance of a number of people in helping provide him with information on publications from a number of linguistic and national backgrounds. This volume thus has coverage of Science Fiction related publications not just from China, Japan, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, but also Israel, Uruguay, and Mongolia, amongst many others, emphasising the global significance of Science Fiction and its fandom. The only continents unrepresented are Antarctica and Africa, and it is not clear whether that is because of lack of publications or simply lack of information. From Ashley's earlier mention of the South African SF scene in the body of the book, it suggests that lack of professional domestic publications is a significant element here, but there is still the potential for later volumes to incorporate any information that comes to Ashley's attention.

So what does this particular volume contain? Firstly, while the title refers to 'Science Fiction,' and Ashley makes clear that he is using 'SF' throughout to refer to this, the book also clearly engages with the genre very broadly, as a necessity, as the magazines considered publish a range of fantastic fiction incorporating Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, and related speculative genres;

'SF' is used in this review in the same broad spirit. The Preface to the volume establishes very briefly what had been covered in the previous volumes, placing the 1980s into the flow of the history of SF, and establishing that flow as one of repeated revolutions and revivals, and responses to changes in cultural, political, and technological context. A six-page Chronology acts as an introductory reference point for key events across the 1980s in terms of SF magazine publishing, mostly focusing on US and UK publications. The narrative history of Anglophone SF magazines then runs to 236 pages, followed by a 110-page appendix on non-English language magazines in the 1980s. This is followed by a 29-page appendix giving a checklist of English-language SF magazines, with a brief description, names of publishers and editors, and a listing of issue release dates and numbers. 22 pages list magazine editors and publishers and the magazine issues they were responsible for, then there is a 40-page listing of magazine cover artists and the issues they provided cover art for. The fifth appendix provides circulation figures for the decade for dominant US magazines *Analog*, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Amazing Stories*, *Omni*, *The Twilight Zone Magazine*, and *Aboriginal SF*. A Select Bibliography is followed by three pages of additions and corrections to previous volumes in the history, followed by a detailed index.

This is a book of many parts, which is both a strength and a drawback. The narrative history details comings and goings of editorial staff and highlights changes in editorial policies and attitudes, which relate to changes in the type of stories that each magazine tended to present. In particular, it shows how different magazines served to separate out mass-media SF from 'literary' SF by addressing different audiences. This is contextualised as necessary to find different ways of dealing with a general decline in interest in the short story and short SF in particular during this period. Ashley attributes this decline to the increase in other interests for young people that might have led them to SF prose in previous decades but who were now drawn to film and TV SF, to tabletop role-playing games with similar fantastic themes, and later to computer games. As a result, the field of the SF magazine as a whole operated during this decade to rejuvenate the genre and develop new subgenres and introduce new voices, even as individual magazines established narrower, more conservative approaches to speculative fiction. The narrative history also covers aspects such as changes in format, and in cover price, and distribution, all of which are significant in considering the potential reach of these magazines, and of SF short stories as a whole, but which can be a bit dry or need more explanation. It can be hard to understand the significance of a cover price increase, for example, if there is no comparison with other magazines both within and outside the genre, or an indication of what that cover price relates to in more general terms.

Depending on the individual reader's interests, this means that the narrative can veer from fascinating to baffling from moment to moment, especially as it clearly relies on an existing knowledge of writers, editors, types of binding and printing, and wider changes in the literary and media SF field. That said, this wide view and clear depth of knowledge of the contexts exhibited by Ashley helps to emphasise how different aspects of the publishing industry and wider elements of culture influence the development of the SF magazine. In other words, by focusing on the magazines, Ashley is able to add more nuance to their treatment than can be found in more general histories of SF. The history as a whole also serves to emphasise the continued vitality and importance of

the SF magazine, which can frequently be neglected in more general histories of SF that focus on book publications and film and TV texts. While such histories typically acknowledge the importance of the early SF magazines in establishing the genre, the continued importance of the format and magazines as outlets can be frequently ignored, even though it is in the magazines that new variants of the speculative genres emerge, including in this period Steampunk and Slipstream fiction. Ashley demonstrates how much the different outlets for the genre are intertwined, with writers moving from fan publications linked to media products to writing in their own settings for the magazines, and potentially moving into editorial roles or writing for film or TV themselves, alongside publishing novels. This aids an understanding of SF as a field covering many outlets and media and where these different outlets and media are intertwined.

The fantastic detail in the appendices, and also included within the narrative history, suggests that a primary use for this and the other volumes will be for reference. Because of the way that Ashley demonstrates the interconnectedness of different expressions of SF, looking up any key SF or Fantasy figure is likely to find some connection to the magazines. This can serve as a way of opening up considerations of key figures and the ways that they interrelate, as well as tracing the development of themes and trends. Again, this history serves to show how trends such as Cyberpunk grew very much from the magazines and were sustained and developed by them as much as by anthologies in book form.

In addition to Cyberpunk and the challenge of a youth market that was engaging more with SF and Fantasy in other media, Ashley comments on a number of factors and trends. Of particular interest to the UK audience may be the development of *Interzone* as a key market and particularly the way that established an editorial stance favouring a return to hard SF, albeit a hard SF based on new understanding of science and technology including nanotechnology and genetic engineering, while continuing to represent a wide range of stories and encourage new voices in SF, particularly from a British background. Similarly, there is a consideration of the importance of writers' workshops, particularly the Clarion workshop, as routes for the discovery and promotion of new writers through their integration into professional networks. Ashley also considers the return of Horror and Weird fiction magazines and their crossover with SF magazines, as well as the rise of the small press and semi-prozines, enabled by new developments in reproduction and, eventually, desktop publishing technologies.

Taken as a whole, Ashley's ongoing history of the SF magazine is an astonishing achievement. This is vital work in uncovering and making available elements in the publishing history of SF that would otherwise be easily forgotten or neglected. As is often the case with such detailed thoroughness in relating matters of fact, it can be off-putting in its presentation, but as a source of material for reference and from which other interpretive scholarship can develop it is of enormous value. Those looking for a wider history of literary SF would be better served by existing histories such as Brian Aldiss' classic *Trillion Year Spree* (1986) or Adam Roberts' *The History of Science Fiction* (2005). Ashley's work serves as a valuable addition to these histories, though, and when the next overarching narrative history of the genre comes to be written, then I hope that they incorporate and acknowledge the understanding of the continued importance and development of the SF magazine that Ashley has documented in this ongoing history.

NOTES

1. The first two volumes of this series themselves rework and significantly expand the historical material from Ashley's four volume *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine* (1974-1978), which included key stories alongside the history.

BIONOTE

Derek Johnston is a Lecturer in Broadcast at Queen's University Belfast, UK. His research examines fantastic genres, including Horror and Science Fiction, particularly their history across media. He is the author of *Haunted Seasons: Television Ghost Stories for Christmas and Horror for Halloween* (2015), as well as a number of book chapters and articles. His chapter on 'Gothic Television' is forthcoming in volume three of *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*.