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A Book Review: A Handy Dictionary for SF Futurists Ace G. Pilkington – *Science Fiction and Futurism: Their Terms and Ideas*

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Pilkington, Ace G. – *Science Fiction and Futurism: Their Terms and Ideas*. McFarland, 2017.
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Science fiction and futures studies, futurism, or any of the other terms that denote the analysis and theorization of the future have been bound in a relationship that Frederick Pohl, writing in *The Futurist*, characterizes as “a pretty amiable symbiosis” (8). Authors and readers of science fiction and its scholarship, futures studies, governmental institutions and private business have commented upon or drawn on this connection to develop contingency plans to future-proof against a variety of scenarios. While there has been much scholarship in this area, there have been few works that propose to offer accessible overviews of the history of ideas and the traffic between science fiction and futures studies. Ace G. Pilkington’s *Science Fiction and Futurism: Their Terms and Ideas* seeks to address this gap in scholarship for a disciplinary intersection that is becoming increasingly important in a climate where Ulrich Beck’s notion of “risk society” is becoming ever more salient.

Published by McFarland, *Science Fiction and Futurism* joins such works as Thomas Lombardo’s *Contemporary Futurist Thought: Science Fiction, Futures Studies, and Theories and Visions of the Future in the Last Century* (2006) and Gary Westfahl, Wong Kin Yuen and Amy Kit-Sze Chan’s *Science Fiction and the Prediction of the Future: Essays on Foresight and Fallacy* (also from McFarland, 2011). Unlike these texts, Pilkington’s reference work offers an introductory account of the key terms in futures studies that have been influenced by science fiction, and not a sustained theoretical analysis of the ways in which science fiction influenced the development of ideas and their application for developing new technologies and scenarios. While informed by Jeff Prucher’s *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (2007), *Science Fiction and Futurism* is not a dictionary. It does not restrict its scope to the emergence of any given term, but it fills a gap in the literature by ranging across time to trace the coherence between ideas that feed into the contemporary scientific understanding of key concepts that science fiction has anticipated.

The book is organized into two sections: part one, “The Terms of Science and its Fictions,” contains fifty-five entries that explore the development of central scientific ideas and technologies. The shorter part two, “Genre Terms,” provide twenty-three entries that address the context for the emergence of these ideas. The text begins with a foreword by the futurist and science fiction writer David Brin, in which he acknowledges the propensity for debate amongst readers and writers of science fiction. He offers an alternative term for the mode: speculative history. While he suggests

unconvincingly that speculative history is appropriate because few science fiction writers are scientifically trained but that “all of us are complete history junkies” (Pilkington 1)—one might just as easily argue that few such writers are trained as historians, but many have an interest in science—Brin’s extended rationale in support of this term is compelling.

The entries in part one include many that are unsurprising, such as “Robot” and “Robotics,” “Artificial Intelligence” and “Deep Blue,” and “Cyberspace.” There are fewer, more recent terms, such as “Internet of Things,” “Utility Fog” (designating clouds of robots at the nanotechnological scale) and “Neural Lace” (“a neural interface between the brain and electronic or chemical systems,” Pilkington 108). Some unusual and colloquial terms appear, such as “Corpsicle,” “Kludge” and “MacGyver.” Pilkington relies heavily on the contributions to science of Isaac Asimov, *Star Trek*, Brin and Bruce Sterling, which accounts for the large number of entries dealing with computing and artificial intelligence. Surprisingly, other science fiction writers one might expect to see in this context, such as Cory Doctorow, Ramaz Naam and Karl Schroeder are not mentioned.

Even more surprising is the dearth of entries relating to biological systems and climate technologies. While entries for “Solar Sail” (which acknowledges solar energy) and “Goldilocks Planet” are present, given the consideration that geoengineering is receiving as an answer to climate change in popular culture and in scientific and governmental contexts, an entry for “Terraforming” or “Geoengineering”—particularly since the former was coined from within science fiction discourse and the latter by analogy to that term—would have been welcome. Similarly, while there is an entry for “Uplift” and “Mutant”—reflecting the interest in nuclear energy throughout the text—“Genetic Engineering” or “Pantropy” do not receive separate entries, although the biological is not completely omitted: there are entries for “Uterine Replicator,” “Multiplex Parenting” (the creation of fertilized embryos with more than two genetic donors) and “Solo Parenting” (distinct from clones; the creation of fertilized embryos created from a single donor), which reflect on how genetic engineering might transform conceptions of family. The omission of such entries despite the inclusion of “Kludge,” a derogatory term for an unadapted human, is puzzling given that the entry “Mutant” does not encapsulate the full range of issues and developing technologies associated with genetic engineering.

Part two, “Genre Terms,” contain entries that account for the different formulations of terms such as “Science Fiction,” “Science Fantasy,” “Speculative Nonfiction” and “Speculative History,” among others. These entries are necessarily not comprehensive and are appropriate to the length of the text itself, but are nevertheless useful for the reader new to science fiction. They open up the dialogue about genre classification that has occupied much scholarship in the field without being burdensome. Other entries in this section explore narrative forms such as “Lost Colony,” “Monomyth” and “Ruritania.” Other useful additions explore science fiction’s mythic inheritance in entries such as “Archetype,” “Cassandras” and “Faust,” which acknowledge the long tradition of thought about the future that informs science fiction and futures studies. However, a notable omission in this section is the lack of entries exploring “Futures Studies” or “Futurism,” which would have helped to orient readers new to these disciplines and would have allowed the symbiotic connection between science fiction and futurism to be contextualized.

The entries in *Science Fiction and Futurism* overall seek to trace the ideas that arise in science fiction and their influence as inspiration to scientists and technologists. These connections are important and are a fascinating read for the new reader and science fiction aficionado alike, although the second part is less useful for those already familiar with the debates about science fiction as a genre or mode. The book is accessibly written and succinct, and is most valuable as an introductory text and a spur for further research into the relationship between the imagination of the future and its realization. While there are glaring omissions with regard to issues related to climate

change, alternative energy systems and to innovations in society, the entries that are included are for the most part highly relevant to the practice of futurism as a discipline.

Works Cited

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Biography: Chris Pak is the editor of the Science Fiction Research Association's *SFRA Review*. He is the author of *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2016).