



Fandom, Academia, and the Literati: Some Historical Speculations

Gary K. Wolfe

If we set out to construct a history of the various discourses and voices that have come to characterise the criticism and scholarship of science fiction and fantasy (SFF), we could do worse than to start in 1939. The year is famous in fan lore for two reasons: it saw both the first World Science Fiction Convention, held in New York from July 2-4, and the July 1939 issue of *Astounding*, which appeared during the convention and is widely viewed as the first issue to fully reflect the editorship of John W. Campbell, Jr., ushering in what some fans would come to label the “Golden Age of Science Fiction”. That term, whether viewed as a critical assessment or merely an expression of nostalgia, would generate debate for decades to come, as evidenced most recently by Jeannette Ng’s Campbell Award acceptance speech at the 2019 Hugo Awards ceremony in Dublin (which contributed strongly to the removal of Campbell’s name from that award). It wasn’t the beginning of the debates about the nature and purposes of SF; those had been going on for more than a decade in the letter columns of pulp magazines and later in amateur fanzines, reaching a kind of crisis point in that first Worldcon, with the ideological debate between the “New Fandom” of Sam Moskowitz and his allies on the one hand, and the more politically activist Futurians, including Donald Wollheim and Frederik Pohl, on the other. Wollheim and Pohl would later become two of the most influential editors in the field (and Pohl one of the most influential writers), and Moskowitz would produce a series of critical/biographical sketches that, collected in book form, became popular sources of genre history: *Explorers of the Infinite* (1963) and *Seekers of Tomorrow* (1965). He also compiled significant historical anthologies of early SF, as well as a rather portentous account of those early fan battles in *The Immortal Storm* (1954).

In brief, 1939 can be seen as a watershed year in the history of fan criticism and, eventually, of fan scholarship. But the year also saw two far less widely celebrated events. James O. Bailey, a 35-year-old English professor at

the University of North Carolina, met with a New York bookseller named Ben Abramson about publishing a version of his 1934 doctoral dissertation, “Scientific Fiction in English, 1817–1914: A Study of Trends and Forms”, which he had been unsuccessfully trying to get published through the academic presses of the time. Bailey was concerned that his bibliography was inadequate, and Abramson – a collector as well as a bookseller – provided an extensive list of titles that he had compiled over several years. Abramson agreed to publish the study, but he suggested that Bailey add a chapter to at least make some mention of post-1914 SF. Bailey’s revisions, together with the World War II paper shortages, delayed the publication until 1947, when Abramson published it under his Argus Books imprint with the title *Pilgrims through Space and Time: Trends and Patterns in Scientific and Utopian Fiction*. It would become the first full-length academic treatise on SF, although two years earlier Abramson (something of an unsung pioneer) had published one of the first important treatises on horror literature, H. P. Lovecraft’s *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Bailey’s study, however, came from within an academic culture that would not seriously begin to grapple with SFF for more than another decade.

The third event was the appearance, in the September 1939 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, an essay by Bernard De Voto titled “Doom Beyond Jupiter”. De Voto was a widely respected novelist, editor, and historian already famous for his scathing criticism of Thomas Wolfe and his curatorship of Mark Twain’s papers, and his dismissive view of the SF pulp magazines probably wasn’t the first time a mainstream literary figure had looked askance at the genre. But coming at such a crucial juncture in the development of science fiction, it quickly became the most widely read of such dismissals. Describing the fiction as “besotted nonsense” in which the “science thus discussed is idiotic beyond any possibility of exaggeration”, he viewed science fiction largely as a setting for transplanted Westerns (another widely popular pulp genre) and concluded:

As the sermons of back-country evangelists dilute and translate into the vernacular the ideas painfully worked out by thinkers on the age’s highest plane, so what we call popular literature has, in every age, accommodated to simpler intelligences the sentiments and beliefs enregistered by artists in what we call good literature.

The notion that SF and fantasy might address the needs of “simpler intelligences” might in part be attributed to the fact that De Voto had simply looked at a handful of pulp magazines rather than trying to engage the genre as a whole, but it’s a criticism that would resurface in similar articles in mainstream literary magazines for decades to come.

These three artifacts from 1939 – the passionate if geeky infighting over the nature of SF at the first Worldcon, the effort of a young academic scholar to get his work on SF in print, and De Voto’s pointedly supercilious *Harper’s* essay – can now be seen as harbingers of what even today constitute three distinct ways of talking about SF and fantasy: the fans, the academics, and the mainstream literary community. To these we might add a fourth – the commentary of SF and fantasy writers themselves– but so much of such commentary originated in fan publications that it becomes problematical to

separate it out. Early writer-critics such as Damon Knight and James Blish originally published much of their work in fan venues, and were active fans themselves in their younger days. Frederik Pohl even won a “best fan writer” Hugo Award in 2010, at the age of 90, for his blog. A smaller subset of writer-critics, such as Joanna Russ with her essays in *Science Fiction Studies* and *Extrapolation*, or Adam Roberts with his dual career as novelist, university-based scholar, and biographer, might also overlap with the academic leg of this triad, but such examples are exceptions rather than the rule.

It seems unlikely that, in 1939, any of these three communities of SF commentary were even aware of the others. It’s improbable that many fans of *Astounding* or *Amazing* were also readers of *Harper’s* or vice versa, and Bailey’s work only glancingly acknowledged the assistance of genre figures (including Lovecraft and Forrest Ackerman) for providing him with additional titles for his bibliography. Over the next decades, we can easily trace the growing mistrust of these three camps toward each other: fans came to regard academia (once it finally turned its attention to SFF) as opportunistic and inadequately informed; academia sometimes regarded fan scholarship as uncritical and lacking in methodological rigor; both fans and academics bristled at the indifference, bordering on contempt, of the literary “establishment”, including university literature departments.

It should be noted at this point that the situation I’ve been describing so far is essentially that of the United States, and usually focused on SF rather than on fantasy. Similar fan groups and fanzines developed in the UK, and the Leeds Science Fiction Conference of January 3, 1937 – which included such later influential figures as Arthur C. Clarke and Edward Carnell – predated the New York Worldcon by more than two years. But the distrust of the fantastic in literary and academic circles seemed much less pronounced. One of the most prominent figures in the British literary community was H. G. Wells, Olaf Stapledon’s philosophical novels were widely praised, and even E. M. Forster had written a classic futuristic tale in “The Machine Stops” (1909) and a touching fantasy in “The Celestial Omnibus” (1911). Nor was the British academic world quite so dismissive of fantasy. In 1935 – while working on the prose “romance” that would probably do more than any other single work to establish the legitimacy of fantasy in the university curriculum – J.R.R. Tolkien delivered his lecture “On Fairy-stories” at the University of St. Andrews. In 1947, the essay was expanded for inclusion in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, edited by C. S. Lewis in honor of their late friend and fellow fantasist Charles Williams. Lewis’s own essay in that volume, “On Stories”, discussed works by Wells, E. R. Eddison, Tolkien, and David Lindsay; of course Lewis’s own fantasy and SF would remain widely popular for decades. While pulp magazines and pulp fiction gained little more respect than they did in the United States, fantastic fiction as a whole seemed to fare much better.

When university-based scholars of SF and fantasy began to proliferate in the 1960s and 1970s, they quickly discovered that many of the source materials needed for research were not to be found in the traditional venues of scholarly journals and academic reference works. Instead, the most useful criticism, scholarship, and bibliographies were largely confined to fan publications and magazines not often collected by academic libraries. Even James Gunn’s seminal 1951 master’s thesis on SF, *Modern Science Fiction: A Critical Analysis*, could not find a book publisher despite the efforts of his agent,

Frederik Pohl, and it ended up as a series of articles in a pulp magazine, *Dynamic Science Fiction*, which folded before it could publish the whole thesis (although it eventually appeared from McFarland in 2018, edited by Michael R. Page). An important early essay collection edited by Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, *Of Worlds Beyond: The Science of Science Fiction Writing*, was published by Eshbach's own Fantasy Press in 1947, with essays by John W. Campbell, Jr., Jack Williamson, A. E. Van Vogt, Edward E. Smith, and especially Robert A. Heinlein, whose "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction" elaborated on an influential argument he had earlier made at a fan convention: that "speculative fiction" was a more appropriate term for the genre. The following year saw Everett F. Bleiler's *Checklist of Fantastic Literature*, the first significant effort at a comprehensive bibliography of the field, and a crucial source for subsequent bibliographies. It, too, came from a small SF specialty press, Shasta.

By the mid-1950s, a handful of other books began to appear, ranging from "how-to" manuals like L. Sprague de Camp's *Science-Fiction Handbook* (1953) to general introductions like Basil Davenport's *Inquiry into Science Fiction* (1955), and essay collections like Reginald Bretnor's *Modern Science Fiction: Its Meaning and Its Future* (1953) and Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder* (1956, in its first edition). The Knight volume, drawn mostly from columns he had written for magazines in the early 1950s, was the first publication of Advent: Publishers, founded by members of the University of Chicago Science Fiction Club and the first publisher dedicated to critical and historical works about SF and fantasy; later volumes included two collections of reviews by James Blish, written under the pseudonym "William Atheling, Jr."

If another year were to be chosen as significant for the conjunction of academia, fandom, and the literary community, it might well be 1959, exactly twenty years after that first Worldcon. That year saw the publication by Advent of *The Science Fiction Novel: Imagination and Social Criticism*, four essays by Robert A. Heinlein, C. M. Kornbluth, Alfred Bester, and Robert Bloch, which had originally been delivered as a series of lectures at the University of Chicago in 1957, and which grappled with the role of SF in the larger literary community. In Ohio, the fan-turned-academic Thomas D. Clareson published the inaugural issue of *Extrapolation*, the first academic journal devoted to SF and fantasy, with essays drawn largely from earlier Modern Language Association conventions. In the spring, the British novelist Kingsley Amis delivered a series of talks at Princeton, focusing largely on contemporary SF authors, including Frederik Pohl, whom Amis described as the "most consistently able writer science fiction, in the modern sense, has yet produced" (102). Amis clearly wanted to make a case for SF before an academic audience, and his own stature as a novelist – which had emerged only five years earlier with *Lucky Jim* – likely helped draw the attention of other literary figures to modern SF. Collected and somewhat revised under the title *New Maps of Hell*, the lectures were published in 1960 not by fan presses, but by Harcourt, Brace in the US and Gollancz in Britain. In all likelihood, Amis's volume reached a wider base of fans and readers than any prior book on SF, since Ballantine Books decided to reprint it in paperback, complete with a cover painting by Richard Powers, whose distinctive style had become a trademark of Ballantine's extensive line of SF and fantasy paperbacks. The publishers, Ian and Betty Ballantine, hoped the volume would both appeal to fans and draw the attention of a broader readership to SF

– though they were also shrewdly aware that nearly two dozen of the works recommended by Amis, including those by Pohl, were from Ballantine’s own list. More important is that a book that began its life in the heart of academia as part of the Christian Gauss lectures at Princeton, written by a significant figure from the mainstream literary community, found its way into fandom through a rare mass-market paperback of literary criticism.

Literary criticism and literary enthusiasm are often two sides of the same coin. Fans began writing a kind of folk-criticism in the letter columns of the early pulp magazines as a way not simply of voting for favorite stories, but of hoping to influence the magazine’s direction and, not infrequently, mounting spirited defenses of the genre as a whole (even if many of these defenses were extra-literary in nature, such as touting science education as a benefit of SF). Academic critics, less likely to be engaged in the month-to-month or year-to-year shaping of the field (though some may have begun as fans), also often found themselves in a defensive posture, simply by arguing that SF and fantasy might yield to the same tools of critical analysis and cultural contextualisation as any other literature. Relatively early academic books, like *SF: The Other Side of Realism*, edited by Thomas D. Clareson in 1971, would often begin by complaining about the “failure of the critics, both of the popular press and of academe, to afford sf even the small recognition given to the western story and the detective novel as forms of popular literature” (x); note that even the title of Clareson’s book implies SF’s value by aligning it with realism.

This sense of being beleaguered by the broader literary community was likely one factor – along with academics’ discovery that much of the crucial historical and bibliographical work they needed was the work of fandom – that eventually drew fans and academics into an uneasy alliance. Certainly there was still distrust on both sides; as late as 1983, writing in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, the author and critic Algis Budrys could complain that the “formal scholarship of speculative fiction is, taken in the whole, worthless”, adding to earlier similar diatribes from Ben Bova, Lester del Rey, William Tenn, and others, culminating in a quotation often attributed to Dena Brown: “Let’s get science fiction out of the classroom and back in the gutter where it belongs” (Gunn, “Protocols”). Other writers, including Damon Knight, Brian Aldiss, Joanna Russ, and Ursula K. Le Guin, were more welcoming of academic attention, and it’s worth noting that each of these writers – as well as Budrys himself – would eventually be awarded the Science Fiction Research Association’s Pilgrim Award (recently changed to The SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship).

But assessments like those of *De Voto* back in 1939 would persist with alarming regularity, dismissing both the readers of SF and its scholars. For example, in another *Harper’s* essay, 46 years after *De Voto’s*, the critic Luc Sante wrote:

Science fiction, by relying on a tradition of mediocrity, has effectively sealed itself off from literature, and, incidentally, from real concerns. From within, science fiction exudes the humid vapor of male prepubescence. The cultlike ferocity of science fiction fandom serves only to cultivate what is most sickly and stunted about the genre. (Sante)

And in reviewing Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* in the *New York Times* in 2003, Sven Birkerts asserted:

I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be Literature with a capital "L," and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility.
(Birkerts)

There are, of course, many literary figures who take exception to such blanket assessments, and Sante's gratuitous comment on fandom reflects a stereotype of male adolescence which was stale even in the 1980s. But such an attack on a genre's readers is implicitly an attack on its scholars as well, resulting in a common cause that has mitigated the once-common distrust between fans and scholars. The pre-eminent fan-voted award in the field, the annual Hugo for best related work, has gone to academic or scholarly works at least ten times since it was instituted in 1980 (depending on how we count such reference works as the Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*), while, as I noted above, the SFRA Pilgrim Award has often recognized authors whose critical work began in fandom rather than academia (Pamela Sargent, Hal Hall, Mike Ashley, and Samuel R. Delany are further examples). Beginning in 1982, Worldcons have usually featured an academic track of programming, which have likely encouraged some scholars to attend their first fan convention while offering fans an opportunity to hear papers and panels that revealed what the academics have actually been up to.

There is, in short, a good deal more to unite fandom and academia than to divide it, at least in terms of literature – but literature is only a part of what each encompasses today. Both SFF academia and SFF fandom have expanded far beyond the relatively narrow focus that I've been discussing throughout this essay, and in the process have fragmented into increasingly refined subspecialties. Literary fandom gives rise not only to distinct groups devoted to hard SF or heroic fantasy or paranormal romances, but to media fandom, which in turn gives rise to film, TV, and gaming fandom, and eventually to even more narrowly focused fandoms ranging from bronies to *Game of Thrones* or the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Academia develops similar subspecialties, including, with some irony, fandom itself. Earlier fan studies, like Joe Sanders's 1994 essay anthology *Science Fiction Fandom*, focused almost entirely on the history of SF fandom, with most contributions by fans themselves; today, essays in *The Journal of Fandom Studies* seldom focus on SFF or literary fandom. Both fan and academic groups have also benefited from intersectionality, finding new perspectives from feminist, LGBTQIA, disabled, BIPOC, and international communities once scarcely visible. These broadening perspectives inevitably lead to new conflicts and new alliances, sometimes reflected in Hugo Awards ballots and convention programming. But those ancient debates about whether SFF is worth reading or studying at all begin to seem almost quaint, and certainly naïve. That group of largely white, male, adolescent fans in 1939 who ambitiously called their New York meeting a Worldcon may be mostly gone now, but – with recent meetings hosted by Finland, Ireland, and New Zealand, with once-marginalized fans (and even scholars!) welcomed – Worldcon may finally have earned its name.

Biography: Gary K. Wolfe is Emeritus Professor of Humanities and a former dean at Roosevelt University and a reviewer for *Locus* magazine and the *Chicago Tribune*. His reviews have been collected in *Soundings* (BSFA Award 2006; Hugo nominee), *Bearings* (Hugo nominee), and *Sightings*, and his *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature* (Wesleyan) received the Locus Award in 2012. Earlier books include *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction* (Eaton Award, 1981), *Harlan Ellison: The Edge of Forever* (with Ellen Weil), and *David Lindsay*. For the Library of America, he edited *American Science Fiction: Nine Classic Novels of the 1950s* (2012), and *American Science Fiction: Eight Classic Novels of the 1960s* (2019). He received the Pilgrim Award from the Science Fiction Research Association, the Distinguished Scholarship Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, and a Special World Fantasy Award for criticism. His 24-lecture series *How Great Science Fiction Works* appeared from The Great Courses in 2016. He has received ten Hugo nominations, two for his reviews collections and eight for *The Coode Street Podcast*, which he has co-hosted with Jonathan Strahan for more than 550 episodes.

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