



BOOK REVIEW:  
*Arthur C. Clarke*

*Rob Browning*

Westfahl, Gary. *Arthur C. Clarke*. U of Illinois P, 2018. ISBN 978-0252083594.

Gary Westfahl's *Arthur C. Clarke* joins five previously published book-length studies of Clarke's fiction, the most recent of which is Robin Anne Reid's *Arthur C. Clarke: A Critical Companion* (1997). Justifying the need for this new study, Westfahl cites several publications that have appeared since Reid's book: fiction attributed to Clarke, chiefly as a collaborator; two collections of correspondence (1998 and 2003); and a number of texts about Clarke – most notably, Neil McAleer's updated biography (2013). His primary justification, however, is the fact that a "truly comprehensive survey of Clarke's science fiction has never been produced" (2). Indeed, Reid focuses only on the major novels, and the earlier scholars – Olander and Greenberg (1977), Slusser (1978), Rabkin (1979), and Hollow (1982) – were unable to consider Clarke's late-career publications. In being the first to "discuss, at least briefly, all of the published works of fiction", Westfahl presents credible overviews of the thematic tendencies in the fiction, noting significant deviations along the way, and he offers well-informed observations about how Clarke's interests and attitudes seem to change over the course of his career (2). The comprehensiveness of his research enables him to take issue with several unqualified or potentially mistaken views about the author that one finds in the critical literature, which I detail below. Whether or not one finds all Westfahl's different arguments fully convincing, the book offers a fresh perspective on Clarke and some thought-provoking readings of his fiction that deserve the attentions of scholars interested in this author.

The book is organised into four main parts: a biographical sketch; a survey of Clarke's juvenilia; six chapters focusing on prominent topics and themes in the fiction ("inventions, space travel, human destinies, aliens, the sea, and religion"); and a chapter analysing Clarke's fictional characters (6).

Westfahl articulates his major findings and arguments in the introductory and concluding paragraphs of each chapter, and he dedicates the bulk of his discussions to surveying the various texts that support these claims. In thematically appropriate places, each of the major novels and short stories receives closer attention. The book concludes with an informative appendix on “Clarke’s ‘Collaborations’ with Other Authors”; an excellent bibliography of Clarke’s publications and other work; and a bibliography of secondary sources that is actually a works-cited list rather than a comprehensive listing of scholarship on Clarke.

Westfahl’s overarching purpose is to describe salient aspects of the worldview that Clarke’s body of writings presents to readers. While Clarke did not attempt to unite his different works into a “cohesive narrative”, such as one finds in the oeuvre of Robert A. Heinlein, Westfahl reveals how Clarke created consistent pictures of humanity’s possible futures (44). The source of this consistency appears to be Clarke’s career-long desire to proselytise for exploration beyond present frontiers, both in space and in the sea, which entails evoking a sense of wonder about these places while also recognising the formidable dangers involved in venturing there and being realistic about human limitations. Westfahl points to numerous examples of the limitations in Clarke’s fiction: machines and other technology fail to work properly, are misused, or break down; natural disasters prove to be overwhelming; and isolated individuals or whole societies fall into boredom and stagnation. While one may be more likely to associate dead astronauts with J. G. Ballard, deaths are a common occurrence in Clarke’s realistically imagined outer-space environments. These casualties serve as a check against notions of Clarke as a thoroughgoing optimist about humanity’s future in space.

For instance, against Peter Brigg’s assertion that Clarke “consistently hints that the universe will be man’s and that man ... will emerge the final victor”, Westfahl points out that Clarke “consistently depicts futures wherein humanity is marginalized – or extinct” (74). He observes that Clarke “stands out among SF writers for refusing to embrace [the] consensus future history” that, in Donald A. Wollheim’s summary, involves humanity venturing beyond the solar system, establishing a “Galactic Empire”, and seeking confrontation with God (73). In Clarke’s approach, promoting human space exploration requires keeping up with the latest scientific advancements and technological innovations, and not getting too far ahead of these with the imaginative flights of fancy common in SF, such as technology for faster-than-light-speed travel. Rather than dazzling readers with pioneering firsts or feats of extraordinary heroes, Westfahl observes, Clarke prefers to focus his fiction on the everyday aspects of life in space as experienced by relatively ordinary (albeit well-trained) people doing their jobs. In this way, Clarke’s fiction encourages readers to imagine humanity’s expansion into space as an imminent reality. In keeping with the author’s realistic vision, these narratives rarely venture beyond the solar system.

Westfahl takes issue with a common critical view termed the “Clarke paradox” by Peter Nicholls and John Clute – namely, that

there were effectively two Arthur C. Clarkes: the hard-nosed, practical Clarke, devoted to meticulously plausible descriptions of near-future technology, and the wild-eyed, mystical Clarke, prone to fuzzy, unfounded speculations about mysterious forces underlying the visible universe. (4)

In the chapters on “Alien Encounters” and “Future Faiths”, Westfahl denies that Clarke shifts between two completely different perspectives, one mundane and another mystical; rather, we should understand that Clarke adjusts his mode of expression according to the epistemological nature of the subject matter at hand. When writing about far-distant futures, which sometimes entails imaginative leaps of millions of years, Clarke “appropriately employed language recalling mysticism” as a way of acknowledging how far beyond our present knowledge he is speculating (5). Similarly, if many of the author’s portrayals of aliens seem mysterious or even mystical, this is because Clarke rarely engages in “scientifically plausible” world-building, preferring to respect the likelihood that humanity will not be able to develop the technology necessary for visiting and observing such worlds (94). Characters in his fiction are more likely to encounter artifacts and other fragmentary signs in our solar system left behind by aliens long ago. Critics have suggested that the handling of advanced aliens in works such as *Childhood’s End* function as the author’s own “ersatz form of religion”, and Westfahl supports this view as an example of the occasionally positive attitudes towards religion one can find in the fiction (142). In his chapter “Future Faiths”, however, Westfahl details how Clarke tends to be strongly critical of religion, arguing throughout his career that humanity ultimately should abandon religion in favor of more mature science-based knowledge, even as Clarke (ever the hard-nosed realist) came to believe that aspects of religious practice are likely to persist.

A revelation for me is the chapter on Clarke’s lesser-known fiction and non-fiction focusing on the sea. Westfahl shows how the sublime forces and exotic life forms of the Earth’s oceans are comparable in general ways to the subjects Clarke explores in his fiction set in outer space – only the sea is a domain that the author, as an avid skin diver, could experience first-hand. As in his space fiction, Clarke’s narratives about the sea show a special interest in how extreme environments can come to affect the perspectives of the people who live and work there.

Westfahl contends that “Clarke remains a writer who has never been properly understood”, in part because scholars tend to project their literary expectations onto Clarke and his fiction, which has led to failures in appreciating what is unique about both (3). Because most of Clarke’s own reading activity focused on non-fiction, critics may run astray if they interpret *Childhood’s End* or *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for instance, through the lens of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or Homer’s *Odyssey*, mistakenly assuming Clarke shared their familiarity with such texts. Here, Westfahl pushes against George Edgar Slusser’s thesis about the “Odyssey pattern” in Clarke’s fiction (Slusser 6), a form that involves ambiguous journeys and homecomings, at least where Westfahl finds Slusser forcing his thesis onto texts such as *Childhood’s End* where it does not seem to apply. As Westfahl remarks, Clarke “consistently resists familiar narrative patterns, yet critics insist upon discerning them” (92). A figure he suggests may have had a significant influence on Clarke’s fiction is

the editor John W. Campbell, Jr., who argued that the “writing of science fiction should proceed in the manner of a thought experiment” (3).

The aspect of Clarke’s craft that receives Westfahl’s closest attention is character. Against the common view that Clarke’s characters are “lifeless and wooden”, Westfahl argues that these typically solitary figures “may represent the most fascinating, and prophetic, aspects of his fiction” (149). They tend to be either unattached or removed (physically, emotionally, or both) from family, partners, and friends; but they offset their loneliness through their professional work, which usually involves lyrical observation of the great wildernesses of the world – either space or the sea – and participating in their professional community. Westfahl suggests that this pattern follows the author’s own lifestyle, which can increasingly be regarded as characteristic of the physically isolated, internet-connected lifestyles of our own time (a comparison that feels all the more poignant after a full year of the COVID-19 pandemic).

Among the book’s other merits are Westfahl’s critical commentaries on the sequels to *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Rendezvous with Rama*, in which we see Clarke (and, in the case of the latter series, his collaborators) shying away from the intimations of superhumanity that characterise the original books. Clarke generally “preferred stories that conclude with unresolved mysteries,” Westfahl notes, “particularly when writing about aliens” (116). In *2010*, *2061*, and *3001*, however, the transcendent Star Child of *2001* returns to recognisably human form as David Bowman, and the mysteriously powerful monoliths prove to be fallible technological devices of the “all too human” aliens who made them. The three *Rama* sequels, meanwhile, veer away from science and mystery (in *Rendezvous with Rama*, the latter was inspired by Kubrick’s inscrutable aliens, Westfahl suggests) into the social dramas of space opera. In the appendix, Westfahl observes the degrees to which the different novels marketed as collaborations agree with the characteristic themes and writing styles of the works Clarke wrote solo.

Since the chapters are surveys with a tendency to focus on thematic matters, this study should prompt other scholars to follow up on Westfahl’s interesting opening assertions about the unique nature of Clarke’s storytelling skills and prose style. Also deserving greater attention are the special qualities of Clarke’s imagery, specifically his depictions of extraterrestrial environments, which rank among the finest poetry in the genre but receive only passing commentary in this book.

*Biography:* Rob Browning teaches SF and early modern literature at the University of Montana. His most recent publication is “Nietzsche Among the Aliens in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*” in *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, November 2020.

## Works Cited

Slusser, George Edgar. *The Space Odysseys of Arthur C. Clarke*. Wildside Press, 1977.