



BOOK REVIEW:

*Science Fiction Rebels:
The Story of the Science Fiction Magazines
from 1981 to 1990*

John McLoughlin

Ashley, Mike. *Science Fiction Rebels: The Story of the Science Fiction Magazines from 1981 to 1990*. Liverpool UP, 2021. ISBN 978-1789621716.

This fourth volume in Mike Ashley's comprehensive chronology of the SF magazines offers more of what came before it: a breath-taking depth and breadth of SF knowledge written in clear, comprehensible prose by an experienced and capable writer of encyclopaedias and anthologies. Ashley's own experience as an editor and the thousands of pages of practice producing his first three volumes allow him to hit the ground running, seamlessly blending the book's key goals into one tight narrative: a continuing chronology of the largest, most influential SF magazines; explication of the editorial policies and people which made those magazines successful and survivable; brief analyses of the high-quality stories which emerged from these processes; and a steady, continuous discussion of SF's larger creative development within the format. For the 1980s, this means the emergence and evolution of cyberpunk as a genre-within-a-genre and the experimental, rebellious publishing practices of the smaller presses. These developments occurred because of – and in reaction to – the efforts of the major SF magazines to avoid ossification, and Ashley takes care to make clear that the boundaries between publishing strata, just as those between genres, are far from stable.

While Ashley does a characteristically excellent job of cataloguing the broad spectrum of opinions from within SF, readers should not expect him to weigh in too heavily on cyberpunk's place in the genre. Instead, Ashley

characterises the subgenre's aesthetic development as just another evolutionary point in SF's growth, closely tied to the emergent technologies of the 1980s in the same way that nuclear and valve technologies dominated previous decades. Far from a crystallising moment for SF, cyberpunk "mutated and melded with the other forms of fiction" (51). While the emergence of a distinctive type of story was clear, those writers most closely associated with it – here Ashley lists names like William Gibson, John Shirley and Pat Cadigan, all regular contributors to *Asimov's* – moved on relatively quickly, refusing to be stereotyped (51). This may seem odd considering cyberpunk's enduring allure and resurgence in the modern day, but forward momentum and continual change are hallmarks of SF; thus, no movement – regardless of its impact – is free from the stagnation and contempt induced by familiarity.

As could be expected, one is continually confronted with a deluge of names in *Science Fiction Rebels*: editors, authors, publishers, critics, printers, and financiers. Many will already be familiar to SF audiences, and readers will be pleased to see SF luminaries and their most famous works appearing often in serialised or otherwise nascent forms. Greg Bear's ground-breaking biotech horror *Blood Music* (1985), for example, originated as a short story in 1983, and Ashley takes time out from his narrative's pace to pay special attention to its origins. That pacing is, at times, relentless, and despite the author's deft handling of his book's priorities, the size of the main text – combined with the broad remit and decade-long timeframe – means that events, names, and stories are often referenced in passing without sufficient exposition. By far the greatest criticism to be made of Ashley's history is that it isn't 7000 pages long as his familiarity with the SF world and his evident (and enviable) access to primary materials means an effectively unlimited potential for scholarly discovery. Of note is Ashley's continuous use of his personal correspondence with SF figures to ensure the accuracy of his history and to clarify the events described, which emphasises one of *Science Fiction Rebels's* emergent qualities: SF publishing is a close-knit field with considerable cross-contamination between publications and formats. The personal touch serves two purposes: showing us that SF is modern and alive in the minds of its community, and offering valuable clarification and context to events. Speaking about the role *Interzone* magazine played in fostering emerging talent, Ashley refers to personal correspondence with no less than three contributing authors in the space of two paragraphs (130).

Most of the names listed above – barring Pat Cadigan – are male, and Ashley repeatedly takes note of the largely male audience and contribution demographics for the SF magazines as observed in contemporary polls. Despite this, several the editorial stars of this volume are women, under whose stewardship important magazines like *Asimov's*, *Omni*, and *Amazing Stories* saw rejuvenation and renewal. Figures like Shawna McCarthy, Ellen Datlow, and Elinor Mavor are credited with the discovery of SF classics and, in many cases, some of the most daring acts of publication (91). Ashley's own attitude towards risky publications evidently mirrors that of trailblazing editors like McCarthy as he stands firmly behind their decision to publish difficult stories, even in the face of pushback from readerships and publishers.

Sexual politics reappears briefly in a discussion of *Interzone* and *Analog's* experiments with all-female rosters, including a subsequent backlash from – largely male – readers. Ashley provides some examples of this criticism

and pins the endeavour down to a “damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don’t” (133) scenario, not to be repeated by either magazine. This is one anecdote amongst several that seem a natural jumping-off point for further scholarship, though the section – perhaps through putting to use Ashley’s correspondence power – could have benefited from further women’s testimony.

Since not all names will be familiar even to SF scholars, the author does an excellent job in highlighting which individuals should be paid special attention and of framing the book’s chronological and narrative thrust around their career trajectories and (in most cases) editorial methodologies. For the major remaining SF magazines of the period, this means balancing historical excellence with the constant push towards novelty and experimentation characteristic of the genre; established magazines like *Amazing Stories*, *Analog* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* were, under the stewardship of editors like Edward Ferman and Shawna McCarthy, balancing traditionally appealing stories with cutting-edge work from unconventional writers. *Science Fiction Rebels* serves admirably in this way as both a linear narrative and a flat reference text; the book itself is split decidedly between both functions. The latter half constitutes the book’s appendix, which contains a brief flyover tour of world SF alongside a number of comprehensive directories: magazines, editors, publishers, and cover artists. If academic readers find themselves, like me, left wanting more of the narrative content in Ashley’s volume, then these directories are a tantalizing invitation for continued scholarship. The extraordinarily comprehensive list of SF magazine editors, provided with information about their affiliations and tenures, is another goldmine for budding SF scholars. Non-academic readers will find an interesting history of SF publication and a reading list beyond compare.

As with previous volumes in the series, a large part of Ashley’s sizeable appendix is taken up by rapid-fire briefs outlining the progress made by SF magazines in the non-Anglophone world. These insights into the larger SF universe are fascinating and they serve to provide a broader vision of SF’s progression, often intersecting with the history already tackled in the main text. This expedition in to the broader SF world is, however, where Ashley’s own scholarship is weakest, developed as it is – by the author’s graceful admission – with the considerable assistance of others; clearly, Ashley’s own strength lies in English-language SF. As with other chapters, the curse of Ashley’s evident devotion and scholarly rigour is that readers are left desiring far more than can fit in to one volume.

One thing sadly missing from *Science Fiction Rebels* are reprints of cover and midbook art. Despite repeatedly referring to the beautiful, strange, esoteric, and – sometimes – hackneyed art which helped to make the pulp magazines and their descendants so distinctive on shelves, Ashley’s volume fails to reproduce it, leaving the reader to rely on the author’s descriptions. This seems an odd omission considering the importance of cover and midbook art; it may simply be an issue of cost as Ashley is clearly aware of its importance, even using gorgeous, bizarre, and thematically relevant artwork from the periods being studied for his own front covers. After all, the sort of art which graced the front covers of the SF magazines deserves full-colour reprints – a prohibitively costly endeavour.

Ashley’s prose is precise, conversational, and uncomplicated, and he writes with an authoritative – but not overbearing – voice. It can be easy, amidst

the avalanche of names and events, for readers to gloss over the briefer moments of analysis and exposition, but it would be a mistake to do so as the author's summative remarks are insightful and concise, providing valuable context and creating a narrative to which the reader can tether their attention. For instance, Ashley ends his chapter on the British hard-SF renaissance with a neat summary of the lessons learned:

In the space of three years a mini-boom in British small-press magazines had come and gone, and the message was clear. A new magazine needed considerable initial planning, investment and time and could not be rushed. *Interzone* had followed what seemed to be the one successful route, allowing itself to set down its roots and grow thanks to the investment in time by the editorial collective and establishing a solid subscriber base before expanding. (145)

Speaking here is not just the voice of scholarship, but of experience; the first volume of Ashley's history saw initial publication in 1977 – four years before the events in the current volume even began. Some depth, granted, has been sacrificed for breadth and scope. Despite this, these books represent a supreme effort of scholarship and history-making, and they will be an invaluable tool to academics and fans alike.

Biography: John McLoughlin is a PhD researcher at Cardiff University studying the intersection between the *Exegesis* (2011) of Philip K. Dick and the literary and philosophical writing of Walter Benjamin. McLoughlin is interested in cultural detritus, nonlinear approaches to art and revelation, and alternative cultural and literary perspectives. Originally from Liverpool, John is a lifelong SF fan and fine artist with a keen interest in interdisciplinary studies, plus a passion for bringing unlikely sources of meaning together.