



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Rise and Fall of American Science Fiction,
from the 1920s to the 1960s*

B. L. King

Westfahl, Gary. *The Rise and Fall of American Science Fiction, from the 1920s to the 1960s*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019. ISBN: 978-1-4766-3851-5.

Gary Westfahl, one of SF's best scholars, asserts a wide array of evaluations on SF's most beloved and prolific historical time periods through his book, *The Rise and Fall of American Science Fiction, from the 1920s to the 1960s*. Westfahl engages with many aspects of Golden Age science fiction, including its authors, well-known texts, subgenres, art, trends, and most notably its success and decline. Through a series of article-like chapters, Westfahl covers a lot of ground. He acknowledges that Hugo Gernsback cultivated and established modern science fiction, but eventually circles back to his main argument: it was Robert A. Heinlein who shaped the course of the genre.

To inform this argument, Westfahl posits that in order to understand the full extent of American SF history, it must be taken into account that the SF community has been divided into two groups: the visible fandom that attends conventions, builds networks, and reviews SF, and the silent fandom, which is composed of readers that passively and individually indulge in SF as observers and consumers. Even as Westfahl argues that the rise of paperback SF novels and the splitting of the SF community resulted in the death of SF magazines, he conditions this position by pointing out that he will only be focusing on American SF, which he considers to have been the most influential and important. While this could be taken as slightly ethnocentric, the entire world history of SF could not be adequately commentated in just 250 pages.

Leading into the first chapter, Westfahl details the success of SF and its metamorphosis from an obscure genre to a pop-culture fixture. As science

improved the lives of 20th-century Americans through various inventions, it was embraced and valued more as part of our culture, and it is this acceptance that opened the door for SF's literary success. Westfahl argues that as the genre introduced ideas and inventions that became reality, SF grew through Gernsback's push for scientifically accurate stories. Within this development, Westfahl credits Gernsback with the cultivation of educational value in SF and relies heavily on his opinion that Hugo Gernsback is the sole founder of SF (38). He also points out that Gernsback facilitated the emergence of SF fandom, relating back to his argument of the two sides of fandom. While Westfahl claims that "Most discussions of science fiction before Gernsback had been imperfect, hesitant, even flippant" (9), he does acknowledge John W. Campbell Jr.'s subsequent role in shaping early SF, as well as the impact of space opera, which he elaborates on in later chapters.

In the second chapter, Westfahl contends that while the launch of *Amazing Stories* in 1926 represents SF's first birthday, the August 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories* marks the "Second Birthday of SF" because of its tremendous impact on the rest of the genre's history. This proves to be the case as this issue of *Amazing Stories* is a coveted prize possession of pulp and SF magazine collectors alike. As further support of his argument on the origins of the genre, Westfahl outlines the importance of Edward E. "Doc" Smith's *The Skylark of Space* (1926) and Philip Francis Nowlan's *Armageddon 2419 A.D.* (1928). These two stories represent the birth of the space opera, one of SF's most successful subgenres. However, although Westfahl acknowledges space opera's impact, he claims that it lacks literary and scientific value because its quality of writing was influenced by half-a-cent-a-word pay rates and its "super science" inventions and novums.

Following this discussion on points of origin, in chapter three Westfahl shifts his consideration to SF art by suggesting that the value of the content inside the books and magazines was reflected by the literally out-of-this-world cover art. He argues that instead of approaching the visual SF arts through art history, in the case of SF, artwork can be best understood by examining it in tandem with SF literature. In doing so, he places the birth of SF art around the same time that "Hugo Gernsback gave birth to the idea of science fiction," (78) in 1926 with the launch of *Amazing Stories*. Westfahl argues that when John Campbell takes over *Astounding Stories* around 1938, Howard Browne starts making art that changes the perspective of SF from emphasis on a human accomplishment to our frailty and insignificance in the context of the universe. In this development, Westfahl sees SF art as heavily intertwined with realism and linked to how Edmund Emshwiller from the early 1950s onwards became the jack of all trades in terms of SF art. "Emsh," as he is often named in the fandom, made complex art by playing on previous archetypes of the genre. He turned away from the flat, dark portraits of planets and their heroes by accentuating their bold colors and other-worldliness, often creating unexpectedly hyper-realistic cosmic scenes. Westfahl closes this discussion by arguing that the cover art of texts correlates to their genre identity, providing an insightful and useful observation for scholars to further research.

In chapters four and six, Westfahl argues that pulp magazine SF has literary value that cannot be ignored. At the same time, however, he excludes space opera from this consideration and notes that it needs to be academically investigated further because its works have not been included in science fiction

college curriculums, even though they are similar in literary quality to the classics that are being taught. Still, as he frequently does throughout the chapters, he also leaves this conversation mostly open ended for future researchers and students to consider. In a similar vein, Westfahl then discusses young SF readers' relationship to SF pulps, including his own experience, which is a delightful, personal touch. At the same time, he points out other useful avenues of scholarly exploration, for example, suggesting that young scholars may compare Asimov's *I, Robot* to its antithetical 2004 film adaptation to answer the question: Why, if SF has matured, has it become less attractive in our technologically advanced Hollywood?

Disrupting his pattern of suggestions and questions, in chapter five Westfahl disputes Patricia Monk's article "Not Just 'Cosmic Skullduggery': A Partial Reconsideration of Space Opera," in which she surveys the popularity and survival of space opera in the current SF literary environment and argues that an attitude of bias has persisted within the literary field. Westfahl agrees with Monk's approach, but not her conclusion, and claims she lacks "an overarching knowledge of the general critical heritage of modern science fiction" (77). As a response to Monk, Westfahl argues that although space opera is a subgenre of SF, its qualities do not make it highbrow; however, he admits that space opera's success stems from its abundance of exhilaration. He further investigates the historic disapproval of space opera while acknowledging it has since evolved to include more scientific attributes. This leads him to the complex and nuanced conclusion that while space opera was and is seen as juvenile, the escapism it offers is often considered the element by which the subgenre earns its inclusion in SF literature.

Furthering Westfahl's studies of space opera, chapter seven points out a fork in the road of SF history, that stems from two of SF's greatest space opera writers. Westfahl suggests that SF could have gone in two different directions: The Heinlein path or the A. E. van Vogt path. Westfahl uses the two authors to represent different early styles of SF and space opera. Overall, it seems that Westfahl has a tendency to interpret SF as a series of binary relationships. In this particular dichotomy, the Heinlein path of SF writing emphasizes hard science and its social impacts, while the Van Vogt way emphasizes thrilling, fast-paced stories of aliens and destruction. In Westfahl's view, SF from the 1920s through the 1960s adhered more to Heinlein's style, and this is something that he also presents as superior to what he considers the pulp action variety.

In chapter eight, Westfahl expands upon his definition of space opera by locating its origin in the 1940s and examining specimens and characteristics of the subgenre. Upon further dissection, he theorizes that there are three types of SF: the pulp classics that shaped the genre, the space opera, and lastly, the conspiracy theorist SF regarding ancient aliens and UFOs. As a sub-argument, he uniquely argues that since conspiracies cannot be proven as real, but are still "scientific," they must be regarded as science fiction, another interesting avenue, he proclaims, for further research. This chapter, however, perhaps could have been placed earlier in the book since it clarifies the qualities he uses to argue against Monk.

After the back and forth regarding space opera, one of the most useful examinations of the history of SF lies in chapter nine. Westfahl discusses in great detail the shortcomings and successes of SF anthologies along with their

different methodologies and contents, and in so doing, he presents a quintessential historical research opportunity for future scholars and anthologists. In Westfahl's view, anthologies went out of fashion because they lacked consistency of character and world-building. While one could dispute his claim, considering that anthologies such as the successful line of *The Year's Best Science Fiction* volumes and *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction* are doing quite well, his research on anthologies will be of great academic use.

In the later chapters, Westfahl explores the maturing and expansion of SF into new mediums like comics, films, and television while the staple authors like Isaac Asimov expanded into other literary genres. Westfahl briefly mentions the impact of SF on cartoons and the DC comics; however, he spends the majority of the chapter recounting the multiple tales of the *Superman* comics and their impact on the genre. For Westfahl, the editor Mort Weisenger had the greatest influence on Superman, and in his view, the impact of comic books on the greater genre of SF has been underrated, a point many would agree with. He also briefly mentions the impact of SF art on vinyl record covers and the emergence of SF merchandise as a type of three-dimensional SF, which is a much-needed analysis that could very well deserve its own field of research. Westfahl also briefly mentions the role of *Rod Sterling's The Twilight Zone* on SF television, but unfortunately does not dig deeper into this topic. For the majority of the chapter, Westfahl brings comics into the discourse mostly to provide avenues for other scholars to continue his examination through other impactful comic book characters, although the move is also a much-needed extension of his argument.

Westfahl concludes his overall argument by discussing SF's fragmentation between novels, paperbacks, comic books, video games, TV series, and movies. Making this more specific, Westfahl documents the roles of individual authors in the decline of the SF magazine, noting how some sought to distance themselves from the magazines and others could not afford to continue. Westfahl also suggests that as New Wave SF did not situate itself within SF magazines, this furthered the decline. While the idea of the publishing industry forcing the SF magazines into scarcity is not a new theory, Westfahl's discussion of the fragmentation of SF into TV, video games, and so on does present potential for a more complete understanding as to why the classic SF literature of the 1920s to 1960s came to an end.

The biggest strength of Westfahl's book is the degree to which it presents new opportunities and questions for younger scholars to explore. As such, Westfahl's questions and presentation of these new directions helps to further develop scholarship, and he does strongly encourage scholars to persist in these inquiries through his suggestions and advice.

However, one of the hinges of Westfahl's argument is that Hugo Gernsback is the sole founder of SF (38). This claim is problematic since it negates the work of figures like Jules Verne, Johannes Kepler, Mary Shelly, Edgar Allan Poe, and others. He also dismisses SF art made before Gernsback's time, such as the various paintings of constellations and planets, and even cave drawings that have been considered as early SF art by some scholars. What is more, the organization and tone of the text makes it seem that the book serves as a collection of Westfahl's opinions and views on certain aspects of SF instead of a recounted history. Because of these reasons, I would not consider this one of Westfahl's best works, which is not especially heavy criticism since he has

authored many quintessential pieces and contributed to the SF field in irreplaceable ways. At the same time, in his usual character, he does conduct and present many aspects of research that prior scholarship has not accomplished and makes this book an efficient supplemental text to scholarship of SF history.

Overall, *The Rise and Fall of American Science Fiction, from the 1920s to the 1960s* holds up Westfahl's intentions to provide an overview and supplementary material to the history of SF. Within his discussion, Westfahl points to important conversations regarding SF's history, and although this does not represent his best work, Westfahl quite impressively engages with all of the most prolific topics within SF scholarship that one could hope to investigate in 250 pages.

Biography: Bryce King graduated in 2022 with her English MA from Florida Atlantic University with a concentration in SF and Fantasy. Her master's thesis is an ecocritical look at *The Witcher* series, and she is a proud working member of Heartwood Books and Art, an antiquarian and rare book seller. Bryce has presented at the ICFA, PCA, and SFRA conferences amongst others between the years of 2021 and 2023. She has also proudly published three book reviews and one research journal article.