



BOOK REVIEW:
*Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on
Alternate History Fiction*

Soni Wadhwa

Morgan, Glyn, and C. Palmer-Patel, editors. *Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction*. Liverpool University Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-802076950.

Alternate history is a relatively understudied subgenre within speculative fiction as it tends to be subsumed by broader themes of time travel. Additionally, it is often dismissed by historians and scholars of historical fiction as rather far-fetched and by scholars of science fiction as mainstream historical fiction. However, given its ubiquity in television, cinema, and literature, alternative history deserves to be seen as a distinct subgenre with a distinct literary history. To this end, in *Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction*, Glyn Morgan and C. Palmer-Patel identify the contours of alternate history as a subject deserving of critical inquiry and contextualize its critical discussion, history (literary as well as literary critical), and defining features. The individual chapters engage in critical readings of one or more texts of alternate history. The editors' introduction works as a good resource for those interested in the subject, while the chapters represent diverse entry points into texts with macro and the micro levels of historical change.

In their introduction to the volume, the editors attempt a coherent narrative of the knowledge around alternative history as a genre – which works very well for those new to the way this domain has been studied so far. Also known as allohistory, parahistory, uchronia, or secret history, alternate history is discussed by the editors as a form of (history) writing that goes back to Livy's ninth book of *Ab Urbe Condita*, written around 35-25 BCE, in which Alexander is portrayed as expanding his empire to include the West. However, they also see Geoffroy-Château's *Histoire de la Monarchie universelle : Napoléon et la*

conquête du monde (1812–1832), translated as *History of the Universal Monarchy: Napoleon and the Conquest of the World*, as the first work of alternate history fiction and consider Murray Leinster's short story "Sidewise in Time" (1934) a central classic of the genre. Indeed, the prestigious award in the genre is called "Sidewise Award for Alternate History." While these details may sound like commonplace historical points on alternate history, they help clarify the first principles behind the study of the subgenre as a whole and also frame the individual chapters in the volume as exercises in close readings of the texts chosen for the study.

In addition to providing the abovementioned overview, the editors point out that there have not been many investigations into formal aspects of the subgenre or into how it interacts with larger questions of literature and popular culture. The editors also note the sparse but theoretically significant body of scholarly work undertaken prior to this volume. This includes book-length studies by Karen Hellekson, Kathleen Singles, Derek J. Thiess, and Catherine Gallagher, who have contributed to the theorization of the field by identifying subgenres within alternate history, raising questions of free will, interrogating the relationship between truth and history, and distinguishing between nonfiction and fiction. While the studies cited and discussed by the editors seem to contradict their argument that the subgenre remains understudied, they also point towards the various questions that still need to be explored, especially as the subgenre has gained new popularity and the concepts of alternative history can be used to examine all kinds of cultural texts. Through the introduction, Morgan and Palmer-Patel further seek to stimulate debates and discussions in the subject, an intention visible in the chapters they include in the volume.

The chapters dealing with macro views of history present an anti-white and anti-patriarchal stance to mainstream history as reflected in the works of alternate history chosen for study. Some of these chapters unpack non-Western views (albeit not necessarily written by non-Westerners), such as Jonathan Rayner's chapter on Japanese film and anime dealing with alternate Pacific War histories, in order to critique Western hegemony over history. Others look at specific events, such as the era of space exploration or the 9/11 attacks, to examine gender or emotions as areas impacted by historicizing. Anna MacFarlane's chapter on Lavie Tidhar's 2011 *Osama: A Novel* is an engaging example of the latter. As the editors put it, these chapters "redistribute spheres of narratological power (from west to east, from male to female) by literally rewriting the historical narrative" (24). The concerns of these readings are informed by large-scale events, and thus the treatments of these themes are informed by what is referred to as the "great men" notion of history. MacFarlane, for instance, proposes a way of reading the text through the invocation of affect. She notes that the novel's focus on fantasy and pulp fiction evoke affect in ways that "a jaded realism" cannot achieve. Citing the work of Lauren Berlant, Brian Massumi, and Sara Ahmed on emotion, she locates the discussion of the form of an alternate history text in the contemporary political dilemmas around post-truth.

However, the volume also addresses the somewhat opposing conception of history that looks at past events not in terms of great personalities, but in terms of socio-cultural forces. Several contributors to the volume discuss a variety of works through the lens of the ordinary, or the individual, to tease out how this conception of history lends itself to fictionalizing. Some readings

explore the relationship between the historical and the apocryphal, a formal innovation of weird fiction that uses secret history as a literary technique. Similarly, other chapters demonstrate how the location of intimate relationships (as opposed to larger political events) can be examined as moments worth dwelling on in fiction. These chapters present “a metatextual leap and challenge the conventions of alternate history whilst continuing to problematize historical narratology” (25). The editors group the first set of chapters, part one of the book, as ideas that challenge historical narratives while the second set, in part two, challenge the conventions of alternate history as a genre.

In the first part of the volume, Adam Roberts’s “Napoleon as Dynamite: Geoffroy’s Napoleon Apocryphe and Science Fiction as Alternate History” begins with the observation that Geoffroy’s 1836 novel *Napoleon et la conquete du monde (1812-1832)* might be the first alternate history novel that sought to re-imagine the French Revolution. Roberts goes on to contrast Geoffroy’s work with Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* to note that history, as Tolstoy saw it, cannot be re-imagined: it is simply too huge a task for an individual. Chris Pak discusses Kim Stanley Robinson’s 2002 novel *The Years of Rice and Salt*, an alternate history that spans from the aftermath of the Black Death plague in the 14th century to today, suggesting that the future is shaped and structured by individuals and societies alike. Jonathan Rayner’s chapter on the Japanese battleship Yamato that was sunk by American bombers at Okinawa in 1945, on the other hand, looks at multiple texts (Japanese as well as American) that reimagine the event. The different treatments of the history of the ship, Rayner argues, contest the idea of past as a fixed entity. After this, Brian Baker’s reading of Ian Sales’s series *Apollo Quarter (2012-2016)* revisits the time of NASA’s inception. In his analysis, Baker examines the deeply male-centric history and discourse of space exploration. Finally, Anne Macfarlane’s chapter on *Osama: A Novel (2011)* highlights the use of the register of “emotional historiography” by its author Lavie Tidhar. This kind of historiography is rich for its genre-bending style, in that it intertwines alternate history with detective fiction, humor, and steampunk to convey the trauma unleashed by 9/11.

While these chapters from part one explore how the texts chosen for study challenge the idea of mainstream history through eastern or female perspectives, the second part of the volume takes a formalist view in examinations of how selected texts manipulate the genre of alternate history. Reflecting on Alfred Bester’s oeuvre, Molly Cobb argues that his work needs to be seen in terms of “anti-alternate histories” because they convey that history cannot be altered. In a way, they speak about the ridiculousness of the project of reimagining or rewriting history. Similarly, thinking about the ontology of the genre of alternate history, Derek Thiess argues that it needs to be seen in the light of secret history or the apocryphal. Paying attention to Juan Miguel Aguilera’s Spanish work *La locura de Dios* [“The Madness of God”] (1998), he makes a case for looking at history as storytelling to explain how events that do not fit such narrative needs get left out and acquire the status of the apocryphal. This connection of the genre of alternate history with the apocryphal is further explored by Chloe Germaine Buckley, who looks at the anthology *Shadows Over Baker Street*, which is a collection of stories featuring an alternate Sherlock Holmes who deals with cases that are a blend of H. P. Lovecraft’s cosmic-horror mythology and rational detection fiction. Andrew M. Butler’s

discussion, on the other hand, locates the genre of alternate history in the personal space; that is, history is not seen as something to do with politics but with interpersonal relationships. His focus is on John Wyndham's short story "Random Quest" (1962) and its adaptation *Quest for Love* (1962). The final chapter by Karen Hellekson examines how the genre of alternate history has expanded from print towards the mushrooming of televisual texts. Thus, Hellekson explores the way alternate history has found a far wider audience in its televisual than its literary form.

Molly Cobb's chapter on Alfred Bester's stories, especially "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed," is part of this microhistorically oriented section of the book, and it is the strongest one in the volume. However, unlike the other chapters that are dedicated to identifying the ways in which the individual and the historical intersect, Cobb suggests that alternate history is too complex to fit within the micro/macro binary. Bester's story is about a scientist who wants to kill his wife when he discovers her extramarital affair. However, he is unable to wipe out her existence in spite of killing her grandmother and going even farther back in time to kill several real historical persons. At the end, the scientist learns that he has not been able to murder anyone because one can only travel back into one's own timeline and killing anyone in it does not have consequences on the universal past. In her discussion of the story, Cobb points out that Bester uses the individual to suggest that alternate history is a project impossible to attain. Examining the text in the context of alternate history, she finds it "a failed alternate history" (122), an idea that runs contrary to the approaches taken by Bester's contemporaries, who were quite excited by the possibilities of alternate history.

Thus, given the diversity of themes and texts in the volume, *Sideways in Time* maps the area of alternate history for further critical reflection with questions pertaining to tensions among past, present, and future. For instance, instead of seeing alternate history only as a niche, one might feel further empowered to ask larger questions of the grand narratives of time and history themselves. In this way, the subgenre could actually activate mainstream political questions asked of history. For instance, in South Asia, the Islamic past is viewed as that of intruders and invaders who desecrated temples. The minority communities in India continue to bear the brunt of accusations and hatred aimed at Muslim dynasties. It is in such issues that the questions of human agency vis-à-vis history, as raised by the editors of the volume, make sense. For instance, can one intervene in the timeline as we largely know it today? Would that intervention translate into a parallel world? And more importantly, will such texts questioning mainstream narratives of history change anything about the prejudice against any communities?

These are important questions raised by the editors in their afterword to the volume. Together, they present further possibilities of inquiry for scholars to interrogate when conducting further, newer, and more context-specific investigations not covered in the volume (such as postcolonial contexts and writers). For instance, though there is a discussion of eastern texts (such as the Japanese anime) in the book, there is hardly any focus on South Asian writers talking about time and history. There are no takeaways from the perspective of Afrofuturism, either. Given that history itself is such a contested domain where narratives about truth and power are constantly challenged, the task of writing alternate histories and engaging with them may seem daunting. In presenting

these questions, however, the editors point towards the moral and intellectual compass to which researchers need to hold themselves accountable. The central takeaway from the book is that alternate history is a vibrant niche that intersects with history, science, and literature in interesting ways. At the same time, the mostly Western focus of this volume makes it clear that it needs to be supplemented with more in-depth studies from the non-Western world. The audience the editors have in mind for the volume – researchers as well as students who are interested in exploring the genre – are likely to welcome this setting of new discussions in motion. Because the range of texts represented in the collection is diverse, one is very likely to find critical commentary on a text one has read while also being stimulated to explore something previously unread. Further, considering that there have hardly been any book-length studies on alternate history since the publication of *Sidewise in Time* in 2019, readers may appreciate the challenges involved in organizing a detailed study of this subgenre that is characterized by strong ties to politics, history, and science fiction. Especially ties that vary in nature and intensity from one region to another may prove fruitful avenues for future research.

Biography: Soni Wadhwa is assistant professor in the Department of English at SRM University, Andhra Pradesh (India). She was Joint Director (Research) at Maritime History Society, a think tank in Mumbai researching maritime history in interdisciplinary facets. Her public writing has appeared in *Asian Review of Books*, *Full Stop*, and *South China Morning Post*.