The Genre. A Geological Survey

Roger Zelazny

It was nearly a half century ago that Hugo Gernsback said, “Let there be Amazing Stories,” then saw that it was good. By this act evolution commenced and set out for science fiction as we know it today. Similar magazines subsequently appeared, and the first decade or so of the phenomenon represented a kind of primal ooze out of which more complex life forms were eventually to arise.

Speaking generally, in keeping with the requirements of a geological survey, the first major period to follow was the development, in the 1940s, of the “classic” science fiction story. This was the time wherein some emphasis actually came to be placed upon the scientific content of a particular piece. Here, names such as Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, L. Sprague de Camp, Lester Del Rey, Fritz Leiber and Theodore Sturgeon came to be associated with a projective or extrapolative sort of writing, with scientific generalizations extended beyond the contemporary state of technology into a future where, as Sturgeon has put it, such questions as “If this goes on...?” and “What if...?” were considered an integral part of the story’s structure. This, in its purest form, was considered by Kingsley Amis as, at the least, approaching an “idea as hero” situation.

The answers to Sturgeon’s questions resulted in two species of story, which Asimov has referred to, respectively, as the “chess game” story and the “chess problem” story. In the chess game story, beginning with the present, known state of the world, situations are extended into the future in a logical, rational fashion and there played out to a dramatic conclusion. The chess problem story, on the other hand, while rational is not necessarily logical (i.e., deductive), in terms of the initial, given situation. It commences with the pieces in positions which are not often likely to arise in the course of ordinary play. Granting this, however, the normal rules obtain and the exercise in speculation may proceed.

This stage in science fiction was at least partly determined by the background of the leading writers of the period. These men were, by and large, scientifically oriented, a thing which may have attracted them to the field initially and contributed to their efforts to purify its scientific content once they had entered it.

The late ’40s and early ’50s saw new writers entering the area⁠—Poul Anderson, Gordon R. Dickson and Philip José Farmer, to name but a few⁠—whose individual touches served to broaden the field of speculation. The magazines flourished and proliferated at an unprecedented rate. By 1953, the science fiction magazine market reached its peak, became overextended and fell apart under the general economic pressures of the recession. Only a half dozen of the magazines survived. Many of the writers at this time turned to the paperback and hardcover book markets as an outlet for their material.

This displacement from the magazine to the book format ultimately proved a benefit. While the genre’s intellectual content had seldom conflicted with taboos in the magazine industry, these restrictions did nevertheless exist, and by hindsight may be seen as having exercised some control over the nature of the material considered. These restrictions were not so severe in the book industry.

Sturgeon’s questions can, of course, be addressed to other subjects than the physical sciences. The social sciences were another source of material, and⁠—of equal importance in times to follow⁠—such areas of thought and activity as theology and sex had also come within reach.

As a result of some of these factors, the 1950s represented a period when the novel of sociological speculation came into greater prominence. In general, whether from habits of thought or the necessity for an economy of argument in a science fiction story, the sex was not overworked and theology remained mostly in the background. Notable exceptions are Farmer’s “The Lovers”, Del Rey’s “For I Am a Jealous People” and Blish’s A Case of Conscience.

In the 1960s, the balance remained tilted toward the novel, the remaining magazines held their own while changing sufficiently to keep pace with the times and more new writers entered the area. There then occurred a reaction. Whether it came from a distrust of the optimistic scientism of the ’40s, a disillusionment precluding the reasonably good-natured social speculation of the ’50s, or simply a vexation with the relatively staid structure and nuts-and-bolts prose of the science fiction story itself, the new writers⁠—such as J. G. Ballard, Thomas Disch and Samuel R. Delany⁠—devoted a good part of their energy to experiments with style and form. Sex and theology were now also exploited. The idea had ceased to be the hero, if it ever truly was, and a preoccupation with method took hold of the field. Appropriately dubbed the New Wave, this form of writing reached its most intense level just before the end of the decade at which time it began to provoke a reaction of its own.

Fairness, however, requires the observation that the concerns of the ’60s brought to the area a measure of stylistic élan and a quality of introspection which eventually resulted in a less manipulative, more humanistic approach to the process.

And so to the Holocene:

The current situation possesses three distinguishing features. First, the balance has swung from the novel back to the short story, a thing which occurred without a resurgence of the magazines. A great number of publishers are now bringing out anthologies of all-original science fiction short stories, and any remaining magazine taboos are thereby skirted. Second, the beginnings of a renewed concern with themes involving the physical sciences has been noted, along with a judicious restoration of sociological speculation. Third, the stylistic experimentation of the ’60s appears to have been absorbed successfully into the greater whole.

Accordingly, the current situation seems best characterized as a period of synthesis.

Writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Larry Niven, Robert Silverberg, Philip K. Dick and Harlan Ellison⁠—all of whom have lived through some of the phases above⁠—seem to have achieved increased mastery within the past few years. Outstanding among the newer writers now receiving notice are George Alec Effinger, Gardner Dozois and Joe Haldeman, who may be seen as representing this recently integrated approach.

The current state of the area and its present relationship to life and letters in general was summarized by Ursula K. Le Guin this past April on the occasion of her acceptance of the National Book Award for The Farthest Shore:

“...Sophisticated readers are accepting the fact that an improbable and unmanageable world is going to produce an improbable and hypothetical art. At this point, realism is perhaps the least adequate means of understanding or portraying the incredible realities of our existence. A scientist who creates a monster in his laboratory; a librarian in the library of Babel; a wizard unable to cast a spell; a space ship having trouble in getting to Alpha Centauri: all these may be precise and profound metaphors of the human condition. The fantasist, whether he uses the ancient stereotypes of myth and legend or the younger ones of science and technology, may be talking as seriously as any sociologist⁠—and a good deal more directly⁠—about human life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived...”

Notes

Author and poet Kingsley Amis was best known for his first novel, Lucky Jim; he was fond of science fiction and edited the sf anthology series Spectrum. The Holocene is a geological epoch that began 10,000 years ago (after the last Ice Age) and continues through today; Zelazny was using the geological metaphor in describing the history of the science fiction field.