Reading for Pleasure

World(s) enough and Time

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"The purpose of the Universe is really quite straightforward," said the Lama, "it is to write out the nine billion names of God in our special nine-letter alphabet. It would normally take us fifteen thousand years, but with your computer it could be done in one hundred days." Arthur C Clarke's famous story goes on to relate how the company agrees to help with this unusual project. Some hours before it is due to be completed, the two cynical computer experts, having received their payment, decide to depart. They do not wish to be there when the computer finishes the print-out and the Lamas learn that their long-held beliefs are delusions. The task ends just as the two are riding away on horseback towards their plane. They look upwards—"Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out." I have been hooked on science fiction or SF, as it is called, since my salad days, as firmly as was De Quincey by his opium, and like his opium it entered and reshaped my dreams.

Fantasy themes

Fantasy and SF owe their origins to the greatest writers of all time. The Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* describes a journey in what sounds like a spaceship, Plato's *Republic* is a Utopia, while Aristophanes's *The Frogs* tells of a journey in hell. Nearer home Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the works of Poe all revolve around fantasy themes, as do the stories of Jules Verne and some works by Balzac and Guy de Maupassant. It was H G Wells, however, who initiated me into the world of SF. His scientific approach appealed to my background. At the age of 14 I read his complete works, my local library having large de-luxe editions that were beautifully illustrated. Wells, who lived from 1866 to 1946, used up all the best plots, according to his followers, and who can argue with that statement? In awe I travelled with him in his *Time Machine* and dreamt about those "bleached Morlocks," cannibals from an underworld set far in the future. I fled from the Martians and their deathray in *The War of the Worlds*, and was haunted by his *Door in the Wall*, where a sad and lonely child (perhaps Wells himself?) seeks refuge when events prove too much for him. Through the door is a demi-Eden where he finds love and compassion. We are left to ponder if the door leads to delusion or another reality.

Popular SF started in those luridly illustrated magazines that sprang up in the 1920s and flourished into the late 40s and 50s—*Amazing Stories*, *Astounding Stories*, *Tales of Wonder*, *Fantasy*, *Galaxy*, etc, were all mopped up by the public. Hugo Gernsback, one of the earliest editors, always insisted on up-to-

the-minute scientific fact, and a near surrealistic art form blossomed at the same time to depict those "bug-eyed monsters" in suitable environments. Edward E Smith and John W Campbell were two famous writers who helped to expand SF, the latter editing the prestigious *Galaxy Magazine*. Although it started as a minor aberration, SF has now blossomed into mainstream literature, and some consider these writings to be the myths and legends of the future. Many works warn about the future and so perhaps help to avert possible disaster. Certainly SF had prepared much of the American public for the Apollo project, and indeed many of the scientists themselves were SF buffs. Machines with artificial intelligence, the robots, now a reality, were first forecast in the 1920s. The word "robot" itself comes from the Slavonic word meaning work and arose from Karel Capek's play *RUR*, standing for Rossum's Universal Robots, written in 1921. In the story Old Rossum invents a formula to make artificial people in a factory—they eventually destroy mankind, but two aberrant male and female forms are left to start again. Capek's writings were predicative—he even forecast atomic energy, and one of his SF plays was turned into an opera, *The Macropoulos Case*, by Janacek. It was Isaac Asimov, however, the Hammurabi of SF, who coined the "Three Laws of Robotics," in a story published in 1940, and these laws will apply today. They are:

- (1) A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction allow a human being to come to harm.
- (2) A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the first law.
- (3) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the first or second laws. (*Handbook of Robotics*. 56th ed. 2058 AD.)

A story by Asimov tells of an expedition to a planet on another galaxy, following in the footsteps of a previous expedition that had been mysteriously destroyed. Included in the team is an interdisciplinary scientist, who irritates the other experts because he knows a little of each man's field. The landing party are soon in trouble, experiencing attacks by weird monsters. The experts are baffled as the landing party is endangered and depleted. The generalist saves them, however. He notices the high boron content of the rocks and recalling the small print in a textbook of pathology realises the crew are developing an encephalopathy due to the boron, so-called "boronosis." The monsters are hallucinations that reflect brain damage. Only a man skilled in many fields would be capable of such lateral thinking—a plea for the generalist.

Problem of true reality

The Yellow Pill poses the problem of what is the true reality. Written by Rog Phillips, it describes a suspect being interrogated by an impassive inquisitor. The victim accuses his tormentor of being insane and begs him to take his "yellow pill." There is a struggle and the interrogator has to strangle his victim. He then belatedly takes the pill and the scene changes

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from a London room to a spaceship. The interrogator gazes in horror at his murdered co-pilot. We never fully know which is the true reality.

When I was a medical student I had to present the case of a physicist of some repute who had developed a presenile dementia and lost his academic faculties. This made *Flowers for Algernon*, a cautionary tale by Daniel Keyes, especially poignant for me. The simple-minded eponymous hero is a cleaner who does menial work sweeping out classrooms. He has simple lessons, but is teased by his classmates. Unfortunately for him he is given a drug by some scientists that has previously been used only on rats. Like the rats, his intelligence soars, and he writes brilliant papers on mathematics and sociobiology. At one phase Algernon wonders how his professorial colleagues could have attained such eminence when they are so stupid. The treated rats, however, suddenly start to regress, and poor Algernon also loses his gifts. Suddenly he cannot understand his own works, and very soon he is back in his remedial class. His teacher cannot look at him without tears in her eyes, which Algernon cannot understand.

The humour of SF

Not that SF is without humour, however. In *The Snowball Effect* Katherine McLean describes the meteoric rise of a public speaker. A scientist gives his elderly mother a formula for successful speaking. She has to address a knitting class but lacks self-confidence. The formula works only too well. Before

long, the whole of the galaxy tunes in breathlessly to await her next instructions. *The Dybbuk of Mazel Tov 4* by Robert Silverberg gives a moving and hilarious account of the problems encountered when the indigenous inhabitants of this planet wish to become Jewish—the fact that they have six limbs and green fur makes the decision no easier for the rabbis.

It is perhaps apt, in a time of threatened nuclear extinction, that Robert Sheckly should describe in his *The Battle* the day of Armageddon. Satan and his followers meet not man, but man's creation, the robots. During a terrible battle which man surveys, the robots are nearly destroyed. Victory, however, is snatched from the jaws of defeat. The Lord of Hosts Himself and His angels arrive, and in an Ezekiel-like scene, "the twisted and scorched metal of the robots is straightened and made whole . . .," and to the growing disbelief of the spectators, the robots are allowed to ascend to heaven. Aghast, the men rush forward to rectify the awful mistake, "but the Lord of Hosts and all His angels had departed."

Time holds no bar for SF, both in its content and its effect on local events. Whether faced with long plane flights or sitting on wet English beaches, or in those interminable hours between surgeries and clinics, SF carries me instantly to the Pleiades or to the depths of Orion, where I struggle with problems of logic or ethics or medical management of alien intelligencies that resemble seaweed in appearance. SF holds up a mirror to our possible future reflections.

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MATERIA NON MEDICA

Squire of all England

There is a bus every two hours, the odd tractor, and an occasional flock of sheep. Add to this the clatter and chatter of the children on their bicycles stealing an extra hour before bed time and you have a total day's noise at Hutton Buscel. This tiny hamlet hugging a ridge to the north of the Scarborough/Pickering road guards its peace and tranquility jealously.

Nevertheless, this quiet village was the early home of a rumbustious character who was to earn for himself the title of "Squire of all England." Born in 1786, George Osbaldeston gained fame as a boxer, cricketer, shot, steeple-chaser, jockey, and gambler. He excelled in every sport but squandered a fortune in making his reputation as a sportsman. Even as a young undergraduate he could not resist a wager—the Master of his college complained of him, "I can't bear a Yorkshireman because he always offers to back his opinion with a bet." Late in life Osbaldeston admitted that he had lost nearly £200 000 by betting and keeping racehorses and another £100 000 by the misdeeds of his agents.

He was the best single wicket cricketer and fastest bowler of his time, but it was his horsemanship that brought him particular fame. He rode with "legs appearing to belong to the animal rather than him, so firm and steady was his seat." He bought the Mastership of the Quorn in Leicestershire for £20 000 in 1817 and hunted furiously until 1821 when he sustained a terrible compound fracture of the leg which forced his resignation. Such was his resilience that after 14 months he was mobile again and had repurchased the Quorn for a second time from 1823-1827. His obsession with hunting was insatiable and at various times he was Master of Hounds at Barton, Atherstone, Hambledon, Thurlow, and Pytchley.

At the age of 44, still unable to resist an attractive bet, he wagered 1000 guineas that he could race 200 miles in 10 consecutive hours. Using 50 horses and changing his mounts every four hours he succeeded in covering a planned course, in stormy weather, at Newmarket in 8 hours 42 minutes—thus averaging 22.99 miles per hour. He did not know that in addition to winning his bet this would earn him the distinction of an entry in the *Guinness Book of Records*! The astonishing nature of this feat emerges when one compares it with the fastest speed for a three-mile race by a racehorse at 34.29 miles per hour, achieved by Farragut at Agua Caliente in 1941.

George Osbaldeston lived in Hutton Buscel until 1808 when he left, as befits his character, in a blaze of glory. In a noisy and indulgent party his home, the Old Hall, caught fire and by the time the fire engine had driven from Scarborough, more than half the hall was destroyed. The old village has never been quite the same since.—P J TOGHILL, consultant physician, Nottingham.

Privileged perspective

It is a rare thing for a non-climber to stand at the top of a high mountain range. Throughout the world the tallest peaks are mostly attainable only with ropes, pitons, and an unshakable head for heights. Even Mont Blanc requires a prodigious effort for the untrained.

Yet almost within sight of Europe stands a cluster of peaks, most of them taller than the magic figure of 4000 m, all of them grouped at the top of one of the most impressive ridges imaginable, and every one conquerable with no more than a little fitness and endeavour. The High Atlas is nothing if not spectacular. The proximity of the summits allows an almost complete panorama from each of them, although the highest (Mt Toubkal, 13 665 ft) affords the most enthralling view.

From the topmost point of a bare rocky mountain one can look down: east—to see the ridge gradually disappearing over hundreds of miles towards Algeria; west—to discern the same irregular ridge as it spans the vast distances towards Agadir and the Atlantic; north—whence, from green valley bases several thousands of feet below and the grey stone villages where we have received such open hospitality, come the faintly audible cries of the Berbers, echoing up the massive buttresses of rock; and beyond, the rapid fall of the mountains to the limitless plain of Morocco, with Marrakesh just distinguishable and, perhaps, even a strip of sea-blue at the coast; and south—with plunging descents to an arid plateau, the distant Anti-Atlas sparkling in the blazing sun, and the beginning of the endless wide Sahara.

It is a sight of breathtaking grandeur. Its vast towering emptiness fills the holiday-maker with awe as he feels the proximity of the sky. And it does not seem difficult to understand that the rock upon which his well-worn boots are standing is indeed supporting the frame of heaven itself.—CHARLES G MACKWORTH YOUNG, registrar in rheumatology and general medicine, London.