

WHOSE CANON?

In 2008, I participated in a panel discussion on an “SF Canon for Short Fiction” at the annual Armadillocon in Austin, Texas. We were asked to consider whether there are “short stories and novellas that we all should have read, or is there no required reading in this form?” The program book said further: “Our panelists will try to determine if there is a canon, and talk about what to add to it or what should be in it.” Fortunately, no one tasked us with the job of whom to leave out of this imaginary canon.

Co-panelist Brad Denton wisely brought along a copy of *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Vol., 1*, which was edited by Robert Silverberg and published in 1970. This is a collection of stories that predated the establishment of the Nebula Awards and which the Science Fiction Writers of America selected by popular vote. With authors like Stanley G. Weinbaum, Robert A. Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, A.E. van Vogt, Lewis Padgett (pseudonym of Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore), Clifford D. Simak, Fredric Brown, Murray Leinster, Judith Merril, Cordwainer Smith, Ray Bradbury, C.M. Kornbluth, Arthur C. Clarke, Alfred Bester, Damon Knight, Daniel Keyes, and Roger Zelazny on its table of contents, it’s an excellent book that does a pretty good job of representing a thirty-year period from 1934 to 1963. Those who are interested in the history of SF, any writers who don’t want to reinvent the wheel, and anyone looking for a great book should certainly include it on their reading list.

As with any anthology, though, there are some major omissions. Works by Frederik Pohl, Poul Anderson, Jack Vance, and Jack Williamson eventually show up in volumes two and three. Stories by Andre Norton, Anne McCaffrey, Kathleen MacLean, Zenna Hernderson,

Kit Reed, Kate Wilhem, and numerous other fine authors don’t appear in any of the volumes.

Luckily, we were a verbose group and none of us were shy about suggesting who merited membership in this club. Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines a canon as “a: an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture b: the authentic works of a writer c: a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works <the *canon* of great literature>.” Science fiction is a young literature. It hasn’t had the three hundred years that it took to collate the Christian Bible or the thousands of years that have contributed to the ossification of the “Western Literary Canon.”

As we moved into the sixties, seventies, and later, our panel discussion mainly seemed to consist of each of us talking about lists of authors we enjoyed and then adding new ones as the next person’s list reminded us of someone else. The conversation was chaotic, but fun, too, and I don’t think we came within a million miles of constructing an SF canon. I don’t want to turn this editorial into an inventory of contemporary authors, so I will resist naming names here, but we did come up with a huge roster of diverse and fascinating writers.

The urge to make lists of “the best SF authors, books, and stories” seems to be a compelling one. The need to jump all over these lists and dash the daylights out of them with a hammer seems to be equally strong. While these lists are omnipresent, most recently they seem to be popping up like critters in a Whac-A-Mole machine. Last spring and summer, two major news corporations joined the act by asking readers and listeners to help them come up with such lists. Sixty thousand NPR listeners winnowed a fi-

nalist list of 237 SF and fantasy books to a “Top 100 List” while readers of Great Britain’s *Theguardian.com* contributed around five hundred suggestions to a list of “favourite science fiction books.”

Both lists contain some wonderful reading material. Indeed, I envy the person who, because of these lists, will discover many of these books for the first time. Naturally, each list also contains quite a few works that have never impressed me or that I have not yet read. Alas, and perhaps unavoidably, each list also omits copious amounts of quality work from some of our field’s most distinguished authors.

Neither list contains anything by Clifford D. Simak or Gregory Benford. Nothing by Octavia E. Butler, Robert Reed, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Nancy Kress, Neal Barrett, Jr., Karen Joy Fowler, Rudy Rucker, Suzy McKee Charnas, and other major contributors to *Asimov’s Science Fiction* magazine. I would not want either of these lists to define my own tastes in science fiction.

While the Venn Diagram of works that contributed to my development as an SF reader and that I would, or would not, have put on these lists differs markedly from what appears at either news outlet, I’m sure that your own diagram differs significantly from mine *and* from these lists as well.

Lists can be fun to draw up and fun to fight over, but there is a danger to them, too. They are exciting when they bring new works to our attention, but it’s imperative that they not restrict our reading. We know that a professor preparing a semester’s curriculum or an editor pulling together the table of contents for an SF survey anthology will encounter limits set by time and space. We can let their suggestions be guideposts if we want, but they only represent a sliver of the tremendous material available to all of us.

The SF canon will never be set in stone. The awesome responsibility for carving out a personal set of the “best science fiction” is up to each and every one of us, alone. ○

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