

GUEST EDITORIAL

Ed Finn

CELEBRATE NATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION DAY BY LEARNING TO LIVE IN THE FUTURE

This article originally appeared on the Future Tense channel of Slate Magazine on January 2, 2013. At Asimov's we believe that every day is National Science Fiction Day. In honor of the Good Doctor and anyone else living in the future, we are delighted to have the chance to offer Ed Finn's essay to you now as a Guest Editorial.

It's 2013, people—we are living in the future. Since the news is still awash with problems we created for ourselves decades or centuries ago (the permanent fiscal crisis, gun control, the political powder-keg that is the Middle East), it may have escaped your notice that today is also National Science Fiction Day.

While you may still be rooting through your holiday gift pile searching for that long-promised jetpack, science fiction writers actually had some grim things to say about 2013. Jack London pegged the coming year for the arrival of the Red Death, a new pandemic. Richard Linklater's screenplay for *A Scanner Darkly* guessed one in five Americans would be hooked on illegal drugs (and if you count criminal hypocrisy, he would not be wrong). And David Brin pretty much called the whole civilizational ballgame with *The Postman* [first published as a novella in *Asimov's*, November 1982], imagining a postapocalyptic hellscape in which only Kevin Costner fans could survive.

And yet, so far, we are two for two on the world not ending in 2013. So let's take a minute to celebrate the idea behind National Science Fiction Day as embodied by the writer and scientist whose birthday it marks, Isaac Asi-

mov. Science and the stories of science that Asimov loved to tell are going strong.

In 2012, we watched the Mars rover Curiosity and its spunky band of rock star engineers explore the red planet, saw the Higgs boson emerge from the ether, traced Felix Baumgartner's twenty-four-mile space-dive, and followed James Cameron seven miles down into the Mariana Trench. Twitter, Facebook, and Google+ helped us share details, rumors, and excitement about these momentous events worldwide. The social media buzz surrounding these events were part of what the *New York Times* has called "an epidemic of science geekiness" that put millions in contact with the latest news from labs and research missions around the world. It also felt like the year in which science became a like-button topic, a zone of what I call "butterfly engagement" in which you watch a short video, share it with your friends, and move on to the next shiny thing.

Now, I'm all for this kind of enthusiastic conversation about science, but we also need interactions that last longer than a few minutes. It's not the fault of scientists (or science writers) that social media naturally encourage slacktivism, in which clicking a button or signing a virtual petition take the place of more substantive forms of engagement. But the rush to amass eyeballs and retweets runs the risk of eliding any actual thinking for the sake of special effects and sound-bites.

This brings us back to Asimov, a guy who took the long view about science and human progress, perhaps most

memorably in his Foundation series, which traced the long arc of human history across millennia. What Asimov knew about science fiction, and science writing in general, is that a good story sticks with you in part because it takes time to tell, and time to absorb.

Fortunately, I think the Internet offers its own antidote to slacktivism in the form of deeper dives: extended conversations, curated archives, long reads, and long tails. The same technologies that can cue up sixty episodes of *The Wire* on a moment's notice can also deliver extended meditations on Asimov's future history <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Future_history>, habitable worlds <www.habworlds.org>, and thoughtful dialogues <www.findtheconversation.com> about the world we ought to make for ourselves.

So why not make this the first day of 2013 that you spend living in a science fiction era? Let social media guide you to the incredible things humans are achieving on and off this planet, and

then let science fiction and the deep riches of digital culture guide you to some new ideas, some better dreams, and better futures.

Ed Finn is the director of the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University, where he is also an assistant professor with a joint appointment between the School of Arts, Media, and Engineering and the Department of English.

The Center for Science and the Imagination brings together humanists, artists, and scientists to reignite humanity's grand ambitions for innovation and discovery. The center serves as a network hub for audacious moonshot ideas and a cultural engine for thoughtful optimism. It provides a space for productive collaboration across disciplines, brings human narratives to scientific questions, and explores the full social implications of cutting-edge research. Learn more at <http://csi.asu.edu>.