

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

ADVERTISEMENTS FOR MYSELF

Advertisements for Myself is the name of a book of essays, poems, fragments of unfinished novels, and short stories by Norman Mailer, published in 1959, which stirred a considerable bit of attention at the time. It has nothing to do with science fiction, which these columns are ostensibly about, but bear with me a moment.

The book is a perfect example of an ego trip. Mailer's intention was to demonstrate his achievements as a writer by way of demonstrating his importance as a human being, and, since his achievements as a writer were significant, he did have no small importance as a human being. He wanted everybody to know about it, too. Every selection in the 532-page book is preceded by an "advertisement" in which he explains its value, and, by extension, the value of Norman Mailer as man and writer. He also feels free to do quick profiles of about a dozen of his literary contemporaries, generally in a blunt and acidulous way. ("Salinger is everybody's favorite. I seem to be alone in finding him no more than the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school.") ("Kerouac lacks discipline, intelligence, honesty, and a sense of the novel.") I can't think of another writer, even a certain highly opinionated science fiction writer renowned for uninhibited speech, who would have committed himself to a set of eviscerations of that sort in a widely distributed book.

A different writer, just as significant in his way as Mailer was in his, was equally famous for his unabashed egotism. Isaac Asimov is who I mean. Like Mailer, he wrote extensively about himself, in particular three huge autobiographical volumes, *In Memory Still Green*, *In Joy Still Felt*, and *I. Asimov*. This trio of memoirs totals 2,121 pages, quite a sizable recollection of a life which, after all, was mostly spent sitting at a typewriter turning out books and stories. But Isaac was convinced that many readers would want to know all about that life, sedentary though it was, and he was right.

Mailer and Asimov had much else in common, too: they were Jewish boys who grew up in Brooklyn between the two world wars, they attended elite colleges (Mailer went to Harvard; Asimov, unable to get into Columbia because of the anti-Jewish quotas of the era, went to Seth Low, a college established by Columbia to accommodate deserving students excluded by quota from Columbia itself), and they both had decided at an early age to become writers. (Mailer says, very early in *Advertisements for Myself*, "Before I was seventeen I had formed the desire to be a major writer." Not just a writer, but a *major* writer. Asimov had much the same idea, and by the time he was twenty-one he had published "Nightfall," which gave him a permanent place in the galaxy of great SF writers.) Once the distraction of World War II was out of the way (Mailer served in uniform in the Pacific; Asimov did military scientific research at the Philadelphia Navy Yard) they launched spectacular literary careers, Mailer with *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948, Asimov with the *Foundation* series beginning in 1941, and went on from there to the end of their days.

I can think of a third Jewish boy from Brooklyn who went to an elite college—Columbia, this time, for the day of quotas was over—and then began a precocious literary career in science fiction, winning a Hugo award by the time he was twenty-one and going on to publish an uncountable number of stories and novels, along with an assortment of non-fiction books and much else. This writer, who had these things, at least, in common with Mailer and Asimov, was—what, you guessed it?—Robert Sil-

verberg, who is going to take advantage of his ownership of this column to provide you with some advertisements for himself, very much in the manner of those other two famous literary egotists.

Of course, I can't compare my reputation as a writer to those of Mailer and Asimov. Nor can I match them as self-promoters. They were frequently seen on television talk programs and were otherwise well known outside the literary world (Mailer even ran once for Mayor of New York), whereas I am a quiet fellow, not exactly shy but certainly reserved, who will make an occasional appearance at a science fiction convention but has no interest in the sort of public recognition Mailer and Asimov loved. And, though I have a healthy enough ego (show me a successful writer who doesn't!), I have never made a point of praising myself in the extravagantly comic way that was one of Isaac's most frequently demonstrated traits, nor of loudly and belligerently confronting the world, as the small but pugnacious Mailer was wont to do. I am not loud; I am not pugnacious; I don't do the sort of deliberately exaggerated bragging that was such a conspicuous part of the public Asimov persona.

Still, I don't hide my light under a bushel. Since 1994 I have written this column every month (indeed, I replaced Isaac Asimov himself in this space after his death), and in it I talk about whatever I see fit to talk about: scientific news, cultural changes, the history of science fiction, and all sorts of things that are happening to me, ME, Robert Silverberg, my travels or my work or my computer problems or my encounters with other writers, on the assumption that a wide audience will find them of interest. I suppose that that assumption is correct, since the editors of this magazine have allowed me to take up this space in nearly three hundred issues so far, and the end is not yet.

This column, in fact, is a kind of ongoing autobiography of my life and mind: a long series of four-page installments in which I express my thoughts and opinions and prejudices and speak of my daily experiences or my writing projects or anything else I care to, essentially creating what is, in Norman Mailer's estimable phrase, a vast group of advertisements for myself. Why not, then, take advantage of my position of power here to make use of a column for a few *literal* advertisements for myself, as Messrs. Mailer and Asimov were frequently known to do?

For example, those of you who read and (I hope) admire this column every issue might want to have a selection of these pieces bound in permanent form. As it happens, two such books of that sort exist at this time. The first, *Reflections and Refractions: Thoughts on Science Fiction and Other Matters*, was published in 1997 by Underwood Books of Grass Valley, California, a small press best known for its elegant editions of books by Jack Vance. It contained 87 of my essays, most of them reprinted from *Asimov's* but some, dating back as far as 1973, originating in *Galileo* and *Amazing Stories*, in which this column had appeared before it moved to *Asimov's*. It covered a wide range of topics in its 425 pages: pieces on the profession of writing, profiles of such colleagues as Jack Williamson, Roger Zelazny, and Philip K. Dick, observations on contemporary events, and much else.

In the course of time *Reflections and Refractions* went out of print, but in 2014 Nonstop Press of New York reissued it in a handsome new edition, revised and expanded. It includes all the essays from the first edition, plus four that were written after that edition appeared, and three earlier ones that were left out of the first one. I understand that Nonstop Press has changed distributors recently and copies of this edition may be hard to find in bookstores, but it is available, of course, from the usual Internet booksellers, or can be ordered from Nonstop's own web site.

Meanwhile Nonstop had also brought out a second collection of my essays, *Musings and Meditations*, about ninety more essays, mostly from *Asimov's*, that had first been published between 1995 and 2010. It's the mixture as before, discussions of trilobites,

cloning, cuneiform, SF conventions, the work of H.P. Lovecraft and Alfred Bester, my theory of story construction, and much, much more, among them my favorite, the piece called “E-Mail from Cthulhu.” Again, available with a couple of clicks from such places as amazon.com, or from Nonstop Press itself.

Then there is a third and more recent volume of Asimovian or Mailersque self-occupation that I want to tell you about here: not a collection of my essays this time, but one long dialog, all about ME. It’s called *Traveler of Worlds: Conversations with Robert Silverberg*. It was published in the summer of 2016 by Fairwood Press at \$17.99, and it can be purchased in all the places where small-press publications can be bought.

The responsible party here is Alvaro Zinos-Amaro, a youngish writer and critic whose incisive essays on science fiction have been appearing here and there for the past decade or so (a particularly fine one was “Pushing the World in a Certain Direction and Other Acts of Submission,” done in collaboration with Paul di Filippo and published in the January 2016 *Asimov’s*), and who has had several dozen short stories published since 2013 in such magazines as *Analog*, *Galaxy’s Edge*, and, yes, *The Journal of Unlikely Entomology*. Alvaro was born in Spain, but was studying physics in Germany when I first heard from him around 1998, and we have been correspondents and friends ever since. In 2012 he did a splendid job of completing a short novel that I had left unfinished many years before, and it was published under our joint by-line in the Arc Manor Stellar Guild series as *When the Blue Shift Comes*. A few years ago he came up with the idea of a book of conversations in which he would question me about such things as my views on society and science, my routine and working methods as a writer, my tastes in art and music and books, the history of my writing career, my travels, the technique of writing, and just about anything else about me that aroused his vast and insatiable curiosity. Five or six times during 2015 he made the long drive from Southern California, where he has lived for some years now, to my home in the San Francisco Bay Area, and peppered me with questions according to a carefully worked out scheme.

At least it seemed carefully worked out to him. To me it all seemed pretty random, but I was astonished, when I read the transcript of the book after he had assembled all his recordings, to discover that the text was actually coherent and sequential, and provides quite a revealing portrait of the mind and life of, well, the science fiction writer Robert Silverberg. You will not be surprised to learn that I found it all fascinating. You will too, I hope—and here I conclude this advertisement for myself. That’s *Traveler of Worlds*, by Robert Silverberg and Alvaro Zinos-Amaro, Fairwood Press, \$17.99. Readily available where books of that sort are sold.

So, then: this month’s column turns out to be one long free advertisement for two collections of my essays and a book in which I consume eighty thousand words or so talking, mostly, about myself. Am I abashed? I am not abashed. I have learned from the masters. How Asimovian this column is! How Maileresque! And one could have far worse models.