

# REFLECTIONS

## GARDNER DOZOIS

Robert Silverberg

Gardner Dozois, who was the guiding spirit of this magazine through many of its greatest years, the decades from 1985 to 2004, died in May 2018. He was seventy years old and had been in failing health for some time. During his time among us, he established himself as an editor—one of the greatest in the history of science fiction—as a writer who was a consummate artist, and as a person who was one of the most beloved figures in the field.

Like many of the other great science fiction editors (John Campbell, Anthony Boucher, Horace Gold, Frederik Pohl), Gardner began his career as a writer. His first story appeared in 1966, when he was still in his teens. It brought him a Nebula award nomination. His masterly novella “A Special Kind of Morning” of 1971 marked him as a major new voice in science fiction, something that was demonstrated by his winning Nebulas for short stories in consecutive years, 1983 and 1984. There was much other fine work as well. But the price of his craftsmanship was the slow, painstaking pace at which he worked, and that took its economic toll on him; and so after a short period as a freelance writer, he began supplementing his income with editorial work. You will find his name on the masthead of the first issue of *Asimov's*, dated Spring 1977, as associate editor, a post he held during the magazine's earliest days. Eight years later he became editor himself.

Gardner's immediate predecessor in the editorial slot was Shawna McCarthy, whose regime was brief but distinguished. She published award-winning stories by Connie Willis, Greg Bear, Octavia Butler, and, yes, Robert Silverberg, as well as Gardner's own first Nebula winner, “The Peacemaker.” In 1984 she was given the Best Editor Hugo and seemed to be settling in for a long and important career here; but the following year other fields of endeavor beckoned to her, and she took her leave. The new editor was Gardner Dozois.

The first issue that was entirely Gardner's work was the magazine's hundredth number, dated January 1986. During the nineteen years that followed, he would win an unprecedented *fifteen* Hugos as Best Editor—a total, you will note, that surpasses that of Campbell, Gold, Pohl, and Boucher combined. I suspect it may never be equaled.

To summarize the Dozois years of *Asimov's* in a paragraph or two is an impossible job. His deep grounding in the history of science fiction imbued him with the desire, which he fulfilled in magnificent fashion, to make *Asimov's* a worthy successor to Campbell's *Astounding*, Gold's *Galaxy*, and Boucher's *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. His ebullient personality put him at the center of a wide group of friends and acquaintances who became major contributors to the magazine. His own considerable talent as a writer gave him the editorial acumen needed to ferret out promising new talent that others might have overlooked. His indefatigable professionalism allowed him to face the staggering job of wading through some eight hundred submissions a month—perhaps ten thousand stories a year, close to two hundred thousand during his whole editorial career, something that could well leave one with a deeply boggled mind.

Out of all that came the magazine you know and cherish, the most honored magazine in science fictional history. He brought you more than two hundred issues glistening with the finest short work, much of it honored by Hugo and Nebula awards itself, of the top writers of our era: Roger Zelazny, James Patrick Kelly, Lucius Shepard, William Gibson (who inaugurated the Dozois regime with a three-part serial, *Count Zero*, in his first issue), Pat Cadigan, Michael Swanwick, Greg Egan, Stephen Baxter,

Gregory Benford, Joe Haldeman, George R.R. Martin, Charles Sheffield, John Varley, Kim Stanley Robinson, Geoff Landis, Robert Reed, Terry Bisson, Jack Dann, Walter Jon Williams, Nancy Kress, Ursula K. Le Guin, Mike Resnick—the list goes on and on. *Asimov's* was the crucible in which the science fiction of the past two decades was forged. Everyone who was anyone, and a good many future anyones, was part of Gardner's dazzling list of contributors.

And then, in 2004, Gardner announced he was stepping down. "It's time to scale back," he said. "I want to go out while I'm still at the top of my game, before editing the magazine becomes a chore rather than a pleasure, and before I become burnt-out and cynical. I'd also like to be able to pursue other projects, including perhaps finding the time to get some of my own writing done." Sheila Williams, who had been executive editor (and, before that, managing editor) of *Asimov's* even longer than Gardner was its editor, took over the top slot as well, beginning with the January 2005 issue. (The editor is the person who picks the stories you get to read. The executive editor is the one who oversees the daily job of getting the magazines out.)

I was an editor myself, doing an annual anthology of new stories called *New Dimensions*, when I first encountered Gardner Dozois. I had been editing *New Dimensions* just a couple of months when a manuscript bearing that byline showed up in the summer of 1969. The accompanying letter explained that its author was twenty-two years old, had sold a story to Fred Pohl's magazine *If* in 1966 and four more—three of them to Damon Knight's *Orbit*—after a three-year hiatus. "I'm working out of a cramped garret apartment (yes, a garret; the clichés I live never fail to amaze me)," he told me, in a pre-World War II house in a suburb of Nuremberg, Germany, where he had been working for an Army newspaper.

The story didn't work for me. My notes say things like "Nice writing, but—story too static. The *situation* is static but that doesn't mean story has to be. . . . Also story insufficiently visionary." So I sent it back. A couple of months later Dozois returned to the United States; I met him at a convention in Philadelphia that November—a skinny kid, long straight hair, hippie clothing—and we exchanged a couple of pleasant words. And a few weeks after that he sent me a manuscript, badly typed on cheap paper, that absolutely astounded me. This is what I told him on December 30, 1969:

"You may be the lousiest speller this side of the Rockies. But you are one hell of a writer, and you have a sale, man. An exciting hour for me—reading your story tensely, wondering if you were going to sustain the promise of the first few pages or let it all go driveling away into slush, as so many of the other new writers who've been sending me stuff have done. . . . But no. The thing held up, it grew from page to page in inventiveness, the style remained vivid and supple—go have a swelled head for an evening. You've earned it. Now I know what editors talk about when they speak of the thrill of having something come in from an unknown that turns them on. But your spelling sure is awful."

That story—"A Special Kind of Morning"—became the lead story in the first issue of *New Dimensions*, and it was the lead again, years later, in my anthology *The Best of New Dimensions*. Of it I said, in the latter book, "All by itself, it made having edited *New Dimensions* worthwhile."

I got to know Gardner very well over the next few years. He wrote some fine stories, a number of which I bought for *New Dimensions*. He became a well-liked member of the science fiction community. And he met and married a keen-witted young lady named Susan Casper, who, among other things, fed him so well that the gaunt, bony Gardner of the 1960s was transformed into the exceedingly non-gaunt Gardner of the years that followed, the splendidly Falstaffian figure that all of us will forever remember.

One interesting thing about Gardner is the divergence between the outer man—that

big, rollicking, boisterous figure, loud of voice and uninhibited in style, a purveyor of off-color jokes and silly party tricks—and the inner Gardner, the writer of so many sensitive, thoughtful, even profound stories, and the editor who could peer deep within the structure of manuscripts and show their authors how, with a few quick touches, they could transform their work from something merely publishable to something extraordinary. Gardner in person was fun: rowdy, unruly fun. Gardner the writer was a dedicated craftsman, a serious artist. Both those Gardners were genuine, the roaring jester and the serious literary man, and if they did not always coexist in perfect harmony, they did, at any rate, provide us, between them, with a very special human being.

As far back as 1977, a time when our genre was undergoing swift and vigorous evolution, he said of his own fiction that he aligned himself both with the experimental and the classical modes of science fiction, that “it was time for a synthesis, a melding together of all that has been done in the past turbulent decade,” that his own place was with those writers who have produced works “that gain much of their power by rationalizing traditional fantasy, that keep the inner power of the dream and the irrational, but attempt to analyze it in terms of the known and the rational, that attempt to fuse yin and yang, to invoke the sense of wonder without insulting the rational intellect.” A concern with style, too, was a significant part of the Dozois approach. As I said of him in a 1992 introduction to one of his stories, “The power of that passage depends on a respect for language and grammar, a sense of the structure of the sentence and the paragraph, and a keen perception of sensory data. Gardner Dozois is as skilled a worker in prose as there is in science fiction.” And I added, “His marvelous ear and eye provide much, though not all, of his success as an editor.”

He was a big man in every sense of the word. His death leaves a very big hole in our community.