

# REFLECTIONS

## FORTY YEARS!

Robert Silverberg

Forty years! The time goes by in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Well, not exactly. Forty years is practically half my life ago, and my life has been a long one. I remember when the first issue of the magazine that was then called *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* appeared, early in 1977, but it doesn't seem like yesterday to me, or even the day before yesterday. Jimmy Carter was President in 1977. Jimmy Carter's presidency seems a long time ago. The big movie of the year was *Star Wars*. I wore my (dark) hair down to my shoulders in 1977. That seems a long time ago, too.

I do recall when I first saw *Asimov's* Number One. The sight of that bright red cover stirred very little emotion in me. Another new science fiction magazine? That's nice, I thought. But I had already been around a long time, a science fiction reader since 1948, a professional SF writer since 1955, and I had seen many a magazine come and go. Who now remembers *The Original Science Fiction Stories*, or *Fantastic Universe*, or *Infinity*, or *Space Science Fiction*, or *Worlds of Tomorrow*? They were begun with high hopes, they had their little moment on the stage, and they vanished. Now my old friend Isaac was lending his name to yet another new title. (He would not be its editor. The man picking the stories would be George Scithers, a retired army officer with an extensive background in reading and writing science fiction. Isaac would hover over the magazine as its editorial director, a benign presence whose name on the cover would guarantee a certain level of quality that had been associated with the name of Isaac Asimov since the beginning of his career more than thirty-five years before, but he would not be responsible for choosing its contents.)

*Fantastic Universe* and *Worlds of Tomorrow* are one with *Nineveh* and *Babylon* today. But Isaac's magazine, now called simply *Asimov's Science Fiction*, was anything but an ephemeral player in our genre. Here we are, forty years on, and for forty years *Asimov's* has been central to the field, a dominant magazine that by now holds a place in its history up there with such defining titles as Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*, and H.L. Gold's *Galaxy*. Year after year it has brought its readers much of the best science fiction being published—stories from *Asimov's* have won fifty or sixty Hugo and Nebula awards, and its editors have collected dozens of Best Editor and Best Magazine trophies—and it marches ever onward now toward its next great milestone, the half-century mark, just a twinkling of an eye in the future.

Of the first issue I had this to say, ten years ago when commemorating *Asimov's* thirtieth anniversary in these pages:

"I have that first issue before me now, and from its pristine condition I suspect that I never did get around to reading it. In format Issue Number One isn't extraordinarily different from the magazine that's in your hands right now. The page size is about half an inch shorter, and it has 192 pages instead of today's 144 [a decade later, our page counts continue to change] . . . The text runs right across the page from right to left, book-style, rather than being divided into columns according to the usual custom of magazines. Instead of today's simply styled straight-up-and-down cover heading that tells us that the magazine's name is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, the name of the magazine on that 1977 issue is splashed across half the cover in giant curving yellow letters against a startling red background, and took up even more space because the magazine, in those days, was called *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Maga-*

zine. Just to reinforce the point, the part of the cover that didn't blazon forth the name of the magazine contained a photograph of Isaac, a lovely picture of him in a dark jacket and light blue necktie, looking formidably intelligent and quite handsome.

"The price of that first issue was \$1. (The price has quadrupled since then, but so has the price of almost everything else.) [Quintupled, by now!] It was dated 'Spring 1977,' because the cautious publisher, Joel Davis, was launching the newcomer as a quarterly. (It was such an immediate success—within a year and a half it was the best-selling magazine in the field—that it shifted to bimonthly publication in 1978, to monthly publication in 1979, and for a giddy time beginning in 1981 published thirteen issues a year before gradually subsiding back to today's schedule.)"

And I went on to say, back then, that I had taken leave of writing science fiction in 1977 and doubted that I would ever return to it, and so "the new magazine receded to the back-burner part of my mind. I still maintained a social interest in the field, though. And over the next year or two I began to hear considerable buzz about the new magazine from my writer friends. It was, they said, the most exciting newcomer to emerge in the field in many years. They were all writing for it. George Scithers won the Hugo Award in 1978 as Best Professional Editor and won it again in 1980. Stories published in the magazine were being nominated regularly for both the Hugo and the Nebula, and some of them were winning.

"I ended my 'retirement' from writing late in 1978 with a new novel, *Lord Valentine's Castle*, and began to think about writing a few new short stories too. When I saw Scithers at the World Science Fiction Convention not long afterward he asked me whether I might care to write one for him, and I said I'd think about it if I ever did start doing them again."

Little did I know!

In fact the magazine would be my home base as a writer for the rest of my active career. Scithers remained as editor through the June 1982 issue, and by that time I had written a sheaf of stories for him. After the interim editorship of Kathleen Moloney, a staff member who took over for the final seven months of 1982, the editorship passed to Shawna McCarthy, for whom I wrote the Nebula award-winning novella "Sailing to Byzantium" in the summer of 1984, not long before the end of her brief but brilliant editorial tenure. When Shawna stepped down in order to try her hand at editing books, her successor was Gardner Dozois, who had briefly been associated with the magazine during the Scithers regime and who had been working as a freelance writer and editor in the past few years.

In nearly twenty years as editor of *Asimov's*, Gardner collected the Hugo award for Best Editor fifteen times, an astonishing record, and stories he published won thirty-four Hugos, fifteen Nebulas, and four World Fantasy Awards, statistics that showed the extent of the magazine's dominance over the field in those years. I was a busy writer during the Dozois years and contributed some two dozen stories to the magazine while he was editing it, including two Hugo winners, "Gilgamesh in the Outback" in 1987 and "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another" in 1990.

A few years later Gardner was responsible for establishing another link between the magazine and me, a most enduring one. Isaac Asimov died in April, 1992. Since the beginning of the magazine he had written a rambling editorial column for each issue, in which he discussed anything that seemed appropriate to him—his own life and career (he was never unwilling to talk about those!), the process by which the magazine was produced each month, the comments he had received from readers, the state of the Universe, or whatever else he cared to talk about. The last of these columns, a very brief one, appeared in the August 1992 issue.

After that Gardner—who was much too busy selecting the stories to be published, a

task Isaac had not had to deal with, to have time to write editorials as well—attempted to provide some color and life for the front of the book with sporadic guest editorials, but that proved not to be successful. What was needed was continuity from month to month, a consistent voice providing a column that, if it was not the work of the actual editor of the magazine, was at least someone close to its workings and to the workings of the science fiction field in general.

It happened that for many years I had been writing a regular column somewhat similar to the one Isaac had been doing for his magazine. It began in 1978 in a small but estimable magazine called *Galileo* and, when *Galileo* expired, shifted over to the far better established *Amazing Stories*, where I held forth for a dozen years starting with the May 1981 issue. *Amazing* went into suspension in 1993, and very quickly Gardner asked me if I would like to move my column into *Asimov's*. Indeed I did, commencing with the July 1994 issue, where I vowed that “you will find me in this space from now on, relentlessly commenting on this or that, month in and month out.”

I have kept that vow. For nearly a quarter of a century I have occupied the pages that once were taken up by Isaac Asimov's editorials, and the end, I hope, is not yet. What with hundreds of columns published and dozens of stories (including many novellas and one serialized novel) I suspect that I have seen more words of mine in *Asimov's* than any other writer. We are now in the thirteenth year of the magazine's current editor, Sheila Williams, who had been on the staff of the magazine as managing editor since its early years, and who took over the top job from Gardner when he gave it up after his spectacular two-decade run. Sheila has maintained *Asimov's* powerful position in the field—she too has won the Hugo as Best Editor—and, although she has not been greatly successful in coaxing new stories out of me here in my senior years (though she did get a few), she has kept me on as a columnist, thereby affording me a link to today's readership that I prize most highly.

So *Asimov's Science Fiction* strides proudly on past its fortieth milestone and into its fifth decade, and I—not quite as quick of step as I once was—march onward along with it. How far I will get toward writing the fiftieth anniversary column, I would not dare to guess. But it has been wonderful to play the part that I have played in this magazine's history over the past four decades, an unforgettable experience, and I will cherish it always.

