

A RELIC OF ANTIQUITY

When I first discovered science fiction magazines, more than sixty years ago, I rushed out and bought all the back issues of them I could find. That wasn't particularly difficult to do back then, because there was an abundance of second-hand bookshops in New York City, where I lived, and—though I didn't realize it—the ancient magazines that I hunted down weren't particularly ancient yet. The oldest of them, Hugo Gernsback's pioneering *Amazing Stories*, was all of twenty-three years old when I first began collecting the old magazines in 1949. And, as I wrote in these pages a few years ago in an essay called "Aladdin's Cave" (January 2008), I had the good fortune to stumble upon a veritable treasure trove of these old magazines in a Brooklyn antique shop and hauled home package after package of them until my files were complete.

I still have those old magazines, and now and again I pull some of them from the shelves and stare at them in wonder. They are true relics of antiquity, strange vestiges of science fiction's earliest years of magazine publishing, and they hold the same attraction for me that the gigantic fossil skeletons of dinosaurs in the museum did for me when I was a small boy.

Yesterday, for some reason, I got out my file of one of the strangest and least known of the early magazines—*Amazing Stories Quarterly*, which Hugo Gernsback founded in 1928 as a companion to his instantly popular monthly *Amazing Stories*, and which lasted twenty-two issues until the Depression finally did it in 1934. I have half a dozen of them on my desk right now. They are truly dinosaurian in every respect: ancient and huge and looking like nothing that walks the earth today.

Amazing Stories was printed in what is now called the "bedsheet" format—each page 8 by 11 inches in size, approximately the dimensions of a sheet of typing paper, or about twice the size of the pages of the magazine you are now reading. Those big pages were covered with a lot of small type, so that each 96-page issue contained well over a hundred thousand words of fiction. But the readers of Gernsback's new magazine were hungry for more and more of what was not yet called science fiction—Gernsback liked to use the compound word "scientifiction," and today's more familiar term did not establish itself until a few years later—and so in 1927 he issued an even larger experimental one-shot magazine, *Amazing Stories Annual*, with room in its 128 big pages for a complete Edgar Rice Burroughs novel, *The Master Mind of Mars*. The *Annual* quickly sold out its hundred thousand-copy printing, which led Gernsback to reinvent it as a quarterly six months later.

It was an imposing thing, that *Quarterly*. It contained 144 pages, making it ideal for running long novels in a single issue, and sold for a whopping fifty cents a copy—this at a time when automobiles cost about six hundred dollars and salaries of ten and fifteen dollars a week were pretty much the norm. How the generally impecunious young men who were the backbone of Gernsback's readership could manage to find the huge sum of half a dollar every three months for the magazine is beyond me. But plenty of them did, and the new jumbo gave them hours and hours of reading pleasure in every issue.

The novels Gernsback liked to publish in the *Quarterly* tended to be massive and slow-moving, strong on descriptive detail and weak on characterization and

dialog. Few of today's readers would be likely to sit still for J. Schlossl's "The Second Swarm" from the second issue, or Stanton A. Coblentz's ponderous satire, "The Sunken World," from the third, let alone Gernsback's own heavy-handed futuristic novel, "Ralph 124C1+" in number five. In fact, the most notable contribution to those early issues may have been a reader's letter that earned a fifty dollar prize. It came from a young writer named Jack Williamson, just setting out on the seventy-five-year-long career that would see him winning Hugos and Nebulas as late as the 1990s. "The chief function of scientific fiction," the teenage Williamson wrote, "is the creation of real pictures of new things, new ideas, and new machines. Scientific fiction is the product of the human imagination, guided by the suggestion of science. It takes the basis of science, considers all the clues that science has to offer, and then adds a thing alien to science—imagination. It goes ahead and lights the way. And when science sees the things made real in the author's mind, it makes them real indeed. It deals only with that which it can see, weigh, or measure; only with logical hypothesis, experiment and influence and calculation. Scientific fiction begins with the ending of science."

Have there been many better definitions of science fiction offered since young Jack Williamson wrote that in 1928?

Gernsback's publishing company went bankrupt in 1929 and he lost control of his magazines. (He bounced back quickly with a new string of them, including *Wonder Stories* and the corresponding *Wonder Stories Quarterly*.) *Amazing* and its quarterly companion emerged from bankruptcy in the hands of a company called Radio Science Publications—think of an era when *radio* was cutting edge high technology!—and then quickly passed to Teck Publishing Corporation. But throughout these corporate migrations there was little change in the appearance of the magazines and none in their editorial policies, because the new

editor was the venerable T. O'Connor Sloane, who had been Gernsback's associate editor from the start.

Sloane (1851-1940) was, from all accounts, a highly conservative geezer, seventy-eight years old when he took over the editorial post, who privately believed that space travel was a fantasy, impossible to achieve. He was old-fashioned in his literary tastes and long-winded and pedantic in his editorial introductions to the stories, and he was so unhurried in deciding to buy material submitted to him that the writers of the day nicknamed him "T. Oh-come-on Slow-one." But there is a certain musty charm and grace to the Sloane magazines, and the *Quarterly* in particular published some of the best science fiction of its day.

I've been looking with pleasure and fascination through the stack of the massive things piled up next to me. The covers are quite handsome: an attractive old-fashioned illustration contained within a huge circle, almost as big as a page of this magazine, with a bright border, usually yellow or red, enclosing it. Here is the Winter, 1930 issue, the ninth, leading off with *The Birth of a New Republic*, a lengthy novel of interplanetary strife written by Miles J. Breuer, M.D., one of the most popular SF authors of the era, in collaboration with none other than Jack Williamson, no longer a teenage fan but now a successful writer. (Those who are curious about it, and I think it will still find appreciative readers after all these years, will find it reprinted in *The Metal Man and Others*, the first volume of Haffner Press's superb series of volumes collecting the work of Jack Williamson.) The theme is not unlike that of Robert Heinlein's much later novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, and its final passage is one that could almost have been written by Jack Williamson about himself at the other end of his ninety-eight-year-long life: "I am an old man now—there is no escaping that. . . . Now, from the eminence of a long life that has been for the most part peaceful and happy, I can foresee for my children a glo-

rious United Solar System.” One can only hope.

And here is the Spring-Summer 1932 issue, featuring “Invaders from the Infinite” by John W. Campbell, Jr. Campbell, only twenty-two years old then, would go on to become the most influential editor in the history of science fiction, but in 1932 he was highly regarded by readers for a series of gadget-happy space-adventure novels, now impenetrably unreadable, featuring three jut-jawed spacemen named Arcot, Morey, and Wade. The early Campbell novels are stiff doses. (“‘Each tube will handle up to a hundred thousand times the potential of zinc-copper in the acid of the yellow powder,’ said Stel Felso Theu. One hundred thousand times the potential of a copper-zinc coil in copper sulphate would be of the order of 110,000 volts. This was a thing as universal as the elements themselves.”)

The Fall 1931 issue leads off with “Seeds of Life” by John Taine, a great early SF novelist now unjustly forgotten. (His dinosaur novel, *Before the Dawn*, was one of the formative books of my youth.) *White Lily*, another splendid Taine novel, had run the year before. And another childhood favorite of mine turns up in the Fall 1929 issue: A. Hyatt Verrill, with the novel *The Bridge of Light*, telling of a lost civilization in South America. I first encountered Verrill at the age of eight, long before I had ever heard of science fiction, in his incarnation as a writer of popular history: his *Great Conquerors of South America*, about the exploits of Cortes, Pizarro, and the other *conquistadores*, was a book I read over and over, and I was delighted to find him again as a frequent contributor to the Gernsback and O’Conor Sloane magazines, usually with long novels set in remote corners of Latin America. Simply the titles of other *Quarterly* stories stir shivers of wonder in me: “The Ant With a Human Soul,” “The Evolutionary Monstrosity,” “When the Moon Ran Wild,” “The Black Star Passes.” Primitive stuff, maybe—but fascinating in its way.

The Depression had its impact on all magazines: *Amazing Stories Quarterly* managed only three issues in 1932, two in 1933, and one lone issue, reduced in size to 128 pages, before giving up the ghost entirely in 1934. But what a glorious run it had, eighty years ago! What a fine fat magazine it was, and what splendid epics of science and adventure are entombed in those huge, closely printed pages! I’ve had a lively archaeological experience this week, prowling these antediluvian magazines. Yes, most of these stories seem antiquated now, and the look of the magazines, page after page after page of solid type, can best be described as quaint. But in order to know who we are we need to know something of our history, and these musty old magazines form the building-blocks on which modern science fiction arose. It’s a pleasure to own them and to go prowling through them now and then. ○

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