

REFLECTIONS

SHARING WORLDS

Robert Silverberg

Science fiction writers are notoriously individualistic in their private lives, political positions, and professional demeanor. SF is a field richly populated with lone wolves, libertarians, bohemians, nonconformists of every stripe. They tend to think their own thoughts and go their own way. Some of them resist editorial tinkering with their work with bright purple ferocity and are usually unhappy in the fundamentally collaborative atmosphere of a place like Hollywood, where writers are (rightly) considered to be nothing more than members of a large team, and not very important members of that team at that.

How strange, then, that the concept of the “shared world” anthology should have taken root so early in our field: a collective enterprise, a book of stories set within a single conceptual framework, produced in round-robin fashion by a group of writers applying their very diverse talents to the same set of ideas and characters.

There have been multitudes of these projects in the modern era of science fiction. A notable early one was *The Petrified Planet* (1952), for which the scientist John D. Clark worked out the chemical and biological specifications of a planet where the basic element of life was silicon, rather than carbon as it is on Earth, and three outstanding writers of the time were invited to contribute novellas based on Dr. Clark’s technical data.

Other shared-world books followed, over the years. I edited a bunch of them myself, usually in the three-novella format of *Petrified Planet*. The most remarkable book of this sort, I think, was Harlan Ellison’s spectacular *Medea*, published in 1985 after a ten-year gestation period. It was Ellison’s brilliant idea to create a science fictional planet by a three-stage process: first, some of the field’s top idea men would produce essays dealing with the astrophysics, geology, biology, and even the politics and theology of the hypothetical world. Then four other writers, given the booklets containing all this information, would improvise plot structures for stories set on this world, doing it on stage before a large audience at the University of California, Los Angeles. Finally, a group of writers including all of the other creators would be asked to do the actual stories.

The result was a triumph of inventiveness. The underlying specifications were drawn up by no less a team than Hal Clement, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, and Poul Anderson. The four who improvised story ideas at that UCLA gathering were Frank Herbert, Theodore Sturgeon, Thomas M. Disch, and myself. The stories themselves were written by Niven, Anderson, Pohl, Clement, Herbert, Silverberg, and Disch, plus Jack Williamson, Kate Wilhelm, and editor Ellison himself. Quite a crew: a plethora of Hugo and Nebula winners and seven Grand Masters (Clement, Niven, Pohl, Anderson, Williamson, Silverberg, and Ellison, plus two or three more who surely would have had that accolade if only they had lived long enough). Their work added up to a dazzling portrait of a fully realized alien world. Several of the stories, when published separately, were Hugo and Nebula nominees, and one (Anderson’s “Hunter’s Moon”) did win a Hugo. The book itself, alas, is long out of print, tied up in copyright problems—but it’s easy enough to buy from dealers, and you should. It stands head and shoulders above all the many other shared-world projects that have come and gone in recent years.

There’s another shared-world SF collection that I’ve been spending time with late-

ly—the first one of all, in fact, published more than eighty years ago. It's no match for the literary and intellectual force of *Medea*, but it's a striking curiosity in its own right. I'm talking about *Cosmos*, the seventeen-part serial that the early semi-pro magazine *Science Fiction Digest* and its successor *Fantasy Magazine* published in 1933 and 1934.

The idea came from Ray Palmer, one of the editors of *Science Fiction Digest* and later to be the dynamic and controversial editor of *Amazing Stories*, which for a time had the largest circulation ever achieved by a science fiction magazine. Palmer set up a story situation: Ay-Artz, the evil dictator of Lemnis, one of the planets of Alpha Centauri, having overthrown the rightful emperor of Lemnis, is looking around for new worlds to conquer—and, finding no suitable target in the Alpha Centauri system, is launching an expedition against Earth, four light-years away. It was at best a pulpy idea for a story, but he made it clear in his invitation to potential contributors that they could take it wherever they wished, so long as they followed his basic story line and kept things moving toward a satisfactorily fulfilling climax.

The ebullient Palmer, who knew everybody in the SF world, had no difficulty lining up top-flight writers, even though they had been told they would work without a fee, for the sheer fun of it. His friend Ralph Milne Farley, a big name since the publication of his novel *The Radio Man* in the widely read pulp magazine *Argosy* in 1924, agreed to do the initial story. *The Radio Man*, which concerns the adventures of a gadgeteer who inadvertently invents a matter transmitter, accidentally transports himself to Venus, and eventually marries a beautiful princess, was considered a state-of-the-art classic in its day, though it is scarcely remembered today. Learning that Farley was on board, another famous writer of the time, David H. Keller, M.D., agreed to write the second installment, and others quickly fell in line. Some of their names are nothing more than trivia-contest items today—Francis Flagg, Bob Olsen, Abner J. Gelula, J. Harvey Haggard—but most of Palmer's writers were key figures in the SF world of eighty years ago, and two of them—John W. Campbell, Jr. and E.E. Smith—would have been on anyone's top-ten list. To crown the whole thing, Palmer succeeded in securing a story by A. Merritt, whose vivid, romantic fantasy novels (*The Ship of Ishtar*, *Seven Footprints to Satan*, etc.) had achieved a vast readership far beyond the borders of science fiction fandom. Pulling together Campbell, Smith, and Merritt in a project like this was an almost unbelievable achievement.

The first *Cosmos* story was stapled into the crudely printed July 1933 issue of *Science Fiction Digest* as a special supplement, and thereafter, month after month until the December 1934 issue of what by then was called *Fantasy Magazine*, the rest followed regularly. Eighteen authors took part, including two (Otis Adelbert Kline and E. Hoffman Price) who collaborated on a single installment. Palmer himself wrote two sections, one under his own name and one under the pseudonym of Rae Winters, hastily replacing a contributor who had fallen ill. Some readers kept their issues intact, but others detached theirs and made separate *Cosmos* files out of them. It's still possible to find loose copies of this segment or that for sale by specialty dealers. When the project had run its course, twenty-five copies were specially bound, five for the five editors of *Fantasy Magazine* and the rest for the contributors. (I'm pleased to say that I own one of those contributor copies, though I have no idea whose it once was.) All those original editions are now rarities, but the set has been reissued several times, and anyone interested in reading *Cosmos* today can find it readily enough in a handsome print-on-demand edition released by Fiction House, Inc. One would read *Cosmos* today, I hasten to say, strictly as a curio. Most of its authors were working with tongue in cheek. What they produced was a romp, a spoof, an exercise in sheer science fictional playfulness. It is also a creaky, melodramatic thing, by and large, displaying all the literary faults of that unsophisticated era in science fiction. It would

be wrong to approach it as anything other than an artifact of its day.

Ralph Milne Farley, a successful pulp craftsman but a pretty rough-hewn writer, starts things off with an opening paragraph that sets some sort of record for breathless expository sweep:

“On the shore of the small island of Elbon, on the planet Lemnis, which circles the lesser of the twin suns known collectively by earthlings as the double-star Alpha Centauri, stood Dos-Tev, the deposed and exiled young Emperor of the planet, in earnest conversation with white-bearded Mea Quin, greatest scientist of all space. The metal-green sky above them sparkled crisply in the afternoon light of the two suns and an iodine-scented breeze swept in from the rolling waves of the sea.”

Having discovered that the sinister usurper Ay-Artz has acquired a faster-than-light spaceship and has set off to conquer distant Earth, Dos-Tev and Mea Quin, with their faithful sidekick Bullo, cobble together a spaceship of their own overnight and head off to thwart Ay-Artz’s dastardly plan. There Farley turns the story over to David H. Keller, who shifts the scene to Earth and then Mercury as the enemy approaches; the next few chapters take us to Callisto, Mars, and Saturn to show our Solar System’s preparations for the invasion, followed by an inventive interlude by John W. Campbell, one of the best chapters of all, bubbling with ideas that will keep his successors in the series very busy indeed. (Among many other things, the brilliant Campbell tosses in an atomic bomb powered by U-239, back there in 1934!)

And so it goes, one lively sequence after another as the zig-zagging plot leaps from author to author. We visit the Death Jungle of Neptune, we see the empire of the Machine Men of Venus, we return to thirty-first-century Earth to find it struggling against another enemy, a horde of warlike robots. In the tenth chapter Palmer shows the arrival of Emperor Dos-Tev and his two companions on our Moon—they have arrived in the Solar System well ahead of Ay-Artz—and emissaries from the various worlds beginning to unite against the common enemy from Alpha Centauri. Then everything pauses while A. Merritt, by far the most skillful writer of the group, disposes of the robot menace in the haunting “The Last Poet and the Robots,” one of the two stories of the sequence that would go on to achieve independence as a stand-alone work. (E.E. Smith’s chapter, which shows that the robots are not quite done for, also attained a separate life as “Robot Nemesis.”)

I need not summarize the twists and turns of the remaining chapters. Suffice it to say that the seventeenth and final installment was entrusted to the knowing hand of the great pulp storyteller Edmond Hamilton, whose job it was to describe the climactic battle with Ay-Artz, and who carries it off in surprising fashion, not only killing off our supposed hero, Dos-Tev, but destroying Neptune, Uranus, and Pluto by a titanic atomic explosion in the process of disposing of the villainous Ay-Artz. And so the grand epic ends, with an Earthman emitting “a cry of superhuman triumph” at the very end: “We of the Solar System gambled our system itself on victory. And we won! We won!”

Creaky, yes. Utterly implausible. But fun, irresistible fun. And a startling demonstration, back in the primeval days of American science fiction, of how well eighteen science fiction writers could work together to create a collaborative novel that, for all its flaws, shows state-of-the-art science fictional thinking, vintage 1933–4.