

REFLECTIONS

STAR (PSI CASSIOPEIA)

Robert Silverberg

It was a casual glance into an old book catalog that led me, a few months ago, to the unexpected discovery of a towering masterpiece of early science fiction, a book completely unknown to me and, I suspect, to you as well.

The catalog was an old one issued by Lloyd Currey, an East Coast bookseller from whom I bought many books over the years while I was building my SF library. Currey is still in business, but my library is so thoroughly built by now that storage space is starting to be a serious problem, and I have begun culling items that I think I am unlikely to refer to again—among them a two-foot shelf of Currey catalogs, which I have passed along to the great critic and encyclopedist John Clute for his reference use. Before shipping the catalogs off to Clute, though, I skimmed through them, an unwise move, as it turned out, because now and then I came upon a listing of some book I felt I needed to own and promptly obtained it, so I ended up with no net gain of shelf space at all.

For example, I saw this in a 1982 catalog:

DEFONTENAY, C[HARLEMAGNE] I[SCHIR]. *Star (Psi) Cassiopeia*. Boston: Gregg Press, 1976. 1st US hardcover ed. A masterpiece of nineteenth century SF, *Star* is not only one of the earliest “space operas,” but also the first work of its scale in the SF field. The story concerns a world leveled by plague, the flight of a few survivors to other planets and the settlement of Star.

That caught my attention. A nineteenth-century interstellar space opera? I rummaged in a few reference books, including the indispensable online encyclopedia created by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, and found some brief mentions of the book, praising its biological and anthropological speculations while dismissing it fairly offhandedly as a work of fiction. But what interested me most was that it had been first published in 1854. That was a decade before Jules Verne’s first novel, and some forty years before that of H.G. Wells. And neither Verne nor Wells had written novels of interstellar travel. Not until 1975 had there been an English translation, by one P.J. Sokolowski, published by Donald A. Wollheim’s enterprising DAW Books. A year later Gregg Press had released a hardcover edition of the DAW paperback. Somehow I had failed to notice either edition at the time, despite a 1976 review in *Analog* by Lester del Rey that called it “fascinating.” “Long before most writers even considered showing any planet beyond Earth as having a real culture of its own,” del Rey said, “Defontenay was investing his invention with many of the aspects of modern science fiction.” Clearly this was a book well ahead of its time and something worth investigating.

The existence of a Gregg Press reprint was a major credential, too. In the 1970s Gregg had released a long series of handsome books in uniform red-and-green bindings under the editorial auspices of the veteran editor David Hartwell and, yes, the bookseller Lloyd Currey, and many estimable Gregg titles had found their way into my library: such classics as Verne’s *An Antarctic Mystery*, Joseph Conrad’s *The Inheritors*, Karel Capek’s *The War with the Newts*, and hardcover reprints of paperback novels by Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delany, Jack Vance, and Fritz Leiber, among others. (They did three Silverberg volumes, too.) Since Gregg Press books had been issued in quantities of only a few hundred each, I expected difficulty in finding the Defontenay book, but, no, an internet dealer was offering it for a mere twenty-five dollars. I sent for it. I read it. And I was bowled over. The original DAW Books blurb, reproduced in the Gregg edition, declares, in capital letters, “AN EPIC COMPARABLE

ONLY TO THE WORKS OF STAPLEDON AND TOLKIEN.” I doubt very much that there is anything Tolkienian about *Star*, but the Stapledon comparison is absolutely on the mark. This is a book worthy of being set beside *Last and First Men* and *Star-maker*, one that offers a richly detailed vision, Stapledonian indeed, of imaginary worlds far from our own—and it was written eighty years before Stapledon’s two great works!

It’s a slender book, achieving much in just 191 pages. And a strange one, too, not really a novel but more of a chronicle, plotless and discursive, which includes samples of the poetry of the alien culture it depicts, geographical descriptions of Star and its neighboring worlds, essays on their politics and philosophy and sociology, two complete one-act plays, and several other pieces designed to provide a thoroughly detailed picture of the complex planet to which Defontenay gave the English name “Star.”

The chronicles of Star that Defontenay offers us arrive on Earth aboard a meteor that an explorer sees crashing into the summit of a Himalayan peak. The spacefaring rock bursts open on impact, revealing a metal chest “embellished with bizarre figures” that contains a trove of books and manuscripts written in a wholly unfamiliar alphabet. Somehow the explorer manages through two years of toil to decipher these texts much as his countryman Champollion had deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphics a few decades earlier. (Never mind that Champollion had the use of the Rosetta Stone, which provided a quite understandable Greek translation of the Egyptian text he deciphered, whereas the finder of the Star documents had no such bilingual assistance. The prologue is mere pretext to take us to the chronicles of the world called Star, far away in the constellation of Cassiopeia, that had been so miraculously carried across the gulf of space to the snowy heights of the Himalayas.)

Star, we learn, is the sole planet of a system of four suns: gigantic white Ruliel, green Altether, fiery red Urrias, and the blue Erragror that casts a “soft and melancholy light” over the entire group. Star, a planet of goodly size whose orbit lies between those of green Altether and blue Erragror, has four moons. Tassul, Lessur, Rudar, and Elier. The entire complex of secondary suns, moons, and Star orbits around the central sun, huge Ruliel.

Already we are in the presence of an astounding feat of imagination. No writer before Defontenay had ever invented anything remotely like this multiple solar system. The idea that there might be extrasolar worlds at all was a daring speculative leap. Whether such an intricate congeries of suns could actually exist is irrelevant: Defontenay simply offers them to us as a fact, and depicts them with a poet’s skill. (“The disk of Tassul, illuminated in totality by the rays of Ruliel, rises clear and silvery in the east. Lessur presents a strange phenomenon; half its surface, receiving the white light of Ruliel, is the pale yellow color of Tassul touched with a nuance of blue, while the other half, reflecting only the rays of Erragror, presents a dim shade of blue. . . .”)

Amidst the perpetual chameleon splendor of these radiant globes is the glorious world of Star, where “a breath of warm wind brings us to the roaring of the sea beating on the marble cliffs.” Two humanoid races inhabit this world, one “beautiful, noble, and strong,” the other “small, hairy, and remarkable . . . for their large, creased, and drooping ears.” This secondary species is, of course, in a state of subjugation, treated as domestic animals by the dominant people.

After a lengthy discourse on the delights of Starian life—delightful for the superior species, at least—we are given a discourse on the history of the planet, its flora and fauna, its mythology, the emergence of various cultures on the several continents and the founding of empires, and then the coming of a forty-year plague (brilliantly depicted by quotations from poems of lamentation) that drives the survivors to flee their planet aboard vast vehicles called *abares*, powered by a force that suspends the action

of gravity, and take refuge on the moon Tassul—abandoning Star to the secondary race, immune to the plague, among whom warlike new kingdoms rapidly spring up. And so the story proceeds: the founding of a civilization in exile on Tassul, the expansion to the adjacent satellite of Lessur (which has inhabitants of its own, humanoids of angelic beauty), the voyages to the moons Rudar and Elier (each inhabited by interesting intelligent species), and, ultimately, the return to Star, the conquest of the secondary race by the returning Starians, and the rebuilding of Starian civilization on the home world, now free of plague. We get, swiftly, accounts of the new Starian leaders and of Starian poetry and metaphysical thought, a lively one-act play that had attained great popularity among them, a second play, and much more, everything told with elegant economy of style. It's an extraordinary achievement. There is nothing like it in previous science fiction, such as there was, and very little of this caliber of invention has been produced in the century and a half since it was written. The blurb-writer's comparison to Stapledon is altogether justifiable.

This was Defontenay's only novel. He was born in 1819 in Cahaigues, France, received a medical degree in 1845, and practiced medicine in St. Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, where his specialty seems to have been plastic surgery. "Ugliness makes people wicked," he wrote in *Essai de Calliplastie* (1846), a textbook that is one of the earliest works on cosmetic surgery. He wrote *Star* seven years later—we will never know what impulse it was that launched him into this phenomenal and unprecedented experiment in speculative fiction—and his only other work, before his death from cancer at the age of thirty-seven in 1856, was *Etudes Dramatiques*, a collection of four unconventional theatrical sketches. That is all we know about this unusual and surely brilliant man.

But his great fantasy remains. It is an astonishing work of enormous visionary power. French scholars of science fiction have remained intermittently aware of it, but the book languished in obscurity until it was reissued in France in 1972, followed a few years later by Sokolowski's English translation.

That Defontenay was a man of remarkable imaginative power is amply demonstrated by this one book; that he would hold a major place in the history of science fiction had he lived to give us others is, I think, a certainty. One of the poems appended to the book in its final pages tells us straightforwardly that he was one of us, given from childhood on to the sort of romantic fantasizing that anyone who has ever written or wanted to write science fiction will find familiar:

You were the origin
Of my dreams. Star is one of those strange worlds,
Eldorado, Eden,
Which each of us adopts for himself and arranges,
Beautiful fields of the foreign
Which every mind invents and embellishes. . . .

* * *

. . . Now, let's create a realm:
And let's invent suns with more delightful planets:
To find something new, let's give light to them.

And he leaves us, this great, unknown predecessor of modern science fiction, with these words:

"May these stories drawn from another world have made you forget for a moment the miseries of this one."