

# REFLECTIONS

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## THE ONE THAT GETS YOU HOOKED

I think it's fair to consider reading science fiction to be an addictive disease. Most of us stumble across it rather early—it used to be that we would get a science fiction magazine from a classmate, or find one in the dentist's office, and then, later, it would be some stray paperback that did the job—but nowadays, I suspect, the initial infection is acquired at the movies, or from a television show. Whatever the cause, though, it seems that anyone susceptible to the SF virus gets a bad case of it right away, and never quite shakes it off. Certainly I haven't. A combination of longevity and persistence of habit has had me reading the stuff for upward of seventy years now.

And what was it, you may ask, that got me hooked on science fiction, back there in the distant fifth decade of the twentieth century?

The earliest sources of science fiction that I was able to draw upon were books—books that I found in the public library. I was a big library user, making a trip every week or ten days to pick up an armload of books, and my tastes, though fairly catholic, leaned toward the fantastic—Norse myths, Lewis Carroll, the adventures of Dr. Doolittle, the levitational exploits of Mary Poppins. I had read Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, too, which is generally considered science fiction, though I had no idea that that was what it was (or had even ever heard the term, back there circa 1946). Somehow, in my almost random exploration of the library shelves, I found H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, with that wondrous vision of a dying sun and Earth's last living thing hopping fitfully about in the blood-red waters of an icy sea—a vision that has never lost its power for me. I didn't know that was science fiction, either, but whatever it was, I wanted more of it.

And found it readily enough, a year or so later, over in the paperback section of my library: *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction*, edited by Donald A. Wollheim. There was a story by H.G. Wells in it, which got my attention immediately, since *The Time Machine* still glowed in my memory. I knew Wells's name was a mark of quality in this peculiar kind of literature for which I already knew I had a predilection; but I discovered other writers in Wollheim's anthology, too—someone named Theodore Sturgeon, and Stanley G. Weinbaum, and Robert A. Heinlein. I wasn't sure how to pronounce Heinlein's name, but his whacky fourth-dimensional story, “—And He Built a Crooked House,” gave me immense pleasure. So did Sturgeon's powerful “Microcosmic God,” and Weinbaum's joyous “A Martian Odyssey.” And then there was T.S. Stripling's long, mysterious “The Green Splotches,” which I now know to be a classic early SF story by a once-famous mainstream writer. There were five more beyond those.

And on the cover were those words, “Science Fiction,” which at last put a name to the commodity that Verne and Wells had been providing for me. What I did not know was that this was the first of all paperback science fiction anthologies, and that this was the first time that the phrase “science fiction” had been used in the title of a book.

My head reeled with wonders. I was thrown into a fever of excitement. My yearning for the world of the distant future was so powerful that I could taste and touch and smell it. I read that little paperback in one long feverish rush, and read it again, and then acquired a copy of my very own. It cost me twenty-five cents, no small sum for a boy not yet into his teens. That was, in fact, quite a lot of money in those days: consider that a Chevrolet sedan cost about fourteen hundred dollars, hot dogs were three for

a quarter, and movie admission was at most a quarter. (Consider, also, that comparable paperbacks today generally cost \$7.99.)

The damage had been done. I wanted more of this thing called “science fiction”—all I could get. Off I went to the book department at Macy’s, and stumbled at once into *Portable Novels of Science*, edited by—Wollheim again! In it were four glorious long stories by Wells again, John Taine, H.P. Lovecraft, and above all Olaf Stapledon’s tale of super-children, *Odd John*, which seemed to speak directly to lonely, maladjusted, high-I.Q. twelve-year-old me.

Verne and Wells had aroused my interest, yes. But it was *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* that really did the job. From its contents page I discovered that there were such things as science fiction magazines—*Amazing Stories*, *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Wonder Stories*. An eighth-grade classmate gave me the July 1948 issue of *Weird Tales*, featuring Edmond Hamilton’s “The Twilight of the Gods,” a story that linked my old fascination with the Norse myths to my new obsession with science fiction. Then, a little while later—it was 1948, now—I began reading John Campbell’s *Astounding Science Fiction* and Raymond A. Palmer’s garish magazine *Amazing Stories*, and quickly went on to add the other pulp SF magazines of the day to my list, *Startling Stories* and *Planet Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*.

Then came the books. From Macy’s book department came three big, spectacular anthologies, Groff Conklin’s *Best of Science Fiction* and *A Treasury of Science Fiction*, and *Adventures in Time and Space*, edited by Raymond Healy and J. Francis McComas, with stories by many of the same authors as the Wollheim collection had offered, and dozens of others, just as exciting. The hook was in, all right. I had acquired a lifelong addiction. And it was *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* that had done it to me.

Who was this Donald A. Wollheim, who was going about the land so flagrantly spreading this literary virus?

He was one of the great figures of American science fiction, an editor who put his mark on it as indelibly as John W. Campbell or Hugo Gernsback. Their names are legendary; his may not be familiar to you at all. But it is a great one within the profession. He was one of the earliest of science fiction fans, having discovered SF in the 1930s and immediately becoming active in the circle of science fiction readers in New York City. He sold his first story in 1934, when he was twenty, and two years later published one issue of a semi-pro science fiction magazine, *Fanciful Tales*. By 1941 he was editing two professional magazines, *Cosmic Stories* and *Stirring Science Stories*, which provided early markets for some of his New York friends who would go on to become major figures in the field—such writers as Isaac Asimov, Frederik Pohl, C.M. Kornbluth. That brief editorial stint somehow brought him in contact with Pocket Books, the pioneering American paperback company, which published, among many other things, a series of anthologies such as *The Pocket Book of Adventure Stories*, *The Pocket Book of Western Stories*, *The Pocket Book of Mystery Stories*. Wollheim was asked to do a *Pocket Book of Science Fiction*. It was a bold move, because science fiction was virtually unknown publishing territory then, and the phrase “science fiction” was familiar only to its small group of devoted aficionados. He chose five stories from the orthodox SF magazines (the Heinlein, Sturgeon, and Weinbaum, one by Wallace West, and one by John W. Campbell under his “Don A. Stuart” pseudonym) and five from mainstream sources (the Wells, the Stribling, one by Ambrose Bierce, one by the fantasist John Collier, and Steven Vincent Benet’s haunting, unforgettable post-apocalyptic tale, “By the Waters of Babylon.” The book appeared in 1943 and, to everyone’s surprise, was an immediate success, going into four big printings by 1947.

By then Wollheim was editing a paperback line himself—the newly established Avon Books, and it was there, between 1947 and 1951, that he put the work of such

great fantasists as C.S. Lewis and A. Merritt into newsstand editions that won wide audiences for these previously obscure writers, along with books by such early masters as Jack Williamson, Ray Cummings, and Ralph Milne Farley. During the Avon years, also, Wollheim edited a quarterly magazine, *The Avon Fantasy Reader*—for which he drew on his vast knowledge of the field to reprint a host of stories from the pages of *Weird Tales*, *Argosy*, and other classic fiction magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, giving new life to the fiction of Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, William Hope Hodgson, C.L. Moore, and dozens of others. (He published the occasional original story in it too—such as “Zero Hour,” by the young Ray Bradbury.)

From there it was on to Ace Books, for whom he invented the Double Novel—two books bound upside-down from each other, so that whichever way you turned it a cover painting faced you. Among the writers who got their first paperback audiences in those back-to-back books were Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delany, John Brunner, Leigh Brackett, Poul Anderson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Harlan Ellison, Brian W. Aldiss, and a guy named Silverberg. Over on the reprint side, Ace offered the first paperback editions of Asimov's Foundation series, Robert E. Howard's Conan books, and A.E. van Vogt's Null-A novels.

Quite a record of accomplishment. But the Wollheim story was only beginning. Next came DAW Books, his own publishing company, which bore his initials: **Donald A. Wollheim**, which before his death in 1990 brought out hundreds of SF and fantasy novels by a host of leading writers, and which still continues today under the editorship of his daughter Betsy.

My own debt to Don Wollheim, both as reader and writer, was enormous. The kind of SF he most loved—rich in wonder and imagination, depicting in vivid detail sweeping vistas of the infinite—was the kind most likely to appeal to my developing mind when I was eleven or twelve years old, and in which I can still find pleasure today, as I discovered by reading *The Pocket Book* last month for the first time in perhaps sixty years. It was those two Wollheim anthologies, notably the *Pocket Book of Science Fiction*, that first put the hook into me, even as some book by Frank Herbert or Robert A. Heinlein or Anne McCaffrey or, even, Robert Silverberg once did it for you. By reading them, my soul had been irrevocably altered. A literary virus had invaded it; and it was Don Wollheim who put it there, as he did for an entire generation of impressionable readers who grew up to be the writers you've cherished for decades.