

# REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

## THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

It is summertime, early September of 1950—seventy years ago. I am midway through the decade of my teens and my junior year in high school, and have just come home from summer camp, where I was the editor of the camp newspaper. All summer long I have been eagerly awaiting what will surely be a very big event in the world of science fiction: the launching of a glossy new magazine called *Galaxy*, which intends to set new high standards of quality for science fiction and which has bombarded the small group that is science fiction fandom for the past three months with hyperbolic press releases announcing its advent. I am the publisher of a small amateur SF fanzine and have somehow attracted the attention of the new magazine's public-relations department, and so I have been getting, and pondering, those press releases since they began coming forth.

In 1950, science fiction publishing had been dominated for more than a decade by John W. Campbell's magazine, *Astounding Science Fiction*. Since taking the editorial job at *Astounding* late in 1937, Campbell had worked a revolution in science fiction, introducing a host of new writers—Robert A. Heinlein, L. Sprague de Camp, Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, A.E. van Vogt—who brought a striking note of maturity to storytelling technique, while at the same time he had altered the magazine's format to rid it of as much of its gaudy pulp-magazine appearance as he could. Though half a dozen other science fiction magazines existed at that time, they were aimed primarily at young readers who wanted fast-paced adventure tales with the accent on the fiction rather than on the science, with Campbell's *Astounding* standing alone for adult readers. The arrival of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1949 had not changed much, because it was, at first, a quarterly magazine with relatively limited distribution. But now, for the first time, Campbell would have a real challenge, a monthly competitor that would pay top rates for its fiction, set demanding standards of quality, and go after many of the writers whom Campbell had developed.

Its editor, those many press releases declared, was to be H.L. Gold—himself a writer who had been a contributor to Campbell's *Astounding*, though not a particularly prominent one. His best-known story was a clever fantasy, "Trouble with Water," that had appeared in *Unknown*, Campbell's companion to *Astounding*, in 1939. A novella in *Astounding*, "A Matter of Form," had attracted some attention that same year. Earlier, in 1934 and 1935, Gold had had a few stories published in *Astounding* under a pseudonym, during the editorial reign of Campbell's predecessor, F. Orlin Tremaine. But he was drafted in 1944 and saw military action in the South Pacific, coming home with a serious case of agoraphobia that confined him to his Manhattan apartment, which he rarely left. Until he was tapped for the editorship of *Galaxy* he earned his living mainly by writing comic-book continuity.

But the press releases promised wonders and marvels. Like *Astounding*, the new magazine would be a 160-page monthly, selling for what was then the standard price of 25 cents a copy. The first issue would feature stories by an assortment of Campbell's star writers: a three-part serial by Clifford D. Simak, a novelette by Theodore Sturgeon, and short stories by Fritz Leiber, Fredric Brown, and Isaac Asimov, along with one by a brilliant newcomer, Richard Matheson. "From cover to cover," we were told, "the book is adult, intelligent, with stress on characterization and psychological conflict . . . *Galaxy* will buy only adult stories. Write the duel on the asteroid if you

must, or feed life forms to the alien eater in the Andes . . . but don't send them to *Galaxy*. Think in terms of human conflict, psychological suspense, throw out action strictly for action's sake, and try to find new elements to hang stories on." Even the cover format would be something different: glossy paper stock, "the most beautiful, highly enameled on the market. It takes color like nothing else elsewhere." By way of proof, advance copies of the cover of the first issue accompanied one of the press releases, a shiny thing indeed, immediately setting the magazine apart as something different.

I counted the days until the September 8 release date, and duly showed up at my neighborhood newsstand, and, yes, there it was in all its glossy glory, Volume One Number One of *Galaxy Science Fiction*. And I had a 25-cent piece in my pocket, waiting for it. You need to understand that 25 cents was a substantial sum of money in 1950, especially for a teenager like me. A ride on the New York subway cost just a nickel then; daily newspapers were even cheaper; hot dogs were two for a quarter; a quarter would buy you a movie ticket or a paperback book.

A quarter was also the price of a pack of cigarettes, and thereby hangs the present tale.

I said, some paragraphs back, that I was midway through my teen decade, and that I had just come back from summer camp. That summer one of my bunkmates had somehow acquired a pack of cigarettes—the brand, I recall, was Pall Mall—and we had made furtive experiments in smoking them, something very daring for teenage boys in that innocent era. I recall smoking three or four cigarettes and not liking them very much, but, nevertheless, feeling terribly adult and sophisticated as I puffed away. Now I was home and back at school and trying very hard to look adult and sophisticated as I entered into my first adventures with . . . girls. A cigarette dangling from the corner of my mouth in the Bogart manner—just the thing! And there I was at the neighborhood newsstand, with just 25 cents in disposable money in my pocket. Buy a pack of Pall Malls for my very own? Well, yes, very tempting—but there was the long-yearned-for first issue of *Galaxy* sitting there in the rack! What was it to be? Invest that quarter in the new magazine that promised all sorts of literary delights? Or pass up *Galaxy* and go for the cigarettes instead, dazzle the girls, but stunt my growth and destroy my lungs (even then, they were nicknamed "coffin nails")?

I hesitated for about one-sixteenth of a second. And then I made my purchase.

Reader, you know which path I chose. Not the one that led to yellowed teeth and blackened lungs and an early demise. Oh, no! My tightly clutched quarter went for H.L. Gold's wonderful new science fiction magazine, and I rushed home and, homework be damned, raced through its 160 pages in breathless haste, and discovered that *Galaxy* did indeed live up to the hype of those press releases. It was a terrific magazine. It put Campbell's *Astounding*, which I had revered with all my heart since I had discovered it three years before, into the shade. It was definitely going to be the most significant science fiction magazine of the coming decade, the place where all the best stories were to be found, and—you know how teenage boys are about such things—I vowed that when I grew up I was going to write for it, and sell it bushels of stories and even some novels. As for cigarettes, well, on the budget of a high-school boy I could afford only so much, and I was already spending as much as I could on science fiction magazines, and now I had to find an additional quarter a month for that. Cigarettes would be an impossible extra financial burden. So I left that pack of Pall Malls where it was, and in fact never in the seventy years since have I smoked even a single cigarette. But I have, you bet, bought plenty of science fiction magazines, and never for an instant have I regretted the road not taken as I look back on that September afternoon in 1950.

The interesting thing is that *Galaxy* became everything it said it was going to be. I have a stack of the early issues beside me now, the very same issues that I so willingly

expended my scarce 1950 quarters on. (Though by the eighth issue the price had gone to 35 cents, which I unhesitatingly paid.) H.L. Gold's editorial in the first issue is headed "For Adults Only," a nice pat on the back for a teenager like me with delusions of adulthood, and told us that "science fiction has finally come of age"—a nice pat on the back for the magazine he was about to offer us, though John W. Campbell, who surely thought he had been editing a magazine for adults since 1937, was not very quietly fuming in his office a couple of miles uptown. The stories, though, justified Gold's boasting: the first part of a powerful novel by Clifford D. Simak, "Time Quarry," later to be published in book form as *Time And Again*, and a splendid Theodore Sturgeon novella, "The Stars are the Styx," and Fritz Leiber's sinister little "Later Than You Think," along with a fine story by Richard Matheson and minor works by Asimov and Fredric Brown. All in all, it was as good as any issue of *Astounding* of recent years, as well it should have been, since all but Matheson were writers whom Campbell had brought into prominence.

Succeeding issues maintained that high level. Leiber, Asimov, and Brown were back, with stronger stories than they had in #1, rival editor Anthony Boucher of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* had a clever novelette, and the gifted young writer Damon Knight had a nasty little short-short, "To Serve Man," that would go on to many an anthology appearance in the years ahead. The third issue was just as good. The fourth started a new serial, "Tyrann," by Isaac Asimov, which made it clear that Asimov, one of Campbell's most famous protégés, had jumped ship to the new magazine. And the lead story in issue #5 would make a big splash, too—Ray Bradbury's novella "The Fireman," which in expanded form would go on to fame everlasting as *Fahrenheit 451*.

Quite a magazine. It had the impact of an earthquake on our field. Everyone wanted to write for it, and in the next few years just about everyone who was anyone did. It brought us such novels as "The Puppet Masters" by Robert A. Heinlein, "The Space Merchants" by Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth, "The Demolished Man" and "The Stars My Destination" by Alfred Bester, Asimov's "The Caves of Steel," and a flood of memorable shorter work by Sturgeon, Simak, Knight, Kornbluth, Pohl, James Blish, Poul Anderson, William Tenn, Robert Sheckley, Philip K. Dick, and nearly all the other major writers of the era. And it would go on playing a dominant role through the years of Gold's editorship and his successors Frederik Pohl and Ejler Jakobsen before expiring, a mere shadow of its former self, in the late 1970s.

Someone who was not a major writer of the era was Robert Silverberg, then finishing high school and moving on to college at Columbia. But I did still have fantasies of seeing a story of mine behind those shiny covers, and eventually—after a lot of H.L. Gold's rejection slips, some of them warm and encouraging, some of them pretty biting—I landed a story in the November 1956 issue, just short of my twenty-second birthday and almost exactly six years after I had made that fateful decision to turn away from that pack of cigarettes and buy the first issue of *Galaxy*. I made that decision seventy years ago. Eventually I would have a couple of dozen more stories published in that magazine, and five or six of my novels. It was the right choice, and no doubt about it.

