

REFLECTIONS

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THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION

This is the time of year when the annual Best Science Fiction of the Year anthologies start coming out—what used to be an exciting time for me, since I often had stories reprinted in those anthologies and I was eager to see what the editors of those books had had to say about them. Now that I'm no longer very active as a science fiction writer, I'm not likely to be a candidate for inclusion in the best-of-the-year anthologies—you have to write something if you want somebody to be able to reprint it—and so I look at the new year's books purely with the interest of an observer who wants to know who the hot new writers of the field might be and what sort of thing they may be writing.

There are four, or maybe five, best-of-the-year anthologies currently being published. The patriarch of them all is Gardner Dozois' *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, now approaching its thirtieth huge volume and in its totality constituting an encyclopedia of all that was memorable about the science fiction short story in the past generation. *Year's Best SF*, edited by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, has been running well over a decade now. More recently, two more best-of-the-year anthologies edited by Jonathan Strahan and Rich Horton have joined them, and I believe there is a fifth such annual collection now, edited by Allen Kaster, available only in Kindle and audio editions. These present-day volumes stand at the head of a long and glorious tradition, for it has been the custom in the science fiction world for many decades now to assemble such collections and thus give a measure of permanence to what would otherwise be the ephemeral existence of magazine fiction.

One of the earliest such series was the work of Judith Merril, who edited twelve annual volumes between 1957 and 1968, beginning under the title of *SF: The Year's Greatest Science-Fiction*

and *Fantasy* and finishing as *SF 12*. The Merril series was distinguished by a wider reach than that of most similar collections, for she went beyond the standard science fiction magazines of the day and sought relevant material in the mainstream world: her contents pages are studded not only with the names of Asimov, Sturgeon, and Leiber but with those of John Updike, Shirley Jackson, William Burroughs, and Jorge Luis Borges. No other anthology editor, past or present, has done so much to expand the boundaries of our field.

Far more conservative in taste, but just as memorable and still just as valuable, was the *World's Best Science Fiction* series edited by the SF pioneer Donald A. Wollheim and his younger associate, Terry Carr, between 1965 and 1971. Wollheim's knowledge of science fiction went back to the almost prehistoric Hugo Gernsback days; Carr was a key editorial figure in the New Wave revolution of the 1960s. Between them, they covered almost the entire creative range of modern SF to produce a series of landmark volumes that ended only when Wollheim and Carr went their separate editorial ways in 1971. Carr continued a series of his own from 1972 until his death in 1987, Wollheim a parallel series from 1974 to 1990. Such people as Lester del Rey, Frederik Pohl, Harry Harrison, and Brian W. Aldiss edited Year's Bests for briefer periods. I even took a turn at it myself, in association with my wife Karen, for a couple of years early in the present century. And Isaac Asimov edited a long series of retro-Year's-Bests beginning in 1979 with the top stories of 1939.

Ancestral to all of these, the first of all the Year's Bests, is a superb set of books produced between 1949 and 1958 by a knowledgeable team of editors whose names mean nothing to modern readers. I have before me at the moment the very

first volume of this series—*The Best Science-Fiction Stories: 1949*, edited by Everett F. Bleiler and T.D. Dikty. I never met Bleiler, who lived to a great old age and died a few years ago, but I did exchange a few letters with him, and with his son, still an active scholar in the field. Bleiler was an anthropologist, with a deep background in SF, who compiled a number of important bibliographical works. His collaborator, Ted Dikty, whom I did know fairly well in the SF world of thirty or forty years ago, was a stocky, jovial man, also a bibliographer and collector, a prime expert on science fiction.

That groundbreaking 1949 Bleiler-Dikty volume covers the best SF stories of 1948. It happens that 1948 was the year I began reading the science fiction magazines: sixty-five years ago, that is, a number that I find astonishing and that many of you will find incomprehensible. What was it like, that world of 1948 that produced the dozen stories (by ten different writers) that Bleiler and Dikty considered the best science fiction of the year? And how do those stories stand up in comparison with those being written today?

It was three years after the most destructive war in history. Much of Europe still lay in ruins. The U.S., though, was enjoying the first rush of post-war prosperity. The soldiers were home from the battlefields and they and their wives were busily engendering millions of babies, the biggest new generation in history, the very same multitude of baby boomers who today, on the threshold of old age, are signing up in droves for Medicare. The Soviet Union, so recently our ally in the great war, had turned hostile and had extended its malign power over much of Europe. Harry S. Truman was president, having inherited the job upon the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945, but Truman was unpopular and was widely expected to be defeated in that fall's presidential elections by Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York. There were no personal computers, no smartphones, no jet airliners. Even television, then in its earliest days of commercial broadcasting,

was a luxury enjoyed only by a few.

Seven science fiction magazines were being published that year, but for the anthologists' purposes only four really mattered. *Astounding Science Fiction*, the ancestor of today's *Analog*, had been the undisputed leader in the field since 1934, the only magazine consistently interested in publishing stories that adult readers might enjoy. *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and its companion *Startling Stories*, after a decade of specializing largely in juvenile pulp fiction, had cautiously begun to impinge on *Astounding's* more mature audience. *Planet Stories*, a pulp magazine joyously devoted to the wildest fringes of space opera, also occasionally ran a more serious story. Of the other three, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* was an all-reprint magazine concentrating largely on classic fantasy novels, and *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures* were staff-written pulp magazines aimed exclusively at teenage boys.

Most of the earliest anthologists—Groff Conklin, J. Francis McComas, and Raymond J. Healy—had perforce chosen a majority of their material from *Astounding*. Another, Donald A. Wollheim, had gone farther afield for his 1943 *Pocket Book of Science Fiction*, using some stories from mainstream sources by writers such as H.G. Wells, Ambrose Bierce, and John Collier, but even he took a third of his material from *Astounding*. Half of Bleiler and Dikty's dozen 1948 stories came from that dominant magazine also, but, because Ray Bradbury was being published in such pulps as *Planet* and *Thrilling Wonder* then, they were able to include fiction from those magazines in their book (and two other *Thrilling Wonder* pieces as well). And, showing a longer reach, they found one story in *Blue Book*, a general-fiction magazine then of wide circulation, and one very brief one in a magazine called *Comment*.

I wonder how many of the ten contributors to that first Year's Best anthology would be familiar to today's readers. Ray Bradbury, of course: his two contributions, "Mars is Heaven" and "And the

Moon Be Still as Bright,” became segments of his classic *The Martian Chronicles*, which still has a strong readership. Nor are Isaac Asimov (“No Connection”) and Poul Anderson (“Genius”) unknown names today, and some of the stories of Murray Leinster (“The Strange Case of John Kingman”) are still being reprinted.

The others, though? The prolific Henry Kuttner, represented here by “Happy Ending” under his own name and “Ex Machina” under his “Lewis Padgett” pseudonym, drifts in and out of print, but is something less than a household name to today’s readers. Fredric Brown (“Knock”), once considered one of SF’s masters, is even more obscure, though his work too is occasionally reprinted, notably this very story. Martin Gardner (“Thang”) was a mathematician who wrote just a few science fiction stories; J.J. Coupling, under his real name of John R. Pierce, was an electronics engineer who dabbled in SF as a hobby. Erik Fennel (“Doughnut Jockey”) was a reliable pulp craftsman who is, I suspect, altogether forgotten. The remaining author, Wilmar H. Shiras, was something of a mystery even in her own day, but the story used here, “In Hiding,” has kept her name alive over the decades, still to be found in many modern anthologies.

Which brings me to a fundamental point: how many of these twelve stories, justifiably chosen as the best work of 1948, would have been published at all, let alone nominated for a Year’s Best anthology, if they were submitted to editors today? (Making allowances, of course, for the fact that they reflect the technology and culture of what has already become a bygone world.) How much evolution has the science fiction short story undergone in the past sixty-five years?

I conclude, after re-reading this anthology of my boyhood, that not all that much has changed. The two Bradbury stories are masterpieces, even though they depict a Mars that we know never existed. No editor would refuse them if Bradbury were just beginning his great Martian parable today. (Though that does create the wrenching prerequisite that the edi-

tor live in an alternative contemporary world unmarked by the impact Bradbury’s Martian stories had in our real one sixty-five years ago. Our hypothetical 2013 editor must be imagined as seeing the thing done for the first time.)

Shiras’ “In Hiding,” surely, would fit nicely into the next issue of this magazine. So would Kuttner’s cleverly plotted “Happy Ending,” and, probably, his lighter but deftly done “Ex Machina.” And if I were editing a magazine these days I would not turn down Leinster’s “John Kingman.”

Neither the Asimov or the Anderson is representative of the best work that those important writers would do later in their careers, but neither story is bad, either, and I would be hard put to find reasons for rejecting them. Martin Gardner’s “Thang” is a one-page filler, but fillers are often useful to editors, and its twist ending is still good fun today. J.J. Coupling’s “Period Piece” is another story that drives nicely onward toward a snapper ending: nothing extraordinary here, but certainly still publishable. And Brown’s “Knock” is a third twist-ending story with rather more substance than twist-ending stories usually have.

That’s eleven of the twelve stories that I think have something to offer, and often a good deal more than “something,” to modern readers. The lone exception is Fennel’s “Doughnut Jockey,” a space story that veers between outmoded pulp tropes and outmoded slick-magazine tropes. But eleven out of twelve is a startlingly high percentage. No one would mistake them for recently written stories, but they are very far from being antiques.

Would they, though, if published in one of today’s magazines, qualify for one or more of next year’s Year’s Best books? The Bradburys would, I’m certain. Probably the Shiras. Perhaps Kuttner’s “Happy Ending.” Whether any of the remaining seven would be picked is a question I’d rather leave to Messrs. Dozois, Strahan, and the other current Year’s Best selectors. But the interesting thing for me is how shrewdly Bleiler and Dikty selected their stories, back there in 1949, and how read-

able most of them remain, six and a half decades later. Or so it seems to this particular survivor of those ancient days.