

REFLECTIONS

LOOKING BACKWARD

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Looking Backward is the name of Edward Bellamy's classic 1888 novel about the future as it looked to a man of the late nineteenth century. It had a powerful effect on my youthful mind when I read it in the middle years of the twentieth century, and it is still very much worth reading. But this column is not about the Bellamy book.

It is, however, about looking backward, which is something I tend to do these days, having rather more to look at behind me than before me. I have reached quite a considerable age, as can be seen from the fact that my first stories were published in 1954, which will be sixty-eight years in the past by the time this column appears, and I was already in my third year of college when they saw print. The arithmetic is remorseless: moving onward in time at a rate of one second per second, I have somehow become an octogenarian. So I find myself often looking back across that ever-increasing span of time that separates the ambitious boy of those early stories from the white-haired oldster who wonders, sometimes, how it came about that he got from there to here.

I've been looking lately at a book that was of great help in making that journey, and which has been something of a talisman in all the years it took. I'm referring to L. Sprague de Camp's *Science Fiction Handbook* (Hermitage House, 1953), which I acquired under somewhat dubious circumstances at the World Science Fiction Convention of 1953 and have treasured ever since.

The name of L. Sprague de Camp may not mean much to today's science fiction readers, which is sad, because he was once among the titans of the field and many of his books, which still can be found by those who seek, offer entertaining and stimulating reading. He was a tall, striking-looking man of erect military bearing, stentorian voice, and formidable erudition, who began writing science fiction in the 1930s, made an early mark with the delightful time-travel novel *Lest Darkness Fall* and a series of fantasy adventures written in collaboration with Fletcher Pratt (another formerly famous figure of our genre), and continued to publish sparkling work well on into modern times. When the Science Fiction Writers of America began designating Grand Master writers, de Camp was one of the first chosen, after Robert A. Heinlein, Jack Williamson, and Clifford D. Simak.

Early in 1953, when word began to circulate in the science fiction world that de Camp was working on a book about how to write science fiction, I was a sophomore in college and extremely interested in learning all I could on that subject. I had already written some stories—a couple of dozen of them, in fact—and was sending them to the magazines of the day, and getting them all back, but with increasingly encouraging notes from the editors. I don't think I ever seriously thought, back then, of making a lifetime career out of writing science fiction, but I yearned with all my heart to sell a story or two, at least, to *Startling Stories* or *Amazing Stories* or one of the other gaudy pulp magazines I had been reading all through my teens.

Come summer, the interval between my second and third years of college, and I journeyed down to Philadelphia from my home in New York to attend my very first world science fiction convention. My roommate at the convention was another would-be writer, Harlan Ellison. I was eighteen, he was about six months older, and we both had that hunger to break through into the ranks of professional writers. (Which indeed we both did, as you know, but not quite yet. I would not make my first fiction sale until the beginning of 1954, and Harlan had to wait another year beyond

that.)

We wandered the halls of the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, where the convention was being held, communing with friends of our own age and staring in awe at such great figures of the field as Theodore Sturgeon, James Blish, and Frederik Pohl, among whom we hoped someday to move as colleagues. (And we did . . . eventually.) One afternoon we entered a deserted exhibit room and saw, stacked up on a table, a couple of dozen display copies of none other than L. Sprague de Camp's *Science Fiction Handbook*

There it was at last, the book I had waited for all year. How hungrily I stared at it! But the price was \$3.50, and in today's purchasing power that is about \$50, maybe more. As an impecunious college boy I could hardly contemplate such an expenditure for a single book. Nor could Harlan. And he wanted it just as badly as I did.

"You want a copy?" he said.

"Of course."

"Well, here." He took one from the stack and handed it to me, and stuck another under his arm, and nudged me toward the door.

I was, let us say, shocked. I had had a nice middle-class upbringing and stealing books was not something I was supposed to be doing. Harlan surely had been raised with similar moral qualms. But there was the pile of display copies of a book we both desperately wanted, we had no money, there was no one else around . . .

Reader, *he stole them*. I was just an accomplice after the fact. That made me nearly as guilty, of course, but I did want the book and did not refuse to receive it, although I would never have initiated the theft myself. Believe me, please: it was his idea. But squealing on my friend at this late date does no real harm, because Harlan is no longer here to object, everybody else involved with the writing and publication of that book is dead as well, no real economic harm was done to Hermitage House (long since vanished also) by the loss of two books it might never have been able to sell (how big a market could a book for would-be science-fiction writers have had in 1953?), and I knew the book was going to be really, really valuable to me in the years ahead. Besides, I wanted it and couldn't afford it and I hope I will be forgiven for my complicity in the crime if it turns out that there actually is an after-life.

I can't say that the de Camp book taught me all I know about writing. Not remotely. Those of us who are destined to become professional writers start out, age seven or eight, telling whoppers to our classmates and siblings and parents, and go on from there to write crude little stories in imitation of things we have read and admired, and then better ones, and better ones still, all the while closely studying how published writers achieved their effects, and then, *mirabile dictu*, comes that envelope with some magazine's check in it.

But *Science Fiction Handbook* was an invaluable guide along the bumpy path that took me, in the course of the next seven decades, from ambitious young tyro to elderly, much-published Grand Master. I read it over and over again, soaking up its wisdom and making it essential to my being.

The first part of the book is a general account of what science fiction is, defining it in terms of its central themes and providing a history of the genre going back to the ancient Greeks, and on up through such seventeenth-century works as Francis Godwin's *Man in the Moon* and Cyrano de Bergerac's account of his own similar voyage to the books of Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells. From there de Camp moved into the twentieth century—Burroughs, Weinbaum, Heinlein, Asimov, and on to such talented newcomers of the time as Alfred Bester, Arthur C. Clarke, Jack Vance, and Ray Bradbury. All well and good: I was a scholarly lad, and literary history was of great interest to me.

But the me of 1953, the one who wanted to sell some stories to *Startling* and *Amazing*, paid much more heed to what came next: the discussion of the science fiction market, the magazines and their editors, with talk of pay rates (one to four cents a word, depending on the magazine and the reputation of the writers) and the process of sending in one's stories for consideration (double-spaced, please, one side of the page) and the chances of any story's actually getting sold (pretty slim). The individual magazines and their editors then came in for capsule description. (John Campbell of the top-paying magazine, *Astounding*, is, we are told, "a large, light-haired man with an incisive, precise manner combined with a dry sense of humor," and Robert W. Lowndes, whose magazines were at the opposite end of the field where pay was concerned, is described as "a quiet, heavy-set fellow with wavy brown hair" whose "editorial taste is better than his budget allows him freely to indulge." These quick descriptions—which I would discover, a few years later when I had launched my own writing career, were dead-on accurate—made the field seem all the more human to me, a place where I might actually find a point of entry myself.

What was even more interesting was the chapter of profiles of the writers themselves. The field was small then, a close-knit collegial group, and de Camp knew everybody. His profiles of the eighteen best-known writers of the day brought brilliantly to life what had just been names on a contents page for me. ("Frank Belknap Long is a quiet, plump, graying man who dresses with the careful consideration of an actor playing a Boston banker." "Bob Heinlein is a theatrically handsome man with a little black mustache and a suave, self-possessed manner." Ray Bradbury is "a handsome fellow looking even younger than his moderate years, with crew-cut blond hair, a bow tie, and an effervescently cheerful manner hardly consistent with the gloom and pathos of most of his stories." And so on through Sturgeon, Edmond Hamilton, Henry Kuttner, and all the other stars. It left me with the feeling that they were real people, and that one day I might be real myself, and even—did I dare think it?—a star.

The remainder of the book dealt with the skills one would need for a career in science fiction—sobering stuff, a little intimidating—and the reference material one should have at hand (dictionary, encyclopedia, thesaurus, etc. . . .) and with the hardware (desk, typewriter, carbon paper). Another chapter told of how to find ideas for stories. (I paid close attention.)

The next dealt with how to develop those ideas into actual stories. One paragraph in particular has remained vividly with me all my life: "When I plot, I sit making shorthand notes on a clipboard as long as is necessary to get my story planned. This may vary from a day to a week for a short story and one or two weeks for a novel." I had a clipboard—every college student had one then—and at once I saw the wisdom of planning stories in advance and adopted the policy of outlining them, not in real shorthand but in a cryptic kind of system of my own, until I saw a beginning, middle, and end sketched out. It was troubling to see how much time de Camp thought necessary for planning his stories (a month just to *plan* a novel?), but I had already discovered that I had a special gift for writing quickly, and I found myself able to construct story outlines with the same speed. There is also a discussion of writing effective prose.

Next came a chapter on how to take your stories out to market. And there was one, finally, on what it is like to be a professional science fiction writer. Back there in 1953, I could only dream of that. By 1955, a little to my surprise, I was one, and I have been one ever since. Would I have gotten there without the aid of Sprague de Camp's handbook? Probably. But its wise words made things much more easy for me along the way, and for that I owe him (and the light-fingered Harlan Ellison) an enormous debt of gratitude.