

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

ADVERTISEMENTS FOR MYSELF, AGAIN

Back in the far-off year of 2017 I wrote a column bearing the unabashed title of “Advertisements for Myself,” shamelessly stealing that name from a book by Norman Mailer. Here, years later, I steal the name from myself for a second round of self-promotion. This is *my* column, after all. Try and stop me.

Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself* was the name of a book of essays, poems, fragments of unfinished novels, and short stories, published in 1959, which stirred a considerable bit of attention at the time. It has nothing to do with science fiction, which these columns are ostensibly about, but bear with me a moment.

His book is a perfect example of an ego trip. Mailer’s intention was to demonstrate his achievements as a writer by way of demonstrating his importance as a human being, and, since his achievements as a writer were significant, he did have no small importance as a human being. He wanted everybody to know about it, too. Every selection in the 532-page book is preceded by an “advertisement” in which he explains its value, and, by extension, the value of Norman Mailer as man and writer.

A different writer, just as significant in his way as Mailer was in his, was equally famous for his unabashed egotism. Isaac Asimov is the one I mean. Like Mailer, he wrote extensively about himself, in particular three huge autobiographical volumes, *In Memory Still Green*, *In Joy Still Felt*, and *I. Asimov*. This trio of memoirs totals 2,121 pages, quite a sizable recollection of a life that, after all, was mostly spent sitting at a typewriter turning out books and stories. But Isaac was convinced that many readers would want to know all about that life, sedentary though it was, and he was right.

Mailer and Asimov had much else in common, too: they were Jewish boys who grew up in Brooklyn between the two world wars, they attended elite colleges (Mailer went to Harvard; Asimov, unable to get into Columbia because of the anti-Jewish quotas of the era, went to Seth Low, a college established by Columbia to accommodate deserving students excluded by quota from Columbia itself), and they both had decided at an early age to become writers. (Mailer says, very early in *Advertisements for Myself*, “Before I was 17 I had formed the desire to be a major writer.” Not just a writer, but a *major* writer. Asimov had much the same idea, and by the time he was twenty-one he had published “Nightfall,” which gave him a permanent place in the galaxy of great SF writers.) Once the distraction of World War II was out of the way (Mailer served in uniform in the Pacific; Asimov did scientific military research at the Philadelphia Navy Yard) they launched spectacular literary careers, Mailer with *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948, Asimov with the Foundation series throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and went on from there.

A third Jewish boy from Brooklyn went to an elite college—Columbia, it was—and then began a precocious literary career in science fiction, winning a Hugo award by the time he was twenty-one and going on to publish an uncountable number of stories and novels, along with an assortment of nonfiction books and much else. This writer, who had these things, at least, in common with Mailer and Asimov, was—what, you guessed it?—Robert Silverberg, who will now take advantage of his ownership of this column to provide you with some advertisements for himself, very much in the manner of those other two famous literary egotists.

Of course, I can’t compare my reputation as a writer to those of Mailer and Asimov.

Nor can I match them as self-promoters. They were frequently seen on television talk programs and were otherwise well known outside the literary world (Mailer even ran once for mayor of New York), whereas I am a quiet fellow, not exactly shy but certainly reserved, who will make an occasional appearance at a science fiction convention but has no interest in the sort of public recognition Mailer and Asimov loved. And, though I have a healthy enough ego (show me a successful writer who doesn't!), I have never made a point of praising myself in the extravagantly comic way that was one of Isaac's most frequently demonstrated traits, nor of loudly and belligerently confronting the world as the small but pugnacious Mailer was wont to do. I am not loud; I am not pugnacious; I don't do the sort of deliberately exaggerated bragging that was such a conspicuous part of the public Asimov persona.

Still, I don't hide my light under a bushel. Since 1994 I have written this column every month (indeed, I replaced Isaac Asimov himself in this space after his death), and in it I talk about whatever I see fit to talk about: scientific news, cultural changes, the history of science fiction, and all sorts of things that are happening to me, ME, Robert Silverberg, my travels or my work or my computer problems or my encounters with other writers, on the assumption that a wide audience will find them of interest. I suppose that that assumption is correct, since the editors of this magazine have allowed me to take up this space in nearly four hundred issues so far, and the end is not yet.

This column, in fact, is a kind of ongoing autobiography of my life and mind: a long series of four-page installments in which I express my thoughts and opinions and prejudices and speak of my daily experiences or my writing projects or anything else I care to, essentially creating what is, in Norman Mailer's estimable phrase, a vast group of advertisements for myself. Why not, then, take advantage of my position of power here to make use of a column for a few *literal* advertisements for myself, as Messrs. Mailer and Asimov were frequently known to do?

For example, those of you who read and (I hope) admire this column every issue might want to have a selection of these pieces bound in permanent form. As it happens, two such books of that sort have been published. The first, *Reflections and Refractions: Thoughts on Science Fiction and Other Matters*, was done in 1997 by Underwood Books of Grass Valley, California, a small press best known for its elegant editions of books by Jack Vance. It contained eighty-seven of my essays, most of them reprinted from *Asimov's* but some, dating back as far as 1973, originating in *Galileo* and *Amazing Stories*, magazines in which this column had appeared before it moved to *Asimov's*. It covered a wide range of topics: pieces on the profession of writing, profiles of such colleagues as Jack Williamson, Roger Zelazny, and Philip K. Dick, observations on contemporary events, and much else.

In the course of time, *Reflections and Refractions* went out of print, but in 2014 Nonstop Press of New York reissued it in a handsome new edition, revised and expanded, which has also gone out of print now. It included all the essays from the first edition, plus four that were written after that edition appeared, and three earlier ones left out of the first one.

Later Nonstop brought out a second collection of my essays, *Musings and Meditations*, about ninety more essays, mostly from *Asimov's*, that had first been published between 1995 and 2010. It's the mixture as before, discussions of trilobites, cloning, cuneiform, SF conventions, the work of H.P. Lovecraft and Alfred Bester, my theory of story construction, and much, much more, among them my favorite, the piece called "E-Mail from Cthulhu." This too eventually went out of print.

I'm delighted to report that *Musings and Meditations* is now once more available, in a shiny new edition published by Wildside Press. It can be bought for the modest sum of \$14.99 from Wildside at wildsidepress.com and from the usual internet book

sites. By the time this column appears, Wildside will also have brought back in print the Nonstop edition of *Reflections and Refractions*. Since I began writing the earliest version of this column in 1978 for the long-vanished magazine *Galileo*, and after *Galileo* expired continued it with relentless punctuality on into various incarnations of that grand old magazine, *Amazing Stories*, and then, after Isaac Asimov died, took his place in 1994 in the magazine that bears his name, it is easy to see that a good many of the columns reprinted in these two collections were published before today's science fiction readers had begun to read the stuff, or, indeed, before some of them were born. So those columns will be unfamiliar to a goodly number of purchasers of the new Wildside editions. Some of the columns may seem ideologically obsolete today, and some have been left behind by advances in science and technology, but most, I assure you with the cheerful insouciance of a Mailer or an Asimov, are well worth reading today. Readers, here is your chance.

A word about Wildside. It was founded in 1989 by the writer and editor John Be-tancourt and his wife Kim, and in its quiet way has become one of the most productive of science fiction publishers, with well over ten thousand books available in print-on-demand editions: classic reprints, anthologies, essay collections like mine, magazines, and much more—check out their web site for their extraordinarily comprehensive list. So, then: this month's column turns out to be one long free advertisement for two collections of my essays. (And a brief one for Wildside.) Am I abashed? I am not abashed. I have learned from the masters. How Asimovian this column is! How Maileresque! And one could have far worse models than those.