



PULP SCIENCE FICTION—A Primer

By Dr. John L. Flynn

Today, when most of us look back nostalgically at *Pulp Science Fiction*, we often see a conglomeration of every cliché and melodramatic element from the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s as well as the bad science fiction movies of the 1950's and 1960's. What we don't realize or tend to overlook is that, when these stories were first published, many of the ideas about interstellar travel, alien worlds, mad scientists, stalwart captains and their blaster-toting crew were fairly fresh. There's a reason why this period is called the Golden Age of Science Fiction. Everything that we read today owes something to the traditions and conventions of the work that was being produced in this period. To ignore writers like Ray Cummings or L. Ron Hubbard is to ignore the giants upon whose shoulders today's writers stand. Early pulp SF stories had an

explosively liberating effect on its first young audiences, especially those coming to maturity in small towns or farms across the United States...and forever changed the genre that we know and love today.

History of the Pulps: The Golden Age of Science Fiction is generally recognized as a twenty-year period between 1926 and 1946 when a handful of writers, including Clifford Simak, Jack Williamson, Isaac Asimov, John W. Campbell, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Frederick Pohl, and L. Ron Hubbard, were publishing highly original, science fiction stories in pulp magazines. While the form of the first pulp magazine actually dates back to 1896, when Frank A. Munsey created The Argosy, it wasn't until 1926 when Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of Amazing Stories that science fiction had its very own forum. Other pulp science fiction magazines, including Astounding Science Fiction, Startling Stories, Weird Tales, Unknown, and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, were soon to follow. Pulp magazines flourished because they could be manufactured cheaply from chemically treated wood pulp, and sold at low costs to audiences that hungered for fun and adventure. Pulp stories emphasized action, romance, heroism, exotic worlds, fantastic adventures, and almost invariably upbeat, optimistic endings. Today, those stories are remembered with great fondness and nostalgia by science fiction fans because of their simple, straightforward approach.

The classic, pulp stories of the 1930s and 40s relied on familiar story elements to tell interesting and compelling stories. Popular conventions like faster than light travel, mad scientists, robots and monsters, lost civilizations, and space opera formed the basis of the story. Familiar conventions:

Lost, Alien Civilizations: Lost alien civilizations containing many wonders, including a form of nuclear power, and evidence that they paid a visit to Earth many thousands of years before the rise of man, were a part of these stories. The aliens in Clifford Simak's "Creator" (1935) and Arthur C. Clarke's "The Sentinel" (1951) are so far removed from their human counterparts that they appear almost godlike. But on the verge of their greatest accomplishment—the control of instrumentation by thought alone—they are struck down in a single night like the lofty-minded aliens in Clarke's "The Star" (1955). The vast and mysterious civilization falls back into the planet, and is buried for a half million years. Similar stories from science fiction and the pulp magazines told of vast and mysterious alien civilizations and the intrepid spacemen who find them, including H.G. Wells's First Men in the Moon (1901) and A.E. van Vogt's "Voyage of the Space Beagle" (1951).

Space Opera: Stalwart commanders and their all-male blaster-toting crew are basically cardboard cutouts of every spaceman who went looking for adventure in the space operas of pulp science fiction. Space opera, a term coined by Wilson Tucker in 1941, referred to space adventure stories in which intrepid, space-faring heroes went "boldly" "where no man had gone before" and faced dangers on a thousand different alien worlds. As far back as 1900, with Robert William Cole's The Struggle for Empire, space adventurers have been toting blasters, killing rampaging monsters, and making the galaxy safe for the rest of us in much the same way that cowboys with six-shooters cleaned up the wild west.

The most popular stories, including E.E. "Doc" Smith's "Skylark" and "Lensman" series and Edmund Hamilton's "Captain Future" novels, were aimed at the juvenile market, and appealed mostly to adolescent males. Later, we see evidence of this

in the movies and television shows of the 1950's. [For instance: In "Forbidden Planet," Commander J.J. Adams (as portrayed by hammy Leslie Nielsen) is the model of the very modern major spaceman with his strong, forceful demeanor and good looks; spun from the same cloth as Tom Corbett and Buzz Corey, he represented the square-jawed, one-dimensional starship captain. At his side, Doc Ostrow (Warren Stevens), the logical science officer, and Lt. Jerry Farman (Jack Kelly), the sentimental, cocksure first officer, complete a familiar triumvirate that had its roots in the juvenile space adventures of Robert Heinlein and would later form the basis of the three central characters in "Star Trek." The basic idea of Adams and his all-male crew of space cowboys was an old one in science fiction terms by the time "Forbidden Planet" was made, and seems even now more outdated and quaint.]

The Mad Scientist & The Damsel in Distress: Even more outdated was the mad scientist and his naïve and innocent daughter. The archetype of the mad scientist no longer carried the literary weight of moral and ethical indifference that it had once had, and was now considered a cliché or bad joke. Each mad scientist was a direct descendant of Aylmer, the alchemist in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" (1840), Jack Griffin, the scientist with lofty ideals in Wells's The Invisible Man (1897), and the quintessential mad scientist and symbol for scientific rationalism, Dr. Victor Frankenstein. No matter how objective and well intentioned the great doctor may be, he still tends to produce a monster. In the pulp magazines of 1930s and 1940s, the mad scientist became the literary equivalent of the mustached villain of cheap melodrama.

The early pulp magazines featured more than their fair share of half-naked women who needed rescuing from the clutches of mad scientists, marauding aliens, and rampaging robots; in fact, the most successful issues were generally those with lurid illustrations of busty, menaced women by Earle Bergey and others because they appealed to the prurient interests of juvenile audiences.

The Robot or Mechanical Man: Robots in the pulps were either rampaging or kind and benevolent, the fears and dreams of science made whole. Prior to 1940, robots were envisioned as slave laborers, as in “Rossum’s Universal Robots” (1921) by Karel Capek, or rampaging monsters, from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) to Franz Harper’s Plus and Minus (1929). In the Forties, at the behest of editor John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov compiled a list of rules or commandments, which were supposed to be stamped on the positronic brains of every robot, and explored how those commandments affected the behavior of robots in “Robbie” (1940), “Liar” (1940), and other tales. Those rules or commandments later became known as the Three Laws of Robotics: 1.) A robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. 2.) A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. 3.) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. Some robots faced moral dilemmas that Asimov’s robots face. Like Eando Binder’s Adam Link, the robots in Clifford Simak’s “City” (1952), and so many other metal men from the pulp era, the later robots are kindly and valued servants of man, and not at all a rampaging monster.

Monsters: Monsters in the pulp magazines followed no commandments or laws, except the law of survival. Ever since Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein created the first artificial

man and rejected him because of his ugliness and fallen nature, man-made monsters have been a staple in science fiction. In the early pulps, monsters proved to be an easy foil for the stalwart hero, and were plentiful, if not entirely believable or fleshed-out. The first invisible monster appeared in George Allan England's "The Thing from—Outside" (1926), published in the very first issue of Amazing Stories. Many other monsters followed, from bug-eyed monsters (as in Charles Diffin's "Dark Moon," 1931) to shape-shifters (as in John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?", 1938). The monster is a product of the mad scientist's darkest desires to play God, and eventually it destroys him, in a retelling of the Frankenstein story.

Faster-than-Light-Travel: The faster-than-light speed of many starships and space craft in the pulp magazines were necessary plot devices. With the vast distances between the various stars (and planets), many pulp science fiction stories relied on techno-babble to explain how spaceships reached velocities at or near the speed of light and still managed to arrive at their destinations in only a few weeks time. Concepts like jump gates, space-warp, and hyperdrive were used to clarify faster than light travel. E.E. "Doc" Smith engaged an "inertia less drive" in the Lensman novels, and Asimov relied on a stardrive in the Foundation books. The first author to invoke the concept of hyperspace—a kind of fourth dimension where ships could travel at high velocities of speed—was John W. Campbell in "The Mightiest Machine" (1934), while Robert Heinlein was simply content to use FTL travel to get his characters from one end of the galaxy to the other without a lot of needless explanation in his juveniles.

Time Travel and Time Paradoxes: Once H.G. Wells had established The Time Machine (originally published as "The Chronic Argonauts" in *Science Schools Journal*,

1888; expanded and revised in 1895), man was suddenly able to control his journeys backward and forward. By taking his anonymous time traveler on a trip into the distant future, then returning him safely to the present, Wells established the pattern for most modern time-travel stories. Pulp writer Raymond Cummings was the first to expand upon Wells' theories with "The Man Who Mastered Time" (*Argosy*, 1924), "The Shadow Girl" (*Argosy*, 1929) and "The Exile of Time" (*Argosy*, 1931). Like their nineteenth century counterparts, they were more interested in using the time machine as a plot device for placing their protagonists in unusual worlds than in documenting its technological features. For example, the travelers in John W. Campbell's "Twilight" (1932) and "Night" (1935) confront a distant future in which man has long since ceased to exist, while P. Schuyler Miller's hero finds himself millions of years in the past, witnessing an alien invasion in "The Sands of Time" (1937). Other stories, notably Jack Williamson's "Legion of Time" (1938), introduced the notion of time patrols and time warfare with the possibility of time paradoxes and alternate worlds.

Must-Read Pulp Authors:

- Ray Cummings – "The Girl in the Golden Atom" (*All-Story Weekly*, 1919) – first story about adventures in a microscopic universe.
- Jack Williamson – "The Legion of Space" (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1934) – space opera about four buccaneering soldiers and their various adventures in the far-flung universe; "The Legion of Time" (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1938) – earliest and most ingenious tale of alternate worlds and time paradoxes with conflicting potential future worlds battling through time.

- E.E. “Doc” Smith – “The Skylark of Space” (*Amazing Stories*, 1928) – first space opera, and also first to feature an inventor scientist who is the hero of the action; “Lensman” (as “Triplanetary”) stories (*Amazing Stories*, 1934) – galactic patrols, telepathy, and the battle for control of the universe are at the basis of the stories.
- A. Merritt – “The Ship of Ishtar” (*Argosy*, 1924) – man travels to magical world and falls in love with beautiful female captain of the ship of Ishtar and has lots of fantastic adventures.
- A. E. Van Vogt – “Slan” (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1940) – mutant race originally created to help mankind; “The Weapon Shops of Isher” (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1941) – transcendent superhero who created the weapon shops to counter an imperial Earth is chosen as one of the universe leaders; “The World of Null A” (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1945) – an early version of cloning and an argument for anti-Aristotelean thought.
- L. Ron Hubbard – “Final Blackout” (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1940) – grimly describes a world devastated by too many wars in which a young army officer becomes dictator of England and fends off decadent America; “Slaves of Sleep” (*Unknown*, 1939) and “Ole Doc Methuselah” (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1947) are two other important works from him.
- Others: Edmund Hamilton – “Captain Future” (*Standard Magazines*, 1940); John W. Campbell – “Twilight” (*Astounding*, 1934) and “Who Goes There?” (*Astounding*, 1938); Lester Del Rey – “Nerves” (*Astounding*, 1942); Clifford Simak – “City” and “Huddling Place” (*Astounding*, 1944); Murray Leinster – “First Contact” (*Astounding*, 1945); Judith Merrill – “That Only a Mother” (*Astounding*, 1948); Frederick Brown – “Arena” (*Astounding*, 1944).

