



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Rise of the Cyberzines: The Story of the
Science-Fiction Magazines from 1991 to 2020*

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Ashley, Mike. *The Rise of the Cyberzines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1991 to 2020*. The History of the Science-Fiction Magazines Volume V. 2022. 444 pages. ISBN 978-180085648.

The Rise of the Cyberzines is the fifth volume in Mike Ashley's series of books on the history of the SF magazine. The first volume, *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines from the Beginning to 1950*, appeared in 2000, followed by three volumes covering the subsequent decades with *Transformations: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1950 to 1970* (2005), *Gateways to Forever: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1970 to 1980* (2007), and *Science Fiction Rebels: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1981 to 1990* (2016). This series, *The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines*, is an expansive and ambitious undertaking considering its scope and volume as well as the difficulties that always beset periodical research, namely the sheer mass of text and access to archives. It is also overdue, given the rising interest in periodical print publishing in the present post-digital moment and the hitherto sporadic attention paid to SF magazines as an area of research. Indeed, in SF scholarship, discussion, or mention, of magazines tends to appear in the footnotes rather than the main body of the text. This reflects the entrenched hierarchization of publication outlets and the scholarly valuation of genres. The neglect of periodicals is not unique to SF studies and pervades other fields as well. In an oft-cited article on this issue, "The Rise of Periodical Studies," Sean Latham and Robert Scholes argue that magazines and newspapers should be studied for their own sake as "autonomous objects of study" (518) rather than as convenient quarries of bits of information used to prop up research that actually focuses on monographic

publications. This call resonated widely in periodical and literary studies, not only because it asserted the status of magazines and other periodicals as objects of research, but also, as Latham and Scholes point out, because this realigned perspective engendered a renewed interest in methodological and conceptual questions as they apply to periodicals (519). The latter, however, remains a lacuna in many studies on periodicals.

While Ashley does not reference Latham and Scholes, his multi-volume work does exactly what they call for and squarely centers the magazines themselves. His interest lies with the magazines as businesses operating in a specific cultural and economic field. As such, the book is not only situated in SF studies, but could also be read as an entry in periodical studies. With this latest volume in his series covering the turn of the millennium, Ashley approaches the present and considers the decades in which magazine culture as a whole is fundamentally transformed by the increasing availability and spread of digital media. Consequently, the book is divided into three main chapters pivoting on the rise of the internet: “Before the Web,” “Into the Web,” and “The Challenge,” followed by a conclusion, “Taking Stock.” The chronological story that Ashley tells through these chapters strings together the biographies of the major (and minor) SF magazines, their launches, cessation, relaunches, and general operation.

Additionally, Ashley highlights the literary content of the magazines and gives summaries of selected short stories that characterize a particular moment in the magazines’ development. These summaries are short and abundant, yet not always necessary. Cumulatively, they do, however, convey a sense of the variety and profusion of material that the magazines published and the different tastes they catered to. For students, these parts of Ashley’s study could prove a springboard for further inquiries into under-researched authors and themes. It is interesting to see the many (un)familiar names among the contributors – such as Paul Di Filippo’s publishing history at *F&SF*, or Shaun Tan’s work in *Eidolon* – and to follow their successes and failures in placing stories in various magazines. Recounting these histories, Ashley insists on giving the rates that magazines were paying per word – a persistent detail that seems irritating at first, but serves as a stark reminder of the financial considerations of publishing and the respective magazine’s economic position, professional status, and orientation. In the same vein, raising or reducing cover prices, winning advertisements, offsetting rising postage costs, and securing subscriptions become a refrain throughout the different magazines’ histories. Chronicling these economic considerations may at times appear repetitive, but nevertheless offers a concrete frame that is all too often neglected. A lot of the information on financial and practical issues comes from emails exchanged between Ashley and magazine editors so that the histories that Ashley unfolds very often follow the editors’ own accounts. The wealth of detail, even trivia, that emerges through these personal communications is impressive. For example, a footnote informs us that the idea of the magazine *Science Fiction Age* was almost dropped in favor of an exotic car magazine. The background information gleaned from email exchanges offers a glimpse, albeit subjective, into the practicalities, and vagaries, of magazine making and especially the personal networks, talents, and tastes involved in the process.

The magazines also operate in a field that is structured by institutions, a context to which Ashley regularly refers in order to chronicle the magazines’

successes and failures at the awards as an indicator of their popularity and identity. This is reflected in the fact that three out of the ten tables in the book lay out awards and nominations, which, among others, drive home the diminishing role of print compared to online outlets. Ashley also uses the institutional framework of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writer's Association's (SFWA) wordage rates to indicate a magazine's professional, semi-professional, or amateur status under their regulations. While these frameworks remain themselves uncommented, they serve as grids to determine the magazines' positions within the field of SF.

The wealth of information that Ashley accumulates is astonishing, but presented in a very readable manner. He is indeed telling a "story" that proceeds chronologically and gains momentum, and interest, with the advent of digital media. The transition from print to digital is particularly engaging: The subchapter "Digital Dust" recounts the very early and experimental adoption of web publishing in the early 1980s with shared-world anthology *Thieves' World* and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* among the first online SF works. Later in the 1980s and 1990s, the early online magazines paralleled the fanzines of the 1930s, and most have since been wiped from the web, a fact that makes this section of the book particularly valuable. The different ways in which magazines adopted electronic media is striking: CD-ROMs and cassettes featured alongside downloadable PDFs, ebooks, and podcasts/podzines, and regular websites accompanying the print version became a staple. This medial variety leads Ashley to raise the question of what a "magazine" actually is, especially in the face of electronic outlets. However, his brief theoretical discussion segues into the introduction of *Tor.com* and its blogosphere as another permutation of the SF magazine. Ashley suggests that by including the website under the umbrella of "magazines," "such a definition came to a head" (277). It is symptomatic of Ashley's approach that he abandons the conceptual discussion in favor of diving into the concrete history of *Tor.com*.

The last subchapter, "The Last Revolutions," makes an unsurprising yet important point: Online magazines were drivers of diversity, and some even formally committed to giving preference to minoritized writers. Another development that Ashley highlights in this short section is the rising interest in non-anglophone and "multi-cultural" SF, which he evaluates as the decade's most significant development (291). The conclusion in "Taking Stock," then, continues this argument that online magazine publishing is overtaking print, a process that is not the least driven by the aging readership of print. Although these conclusions seem unspectacular, the detailed account of the processes that lead to the rise of online magazines and websites and the survival of niche print is intriguing.

Ashley's book is an important reminder that SF not only takes place in book-form, in cinemas, and in games, but also in magazines, both online and in print. At the same time, it is also a reminder that SF publishing is predicated on financial and institutional frameworks and personal networks, a lens that informs Ashley's approach throughout. As he demonstrates, magazines still provide a dynamic, if messy, site for SF. Moreover, centering this seemingly marginal form of publication, which is, especially today, often seen as the "paratext" to monographic editions of texts, has the potential to productively challenge our understanding of where and in what forms we encounter SF. A drawback of Ashley's book for students and scholars with an interest in the

magazines themselves is that it does not reproduce covers or double-page spreads to give an impression of their visual tone and design. This might well be due to copyright or production issues.

The Rise of the Cyberzines is a bibliographic endeavor, and as such, its approach is not analytical or interpretative. There is a tradition of such writing in periodical studies that is concerned with recovering and preserving magazines and that aims to reconstruct their “biographies,” often veering into quantitative methods. On this front, Ashley succeeds unquestionably, but sometimes offers readers ever more details when they would have needed signposts to navigate this wealth of information. Contributing to the volume’s data-driven approach, Appendices I and II list all the magazines discussed, their editors, published issues, and the circulation figures or numbers of online unique visitors as they are available for the bigger, professional magazines. At the same time, what these kinds of bibliographical studies often lack is methodological awareness. The same is true for *Rise of the Cyberzines*: The extensive email correspondence with magazine editors, which undergirds large parts of the book, is never reflected on as a method with certain ingrained problems (and opportunities). In the same vein, the wealth of facts and numbers which Ashley collects could have profited from more contextualization. For the SF scholar, such context and a more analytical outlook would help to clarify the position and significance of the individual magazines within the field. However, given the scope of the project, such demands would be unrealistic, and they are outweighed by what the book *does* offer: a map of a vast and previously uncharted field that is set to inspire future in-depth studies of individual titles or themes. As such, *The Rise of the Cyberzines* is invaluable.

In the preface, Ashley already announces that another volume will follow: *No Limits* will focus on the SF magazine outside the Anglosphere. Like the readers of print magazines, we should look forward to this next installment.

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Works cited

Latham, Sean, and Robert Scholes. “The rise of periodical studies.” *PMLA* 121.2 (2006): 517-531.