



BOOK REVIEW:
*Science Fiction and the Historical Novel:
Days of Future Pasts*

Jeremy Brett

MacDonald, Ian P. and Kate Polak, editors. *Science Fiction and the Historical Novel: Days of Future Pasts*. Liverpool University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-83553-839-5.

Frederic Jameson casts a long scholarly shadow over the thoughtful and expansive text of *Science Fiction and the Historical Novel: Days of Future Pasts*. With his ability to make incisive connections between literary genres, Jameson famously argued in his 1982 article “Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future” that science fiction (SF) picked up from its predecessor, the historical novel, the mantle of narratively expressing our collective understanding of historical thinking. That is, where historical fiction achieved its literary significance by producing an intense alienation for the reader between past and present – thus marking the past as truly strange and as a space marked by its temporal and psychic distance from us – science fiction accomplishes similar outcomes by estranging the reader, fundamentally, from both past *and* future. As MacDonald and Polak note in their introduction, the collection focuses on the “doubly temporalized estrangement” of how, “despite its speculative future, sf provides a critical laboratory not just, or even primarily, for looking forward but also for looking backwards, for thinking historically” (2). At first glance, historical fiction and SF might seem entirely at odds – apart, perhaps, from those SF novels set in a fictional past or that are billed as alternate histories. However, taking into account how SF is generally pitched as a genre that documents the human future, the volume’s contributors demonstrate that SF frequently engages in narrative and thematic discourse with the past generally by “either relocating it to a fictional space in the future in a metaphorical or allegorical fashion ... or reimagining and adjusting past

events and considering what might have happened had circumstances gone differently” (7).

In this context, SF performs what the editors term the action of *metarecursivity*, that is, the process by which characters in a set future “look back” to an historical moment even as their author thinks “history forward by projecting a sequence of events leading to a future condition” (7). A loop is thereby created connecting what lies behind us to what lies in front of us, our pasts to our futures, and this connection is made especially manifest when characters in SF futures think about pasts that are still part of our own futures as the readers. In this way, the volume’s editors and contributors posit that “future spaces engage the historical process by creating pasts from our futures” (8). This leads them to examine how SF repeats, reexamines, and reconfigures our understanding of history and our place in it, and inspires them to explore the ways in which memory and imagination intersect. These are important starting points for discussing a genre so innately linked to futures that are informed by actions and decisions of the human past and driven by potentialities that create a myriad of these futures.

The collection’s usefulness is amplified by the selection of analyzed texts; it is a well-chosen group that casts a wide net to capture a variety of diverse types of narratives that approach our relationship to our pasts in complex, profound ways. In his chapter, Phillip E. Wegner takes up the general development of the historical novel and the process by which SF adds a new multidimensionality to the narrative of the historical by creating futures that transform our present into a past that has not yet happened, thus rendering our own present as historical time. He quotes Jameson’s observation that “our history, our historical past and our historical novels, must now also include our historical futures as well” (19), punctuating this with an analysis of Jo Walton’s novel *Lent* (2019), set in early Renaissance Florence and swirling around the figure of fiery monk Girolamo Savonarola. Walton’s protagonist is engaged in a thoroughgoing utopian process that seeds a field of creative possibilities, including that of the ultimate triumph of a collectively developed future based on changing how we conduct ourselves in the past. In Cao Xuenan’s analysis of Liu Cixin’s *Three-Body Problem* trilogy (2006-2010), as well as its English translation vs. the Chinese originals that have resulted in varying readings of the series’ dystopian significance, Cao looks at how the series champions opacity as a virtue over transparency in sharing culture and information. Meanwhile, Eric Aronoff analyzes two works by Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and the future anthropology *Always Coming Home* (1985). Aronoff makes much of Le Guin’s academic background as an anthropologist and her frequent engagement with the various meanings and conceptions of *culture*. In *Left Hand*, Aronoff sees Le Guin linking literary form to what he calls “culture-building” where the individual elements of a culture “become meaningful when understood within the structure or patterns of that cultural whole,” in this way working as “the evocation of a ‘whole’ culture” (68). In his analysis, Aronoff argues that *Left Hand* renders unfamiliar cultural symbols and practices into a familiarized text in which SF’s traditional “cognitive estrangement” is tamed by making structural sense of an ethnographic present via familiar textual structures. By contrast, in *Always Coming Home* he sees Le Guin create a future ethnography describing a post-apocalyptic Northern California through a construction of various kinds of texts

– songs, poems, myths, rituals, and so on – that belie the idea of a cultural “whole” and posit the conception of a settled cultural order as a privileged Western idea. In Aronoff’s examination, the two works together push and pull against and towards our understandings of the components of which “history” is made.

Examinations of depicted apocalypses form the next portion of the volume. They are the focal point of Rebecca Oh’s chapter, where she discusses works not generally thought of as SF: Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2009) and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). These works eschew the traditional view of speculative apocalyptic fiction as driven by the reader’s impulse to save the actual world, an impulse undergirded by a belief in a changeable present. Oh argues that these works, instead, work in favor of ‘realist apocalypse’ set in worlds (specifically, the Global South) that are already destroyed by the forces of inequality and global capitalism, or that are languishing in an everyday dystopia created by them. As Oh puts it, “[a]pocalyptic realism challenges the recuperation of the future at the heart of apocalypses yet-to-come” (82). Rather, works like these demand that we confront the various structural inequalities already in existence that warp possible futures for so many. This type of apocalypticism transfers world-ending visions from a conjectured future into a localized present. Dystopia is also the main concern in Luke Alan Rodewald’s analysis of Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* (2019), the sequel to the classic 1985 work *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Rodewald labels *The Testaments* as a “critical dystopia” that complicates the fictional nation of Gilead by infusing it with hope and the resistant nature of oppositional spaces. At the same time, he sees the novel challenge the monochromatic bleakness of its predecessor by reinterpreting characters and motivations to allow for the introduction of positivity and optimism for characters and readers alike. After this, volume editor MacDonald looks at the interaction between history, the present, and memory in Tade Thompson’s Africanfuturist *Wormwood* trilogy (2016-2019). MacDonald offers the series as a “sustained meditation on the process of historization and the nature and effect of the historian on, in, and as the archive” (113). As MacDonald points out, the historical “archive,” as long known by librarians, archivists, and scholars alike, is an inherently brittle construct, marked by numerous acts of deliberate and inadvertent silencings. Likewise, the accuracy of the series’ xenospheric archive (a bionetworked data repository) is affected by ongoing changes in the future memory of past events. As memory changes, MacDonald notes, so does the record of the past change – so that the novel presents a world where new pasts are always being created and with them, new presents.

This is followed by Jackson Ayres in an essay on Ian McEwan’s AI-centered novel *Machines Like Me* (2019). Ayres analyzes the work in the context of contemporary neoliberalism and discusses how McEwan uses the setting of an alternate Britain as a lens through which to examine our own present, an age lacking in effective political consensus and awash in a dangerous subjectivity. Notably, McEwan sets his work in an alternate 1982, thus tying in our current neoliberal moment to the 1980s, when the rise of Thatcherism in the UK helped instigate that very moment. Edgar Nabutanyi’s essay follows this discussion by looking at the stories of Ugandan author Innocent Immaculate Acan, whose concern with environmental degradation and devotion to a Ugandan tradition of activist short fiction has resulted in a body of work that subverts the themes

and tropes of Western ecological catastrophe – particularly the theme of collective societal guilt that ignores the specific harms that the West commits – that often resonate differently, to say the least, for the peoples of the Global South. These non-Western-centric perspectives continue with an examination of a different counternarrative to settler colonialism in Shannon Lodoen’s discussion of Cherie Dimaline’s Indigenous YA dystopia *The Marrow Thieves* (2017). Lodoen argues that Dimaline critiques the colonialist practice of treating Indigenous peoples as consumable commodities and resources, and in so doing highlights the inhumanity inherent to policies of extraction. As a result, the essay also examines how Dimaline centers the Indigenous voice over the traditional hegemonic narratives of white Canadian history and settlement.

With Preston Waltrip’s analysis, the focus shifts to examining Carmen Boullosa’s 1997 multinarrative work *Heavens on Earth* which threads together a seventeenth-century Aztec memoir, the story of a woman living in the violent Mexico of the 1990s, and the record of a far-future archivist whose community resolves to abolish all language and past memory to end history. In Waltrip’s reading, the novel posits that past, present, and future are, indeed, intimately connected, but remain vastly different and not subject to any sort of totalizing historical narrative. This is followed by volume co-editor Polak’s contribution in which she analyzes Naomi Alderman’s *The Power* (2016) and its concern with tensions between the unjust systems of power under which we live. That power, Alderman and Polak both note, tends to be generally limited to certain *kinds* of bodies, but a range of possible alternate futures exist if we can escape our traditional understandings of those bodies.

The collection concludes with Gabriella Friedman’s study of the surrealist alternate history *The Bird is Gone: A Manifesto* (2003) by Stephen Graham Jones. In Friedman’s view, the novel subverts the traditional contagion narrative to consider how Indigenous peoples relate to the U.S. nation-state that occupies them (209). As Jones creates a fictional world where Native Americans have reclaimed the possession of vast swathes of American land, Friedman observes Jones’ use of a fictional disease rampant among the Native population as a tool for examining definitions of national and cultural identity. In her reading, the novel also uses the disease trope to reflect the complicated ways in which Native Americans relate to and interact with the technologies and social structures of white settler colonialism.

The volume concludes with a critical afterword by Gerry Canavan, cementing the idea that SF is less about the future and more about “exploring how choices made in the present both by individuals and by groups could lead to highly divergent potential consequences. *If x were to happen, or y were to exist, what would happen next?*” (227). In this way, Canavan’s afterword ably complements the multiplicity of narratives presented in the collection, as they together demonstrate the thematic possibilities of metarecursivity, that is, “understanding the present as the past of a future that is itself the past of some further future” (230). Such a radical way of science-fictional thinking has immense implications for people desiring to rethink their approach to interpreting history and thus to considering the true diversity of possible futures for ourselves and for our planet. The work is accessible for scholars and students alike, with thoughtful analyses of a wide variety of sources; just as valuably, each piece in the volume is girded by strong theoretical foundations that enhance the essays without overburdening them with academic jargon.

Biography: Jeremy Brett is a Librarian at Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, Texas A&M University, where he is the Curator of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection, one of the largest of its kind in the world. He has worked at many different libraries and repositories and received his MLS and his MA in History from the University of Maryland – College Park in 1999. His professional interests include science fiction, fan studies, and the intersection of libraries and social justice.