ISSN: 2342-2009 Fafnir vol 4, iss 1, pages 31–35

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

13 Questions on Science Fiction: Interview with Professor James Edwin Gunn

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The present text is an interview with James Edwin Gunn (born July 12, 1923), Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Kansas (US), on science fiction literature. The purpose of this interview is to ask questions related to themes central in science fiction, such as human transcendence, immortality, apocalypse, and so on. As a science fiction writer, Gunn can provide insight into pressing questions relating to technology and its influences on human life as expressed in fiction. Due to his long career in writing science fiction, Gunn also possesses knowledge on the changes that have occurred within the genre.

In 1976, Gunn won the Locus Award for *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*. He received the Hugo Award for *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction* in 1983, and Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) presented him as their 24th Grand Master in 2007. Professor Gunn has written or edited 45 books. His works include *This Fortress World* (1955), *The Immortals* (1962), which was adapted into a TV movie called *The Immortal* (1969) and became a TV series the following year, *The Listeners* (1972), *Human Voices* (2002), and *Transcendental* (2013). He is the founding director of the Center for the Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas.

The Questions

1) How do you see the relationship between science fiction and culture? How about the boundaries between science fiction and reality?

I have three short definitions of science fiction: 1) a literature of ideas; 2) the literature of anticipation; and 3) the literature of the human species. All three have some applications to culture – that is, the way people get their concepts of the way people and their associations operate, and the way they apply these concepts to their behavior. Science fiction, unlike fantasy, is speculation about how changes in circumstances will affect the human condition, and science (and particularly technology, which is the application of scientific understanding to human affairs) is one of the major influences on change. So science fiction is shaped by the reality we share (while fantasy creates a different reality).

2) Shall we include Science Fiction under the category of Speculative Fiction? Please explain why or why not?

Speculative fiction is a term used by involved people who think that Science Fiction isn't accurate enough. But "science fiction" – or its predecessor, "scientific fiction" or "scientifiction" – has more tradition and is more clearly defined. And, as Theodore Sturgeon has written, "science" means "knowledge," and science fiction can be viewed as "knowledge fiction."

3) What, in your view, are the earliest works of science fiction?

It depends on what aspect of fiction you're looking for. In some respects the earliest forms of fiction, going back to "Gilgamesh," have elements that evolve into later science fiction. But what we now consider science fiction requires a change in human attitude toward existence, a change brought on by the Industrial Revolution, that the world was being changed by science and technology, changes visible within a person's lifetime. Some scholars, including Brian Aldiss, consider *Frankenstein* (1818) to be the first SF novel, but I think the first SF story is Edgar Allen Poe's "Mellonta Tauta" (1849), the first SF writer to be Jules Verne, and the first English SF writer to be H. G. Wells.

4) To what extent can science fiction affect or improve the developments in science and technology in human life? Is it right to say that science fiction can change what human life looks like in the future?

John W. Campbell once wrote that science fiction exists between the laboratory and the marketplace, that is, between the time when something is possible and when it has been applied to everyday life. And further, he wrote that science fiction is a way to practice in a no-practice area, that is, to consider scenarios that might lead to human catastrophe. That applies to the many stories about atomic bombs that were published before World War II and the many post-catastrophe stories that have been published more recently. But it also is true of other scenarios yet to be acted out in real life. It is also true that science fiction can inspire young people to pursue careers in science and engineering. As Carl Sagan wrote once, "The reality of science must be preceded by the romance of science." Scientific and engineering laboratories (and NASA) are filled with science-fiction readers.

5) Is classic science fiction literature different from modern science fiction literature? Have the key aims of the genre changed considerably or not?

Classic science fiction was much more clearly a literature of ideas and evoked what Sam Moskowitz described as "a sense of wonder." Modern science fiction is much more like mainstream literature, concerned more with words and character than ideas. That may be because most of the wonder-inspiring ideas have been written out and modern science fiction is in the process of reconsidering them rather than evoking them. When you speak of "literature," you may mean many things. Traditional literature considers the human condition as it is, not how it might be, and focuses on individual responses to everyday reality. In that sense modern science fiction is more "literature." But in that sense maybe less science fiction. What I've tried to do is to apply literary skills to traditional science fiction scenarios.

6) What do you think are the main reasons of the popularity of science fiction? To what extent has the film industry helped in popularizing the genre? Will sci-fi motion pictures substitute science fiction novels one day?

There's no doubt that science fiction on film or TV is more popular than written SF, but I'm not sure it has done anything for the popularity of written SF, except for movie and TV tie-in novels. They sell better than most written SF and in a number of cases have crowded out what is called the "mid-list" book. It may be critical to understanding the connection between film and TV SF to written SF is that they are different media with different philosophies and different capabilities. Film SF is primarily conservative and doesn't do ideas (the visual media believe that ideas can't be filmed; I think they're wrong, as the first 25 minutes of *2001: A Space Odyssey* demonstrates). So, I think SF film and TV have done much to make an acceptance of the "concept" of SF acceptable, but it hasn't done much of anything to advance the consideration of SF and its concerns.

7) How do you see the future of science fiction literature? Will science fiction maintain its independence or intertwine with other literary genres?

In my 1975 book *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*, I concluded with a prediction that science fiction and the mainstream would grow closer together until they were indistinguishable in the middle, and I think that is how it has worked out. But I also said that there still would be science fiction that is clearly science fiction on the outskirts, and I think that is true as well. But today I think there is also a merger with fantasy. I also mentioned in that book that science fiction has been transformed every dozen years by new editors and new writers. We haven't had such a transformation in recent years, mostly because the magazines have lost their dominant positions as creators of change, unless one counts cyberpunk and the new weird, but it may still happen – or maybe it has happened and we haven't recognized it yet.

8) For long, humans have been looking for immortality at all costs. Do you think this will lead to our eventual dehumanization? How have you depicted immortality and transcendence in your fiction?

Certainly immortality would lead to major social, economic, psychological, and cultural change. Science fiction has dealt with many of these, often pointing out the negative over the positives. I chose not to tackle these issues in *The Immortals*, which ends with the protagonist, having defeated the efforts of powerful aging people to control immortality for their own benefits, going out to face the problems of species-wide immortality. I was more concerned with the impact of the "possibility" of immortality on society, and the novel's depiction of the growth of the medical system and the way in which it is assisted by the deep fear of disease and death in us all have largely been realized in today's world.

I think I've dealt with immortality substantively only in *The Immortals* (it plays a minor part in *Gifts from the Stars* mainly because I wanted to keep alive a character I was fond of). I chose a mutation that improved the blood circulatory system because my research suggested that this was the most likely, but today I think that DNA improvements may be the probable direction in longevity. I used transcendence in Transcendental as a shortcut for evolutionary change, and species improvement to meet increasingly more complex environmental challenges seems necessary.

9) In your view, who are the best science fiction writers?

I'd credit different writers for different reasons. H.G. Wells for getting it all started and launching many of the concerns that writers have pursued ever since. Robert A. Heinlein for his innovative techniques and bringing ideology consciously into the SF field. Ted Sturgeon for literary skills and changing the focus to the social outsider. Isaac Asimov for his contribution of intelligence as a narrative focus. And Frederik Pohl for his making satire and social concerns a central part of SF. But something could be said about the contributions of dozens of others.

10) Science fiction has a long history. Which era do you consider the most effective period in whole history of the genre?

It depends on what you mean by "effective" and whom you're asking the question. There's an old saying that the golden age of science fiction is 12, and for that reader the most effective period is when you started reading passionately. More generally, I would point to the Golden Age between 1938 and 1950, when much of the foundation of contemporary science fiction was laid down. But the period between 1950 and 1960 also deserves consideration because this was the period of postwar expansion in magazines and books, when *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Galaxy* were expanding science fiction's horizons. And some critics would like to consider the succeeding decade when *New Worlds* attempted a literary revolution, or later when science fiction broke out of its ghetto into the literary mainstream.

11) Ray Bradbury considers science fiction as "the important literature in the history of the world, because it's the history of ideas, and the history of our civilization birthing itself" (Segal & Lupesco 11). Do you agree with him, as many science fiction stories do, indeed, depict disaster?

Sure. I like to describe science fiction as "the literature of the human species. "It's about humanity, not about individual humans, and so it tells us about our mutual survival or destruction. Science fiction can be about disaster (Brian Aldiss' short definition is "hubris clobbered by nemesis") but it doesn't have to be. There are lots of stories that tell us how to survive in changing times.

12) In many science fiction stories, the existence of God is denied. Could we call science fiction as an atheist literary genre?

Science fiction seeks to find answers to the same questions that religion says it has answers for: who are we, where did we come from, where are we going, how is it all going to end. Religious science fiction, like C. S. Lewis's *Perelandra* trilogy tends to read like Christian apologia. It's difficult to write serious science fiction when the answers have already been answered by your faith.

13) Finally, in *Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin says that "science fiction is not prescriptive; it is descriptive" (Le Guin 151). Do you agree with her?

Certainly that's true of a good part of science fiction, and if the terms are broad enough of all of it – that is, authors are moved to write on topics that come out of their experience. But in more specific terms much science fiction attempts to imagine something different, and its success depends on the ability of the individual author to imagine something truly different.

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