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The Oxford Book Of Science Fiction Stories



Synopsis

This is the definitive collection of the twentieth-century's most characteristic genre--science fiction. The tales are organized chronologically to give readers a sense of how the genre's range, vitality, and literary quality have evolved over time. Each tale offers a unique vision, an altered reality, a universe all its own. Readers can sample H.G. Well's 1903 story "The Land Ironclads" (which predicted the stalemate of trench warfare and the invention of the tank), Jack Williamson's "The Metal Man," a rarely anthologized gem written in 1928, Clifford D. Simak's 1940s classic, "Desertion," set on "the howling maelstrom that was Jupiter," Frederik Pohl's 1955 "The Tunnel Under the World" (with its gripping first line, "On the morning of June 15th, Guy Burckhardt woke up screaming out of a dream"), right up to the current crop of writers, such as cyberpunks Bruce Sterling and William Gibson, whose 1982 story "Burning Chrome" foreshadows the idea of virtual reality, and David Brin's "Piecework," written in 1990. In addition, Shippey provides an informative Introduction, examining the history of the genre, its major themes, and its literary techniques.

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Customer Reviews

These 30 SF tales, arranged chronologically from 1903 to 1990, cover a typically wide and uneven range in the genre. The omission of some authors might raise eyebrows--notably Isaac Asimov, Harlan Ellison, and Robert A. Heinlein, all known for their short fiction. Only three women are represented: C. L. Moore (whose *The Piper's Son* is written under the collaborative pseudonym Lewis Padgett), Ursula K. Le Guin and Racoon Sheldon (Alice Sheldon, better known under the

James Tiptree Jr. pseudonym). Only Sheldon's *The Screwfly Solution*, a devastatingly scary story about misogyny gone mad, dates from the past 20 years, during which women have made serious progress in the genre; thus, the final third of the book is less representative than it might be.

Standouts include Le Guin's 0. Henry-esque *The Dowry of the Angyar*, Gene Wolfe's frightening *How the Whip Came Back*, H. G. Wells's anticipation of modern weapons in *The Land Ironclads*, Thomas M. Disch's insightful *Problems of Creativeness*, George R.R. Martin's fascinating religious study *The Way of Cross and Dragon* and Frederik Pohl's *The Tunnel Under the World*, which opens with the now-classic line, On the morning of June 15th, Guy Burckhardt woke up screaming out of a dream. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

From H.G. Wells's *"The Land Ironclads"* (1903) to David Brin's *"Piecework"* (1990), this collection of 30 sf stories gives a chronological sampling of 20th-century speculative fiction. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It is difficult to choose from among the myriad science fiction anthologies currently on the market; their lurid, garish covers demand the consumer's equal attention and purchase. The cover of Shippey's anthology is markedly nonchalant and spare in comparison to the aforementioned, but as one of the best SF anthologies in existence today, it is worth a second (and third and fourth) look. Shippey was wise to avoid the second-rate and overly anthologized work of Heinlein and Asimov, and to choose just one of Clarke's better stories. The rest of the anthology he reserves for SF's more literary, and occasionally more obscure, authors - Cordwainer Smith's luxuriant *"The Ballad of Lost C'mell"* and Frank L. Pollack's fuliginous *"Finis"* can compete with the most profound of traditional literary fiction. Other works like A.E. van Vogt's *"The Monster"* - so illogical that it becomes charmingly surreal, Racoon Sheldon's artfully acidic *"The Screwfly Solution"*, and David Brin's poignantly lambent *"Piecework"* reveal the thought processes and weltanschauungen which make SF so fascinating. There are a few middling stories in the anthology - these were likely chosen by Shippey to demonstrate an evolution of the genre. Harry Harrison's *"A Criminal Act"* has homophobic dialogue and a clunky exposition (the 'ah, but first I will tell you...' syndrome of mid-century SF), and Gene Wolfe's *"How The Whip Came Back"* loses credibility when it makes the Catholic Church a guarantor of personal freedom. (Walter Miller's *"Crucifixus Etiam"* and George R.R. Martin's *"The Way of Cross and Dragon"* demonstrate more insightful takes on the muddled collisions of faith, religion, science fiction, and society.) Oxford and Shippey have rendered a

voluminous, cogent collection - if you appreciate the history and the potential of science fiction, I urge you to consider it.

There's a certain *je ne sais quoi* about the work of the earliest sci-fi writers by which they draw the reader into a richly painted world that scarcely allows him to come up for breath. This may sound trite, but, as one recalls, the ultimate objective of all strongly crafted fiction is to dissolve the delineation between the reader's universe and the story's universe. Perhaps I should except the trite--even silly--works of the likes of H. G. Wells and Rudyard Kipling (I have difficulty getting into a story where "high-tech" battles between opposing forces are fought on horseback!), but the majority of the stories are very finely textured. Ironically, as we leave the Golden Age and progress toward modern times, the "tightness" of the individual story as a complete, conceptual unit is lost: frankly, I'd prefer if sci-fi never advanced past the '70s. But that's not the fault of this book, but, rather, of the "writers" who are too concerned with glitz and pseudo-technique than with telling an enrapturing story. Also on the downside, there are some editing problems, and I'd have been happier if the British editors hadn't insisted on forcing British orthographic conventions upon American text. Kudos to the editors of this absorbing volume for doing just about the best that could be done with the hundred-plus-year panoply of science fiction literature in the English language.

Although the authors are strong in this compilation, the stories are not of the highest quality. It is fairly middling fiction, I am sorry to say.

These stories are selected with the cerebral reader in mind---that reader who will slog through static, atmospheric, literary stories without ever skipping ahead to see if anything ever happens (it doesn't). They probably ate all their brussels sprouts as kids, too. If you read books because they are good for you, you'll love these. If, on the other hand, like me, you read SF because you want to empathize with characters facing fascinating problems and you want to be thrilled by what happens next, then there are few stories here to thrill you. The pick of the litter: *The Screwfly Solution* is subtly perverse, dark, wonderfully told and scary as hell (is it happening now?). *Desertion* is, though predictable, sweetly satisfying, especially to dog lovers. *The Monster* is the cleverest Van Vogt ever wrote, mind blowing and will have you cheering for the human hero for a change. *The Swarm* is such a vivid visit to a hive that it will have your skin crawling, and the twist is gut-wrenching. *Second Night of Summer* is a fine heartwarming tale of evil aliens, a boy and a simpler time. The others are snoozers only an Oxford English major (or the author's mother) could love. But don't take my word for it...

This is a history of sci-fi kind of anthology. We start early, then we move upwards through the 1980s. As a history, this is a fine collection, very enjoyable, as it makes it possible for one to trace the development of the genre alongside what was happening in the world it has its roots in. But as a history, sometimes, I fear, quality has to be sacrificed. Not all these short stories are optimal for the genre.

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