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### Chapter 2 : Title: The History of Science Fiction: Second Edition

*The History of Science Fiction traces the origin and development of science fiction from Ancient Greece up to the present day. The author is both an academic literary critic and acclaimed creative writer of the genre. Written in lively, accessible prose it is specifically designed to bridge the.*

Roberts claims to have changed his mind about science fiction. Before this book, he thought that science fiction was an invention of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Now he thinks it is a This book is good to wrestle with. Now he thinks it is a branch of fantasticâ€”as opposed to realisticâ€”fiction with roots in Greek romances. He spends a chapter on definitionsâ€”noting that science fiction is about positing some new thing be it a technological or social invention that the author works out in narrative form, or, alternatively, a genre that is constructed by a reader who approaches a story with certain expectationsâ€”but really wants to sidestep the mind-numbing debates. Instead, he offers something of a historical explanation for science fiction. It is a fantastic genre marked by a tension between sacramental and materialistic explanations of the world. Some narratives switch this around a bit so the new thing is actually a traveling downward or through time. Utopian fiction feeds into later science fiction by positing the new thing as some social development. Roberts spends a little time looking at Greek romances that he classifies as science fiction, but this part of the argument is less persuasive than the middle. It is also unclear what is meant by science during this periodâ€”indeed, the meaning of science presents a big problem for the book. Roberts argues that, quite apart from theme, science fiction comes in two different flavors. One is the technological tale. By technology Roberts does not mean just tools; rather, he borrows from Heidegger to suggest that technologies are an entire suite of things and behaviors that enflame how we see the world: The other kind of science fiction tale is Fortean! This is an excellent and overlooked point: Relying upon this definition, he can project science back in time as far back as he wants. Thus the Greeks practiced science just as Newton did just as a biologist does today. But science is not just a philosophical approachâ€”like technology, it is a form of practice, of engagement with the world. And what we know of as science was created in the nineteenth century. Roberts was right in his initial assessment about the history of science fiction coming relatively late. The confusion over science is not clear when he first presents his thesis, but it is when he gets to the Greeks. And then it is hidden again as he jumps to the seventeenth centuryâ€”at least it seems to be hidden. The reason is that Roberts uses terms that derived from the seventeenth century to make his case, which works when discussing that period, but not nearly as well for the Greeks, nor necessarily laterâ€”and so he does tend to abandon the terms of his own argument as the story progresses. In addition to the different themes that characterize science fiction, and the different ways in which it intervenes in the worldâ€”as a tale of technology or a form of speculative science practiceâ€”science fiction is also the working out of a particular cultural complex created in the seventeenth century. It is a credit to Roberts as a writer that though he is examining science fiction along these many axes, his book never becomes overly burdened with theoretical discussion. Copernicus and, especially, Bruno presented the Catholic church with a quandary in the seventeenth century by suggesting that the earth was not the center of the universe nor necessarily the only inhabited planet. What of Christ, then? Did he visit all the planets? Or were the other planets made without sin? Catholic countries tended to clamp down on these speculations. While there were fantastic writings down in these places, they tended to be sacramentalâ€”or magicalâ€”what he calls magical pantheism. Theology also explains why no science fiction was written from the end of the Greek period to the Reformation. Protestant countries were less concerned with the theological implications of the new astronomy he claims and so freer to examine the possible material and rational implications of such speculations. Thus, fantastic writing also became marked by materialism. Science fiction is the genre of fantastic literature that mediates this dilemma, tacking back and forth between transcendental concerns and material ones. Science fiction is about magicâ€”but not just about magic that can be reduced to science, but also science that is at heart magical. Without seeming to know it, Roberts has happened upon the Merton thesis. The method also

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works well for the eighteenth century as it is presented here, in a separate chapter. Roberts focuses mostly on Swift and Voltaire, one from a Protestant country, the other from a Catholic one. These two rewrote fantastic voyages so that they were no longer necessarily literal, but nor were they theological metaphors—rather they were speculative interventions into the production of knowledge. They inverted some earlier themes, with aliens now coming to earth and with no concern about whether Christ had gone to other planets. But what is science? And what is good science fiction? Roberts argues that England stopped producing science fiction because of its enthrallment with Gothic writing, which was overly concerned with the transcendental—but a concern with the transcendental is part of the dynamic of science fiction, as he sees it. France, by contrast, thanks to the Revolution, was in a mood to freely speculate, and so there was a great deal of science fiction coming out of that country. By the time that Roberts moves into the early nineteenth century—to which he devotes another chapter—he is leaving behind his thesis about the dynamic between materialism and sacrament, more interested in the other, more dominant themes of the period. This chapter focuses mostly on Shelley, Frankenstein, and Poe, neither of whom Roberts likes much: The science fiction writer Brian Aldiss had before argued that Frankenstein is the Ur-text of science fiction, but Roberts disagrees, mostly, it seems, because he is not a fan of the gothic strand of fantastic writing. There were other science fictional developments in the period, too. For some reason, fictions about the end times—the last time—became popular. The intuition behind science was emphasized—a kind of Feyerabendian intervention influenced, likely, by the Romantic movement, though Roberts has nothing to say on the matter. Roberts wants to claim that the intent of the Protestant Reformation was to purge magic from theology. But, that never seems to have been the case: Protestant theology, like Catholic theology, involved consideration of demons, and demonology was closely allied with science. Roberts gives this a short discussion, without integrating it into his overall perspective. And British science fiction—as well as British science—remained closely tied to some forms of magical or sacramental thought in the nineteenth century, what with Theosophy and the rebirth of alchemy. His chapter on science fiction in the second half of the s notes how scientific metaphors of positivism and entropy informed the burgeoning literature, and that there continued to be a focus on the spiritual. This was the age of spiritualism, after all. Indeed, science fiction is becoming so crowded that Roberts has to have a whole other separate chapter on the two acknowledged greats of science fiction—compared to the single chapter he gave to the Greeks, another single chapter to the 17th century, and a third to the 18th. He acknowledges that H. Wells was probably the greatest science fiction writer ever. This period, then, was the birth of science fiction. Though he has a writer from a Protestant country and another from a Catholic one, though he roots both of their works in their biographies, he never really brings his thesis to bear on the subjects. Rather, he offers close readings, arguing that Verne was more than a pure entertainer and that Wells was at his best from to when he was precise in his language, and less so later one when he became more abstract and cranky. To the extent that he brings a critical apparatus into the investigation, it is to call the two writers bourgeois, which is based—in a hard to specify way—on his view of technology as enflaming reality. This is the first time that enflaming really becomes an issue, so while it was a nice set up there is not much of a pay off. The book becomes increasingly confused in regards to its thesis, even as it offers some interesting insights. Roberts spends a chapter on the high modernists—Pound, etc. Certainly by the time that he gets to the middle of the 20th century, he can find examples of the tension between magic and science, or sacrament and science—but the connection to 17th century dynamics seem lost—with the exception of James Blish, who explicitly references the exact dynamic of a Catholic confronting an alien race that did not know Christ. By this point, the transcendental—or sacramental—aspects of the stories are a long way from 17th century Catholicism, and invoking that period no longer seems necessary. Another way to make this point is to say that there is something to the dynamic that Roberts identifies, even if the historical genealogy is not necessary—and strains for effect. Roberts does not make the point, but the Shaver mystery, which split science fiction fans in the middle of the 20th century, clearly hit at this cleavage. As well, thinking of the dynamic as recurring, rather than a progressive unfolding of the paranormal—as, say, Kripal does—is better history. But it sill

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makes little sense to say that science fiction was a product of the 17th century anymore than saying science was a product of the seventeenth century: Mostly, though, Roberts is unimpressed by the mid-century products of science fiction. He thinks the pulps were intentionally bad, and any breakthroughs they made, even as the stories were put into novels, were accidental. Rather, he prefers the New Wave writers—Moorcock and Dick and Herbert—who brought in sex and drugs and Messiah figures. Lots of Messiah figures. He does not note the influence of Burroughs, but it was there, too. Nor does he really do much with his thesis, beyond saying that these writers were more inclined to the sacramental. The real reason offers the real end to the real book. Roberts started with the Greeks saying that the story of science fiction was a voyage upwards though sometimes down or through time to somewhere impossible. At the time, the moon and the sun were parts of the sky—the stars were part of the divine world—and so could be voyaged to, at least in the imagination. By the 1950s, the moon was clearly in space—but it had been reached. And it was boring. There was nothing on the moon. The world ended not with a bang but a whimper. The rest of the book is an extended conclusion making this point—and an interesting, point. There is still a great deal of science fiction being published, Roberts acknowledges, much of it excellent—more than any one person could read. But there are no more formal innovations in prose science fiction. It has reached its dead end. Instead, science fiction has become primarily a visual medium, with stories in comics, graphic novels, movies, and games. Roberts spends some time going through these developments. But it is never clear how these fit into his overall story, given his early on commitment to arguing that science fiction was wedded to the novel.

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In that time, she wrote about books she was reading, covering an impressive range of classic works and providing her thoughts. The essays are typically short: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book. It provides a great look at the early days of the publishing industry and how it came to produce comic books, and how it evolved over the 20th century. Science Fiction after Anyone who researches science-fiction history will come across one name: One of the major fans in the golden age, he worked tirelessly as a self-appointed historian of the genre, writing a number of works. Masters of Modern Science Fiction. It provides some good biographical sketches of a number of notable authors in the middle of the 20th century. Another excellent read is The Futurians: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from to Sadly, Time Machines is out of print, and while the publisher says that they plan to reprint it at some point, the only copies available go for a couple hundred dollars. The book on Brunner is an excellent look at the author, reviewing his life and work in an even, critical fashion. The best place to go is to some of the original magazines, some of which can be found online, such as Galaxy Science Fiction Archive. One of the best anthologies to look at is The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume One, , which contains some of the absolute best short stories from the era. It has some shortcomingsâ€”only one story of the 26 is written by a woman, overlooking a number of worthy candidatesâ€”but the stories here are utterly fantastic and provide a good overview of the feel of midth-century science fiction. Under the Moons of Mars: Merritt and Murray Leinster. Over the holiday break, I picked up a fantastic anthology titled Famous Fantastic Mysteries: Clair , Donald Wollheim , H. Lovecraft , Ray Bradbury and Robert E. Evans, Istvan Csicsery-Ronany Jr. LeGuin and Brian Attebery. The Wesleyan book is a comprehensive survey of the genre, ranging from with Nathaniel Hawthorne and running through with Ted Chiang. The Norton Anthology covers short fiction from and runs through Both books represent a diverse and excellent range of authors and stories, and are well worth reading as introductory texts to the genre. Andrew Liptak is a freelance writer and historian from Vermont. You Might Also Like.

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