

OF TIME, AND GULLY FOYLE

by Neil Gaiman

You can tell when a Hollywood historical film was made by looking at the eye makeup of the leading ladies, and you can tell the date of an old science fiction novel by every word on the page. Nothing dates harder and faster and more strangely than the future.

This was not always true, but somewhere in the last thirty years (somewhere between the beginning of the death of what John Clute and Peter Nicholls termed, in their *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, “First SF” in 1957 when Sputnik brought space down to earth and 1984, the year that George Orwell ended and William Gibson started) we lurched into the futures we now try to inhabit, and all the old SF futures found themselves surplus to requirements, standing alone on the sidewalk, pensioned off and abandoned. Or were they?

SF is a difficult and transient literature at the best of times, ultimately problematic. It claims to treat of the future, all the what-ifs and if-this-goes-ons; but the what-ifs and if-this-goes-ons are always founded here and hard in today. Whatever today is.

To put it another way, nothing dates harder than historical fiction and science fiction. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s historical fiction and his SF are of a piece—and both have dated in a way in which Sherlock Holmes, pinned to his time in the gaslit streets of Victorian London, has not.

Dated? Rather, they are of their time.

For there are always exceptions. There may, for instance, be nothing in Alfred Bester’s *Tiger! Tiger!* (1956 U.K.; republished in the U.S. under the original 1956 *Galaxy* magazine title, *The Stars My Destination*, in 1957) that radically transgresses any of the speculative notions SF writers then shared about the possible shape of a future solar system. But Gully Foyle, the obsessive protagonist who dominates every page of the tale, has not dated a moment. In a fashion which inescapably reminds us of the great grotesques of other literary traditions, of dark figures from Poe or Gogol or Dickens, Gully Foyle controls the world around him, so that the awkwardnesses of the 1956 future do not so much fade into the background as obey his obsessive dance. If he were

not so intransigent, so utterly bloody-minded, so unborn, Gully Foyle could have become an icon like Sherlock Holmes. But he is; and even though Bester based him on a quote—he is a reworking of the Byronesque magus Edmond Dantès whose revenge over his oppressors takes a thousand pages of Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) to accomplish—he cannot himself be quoted.

When I read this book—or one very similar; you can no more read the same book again than you can step into the same river—in the early 1970s, as a young teenager, I read it under the title *Tiger! Tiger!* It's a title I prefer to the rather more upbeat *The Stars My Destination*. It is a title of warning, of admiration. God, we are reminded in Blake's poem, created the tiger too. The God who made the lamb also made the carnivores that prey upon it. And Gully Foyle, our hero, is a predator. We meet him and are informed that he is everyman, a nonentity; then Bester lights the touchpaper, and we stand back and watch him flare and burn and illuminate: almost illiterate, stupid, single-minded, amoral (not in the hip sense of being too cool for morality, but simply utterly, blindly selfish), he is a murderer—perhaps a multiple murderer—a rapist, a monster. A tiger.

(And because Bester began working on the book in England, naming his characters from an English telephone directory, Foyle shares a name with the largest, and most irritating book shop in London—and with Lemuel Gulliver, who voyaged among strange peoples. Dagenham, Yeovil, and Sheffield are all English cities.)

We are entering a second-stage world of introductions to SF. It is not long since everyone knew everybody. I for one never met Alfred Bester: I never travelled to America as a young man, and by the time he was due to come to England, to the 1987 Brighton Worldcon, his health did not permit it, and he died shortly after the convention.

I can offer no personal encomia to Bester the man—author of many fine short stories, two remarkable SF novels in the first round of his career (*The Demolished Man* and the book you now hold in your hand); author of three somewhat less notable SF books in later life. (Also a fascinating psychological thriller called *The Rat Race*, about the world of New York television in the 1950s.)

He began his career as a writer in the SF pulps, moved from there to comics, writing *Superman*, *Green Lantern* (he created the

“Green Lantern Oath”), and many other characters; he moved from there to radio, writing for Charlie Chan and The Shadow. “The comic book days were over, but the splendid training I received in visualization, attack, dialogue, and economy stayed with me forever,” he said in a memoir.

He was one of the only—perhaps the only—SF writers to be revered by the old timers (“First SF”), by the radical “New Wave” of the 1960s and early 1970s, and, in the 1980s, by the “cyberpunks.” When he died in 1987, three years into the flowering of cyberpunk, it was apparent that the 1980s genre owed an enormous debt to Bester—and to this book in particular.

The Stars My Destination is, after all, the perfect cyberpunk novel: it contains such cheerfully protocyber elements as multinational corporate intrigue; a dangerous, mysterious, hyperscientific McGuffin (PyrE); an amoral hero; a supercool thief woman ...

But what makes *The Stars My Destination* more interesting—and ten years on, less dated—than most cyberpunk, is watching Gully Foyle become a moral creature, during his sequence of transfigurations (keep all heroes going long enough, and they become gods). The tiger tattoos force him to learn control. His emotional state is no longer written in his face—it forces him to move beyond predation, beyond rage, back to the womb, as it were. (And what a sequence of wombs the book gives us: the coffin, the Nomad, the Goufre Martel, St. Pat’s, and finally the Nomad again.) It gives us more than that. It gives us:

Birth.

Symmetry.

Hate.

A word of warning: the vintage of the book demands more work from the reader than she or he may be used to. Were it written now, its author would have shown us the rape, not implied it, just as we would have been permitted to watch the sex on the grass in the night after the Goufre Martel, before the sun came up, and she saw his face...

So assume it’s 1956 again. You are about to meet Gully Foyle, and to learn how to jaunte. You are on the way to the future.

It was, or is, or will be, as Bester might have said, had someone not beaten him to it, the best of times. It will be the worst of times....

The Stars
My
Destination

PART 1

*Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

—Blake

PROLOGUE

This was a Golden Age, a time of high adventure, rich living, and hard dying...but nobody thought so. This was a future of fortune and theft, pillage and rapine, culture and vice...but nobody admitted it. This was an age of extremes, a fascinating century of freaks...but nobody loved it.

All the habitable worlds of the solar system were occupied. Three planets and eight satellites and eleven million million people swarmed in one of the most exciting ages ever known, yet minds still yearned for other times, as always. The solar system seethed with activity...fighting, feeding, and breeding, learning the new technologies that spewed forth almost before the old had been mastered, girding itself for the first exploration of the far stars in deep space; but—

“Where are the new frontiers?” the Romantics cried, unaware that the frontier of the mind had opened in a laboratory on Callisto at the turn of the twenty-fourth century. A researcher named Jaunte set fire to his bench and himself (accidentally) and let out a yell for help with particular reference to a fire extinguisher. Who so surprised as Jaunte and his colleagues when he found himself standing alongside said extinguisher, seventy feet removed from his lab bench.

They put Jaunte out and went into the whys and wherefores of his instantaneous seventy-foot journey. Teleportation...the