

THE YEAR IN FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, 2015

RICH HORTON



Not a Manifesto

It seems, perhaps, time to restate my goals for these books; to issue some variety of declaration of intent. But this is not a manifesto! We may have had too many of those recently.

To begin with, the title of the anthology series is quite honestly intended: **The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy**. These are my choices for the best short fiction of the year in our field. (With a few mild caveats: every year there are one or two stories I want to use but cannot because of contractual issues, or sometimes because another editor got there first. And every year my choices for the last half-dozen or so pieces are difficult: at least the next half-dozen, if not more, are equally worthy in my eyes.) Seems simple, doesn't it? But people can misread it—one of the most common complaints is that a particular story “isn't science fiction.” Well, no, each year roughly half the book is fantasy—an intention stated in the title. The goal here is to celebrate “fantastika” (to use John Clute's term) of all sorts.

Even within those choices I would call “science fiction” there is some fuzziness. My definition of science fiction is purposely broad. I love hard science fiction, but I like the softer stuff too. And some stuff I like is scientifically impossible. (But heck, it's likely much of hard science fiction is just as impossible: are we so sure that faster-than-light travel will ever be a reality?) Indeed, in some ways I think that far-future science fiction that plays especially fast and loose with “science as we know it” gets it more right than “stricter” work: as J. B. S. Haldane said: “. . . my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.” Perhaps the best way to get at Haldane's notion is to invoke that strangeness using the tools of fantasy.

One thing I will not apologize for is a preference for good prose. Stories are made of words, and the words matter. The order matters, the meaning matters, the rhythm matters. This doesn't mean prose needs to be "ornate" or "pretty"—ornate and pretty prose have their places, of course, but prose should serve the reader first. In many contexts fairly plain prose is best. But ungrammatical prose, or clunky prose, or cliché-ridden prose, is almost never okay. Which is not to say that I won't publish a story that falls short in one of these ways. Most stories this side of John Crowley's *Engine Summer* are imperfect, and in some cases the imperfection is manifest in the prose.

I will add that as a reader of science fiction for more than four decades I value surprise very highly. I love being surprised by a new turn of phrase, or a new image. I also love being surprised by a novel idea, or a novel variation on an old idea. And I still love being surprised by a plot twist coming from out of the ecliptic.

And I love science fiction and fantasy of all sorts. Military science fiction. Space opera. Heroic fantasy. Near future sociological speculation, alternate history, elegiac far future meditations, urban fantasy, comic fantasy, slipstream, steampunk: great writing, great stories, come from every corner of the field—and from outside the field.

State of the Field

Whenever I discuss the state of the field, it seems to be in flux, even perhaps in crisis. I suppose we must accept that as the normal state of things. And after all, if this is a field devoted to strangeness and change, why not accept a state of continual change?

The big three US print magazines remain *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and *F&SF*; as they have pretty much since *Asimov's* was founded in 1976. *Analog* transitioned to a new editor in 2013, after Stanley Schmidt retired, following a career of nearly identical length to that of the very founder of "Modern Science Fiction," John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding/Analog* for some thirty-three years. Schmidt's successor is Trevor Quacchri, long an assistant there, and my impression of his early issues, not that he has more than a year under his belt, is quite positive: he's introducing some intriguing new writers, while not abandoning *Analog's* core identity. Last year he published Timons Esais' "Sadness," clearly one of the very best stories of the year. Even more recently, *F&SF* has changed editors. Gordon Van Gelder remains the publisher, but the editing reins have been handed to C. C. Finaly, who "auditioned" with a strong guest issue in July-August 2014, from which I've chose Alaya Dawn Johnson's "A Guide to the Fruits of Hawai'i" for this book. *Asimov's* stays the course with Sheila Williams, and 2014 was a very good year for the magazine, I thought, as evidenced by the three stories included here.

The UK's top magazine remains *Interzone*, and Andy Cox continues to produce a colorful and individualistic magazine, represented here by John Grant's "Ghost Story." Two of the most interesting among the remaining print magazines are very small press productions, modestly produced (saddle-stapled), both quite long-lived in that context: *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and *Not One of Us*. This year I chose two pieces from LCRW: Kathleen Jennings' steampunkish fantasy "Skull and *Hyssop*" and Damien Ober's very strange "The Endless Sink." From *Not One of Us*, which has been around for over a quarter-century, I've taken a wonderful piece by one of their regulars, Patricia Russo, "The Wild and Hungry Times." Russo is an outstanding writer with an entirely personal voice and set of concerns, who seems to have hovered just below wide notice for far too long.

It's very old news by now that much of the action is online. There are a lot of online 'zines, but I don't think it would be much of a distortion to suggest that the six featured here represent to the cream of the crop. Alas, one of them closed in 2014: *Subterranean Press Magazine* (formerly known as *Subterranean Online*), which published a whole lot of truly outstanding work, including in particular an impressive array of novellas. This book has one of the last of those novellas, Rachel Swirsky's "Grand Jeté (the Great Leap)," as well as a lovely and wise story about writing by Eleanor Arnason, "The Scrivener."

I chose four stories each from two other top online sources, *Clarkesworld* (three-time Hugo Winner for Best Semiprozine) and *Lightspeed* (2014 Hugo Winner for Best Semiprozine). (In the interests of full disclosure, I should add that I am the Reprint Editor for *Lightspeed*, and that this volume's publisher, Sean Wallace, is the co-editor at *Clarkesworld*.)

Clarkesworld publishes almost solely science fiction, and *Lightspeed* publishes an even mixture of science fiction and fantasy, so it can be argued that another online 'zine, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, is the top fantasy magazine online, and the two outstanding stories I chose from it should support that argument. And it would be folly to forget *Tor.com*, which besides publishing a lot of exceptional fiction (both science fiction and fantasy, and much of it long form), also features a lively blogspace, with lots of discussion of science fiction of all forms (graphic stories, movies, and TV definitely included); or the oldest remaining online 'zine, *Strange Horizons*, which probably features as wide a variety of short fantastika as anyone, and which also has a strong feature set, include poetry, non-fiction, and a provocative review section.

Science fiction is no stranger to the so-called "mainstream" or "literary" magazines these days either. The *New Yorker* regularly features science fiction and fantasy (including a pretty decent story Tom Hanks this year), and *New Yorker* stories have appeared in these anthologies. *Tin House* in particular is

very hospitable to fantastika, and this year I saw some outstanding work at *Granta*. (Alas, contractual tangles prevented anything from either of those places appearing in this year's volume.) But we do have a brilliant piece from *McSweeney's*, Kelly Link's "I Can See Right Through You."

Finally, as ever, many of the best stories first appear in original anthologies. Jonathan Strahan has a couple of ongoing "stealth series," the "Infinity" set of science fiction books, the latest being *Reach for Infinity*, from which this book features Adam Roberts' "Trademark Bugs" and Hannu Rajaniemi's "Invisible Planets"; and the "Fearsome" set of Fantasy books, the latest being *Fearsome Magics*, source of Genevieve Valentine's "Aberration." (Further disclosure: Jonathan Strahan is my editor at *Locus*.) The one acknowledged ongoing original anthology series is Ian Whates' SF-oriented *Solaris Rising*, and from the third volume of that series this book features Benjamin Rosenbaum's delightful "Fift and Shria."

Neil Clarke, the other co-editor of *Clarkesworld*, put out his first original anthology in 2014, *Upgraded*, and Peter Watt's challenging "Collateral" comes from it, while John Joseph Adams teamed with Hugh Howey for a set of independently published anthologies of pre-, during, and post-apocalyptic stories. The first of these, *The End is Nigh*, featured Charlie Jane Anders' jaggedly and desperately comic story "Break! Break! Break!" (And, to complete the acknowledgement that, yes, this can be a somewhat incestuous field, I'll disclose that John Joseph Adams is the editor-in-chief at *Lightspeed*.)

George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois have teamed up for a series of big anthologies featuring stories from multiple genres. The entry for 2014 was *Rogues*, from which Paul Cornell's "A Better Way to Die" is taken. And finally, the *MIT Technology Review* has put out a few anthologies featuring near-future speculative science fiction in recent years, all of high quality, and in 2014 *Twelve Tomorrows* featured Cory Doctorow's whipsmart "Petard: A Tale of Just Deserts." Finally, Ben Bova (one of *Analog's* best editors) teamed up with Eric Choi for an impressive collection of new very hard science fiction last year, *Carbide Tipped Pens*, from which I've taken one of two outstanding Robert Reed stories included here: "Every Hill Ends With Sky."

The bottom line for me is that—churn notwithstanding—the science fiction and fantasy field is as strong or stronger than ever, and this book, in my opinion, reflects that strength. Enjoy!

SCHOOLS OF CLAY

DEREK KÜNSKEN



Present

The workers' revolution began on the hive's nine hundred and third day, when the Hero pulsar was above the horizon to the north. A pod of predatory shaghāl emerged from behind a small asteroid to the west. The exhaust of their thrust was shielded by their bodies, but the point shines of their souls were visible to those in the colony who had souls. The shine was just slightly blue-shifting.

The skates were not ready. Only half the princesses were fueled in the launch tubes of the hive. Indecision washed over the colony. Skates and souls yelled over each other. Then, a thousand tiny reactions bloomed. The colony panicked. The flat, triangular skates hopped along the regolith in different directions on steely fingers.

Diviya stood above the rising dust, on a mound of mine tailings. He had been meeting with a half-dozen revolutionaries in the slums past the worker shanties. None of his revolutionaries possessed souls, so they could not see the shaghāl, but the panicked radio bursts from the hive alarmed them. Some thought that a squad of hive drones had found them.

"Oh no," Diviya said.

"Flee!" Diviya's soul crackled to him in the radio static. "Save the princesses!"

"Diviya, the revolution isn't ready!" Tejas said. Tejas was a soulless worker, made of carbon-reinforced ceramic. He was triangular and flat, with a single, lightly abraded lens on the vertex of the leading edges of his wide fins. "The workers are not assembled."

Hours away yet, the shaghāl split into two pods. The first pod of predators continued toward the hive. The second angled to intercept the migration, before it had even launched.

"The whole colony is already late," Diviya said. "The revolution must happen now."