

THE PAST THROUGH TOMORROW
UNDERSTANDING HISTORY THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION

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The central character in Ward Moore's remarkable 1955 science fiction novel, Bring the Jubilee, is Hodgins McCormick Backmaker, a historian. At one point in the story, he speculates about the nature of history:

I also began to understand the central mystery of historical theory. When and what and how and where, but the when is the least. Not chronology but relationship is ultimately what the historian deals in. The element of time, so vital at first glance, assumes a constantly more subordinate character. That the past is past becomes ever less important. Except for perspective it might as well be the present or the future or, if one can conceive it, a parallel time. I was not investigating a petrification but a fluid. Were it possible to know fully the what and how and where one might learn the why, and assuredly if one grasped the why he could place the when at will.¹

More simply, as William Faulkner said it, "The past is never dead; it is not even past."²

Since I became involved in using science fiction to understand history, many people have insisted that it is a gimmick, that there is little relationship between history, which deals with the past, and science fiction, most of which deals with the future. I draw again from American literature for a bit of dialogue which helps to illustrate the contrary. "For God's sake, forget the past," insists one character to another in Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey into Night." The response: "Why? How can I? The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us."³

My basic point is that the past, the present, and the future are all inter-related, part of a continuum. Thus, understanding any one of them helps to understand the other two. A friend of mine in history at Metropolitan State College in Denver has drawn a cartoon to illustrate this. It shows a ship about to run into an iceberg. Of course, only the tip of the iceberg is visible to the ship's captain. The tip is the present. Under the water is the massive portion of the iceberg--the past. The water itself is the future. The point is made visually and very effectively that if we do not realize that the past is a major part of the present, we face a very real risk of running aground on the present and never even knowing the future. "History repeats itself," as Thomas A. Bailey has written, "because no one was listening the first time."⁴

But what, you might ask, do bug-eyed monsters and space ships have to do with history? The answer, of course, is that much science fiction does deal with such topics, and while it justifies itself as escapism if nothing else, it really cannot be used all that productively to understand history. There is, however, a significant amount of science fiction, and apparently an increasing amount, that falls into one of three categories which I think can help us approach history.

The first is science fiction which involves alteration of historical events. Bring the Jubilee is an example; its setting is the United States

after the loss of the "War of Southron Independence" to the Confederate States of America. The U.S. is a third-rate power in a world dominated by the Confederacy and the German Union, and the former Mexico City is now Leesburg. But the hero travels through time to a crucial turning point in the battle of Gettysburg because of his historian's curiosity. He accidentally gets caught up in the battle and causes it to come out differently--i.e., the way we know it really did come out! Another example is T. R. Fehrenbach's short story, "Remember the Alamo," in which an historian of the future, through time travel, arrives at the scene just on the eve of the Battle of the Alamo. Of course, he knows historically how the battle came out, but he gets involved in an advisory capacity and has an impact on the battle that makes it come out differently. And, just to show you how inside-out that version is, "Remember the Alamo" becomes a Mexican rallying cry.⁵ Such "alternate history" science fiction can be used very productively to make us think of the impact if historical events had turned out differently and, therefore, the importance of them turning out the way they did.

The second category is science fiction which uses the past and the present to project different possible futures. Harlan Ellison, a master of this genre, which he is fond of calling "speculative fiction," has edited an important anthology of such stories under the title Dangerous Visions.⁶ Ecological science fiction provides an excellent example of this type of theme: viewing the present state of the environment, and how it got this way historically, science fiction writers have speculated in many different ways about the possible ecological futures before us.⁷

The third category is the broadest: it is science fiction that simply treats subjects in a futuristic setting which are in reality timeless. Indeed, such works need not necessarily even be futuristic, as evidenced by Star Wars: the movie begins with the words, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. . . ." Laurence M. Janifer's novel, Power, is an excellent example of this genre. It deals with a rebellion on board a space ship belonging to Empire Earth in the far distant future. But the document issued by the rebels is reminiscent of every great document for human liberty in history; it speaks of concepts like liberty, freedom, equality--ideas long since forgotten by the leaders of Empire Earth. Also, the leader of the rebellion is the son of one of the most powerful political figures in the empire, and he has a brother who is a major figure in one of the churches.⁸ Through this science fiction novel, students can be directed into a discussion of many questions. What is the nature of power? What motivates revolutionaries? Do revolutions succeed? Has there always been a generation gap? What is the role of religion in politics? What have concepts like liberty, freedom, and equality meant historically? Does human history show a movement away from them or toward them?

At the University of Tulsa, an undergraduate seminar program in the history department allows exploration of topics of obvious interest and importance which are not dealt with, or at least not adequately, within the framework of the regular curriculum. The seminars are limited to 15 students. In the fall of 1976, I offered "The Past Through Tomorrow: Understanding History Through Science Fiction."

Our "core" reading, which we began the semester by discussing together, consisted of Transformations: Understanding World History through Science Fiction and Transformations II: Understanding American History through Science Fiction, both edited by Daniel Roselle, and Political Science Fiction: An Introductory Reader, edited by Martin Harry Greenberg and Patricia S. Warrick.⁹ Roselle's volumes consist of ten short stories each organized by historical topics and time periods. Greenberg and Warrick is an anthology also, organized around such political science topics as ideology and political philosophy, political leadership, elections and electoral behavior, political

violence and revolution, diplomacy and international relations, and conflict resolution.

Growing out of this reading and discussion together, each student, in close consultation with me, selected a topic to pursue extensively for the rest of the semester and to report back on to the group at the end. These topics included war, urban science fiction, women in science fiction, ecological science fiction, the history of science fiction, science fiction of the past as history, social attitudes in science fiction, technology and changing life-styles, and such authors as Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and R. A. Lafferty. I constantly insisted that the students be aware of the historical foundation of their topic; indeed, it was primarily at this point in the seminar that a significant amount of "pure" history was utilized in both reading and discussion. For example, on women in science fiction, I encouraged the student to ask such questions as whether the roles science fiction writers envision for women in the future are meaningfully related to women's roles today and especially historically; the same approach was used on ecological science fiction and most of the other topics as well. On each of the topics, especially those where the student involved showed any lack of mastery of the fundamental historical information, I suggested reading which would supply such information.

For another, smaller project, students selected a science fiction novel to read and discuss with the class which they felt was helpful for understanding history. By this time, most of the students had a reasonably firm grasp of what the course was all about, so the selection process was essentially an independent one. Choices varied greatly, and included Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 and Andre Norton's The Time Traders, a novel with a Cold War setting in which both Russians and Americans, through time travel, mine the past for technologies which will give them an advantage in the present.¹⁰

The seminar involved a blend of methods, including lecture, reading, reports, discussion, guest speakers (e.g., a member of our philosophy department with a presentation entitled "The Future: A Sketch of Possibilities"), and films (e.g., "Future Shock"). Also, a brief personal essay came due at the end of the semester to encourage each student to think about the content of the course in an over-all way.

Student essays and responses on a quantified evaluation form would indicate that the course was a remarkable success. The over-all rating was a 4.3 on a 5-point scale; nothing ranked lower than a 3.4 (Interestingly enough, that was "Future Shock," and the major reason, ironically, seemed to be that the film itself is so dated now!).¹¹ The seminar also provided an excellent example of a phenomenon unfortunately all too rare in the world of higher education--having fun while learning. And it offered an excellent way to capitalize on the current popularity of science fiction. Because of its flexibility, this idea could be adapted to every level from high school to continuing education, and to every format from seminars to interim terms to summer sessions to independent study.

On a cautionary note, with a topic of this type, as historians we must be careful to insist that we know better than to try to predict the future. For some reason not entirely clear to me, that has been a central criticism of my work in this area. I insist that I am simply using futuristic literature to provide a different and broader perspective on the present and the past. I remind the critics of these words of eminent historian, E. H. Carr: "Good historians, I suspect, whether they think about it or not, have the future in their bones. Besides the question: Why? the historian also asks the question: Whither?"¹² And I remind them of these meaningful comments of New Left historian Staughton Lynd about the nature of the historian's involvement with the future:

What distinguishes the historian from other social scientists is not that he writes about the past but that he considers things in process of development. "History" and "sociology" are not concerned with different objects; they are different ways of looking at the same object. Hence the historian need not be embarrassed if he concerns himself more with the present and future than with the past . . . the historian's business with the future is not to predict but to envision, to say (as Howard Zinn has put it) not what will be but what can be. The past is ransacked, not for its own sake, but as a source of alternative models of what the future might become.¹³

NOTES

¹Ward Moore, Bring the Jubilee (New York, 1955), 137-138.

²Faulkner made the same point many different places. He once said that "no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment." Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958 (Charlottesville, 1959), 84.

³Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven, 1956), 87.

⁴Thomas A. Bailey, "The Mythmakers of American History," Journal of American History, LV (June, 1968), 20.

⁵The story is included in Daniel Roselle, ed., Transformations II: Understanding American History through Science Fiction (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1974), 49-63.

⁶Harlan Ellison, ed., Dangerous Visions, 3 vols. (New York, 1967-1969). The idea worked so well Ellison edited a second, two-volume anthology, Again, Dangerous Visions (New York, 1972-1973). Still another, The Last Dangerous Visions, is forthcoming.

⁷Roger Elwood and Virginia Kidd, eds., The Wounded Planet (New York, 1973), is one anthology of such fiction.

⁸Lawrence M. Janifer, Power (New York, 1974).

⁹Both volumes of Transformations were published by Fawcett, the first in 1973, the second in 1974. Unfortunately, both are already out of print, though copies are still available in some bookstores. Also, many of the stories are available in the works of individual authors. Political Science Fiction was published by Prentice-Hall in 1974, and is still available, as are similar collections in sociology and anthropology. Social Education is one of the few journals which have published in this field. Roselle's Transformations originally saw print as a special issue in February, 1973. "Teaching American History with Science Fiction" by Bernard C. Hollister appeared in February, 1975. It was basically bibliographical and focused on cultural shock and future shock, with a few suggestions on economics, urbanization, minorities, politics, international relations, and contemporary America.

¹⁰Others were Citizen of the Galaxy by Robert Heinlein; The Stainless Steel Rat Saves the World by Harry Harrison; Day after Tomorrow and Depression or Bust by Mack Reynolds; Brain Wave by Poul Anderson; Times without Number

by John Brunner; Dune and Dune Messiah by Frank Herbert; Childhood's End by Arthur C. Clarke; and Andromeda Gun by John Boyd.

¹¹The quantified evaluation form referred to was one designed specifically for the seminar. However, that semester the university was also using the "Student Instructional Report" of the Educational Testing Service. Among the interesting statistics, 92% agreed that the course "encouraged students to think for themselves," 75% that it "raised challenging questions or problems for discussion," and 100% that their interest in the subject area had been stimulated. The books used were rated satisfactory or better by 83% of the students, and the over-all value of the course satisfactory or better by 92% (50% excellent.)

¹²E. H. Carr, What is History? (New York, 1962), 143.

¹³Staughton Lynd, "Historical Past and Existential Present," in Theodore Roszak, ed., The Dissenting Academy (New York, 1967), 107.