

Forum

Science Fiction and Imagination

TO THE EDITOR:

I am responding to Eric S. Rabkin's "Science Fiction and the Future of Criticism" (119 [2004]: 457–73) in its special-topic context, "Science Fiction and Literary Studies: The Next Millennium" (429–546). Based on a statistical tabulation of the form and content of 1,959 science fiction short stories published in American science fiction magazines in the years 1926 to 2000 and a statistical tabulation of the 159 of those stories that were reprinted more than twice, Rabkin notes that "to get a science fiction story printed at all, one is best advised to write an alien contact–alien story; however, if one hopes to make a lasting contribution, one is best advised to write a dystopian satire." He goes on to suggest that much more statistical information, related in particular to "the cultural system of science fiction" (472), will need to be available to explain these, his two most important findings. It seems to me that those findings are pretty much what the informed reader of science fiction would expect, and, as such a reader, I feel able to offer a plausible explanation without the benefit of further systemic statistics.

The essential distinction between the two story types highlighted by Rabkin's statistics can be correlated with the commonsense distinction that Margaret Atwood, in her Correspondents Abroad contribution ("*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context," 119 [2004]: 513–17), makes between "science fiction proper" and "speculative fiction." The science fiction "label denotes books with things in them we can't yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can't go"; alternatively, speculative fiction "employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth." She instances a story about "the talking squid of Saturn" (513) as an example of science fiction and classifies her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* (and implicitly such dystopias as *1984* and *Brave New World*) as examples of speculative fiction. What Rabkin describes as the "alien contact–alien story" is, for Atwood, "science fiction,"

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

while his “dystopian satire” she would classify as “speculative fiction.”

Atwood’s and Rabkin’s labels distinguish between more realistic and less realistic categories of science fiction (if one wishes to make science fiction the inclusive label) or between more realistic and less realistic categories of speculative fiction (if one prefers to make speculative fiction the inclusive label). Because, for at least a couple of centuries, the novel and fiction generally have been accorded “literary” value on the basis of realistic verisimilitude, the kind of science fiction (I am using the term inclusively) that is most highly valued by the literary and academic establishments is that of the more realistic variety. Kingsley Amis, in *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (1960; derived from his 1959 Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism lectures at Princeton University), inaugurated the ruling academic justification for the value of science fiction as a form of improving satire. Much science fiction is indeed best read, like much satire, as an estranged or distorted version of the world we know. Many of the aliens of science fiction *are* best read as disguised representations of women or of oppressed races and classes. In this way stories about extraterrestrials can be mundanely recuperated for Atwood’s sense of speculative fiction. But that reading, it should be emphasized, directly counters what our experience of a real extraterrestrial would or should be.

Science fiction (in the inclusive sense) combines satire with the kind of visionary (or prophetic) imagination exemplified by Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Olaf Stapledon’s *Star Maker*, and the best of Arthur C. Clarke’s fiction. The frequent claim that we now live in a science fiction world testifies to the genre’s prophetic and visionary success. It is the sublime visionary aspect of science fiction—its “sense of wonder”—that, I suspect, a majority of science fiction readers respond to. And it is with a sense of wonder (intermixed perhaps with terror or horror or both) that we would all respond in the event of real contact with a real extraterrestrial intelligence. The sense of wonder traditionally associated with science fiction has much to do with the vastness of the universe and the persistent faith that somewhere it harbors alien life-forms (with the conceptual

breakthrough that entails). That is why science fiction readers like stories with exotic aliens in them and why the editors of science fiction magazines publish so many such stories.

Thus far, the academic approach to science fiction has paid insufficient attention to its visionary dimension and the dream of first contact with an extraterrestrial intelligence. Whatever verisimilitude science fiction writers can give to that event requires a high degree of imagination. In denigrating the visionary aspect of science fiction, academic criticism is reading the genre against the grain. Thus Raffaella Baccolini, in her *Correspondents Abroad* contribution (“The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,” 119 [2004]: 518–21), writes of science fiction (in the inclusive sense) that “[i]n its extrapolation of the present, it has the potential to envision different worlds that can work as a purely imaginative (at worst) or a critical (at best) exploration of our society” (519). Baccolini wants science fiction of the satiric dystopian or utopian kind. The kind of science fiction that depends on the power of imagination (fantasy, if you will)—in my view often the best kind—is for her the worst.

David Ketterer
University of Liverpool

Reply:

David Ketterer writes about the finding of the Genre Evolution Project (GEP) that among American science fiction short stories of the twentieth century, alien–alien contact stories are those most likely to be published at all while dystopian satires are those most likely to be reprinted (www.umich.edu/~genreevo/). He says this is “pretty much what the informed reader of science fiction would expect, and, as such a reader, I feel able to offer a plausible explanation without the benefit of further systemic statistics.” His explanation is that alien–alien contact stories are the more fantastic and engage a sense of wonder that motivates science fiction readers while dystopian satire stories are more realistic and appeal to those of educated literary taste.

While one may at least provisionally accept the distinction that Ketterer makes, I find it hard