

**The World Beyond the Hill:
Science Fiction and the Quest for Transcendence**

Alexei Panshin + Cory Panshin

Phoenix Pick 2010 [1989]

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2010 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

The World Beyond the Hill is a history of science fiction from its beginnings to the end of the "Golden Age" in 1945. It concentrates on broad themes such as transcendence, attitudes to science and technology, the fate of humanity, and so forth; it is also quite focused temporally, with more than half of it devoted to John Campbell and the period from 1937 to 1945.

The Panshins begin their story with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, which came closest of his works to escaping the "village" and reaching "the world beyond the hill".

Three works from 1871 are considered in detail: William Henry Rhodes' "The Case of Summerfield", George Chesney's "The Battle of Dorking", and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*. These had in common that they "bowed to transcendent mystery wearing the guise of presently unknown higher powers of science". They are contrasted with dime and invention novels, which were about science but lacked mystery, and with the older utopian tradition.

H.G. Wells gets almost a whole chapter to himself, with a detailed analysis of "The Time Machine"; there is a digression to cover Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, which "marks the capitulation by the utopian story to the forces of science". A chapter then segues from Wells via Bertrand Russell ("A Free Man's Worship"), Lord Dunsany and Jack London to Edgar Rice Burroughs (Mars and Tarzan).

"By sloughing off certain Edwardian values — by discarding the soul and primary dependence on civilization — Burroughs was able to imagine a new exemplar of human possibility, the adaptable existential man of action, who was the fulfilment of

the irrational Edwardian confidence in Man."

The First World War "drove a wedge between SF and all hope of respectability" and was responsible for the "death" of European SF and the shift to America. Writers considered in this context include A. Merrit (*The Moon Pool* and *The Metal Monster*), James Branch Cabell, E.R. Eddison, Yevgeny Zamyatin, and H.P. Lovecraft.

In the last years of the "Age of Technology" the focus is on editor Hugo Gernsback and key magazines.

"In the late Twenties in the Gernsback *Amazing*, and then more frequently within the more congenial context of *Astounding Stories*, a new kind of SF story began to appear. This fiction was written by men — and one woman — who were able to accept the immensity and instability of the physical universe, the disestablishment of man, and the radical uncertainty of existence."

The Panshins begin their treatment of what they consider "modern science fiction" in 1928, with E.E. "Doc" Smith's *The Skylark of Space* and Edmond Hamilton's "Crashing Suns". These works are contrasted with the limitations of Olaf Stapledon in *Last and First Men*: "too much affection for the tragic", "too unwilling to chance transgressing the limits of his own cultural matrix", and failing "to take into account ... the new scientific thinking".

Skimming over the next decade, the Panshins touch on further works by E.E. Smith, including the Lensman series, other space opera offerings, and works by Clifford Simak, Jack Williamson, and Stanley Weinbaum. They then introduce the figure who will centre the rest of their story, John Campbell.

Campbell became editor of *Astounding* in 1937. His earliest crop of writers included such notables as Frederik Pohl, Jack Williamson, Clifford Simak, L. Ron Hubbard, Isaac Asimov, Lester Del Rey, and L. Sprague de Camp. He nurtured their talents, but also moulded them to fit his own program for the genre.

"Things hang together. The universe is not to be feared; it will respond if asked the right questions. The facts are the key, but the

facts must be determined. The future may be anticipated. Human evolution is possible. The way to proceed is through the acceptance of change. The method is science and engineering applied with reason and imagination. The ultimate end is human dominion over the universe.

To write modern science fiction for John Campbell, all that would be necessary would be to take one or more of these fundamental tenets and give them expression in story form."

A chapter introduces Asimov and describes key early works, notably "Nightfall" and the first robot stories, and his relationship with Campbell. The next chapter introduces L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt and their Harold Shea stories, but is mostly devoted to Robert Heinlein.

"To understand the radically constrained science fiction of the 1939 and 1940 *Astounding* we must be aware that at the hour it was published, it was not perceived as an imaginative retreat. Rather, it was hailed as a giant step forward, a radical advance in realism, rigor and relevance."

Turning to the influence of quantum mechanics, Jungian psychology, and other developments, the Panshins look at works by Campbell himself (writing as Don A. Stuart), L. Sprague de Camp, L. Ron Hubbard, and Jack Williamson. A.E. van Vogt gets a chapter pretty much to himself, which covers *Slan*, "The Seesaw", and other stories. And a second chapter on Asimov looks at the novellas that would go to make *Foundation*.

"Without the comparatively restrained and careful work of de Camp, Heinlein, Asimov and the others, van Vogt's flights of dreamlike imagination might very easily have seemed completely unfounded — just as without his work, many of their stories might have seemed lacking in mystery."

The World Beyond the Hill finishes in 1945, ending with a chapter "Man Transcending" on the changes following the entry of the United States into the Second World War. This covers the problems Campbell faced losing authors to the war effort, and looks at Van Vogt (*The Weapon Makers*), Lewis Padgett (CL Moore and Henry Kuttner writing together) and Fredric Brown, ending with Asimov and "The Mule".

Rather than trying to survey everything of importance, the Panshins offer detailed analysis of a smaller number of key works. These are discussed in

depth, often with extensive summaries and quotations, and this makes the analysis accessible even to those who haven't read them — or who perhaps read them as teenagers and can now barely remember them.

There is a tendency to over-simple generalisation. The connections to social changes, for example, involve broad statements about the "Romantic Period" or the "Technological Age", for example, and about Victorians and Edwardians. And the links to scientific changes are similarly sweeping. Did the Michelson-Morley experiment really affect popular consciousness?

An idea of progress and an almost triumphalist sentiment dominates both in the development of the genre and in individual biographies. Wells' early life, for example, is written up as if it were designing him to be a science fiction writer. And authors and works are fitted into the Panshins' grand narrative, with those themes and strands consistent with it given the most prominence. There are significant areas which aren't covered at all — there is almost nothing about the science fiction fan community, for example — and entirely different histories covering the same material are possible. (Compare something like *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*).

This relatively restricted approach does, however, help make *The World Beyond the Hill* into a compulsive read. It carries its six hundred and fifty pages lightly, leaving one wishing it continued for another decade or two.

Anyone studying the history of science fiction needs to read *The World Beyond the Hill*, even if only to disagree with it. It is also the kind of account that may appeal to science fiction readers who normally avoid literary criticism, especially those keen on the Golden Age writers.

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