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Special Issue: Children's Science Fiction

Margaret P. Esmonde

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Special Issue: Children's Science Fiction

Margaret P. Esmonde

With children running around wielding light sabres like Luke Skywalker, or zapping Space Invaders on their Atari Video Consoles, or watching the ubiquitous Star Trek reruns, who could deny that science fiction is an

important part of their life.

Science fiction—the literary response to the technological explosion—has become an increasingly significant sub-genre of children's literature as well. It is a curiously ambivalent literature. Its supporters look back to such distinguished writers as Thomas More, claiming that his Utopia is science fiction. (Imaginary lands and imaginary lunar voyages were the earliest forerunners of modern science fiction.) Its detractors cite the seemingly endless supply of Grade Z "monster" movies, the science fiction pulp magazines, and the old Flash Gordon serials as representative of the genre they unhesitatingly label "Trash!"

It is difficult to pinpoint the first real science fiction story, but many critics argue for Mary Godwin Shelley's Frankenstein (1817). Although it is basically a Gothic novel, Shelley did introduce as her protagonist a scientist, not a wizard, who revivifies a corpse through "galvanics" rather than incantations; she also introduces one of the central themes of science fiction, the proper use of knowledge and the moral responsibility of the scientist for his discovery—a theme often expressed in later "mad scientist" movies by the hushed statement at the end of the film: "There are some things man was not meant to know!"

Throughout the nineteenth century, various authors such as Hawthorne, Melville and Poe produced stories which could be classified as science fiction according to modern definitions. But it **[End Page 1]** was the work of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells that is considered the most significant predecessor of twentieth-century science fiction. Wells styled these novels "scientific romances," and they are still highly popular with young readers. But Wells and Verne were not alone in producing literature which extrapolated on scientific possibilities. In the children's literature of the same period, authors reflected the increased interest in science. In his essay, "Juvenile Science Fiction," (Anatom of Wonder: Science Fiction, ed. Neil Barron, Bowker, 1976, pp. 302-307), Francis J. Molson notes that as early as 1879, Lu Senarens turned out the first of his 180 Frank Reade, Jr. stories "which chronicled the adventures of a boy genius responsible for many remarkable inventions." Frank Reade, Jr. was

followed by other well-known teen protagonists such as Tom Edison, Jr. and Tom Swift, a series inaugurated in 1910 and continued through the 30's. In this issue of the Quarterly, Molson presents further literary insights into children's science fiction at the turn of the century via a look at Frances Hodgson Burnett's "electric boy," and David L. Greene, author of numerous books on Oz, discusses another early manifestation of interest in science in the works of L. Frank Baum.

In addition to the juvenile series books, the children's magazines occasionally offered stories based on the growing interest in science. But these magazines were overshadowed by the emergence of the science fiction pulp magazines in the 1920's. The first magazine devoted solely to stories which its editor, Hugo Gernsbach, labeled "scientifiction" initially, later changing the term to "science fiction," was Amazing Stories which first appeared in 1926. Depending heavily on reprints of authors such as Wells and Verne, the magazine attracted teenage male readers chiefly. (Girls weren't encouraged to be interested in science and relatively few were attracted by these magazines.) The original material which appeared in Gernsbach's publication was seldom (if ever) of significant literary quality, but the teenage reader could overlook an enormous amount of bad writing if the action or the idea held his interest. There emerged in this first flowering of science fiction two main types of plots: "space opera," the action-adventure oriented story with a strong young hero in conflict with an evil villain. The young **[End Page 2]** hero is usually associated with a good scientist who practically always has a beautiful daughter whose function, in addition to decorating the cover of the magazine in the clutches of a tentacled monster, robot or other unspeakable horror...

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

Quarterly

WINTER 1981

Special Issue: CHILDREN'S SCIENCE FICTION



ILLUSTRATION FOR THE GENERAL FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION BY ELEANOR CAMERON

Fantasy, SF and the Mushroom Planet Books

BY ELEANOR CAMERON

Having been asked to put those three names up there in the title together and say something about them, I remember what an innocent I was about science fiction when I began *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet* for a boy aged eight who was absolutely devoted to the idea of Doctor Dolittle going to the moon. I was an innocent who would have agreed heartily that fantasy was one thing and one thing only: a fanciful work dealing with supernatural events or characters, and science fiction quite another: a kind of story that draws imaginatively on scientific knowledge and speculation. I know nothing then of

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EDITED BY MARGARET P. ESMONDE

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