

*The essay is an extraordinary and quite exclusive literature genre, well written by few, appreciated fully by only a small part of the reading public. Taken literally, the term essay—meaning a tryout—indicates that we have something here that is not completely finished. The essay, as we meet it in the book pages, is not a complete and ended product; it is merely the start of a process. It is an invitation to an exchange of viewpoints, demanding a dialogue between the writer and the reader. It also characteristic for an essay that it should be learned, well written and witty, preferably all of it.*

*Having made this point, we are happy to invite the reader to a dialogue of this kind. Here is someone who wants to start a dialogue with you, and the topic is another highly communicative, demanding and somewhat exclusive literature genre, i.e. science fiction.*

*This essay, which here has its original publication, is written by Kicki Stridh within the frames of an academy course at Halmstad University. Ms Stridh has held a mixed variety of jobs, just like science fiction writers use to. She is not one of those, however, although she has been touching the closely linked fantasy genre; being the author of a well-received children's book, *The Horrible Spookhouse*. Her everyday writing is non fiction. She is working as a consultant to governmental and European development projects. And that, dear reader, means strict reports, and not any extraterrestrial stuff of green little men.*

*Her essay treats an anthology of science fiction, which in its title asks a key question significant for this speculative genre: "What if?!" But Ms Stridh is not writing about the short stories collected, the content of the dialogue, so to speak. She is fascinated of the framework surrounding science fiction stories, the arena where the dialogues take place and which forms the content. What makes a sf fan tick?*

## What if? Reader is Invited

KICKI STRIDH

If this essay had been a science fiction short story, published under a common theme with some others after the sf anthology fashion, an introduction like the one above had inevitably been there. An enthusiastic editor would have written something to this effect, and it would have been in italics, too.

Isn't it nice to have some clues before you start to read what the text will be about, and of what could be an fruitful way to approach it? I must say I like it a lot. I love the introductions. They are always there, just before each short story, in the sf anthologies I have been collecting since I started buying books at all. Those integrated texts in italics stand for a kind of attitude to fictional texts that you find in science fiction among its editors, writers and readers, but seldom in the mainstream literature genres. Above, I have tried to mimic the characteristic tune of these reader's-how-to; it's chatty, it's didactic close to being besserwisserish, and it mixes some sparks of general literature theory with highlighting and comments to the themes and motives in the actual story. It's also spiced with biographical notes on the author, sometimes even real gossip. Those introductions are part of the science fiction framework, to me an essential reason for my love of these stories.

Let us take a look at this sf framework, demonstrated by one of those anthologies. Here is a nice little book with a big white question-mark on it. The title is all over the cover in big font, it's a question, and it's short: *WHAT IF?* This anthology is edited by a *Richard A. Lupoff*, name given directly under the title. Let this pocketbook printed in 1981 in New York be our example.

To be more precise, the full name of the book is "What if? Volume 2." This actual book that we hold in our hands, virtually of course – notice that the cover is tomato red – does obviously not stand alone. There is a Volume 1, naturally, which I can personally guarantee for<sup>1</sup>, and there are Volumes 3 and 4, announced on the title page as forthcoming. *What if? Volume 2*, has a history and a future. It exists in a context, a little universe of its own.

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<sup>1</sup> I used to have Volume 1 as well. I lent it to someone, and so I lost the wonderful Poul Andersen story *The Man Who Came Early* (Late?), about an American Air Force officer, stationed in Iceland, who suddenly finds himself transported to Viking Age. He is betrayed by his arrogant belief that technological development means superiority, and this leads to his death.

The impulse to buy a book is heavily supported by signals sent out by the cover, generally. What, then, does this specific framework say to attract me? I have already told you that the cover has the colour of a stop-signal. "Stop! Buy ME!" Some key-words on the cover trigger me further; the content is advertised as "*Amazing! Fantastic! Brilliant! More stories that should have won the Hugo!*". And I am supposed to know that this is a reference to the Hugo awards, granted annually to books and stories in the sf genre, much like Oscars in the film world. (Amazing is another sf trigger word, by the way, innocent as it looks, it's the name of one of the legendary magazines of the genre and stands here as a subtle guaranty of high quality level.) There is also a cover illustration; picturing the usual strange gadgets on an alien planet.

The back of the cover holds an elaboration on the title question. "*Let us right the wrongs of the past!*" it cries, and an argumentative text follows. WHAT IF those stories would have won? They are "*too good to have lost the gold medal because of the evils of popularity contests, which are what the Hugo and Nebula awards have too often been*". This conspiratory wink includes the reader in an exclusive little group, not only well informed on these awards as such, but possibly also on how unjust they often are. I level, I am in. I am invited and I am flattered. I am now prepared to start a casual and friendly chat with this editor – i e purchase the book – about who should have won, had there been justice in this world. I, the reader, am included by the context.

So. Who should have won? According to Richard A. Luboff these stories have been unjustly neglected during the period of this volume:

- 1959 The Pi Man, Alfred Bester
- 1960 The Lost Kafoozalum, Pauline Ashwell
- 1961 The Sources of the Nile, Avram Davidson
- 1962 Where is the Bird of Fire? Thomas Burnett Swann
- 1963 Stand-by, Philip K. Dick
- 1964 Now is forever, Thomas M. Disch
- 1965 All the King's Men, Barrington J. Bayley

Trigger names most of them. I will not write a word about their stories, just say that they are concerned with the key-question of sf ("what if it had happened like this - instead?") and that they are thoroughly introduced by Mr Luboff.

First, Luboff gives us a general overview to the collection. We learn here that his hair is greying, and he rolls up history for us along three twinned threads: life and opinions of his aunt Cora, Dayton, Ohio – devoted sf fan of age, sf history and technological advance in the twentieth century – airplanes, ENIAC, sputniks, moonlanding, microtechnology, genes and all. The tune is personal, intimate, full of sf namedropping and facts in this typical and wonderful sf editorial mix. The five pages contain a quite dated discussion on whether sf is an outdying literature, vanishing as the dramatic technological development makes this genre of technological dreams unnecessary. Luboff ends up with the contrary conclusion, that "*Science fiction is just beginning to live. If you don't believe me, just ask my aunt Cora in Dayton!*" (p 11). Survival and even prospering will follow from the shift from hard science to softer and more humanistic, which the stories chosen illustrates.

His long and rich introductions of the individual stories span over about three and a half pages for each of them. He gives the full list of the Hugo and Nebula nominees and winners year by year, he comments upon their content and quality, and he provides us with the politics behind the medal distribution. He gives perspectives and added value to the simple reading of the actual stories.

Mr Luboff's own first-choices are introduced just like I told you sf stories are. I will quote from just one of his introductions to illustrate and expand my point further:

*"I think 'The Lost Kafoozalum' – which has never been reprinted from Analog until now – is the most egregiously overlooked of all the overlooked stories in the present anthology. If you are like me, you will suspect at the outset of the story that it is marred by a bizarre string of typographical errors.*

*Not so.*

*The author was writing in a futuristic jargon, just one of the many fine touches of craft present in the story."*

(p 34, author's italic)

Richard – I feel that we are on first name basis now - reaches out to me (“if you are like me”). He speaks to me of how the author uses “futuristic jargon” to strengthen the story content, i e he comments on her writing technique. He also gives brief information about printing history. This is a view of literature as a craft: How does the author use her/his tools? What are the conditions for writing and publishing? Editors of sf approach texts hands-on, and they point out why and how the author achieves her/his results. Another example: the stories in one of the other sf anthologies in my bookshelves have as common ground that they are all *written in first person...* (“The Future I.”) Could you imagine an ordinary collection of short stories, main wave ones, introduced and grouped like that?

Sf stories are published in many folded contexts with the purpose to include the reader in a tight and exclusive relationship. We are invited to be part of an exclusive and well-informed group of people. Welcome to an informed chat, between us subculturalists. Without this framework, sf books would lose their intimacy and some of their magic, at least to me. I want them pragmatic. I like their stupid high-tech futuristic cover illustrations. I prefer the pocket books before the hard cover ones, which to me seem pretentious and looking much like ordinary literature. I also gladly buy them second hand. To me, there is a dynamic contrast between the matter-of-factly, trashy, cultic framework and the thought-provoking Sense of Wonder content.

Oh yes. One last thing. Richard A. Luboff's introductions are interesting, inviting and full of facts. But in one aspect they are not typical: they are not in italic.

- *What if? Volume 2. Richard A. Luboff, ed., Pocket Books, New York 1981* -