

ISSN
1879-5676

GATEHOUSE GAZETTE

JAN '10

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TAKING TO THE SKIES

OPINION ONE OF THE OLD SCHOOL

Why one opinionated bastard can't just get along.

STEAM? YES. PUNK? NO. STEAMPUNK? OF COURSE not. End of discussion, right? I only wish. While there is little argument over what constitutes steampunk as a subculture, what constitutes steampunk as a literary genre is an argument that ignores entropy to this day. Some would have you believe that, like the subculture which it has birthed, steampunk as a genre can be a Jack-of-all-trades. Others stick to their rayguns, drawing lines in the industrial grime to separate steampunk from the myriad of sub-genres surrounding it.

It should be clear at this point where I hang my stylishly-battered top hat in all of this.

While it takes a lot for me to say that various bits of anachronistic technology don't fit with the steampunk subculture, I draw the aforementioned line when people get near my beloved books, telling me that it's okay to take the punk out of my steampunk. That with all the brass fittings, I won't be able to tell the difference. Steampunk books must possess two essential elements: steam and punk. Without those, all the valves and gears in the world aren't going to make a story into something that it's not.

The first element, steam, is self-explanatory. It's what everyone thinks of when they hear "steampunk." Brass, gears, dirigibles, mechanical computers, a British Empire upon which the sun never sets, and of course steam. Victorian styling and coal-fired steam power combine, emulating everything through silicon-age technology but with a nice "antique" patina, so the story is steampunk, right? Close, chummer, but no gilt snuff-box.

What gets forgotten is that key second syllable—punk. What distinguishes steampunk from pseudo-Victorian capers and gas lamp scientific romances is the oft-neglected punk. It's the smog, the swearing, the grit of factory-workers down on their luck, the greedy politicians who inspire countless be-goggled Robin Hoods, the machine (often literally) against which one rages. Taking the punk out is like taking the steam out; you've got shiny brass or gritty realism, but you don't have steampunk. It would be like taking the mega corporations or ubiquitous computing out of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984); it just wouldn't work.

I'm in no way against the other genres which get grouped in with steampunk, much though I wish that they weren't labeled incorrectly. I love a well-told and

well-written rip-roaring adventure tale as much as the next reader, but even a life of constant adventure can get boring. What draws me to steampunk is something deeper than that. Steampunk should be a lens through which to examine life's persistent issues, regardless of whether those issues are caused by a fanciful steam-powered artificial intelligence which rules the civilized world with thousands of mechanized brass fists or a too-real politician pursuing his or her own ends at the expense of the common person.

After looking at the issue for a long time, squinting and turning my head this way and that, I discovered the disconnect. The perceived newness and hipness of steampunk, which has existed as a literary sub-genre for over twenty years, is a bandwagon, and everyone wants a seat. The "me too" habit of calling a story steampunk when it lacks either of the above elements vexes me most because it often seems to go unchecked. When somebody says that they prefer their steampunk stories without the punk, I must ask them if they're looking at the right genre. It's in the separation of genre from subculture that's getting in the way. People read about airships and goggles and immediately think "steampunk," because it takes little more than getting some spray-painted welding goggles, a few oddments from a thrift-store, and an outrageously "steamy" name and title to get into the subculture. As a result, they will argue that a pulp air pirate caper is steampunk, not because it possesses both steam and punk, but because steampunk is cool.

When I state that such-and-such a literary work is not steampunk, it is not my intent to invalidate the work; it's calling a spade a spade. You can still move earth with it, but don't try to tell me that it's a hoe just because it has a wooden handle and you keep it in your tool shed. It is not out of bloody-mindedness that I argue this point, but because I want to see the genre furthered, whether by my own works or those of other authors.

Brass goggles are all well and good, but what makes steampunk more than a passing curiosity is its utility as a tool to explore sometimes-familiar territory in a new way. If we lose that, then all our fancy dress and affectations can't save us from being just another derivative footnote in the history of speculative fiction. ■



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