

The Lure of Scientifiction

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SCIENTIFICITON is not a new thing on this planet. While Edgar Allan Poe probably was one of the first to conceive the idea of a scientific story, there are suspicions that there were other scientifiction authors before him. Perhaps they were not such outstanding figures in literature, and perhaps they did not write what we understand today as scientifiction at all. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), a great genius, while he was not really an author of scientifiction, nevertheless had enough prophetic vision to create a number of machines in his own mind that were only to materialize centuries later. He described a number of machines, seemingly fantastic in those days, which would have done credit to a Jules verne.¹

There may have been other scientific prophets, if not scientifiction writers, before his time, but the past centuries are so beclouded, and there are so few manuscripts of such literature in existence today, that we cannot really be sure who was the real inventor of scientifiction.

In the eleventh century there also lived a Franciscan monk, the amazing as well as famous Roger Bacon (1214-1294). He had a most astounding and prolific imagination, with which he foresaw many of our present-day wonders. But as an author of scientifiction, he had to be extremely careful, because in those days it was not “healthy” to predict new and startling inventions. IT was necessary to disguise the manuscript—to use a cypher—as a matter of fact, so that it has taken many great modern minds to unravel the astonishing scientific prophesies

¹Gernsback: “Da Vinci—the Edison of the Middle Ages—is credited with having first imagined the printing press, the breech-loading gun, the mitrailleuse gun, the steam engine, the chain drive, a man-propelled airplane, the parachute and many others—an amazing array of”scientifiction“—because he admittedly only imagined these inventions.”

of Roger Bacon.²

The scientifiction writer of today is somewhat more fortunate—but not so very much more. It is true that we do not behead him or throw him into a dungeon when he dares to blaze forth with, what seems to us, an impossible tale, but in our inner minds, we are just as intolerant today, as were the contemporaries of Roger Bacon. We have not learned much in the interval. Even such a comparatively tame invention as the submarine, which was predicted by Jules Verne, was greeted with derisive laughter, and he was denounced in many quarters. Still, only forty years after the prediction of the modern submarine by Verne, it has become a reality.

There are few things written by our scientifiction writers, frankly impossible today, that may not become a reality tomorrow. Frequently, the author himself does not realize that his very fantastic yarn may come true in the future, and often he, himself, does not take his prediction seriously.

But the seriously-minded scientifiction reader absorbs the knowledge contained in such stories with avidity, with the result that such stories prove an incentive in starting some one to work on a device or invention suggested by some author of scientifiction.

One of our great surprises since started publishing AMAZING STORIES is the tremendous amount of mail we receive from—shall we call them “Scientifiction Fans”?—who seem to be pretty well orientated in this sort of literature. From the suggestions for reprints that are coming in, these “fans” seem to have a hobby all their own of hunting up scientifiction stories, not only in English, but in many other languages. There is not a day, now, that passes, but we get from a dozen to fifty suggestions as to stories of which, frankly, we have no record, although we have a list of some 600 or 700 scientifiction stories. Some of these fans are constantly visiting the book stores with the express purpose of buying new or old scientifiction tales, and they even go to the trouble of advertising for some volumes that have long ago gone out of print.

Scientifiction, in other words, furnishes a tremendous amount of scientific education and fires the reader’s imagination more perhaps than anything else of which we know.³

²Gernsback: “In his famous *Opus Majus* he accurately prophesied the telescope. He gave excellent descriptions of the *camera obscura*, and of the burning glass—even the invention of gun powder is accredited to him. He forecast an age of industry and invention, with all prominence given to experiment. As a reward for his immortal work, he was incarcerated for a number of years.

³Scientifiction thus is not just a new endeavour, a new invention, but an attempt to dig back into the archives, into history, among a group of fans, and find precursor texts, past dreams.