Fiction Versus Facts

Amazing Stories, vol. 1 no. 4

July 1926

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A FEW letters have come to the Editor's desk from some readers who wish to know what prompts us to so frequently preface our stories in our introductory remarks with the statement that this or that scientific plot is not impossible, but quite probable.

These readers seem to have the idea that we try to impress our friends with the fact that whatever is printed in AMAZING STORIES is not necessarily pure fiction, but could or can be fact.[1]

That impression is quite correct. We DO wish to do so, and have tried to do so ever since we started AMAZING STORIES. As a matter of fact, our editorial policy is built upon this structure and will be so continued indefinitely.

The reason is quite simple. The human mind, not only of today, but of ten thousand years ago also is and was so constituted that being merged into the present if can see neither the past nor the future clearly. If only five hundred years ago (or little more than ten generations), which is not a long time as human progress goes, anyone had come along with a story wherein radio telephone,

[1] John Cheng argues that the publication of readers' letters in the pages of *Amazing Stories* allowed for writers, editors, and readers to engage in a dialogue on science that wasn't merely a passive spectator sport. It was the construction of a popular consensus on what counted as scientific fact:

> As they redefined the character of participation that publishers sought to create for them, readers' exchanges also reshaped the character of science within their writers' fiction and their editors' features, reading it with unanticipated intent and unintended consequence. Science fiction's conversations not only fostered a community of readership, they imagined and reimagined science and fiction within the social dynamics and historical circumstances of the 1920s and 1930s." John Cheng, *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 78.

steamships, airplanes, electricity, painless surgery, the phonograph, and a few other modern marvels were described, he would probably have been promptly flung into a dungeon.

All these things sounded preposterous and the height of nonsense even as little as one hundred years ago, and, lo and behold! within two generations we take these marvels and miracles as everyday occurrences, and do not get in the least excited when we read of recent reports that it will be possible, within a year or less, to see as well as hear your sweetheart a thousand miles away, without intervening wires or connections of any sort.

So when we do read one of these to us "impossible" tales, in AMAZING STORIES, we may be almost certain that the "impossibility" will have become a fact perhaps before another generation—if not much sooner. It is most unwise in this age to declare anything impossible, because you may never be sure but that even while you are talking it has already become a reality. Many things in the past which were declared impossible, are of everyday occurrence now.

There are few stories published in this magazine that can be called outright impossible. As a matter of fact, in selecting our stories we always consider their possibility. We reject stories often on the ground that, in our opinion, the plot or action is not in keeping with science as we know it today. For instance, when we see a plot wherein the hero is turned into a tree, later on into a stone, and then again back to himself, we do not consider this science, but, rather, a fairy tale, and such stories have no place in AMAZING STORIES.

Of course once in a great while an author may take some liberties, as happened, for instance, in the conclusion of "A Trip to the Center of the Earth," printed in this issue.

Jules Verne brought back his heroes in a most improbable manner. But this one defect does not detract from the story as a whole, throughout which good science is maintained. It is only when the entire plot becomes frankly impossible, or far too improbable, that we draw the line.

And it should never be forgotten that the educational value of the scientifiction type of story is tremendous.

Mr. G. Peyton Wertenbaker, author of "The Man from the Atom," says this on the same subject:

"AMAZING STORIES should appeal, however, to quite a different public (referring to the sex-type of literature). Scientifiction is a branch of literature which requires more intelligence and even more aesthetic sense than is possessed by the sex-type reading public. It is designed to reach those qualities of the mind which are aroused only by things vast, things cataclysmic, and things unfathomably strange. It is designed to reach that portion of the imagination which grasps with its eager, feeble talons after the unknown. It should be an influence greater than the influence of any literature I know upon the restless ambition of man for further conquests, further understandings. Literature of the past

and the present has made the mystery of man and his world more clear to us, and for that reason it has been less beautiful, for beauty lies only in the things that are mysterious. Beauty is a groping of the emotions towards realization of things which may be unknown only to the intellect.

"Scientifiction goes out into the remote vistas of the universe, where there is still mystery and so still beauty. For that reason scientifiction seems to me to be the true literature of the future.

"The danger that may lie before AMAZING STORIES is that of becoming too scientific and not sufficiently literary. It is yet too early to be sure, but not too early for a warning to he issued amicably and frankly.

"It is hard to make an actual measure, of course, for the determination of the correct amount of science, but the aesthetic instinct can judge. I can only point out as a model the works of Mr. H. G. Wells, who hits instinctively recognized, in his stories, the correct proportions of fiction, fact, and science. This has been possible only because Mr. Wells is a literary artist above everything, rather than predomin- antly a scientist. If he were a scientist, his taste and sense would permit him only to write books of scientific research. Since he is an artist, he has given us the first truly beautiful work in this new field of literature."

These opinions, we believe, state the case clearly. If we may voice our own opinion we should say that the ideal proportion of a scientifiction story should be seventy-five per cent literature interwoven with twenty-five per cent science.[2]

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[2]For Darko Suvin, whose formulation of "cognitive estrangement" has been one of the most influential critical concepts in science fiction studies, the science that a given work explores shapes the parameters of its "literariness," as Wertenbaker and Gernsback put it here. "Once the elastic criteria of literary structuring have been met, *a cognitive—in most cases strictly scientific—element becomes a measure of aesthetic quality, of the specific pleasure to be sought in SF.* In other words, the cognitive nucleus of the plot [the work's scientifically plausible conceit] codetermines the fictional estrangement [the fictional construction of a world different from our own] itself." Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: on the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, (Yale University Press, 1979), p. 15.

Samuel R. Delany, on the other hand, argues that attempts to locate the proper proportions of science to fiction in the genre are useless, as the variety of forms operating under the banner of SF far outpace any attempts to pin it down.

> The presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition in a literary work are simply and blatantly insufficient to produce SF. If they interact in one way, they produce fantasy. If they interact in another, they produce surrealism. If they interact in still another, they produce criticism. And it can be argued that as well as insufficient, they are not really necessary either. There are too many space-operas, as familiar to readers as the last fifty of them read, in which there is no cognitive thrust at all. And if these are excluded—by definition—from the genre, then we have no definition at all. … But this notion that SF *is* somehow definable is an idea that haunts the academic discussion of SF as much as it haunts the informal discussion that has filled the fanzines since '39. If SF were definable, then it would be the only genre that was! No one has found hte necessary and sufficient conditions for poetry. No one has found the necessary and sufficient conditions for tragedy, for the novel, for fiction. If SF is, as Suvin calls it, "a full fledged literary genre," why should itbe the single one to *have* necessary and sufficient conditions?

Samuel R Delany, *Silent Interviews on Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics: a Collection of Written Interviews*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=362281, p. 191-2.