

# Reasonableness in Science Fiction

*Wonder Stories*, vol. 4 no. 7

December 1932

**DRAFT:** *Please do not share without permission of the author. Typeset versions in [web](#) / [pdf](#) / [doc](#)*

---

When science fiction first came into being, it was taken most seriously by all authors. In practically all instances, authors laid the basis of their stories upon a solid scientific foundation. If an author made a statement as to certain future instrumentalities, he usually found it advisable to adhere closely to the possibilities of science as it was then known.

Many modern science fiction authors have no such scruples. They do not hesitate to throw scientific plausibility overboard, and embark upon a policy of what I might call scientific magic, in other words, science that is neither plausible, nor possible. Indeed, it overlaps the fairy tale, and often goes the fairy tale one better.

This is a deplorable state of affairs, and one that I certainly believe should be avoided by all science fiction authors, if science fiction is to survive.

In the present offering, Mr. John W. Campbell, Jr., has no doubt realized this state of affairs and has proceeded in an earnest way to burlesque some of our rash authors to whom plausibility and possible science mean nothing.<sup>1</sup> He

---

<sup>1</sup>This editorial note introduces John W. Campbell's short story, "Space Rays." The ad for the story in the previous month's issue announces:

'Space Rays' is a new and rather intriguing story by that popular author. Mr. Campbell probably had an unusual idea in writing this story. he not only has written a gripping adventure of space, but has at the same time put his finger on one of the weaknesses of science fiction. You will be amazed at the man who can throw a screw driver with the speed of a pistol bullet, and who can whip a dozen men at once. These feats, strange as they seem, are explained by our author scientifically, in a battle of one man against desperate odds.

Campbell would of course soon become famous as the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* from 1937-1971, playing a decisive role in the development of the genre throughout the twentieth century. Here, Gernsback takes the opportunity to remind his readers (and potential

pulls, magician-like, all sorts of impossible rays from his silk hat, much as a magician extracts rabbits. There is no situation that cannot easily be overcome by some sort of a preposterous—as he terms it—gimmick. Hurling fifteen million horsepower from one space flyer to another means nothing. If he has left out any colored rays, or any magical rays that could not immediately perform certain miraculous wonders, we are not aware of this shortcoming in his story.

In other words, the author proceeds to burlesque science fiction—not only science fiction, but he burlesques his own abilities, to show us what really can be accomplished when the bounds of reasonableness are overstepped.

Yet, all in all, he has spun a delightful tale which will, nevertheless, entertain you, and keep your interest throughout. We are tempted to rename the story “Ray! Ray!” but thought better of it.

I have gone to this length to preach the sermon in the hope that misguided authors will see the light, and hereafter stick to science as it is known, or as it may reasonably develop in the future.

---

contributors) of the empirical plausibility and educational aims of scientifiction as he first formulated it. Though Campbell himself would later demand the same sort of empirical rigor from his authors, this is evidently not what he was after in this story of space piracy and a hero from Jupiter with the strength of ten men. Commenting on Gernsback’s tone here, Gary Westfahl writes, “Clearly, Gernsback was imposing his own didactic message on a story with no satiric intent, but no doubt thought this was the gentlest way to inform Campbell and his colleagues that their colorful adventure stories were not the sort of science fiction he admired.” Gary Westfahl, “The Mightiest Machine: The Development of American Science Fiction from the 1920s to the 1960s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 17–30, 23.

# SPACE RAYS

By John W. Campbell, Jr.

● Eight large men were crowded in a small emergency space ship. They were physically crowded; the air was bad for the little ship was built for three men, and the capacity of the air apparatus was hardly sufficient for them. And so the E.E. 4 was wobbling under her controls, with acceleration greatly reduced.

Lt. Roger Lane and his men felt exceedingly foolish. They had just surrendered without protest to a pirate, for the altogether-too-good ship *Robin Good* had suddenly appeared alongside the Lane Patrol ship L.P.C. 563. The air in the patrol cruiser glowed faintly blue, and the crew of seven men and two officers slumped down where they were. The latest Farrel Atomics, capable of generating fifteen million horsepower for the defense of the cruiser hadn't even started. Nine helpless men watched while *Robin Good* sent over a ship load of men in space suits. Each carried a small hand projector, and without entering the beam from the ship they turned their small projectors on the men in the cruiser.

Fully conscious, but helplessly paralyzed, Lt. Lane and his men were dumped unceremoniously into this tiny escape ship, and turned adrift, without radio or weapons. Lane was heading with all speed for Mars, some thirty million miles away. But one of the pirate crew had thoughtfully removed one of the miniature Farrel Atomic engines, with the result that their McKinley space-drive plates were not getting the power they should have—the lights were dim, and the already overloaded air apparatus was functioning badly.

Pilot Warren was in the

tiny cubby-hole in the nose of the ship, speeding with all the acceleration he could muster for Mars, although the officers of the ship were not so enthusiastic about getting there. It would have been bad enough to have been unable to find the pirate after being sent out for the purpose of overhauling his slower ex-space-yacht, but to have lost the speedy, powerfully armed space cruiser without a struggle! Commander Morrison would make some exceedingly pointed remarks, and it would be a long, long time before Lane got a new rating.

"I'll bet Barclay gets a work-out outa this," said Patrolman Reynolds, sourly.

Yes, decided Lane, Special Captain Donald Barclay would probably get some work. He hoped that Barclay would be picked up by the pirate too. Barclay had an annoying habit of doing what he was sent to do. Nobody ever said anything about it, least of all Barclay, but those reports on the bulletin board had become monotonous.

Lt. Lane permitted himself to grouse heartily, silently and hungrily for thirty hours while the escape ship limped into port. He decided to permit himself a meal, and a shower before appearing before Commander Morrison. It would be a television appearance, because Morrison was on Earth, but the Commander had long since learned the knack of being nasty over the television. He would be specially nasty this time. Lane took a long pull on some forbidden *tekey*—fermented Martian cactus juice—and felt ready to face the Commander.

Half an hour later he came out of the booth. It was after sunset, the air was chill, but Lane was sweating profusely. Morrison had just grinned and nodded. Lane wished he could grin like that. Then

## Reasonableness In Science Fiction

BY HUGO GERNSBACH

● When science fiction first came into being, it was taken most seriously by all authors. In practically all instances, authors laid the basis of their stories upon a solid scientific foundation. If an author made a statement as to certain future instrumentalities, he usually found it advisable to adhere closely to the possibilities of science as it was then known.

Many modern science fiction authors have no such scruples. They do not hesitate to throw scientific plausibility overboard, and embark upon a policy of what I might call scientific magic, in other words, science that is neither plausible, nor possible. Indeed, it overlaps the fairy tale, and often goes the fairy tale one better.

This is a deplorable state of affairs, and one that I certainly believe should be avoided by all science fiction authors, if science fiction is to survive.

In the present offering, Mr. John W. Campbell, Jr., has no doubt realized this state of affairs and has proceeded in an earnest way to burlesque some of our rash authors to whom plausibility and possible science mean nothing. He pulls, magician-like, all sorts of impossible rays from his silk hat, much as a magician extracts rabbits. There is no situation that cannot easily be overcome by some sort of a preposterous scientific—as he terms it—gimmick. Hurling fifteen million horsepower from one space flyer to another means nothing. If he has left out any colored rays, or any magical rays that could not immediately perform certain miraculous wonders, we are not aware of this shortcoming in his story.

In other words, the author proceeds to burlesque science fiction—not only science fiction, but he burlesques his own abilities, to show us what really can be accomplished when the bounds of reasonableness are overstepped.

Yet, all in all, he has spun a delightful tale which will, nevertheless, entertain you, and keep your interest throughout. We were tempted to rename the story "Ray! Ray!" but thought better of it.

I have gone to this length to preach a sermon in the hope that misguided authors will see the light, and hereafter stick to science as it is known, or as it may reasonably develop in the future.