

= Astonishing Stories =

Astonishing Stories was an American pulp science fiction magazine , published by Popular Publications between 1940 and 1943 . It was founded under Popular 's " Fictioneers " imprint , which paid lower rates than Popular 's other magazines . The magazine 's first editor was Frederik Pohl , who also edited a companion publication , Super Science Stories . After nine issues Pohl was replaced by Alden H. Norton , who subsequently rehired Pohl as an assistant . The budget for Astonishing was very low , which made it difficult to acquire good fiction , but through his membership in the Futurians , a group of young science fiction fans and aspiring writers , Pohl was able to find material to fill the early issues . The magazine was successful , and Pohl was able to increase his pay rates slightly within a year . He managed to obtain stories by writers who subsequently became very well known , such as Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein . After Pohl entered the army in early 1943 , wartime paper shortages led Popular to cease publication of Astonishing . The final issue was dated April of that year .

The magazine was never regarded as one of the leading titles of the genre , but despite the low budget it published some well @-@ received material . Science fiction critic Peter Nicholls comments that " its stories were surprisingly good considering how little was paid for them " , and this view has been echoed by other historians of the field .

= = Publication history = =

Although science fiction (sf) had been published before the 1920s , it did not begin to coalesce into a separately marketed genre until the appearance in 1926 of Amazing Stories , a pulp magazine published by Hugo Gernsback . By the end of the 1930s the field was booming , and several new sf magazines were launched in 1939 . Frederik Pohl , a young science fiction reader , was looking for a job that year . He visited Robert Erisman , who was the editor of two pulps , Marvel Science Stories and Dynamic Science Stories , to ask for a job as an assistant . Erisman turned him down , but suggested that Pohl contact Rogers Terrill at Popular Publications , a leading pulp publisher . Erisman had heard that Popular was starting a new line of magazines , and thought that they might be interested in adding a science fiction title . On October 25 , 1939 , Pohl visited Terrill and persuaded him to give the idea a try , and left Terrill 's office having been hired , at the age of nineteen , to edit two new magazines , on a salary of ten dollars per week . One was Super Science Stories ; the other was at one point intended to be titled Incredible Stories , but ultimately appeared as Astonishing Stories .

Popular was uncertain of the sales potential for the two new titles and decided to publish them under its Fictioneers imprint , which was used for lower @-@ paying magazines . Astonishing 's first issue was dated February 1940 ; it was bimonthly , alternating monthly with Super Science Stories . Pohl 's budget for an issue was \$ 405 : in Pohl 's memoirs he recalls Harry Steeger , one of the company owners , breaking down the budget for him : " Two hundred seventy @-@ five dollars for stories . A hundred dollars for black and white art . Thirty dollars for a cover . " Pohl could only offer half a cent per word for fiction , well below the rates offered by the leading magazines . At ten cents , the magazine was cheaper than any of the other sf magazines of the day , and it sold well , despite Pohl 's limited resources . It was certainly assisted by Popular 's wide and effective distribution network , and the publisher soon increased Pohl 's budget , to pay bonuses for popular stories . Pohl later commented that he was uncertain whether the additional funds really helped to bring in higher quality submissions , although at the time he assured Steeger it would improve the magazine . Some of the additional money went to long @-@ time writer Ray Cummings , who was sufficiently well known that the young Pohl felt unable to reject his stories , even though he disliked his work . Cummings came to see Pohl in person to submit his work , and refused to sell for less than one cent a word ; since the first visit came on a day when Pohl had some extra money available , Pohl was never able to bring himself to tell Cummings that he could not really afford to pay that rate . Pohl comments in his memoirs that " for months he would turn up regularly as clockwork and sell me a new story ; I hated them all , and bought them all . "

Pohl stretched his budget by reducing the space he needed to fill with fiction . For example , a long letter column took up several pages but required no payment ; similarly , running advertisements for Popular 's other magazines did not use up the fiction budget . Some authors sent inaccurate word counts with the stories they submitted , and Popular saved money by paying them on the basis of whichever word count was less ? the author 's or one done by Popular 's staff . The result was a saving of forty to fifty dollars per issue . More money was saved by reusing snipped elements of black and white illustrations to fill space , as multiple uses of the same artwork did not require additional payments to the artist .

Towards the end of 1940 Popular doubled Pohl 's salary to twenty dollars per week . In June 1941 Pohl went to see Steeger to ask for a further raise ; he was planning to resign and work as a free lance writer if he did not get more pay . Steeger , in Pohl 's words , " had complaints of his own " , and was not receptive ; by the end of the meeting Pohl had lost his job as editor . Pohl later commented " I have never been sure whether I quit or got fired . " Instead of replacing Pohl , Popular assigned editor @-@ in @-@ chief Alden H. Norton to add the magazines to his responsibilities . The arrangement lasted for seven months , after which Norton asked Pohl to return as his assistant . Norton offered Pohl a higher salary as an associate editor than he had received as the editor , and Pohl quickly accepted .

Pohl was not eligible to be drafted for military service as he was married , but by the end of 1942 his marriage was over and he decided to enlist . As voluntary enlistment was suspended he was unable to immediately join the army , but eventually was inducted on April 1 , 1943 . Paper was difficult to obtain because of the war , and Popular decided to close the magazine down ; the final issue , dated April 1943 , was assembled with the assistance of Ejler Jakobsson .

= = Contents and reception = =

Because of the low rates of pay , the stories submitted to Astonishing in its first year had generally already been rejected elsewhere . However , Pohl was a member of the Futurians , a group of science fiction fans that included Isaac Asimov , C.M. Kornbluth , Richard Wilson and Donald Wollheim ; the Futurians were eager to become professional writers and were glad to submit stories to Pohl . Asimov recalls in his memoirs that on October 27 , 1939 , two days after Pohl was hired to edit the magazines , Pohl turned up at Asimov 's apartment and asked to buy " Half @-@ Breed " , a story Pohl had been trying to sell on Asimov 's behalf since June of that year . Pohl needed stories quickly for the first issue of Astonishing (though the name had not yet been selected) , and as the story had been rejected by Amazing Stories and Astounding Stories , Asimov was willing to sell it for half a cent per word . A couple of weeks later Pohl also acquired " The Callistan Menace " from Asimov . The other Futurians were prolific as well ; in Pohl 's first year as an editor he bought a total of fifteen stories from them for the two magazines . Damon Knight , another of the Futurians , recalled in his memoirs that Pohl once asked the group for a story to fill out an issue , with \$ 35 available to pay for it . Kornbluth and Wilson wrote a first draft , alternating turns at the typewriter ; the result was edited by Harry Dockweiler , another Futurian , and then again by Pohl before it appeared in the April 1940 Astonishing under the title " Stepsons of Mars " , with a byline of " Ivar Towers " . Pohl contributed material himself , using the pseudonyms " James McCreigh " and " Dirk Wylie " (the latter pseudonym was also used by Dockweiler) ; he used his own stories when he needed to fill an issue , and to supplement his salary of ten dollars a week . Particularly after his marriage to Doris Baumgardt in August 1940 , Pohl realized that his salary covered their apartment rent with almost no money left over , and began to augment his income by selling to himself as well as to other magazines . When Pohl lost his job as editor in late 1941 , he had bought from himself (and paid for) a couple of stories that he had not actually written , and hence had to write them very quickly and turn them in .

The first issue of Astonishing Stories was dated February 1940 ; the lead story was " Chameleon Planet " by John Russell Fearn , and it also included Asimov 's " Half @-@ Breed " and fiction by Henry Kuttner and Manly Wade Wellman . Despite the difficulties caused by the low budget , Pohl was able to pay his authors promptly , unlike some of his competitors , and he thus began to receive

stories of higher quality . Sf historian Mike Ashley identifies " The Last Drop " , by L. Ron Hubbard and L. Sprague de Camp as one of the better stories in *Astonishing* ; historians Milton Wolf and Raymond H. Thompson consider the story to be unimpressive , and point instead to Alfred Bester 's " The Pet Nebula " in the February 1941 issue . Kuttner 's " Soldiers of Space " and Robert Bloch 's " It Happened Tomorrow " , both of which appeared in the February 1943 issue , are also praised . Pohl was also able to print the first three of Ross Rocklynne 's well @-@ liked " Into the Darkness " series . Other well @-@ known writers who appeared in the pages of *Astonishing* include Leigh Brackett , Clifford Simak , and E. E. Smith .

Pohl told his readers in *Astonishing* 's first issue that he would listen to their feedback and respond to their requests . In addition to paying attention to their comments on stories , he included departments in the magazine that encouraged interaction with the fans , such as a letter column , a section that listed fanzines with names and addresses , and a review column . The reviews , primarily by Wollheim , but also including contributions from Richard Wilson , Forrest Ackerman , and John Michel , were of a higher standard than elsewhere in the field , and historian Paul Carter regards *Astonishing* and *Super Science Stories* as the place where " book reviewing for the first time began to merit the term ' literary criticism ' " , and adds that " it was in those magazines that the custom began of paying attention to science fiction on the stage and screen also . "

The artwork in *Astonishing* was initially quite poor , which was unsurprising given the minuscule budget Pohl had to work with . Much of the art was supplied by fans and artists early in their careers , including Doris Baumgardt (under the pseudonym Leslie Perri) and Dorothy Les Tina , who later became Pohl 's first and second wives , respectively . One fan artist who stood out from the rest was Hannes Bok , who went on to become a well @-@ respected artist with a very distinctive style . Ray Bradbury commented positively on Bok 's work in a letter in the August 1940 *Astonishing* , and Bok subsequently illustrated a story of Bradbury 's in the April 1943 issue . Aleck Portegal , Popular 's art director , had initially told Pohl that the regular artists would be unwilling to work for the low rates he could offer , but in the event some of them were willing to take less pay to get the extra work . More professional art began to appear in the magazine , including work by Virgil Finlay , Alexander Leydenfrost , Leo Morey , Hans Wessolowski , and Frank R. Paul , all well known in the field . Some art appeared under the name Stephen Lawrence , which was known to be a pseudonym of Lawrence Stevens , but it was subsequently discovered that some of this work was actually by Lawrence Stevens ' son Peter .

Astonishing Stories is not remembered as being among the best science fiction magazines : both critic Peter Nicholls and sf writer Jack Williamson have described it as a " training ground " for writers who would go on to do their best work elsewhere . However , Nicholls adds that " its stories were surprisingly good considering how little was paid for them " , and Wolf and Thompson agree , claiming that " there was much that was memorable in *Astonishing* , both by way of immediate appeal and of more lasting quality " . Pohl himself , who later became a very successful magazine editor , felt he made many mistakes . He quotes as an example his serialization of Malcolm Jameson 's story " Quicksands of Youthwardness " in three parts ; the story was only 27 @,@ 000 words long , and readers complained (justifiably , in Pohl 's view) that serializing it in a bimonthly magazine meant they had to wait for five months to read the whole story , in relatively small 9 @,@ 000 @-@ word pieces . Overall , Pohl assessed his performance by saying " I wasn 't really a very good editor " ; adding " With what I know now I could have made those magazines sing , but as it was they just lay there " .

= = Bibliographic details = =

Astonishing Stories was edited by Frederik Pohl from February 1940 through September 1941 (nine issues) , and then by Alden H. Norton from November 1941 through April 1943 (seven issues) . It was published by Fictioneers , Inc . , a subsidiary of Popular Publications . It was pulp @-@ sized throughout its run , with 112 pages and a cover price of 10 cents . The volume numbering was regular , with four volumes of four numbers . It was bimonthly for the first eight issues ; the next four were on an irregular schedule , and the last four , from October 1942 , were bimonthly again .

A Canadian edition appeared for three issues , dated January , March , and May 1942 , published by Popular Publications ' Toronto branch . It was priced at 10 cents and ran to 96 pages ; it was also in pulp format , but fractionally larger than the US version . The first and third issues reprinted the November 1941 and March 1942 US issues of Astonishing , but the March 1942 Canadian issue was a reprint of the November 1941 Super Science Stories , omitting one story . The covers in all three issues were replaced by new paintings , and the interior artwork was also different . The artists responsible for the new illustrations and covers were not credited . In August 1942 a Canadian edition of Super Science Stories began which also alternated between reprinting the US editions of Astonishing and Super Science Stories ; this could be regarded as a continuation of the Canadian edition of Astonishing , although the volume numbering was restarted at volume 1 number 1 when the name was changed .