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## Review of *John Brunner* by Jad Smith

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Smith, Jad. *John Brunner*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013. 184 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-252-0788-1. \$21.95.

The new “Modern Masters of Science Fiction” series from University of Illinois Press promises a category of monograph that up to now has not been common in sf criticism: book-length retrospectives devoted to the careers of major authors in the genre. The first of these to arrive is Jad Smith’s fascinating new book on John Brunner, and if Smith’s approach in *John Brunner* represents the quality of the series as a whole, “Modern Masters of Science Fiction” will undoubtedly prove an important resource for scholars of sf and fantasy in the coming decades. Smith’s exhaustively researched book puts Brunner’s many novels into conversation with his public lectures, interviews, private letters, and political activism, as well as with longstanding fan debates about the essence of sf. The result casts new—and, at times, quite tragic—light on the complicated legacy of this important figure in the history of the genre, an author whose memory has too frequently been reduced to critics’ celebration of just a handful of his texts.

Brunner is certainly best remembered today for the dire jeremiads offered in *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) and *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), stark novels of ecological disaster that have only gained urgency since their publication over forty years ago. Fewer readers, perhaps, have sampled one or another of *The Whole Man* (1964), *The Squares of the City* (1965), *The Shockwave Rider* (1975), or *The Crucible of Time* (1983) as well. It thus falls to Smith to place these well-known books into the larger context of Brunner’s absurdly prolific career of seventy novels and dozens of short stories for the benefit of a readership that will, in the main, be unfamiliar with most of them. But Smith somehow pulls this off: the reader of *John Brunner* receives a detailed and critically sharp investigation into the themes and reception of interesting and important works across Brunner’s oeuvre, but with admirable attention paid as well to the minor novels and stories.

Just as important as its totalizing ambition is the book’s balanced tone. Smith’s frank critical approach pulls no punches; while *John Brunner* is certainly a celebration of Brunner’s work and artistic legacy, it is also an unflinchingly honest one, striving for an objective assessment of Brunner’s works. Smith’s treatment of Brunner’s career comprises three chapters: “Raising the Noise Level, 1951-66,” which traces Brunner’s early work; “Fierce Speculation, 1967-75,” which charts his rise to prominence; and “At the Wrong End of Time, 1976-95,” which details his unhappy fall from grace. An Introduction and various end materials, including a 1975 interview and a “Jon Brunner Bibliography,” speak to Brunner’s continuing relevance. Across all three periods, Smith finds Brunner operating at the interstices of important divides in sf and sf fandom: high and pop culture, literary ambition and mainstream appeal,

New Wave and Old Guard, America and Britain, optimism and pessimism. Smith’s Brunner is always *both/and*; he can’t be pinned down or reduced to easy descriptors. The explosive collision of all these different categories, Smith argues, resulted not only in the wide scope of Brunner’s tremendously varied fictions but also in his highly contentious public persona, a facet of his career that may come as a surprise to those too young to have witnessed it firsthand and who remember Brunner only for his universally acclaimed classics. Even at the moment of Brunner’s death in 1995, one discovers not forlorn tributes to a elder statesman of the genre but “sometimes hesitant or oddly polemical memorials that provoke questions as to why those who wrote them agreed to do so” (15); as late as 2007, Smith recounts, a late remembrance essay from John Hall in the fanzine *Prolapse* “triggered a debate that transformed the letters column into a spectacular, issues-long train wreck from which few readers could look away” (15).

Smith’s study ably demonstrates the possibilities of biographically infused criticism of an author’s entire career for sf scholars whose research practices—often because of publishing constraints—have tended to focus rather narrowly on small sets of texts. Here, Smith has enough room to trace the full contours of Brunner’s long career—contours that include not only Brunner’s first published short story, “The Watchers” (1951), whose optimistic anticipation of manned space flight marks the seventeen-year-old Brunner as “a devoted idealist,” but also his unsuccessful first novel, *The Galactic Storm* (also 1951), whose ambiguous ending promising only more brutal interplanetary war finds the young Brunner already a committed pessimist (18). In Smith’s telling, this tension accounts both for Brunner’s immense creativity and his career-long difficulty in finding an audience. Because he never wrote the same book twice—because he was constantly experimenting with style, form, and theme—Brunner was never able to brand himself like more financially successful sf writers of his generation. The result was a career dominated by booms and busts, and by periodic, significant financial crises.

Brunner, Smith suggests, simply never found the proper rhythm to keep his workflow stable and reliable. Instead, fighting on behalf of his literary aspirations, Brunner “wrote furiously” in a pulp register “until he built up his savings and then worked on a more ambitious project until the money ran dry” (43-44). From 1958 to 1963 alone Brunner sold a staggering twenty novels to Ace; he was so prolific at times that he had to release novels under pseudonyms so as not to compete with himself. One result of Smith’s analysis is thus the somewhat unexpected diminution of Brunner’s prodigious talents; taken in the context of his entire career, rather than of simply his most successful novels, Brunner looks like rather less like a singular genius and more like a struggling writer striving—and only occasionally succeeding—to balance his dreams of high art with the demands of his wallet.

Still, despite this critical distinction, Smith finds in even the pulpiest of Brunner's texts something worth recuperating, despite the speed and lack of care with which they were sometimes written. Taking aim at James Blish's negative declaration that "very little promise was visible" at the start of Brunner's career, Smith argues instead that the "distinct craft vision" and brilliant ideas of the early work in fact set the stage for the true masterworks that followed (50). Consistently, Smith finds, events in Brunner's early novels simply "do not play out as an SF reader of the day might have expected" (24); the delightfully subversive quality that dominated Brunner's work in the famous middle period of his career, and that rightly marks him as one of the genre's most important figures, was evident from the outset.

Just as startling for the contemporary admirer of Brunner as the revelation of his huge archive of minor and failed works is the extent to which Smith finds this "Modern Master of Science Fiction" went unrecognized as such in his day. In his research into book reviews and contemporaneous criticism, Smith finds Brunner's work frequently "became the focus of crosstalk about the New Wave rather than being taken on its own terms" (58). Widely seen as a figurehead of the New Wave despite not really being of it, Brunner's work was championed neither by the proponents of the New Wave nor by its detractors, and thus languished. In the latter part of the 1970s, Brunner's reputation further suffered from a "growing backlash against extrapolative SF" that "sometimes appeared to target Brunner's work specifically" (92). In Brunner's case, this backlash was intensified by a renewed divide between British SF, which looked down upon Brunner's often market-driven writings, and American sf, which still viewed his work as belonging to the other side of the Atlantic. This divide was accompanied by hostility from other writers in the field that seems at times to have had the character of a hateful and irrational personal vendetta. These conflicts resulted in a long, sad decline, and Smith devotes a full third of his book to the unhappiness of Brunner's post-1970s, arguably post-sf career and his frustrated, pervasive sense of his own artistic failure. At a convention near the end of his career, when asked about his fascination with parallel worlds, Brunner replied: "I'm sure there is a version of me in uncountable other universes where I'm happy and successful and all the things I'm not in this one" (116). Friends describe "slurry, late-night phone calls"; a health crisis leads to a massive slowdown in productivity and coherence, and even to "psychotic episodes" (116). A much longed-for comeback never materializes, and may have contributed to Brunner's death: in an effort to regain the lost focus of his youth Brunner stopped taking his blood pressure medication, only to die of a massive stroke at a WorldCon in Glasgow. Even at the end, Brunner found himself situated uncomfortably between obscurity and acclaim; a eulogy at that same WorldCon resulted in a raucous standing

ovation that lasted four minutes, while a call for papers on Brunner's work later that year yielded only a single article.

Smith concludes by suggesting that this fall into critical irrelevance is something of an ongoing tragedy, and persuasively calls for renewed critical interest in Brunner and a revival of scholarship in the full corpus of his work—not out of charity or some misplaced spirit of hagiography, but in complex, multi-faceted consideration of the whole man. It seems hard to imagine how *John Brunner* could fail to spark that conversation.

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