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Review: Reinventing the Wheel

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Reinventing the Wheel. Steven Hrotic. *Religion in Science Fiction: The Evolution of an Idea and the Extinction of a Genre*. SCIENTIFIC STUDIES OF RELIGION: INQUIRY AND EXPLANATION. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. ix + 225 pp. \$112 hc.

As critical work on science fiction becomes more mainstream across multiple disciplines, we see more and more scholarship that does not take the disciplinary assumptions and well-worn thematic concerns of “science fiction studies” as its starting point. As a development this is, paradoxically, both

very welcome and very frustrating: welcome in the sense that such new approaches have the potential to breathe new life into our sub-discipline, but frustrating in the sense that such work often feels like an unnecessary attempt to reinvent the wheel—or, perhaps worse yet, that it treats itself as a landmark expedition into virgin territory without taking any note whatsoever of the extensive work that has already been done in the field. Such as it is, for better and for worse, with *Religion in Science Fiction*, a book whose focus on the genre's uses and abuses of religious thinking both benefits from and is significantly harmed by its independence from decades of sf scholarship. Neither the words "Suvin" nor "Jameson" appear anywhere in the text; "Le Guin" is mentioned only a few times in passing, once in a reference to her anthropologist father; "Atwood" appears only in the context of her famous frustration with the science-fiction label; nor is there any reference to Samuel R. Delany, Stanislaw Lem, James Tiptree, Jr./Alice Sheldon, Kim Stanley Robinson, Nalo Hopkinson, or any of a host of other writers who have rightly become inevitable references within our field.

This deeply odd principle of selection extends even to authors who would seem absolutely unavoidable touchstones for a book on this subject; Philip K. Dick, for instance, appears only in a footnote about the comparatively *much* more obscure Roger Zelazny—and even then the reference is to the book he co-wrote with Zelazny, *Deus Irae* (1976), rather than to *VALIS* (1978), or to Dick's famously bizarre "Exegesis" of his own myriad mystical experiences. Isaac Asimov, president of the American Humanist Association and in some sense the poster child for the often tense relationship between science fiction and religion, barely appears in the text, primarily in the context of a close reading of the comparatively obscure story "Trends" (1939)—and his successor-president at the AHA, Kurt Vonnegut, again does not appear anywhere in the text at all.

This striking independence of Hrotic's work from mainline "science fiction studies" sometimes produces interesting quirks in the text, like his creation of the opposing categories "gSF" (for genre SF, by which he means the literary, "niche" sf of specialist fandom) and "mSF" (mainstream SF, your blockbuster hits)—essentially a replication of Suvin's decision to throw out "95%" of what is published as sf, a posture long since been reconsidered by the field—or his prolonged development of the term "metanarrative" to identify, in the end, exactly what Damien Broderick had already named the "megatext" twenty years ago. In other cases the lapses seem much more severe: it seems extremely hard to credit Hrotic's claim that there has been no significant "evolution" of science fiction's use of religion since *The Sparrow* (1996) with Robinson, Hopkinson, Atwood, and so many others still hard at work, much less to admit his final conclusion that the category he calls gSF—the very category on which *SFS* still publishes three times a year—has thus become "extinct" altogether!

The deep disjuncture between the form of *Religion in Science Fiction* and the subfield of scholarship to which it would seem most naturally at home is all the more regrettable insofar as much of the book in isolation is quite

admirable, shining light on an area of sf that has perhaps become so naturalized to us that we do not talk much about it. With notable exceptions such as Clifford D. Simak—another author I find surprisingly underdiscussed in this treatment—science fiction of the so-called “Golden Age” *really did* generally predict the near-term extinction of religion, and really has proven to be spectacularly wrong on that account. And more recent science fiction really has had to come to terms with the persistence (and to a large extent radical resurgence) of religion, as it has to varying degrees in some of the more recent work Hrotic does take up late in the book (such as the aforementioned *The Sparrow*, or Neal Stephenson’s *Anathem* (2008), or Octavia E. Butler’s PARABLE novels [1993, 1998]).

Hrotic’s tracing of the contours of gSF over the decades also resurrects some unjustly neglected texts from authors who have tended to fall out of the familiar discursive habits of “science fiction studies,” such as Fred Barclay, Arthur Jones, and Leigh Brackett—authors we might very well take up and begin to read again, or perhaps read for the first time. Even Hrotic’s disciplinary standpoint as a cognitive anthropologist, as opposed to a literary critic or philosopher, marks his intervention as usefully distinct from our field’s usual patterns of inquiry; the approach is quite different from what we usually do, and quite usefully so, and the book surely worth reading. But I suspect many of Hrotic’s readers who originate within our academic sub-specialty will find themselves reading *Religion in Science Fiction* with the same sour mix of enjoyment and frustration I experienced, with the same bemused grimace on their faces, and with the same half-uttered “Okay, but what about...?” on the tips of their tongues.—**Gerry Canavan, Marquette University**