

Along comes ASTOUNDING (I'm going to forego the rest of the title) by Alec Nevala-Lee. I first heard about the book at Worldcon 76 in San Jose. There was a panel about the book that I attended (hey, I was still curious about Campbell and ASTOUNDING), and later I attended a kaffee klatsch with Lee where I learned more about the book. I was eager to read it.

ASTOUNDING takes its title from the magazine, of course, but the real story here is that of the people that share the title of the book. ASTOUNDING is a fascinating book about the early days of the genre, going back to the 1930s and up through not only the death of Campbell, but the post-Campbell days of Asimov, Heinlein, and Hubbard. It's a terrific look at how the careers of those four people were intertwined for so long, how they influenced each other, and how Campbell influenced them. It's also an in depth look into the personalities of these four, and it does not pull punches. But more about that in a bit.

We hear a lot today about how the field is so much bigger than it used to be, and how we can't read everything that is published nor can anyone know everyone in the field. I believe it was at Loncon in 2014 where Robert Silverberg commented in a panel that he looked around and recognized no one. Yes, that is in part because he's outlived just about everyone he came into the field with, but it's also true that there are so many fans and professionals that one just can't know everyone. This is definitely not true back in the days of Astounding magazine. I was amazed every time Lee tells about a party where certain authors were in attendance--that was not at a convention. The lives of these four people, as well as many others, were intertwined not only within the field and the magazine, but outside it as well, from World War II to the birth of Scientology (also more about that later).

Campbell's influence on these four, and the field in general, is also an interesting topic. It is known that he would come up with ideas and give them to writers to put the story together. I had no idea that he suggested the idea that would become the Three Laws of Robotics, or that he was influential in the creation and development of the Foundation universe.

Lee also is not afraid to delve into the dark side of these four men who were such a big part of the field for so long (although I suppose Hubbard wasn't as influential in the field as he was with other things). We learn about Campbell's racism and Asimov's lecherous behavior, which today would not be tolerated anywhere, let alone at a science fiction convention. I also came away from reading the book pretty much disgusted with L. Ron Hubbard, with his treatment of people (including his wives), his lying, and well, just about everything else. Lee spends quite a bit of time covering the creation of dianetics and the Church of Scientology, but that time spent is necessary to show how Campbell lost his influence on the field in part because of his relationship with Hubbard. It was also surprising to me how much these writers slept around, in part with each other's wives and girlfriends (Hubbard being the leader in this category, it seems). This is certainly not the picture I had of the field in the 1940s and 1950s, and I think the boy of ten years old that I was when I started reading SF would have been devastated to learn about all this stuff, had I understood it (at least I was older when I read Jim Bouton's BALL FOUR, which tore apart every illusion I ever had about my hero baseball players).

Lee put an astonishing amount of time into researching this book. There are some 82 pages of footnotes, and a roughly nine-page bibliography that Lee cites during the book. I will confess that I did not look at a majority of the footnotes, but occasionally I would turn to the back of the book if a particular statement fascinated me.

I firmly believe that ASTOUNDING is a must read for all fans of science fiction who are interested in finding out about an important part of the history of the field. It's a fascinating read, and I expect that it will be on the Hugo ballot in 2019. [-jak]

ISLE OF DOGS (letter of comment by Daniel M. Kimmel):

In response to [Mark's review of ISLE OF DOGS](#) in the 11/16/18 issue of the MT VOID, Dan Kimmel writes:

I have detested all of Wes Anderson's films, and thought FANTASTIC MR. FOX was particularly inept. The man directs like a kid with an Etch-a-Sketch. I think he has gotten some career worst performances out of casts that have done fine work elsewhere.

That said, I was utterly surprised by "Isle of Dogs." I'll be curious to see if this is an aberration or his career is--finally--taking a turn for the better. [-dmk]

Mark responds:

I have thought to this point that Anderson's films have been spotty. I did like THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL and one or two others, but for most of his films I would agree with you. [-mrl]

Penguin Books (letters of comment by Paul Dormer, Dorothy J. Heydt, and Kevin R):

In response to [Gary Labowitz's comments on THE PENGUIN ESSAYS OF GEORGE ORWELL](#) in the 11/16/18 issue of the MT VOID, Paul Dormer writes:

[Gary Labowitz writes.] "On the Penguins: What comes to my mind is the book report given by a small third grade girl: 'This book told me more than I wanted to know about Penguins.' Short, sweet, and absolutely correct."

I heard that attributed to Robert Benchley. [-pd]

Dorothy Heydt responds:

I seem to recall Art Linkletter. Of course, he could've been quoting Benchley. [-djh]

Kevin R asks:

"Kids say the darndest things"? [-kr]

The Metric System (letter of comment by Dale Spiers):

In response to [comments on the metric system](#) in the 11/09/18 issue of the MT VOID, Dale Spiers writes:

Canada converted in 1971 when I was a teenager. My father complained about learning km/hr speed limits, to which I replied that he never paid attention to the old limits, so why was he fussing about the new ones? At that time, stores sold sets of stickers that could be placed on speedometer gauges to convert older cars.

Temperatures are much easier to understand in metric. Water freezes at zero and boils at 100 degrees Celsius. Room temperature is 20 degrees and a hot sunny day is 30 degrees. 35 degrees is a heat wave in Canada. At -20 degrees, we plug in our car engine block heaters.

30 cm is the length of the average adult foot and 1 metre is a long pace. If you need to be more precise, you'll be using a tape measure anyway.

By definition, 1 litre of water weighs 1 kilogramme, so a litre carton of milk is a kilo.

Metre is the measurement and meter is a measuring device. My water meter measures cubic metres. On average I use 4 cubic metres per month, which is low because I never water my lawn. [-ds]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

The third author in the Great Courses course on American classics was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Since I have always found Emerson impenetrable, I turned to THE ANNOTATED EMERSON by Ralph Waldo Emerson (annotations by David Mikics) (ISBN 978-0-674-04926-9). (Other factors that made me choose this were the discoveries that my Shambala edition of several of Emerson's essays heavily abridged even those, my Signet edition was much underlined, and my Dover Thrift edition was missing several of the ones being discussed.)

In "Nature", Emerson writes, "If the stars should appear in night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown!" But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile." The first sentence is famously the inspiration for Isaac Asimov's classic story "Nightfall", in which a world with six suns sees the stars only once in 2,000 years. (The astrophysics of this are a little dodgy. Even with a previously invisible moon eclipsing the one sun in Lagash's sky, one would think the other five suns would be lighting the other hemisphere.)

But the second sentence bears more attention today, because for the vast majority of people "these envoys of beauty" *are* mostly invisible, drowned out by the lights of the cities and the suburbs. I can recall, for example, seeing the Milky Way only twice, once in a tent camp in the Australian Outback after the generator for the lights had been switched off, and once in Wupatki National Monument in Arizona when we pulled a ways off the highway about midnight one night. Even ordinary stars are rarely visible in New Jersey because of cloud cover or other atmospheric conditions. The problem today is not that of Emerson's time, that people don't pay attention to the stars because they are so common, but his hypothetical problem of the stars appearing so rarely.

(Of course, urban/suburban people today are at least familiar with the stars, because movies often show the night sky. Then again, they often get it wrong; Neil deGrasse Tyson famously pointed out that TITANIC had the sky completely wrong.)

Emerson's best-known essay, however, is "Self-Reliance". Its most famous line--"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds"--is often misinterpreted, and is not as paradoxical as it sounds. What Emerson was talking about was the changing of one's mind (rather than obstinately sticking to whatever opinion one had first expressed), not to the insistence on two mutually contradictory beliefs simultaneously.

However, while self-reliance sounds good, Emerson takes it to extremes that I cannot support. For example, he writes:

"If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.'"

And:

"Then, again, do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong."

Basically, Emerson seems to be supporting a very limited charity, aimed only at "his sort of people." And though he explicitly excludes such things as "the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies," it is not that far a step to also exclude charity to people who are different from in some way, whether by nationality, economic class, color, religion, or whatever.

(Need I say that this sounds distressingly like some people's attitudes today?)

Ultimately Emerson is proposing that people lead the sort of life they believe in, not what other people dictate. The most famous person to advocate this was Aleister Crowley, whose fundamental tenet was, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." I may be wrong, but I doubt most of those who elevate Emerson's philosophy would do the same with Crowley's.

See also "The Foul Reign of 'Self-Reliance'" by Benjamin Anastas [The Sunday Magazine, December 4, 2011]. Anastas's premise seems encapsulated in these words:

"This is the essay's greatest virtue for its original audience: it ordained them with an authority to speak what had been reserved for only the powerful, and bowed to no greater human laws, social customs or dictates from the pulpit. ... There is a downside to ordaining the self with divine authority, though. We humans are fickle creatures, and natures -- however sacred -- can mislead us. ... The larger problem with the essay, and its more lasting legacy as a cornerstone of the American identity, has been Emerson's tacit endorsement of a radically self-centered worldview." [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

If people would dare to speak to one another
unreservedly, there would be a good deal less sorrow
in the world a hundred years hence.
--Samuel Butler