



PALGRAVE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY: A NEW CANON

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Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*: A Critical Companion

D. Harlan Wilson

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Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon

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Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon provides short introductions to key works of science fiction and fantasy (SFF) speaking to why a text, trilogy, or series matters to SFF as a genre as well as to readers, scholars, and fans. These books aim to serve as a go-to resource for thinking on specific texts and series and for prompting further inquiry. Each book will be less than 30,000 words and structured similarly to facilitate classroom use. Focusing specifically on literature, the books will also address film and TV adaptations of the texts as relevant. Beginning with background and context on the text's place in the field, the author and how this text fits in their oeuvre, and the socio-historical reception of the text, the books will provide an understanding of how students, readers, and scholars can think dynamically about a given text. Each book will describe the major approaches to the text and how the critical engagements with the text have shaped SFF. Engaging with classic works as well as recent books that have been taken up by SFF fans and scholars, the goal of the series is not to be the arbiters of canonical importance, but to show how sustained critical analysis of these texts might bring about a new canon. In addition to their suitability for undergraduate courses, the books will appeal to fans of SFF.

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Stars My Destination*

A Critical Companion

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

The infinite worlds of science fiction and fantasy (SFF) dance along the borders between the possible and the impossible, the familiar and the strange, the immediate and the ever-approaching horizon. Speculative fiction in all its forms has been considered a genre, a medium, a mode, a practice, a compilation of themes, or a web of assertions. With this in mind, *Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon* offers an expansive and dynamic approach to thinking SFF, destabilizing notions of *the* canon, so long associated with privilege, power, class, and hegemony. We take canon not as a singular and unchallenged authority but as shifting and thoughtful consensus among an always-growing collective of readers, scholars, and writers.

The cultural practice and production of speculation has encompassed novels, stories, plays, games, music, comics, and other media, with a lineage dating back at least to the nineteenth-century precursors through to the most recent publications. Existing scholarship has considered some of these media extensively, often with particular focus on film and TV. It is for this reason that *Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy* will forgo the cinematic and televisual, aspiring to direct critical attention at the other nodes of SFF expression.

Each volume in the series introduces, contextualizes, and analyzes a single work of SFF that ranges from the acknowledged “classic” to the should-be-classic, and asks two basic, but provocative, questions: *Why does this text matter to SFF?* and *Why does (or should) this text matter to SFF*

readers, scholars, and fans? Thus, the series joins into conversation both with scholars and students of the field to examine the parameters of SFF studies and the changing valences of fundamental categories like genre, medium, and canon. By emphasizing the critical approaches and major questions each text inspires, the series aims to offer “go-to” books for thinking about, writing on, and teaching major works of SFF.

Ann Arbor, USA
Haifa, Israel

Sean Guynes
Keren Omry

PRAISE FOR ALFRED BESTER'S *THE STARS MY DESTINATION*

“This monograph demonstrates several reasons why Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination* remains one of the most fascinating SF novels ever, even 65 years after it was first published. There are, for example, the book’s ‘proto-cyberpunk style’ and ‘pyrotechnic’ plot, its strange anti-hero, Gully Foyle, its connections to other works, including *Frankenstein*, its representation of a twenty-fifth century society that often seems all too familiar, and its essential plot element, the transformation of Bester’s ‘stereotype Common Man’ into a Promethean figure at the novel’s end. For anyone interested in Alfred Bester, Wilson’s book is essential reading.”

—Patrick A. McCarthy, Professor of English, University of Miami, USA,
and author of *The Riddles of Finnegans Wake* (1980)

“Alfred Bester was essentially writing parody during his great period, parody of a field he loved for the very contempt it was able to instill and extract from him. It was the junkiness of science fiction which enthralled him—his stories and his two great novels bestow the armament of junk upon narrative. In this dazzling study of *The Stars My Destination*, D. Harlan Wilson shows us how Bester took the eviscerated, glowing heart of the artichoke and pronounced it as torn from heaven.”

—Barry N. Malzberg, author of *Beyond Apollo* (1972) and
Galaxies (1975)

“D. Harlan Wilson’s study is the perfect example of how rigorous literary scholarship can shine a light on a forgotten text and really put it front and center for a contemporary readership. Connecting Alfred Bester’s experimental novel of the 1950s through intertextual lines, Wilson uncovers the rhizome that is the SF megatext: from monomyth to mad scientist, from *Frankenstein* to *Neuromancer*, from Joyce’s modernism to Wells’ scientific romances, from proto-SF to cyberpunk. And the best thing is that Wilson remains true to his subject of study, mirroring Bester’s ‘pyrotechnic’ style in his scholarship. This monograph is a rush of densely packed readings and analyses, giving the story of Gully Foyle its due in the history of science fiction, and revealing its contemporary importance.”

—Lars Schmeink, Liverhulme Visiting Professor, University of Leeds, UK, and author of *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society, and Science Fiction* (2016)

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
	<i>Hammers of Demolition and Redemption</i>	1
	<i>Renaissance Man: Biography</i>	4
	<i>Critique of Science Fiction</i>	7
	<i>The Classic Pyrotechnic Novel</i>	10
	<i>Context, Composition, and Reception</i>	13
	<i>Thesis and Outline</i>	17
	<i>A Note on Scholarship</i>	17
	<i>References</i>	18
2	Synopsis	21
	<i>Part I</i>	21
	<i>Part II</i>	25
3	Cyberpunk Previsions and Literary Influences	31
	<i>Bester's Wastebasket</i>	32
	<i>Name Games and Adaptations</i>	35
	<i>Intertextuality in Excess</i>	42
	<i>The Sleepers Must Awaken</i>	48
	<i>References</i>	50
4	The Frankenstein Riff	53
	<i>Call for Submissions</i>	54
	<i>An Age of Freaks, Monsters, and Grotesques</i>	54
	<i>Gothic Science Fiction</i>	56

<i>The Author and the Mad Scientist</i>	58
<i>Explorations in Experimentalism</i>	61
<i>“None Escape”: Star’s Palimpsest</i>	67
<i>The Monomyth</i>	70
<i>References</i>	72
5 Architectures of Psyche, Power, and Patriarchy	75
<i>Overview</i>	76
<i>The Science Fiction of Sigmund Freud</i>	76
<i>From the Abyss to the Mountaintop: Class Relations</i>	81
<i>Foyle’s Female Foils: Gender Relations</i>	86
<i>Toward a Vanishing Point: Race Relations</i>	94
<i>References</i>	99
6 Speaking in Gutter Tongues	101
<i>The Anti-Christ</i>	101
<i>“Gonna Sermonize, Me”</i>	103
<i>Skoptsys and Cellar Christians</i>	108
<i>Last Rites</i>	114
<i>References</i>	115
7 Coda	117
<i>References</i>	119
Index	121

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D. Harlan Wilson is an American novelist, playwright, editor, critic, and college professor. He is the author of over 30 book-length works of fiction and nonfiction, many of which have won literary awards, and hundreds of his essays, reviews, and stories have appeared in journals, magazines, and anthologies across the world in multiple languages. Website: dharlanwilson.com. Twitter & Instagram: @DHarlanWilson.



Introduction

Abstract Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* is a proto-cyberpunk novel that shares common ground with Marshall McLuhan's media theories and represents an increasingly technological society. Bester's desire to become a Renaissance Man in his youth informed his authorship and led to a deep resentment for other SF authors, who he blamed for the genre's inability to transcend its pulp roots and boyish inclinations. Propelled by its Hugo Award-winning predecessor *The Demolished Man*, *Stars* charted new literary terrain and inspired SF's most innovative movements: the New Wave (1960s and 1970s) and cyberpunk (1980s). The latter movement was the genre's death knell as the futuristic technologies depicted in its narratives bled into the real world and rendered SF a twentieth-century artifact.

Keywords Bester · Biography · Sci-fi · Media · Technology

HAMMERS OF DEMOLITION AND REDEMPTION

Midway through the twentieth century, Marshall McLuhan published his first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), a study of the American culture industry that explores the effects of popular

media. Many reviewers were confused by McLuhan's rhizomatic method as much as the subject matter, which had never been probed with such bravura. Five years later, UK publisher Sidgwick and Jackson released Alfred Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!* (1956). The novel was renamed *The Stars My Destination* in 1957 by its US publisher, Signet Books. Like McLuhan, Bester hurled readers into a vortex of wonder, spectacle, and technology that was at once familiar and estranging, transcendent and disarming, preposterous and perfectly (in)sane.

Bester and McLuhan were proto-cyberpunks who paved the way for late capitalist SF and media culture in the twentieth century. The cyberpunk movement of the 1980s can be directly traced back to fictional and theoretical works by both authors. To a certain extent, *Stars* takes the baton from *The Mechanical Bride* and runs with it. There is no evidence that Bester read McLuhan before composing his novel. Stylistically and thematically, however, they exhibit ripe similarities in the form of quixotic approaches to narrative, representations of the anxiety and agency induced by the cultural maelstrom, and an attention to the vicissitudes of corporate power, patriarchy, and abuse—all cyberpunk staples. Most importantly, both texts point toward a future distinguished by *the science fictionalization of reality*. This, of course, is the future that has overtaken us. McLuhan predicted the wave. Bester and his cyberpunk descendants rode the wave. And now here we are, crashed on the Terminal Beach.

A collection of "exhibits," *The Mechanical Bride* is a "Frankenstein fantasy" that concerns the "widely occurring cluster image of sex, technology, and death" in consumer-capitalist culture, especially advertising (McLuhan, *Mechanical* 29). McLuhan adopts a high-energy, immersive, and oblique style, compelling readers to make their own connections and dynamically engage with the material. Style is a way of seeing, just as it is for cyberpunk's foundational texts: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1981) and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Bester does likewise in *Stars*, challenging readers to manage their expectations, pushing the limits of the SF genre, and manifesting a pyrotechnic style that reifies his content and characters.

The monster of culture is the apple of McLuhan's eye. Bester has his eye on this apple, too, but the twenty-fifth century depicted in *Stars* is a virtual circus of monsters. One monster, however, towers above all the rest: Gully Foyle.

Bester's quintessential antihero is one of the most complex, thought-provoking, and problematic ever created in SF, pieced together with