Science Fiction, Critical Frontiers
Also by Karen Sayer

WOMEN OF THE FIELDS: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century

Also by John Moore

Science Fiction, Critical Frontiers

Edited by

Karen Sayer
Lecturer in Literary Studies
University of Luton

and

John Moore
Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies
University of Luton
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Karen Sayer
John Moore
Notes on the Contributors

**Raffaella Baccolini** teaches British and American literature at the University of Bologna. She has published articles on women’s writing, feminist literary theory and dystopia. She is the author of *Tradition, Identity, Desire: Revisionist Strategies in H.D.’s Late Poetry* (1995) and is assistant editor of *Utopian Studies*. She is currently working on memory in twentieth-century women’s literature.

**Joan Haran** is researching for an ESRC-funded PhD on feminist science fiction at the University of Warwick. The project’s working title is ‘Revisioning Feminist Futures: Literature as Social Theory’. She is particularly interested in the science fiction of Marge Piercy and Sheri S. Tepper, and in feminist social theory on gender and sexuality, reproduction and mothering, and nature and spirituality. The essay in this collection was developed from a dissertation submitted for her MA in Gender, Society and Culture at Birkbeck College, University of London.

**Lorna Jowett** is a Lecturer in American Studies at Nene, University College, Northampton, where she teaches, among other cultural and literary topics, a final-year course on science fiction. Science fiction (in film, TV and literature), representations of the vampire (in film and literature), women’s writing, feminism, and twentieth-century American poetry, are some of her research interests. Current projects include work on late corporate capitalism and gender in science fiction. Some of her writing on the Wisconsin poet Lorine Niedecker will be published in 1999.

**Tom Moylan** is Associate Professor of English and Cultural Studies, George Mason University, USA. He is the author of *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, and co-editor with Jamie Owen Daniel of *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*. He is currently completing a book on science fiction, dystopia and the political imagination.

**Patrick Parrinder**’s books include *Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching* (1980) and *Shadows of the Future* (1995). He is editor of a forthcoming collection of essays in honour of Darko Suvin, *Learning from Other Worlds*. He is a Professor of English at the University of Reading.
Gregory Paschalidis is Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. He is the author of The Poetics of Autobiography (Athens, 1993) and has published on mass communications, literary and cultural theory. Research interests include personal literature, utopia studies, visual culture and issues of cultural identity.

Gloria Pastorino is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at Harvard University, where she teaches Spanish and Italian language and literature. She has published articles on Seamus Heaney, Graham Greene, Native American poetry and Dario Fo. She is currently working on a dissertation about language in William Burroughs, Dario Fo and Pedro Almodovar.

Salvatore Proietti has just completed a PhD dissertation at McGill University on cyborgs, virtual space and North American science fiction. He has published, in both English and Italian, articles on Canadian and US literature; his essays on science fiction have appeared in journals such as Science-Fiction Studies and Acoma. He is currently working on a project on US literature in the early republican period.

Carlos Seligo received his PhD in English Literature from the University of Washington for his dissertation on The Origin of Science Fiction in the Monsters of Botany. He is currently a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Humanities at Stanford, where he teaches innovative survey courses for Freshmen mediated by computers. His scholarly interest lies in the future of reproductive technology, as it has been imagined in the history of science fiction, and he is currently working on a book about Greg Egan.

Darko Suvin, born in Yugoslavia, teacher, critic and writer, is a Professor of English at McGill University and fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He has published widely on theatre and science fiction, including Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, Victorian Science Fiction in the UK, and Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction; also c. 500 articles in the above fields and that of political-cum-epistemological theory. His latest items are Lessons of Japan (c/o Maisonneuve P, Washington, DC); 'Two Cheers for Essentialism and Totality', in Rethinking Marxism, vol. 10(1) (1998); and 'Utopianism from Orientation to Agency: What are We Intellectuals under Post-Fordism to do?' in Utopian Studies, vol. 9(2) (1998).
Susan Tebbutt is a Lecturer in German in the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Bradford, where she teaches on the undergraduate programme and on the MA in European Cultural Studies. She has published a student edition of Die Wolke (Manchester University Press, 1992). Her doctoral dissertation on Gudrun Pausewang was published by Peter Lang in 1994, and she has since published many articles in English and German on German socially-critical teenage literature. She is the editor of a volume on Sinti and Roma (Gypsies) in German-speaking society and culture (Berghahn, 1998).

Jeffrey A. Tucker is Professor of English at Ohio University where he teaches courses on African-American literature. He is co-editor of Race Consciousness: African-American Studies for the New Century (NYU Press, 1997). He is currently working on a book-length study of race and postmodernism in the works of Samuel R. Delany.

The editors

John Moore is Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies at the University of Luton. He is the author of numerous essays on science fiction and in 1997 was the recipient of the Science Fiction Research Association’s Pioneer Award for the best critical essay in the field. He is also the editor of Thomas Morton, New English Canaan: a Critical Edition.

Karen Sayer is Lecturer in Literary Studies at the University of Luton. She has written Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century and A Cottage in the Country.
Introduction

John Moore and Karen Sayer

Given the current state of social and ecological decomposition and the increasing dominance of technological society, there can be little doubt that science fiction – at its best – represents an invaluable tool for analysing the current malaise and envisioning alternatives to it. And given this privileged status of science fiction, the criticism of sf acquires a new and urgent impetus. If science fiction pushes back the boundaries of the known and the possible and opens up avenues for future exploration, then sf criticism needs to keep pace by exploring the critical frontiers made available by this most vital of contemporary discursive formations. The current collection aims to participate in and forward this project of critical discovery, a project which plays an important part not merely in understanding science fiction’s sociocultural functions, but also its role in promoting social critique and human renewal.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the theoretical concerns which shape contemporary science fiction studies. The second examines a varied range of texts which act as case studies in the analysis of sf narratives. From different perspectives, all four essays in the first part take Darko Suvin’s landmark 1972 essay ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre’ as the starting point of their theoretical considerations. In the opening essay, Suvin himself provides a historically significant revision of the critical concepts introduced in the 1972 essay. In light of developments in global capitalist society in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Suvin revises his earlier optimism regarding the innovatory formal elements which he identified as characteristic operations of the science fiction genre. The other essays in this section similarly seek to engage with Suvin’s groundbreaking work in sf studies. Patrick Parrinder, drawing on Suvin’s ideas on science fiction poetics, explores and appraises the various paradigms which are used to interpret sf texts. Gregory Paschalidis, exploring the dialogic interface between science fiction and utopian writing, assumes a more sceptical stance towards Suvin’s modernist faith in the redemptive capacities of newness. Tom Moylan, finally, assesses the relationship between science fiction and social agency in the 1990s in the light of Suvin’s focus on the socially progressive procedures of sf texts.
The texts considered in the volume's second part are varied, but certain linkages and key themes are apparent. Several essays explore the hybrid nature of the science fiction genre and its concern with issues of hybridity. Carlos Seligo's essay on the discourses of botany and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* reminds us that the text often seen as foundational to the genre is situated squarely in these terms of reference. Not merely an essay of interest to students of the literary past, Seligo's paper raises issues pertinent to contemporary debates around genetic engineering, but also wider cultural concerns with hybridity and pastiche. These concerns are also raised in one form or another in the succeeding essays which deal with aspects of postmodernity. Jeffrey A. Tucker considers the significance of racial and sexual narratives in perhaps the defining epic of postmodern sf, Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren*. Gloria Pastorino, exploring the interfaces between sf fiction and film, discusses the convergences between the hybridisation of science fiction narratives and postmodern concerns with pastiche, focusing on *Naked Lunch* and *Blade Runner* and the fictional narratives by Burroughs and Dick from which the films derive. The connections between American preoccupations with the frontier and the development of US cyberculture in fictional and non-fictional texts remain the focus of Salvatore Proietti's essay, with a blurring of fictional and non-fictional discursive orders forming a focus for hybridisation.

Another key theme in the second part remains women's appropriation of science fiction in order to launch social critique and/or envision alternatives. Susan Tebbutt examines the anti-nuclear sf narratives of the German writer Gudrun Pausewang in order to explore how science fiction can be deployed as a means of addressing social issues to a readership of children. Raffaella Baccolini, through an analysis of C. L. Moore's early female cyborg narrative 'No Woman Born', indicates how a woman sf writer made use of the cyborg figure to explore women's issues long before the second-wave of feminism made possible the centrality of this figure in contemporary women's science fiction. Joan Haran reassesses the sf work of a writer – Marge Piercy – who remains crucial in the latter field. Haran compares and contrasts Piercy's changing views on and representations of reproduction in her science fiction texts, as well as examining her use of the cyborg figure. Finally, through a comparative study of texts by Sheri Tepper and Orson Scott Card, Lorna Jowett indicates how even though science fiction forms a forum for posing alternatives to patriarchy, these alternatives remain distinctly gendered.

Science fiction studies remains a field of vivid debate. The frontiers opened by science fiction and in turn by science fiction criticism are
continually expanding. The objective of this volume is to prompt further expansion and encourage further exploration. The science fictional capacity to deliver social critique and envision alternatives remains of inestimable value.