SAMPLE REVIEWS FROM

SOUNDINGS

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The Norton Book of Science Fiction:
North American Science Fiction, 1960-1990 ~
~ edited by Ursula K. Le Guin & Brian Attebery;
Karen Joy Fowler, consultant

The more opinionated SF readers – those for whom an anthology is by definition a collection of the wrong stories – will find in ***The Norton Book of Science Fiction*** a target as big as a barn door. The authoritative combination of the names Norton (familiar to everyone who's ever taken an undergraduate literature survey) and Le Guin (familiar to everyone, period) give the book an unusually high profile both in and out of the SF community, as well as a good chance of staying in print and showing up in a lot of classrooms. You can already hear the litany of potshots to come: Writers Wrongfully Omitted, Writers Inexplicably Included, Writers Justly Included But Who Have Done Better Stories, Writers Included For the Sake of Political Correctness, Writers Included To Avoid The Appearance of Political Correctness, Writers You Never Heard Of But Who Are Bumping Writers You Admire, Writers Included By Special But Unstated Privilege, etc., etc. So the first thing we should try to establish is what the book pretends to be and what it does not pretend to be.

It does not pretend to be a definitive historical or typological anthology of SF. Le Guin makes this clear in her long and very intelligent introduction, and the title underlines it. Those vast historical collections you read in school were Norton *anthologies*; this is only a Norton book, although the distinction will likely be lost on most readers. (A similar fine line characterized Tom Shippey's *Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories* last year, which stopped short of calling itself the *Oxford Book of Science Fiction*.) The subtitle narrows the range even further: "North American Science Fiction, 1960-1990" (a half-dozen Canadian stories justify the "North American"). The putative reason for such restrictive coverage was simply to make the size of the book manageable, although 67 stories seems pretty roomy by most standards. Furthermore, more than half the stories date from 1981 or later, which suggests that the collection really is a generous overview of contemporary American literary SF. Taken in that more modest light, it's unarguably first-rate.

Ah, but there is that conditional "literary," which again carries the whisper of guns being drawn. Le Guin does not specifically characterize the selections as such in her introduction, but it's clear from the selection and from the editorial assumptions Le Guin outlines that she and her co-editors share a particular, more or less postmodern view of SF. SF is a literary tradition as broad as that of realism, Le Guin argues, but it draws on both realistic and fantastic narrative techniques to tell stories which refer, implicitly or explicitly, to the "mythos of science and technology."

Quoting co-editor Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy*, she sees the scientific world-view as a "megatext" or "nourishing medium" in which SF stories take place.

This seems innocent enough, but it produces a radically different view of the field than you get from the Big Anthology from an earlier era, Healy and McComas's *Adventures in Time and Space*. That collection, drawn almost entirely from a single decade of *Astounding* when the short story was the principle medium of SF, showcased work in which the Idea came first, and the narrative followed – stories governed more by metonymy than by metaphor. Only a handful of stories in *The Norton Book* – perhaps those by Dick, Bear, James H. Schmitz, Poul Anderson, Octavia Butler, and Andrew Weiner – could remotely have made sense in that collection. Today, in a field in which novels and novellas very nearly outnumber short stories and from which consensus has long since evaporated, even the possibility of trying to represent SF in such a collection is problematical. Thus the cutoff date of 1960, when Le Guin tells us SF "changed" because both readers and writers gained new sophistication and new consciousness. In other words (mine not theirs), metaphor trumps metonymy.

If the Campbellian ethos is pretty much invisible in *The Norton Book*, then it seems entirely reasonable to ask what has replaced it. A handful of more-or-less traditionally canonical authors set the stage for the collection, and three of these – Cordwainer Smith, Philip K. Dick, and Fritz Leiber – are singled out for special praise in Le Guin's introduction. Smith (represented by "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard") pioneered the morality play in ultra-exotic settings, which shows up here in stories by Bunch, Lafferty, Gene Wolfe, Suzette Haden Elgin, Michael Coney, and a few others. Dick (represented by "Frozen Journey") may not have invented the notion of reality-slippage, but he certainly made it a convention, and it's featured in various ways in stories by Ellison, Gibson, Shiner, Crowley, and Eileen Gunn. Leiber, whose "The Winter Flies" stretches even the editors' generous notion of what SF includes, is rapidly emerging as one of the pioneers of the whole notion of literary SF. (Leiber's "Coming Attraction" – far too old to include – seems to haunt several of the grittier stories in the book, and Bruce Sterling's "We See Things Differently" reads almost like a 1980s revisioning of it.)

Other old masters seem to set certain tones, too. Theodore Sturgeon's alienated children and outcasts show up not only in his own "Tandy's Story," but haunt well over a dozen other stories, more if you include the various portrayals of women as outsiders by Tiptree, Russ, Elgin, and others. Pohl's "Day Million," though perhaps not particularly characteristic of his own fiction, heralds further explorations of media culture by Andrew Weiner, Malzberg, Sheckley, Gibson, Shiner, Michael Bishop, and Candace Jane Dorsey. Several other stories carry echoes of writers not present: Delany's "High Weir" suggests Bradbury's humans-as-Martians, and the alternate science history of Howard Waldrop's ". . . the World, as we Know 't" suggests Farmer's "Sail On, Sail On".

Recent SF's preoccupation with history is represented not only by Waldrop, but

by Kim Stanley Robinson ("The Lucky Strike"), Connie Willis ("Schwarzchild Radius"), Paul Preuss ("Half-Life"), and John Kessel ("Invaders"). The Preuss and Willis stories also form a group with other stories which use science metaphors to illuminate character relationships, most notably Edward Bryant's "Precession" and Gregory Benford's "Exposures." A few other patterns emerge as well: feminism and sexual identity (which includes Michael Blumlein's "The Brains of Rats" as well as authors I've already mentioned); conflicts with native cultures (Kessel, Resnick's "Kirinyaga," Card's "America," Diane Glancy's "Aunt Parnetta's Electric Blisters"); even SF itself (in Kessel, Eleanor Arnason's "The Warlord of Saturn's Moons," and Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum").

One nagging question is whether teachers assigning this book or their students (or any readers generally unfamiliar with the field's history) will be able to detect such patterns, or to discern any sort of meaningful context for what is essentially an ahistorical portrait of the field. Gone are the easy dichotomies that made the old SF seem manageable. There are no epics of technological optimism here — but nor are there any tales of nuclear doom. What was once a literature of heroes and villains here seems overrun with outcasts, victims, and invaders; it is, if anything, a literature of confrontation. Environments once ripe for eminent domain now fight back (ironically, the story that portrays this most directly is also one of the more traditional SF pieces in the book — James H. Schmitz's "Balanced Ecology"). If it's hard to find a center in all this, it may be simply that SF doesn't really have a center anymore, and doesn't seem to want one much.

One thing the editors deserve considerable credit for is a great deal of winnowing and a fiercely independent judgment. Out of 30 years of stories, they've included only two Hugo winners (Butler's "Speech Sounds" and Resnick's "Kirinyaga") and two Nebula winners (Silverberg's "Good News from the Vatican" and Kress's "Out of All Them Bright Stars"). I counted fewer than a dozen stories which had appeared in the Dozois annuals of the 1980s, none which overlap with his *Legend Book of Science Fiction* (which covers a similar period and includes many of the same authors), and only one (Blish's "How Beautiful with Banners") which is also in Shippey's *Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories*. This selection of stories not often anthologized, together with Le Guin's useful and important introduction, are more than enough to suggest that the book probably ought to be on the bookshelf of every reader concerned with the shape of modern SF — it just shouldn't be the only SF book on that shelf.

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Red Dust ~~ Paul J. McAuley

At first, Paul J. McAuley's ***Red Dust*** looks like it's going to be just another novel about Elvis-worshipping Chinese Martians. Some centuries after Martian colonization (first by Americans, later by Chinese with the aid of Tibetan labor), terraforming has led to a breathable atmosphere, a certain amount of free water, and a variety of genetically-engineered native species. But now the terraforming project has been abandoned, under the influence of a shadowy but powerful government called Earth's Consensus, which has pretty much grown hostile toward organic life in general, which it views as all but obsolete in the new age of artificial intelligences and computer-encoded personalities. Opposing this decision are "Sky Roaders" and asteroid-based anarchists, who would like to wrest control of Mars from its aging Chinese rulers, the Ten Thousand Years, and restore the terraforming process.

Wei Lee works as an agronomist at a rural settlement called Bitter Waters, where he passes time listening to mysterious broadcasts from the region of Jupiter from someone claiming to be the King of rock 'n' roll. Although fearful of his powerful great-grandfather, he hopes to eventually learn from him what happened to his parents, who disappeared in some sort of political disgrace; his only aid is an AI "librarian" who appears to him in his dreams. But an opportunity seems to present itself when he rescues a crashed anarchist, Miriam Makepeace Mbele, who turns out to be a clone harboring various "fullerene viruses" that give the host all sorts of powers, from enhanced vision to super-acceleration to the possibility of surviving in other bodies. Convinced to escape with Mbele, Lee embarks on a series of adventures that take full advantage not only of the utopian and technological potential of this subgenre, but also of the flat-out adventurousness of Edgar Rice Burroughs and the playful inventiveness of Stanley Weinbaum. Captured by mad computer-controlled monks in an abandoned Tibetan lamasery, Lee barely escapes with his life – and with that of Mbele, partially transferred to him by the viruses when she gives him a kiss before dying. He takes up with a band of yak-herding cowboys (making this the second novel this month to feature a trail drive; have to keep that in mind when it comes time to sum up the year's trends) and makes his way to Xin Beijing, the sprawling capital – where he is received as a god by a group of fisherfolk who get their nanoviruses from dolphin-like creatures. After fomenting a revolution there, Lee sets out for the highest mountain on Mars, called here Tiger Mountain, where he meets his final destiny – and finds out who Elvis really is – in a conclusion that almost reads like an intelligent version of the ending of *Total Recall*.

McAuley draws on a wide variety of SF sources – Mars adventures, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, terraforming – while

maintaining firm control of both his narrative and the consistency of his complex environment. While the political intrigues, the debates over terraforming, and the historical background invite us to consider the book in light of other recent Mars novels by Robinson, Bear, Bisson, Bova, and others, it's clear that McAuley is up to something quite different from any of these. His Mars is not only a convincing hard-SF environment, but the kind of playground for adventure and imagination that it was for the writers who first discovered it (in fact, McAuley's nanotech, VR, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence would be enough to rationalize even Burroughs' more farfetched daydreams, and in her own way McAuley's Miriam Makepeace Mbele is a distant descendant of Dejah Thoris.) A small example: while on the run in the desert, Lee hides out from a storm in the eyesocket of a gigantic skull, the remains of an ancient failed effort to introduce genetically engineered "archiosaurs" to Mars. Burroughs would have been proud of the sheer wonder invested in such a detail, but in McAuley, it makes sense.

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Idoru ~~ William Gibson

William Gibson's most famous sentence remains his first: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." Knowing when he's on to a good thing, Gibson doesn't let us out of his new novel ***Idoru*** until we've seen a sky like a "paint-chip submitted by the contractor of the universe," a sky "like mother-of-pearl," a sky crawling with "oil-slick colors," a "serious sky," a "gasoline sky," endless gray skies that are pressing down, and at least one rare sky that's "beautiful but empty . . . like pale turquoise." Mostly, the skies are rainy, and the rain generally ends up in greasy puddles on streets, casting distorted reflections of neon lights in seedy retrofuture cities. In short, Gibson knows his territory, and it's a territory as distinctive — and by now as familiar — as that of Hammett or Chandler. But for all its sardonic edginess, Gibson's world is seldom quite as tough or ruthless as those of his hardboiled ancestors, and never as heroic. When he shifts fully into hardboiled mode — as he does toward the conclusion of *Idoru* — the result is deliberately comical, as much parody as *hommage*. It may be that all the grimness and the glitz have caused readers to overlook the considerable wit underlying Gibson's deadpan hipness, but in *Idoru* it's impossible to ignore.

Like *Virtual Light*, *Idoru* is more user-friendly, and thus more likely to appeal to a broader mainstream audience, than the earlier novels. Instead of a complex multilevel plot involving worldwide conspiracies, we get a simple two-track narrative focusing on a problem of daunting tabloid triviality: why has the lead singer of the rock band Lo/Rez announced his intention to marry an *idoru*, or computer-generated "idol singer"? (These artificial-personality media stars are compared to similarly constructed "synthespians" in the movies.) Instead of burned-out cyberjockeys, we get a spunky teenage fan from Seattle and a grown-up orphan whose youthful exposure to an experimental drug has given him a kind of psychic ability to perceive "nodal points" in vast fields of information, making him a useful data detective. And instead of brutal shadowy villains, we get B-movie molls and gunsels.

The young rock fan Chia has been sent to Tokyo by her chapter of the Lo/Rez fan club to make contact with the local chapter and get to the bottom of the rumor that Rez intends to marry a data construct, or "software agent," named Rei Toei. The detective, Colin Laney, who had established a reputation with Slitscan (a kind of reality-TV program turned international megacorporation), is hired for a similar mission — to examine Rez's data fields in order to get clues to his intentions. Exactly why all this is important to anyone is unclear, but skewed perspectives are an important part of the Gibson universe. As Laney moves through theme bars devoted to Kafka or chewing gum, landscapes of Giger-like nanotech buildings, or a decadent

club called the Western World in a ruined building caked with solidified urine, we get the impression that no one in this future delves much beneath the surface: what is important is what is in front of you. Part of the reason Gibson hinges his plot on a rumor barely worthy of a minor gossip-column item is to show us a society in which it really seems important.

Chia represents a kind of innocent idealism unusual to the Gibson universe. She spends time in a virtual Venice given to her by her father, and meets her fellow club members in richly textured virtual environments; her world retains both color and promise. En route to Tokyo, however, she naively agrees to carry a suitcase for a stranger, and inevitably gets mixed up with spies trying to smuggle nanotech generators, which are as illegal as nuclear weapons. For a while – for a long while, actually – it seems as though we're in the middle of a bizarre conflation of young-adult suspense and *fin de siècle* techno-decadence: Harriet the Spy turned bladerunner. The novel's tough-guy villains – an ex-con bodyguard named Blackwell (nicknamed "Toecutter") and a blowsy blonde named Maryalice who totes a cigarette lighter in the shape of a gun – add a note of comic-book excess to a narrative that seems increasingly slapstick. By the final confrontation – Chia trapped in a love-hotel by Maryalice and her partner, with Laney racing to find her – the dialogue has turned into full-fledged parody and the action into something resembling screwball comedy. Although lightweight by comparison with almost anything else he has written, *Idoru* is entertaining, funny, and slyly subversive of the whole cyberpunk aesthetic.