



Aurealis Magazine

The essence of speculative fiction — a personal view Editorial — Aurealis #30

Speculative fiction. We all love it, read it, talk about it avidly. It fires our imagination. This issue of Aurealis is dedicated to it. We've managed to shoehorn in more than our usual share of Australian authors this time around, plus bring you the latest Dune story 'Hunting Harkonnens' by Brian Herbert and Kevin J Anderson, which leads into their new three-book Dune Cycle, *The Butlerian Jihad*. As if this weren't enough, we've also interviewed two of the greatest proponents of the art — Terry Dowling and Robert Silverberg.

But what is it about speculative fiction that appeals so deeply to us? What is it — in contrast to other kinds of fictional writing — that brings us back to it again and again, that seduces us into reading the bad along with the good in search of that feeling we had when we finished our first story and thought, 'Wow, I want to read more of this kind of stuff'?

In preparation for this article, I conducted a quick straw poll of the Aurealis staff, asking them what was special about or defined speculative fiction, as opposed to other kind of writing; what is it about the form that particularly appeals. Here are some of the responses:

- The sense of adventure. There has been a trend since WWII towards introspection in most of the arts, and with speculative fiction there's still room to be extroverted, to move beyond bellybutton-gazing. There's a pushing of limits of imagination that appeals.
- It's about escaping reality, and highlighting reality. So while a character may be larger than life, we can empathise with them and perhaps learn from their example. And while the setting may contain supernatural and technological factors that don't exist in our world, the contrast often highlights the good and bad in the world we live in. And it's fun to stretch your imagination a little.
- It's transcendent. That's almost a self-evident statement, but a powerful one. It goes beyond the here and now, it grapples with themes and issues of fundamental and universal importance.

And this from Brian Aldiss, in his foreword to *Earth is But a Star* (edited by Damien Broderick, UWA 2001):

'Since recent research has shown, or at least indicated, that emotion lies at the base of intellect, we accept that the far future, a concept intermingling emotion and intellect, is a satisfying if eccentric art form, a cross between a dream and a discovery.'

All this drama is staged after our deaths, long after. It is hard to see what are the implications of this. Perhaps by writing and reading of far futures we reclaim something of eternity for our inward spirit.'

Perhaps...

You can agree or disagree with some or all of the comments above, but each view is entirely valid. Because although seemingly innocuous, my question was an intensely personal one that goes, I believe, to the very heart of each individual's being.

Speculative fiction takes on the role that best reflects our own inner disposition. It can allow us to gain perspectives on contemporary issues or to ponder universal questions; it can let us reclaim eternity as an almost spiritual experience; it can excite us with possibilities we never dared imagine. For me, it delivers the most precious commodity of all: hope.

The genesis for my own love of speculative fiction is still very clear to me. I remember being eight or nine and reading in an encyclopaedia about the unavoidable heat



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death awaiting Earth and all life on it. Even though the end was remote in time, I can remember crying heartily and being inconsolable for quite some time afterward. It was, for me, an extinction of hope, an end of everything. The fact that I began reading SF not long after seems now to have been an obvious remedy to that poignant experience. The stories I read portrayed a rediscovery of hope, a chance to escape our shared fate on Earth, by claiming the wider universe as our own. Of course, I learned in time that the universe itself might come to an end, but books like James Blish's *Clash of Cymbals* showed me even that finality wasn't entirely 'The End'.

In particular, I came to love the work of Philip K Dick. An odd choice, you might say, for someone looking for a hopeful message. But if you look past the surface of his work, past the bleak, soulless, crushing futures he portrayed, there was always an element of redemption there. Even his blackest piece, *A Scanner Darkly*, which plots the unerring and inevitably hope-less disintegration of a human personality, carries a message of hope in the denouement. The dark forces that caused the protagonist's suffering and eventual downfall have been exposed and there is the possibility of action against them. On the other hand, I find horror most disturbingly effective when it shows all hope extinguished, the eternal struggle finally and irretrievably lost.

Either as technological or predictive SF or imaginative high fantasy, I feel speculative fiction has at its heart a hopeful message about the human condition. Firstly, that the essence of humanity still survives in the far future or in other fantastic dimensions, and secondly, that in the end we do not betray what that essence entails. In fact, it may be that single aspect of the genre that has done much to make speculative fiction so appealing and ensured that it endures and continues to grow in popularity.

In any event, this is a purely personal view. You pick up this magazine to find stories that deliver what you want from speculative fiction. So here they are, an array of tales of the future, the past, the might have been. I trust you'll find what you're looking for.

Here's to the future.

Keith

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