

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Interview with Jess Nevins July 2019

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**Gary Denton: In America, we had Hugo Gernsback who founded science fiction magazines, who were the equivalents in other countries?**

The sort of science fiction magazine that Gernsback established, in which the stories were all science fiction and in which no other genres appeared, and which were by different authors, were slow to appear in other countries and really only began in earnest after World War Two ended. (In Great Britain there was briefly *Scoops*, which only 20 issues published in 1934, and *Tales of Wonder*, which ran from 1937 to 1942). What you had instead were newspapers, dime novels, pulp magazines, and mainstream magazines which regularly published science fiction mixed in alongside other genres. The idea of a magazine featuring stories by different authors but all of one genre didn’t really begin in Europe until after World War One, and science fiction magazines in those countries lagged far behind mysteries, romances, and Westerns, so that it wasn’t until the late 1940s that purely science fiction magazines began appearing in Europe and Great Britain in earnest.

**Gary Denton: Although he was mainly known for Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle also created the Professor Challenger stories like The Lost World. Are there any other stories or characters of his we might find interesting?**

Honestly, I find Conan Doyle’s historical adventure novels and stories his most enjoyable ones. Certainly they were the ones he put the most time and effort and research into, and which he hoped he would be remembered for. Two favorites of mine are *The White Company* (1891) and the Brigadier Gerard stories, which were published between 1894 and 1910. *The White Company* was Conan Doyle’s personal favorite of anything he wrote. It’s about a young Englishman in the 14<sup>th</sup> century who joins a band of mercenaries, the White Company, and has adventures across Europe fighting alongside the White Company. Doyle romanticizes the past a bit, and makes the knights of the White Company a little more noble than is realistic—but of course Doyle was writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when authors didn’t really do grim and gritty portrayals of the past. *The White Company* is enormously entertaining, with very colorful characterization and descriptions—if you’re a fan of historical adventure novels, you’ll enjoy *The White Company*.

The Brigadier Gerard stories (there are 17 of them) are set during the Napoleonic Wars, and are narrated by Brigadier Gerard, who fought on the side of Napoleon. Gerard is a very entertaining narrator—he’s really vain, but he is almost as good a swordsman, horseman, and cavalry officer as he thinks he is, and is clever enough to get himself out of the situations and difficulties that his ego gets

him into—and the series is good-humored, light, historical fun. If you like George Macdonald Fraser's Flashman stories, you'll love the Brigadier Gerard stories.

**Seth A. Milman: World War I (WWI) was perhaps the first large scale international event, and it changed people's mindsets about the size and scope of our world. How did it affect sci-fi literature, and how did sci-fi incorporate this changing, shrinking world into its canon? What are some works that you think are a direct result of WWI?**

WW1 had a great impact, as you note. How it affected science fiction really varied from country to country. There was an upsurge in science fiction in the US after WW1, while science fiction in England slumped through most of the 1920s. There was a great flourishing of science fiction in France after WW1, while the output of science fiction in Germany increased after WW1 as opposed to before WW1.

As a general rule, though, we can say that WW1 made everyone understand that wars were a lot deadlier and destructive than anyone had guessed, that the experience of living through and surviving modern wars, when the enemy had modern weapons, was a lot more harrowing than anyone had guessed, and that a lot of the science fiction about the future published before WW1 was naïve. There was a significant decrease in the number of stories in which a heroic scientist could invent a super-weapon which would intimidate enemy countries and lead to world peace. What you got instead were stories in which a mad scientist invents a super-weapon and tries to take over the world. Stories that were science fantasy (think Star Wars) decreased; stories with pseudo-science (think Star Trek) increased. Most of all, science fiction stories and novels no longer assumed that the world after a significant change, whether it was a major war or someone instituting a world government, would be the same. Science fiction stories about lost races and utopias and the future started to extrapolate and portray other places, other times, and the future as being different from both the past and the present.

Some science fiction novels that were (in my opinion) a direct result of World War One are: James Hilton's Tibetan utopia *Lost Horizon* (1934), which gave the world Shangri-La—the idea of a serene paradise existing out there, far from the horrors of WW1 but threatened by the second world war that everyone knew was coming, is very typical of the post-WW1 environment; Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* (1920), which introduced the word "robot"; Philip Wylie's *Gladiator* (1930), one of the biggest inspirations for the creators of Superman; the Buck Rogers & Flash Gordon serials; E.E. "Doc" Smith's Lensmen series; Olaf Stapledon's *First and Last Man* (1930).

**Molly Greenspring: How is UK pulp fiction different from US pulp fiction?**

The English version of the pulps were the story papers, which started appearing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were published up through World War Two. Basically the fiction in the story papers was...okay, I haven't read all of the story papers, but I've read a lot of them, enough to judge...the fiction in the story papers was more simple than the fiction in the American pulps. The story papers, for the most part, featured fiction that wasn't as well-written as what was in the pulps, wasn't as complex, wasn't as imaginative, wasn't as long—just not as good. There were exceptions, of course, but as a general rule the average story paper story wasn't as good as the average pulp story.

Now, what appeared in the mainstream British fiction magazines was just as good as what was appearing in the mainstream American fiction magazines. But in the cheaper magazines the Americans were better than the British.

**Molly Greenspring: Did greater understanding of space science alter the writing of pulp fiction, if so how?**

Somewhat, although I think the real impact of the greater knowledge and awareness of space science was only felt beginning in the late 1940s and 1950s. What you got in pulp science fiction were stories that applied the broad outlines of the new information to stories that had traditional plots and characters and tropes and motifs. There are exceptions to this, of course, and pulp science fiction had aspects that were innovative, and some writers brought new things to the pulps (Stanley Weinbaum, for example, did truly different aliens at a time when most aliens were human beings in different bodies). But for the most part pulp science fiction wasn't really scientific.

**Erik Wilkenfeldt: Which was more prevalent at the time, Sci Fi or Sword and Sorcery? Was there any delineation between the two, or did they all kind of fall into the "Weird Fiction" category?**

Science fiction was a lot more dominant. There were Sword and Sorcery stories in the pulps, especially in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, and there were writers who wrote some or many Sword and Sorcery stories, like Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, C.L. Moore, Henry Kuttner, and Fritz Leiber. But there weren't pulps dedicated to Sword and Sorcery fiction the way there were pulps dedicated to just science fiction. My impression is that Sword & Sorcery fiction was seen as "weird fiction" at the time rather than being seen as a separate category of fantasy; I think the separate category status began in the early 1960s.

**John Grayshaw: Who are some of your favorite Edwardian/Pulp Era Sci-fi authors? What are some of your favorite novels and stories from this era?**

Whoo, boy, where to begin?

- It's not that Edgar Rice Burroughs' Barsoom/John Carter of Mars books are *good*, necessarily, but I read them when I was 14 and was blown away by them, and when I (rarely) reread them today I still experience something of that sense of wonder.
- Robert E. Howard's Conan stories aren't Art in any respect, but they have a certain primal power and innocence that I still enjoy.
- H.P. Lovecraft's work is, as the kids these days say, problematic in several ways, but if you can get past those problems and you can get past his style (which certainly isn't for everyone) you'll be rewarded with groundbreaking, influential, and unique science fiction/horror stories. At least, I find them rewarding.
- I really enjoy the science fantasy stories of Clark Ashton Smith, although his style can be off-putting to a lot of people. They are very imaginative and very well-written, although it's a style that, as I said, can put off people.

- Cordwainer Smith's science fiction may be a little too late to be considered pulp era, but boy do I love it. He wrote stories and novels unlike anything else out there, which combined characterization and imagination and world-building better than anyone else was doing, and which have aged only a very little. There was a 1993 collection of his short fiction called *The Rediscovery of Man* which is well worth searching out.
- Fredric Brown remains a pleasure to read—start with *From the Ashes* (2001). Slick and polished and usually quite amusing.

**John Grayshaw: Why do you think that this is such an under-appreciated period in science fiction?**

Accessibility. When I was a kid (the 1970s) it was relatively easy to find anthologies of Edwardian and Pulp-era science fiction in libraries, if not bookstores, and reading them gave me a good, basic introduction to the science fiction of those decades. But those anthologies aren't easy to find any more—most libraries don't stock them, for various reasons, mostly good ones—and nothing's really replaced them. If you go looking for collections of individual authors' works from those decades, you can find them, but most kids are going to start with what's in their libraries, and what's in their libraries is modern stuff rather than older stuff.

Too, a lot of the stories and novels from those eras hasn't aged well, and modern readers find them racist or sexist or hilarious or just not enjoyable because of their style. These modern readers aren't *wrong*, exactly, but in their rush to dismiss the old stuff they tend to overlook the things that those stories did right. This isn't a problem of only science fiction fans, of course—mystery fans would prefer to read newer stuff rather than pulp-era stuff—same with romance fans, etc.

Finally, I think a part of this lack of appreciation is the fact that nearly all of the Edwardian & Pulp Era science fiction doesn't get made into cartoons or tv shows or movies. We're shifting from a print age to a visual age, and the great majority of people are more interested in what they can consume visually rather than from books and magazines. I'd like to think that a really good Netflix series of, for example, Asimov's Foundation series would renew interest in the original books—but that series is never gonna be made, so the great majority of the people who might enjoy Asimov won't ever hear of him, much less read them.

**John Grayshaw: What (if any) are some of the themes that unify the science fiction works of this period?**

Hmm. Technological optimism, often in the form of stories set in high-tech futures of interstellar federations, republics, and empires. But accompanying this technological optimism was the theme of society not evolving--the portrayal of the future as being much like the present, only with robots and spaceships and blasters. Science as something that could be either incredibly beneficial or massively destructive, with little space in-between. Those who practice science, whether in a laboratory or as inventors, being portrayed as heroic in ways that previously only two-fisted action heroes had been. Aliens and those who are different from us being shown to be a threat rather than merely different or friendly to us. The idea that outer space is the new frontier, and that exploration, conquest, colonization, and settlement—seemingly at an end when the western frontier of the United States was

“settled” in the 1890s—could resume once more, and that those who go into space could act like and think like explorers, conquerors, etc. The countries of the Earth outside the United States and western Europe as being colorful, exotic, and full of potential adventures and dangers.

**John Grayshaw: How significant a role did Science Fiction play in the pulps? It seems like it was just one of many other genres in these magazines?**

There are a number of reasons why, when most people talk about the pulps, they are thinking about the science fiction in the pulps. But the truth is that science fiction was a minority interest in the pulps. Detective stories/crime stories/mysteries, Westerns, Romances, and general adventure stories were a lot more popular: there were a lot more pulps about each of those genres than there were about science fiction, and there were a lot more stories published in those genres than in science fiction. There were pulps specializing in those genres published before there were pulps specializing in science fiction, and the pulps which specialized in those genres sold a lot better than the science fiction pulps and attracted better writers. (They also paid a lot better than the sf pulps, which is a big reason why they attracted better writers).

Science fiction fandom was small compared to the fandom in those other genres. The attention that publishers and editors paid to the science fiction pulps was small compared to what they thought of the big-time pulps. Mainstream, general pulps would publish science fiction, but the editors of those pulps were generally more interested in publishing a good adventure or romance story than a science fiction story.

**John Grayshaw: Was the definition of Science fiction more fluid at this time? There seems to be a lot of crossover with different genres like adventure/fantasy/and horror.**

Yes, very much so.

People during the 19<sup>th</sup> century—from Jules Verne’s heyday onward—were aware of science fiction as a separate thing, a discrete and unique kind of literature compared to mysteries and romances, etc. But there was no one, agreed-upon, term for science fiction; everything from “scientific fiction” to “science novel” to “scientifiction” was used. It wasn’t until Hugo Gernsback began popularizing “science fiction” as a phrase in the 1930s that people had a specific phrase to use when talking about science fiction.

Definitions of science fiction before the 1930s were similarly scattered, although most of them boiled down to what Hugo Gernsback wrote in 1926: “the Jules Verne, H G Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story – a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic fiction.” A decade later John W. Campbell, the editor of the pulp *Astounding Stories* and the single most influential figure in science fiction in the 1930s and 1940s, would write “Scientific methodology involves the proposition that a well-constructed theory will not only explain away known phenomena, but will also predict new and still undiscovered phenomena. Science fiction tries to do much the same – and write up, in story form, what the results look like when applied not only to machines, but to human society as well.”

But there were other, broader definitions of science fiction active at the time, that included things like the Doc Savage pulp stories (undeniably science fiction, and undeniably different from what Campbell was publishing in *Astounding Stories*) and like H.P. Lovecraft stories (same) and the science fiction appearing in the mainstream magazines and the mainstream pulps. It wasn't until 1947 that you got the first major study of the field by an academic and his definition "A piece of scientific fiction is a narrative of an imaginary invention or discovery in the natural sciences and consequent adventures and experiences ... It must be a scientific discovery – something that the author at least rationalizes as possible to science."

Just as the definitions of science fiction tended to be a lot broader, so too was there a lot more crossover with different genres. This was a time when the idea of genres being separate, discrete things with well-defined borders and limits was only slowly being accepted, so that readers, writers, critics, and fans were a lot more welcoming to genre-mixing than they would later be. Nobody at the time said "H.P. Lovecraft is horror, therefore he can't be science fiction!" People simply said "He's both."

**John Grayshaw: At the time, who were the most successful/well known science fiction writers of this period?**

Interesting question! Most of these people aren't well known today, but were seen as the best that science fiction had to offer: Ralph Milne Farley, Lester del Rey, Theodore Sturgeon, Otto Binder, Murray Leinster, E.E. "Doc" Smith, Isaac Asimov, Henry Kuttner, Manly Wade Wellman, August Derleth, T.S. Stribling, John W. Campbell Jr., Robert A. Heinlein, Cleve Cartmill, Clifford D. Simak, David H. Keller, Donald Wandrei, John Taine, A.E. van Vogt, Nelson S. Bond, Austin Hall.

**John Grayshaw: Who are some of the authors in this period who are particularly intriguing but may be largely forgotten today?**

Limiting myself to science fiction: Cordwainer Smith, Clark Ashton Smith, and Fredric Brown, for the reasons I gave above; Olaf Stapledon (a genuine visionary); Henry Kuttner & C.L. Moore, a married pair of writers who collaborated to produce stories that were generally of a much higher quality than the rest of the genre; Leigh Brackett, likewise; William Hope Hodgson, although his best stuff is horror/sf rather than purely sf.

**John Grayshaw: How did you become interested in researching Edwardian/Pulp era Science Fiction?**

In part it was because I was trying to get ahead of Alan Moore while doing the annotations for *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*—anticipating what stories or novels he might use in the comic book series, and reading the stories and novels so I would be knowledgeable about them when he referenced them. But largely it was because I discovered, once I started delving into Edwardian and Pulp Era science fiction, that while a lot of it was dated, a lot of it could be fun to read about and had concepts and characters who were entertaining and had fictional potential that I might use in my own fiction writing.

I can't say that a lot of the science fiction in the pulps was of good literary merit, but they are entertaining, and that's no small thing.

**John Grayshaw: What are some fun anecdotes about your research? Like quirky, unexpected, or amusing discoveries?**

I would say that my favorite discovery was the Coffin Kirk stories by Arch Whitehouse. They appeared in the aviation pulp magazine *Flying Aces* from 1937-1941. *Flying Aces* was about heroic pilots fighting enemies of the United States, usually German and Japanese, and was hardly the place to look for science fiction. But in the Coffin Kirk stories the titular pilot, as a child, rescues a baby gorilla from the Berlin Zoo and then escapes with the gorilla to the West. 20 years later, Kirk is a heroic pilot and Tank, the gorilla, is his tailgunner. The really great moment in these stories is in the first one, when a friend who hasn't seen Kirk seen he was a child is grilling Kirk about Tank, and Kirk is describing all the things that he taught Tank, and then Tank interrupts Kirk and says, "How come nobody ever talks about all the things I taught him?"

That's right: a talking gorilla tailgunner.

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who think a talking gorilla tailgunner is absurd, and those who think it's the greatest thing since air conditioning, and who want to read a novel about him. I fall into the second category.

**John Grayshaw: What information did you find that really surprised you?**

Let's see. The fact that science fiction was such a small part of the world of the pulps—I wrote an encyclopedia of pulp characters, and the characters from the science fiction stories are numerically small next to the characters from the other genre of pulps. The fact that there were so many women and non-white characters in the sf pulps—the sf pulps had a lot more diversity than they are given credit for. The fact that there were so many women writers in the sf pulps. The fact that we now know so little about most of the writers for the sf pulps—they've disappeared into history. The fact that so much of the sf was still readable and enjoyable even though it was dated and written a lot differently than modern science fiction. The fact that there were so many science fiction pulps from other countries—they weren't like the American pulps, but they had science fiction stories in them—and that the pulp science fiction in these other countries was as exciting and imaginative as American pulp science fiction.

**John Grayshaw: Did the writers of the era know they were creating a new genre?**

I think there was a general awareness that they were doing something different, something in the vein of Poe and Verne and Wells and the other 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century science fiction writers. I think, if someone had asked them to define what they were doing, they would have been able to come up with a good general definition of science fiction. But (from everything I've read) I think they wouldn't have used the word "genre" in the way we do now. The idea of literary genres—as opposed to the "genres" of "novel," "poetry," "non-fiction," etc—was still being formed during the pulp age. The idea that some kinds of stories were inherently different and worse than other stories just because of their content started in the 1890s and was still being promulgated as if new during the 1920s. What we think of as literary genres today were still being defined during the Edwardian and Pulp Eras, and didn't really become solidified as publishing and library categories until after World War Two.

**John Grayshaw: Was it difficult for Edwardian/Pulp era Sci-fi authors to get published?**

It's always been difficult to get published, but I think it's fair to say that it was harder in the Edwardian era than in the Pulp Era, and that the easiest it's ever been to get science fiction published was during the Pulp Era. There were so many magazines, pulp and mainstream, that were appearing monthly or even weekly during the Pulp Era, and they all needed new stories every week or month, month after month, year after year. And especially in genres which weren't as widely known or respected, like science fiction, the demand for stories...it didn't exactly outweigh the supply of stories, but there was so much demand for stories that editors and publishers often couldn't be choosy about what they published. Which explains why a lot of the science fiction stories of the Pulp Era aren't that good—they were written by fans of science fiction who hadn't written much before and didn't go on to write much in the future. (The list of writers who only published one story in *Weird Tales* or *Astounding* or *Amazing* and nothing else, ever, is surprisingly long).

**John Grayshaw: Was there a community of Edwardian/Pulp era Sci-fi authors or did they write in isolation?**

From what I can tell there were groups of authors who communicated with each other—H.P. Lovecraft wrote to a lot of authors of the time—and groups of authors who knew each other in real life, but there wasn't the feeling of one community the way there is now. It was more like a bunch of communities, divided by geography or class (the sf writers in the mainstream pulps and magazines knew each other but didn't know the sf writers in the sf pulps, for example). You might almost call them cliques.

**John Grayshaw: Was Fandom beginning in this period?**

Science fiction fandom got its beginning in this time, but it's important to remember that fandom predated the science fiction pulps. There were fans for the dime novels of various genres in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were fandoms for the various magazines aimed at teenage girls during that time, and there were fandoms for the genres whose pulps predated the science fiction pulps. *Western Story Magazine*, which began in 1919, was the first Western pulp, and attracted a devoted fandom pretty quickly, especially of teenage girls and young women. That fandom grew to sizable numbers, and had their first informal conventions years before the first science fiction convention in the mid-1930s.

As far as science fiction fandom is concerned, yes, the Pulp Era was where it began, largely driven by Hugo Gernsback (editor of *Amazing Stories*, the first sf pulp) through the letters pages of his pulps in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The first meeting of science fiction fans that anyone knows of—the first sf fan club--was in December, 1929, in New York City. The first science fiction convention took place in 1935.

**John Grayshaw: What novels were the biggest hits at the time?**

It's hard to say. The bestseller lists of the *New York Times* for the 1920s and 1930s don't include any science fiction novels. If I had to guess, I would say that the novelizations of Edgar Rice Burroughs' John



Carter of Mars pulp serials were among the most popular, as were Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Philip Wylie & Edwin Balmer's *When Worlds Collide*, Stanley Weinbaum's *A Martian Odyssey*, any of E.E. "Doc" Smith's novels, and A. Merrit's *Dwellers in the Mirage*.

The thing to remember, though, was that popular publishing in the US was largely hardcover rather than paperback, and so there tended to be a lot fewer science fiction novels published at the time compared to stories and serials published in magazines and pulps. Most of the attention paid to science fiction was to magazine and pulp science fiction rather than the stuff in novels.

**John Grayshaw: Which Edwardian/Pulp era novels only turned out to be significant after the era was over?**

Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Man* (visionary & directly influential on a number of later writers), J.C. Squire's *If It Had Happened Otherwise* (first collection of alternate history stories), Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (a Hitler Wins future history published in 1937), A.E. Van Vogt's *Slan* (hugely influential on science fiction fandom).

**John Grayshaw: What makes Edwardian/Pulp era Science Fiction different than other eras of Sci-fi? And what makes it similar?**

I think you can divide science fiction of those eras into two parts: the pre-World War One science fiction, and the science fiction appearing between the end of World War One and the beginning of World War Two.

Before World War One there was a certain—I don't want to call it naivete—but a strange innocence in the way that science fiction writers regarded the future and the technology that would take us there. Edwardian sf isn't naïve about the fact that advanced technology could lead to tyrannies—but they are largely naïve about the process by which it would happen. Edwardian sf is innocent verging on naïve about what a war with modern technology—not even speaking of advanced technology—would be like. It's all very bloodless, for the Edwardian sf writers. At the same time, though, there's a recurring concern for the Edwardians of a revolt of those conquered by empire (British or American) which shows up in science fiction metaphorically and analogically (through aliens) or directly (through invasions from Mexico or India or China what have you). Like most science fiction, the sf of the Edwardian era is largely an expression of the era's philosophical, moral, and political concerns—but those concerns are increasingly alien to us, and in some respect naïve.

Between World War One and World War Two that innocence and naivete went away. SF writers could no longer pretend that a future war would be relatively bloodless, or that those who underwent the war would not be profoundly affected and damaged by the war. So the 1919-1939 science fiction mostly does away with stories of the future war and instead tells stories of a future in which a change has already happened and, whatever the realities of the cost of that change, the stories don't need to describe the process or describe the costs of the change. Before 1914 the idea of a super-weapon being invented by a scientist was often (not always) applied to heroic scientists; between 1919-1939 super weapons are usually created by madmen who want to take over the world.

What makes the science fiction of the 1901-1914 and 1919-1939 eras similar to our time is that, as I said above, those stories, for the most part, express their times' philosophical, moral, and political concerns and anxieties, just as the science fiction of the 1950s and 1980s and 2000s and 2019 does. And some of those concerns and anxieties are shared today. I don't think there's an easy definition of science fiction, but I think one thing that most science fiction narratives have in common is that they aren't about the future; they are about the time that they were written.

**John Grayshaw: What is the legacy of Edwardian/Pulp era Science Fiction? Why is it still relevant?**

Edwardian and Pulp science fiction were evolutionary stages in the development of the science fiction genre. Modern sf wouldn't have developed as it did without the imagination of the Edwardian and Pulp sf writers, their willingness to apply fantastic solutions to contemporary problems, their creation of science fiction fandom, their cross-medium penetration (before and during WW1, popular science fiction literature often took its cues from films; between 1919-1939, science fiction films were mostly influenced by sf literature, rather than vice-versa), their creation of, in essence, High Art science fiction (the stuff aimed at literary markets) and Low Art sf (the stuff aimed at the mass market), their creation of a lot of the basic tropes and motifs and plot dynamics and clichés of science fiction, their creation of certain basic modes of science fiction story-telling. Without Edwardian and Pulp science fiction, modern science fiction would look entirely different and likely be a very small and overlooked genre.

I think the sf of the Edwardian and Pulp eras is still relevant because there's a fair amount of it which is still readable, entertaining, and of at least average quality. The vogue in storytelling style changed in the 1880s and produced the magazine style of the 1890s and 1900s, a style which has dated only a little and which is still very readable. That style continued—and developed and evolved—throughout the Edwardian and Pulp eras, so that the sf of those eras, though bad predictions of the future and containing content that is problematic to modern readers, still can be read with pleasure and enjoyment. Sometimes the stories even have ideas which have come true.