

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Eric Leif Davin (Aug. 2021)

Dr. Eric Leif Davin teaches labor and political history at the University of Pittsburgh. He wrote "Pioneers of Wonder: Conversations with the Founders of Science Fiction." as well as "Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction, 1928-1965."

John Grayshaw: What is the Gernsback era?

Although Hugo Gernsback briefly published an SF magazine in the 1950s, "SF Plus," the Gernsback Era is actually referring to the period 1926-1934. In 1926 Gernsback launched "Amazing Stories," the first SF magazine. It was the only SF magazine until 1929, when he launched "Wonder Stories." In 1934 he sold the latter magazine to the Thrilling group, with it becoming "Thrilling Wonder Stories." With that, he exited the SF magazine world until the 1950s.

Bill Rogers: Professor Davin, have you done much research on early Russian science fiction, particularly that written after the October Revolution? If so, what do you think it contributed to the genre, or was it too isolated due to the external reaction to the revolution to have much effect beyond Russia?

I've not done much research on early Russian SF. My feeling is that the handful of Russian SF films were more influential than the print versions. This might be seen in the impact they had on Fritz Lang's "Metropolis," a German film, which is currently playing in Berlin in the year 2021.

Eva Sable: Has the function of the editor changed much from Gernsback's day to today? Is an editor more or less directive of the content, for example?

No, the job of the editor has not basically changed. A Managing Editor still sets the tone of a magazine with the type of stories he or she buys. Although Gernsback is often thought of as the "editor" of his early magazines, his Managing Editors were the ones who actually chose the stories. This was true of David Lasser, e.g., who edited Wonder Stories from 1929-1934.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of your favorite Sci-fi authors from this period?

I'd have to say my favorite is Edgar Rice Burroughs. Although he is best known for his Tarzan stories, he wrote many novels set on Venus, at the earth's core, and on Mars. His novel, "A Princess of Mars," was the basis for the Disney movie, "John Carter."

John Grayshaw: What are some of your favorite novels and stories from this era?

Again, the Burroughs novels, especially the first three Martian novels. Also, Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey," often referred to as introducing believable aliens to the genre.

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

It's underappreciated for a few reasons. 1) We all have amnesia about the past and believe that only the newest (of anything) is the best; 2) Styles in literature change greatly over time, and this is true of both

mainstream literature (even college students don't read Henry James any more) and genre literature. SF from the Gernsback Era is now antiquated in style.

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

It was heavily gadget-oriented. Gernsback was not interested in SF, per se. He saw it as a means of scientific education. Thus, most of the stories from this era seem like science lectures more than entertainment.

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?

At that time there was a pulp for every interest. There were railroad pulps, boxing pulps, Western pulps, horror pulps, mystery pulps, you name it. SF and fantasy (Weird Tales magazine launched before even Amazing Stories) were just two more pulp niches... which have happened to have survived. Indeed, the only genre magazines that still survive today are fantasy, science fiction, and mystery magazines.

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.

"Weird Tales," e.g., published SF, fantasy, and horror. Amazing and Wonder Stories, however, specialized in "hard" SF.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about the experiences of female science fiction authors of this period?

There were many more than commonly realized. The first issue of Weird Tales in 1923 carried a story by a woman, as did the second issue of Amazing Stories. They published under their own female-identified names and were welcomed by the editors. The only prominent person in SF in the 1930s who really objected to women writers in the field was, interestingly enough, Isaac Asimov, who expressed an unpopular hostility to women in the genre.

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

The two most well-known were Burroughs, who sold anything he wrote, and Weinbaum, who was thought to have brought a certain maturity to the field. Weinbaum actually wanted to be a mainstream author and stumbled into the field with "A Martian Odyssey," immediately recognized as a masterpiece. Thereafter, anything he wrote sold, so he stayed with it. It was the Great Depression and he needed the money. He died in 1935 before he could write outside the field.

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

Francis Stevens is unjustly neglected. She wrote perhaps the first parallel world story. Her "Fifth Head of Cerebus" is a milestone in the field.

John Grayshaw: How did you become interested in researching Gernsback era Science Fiction?

I've read F&SF ever since I was a young boy, so it was a natural evolution.

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

I discovered that Asimov was such an egregious sexual harasser that he would be a pariah in today's culture. At conventions he would greet female fans by reaching out and shaking their breasts instead of their hands. One could tell stories....

David Lasser, who was Gernsback's Managing Editor at Wonder Stories, was fired by Gernsback because he was also deeply involved in organizing the unemployed in the early 1930s. Lasser went on to lead the Workers' Alliance of America, the main organization of the unemployed in the 1930s. He was a member of the Socialist Party and Gernsback replaced him with Charles Hornig.... who, unbeknownst to Gernsback, was also a member of the Socialist Party. Hornig was also a pacifist, who served time in prison during World War II for being a Conscientious Objector who refused to be drafted. David Lasser was surveilled by the FBI until the day he died.

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

As I was already familiar with the era, nothing much surprised me. But, my research revealed the large number of women writers and fans in this era, and their acceptance as equals by male writers and editors, which was surprising to others who presumed the field was hostile to women authors and fans.

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

They felt they were continuing a long tradition. The early issues of Amazing Stories were filled with reprints of stories by Poe, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and other such precursors. They felt they were continuing in that vein.

John Grayshaw: Was it difficult for Gernsback era Sci-fi authors to get published?

If you were a decent writer, it was relatively easy to get published. There was a great need for content. In some ways it was a "young" field. Some of the writers were teenagers. When Charles Hornig replaced David Lasser as editor at Wonder Stories, he was a teenager.

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

Both, depending on where you lived. New York City was the center of American publishing, and the magazines. If you lived there, it was easy to find a community of fans and writers. Jack Williamson, on the other hand, lived in New Mexico, which was still rather primitive at this time, and he was pretty much alone.

John Grayshaw: Was Fandom beginning in this period?

Yes, fandom began at this time. Gernsback published the addresses of fans who wrote letters to the magazine, along with their names. Those who lived in New York could thus easily look up other fans in

the city and NY became the center of fandom. The first World SF Convention took place in New York City in 1939 because it had become the center of fandom.

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

SF at this time was mainly a magazine genre. Novels did not become part of the expectation until the 1950s and later. The novels which were published were by “crossover” authors who also had a reputation outside the field, such as Burroughs, Wells, and Verne.

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

Gernsback SF was heavily gadget oriented. Today that would be called “hard SF,” and the major publisher of it is Analog magazine. Only with the launch of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction in 1950 (and still in existence today) was there a market for “soft” SF.

John Grayshaw: What is the legacy of Gernsback era Science Fiction? Why is it still relevant?

The greatest legacy of the Gernsback Era is the creation of SF as a separate genre. Before the launch of Amazing Stories in 1926, magazines published an eclectic array of stories, including those by Wells, Verne, and others. These stories weren’t seen as “science fiction” (a term coined by Gernsback in the first issue of Wonder Stories in 1929). They were just “different.” By launching a magazine that just published such stories, he gave these stories a separate identity. Hence forth, they were known as “science fiction” stories. That’s why Hugo Gernsback is known as “The Father of Science Fiction” and why the highest fan award in the field is named after him, the Hugo Award.