

Realistic visions of tomorrow

Colin Steel reports on the current boom in science fiction publishing and writing.

The *Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide to Science Fiction & Fantasy* by M. H. Zool (Bloomsbury \$12.95) provides a point of reference to an overview of the plethora of science fiction being released by the major publishers, notably Gollancz, which reflects the continued boom in the genre.

While SF readers traditionally begin at an early age, it is fascinating that recent studies of the readership of *Analog* and Isaac Asimov's magazines revealed the median age of their readers to be 41.4, with most being college graduates with an average household income of A\$66,000.

Most of these readers would not require Zool's *Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide*, which is a basic but sound listing of leading SF authors, and their most important works. Experienced fans prefer more extensive sources such as Barron's *Anatomy of Wonder* (Bowker) and Aldiss and Wingrove's *Trillion Year Spree* (Gollancz).

Science fiction began in the twentieth century in pulp magazines such as *Astounding*. Arthur C. Clarke in *Astounding Days* (Gollancz \$29.95) bases his recollections of his childhood and adolescence, before he became "The Prophet of the Space Age", around the early issues of *Astounding*.

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sense of wonder are encapsulated in such works as *2001* (1968) and *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), which is chosen by Zool as the best example of Clarke's work.

This portrayal of an alien spaceship world entering our solar system, and the wonder of subsequent scientific discovery that ensued, is now diluted by a sequel, *Rama 2* (Gollancz \$29.95), which Clarke co-wrote with NASA scientist Gentry Lee. Clarke states in a postscript that "collaboration is a risky business" and clearly believes he has overcome it.

On the evidence of *Rama 2*, however, and his first collaboration with Lee, *Cradle* (1988), it is Clarke's reputation, if not bank balance, that will suffer. The scientific exploration of this second Rama space has more to do with human activities such as sex, religion and the power of the media than any sense of alien wonder.

Given the huge shock of the knowledge of the existence of other civilisations brought about by *Rendezvous with Rama*, humanity seems to have progressed little as the cosmonauts squabble on familiar 1990 lines.

Cradle also shared elements of soap opera, but at least this was explainable given that it was originally written as a film script. Clarke has said that the pleth-





Arthur C. Clarke: One of the original science-fiction creators.

ora of underwater movies then in production buried *Cradle's* subsequent filming. The biggest of these in financial terms, *Abyss*, was released in Australia at the end of 1989.

The story of an underwater exploration team trying to recover a lost nuclear submarine off the Cayman Trench and encountering aliens has been termed "Close Encounters of the Watery Kind". The novel of *Abyss* by Orson Scott Card (Legend \$9.95) provides more back-

ground detail, and is preferable to the movie version. The fictional depiction of aliens has fluctuated over the decades. In the 1950s aliens were generally represented as hostile, reflecting underlying American concerns with UFOs, radiation and the threat of communism. In the 1980s, aliens were far more benevolent or neutrally depicted.

Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy has now been successfully completed with *Imago Xenogenesis Three* (Gollancz \$32.95) in which an alien race, the Oankali, interbreed "to save" the rem-

Oankali, interbreed "to save" the remnants of humanity. Butler, through this trilogy, also reflects today's differences and what they mean, that is, racial and physical differences and differences in intelligence.

Philip K. Dick, who died in 1982, was another to provide social commentaries through his fiction. The third in the series of his collected short fiction *The Father-Thing* (Gollancz \$35) includes 23 short stories, largely written in 1953-4. *Foster, You're Dead* evokes the nuclear war hysteria of the early 1950s as consumers vie to buy the latest fall-out shelter. In *The Golden Man*, the evolution of a superhuman foreshadows the end of humanity as we know it.

Dr Gregory Benford's bleak view of humanity in the far future began in *The Great Sky River* (1987) and continues in *The Tides of Light* (Gollancz \$29.95). Humanity flees from planet to planet to escape the machine intelligence that dominates the galaxy.

In the latest novel, a temporary alliance with human cyborgs allows the quest for sanctuary to continue. Benford, like his American contemporary, Greg Bear, weaves contemporary "hard science" into some enthralling fictions.

Bear's *Eon* was a global bestseller, and its successor, *Eternity* (Gollancz \$15.95), is equally breathtaking, with concepts that owe much to the writings of the early Clarke and Olaf Stapledon.

Bear's short stories collected in *Tangents* (Gollancz \$29.95) are equally inventive, notably "Blood Music" in which bio-chip engineering transforms the human race.

Another scientist recently to break successfully into the SF field is biologist Dr Paul McAulay of Oxford University

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whose first novel *Four Hundred Billion*

Stars (1988) shared the Philip K. Dick award.

His second novel, *Secret Harmonies* (Gollancz \$32.95), has eighteenth century Australian affinities. A remote colony, reliant on earth for supplies and scientific knowledge, and with a local "aboriginal" population, is cut off and local warfare erupts. McAulay here effectively contrasts the evolution of societies.

M. H. Zool states of British writer Bob Shaw that his main interest is in the human ramifications of unusual sciences as in *Other Days, Other Eyes* (1972), but Shaw's two latest novels *Killer Planet* (Gollancz \$19.95) and *The Fugitive Worlds* (Gollancz \$29.95) are weak in this respect.

Shaw's first story for children, *Killer Planet*, is pure pulp fiction with cardboard characters, notably adolescents who confront and defeat an alien monster on a distant planet and find each other.

Shaw's "Ragged Astronaut" series, which began in 1986, has also fallen away badly from its promising beginning of twin planets between which "astronauts" floated and battled in hot-air balloons.

The latest volume of the series *The Fugitive Worlds*, however, lacks inventiveness and, far from completing the trilogy, seems to leave the way open for future stories.

Huge airships also feature in Australian writer John Brosnan's *War of the Sky Lords* (Gollancz \$29.95), a readable yet repellent saga in which male chauvin-

yet repellent saga in which male chauvinists ruthlessly subordinate the remnants of humanity, notably females, from the skies of a future devastated earth.

The female revolt, begun in *The Sky Lords* (1989), is continued with the hope of a utopian Shrangila revealed at the end of this middle volume of the trilogy.

Far more realistic is William Gibson's cyberpunk future of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (Grafton \$10.95) begun in the award-winning *Neuromancer* (1984) and continued in *Count Zero* (1986).

Gibson's work lies squarely in the best traditions of science fiction, that is, to extrapolate from today to provide a realistic vision of, and for, tomorrow — Gibson's future images linger on the retina of the reader's imagination.