

SF: Guides to the Ghetto

It is Stanislaw Lem's deeply felt and closely argued contention that the field of science fiction has produced only four authors worthy of that genre's rich potential: Verne, Wells, Stapledon, and himself. The proliferation of work by other writers in the genre, especially by Americans, has actually been a morbid condition characterized by "retrogression, degeneration, or at the very least developmental stagnation, typical of populations isolated from the outside world and vitiated by inbreeding" such as obtains in ghettos. American sf is the "domain of herd creativity," and it "repel[s] the more exigent authors and readers, so that the loss of individuality in science fiction is at once a cause and an effect of ghetto seclusion." Lem charitably makes an exception for Philip K. Dick, on the basis of reading only seven of his novels, from which he is nevertheless able to abstract a "main sequence" comprised of "*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *Ubik*, *Now Wait for Last Year*, and perhaps also *Galactic Pot-Healer*."

As that "sequence" will evidence to any reader well-acquainted with Dick's major novels, the fatuity and self-serving nature of Lem's pronouncements on the field of sf are matched only by the slenderness of the reading on which they are based. Most of the essays in *Microworlds* date from ten to fifteen years ago, and even then Lem's knowledge of sf was based (according to the book's introducer, Franz Rottensteiner, who is also Lem's agent in the West) on French translations chosen by Rottensteiner, a filtering process that provided Lem with a canon of American science fiction that systematically excluded most of the titles that were, even within that time-frame, canonical. Except for his random sampling of Dick's novels, most of the titles he cites are by those writers of the forties and fifties—Asimov, van Vogt, Heinlein, Bradbury—whose appeal is essentially to a juvenile audience. Taxed with having dismissed American sf as "a hopeless case" without having read its best authors, Lem, in a postscript to one of his essays, shifts the blame from himself to criticism in general, which has failed to establish a canon. Lem himself, appar-

Review of *Microworlds: Writing on Science Fiction and Fantasy*, by Stanislaw Lem; and *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*, by David Pringle.

ently, as a meta-critic stands above the drudgery of distinguishing between the wheat and the chaff.

And truly, he needn't bother, for it is clear from his treatments of even those texts for which he professes some regard that the only living author who can command his sustained attention is Stanislaw Lem. The first essay in the book, "Reflections on My Life," is an exercise in unwitting self-betrayal as droll as the diaries of the thirteen-and-three-quarters-year-old Adrian Mole. It begins with a ponderous inquiry as to whether the series of events that has led to the crowning achievement of his own work can be ascribed to mere chance or whether Destiny didn't somehow enter into it. He marvels at his own IQ: "mine was over 180, and I was said to have been . . . the most intelligent child in southern Poland." He re-invented the differential gear and "drew many funny things in my thick copybooks, including a bicycle on which one rode moving up and down as on a horse." He proves by deductive logic the radical novelty of his most recent work, and as an afterthought remarks on those books that exhibit not his philosophic achievements but his cavortings in the provinces of the humorous—of satire, irony, and wit—with a touch of Swift and of dry, mischievous Voltairean misanthropy: "As is well known, the great humorists were people who had been driven to despair and anger by the conduct of mankind. In this respect, I am one of those people." In the creation of the figure of Stanislaw Lem, if in nothing else, one must grant that he's one of the great humorists, but in the other essays that follow his little autobiography he comes across more vividly as a great pedant driven to despair and anger by the failure of other writers to follow his own example in adulating Stanislaw Lem.

Concerning science fiction in its non-Lemish aspects, a much better guide is available in *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*. These are by the author's admission a personal selection, but Pringle knows the territory well (since 1980 he has been the editor of *Foundation*, the best critical journal surveying the field) and his selection is judicious, respecting the *monstris sacrée* of the genre without weighting his list with their dinosaur eggs. Omitted are such standard texts as Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* (it "has always seemed to me to be overrated," Pringle explains) and Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and popular favorites like Anne McCaffery and Marion Zimmer Bradley are dismissed as purveyors of "planetary romance" for which Pringle has no use. In short, Pringle's concern is to single out those books and authors (the one hundred titles are by seventy-three authors) likeliest to appeal to the generally literate reader who wants something better than junk food when her imagination is dining out in the genre. As a checklist of what to stock up on, I don't think this

book has a rival. Pringle's summaries of the one hundred chosen novels exactly convey the merits and fascination of each book without spoiling its surprises, and I finished the one hundredth evaluation with my own list of a dozen sure bets that I will be making room for on my shelf of ready-to-read good intentions. As an indication of Pringle's (and my own) taste, here are some of the titles from just the last twelve years that receive his highest encomia: Ballard's *Crash and High-Rise*, LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, Russ's *The Female Man*, Crowley's *Engine Summer*, Benford's *Timescape*, and Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*. Strict honesty obliges me to note that I get three citations, and doubtless that made me better-disposed to the book than if I'd had none, or only one, but I can still aspire to the condition of Ballard and Aldiss, who get four each, and Philip Dick, who gets five and an apology for the omission of further first-rate books. I commend the book to one and all—and particularly to Stanislaw Lem.