Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction, by Glyn Morgan and C. Palmer-Patel

Carl Abbott

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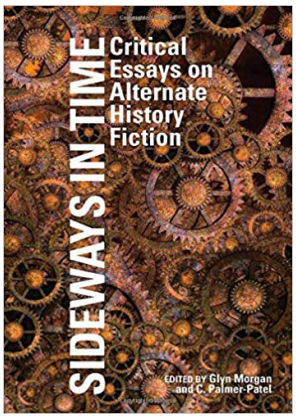

Sideways in Time collects essays derived from a 2015 conference at the University of Liverpool. It opens with a Foreword from prolific speculative fiction author Stephen Baxter and includes ten essays that are bookended by an Introduction and an Afterword by the editors. With a couple of exceptions, the contributors are based in Britain or have British academic connections.

That scaffolding described, the editors deserve a shout-out for their Introduction. In eleven pages they provide a quick and clear review of the critical literature on alternate history from H to G (Hellekson to Gallagher) and make a cogent argument for simple and direct terminology that avoids awkward coinages like allohistory and in-crowd references like Jonbar Hinge. Use "alternate history" and "point of divergence" and people will know what's being talked about. They also make a case for considering alternate history as its own genre or category that overlaps science fiction but also draws from counterfactual history and historical fiction, attracts mainstream writers, and morphs easily into television thriller mode.

The ten essays touch on some familiar landmarks of alternative history: *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (1836), *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), *The Man in the High Castle* (TV version, 2015-19). Other contributors treat less frequently studied texts, such as short stories by Alfred Bester and John Wyndham, as well as introducing English-language readers to a Spanish novel from 1998 and a set of twenty-first century films and anime from Japan. All of the pieces offer interesting takes, and every reader will have their preferences. One of mine is Jonathan Rayner's "Forever Being Yamato: Alternate Pacific War Histories in Japanese Film and Anime," which explores a fascinating set of feature films and animations. It is a good start at developing a complement to the extensive analysis of alternate "Hitler wins, or doesn't he?" fiction by Gavriel Rosenfeld and Catherine Gallagher. A second is Chris Pak's "'It Is One Story': Writing a Global Alternate History in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*." A third is Karen Hellekson's "Agency and Contingency in Televisual Alternate History Texts," which energetically analyzes eight separate television series and mini-series (Maine winters must be good for bingeing). As a group, the essays raise several questions about the character and boundaries of alternate history, which the editors interpret broadly.

A first issue is the tension between "timeline stories" and "lifeline stories." The former explore the social, political, and cultural effects of a divergence and work in the same realm as do the more abstract counterfactuals that historians sometimes propose. The latter focus on single individuals whose personal stories change through time travel interventions or passage to a parallel world. In very rough division, the essays in "Part I: Points of Divergence" deal with timelines and those in "Part II: Manipulating the Genre" with lifelines. The point of this boundary question is whether something to be called alternate *history* needs to dramatize counterfactuals with implications for social groups, societies, or nations. "Straight" alternate history hews to the plausible, whether its scope is as specific as Simone Zelitch's *Judenstaat* (2016) or as broad and deep as *The Years of Rice and Salt*. Authors who work in this vein are interested in how their characters interact with the changed society, which remains "realistic" in that we can understand how things might get from the point of divergence to the society being described. Some of the best examples, of course—Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* (2004) or Jo Walton's "Small Change" trilogy (2006-08)—are able to span the two interests by placing compelling characters in alternate timelines where they have to cope with very interesting dynamics of politics and power.

A second issue involves the mechanisms that generate the alternate history. Is the divergence based on an event that is conceivable within the context of the time, such as the assassination of Elizabeth I or southern victory in the American Civil War without extra weapons from the future? In contrast, does the story depend on the speculative physics of parallel worlds with convenient portals tucked away in a basement? Or on equally speculative time travel scenarios in which a Japanese warship from the twenty-first century can materialize in 1942 (the manga series *Zipang* [2000-09]) or a history professor (!) joins the time patrol to save the world (Michael Crichton's *Timeless* [1999])? Utilization of alternate physics offers abundant options for authors to play with but may thin the "history" part of the alternative. It also brings these sorts of alternate history firmly into the science fiction camp.

On a different side of the Venn diagram are stories that fall in the realm of fantasy with fully implausible, non-scientific premises. Stephen Baxter suggests distending the category to alternate cosmologies, favorably citing the flat Earth in Philip Jose Farmer's "Sail On, Sail On!" (1952), Chloé Germaine Buckley's essay explores *Shadows over Baker Street* (2003), edited by John Pelan and Michael Reaves; its contributors imagine Lovecraftian monsters, shape-shifters, and other supernatural phenomena perplexing reimagined versions of Sherlock Holmes. *La locura de Dios* (1999) by Juan Miguel Aguilera seems born from a kinky coupling of H. Rider Haggard, Dan Brown, and Erich von Daniken. The analysis in these essays is interesting, but I wonder if the texts are alternate history or some other category such as fantasy, fantastic adventure, or magical realism (the latter being perhaps the best slot for Colson Whitehead's alternate-historyish *The Underground Railroad* [2016]).

There is a matter of intellectual interests behind these boundary issues, for different readers engage most deeply with different aspects of human experience. I've been studying, practicing, and writing "straight" history for multiple audiences for longer than I've been writing

about speculative fiction, and find alternate history that engages the dynamics of societal change to be the most challenging and the most capable of imagining more just as well as more unjust societies. One might guess as much from the individual essays that I've cited. Readers of *Sideways in Time* whose predilection is for narratives that focus on the thoughts and emotions of individuals or that play with the weird and fantastic will have a different set of favorites. To paraphrase the editors, they will be drawn to the narratives that expand, stretch, subvert, and redefine the genre. For all of us, however, the collection is worth reading and consulting.

Carl Abbott retired after teaching Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University in five decades (but not fifty years!). His book Imagining Urban Futures was recently published in Chinese translation.