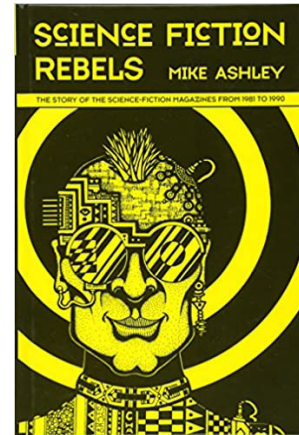


Science Fiction Rebels, by Mike Ashley

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Mike Ashley. *Science Fiction Rebels: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1981 to 1990*. Liverpool University Press, 2020 (hardback: 2016). Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies 54. Paperback. 495 pg. \$39.10. ISBN 9781789621716. Ebook ISBN 9781781384404.



To fully and accurately account for the history of science fiction remains a difficult task for scholars of the genre due to its ever-changing subject matter, fluctuating surges, and mixed public receptions, as well as the bordering genres it can include, depending on who one asks and in what time period, and the colossal range and measure of the genre in itself. It seems to be to this end that Mike Ashley, a legendary scholar, editor, and anthologist of science fiction, fantasy, and mystery, attempts to recount the history of specifically science fiction (hereafter “SF”) magazines by time period in his ambitious collection of volumes entitled *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine*. The series includes the previously published *The Time Machines* (2001), *Transformations* (2005), and *Gateways to Forever* (2007) and the subject of this review, *Science Fiction Rebels: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1981 to 1990* (2016), the latest volume, although a projected fifth volume entitled *The Rise of the Cyber Chronicles* is set to cover the 1990s. Unlike most existing scholarship on science fiction magazines, *Science Fiction Rebels* microscopically focuses on the publication and editing history of the magazines while occasionally mentioning the trends of the genre, namely the cyberpunk movement, slipstream SF, and the radical hard-SF renaissance. This volume heavily centers on the editors and sales trends of the SF magazines around the world along with their format, level of professionalism, circulation, and samples of their content. *Science Fiction Rebels* proves to be an irreplaceable companion for study of SF magazine editorship in the 1980s and, though it is not ideal for new or casual SF fans, those interested in specifically SF magazine editing will find this volume as a useful resource for surveying editorial hardships and might view the decade as more difficult for SF writers to prosper in than originally thought. Besides arguing for better publishing and editorial techniques, Ashley displays no interest in hypothesizing an argument from his data, but instead offers it up to future scholars as a prime literary source on SF magazine culture in the 80s.

In *Science Fiction Rebels*, Ashley organizes the magazines by prozine—meaning professional magazine, semi-prozine—to mean semi-professional magazine, and small press magazines, approaching them in mostly that respective order. Ashley also divides the magazines by region,

starting with America, Britain, Canada, Ireland, Australia, and South Africa, ending with non-English speaking regions covering Asia, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Americas. Ashley concludes the volume with five appendixes that are astoundingly detailed and absolutely unparalleled in bibliographic utility, recounting the names and issues of the magazines, a directory of the magazines' editors and cover artists, and the magazines' circulation figures. Interviews with editors, a few authors, and clips of reviews and even some magazine reader reviews are frequently made use of throughout *Science Fiction Rebels* to establish public attitudes and behind-the-scenes stories surrounding the magazines.

Ashley spends little time speculating or judging what makes an SF magazine attractive or successful, but rather suggests that future magazines learn from the mistakes of the many failed magazines of the 1980s. He postulates, using the recounted tales of fallen SF magazines in the 80s as evidence, that insufficient funding, inadequate planning, and lack of an open, devout, manifold publishing and editing team as combined and individual factors steered the magazines, professional or not, into their demise. Other than this, however, Ashley does not attempt to argue over the best of the magazines, their content or art, nor the theory surrounding their content. Ashley's main objective in *Science Fiction Rebels* is to give a mostly historical account of SF magazines in the 80's, not more, not less, with microscopic detail and momentous collections of data, focusing mainly on the editorial side of the magazines. Throughout *Science Fiction Rebels*, the rapid imparting of editorial history and name-dropping might be overwhelming for less than serious SF readers, but to advanced SF enthusiasts and scholars, the brisk history is welcome for academic purposes, and the name-dropping is an exciting discovery of beloved authors who started their careers in SF magazines. However, to both types of readers the repetitiveness of recounting the back story and demise of the literary magazines can become tedious.

Thus to start, in chapters 1 and 2, Ashley recounts the stories of the prozine SF magazines, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories* and *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, and *Omni*. Here Ashley retells the birth of cyberpunk and the competition between SF magazines as well as their conformity to a slick magazine design or tradition, as well as the ways in which formatting and content changed and affected sales. Ashley briefly mentions public opinions on each magazine while paying most attention to the editors behind the magazines and sales and circulation history. As with most of the magazines discussed in *Science Fiction Rebels*, Ashley offers brief bibliographies of some authors and summaries of stories within these magazines to provide a glimpse into what each magazines' interests and readerships were like. Ashley spends the most time on these magazines, rightfully so given their legendary legacies and impact on not only SF magazines, but SF as a whole.

Chapter 3 details the related cousin of SF in horror and dark SF, mentioning splatter punk. Here Ashley describes the histories of Rod Sterling's *The Twilight Zone* magazine, *Night Cry*, *The Horror Show*, and *Pulphouse*, amongst other small press magazines, giving an overview of their birth, life, and fall. Here Ashley draws attention to the blurring and mixing of genres that SF was

undergoing in America while also emphasizing the competition between SF and other genre magazines. Recounting the hard-SF renaissance, though there is relatively little commentary on what contributed to it, chapters 4 and 5 tell the histories of SF magazines in English-speaking countries other than America. These include *Interzone*, *Something Else*, *Back Brain Recluse*, *Dream Magazine*, *Stargate*, *Tesseract*, *Omega*, and, of course, others. These chapters illuminate the reversion to hard SF in other countries besides America, which was experiencing a pushing of SF boundaries and a “Cyberpunk Daze,” (212) as Ashley coins it.

At the end, chapters 6 and 7 encompass slipstream SF’s and speculative fiction’s places in the SF magazines, discussing the history of *Last Wave*, *Modern Stories*, *New Pathways* and others. The chapter also offers a much-needed highlight on the short-lived but influential small press magazines of the 80s. Lastly and interestingly, appendix 1, which seems out of place as an appendix and could have easily been a chapter 8, details the history of SF magazines that took root in non-English speaking countries; here Ashley manages to cover multiple countries from every region of the world. The other appendixes are collections of data tables involving sales figures, production, and contributors.

Though *Science Fiction Rebels* offers an unparalleled collection of data and a detailed editorial history, it excludes historical events and social justice issues of the 80s that impacted SF. For instance, there is no mention of the AIDS epidemic, the Cold War, the election of Sandra Day O’Connor (the first female U.S. Supreme Court Justice), the Ronald Reagan campaign, or the savings and loan crisis, all of which impacted either the economic or the content side of SF. Ashley makes no connection between general history and the history of SF magazines, not even to make commentary or connections on the impact of the world on the genre, its authors or editors.

There is also no mention of or allusion to the relationship between SF magazines and the massive blockbuster SF films of the 80s such as *Back to the Future* (1985), *E.T.* (1982), *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), or *Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi* (1983), all of which sparked mainstream and widespread interest in SF. Ashley does not speculate about whether the magazines received any benefit from this SF explosion or if the content was influenced by these major films. Given the hard-SF renaissance, it seems impossible to not discuss these major films and their impact on authors. Part of this omission could be due to the fact that Ashley seems less interested in analyzing the literary content of the magazines than in focusing on the sales and editorship of the magazines, in an attempt to avoid arguments over the magazines’ stories and literary themes. This remains the only, albeit major, downside of *Science Fiction Rebels*. With no opinion or connection between the world of SF outside of magazines, a microscopic view of the 1980s SF magazines editorship becomes the result.

Besides its lack of historical context and linguistic repetitiveness, *Science Fiction Rebels* fills a niche but tremendous void in SF scholarship of 80s literary magazines and history. Giving an origin story of cyberpunk and slipstream SF, along with over 200 pages of appendices of editorial data and a developed recounting of the history behind the SF magazines of the 80s, Ashley gives other scholars of SF magazines valuable insight to the world of editing SF in one of the world's most eclectic decades. Ashley makes *Science Fiction Rebels* a scholarly must-have for research and editorial history within 80s SF.

B.L. King is an MA graduate student and instructor at Florida Atlantic University with a concentration in SF and Fantasy. She is an ICFA, PCA/ACA and SFRA member and has presented at each of the 2021 conferences for those associations. Her master's thesis will be an ecocritical look at *The Witcher* series and she is a proud working member of Heartwood Books and Art, an antiquarian and rare book seller.