

Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles: Contesting the Road in American Science Fiction, by Jeremy Withers



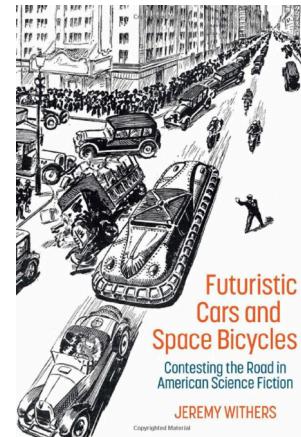
Fred Motson

Jeremy Withers. *Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles: Contesting the Road in American Science Fiction*. Liverpool UP, 2020. Hardcover. 256 pg. \$120.00. ISBN 9781789621754.

As technology continues to advance, it can increasingly feel as though the (first) world is coming ever closer to transportation methods from “science fiction.” Jeremy Withers’ *Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles: Contesting the Road in American Science Fiction* provides a timely and wide-ranging survey of how many methods of transportation, but most predominantly the car and the bicycle, have been portrayed in the past century of speculative fiction.

Withers identifies six eras of speculative fiction, each of which has produced works which include representations of cars and/or bicycles. These eras are identified by Withers as: the pulp era (c. 1926-40); the ‘Golden Age’ of sf in the 1950s; the New Wave era (c. 1960-1975); postcyberpunk in the 1990s; and in recent times both postapocalyptic cli-fi and 1980s-nostalgia sf. For each of the six eras, Withers focuses on three exemplar works. The majority of the authors selected will be familiar to the sf enthusiast, although the specific works identified are not necessarily their best-known texts. Thus authors such as Hugo Gernsback, Ray Bradbury, Ursula K. Le Guin and William Gibson are represented, with a roughly even split in the texts examined between short stories and books. The final chapter goes beyond the written word to also consider film and television works.

In the introduction, Withers stresses the multidisciplinary nature of his studies, and while the theme of transportation vehicles is present throughout, it is difficult to categorise the book as belonging to a particular discipline. Withers himself suggests that it sits between ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and mobility studies. I would not underestimate the sociohistorical elements of the book either. Much of the discussion expressly draws connections between wider social concerns and the perspective taken in the texts discussed. This is done particularly well in relation to authors’ individual and often ill-fated histories with automobiles. Many of the authors examined in the book were avowed non-drivers, albeit for a wide range of reasons (Bradbury saw a shocking and gory car accident as a teenager; Octavia Butler was prevented by her dyslexia). Most shockingly of all, Hugo Gernsback’s three-year-old daughter was struck and killed by a taxi in 1928. The two factors which seem to arise again and again are the physical dangers of automobiles (especially to pedestrians) and their environmental impact.



As this might suggest, Withers' own view is clear. "Two wheels good, four wheels bad" is perhaps an unfair reduction of the argument that pervades the book, but this is very much a critique of the automobile rather than a simple exploration of its portrayal. The methodical structure maintained throughout the book does mean that it is of considerable value in tracking how (some) sf has represented and interpreted the (futuristic) car and bicycle over time; but it should always be borne in mind that the author has chosen the examples to support the argument.

It is usually a mark of good writing when a reviewer would have appreciated a fuller treatment of the subject. Both elements of that sentence apply here. The book is engagingly-written and was an ideal companion for post-lockdown trips to the coffee shop: trips usually followed by a search for some of the lesser-known short stories discussed in the book (although do be aware that the discussion does contain plot spoilers). My one regret is that during the author's necessarily limited tour of a hundred years of sf, there was not space for a little more reflection on the wider literary context of each era. As the book progressed, so did the scope, as skateboards, airships and tanks enter the scene. I felt that at times the narrative broadened to a more general comparison of 'harmful' and 'benign' (again, in the sense of safety and particularly environmental impact) methods of transport – an interesting discussion but arguably one better explored in a further book. A similar point could be made about the final substantive chapter relating to the increasingly iconic 1980s nostalgia trope of "kids on bikes." Withers discusses these recent texts with some authority and raises some interesting points, particularly related to gender, but the chapter feels a little disconnected from what has come before. This is perhaps at least in part due to the fact that the bikes and cars involved in these texts are nostalgic representations of what was (at least in a certain idealised America) rather than futuristic representations of what may be.

Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles is a valuable contribution to a wide range of fields which touch on transport and imagined futures. From my own legal perspective, I found sections on how regulation of various forms of futuristic transport has been portrayed in sf particularly interesting, especially given the ongoing debate as to how the law should react and adapt to advances such as autonomous vehicles and e-scooters. I would suggest that the book is of interest to a wide academic audience and while the (seemingly inevitable) price point of a hardback specialist academic work places it outside the budget of the general sf enthusiast, hopefully library access and perhaps a future paperback edition might ensure the book receives a deserved wider audience.

Fred Motson is a Lecturer in Law at the Open University, UK. Fred's research interests include sports law, property law and environmental law. He has a particular interest in the intersection between law and technology, both in how technology can shape or change the practice of law and in how law responds to technological advances. Fred has a number of forthcoming projects exploring how representations of the law in sf can inform legal policy today.