

BOOK CLUB DISCOVER THE CLASSICS OF SF LITERATURE

The Stars My Destination

Alfred Bester, 1956

>> David Langford experiences an anti-hero's violent vengeance.

He was one hundred and seventy days dying and not yet dead. He fought for survival with the passion of a beast in a trap. He was delirious and rotting... "

Gully Foyle starts at the bottom and claws his way up to become one of science fiction's strongest anti-heroes. At first a non-entity, a dull space-hand with no future, he's marooned in deep space amid the wreckage of his ship, Nomad. Foyle's transformation begins when the sister craft Vorga appears, ignores a barrage of distress flares, and passes him by. "Vorga, I kill you filthy."

The Stars My Destination is a wildly inventive revenge melodrama, inspired by Alexandre Dumas's classic *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Driven by obsession, Foyle rescues himself – after a fashion – and returns, strangely disfigured, to the rich decadence of 25th-century Earth. Society has been transformed by the widespread power to teleport or "jaunte", and Bester gleefully explores the criminal possibilities.

In a first, bungled vengeance bid, Foyle tries to blow up the docked Vorga and is thrown into an underground prison whose inmates are kept in total darkness (because to teleport, you must know where you are). Like the Count of Monte Cristo in the Chateau d'If, Foyle gets educated while still captive, escapes the escape-proof jail, acquires huge wealth and a title, and begins to plot serious revenge.

In his new identity as "Fourmyle of Ceres" – an upstart dilettante who runs a travelling circus and charms high society with his eccentricity – Foyle tracks down Vorga's crew for brutal interrogation. He rapes, tortures, kills. He's had himself rewired as a cyborg commando with hyper-accelerated reflexes, an infernal machine in human form. Like the Count – who learned the trick in prison – he can see in the dark...

Frenzied background activity includes war between the solar system's Inner Planets and Outer Satellites. Massive OS nuclear attacks on Earth and Mars provide dazzling special effects for key episodes – one of them a love scene. IP



Back when SF was often antiseptic, Bester stood out for his enthusiastic vision of life's seamy side.

Intelligence, OS spies and the merchant-prince owner of Nomad and Vorga are frantically chasing a superweapon called "Pyre", now in Foyle's hands; plus a personal secret which Foyle himself doesn't know.

Bester's rapid-action plot teems with bizarre characters: a blind woman whose eyes, impossibly, function only in the radio/radar bands. A woman cursed with projective telepathy – everyone can hear her thoughts. A man made lethally radioactive by a nuclear accident – reminding us that Bester once worked in comics, scripting supervillains like Dr Radium. Above all, there's the enigmatic Burning Man who flickers into existence at crisis-points of Foyle's

adventures, to distract, save, mystify... and vanish. Further eccentrics include the Scientific People, whose religion is a crazy patchwork of technical jargon ("Quant Suff!"), and Cellar Christians practising forbidden worship in safehouses guarded by the Lethal Defense Corporation of Sweden.

What makes this farrago work is the crazy, obsessive tempo of Bester's writing. In an interview, Bester said he took his pace from music. "I say to myself... I need the attack of Beethoven in the first movement of the *Eroica*." He also liked to quote the Hollywood advice, "Start with an earthquake and build to a climax."

For decades there were two versions of *Stars*. The UK's *Tiger! Tiger!* appeared first and was edited differently from the US *The Stars My Destination*. In Britain, Foyle's repeated curse became "Vorga, I kill you deadly", not "filthy". Some typographic gimmicks vanished from the climactic "synaesthesia" sequence, where Foyle's senses become cross-wired and he experiences sound as light, colour as pain, touch as taste... Alex and Phyllis Eisenstein edited a best-of-both-versions *Stars* in 1996 – now the official text worldwide.

Back when SF was often pale and antiseptic, Bester stood out for his enthusiastic vision of life's seamy side. He invented flash crowds: "Jack-janters" teleporting into disaster areas to rob and loot. Cyberpunk authors took their cue from the sleaziness of his mean streets. Many others were influenced. Michael Moorcock recently told me: "I would never have started reading SF (as such) if I hadn't got hold of a second-hand copy of *The Stars My Destination* in Paris in 1957. Until then, I hadn't liked anything I'd seen..."

This one really is a classic, and compulsively readable too. **SFX**

Like this? Try these!

***The Demolished Man* by Alfred Bester (1952)**

Ben Reich, another towering anti-hero, schemes to commit murder and get away with it. Even though the police are mind-readers...



***Nova* by Samuel R Delany (1968)**

A New Yorker, like Bester, Delany created in *Nova* an innovative, obsessive quest for treasure at the heart of a star, whose freakish cast is pictured with Bester-like charm and dazzlement.



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>> "A mindblowingly good book. One of the absolute greats of SF. Widescreen Baroque indeed. Often imitated but never topped." **umopapisdn**

>> "After finishing it I couldn't help but wish I'd actually had the chance to read it when it was first published. Much as I'd enjoyed it, my viewpoint was somewhat jaded by our current society's morals and values." **Cally5000**

>> "Doesn't hang about, does it? When Gully gets in a scrape, the plan and its execution are over in pages, not chapters. The entire book could be the definition of a rip-cracking yarn." **jstarbuck**

>> "One of the all-time great revenge stories, especially given the ending. At the height of the Cold War, this was stunning. I can't think of a similar resolution of revenge or a revolutionary theme as staggering as this until Alan Moore's *V*." **pete_darby**

>> "Chuffing amazing book, puts most modern writers to shame with its fast pace and the depth of its imagination." **Clown Asylum**

>> "I do enjoy big sci-fi books but always going into tiny detail can spoil the flow. Not a problem with this. Bester keeps it simple: this is the equipment, it works, move on. It keeps the story going smoother and makes the book a real page-turner." **vagabond**

Get reading!

>> In SFX155 Stephen Baxter will be making a *Rendezvous With Rama*. **NEXT ISSUE: We take to the skies with Anne McCaffrey's fantasy classic *Dragonflight*.**