

Dangerous Visions

Edited by Harlan Ellison, 1967

Geoff Ryman thumbs through a seminal short story anthology

There was a time when you couldn't start a science fiction story with "Call me Ishmael". Pulp editors banned first-person narrative. SF prose was serviceable at best, and a whole range of topics from sex to religion were taboo. Though SF congratulated itself on being way-out and forward thinking, by the 1960s it was dullsville, square.

Then Harlan Ellison, a mouthy young man, pulled together *Dangerous Visions*, the most explosive anthology in the history of science fiction. "Break the taboos", he said. Through sheer chutzpah, he got almost every big name in the field to write an original story.

Isaac Asimov wrote the introduction and Ellison came back with opinionated commentaries as fascinating as a fixated cobra. The authors got a chance to reply in afterwords. All this highly personal writing makes *Dangerous Visions* a great introduction to SF coterie politics. Everyone knows each other, helps each other and sometimes hates each other.

What other anthologist has been inspired to write a sequel to one of the stories he's bought? Ellison's own "The Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World" carries right on from Robert Bloch's "Toy for Juliette", using the same characters. Bloch swaps the role of editor, introducing Ellison. The story shows Jack the Ripper in a blazingly imagined city of the future. It reads like Ripper in Wonderland:

"A drop of water, thick as quicksilver, plummeted to the pavement, struck, bounded, rose several inches, then evaporated into a crimson smear in the shape of a whale's tooth, which settled to the pavement and lay still."

My God, they wrote great prose in those days, great chewable chunks of it. There's an artistic ambition in these stories sorely lacking in today's blandly written SF.

That might be no bad thing, mind. It's hard to imagine "Riders of the Purple Wage" by Philip José Farmer being published now. It's 30,000 words of fake '60s Dylan, only without any good tunes. An artist mopes about the house while characters spout cod philosophy



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and bad puns. The hero beats up his girlfriend for applying spermicidal jelly, and then uses molecular glue to seal her genitalia so she has to have his child. Later, in a scene described like Keystone Kops, they have another fight. It won a Hugo.

Those of us not in possession of a Y chromosome might be grateful that we no longer live in the swinging '60s. Of *Dangerous Visions'* 33 stories, only three are by women, and one of those, by Miriam Allen de Ford, starts with the graphic rape and murder of a little girl.

Stories from *Dangerous Visions* swept the following year's awards. Fritz Leiber's "Gonna Roll the Bones" won

both a Hugo and a Nebula. It's an American tall tale about a gambler shooting crap with Death, but it somehow also turns into a parable about mothers and why boys need to escape them. Philip K Dick's "Faith of our Fathers" was nominated for a Hugo and Nebula and is a truly dangerous vision for 1967 – the Communists have won, and Mao's successor turns out to be God. But God is evil. "Aye, and Gomorrah" by Samuel R Delaney won a Nebula. It's about a new, sexless gender. Moving and simple, it could have been written yesterday.

The older hands also deliver effective kicks to conventionality. Lester del Rey opens with "Evensong", in which post-human Man finally imprisons God in Eden, old Earth. It's the ultimate statement of SF's replacement of God the Father with self-created Man.

The 26th World SF convention gave Ellison a special citation calling his collection "the most significant and controversial SF book published in 1967". Only three years later Ursula Le Guin won the Hugo with *The Left Hand of Darkness*. She, Alice Sheldon (writing as James Tiptree Jr), Joanna Russ and other overturning women hit SF with another revolution. This one-two punch made the field we know today.

The best of SF is often found in short stories. Clusters of stories by a number of different authors can show that a new movement has taken hold. *Dangerous Visions*, like the British magazine *New Worlds*, made SF into modernist literature through style, substance, experimentation and bravery. It's still as dangerous as hell. **SFX**

Geoff Ryman's story "Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter" is up for a Hugo Award. You can download it for free from www.orionbooks.co.uk/11488-0/author-Geoff-Ryman.htm

Like This? Try These!

Her Smoke Rose up Forever by James Tiptree Jr (2004)

A collection of short stories by Tiptree. These great tales, which mostly date from the '70s, helped make feminism a permanent feature of SF.



Mirrorshades edited by Bruce Sterling (1986)

Science fiction catches up with the cyberpunk revolution. This anthology with stories by William Gibson, Pat Cadigan, Rudy Rucker and others made SF cool again.



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>> "Sex and/or Mr Morrison" – marvellous writing, and it's all about genitals. Good work." **DocSavage**

>> "Most of the stories aren't bad, but they don't give me tingles down the spine. Pohl's 'The Day After the Day the Martians Came' stands out." **Shoesworth**

>> "Auto-Da-Fe" – pointless toss." **DocSavage**

>> "The stories may seem dated but these were/are masters of their craft at their most eloquent. Pre-Ellison, speculative fiction writers were restrained to write to a specific format, but Harlan gave writers carte-blanche." **Bernard Quatermass**

>> "The Escaping" – not sure I understood it until I read the afterword." **DocSavage**

>> "Delany's 'Aye and Gomorrah' is brilliant." **Gaspar**

>> "Riders of the Purple Wage... not what I would call enjoyable." **DocSavage**

>> "Theodore Sturgeon's 'If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?' is absolutely brilliant (about incest, and all the reasons why we should do it...)." **Gaspar**

>> "Gonna Roll the Bones" – rightly won Nebula and Hugo awards. Sheer ruddy genius. And one of the best last lines ever." **DocSavage**

Get Reading!

>> In *SFX161* it's time for some Dick. Philip K Dick, that is, as Stephen Baxter ponders: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* **NEXT ISSUE:** Dave Langford goes back to school with Ursula Le Guin's 1968 novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*