

The fiction of possible themes

'According to Ecclesiastes, there is no new thing under the sun. That eponymous Preacher was speaking, of course, from the vantage point of an Earth assumed to be at the centre of the cosmos. Eventually, science established a different perspective. And then came science fiction, recklessly proclaiming an infinity of new things under an infinity of suns.' (Edmund Cooper)

In 1954, the Astronomer Royal claimed that a man would never get out into space. That same year, Edmund had his first SF novel published - 'Ferry Rocket' - though under a pseudonym. He was also writing an SF short story, *The Intruders*. Both the novel and this story are about people going to the moon in space ships; the short story being of the first ever expedition to the moon, and the novel set mainly in and around a lunar city. Both feature sandy rocky landscapes, gravity much less than that of Earth, and no oxygen in the atmosphere. Footprints last for ages, jumping and running can be a bit unpredictable, and people have to wear space-suits and helmets and have oxygen supplied to them. Edmund had managed to describe the exact conditions and problems that the men met who first set foot on the moon, in July 1969.

So Edmund had done some research. He had been interested in astronomy since he was a teenager, and in the early 1950s he read books and articles and even other stories concerning the moon, building up in his mind as he kept some ideas and discarded others, a picture of what the conditions on the moon's surface *might* be like. And, as it turned out, Edmund had foretold the conditions on the surface of the moon with uncanny accuracy, in both 'Ferry Rocket' and *The Intruders*.

The above two paragraphs, which attempt to illustrate what science fiction is about, are based around the Introductions which Edmund wrote for a couple of his books. Indeed, other paragraphs in this article are based around ones Edmund wrote, and there are also quotes from an interview, and from reviews and other sources. In this article, I show what Edmund considered science fiction to be about - rather than my own thoughts on the subject, and although in some places I've supplied alternative words, it is mainly Edmund's voice which is written here.

Science fiction is about what could happen, or even what could have happened, according to the laws of science - but it's not about things that in reality could not occur. Edmund used to tell me that there are three kinds of SF: space-opera; 'hard' SF; and science fantasy. Science fantasy was, according to him, just fantasy with a gloss of spaceships and so on, set in the future: recognisable by such pure fantasy elements as beaming down to a planet and back to the ship via means of some sort of matter transmitter, or time-travel.

'Space-opera', likened to the SF equivalent of soap-opera, was like science fantasy, except that it tended to be less fantastic and concentrated a lot on gadgets and possible new inventions of the future and most of it takes place away from Earth. 'Hard' SF was what he thought of as proper science fiction and was a literature of the possible, according to Edmund's definition of it. What might happen, if...

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In an interview with Jim Goddard, when asked if he had a pet definition of SF, Edmund said that for his money 'SF has got to be the art of the possible':

'If it becomes impossible and absurd, if it involves concepts, ideas, gadgetry, and so on, that really offend all the laws of science, and even offend human intelligence, then it's not SF, it's gobbledegook. A great deal of gobbledegook is passed off as SF, these days...

'[When] you get faster-than-light drives - and I've committed this dreadful thing myself - it's impossible, it offends the laws of science, so it's not SF.'

Here, this 'dreadful thing' that Edmund had committed was, principally, his Expendables series, written in the 1970s - which Jim Goddard, elsewhere, calls 'cheerful shoot-em-up space exploration stories'.

When he was writing his early SF short stories, in the 1950s, Edmund was fascinated by scientific and technological innovations. In his later short stories, he became more concerned with moral issues - as indeed he was in many of his SF novels, even the most satirical. For example, 'Kronk' and 'All Fools' Day'. The latter was published in 1966 and described as 'the wackiest book of the year' (by the Edinburgh Evening News), while 'Kronk', 1970, was 'mad' and 'extremely funny', according to The Sunday Times - yet there was nothing in either book that could offend a scientist or any intelligent person; because they were novels of the possible.

In a publicity handout, used by the publishers Coronet in 1977, Edmund was quoted as saying that in a typical novel of his 'there will be a theme that I care about and take seriously. In a sense, the novel will be a propaganda vehicle... These are serious novels, not intended for science fiction addicts only. I have a big readership among people who wouldn't read science fiction but like the blend I write because it's fairly credible and doesn't offend their intelligence.'

Edmund said that science fiction wasn't necessarily just doomwatching, but speculation on what is possible, what could happen one day, in the future, however near or far that be. For him, it was a literature of ideas, a genre in which he could explore possible themes.

As social commentary, SF is now taken more seriously than it was before. Lots of people from all different walks of life read it and it has become fashionable, almost respectable. Not so long ago, SF writers were literary outcasts; yet now they are in grave danger of being part of the literary establishment.

Maybe this is because our world now is one that would have been regarded, not so long ago, as a science fiction world. It's a world where hundreds of millions of people can watch the exploration of Mars while it is happening; where dying people can have heart-transplants, or even be given synthetic organs; where computers can diagnose illnesses or control automated productions; where food, fuel, fertilizers, fabrics, lubricants, and even explosives can all be derived from the same raw material.

A huge technological and scientific revolution has taken place in such a short space of time. Edmund's own lifetime spanned the development of the motor car, the use of electrical power, radio communications and television, antibiotics, nuclear energy, computers, and the start of space exploration.

Edmund's father, Joe, was born before the flight of the first aircraft, and in his lifetime saw men land on the moon. Actually, Joe did not believe that men had been on the moon; he reckoned that it was all done in a television studio. Many

of the older people in technologically advanced countries are experiencing what Alvin Toffler has described as 'future shock'. Younger people too have difficulty coping with the tremendous rate of change and turn to drugs, or try to evolve alternative lifestyles, or end up involved in crime. The human race is galloping into greater and greater absurdity. More people are killed on the roads in a year than in a major war a hundred years ago, yet we tolerate it. We are deluged with news. It has to be a 'first', like landing on the moon, or something unique for people to take it in. We have so many bloody things to worry about we are too dazed to know what to worry about next. Fact has overtaken fiction in so many ways that our sense of wonder has become punch-drunk. Yet, more and more people are still attracted to science fiction.

Some people are finding in certain kinds of hard SF a valid and relevant form of social criticism. Others look for scientific and technological sign-posts to the future, searching SF to see if it offers any indication of the major advances likely to be made. Thinking people everywhere have begun to realize that we are living in a science fiction world made real, and that the sophisticated, technology-based civilization we have produced is reaching critical mass and is ready to explode.

History has shown that no civilization, whatever its culture, is going to last for ever, and there is no reason to expect our own machine-based culture will be an exception to the pattern. But, whatever else it might be, science fiction is not a literature of prophecy. Sometimes, some SF stories seem, with hindsight, to have foretold what actually was going to happen; yet each and every SF writer has written many stories that did not come true.

Edmund wrote many SF novels and short stories; some, on reflection, seem to have contained a prophetic element, and many did not. The same can probably be said of all serious science fiction writers, past and present. They told of possible scenarios; not things definitely going to happen, or even probably going to, but speculating on and with possible themes.