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Russian And East European Science Fiction

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vanished. My eyes, a thousand eyes, gazed upwards, at the Machine. There—the third, iron gesture of that inhuman hand. Shaking in an unseen wind, the criminal makes his way, slowly, up the steps, one step, another, and with that step, the last of his life, throws his face back to the sky, to the blue. Standing on his final resting place.

Severe and immovable as destiny, the Benefactor passed around the Machine in a circle, laid an enormous hand on the lever. There was not a whisper of breath: every eye was on the hand. The hand gripped the fiery vortex, the instrument, with its force of hundreds of thousands of volts. What a magnificent charge!

An immeasurable second. The hand, crackling with current, lowers. An unbearably sharp, cutting beam flashes—like a shiver, a just audible crackle in the tubes of the machine. The prostrate body is bathed in a luminous haze; dissolving, dissolving, with a terrible speed before our eyes. And then nothing: only a puddle of pure, clean water, where a moment before a scarlet heart beat violently...

This process was simple, and familiar to each of us: yes, dissociated matter, yes, the splitting of the body's atoms. But nonetheless, every time it was like a miracle, a sign of the inhuman power of the Benefactor.

Before Him flared the faces of a dozen female ciphers, women with lips half-open from agitation, their flowers fluttering in the wind.[1]

According to the old custom, ten women adorned the uniform of the Benefactor, which was still damp from the spray, with flowers. With the magnificent steps of a high priest He slowly descended, slowly moved through the Tribunal, and after him the tender white branches of women's arms, and a storm of cries from the unified millions. And then cries in honor of the Guardians, invisibly present, somewhere in our rows. Who knows: maybe the Guardians were foreseen in the fantasies of the ancient people, in creating their tender-terrible "guardian angels" that were placed beside each individual at birth.

Yes, something from the ancient religions, something purifying, like a thunderstorm, was present in the whole celebration. You, whose task it is to read this—do you know moments like these? I feel sorry for you, if you do not...

[1] From the Botanical Museum, of course. I personally have never seen any beauty in flowers—like everything else belonging to the savage, ancient world, everything that was exiled beyond the Green Wall. The only beauty is reasonable and useful: machines, boots, formulas, food, etc.

Record Fourteen.

"Mine." I can't. The cold floor.

Yet more about yesterday. The personal hour before sleep ended, and thus I could not write. All of this has been carved into me, engraved forever, especially this unbearably cold floor...

Yesterday evening it was time for O's visit—it was her day. I went down to the attendant to obtain a certification for closing the blinds.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "You seem...a little off, today."

"I... I'm sick."

In essence, this was true; certainly this was a sickness. All of it was a sickness. All of a sudden I remembered; of course I had the certification. I felt in my pocket, and there it was: a rustle of paper. That meant—but that meant everything had happened, all of it had truly happened.

I held out the slip of paper to the attendant, feeling like my cheeks would catch fire; without raising my head, I knew that the attendant was surprised to see me.

Then it was 21:30. In the room to the left I see my neighbor, bent over a book, his lumps, his bald spot and his forehead, shaping an enormous, yellow parabola. I agonized; after everything with her, how could I want O? And to the right I could feel his eyes on me, I could see distinctly the wrinkles on his forehead, ranks of yellow, illegible scratches. And for some reason it appears that these scratches were all about me.

At a quarter to 22 she came to my room, a joyful pink whirlwind, a firm squeeze of pink arms around me. And then I felt that squeeze slowly getting weaker, her arms releasing me, until her hands lowered and she said:

"You aren't the same, you aren't like before, you aren't mine!"

What a wild term, "mine"! I was never... but I hesitated. Earlier I wasn't, not reliably, but now, you see, I don't live in our rational world, but in a second, nonsensical world. The world of the square root of negative one.

The blinds fell. To the right, my neighbor dropped his book from the table to the floor, and in the last, instantaneous, narrow crevice between the blinds and the floor, I saw a yellow hand snatch up the book. And in my heart, I would have used all my strength if I could have grasped that hand.

"I thought... I hoped to see you on my walk today. I need you, I need you so much..."

Poor, pretty O! Her pink mouth was a half moon with the horns pointing downwards. But I couldn't tell her why, what I had done; it would have made her an accomplice to my crimes, and I knew that she didn't have the strength to go the Bureau of Guardians, so consequently...

O lay down. I slowly kissed her, kissing the sweet, plump crease in her wrist. Her blue eyes were closed, and that pink half moon slowly blossomed, melting, as I kissed her everywhere.

Suddenly I felt clearly how empty and devastated I was, how I had been cast off. I couldn't—it wasn't possible. I must, but I couldn't. My lips froze.

The pink half moon trembled, faded, convulsed. O threw the cover over herself, cocooned in the bed, her face buried in the pillow.

I sat on the floor near the bed, the cold, despairing floor. I sat in silence. Agonizing cold came from below; everything was over. This was, it seemed to me, the same, silent cold, found in the mute, black space between planets.

"You must understand, I didn't want..." I mumbled. "I tried, with all my strength..."

It was true; I really didn't want to. And everything else, every word I said to her. But how to explain to her, that iron doesn't want to, but the law, inevitable and precise...

O raised her face from the pillow and, without opening her eyes, said "Go away," but through her tears it sounded like "goway," and for some reason that absurd, childish trifle broke my heart.

My whole being was freezing, pierced with the cold. I left, walking out into the corridor. Through the glass I could see a light, barely perceptible wisp of smoke. At night, the smoke would descend, attaching to everything. What would that night bring?

O slipped past me silently, to the elevator. There was a knock on the door.

"One minute," I cried, frightened.

But the elevator was already descending, down, down, down...

She had taken R from me.

She had taken O from me.

And yet, and yet...

RUSSIAN AND EAST EUROPEAN SCIENCE FICTION

Sibelan Forrester

Although Anglo-American science fiction is better known throughout the world, not to mention (naturally) in North America, Russian and East European science fiction has played a significant role in the development of SF for more than a century. Russian and East European SF differ enough to be treated separately here, but they have been closely interrelated thanks to mutual translation as well as geographical proximity, especially in the socialist era (1917–1991 for the USSR and roughly 1947–1991 for most of the rest of Eastern Europe).

For many reasons, SF has long been a popular genre in Eastern Europe and Russia. Many early SF works were acceptable even to socialist censorship, because the future or interplanetary societies they depicted were essentially socialist; many authors (H. G. Wells and others) were Fabians or some other variety of leftist. Jules Verne and Wells were translated frequently, so their works were easily available and widely enjoyed. Readers of SF in Russia and East Europe today are much more familiar with the best western SF—from classics to the present day—than Western readers are with Russian and East European SF.

RUSSIAN AND SOVIET SF

Russian SF sprang from a utopian chapter of Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What Is To Be Done?* ("Vera Pavlovna's Dream") and from Fyodor Dostoevsky's story "Dream of a Ridiculous Man" and "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" (a chapter from the 1880 novel *The Karamazov Brothers*) as much as from the perpetual favorites Jules Verne or H. G. Wells. The stories of rocketry pioneer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935) and Old Bolshevik Alexander Bogdanov's 1908 novel *Red Star*, among others, founded the genre. Tsiolkovsky was strongly influenced by philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov (1827-1903), who felt it was mankind's duty to pursue science until we could resurrect "the fathers" (our dead ancestors); he urged development of space travel as a way to find new planets, so all those reincorporated human beings would have room to live. Bogdanov's *Red Star* posits a more advanced utopian society on Mars (the conveniently red planet); the novel's earthling hero marvels at the economic and social achievements of the highly developed civilization there, though troubled by his lover's sexual past. Bogdanov (1873-1928) was one of many Marxist SF authors who depicted aliens as humanoid; according to scientific Marxism, humanity must be the pinnacle of evolution. Bogdanov's belief in the salubrious effects of exchanging blood led to his (accidental?) death after a botched transfusion. Many other literary figures of the Russian fin-de-siècle dabbled in SF; Symbolist poet Valerii Briusov's decadent dystopia "Republic of the Southern Cross" (1905) is one striking example.

Given the flowering of radical social theories after the Russian Revolution, SF's popularity in the early Soviet years is no surprise. The best-known works at the time were written by authors who wrote in other genres too; there are elements of SF in most of the Russian Futurist poets, especially Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky (his 1929 play "The Bedbug" has a petty bourgeois from the 1920s

defrosted in a sterile socialist future). There are echoes of Fyodorov even in high Modernists like poet Osip Mandelshtam or Boris Pasternak. Evgenii Zamyatin (1884-1937) was educated as a naval engineer and joined the Bolsheviks before the 1905 Revolution; his political interests led to years in provincial exile, which sparked his career as a writer. His classic dystopian novel *We* is perhaps still the best known work of Russian SF. Written in 1919-21, *We* was one of the first literary works banned in the Soviet Union and, oddly enough, was first published in English translation in 1924. (It was first officially published in the USSR only in 1988—three years before the USSR itself ended.) *We* had a formative influence on Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931) and Orwell's *1984* (1948); it depicts a regimented society whose members have numbers rather than names, and where a brain operation ultimately "saves" the mathematician hero D-503 from the wiles of revolution. *We* is often read as a prophetic anti-Bolshevik dystopia, but in fact many negative elements in the novel are drawn from Zamyatin's experience of English society, where he lived during WWI, designing icebreakers for the Russian navy. Zamyatin was unable to publish under Stalin; he was allowed to emigrate in 1931 and died in Paris after years of literary silence.

Other early Soviet authors produced important SF. Alexei N. Tolstoy (1883-1945), "the Red Count," wrote the novel *Aėlita*, the basis of one of the first (perhaps *the* first) full-length SF films, Yakov Protozanov's *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (1924). Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), now best known for his plays and the novel *The Master and Margarita*, wrote several works of SF, including "The Fatal Eggs" (1925) and the novel *Heart of a Dog* (written 1925; officially published in the USSR in 1987). In "The Fatal Eggs" a scientist's discovery plus political interference cause disaster, as a mysterious Red Ray turns reptile and ostrich eggs into super-fertile monsters—but the tale also depicts the devious mechanism of celebrity in a very near future (it is set in 1929, imagining that Lenin's New Economic Policy continued). By 1929, censorship was clanging down on Soviet writers; Bulgakov's request to emigrate was denied. Andrei Platonov (1899-1951) wrote SF where passionate Bolshevik scientists alter the physical fabric of the world; Marietta Shaginian (1888-1982) included some SF among her many, many socialist realist novels.

Alexander Belyaev (1884-1942) wrote primarily SF—numerous stories, long tales, and novels—but has been largely neglected in the West. His story "Hoity-Toity (Professor Wagner's Invention)" appeared in English in a 1962 collection edited by Isaac Asimov, and *Professor Dowell's Head* (1925) was published in English in 1980. Several of his works have been made into films (*Last Man from Atlantis* (2011), *The Amphibian Man* (1962), etc.); always beloved by readers, Belyaev is now becoming more of an object of scholarly interest.

Under Stalin writers had to be as careful as everyone else, but after his death in 1953 SF became a kind of safe zone for writers who did not want to sell out (along with children's literature, historical novels, and literary translation). Paleontologist Ivan Efremov had great success with the novel *The Andromeda Nebula* (better translated as *Andromeda Galaxy*, 1956); it went through at least thirty editions in the Soviet period. Once Stalinist literary censorship eased, the USSR was a favorable environment for SF. The Party fostered a cult of scientists and supported a large population of scientific researchers, upheld by a planned economy in education that every year turned out this or that many new qualified scientists in every field. (The scientists themselves, of course, might be anything from a Trofim Lysenko, the agronomist whose Lamarckian theories and political machinations hobbled Soviet genetics and agriculture for decades, to an Andrei Sakharov, the nuclear physicist who became a Nobel Prize–winning dissident and human rights activist.) Educated citizens enjoyed reading popular science, and SF tended to be some of the best fiction available while socialist realism was still favored by the literary bureaucracy. Soviet citizens read not only SF by Russian (or Ukrainian, Kyrgyz, etc.) authors, but also translations of classics (Verne, Wells) and writers from "brotherly" socialist countries (Čapek, Lem). Some Anglo-American SF writers were widely available and very popular: Isaac Asimov (himself born in Russia), Arthur C. Clarke, and Ray Bradbury.

By the late 1950s a growing Soviet SF scene included gee-whiz magazines for boys and a growing number of writers producing mostly hard SF. The 95% that was bound to be crap was socialist realist crap, more idealist and less sexy than American style pulp SF. (Efremov's *Andromeda Galaxy*, far from crap, still makes tedious reading today.) Showing a distant future meant that many of the platitudes of socialist realism could be dispensed with, and including characters whose names pointed to many nationalities could suggest either worldwide socialism or a science-based meritocracy of the future. The early achievements of the Soviet space program added excitement to plots of space travel—and honestly, isn't cosmonaut (meaning someone who navigates the cosmos) a better term than astronaut (someone who... sails into a star and gets vaporized)? SF may have been encouraged because it was another venue where the Soviet Union could compete with the West.

Besides the Strugatskys (see below) there were many popular and enjoyable SF authors in the USSR during the Thaw (1956–64) and the subsequent period of Stagnation: Chingiz Aitmatov, Genrikh Altov, Vladlen Bakhnov, Dmitrii Bilenkin, Kir Bulychëv, Anatolii Dneprov, Mikhail Emtsev, Sever Gansovsky, Gennadii Gor, Mikhail Greshnov, Vladimir Grigoriev, Georgii Gurevich, Aleksandr Kazantsev, Viktor Kolupaev, Vladislav Krapivin, Isai Lukodianov, Eremei Parnov, Aleksandr Poleshchuk, Vladimir Savchenko, Viktor Separin, Vadim Shefner, Nikolai Toman, Ilya Varshavsky, Evgenii Voiskunsky, Roman Yarov, and Valentina Zhuravleva all have at least one work of SF available in English—sometimes rendered by superb translators such as Antonina Bouis and Mirra Ginsburg. I have slowed your reading with this list to make clear how many Soviet SF authors were worth translating. The list also shows that it was mostly men who wrote SF in the Soviet period (and almost solely men who were translated into English)—and mostly Russians, rather than other Soviet nationalities, whose work made it across the border. Some stories even made digs at corruption in the Soviet system, always a thrill for readers. For all the tight control over literature in the USSR, censors often seemed to miss irony and even out-and-out sarcasm in SF, especially in short stories (the Strugatskys had more trouble because they wrote novels, because their work was so widely popular—and no doubt because they were Jews). Like the other permitted "marginal" genres, SF gave writers considerably more freedom than socialist realist fiction, as long as it observed certain conventions ("the Party in space"). In 1970, the Strugatskys were invited to the International Science Fiction Writers' Symposium in Tokyo (but not allowed to go). Four other Soviet SF authors were sent (including one Ukrainian!); Brian Aldiss describes one of the writers, Vasilii Zakharchenko, being treated like a rock star at the Expo Soviet pavilion.

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky are the best-known SF writers in Russian after Zamyatin. Arkady Natanovich Strugatsky (1925–1991) was trained in artillery and graduated from the military foreign language institute in 1949 as a specialist in translation from Japanese and English. Boris (b. 1933) graduated from high school with honors in 1950 but was not admitted to the physics department at Leningrad State University because of quotas on Jews. He studied mathematics and mechanics instead and graduated in 1955, specializing in astronomy. The brothers wrote together and always insisted their work should be read as the creation of a single author; their first story was published in 1958, and their first novel in 1959. Before long, their take on the universe became more pessimistic (in the end of *Distant Rainbow*, for example, everyone dies and the planet is trashed by research carelessly pursued), and they encountered some trouble with the literary establishment. They published 27 novels, a play, and two books of stories; several works were adapted as films, including Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (from *Roadside Picnic*). The Strugatskys' popularity extended far beyond SF fans: every member of the intelligentsia felt obliged to read works like *Hard to Be a God*.

Around the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, Western SF that had not previously been available came flooding into Russia (along with porn and pulp of all kinds), but local SF has continued to flourish alongside fantasy. Despite copious current production, however, the SF most available in English translation is by writers who write not only SF: Viktor Pelevin (*OMON Ra*), Vladimir Sorokin (*Ice* and others), Tatyana Tolstaya (*The Slynx*). Olga Slavnikova's *2017* combines a dystopian, globalized capitalist Russian future with the legends of Ural miners. At the same time, the web (where SF-loving geeks got a head start on everyone else) makes it possible to find all kinds of SF works with some thoughtful searching. The post-Soviet SF scene in Russia is varied and exciting: some authors to check out include Marina and Sergei Diachenko, Aleksandr Gromov, Sviatoslav Loginov, Sergei Lukyanenko, Genri Laion Oldi (Dmitrii Gromov and Oleg Ladyzhenskii), Nik Perumov, Viacheslav Rybakov, and Vladimir Vasil'ev. The prolific Lukyanenko (b. 1968) may be the most popular SF author in Russia today; his fantasy novels *Night Watch* (1998) and *Day Watch* (1999) were made into movies (2004 and 2006) that did well in North America, and he is increasingly well represented in English translation.

EAST EUROPEAN SF

Eastern Europe includes more than fifteen countries and languages (if you count Belarus and Ukraine). Before WWI, it was almost all under one or another empire, Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, or Russian; local cultural production tended to favor the protection of the national language and folklore. After WWI, however, SF appealed to many aspiring writers who sought an audience and started to build the new national literatures. The best-known interwar East European SF writer was the Czech Karel

Čapek (1890–1938), inventor of the word "robot" (or at last first user: he said it was his brother's idea). It comes from the Czech word *robota* (the kind of unpaid work serfs would do). Čapek's 1920 play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*) is still regularly performed—and the nefarious Rossum Corporation makes an appearance in Joss Whedon's series *Dollhouse*. Much of Čapek's writing was not SF, but the 1936 speculative novel *War with the Newts* is both delightfully funny and pointedly critical of the flaws of human societies, which all exploit the newly discovered sentient newts until the newts take over. When the Nazis entered Czechoslovakia in 1938 Čapek was #2 on their list of enemies, but he thwarted plans to arrest and intern him by dying of pneumonia on December 25, 1938.

After WWII most of Eastern Europe was in the Soviet orbit, and SF was popular in many East European countries for the same reasons as in the USSR: it allowed a certain freedom from stultifying socialist realism. Josef Nesvadba (1926–2005) in Czechoslovakia incorporated numerous generic traits into SF stories; his collection *The Lost Face* is available in English translation. Stanisław Lem (1921–2006) did not consider himself a SF author, but he is the outstanding SF author of the period. His work is the exception to the rule for East European SF in the West: he is not marketed or sought out as a Polish writer, almost all of his work has been translated, the book covers spell his name wrong (not barring the "l" in his first name, pronounced like a "w"), and much of his opus is still in print in English decades after its first appearance. A medical education gave Lem a background in science. His work is extremely broad in scope and theme, ranging from *Pirx* stories for young adults to the philosophical depth of *Solaris*, the manic linguistic play (and underlying deep pessimism) of *Cyberiad*, and the psychedelia of *Futurological Congress*. Many of his works slyly mock socialist platitudes. (He has also been well served by translators; Michael Kandel, in particular, is a genius.) Lem said that the only Western SF writer worth reading was Philip K. Dick; the paranoid Dick was not pleased to be fingered by a Commie and feared LEM must be the acronym of some malevolent agency. Lem aged into a cranky critic, and his later writing is harshly critical of the cultural decline he saw all around him.

The period of "transition" after socialism tended to disrupt the development of SF in Eastern Europe. In the early 1990s in Hungary, where SF had been fairly vigorous, local writers chose to present their own work under plausible pseudonyms as translations from English. Publishers felt—perhaps with justice—that SF by Hungarian authors would not sell. In the twenty-first century, however, there is a wide and vigorous SF scene in Eastern Europe: the biggest SF convention in Europe, Tricon, takes place in Poland and the Czech Republic. Where Socialist-era fanzines stopped publication, attractive new magazines—often with "Science Fiction" on the cover alongside *Fantastyka* or whatever local equivalent—have sprung up and do a lively business. East European SF authors are extremely various; some are post-modern (like Zoran Živković, many of whose novels have been translated from Serbian into English); others are better known for other skills (like the Croatian rock guitarist and computer programmer Davor Slamnig). In magazines and bookshops, SF is cheek by jowl with fantasy and horror, and the genres often bleed together.

RUSSIAN AND EAST EUROPEAN SF IN THE WEST

Thanks largely to Darko Suvin, whose 1979 book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* is seminal for SF scholarship, anyone serious about the genre has heard of the most important Russian and East European SF authors (up to the 1970s). Suvin devotes chapters to Lem and the Strugatskys. The MacMillan "Best Soviet SF" translations of the 1970s and 1980s, many introduced by Theodore Sturgeon, attended to how much a Soviet writer "could say" but also appeared to view SF as a place of common cause despite political differences. Isaac Asimov was editor of an early 1962 collection of Soviet SF in translation. During the Cold War, Russian or East European SF could be read as an important source of info about the enemy—or the reader could assume that SF authors were the voices of the future, in which East and West would agree better than in the present. Suvin's rich and erudite study put a Marxist stamp on SF scholarship that has largely endured until the present. Suvin, himself an Eastern European, came to North America from Yugoslavia. (Today as well, some prominent scholars of SF bear tellingly East European names—Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, for example.)

With the end of the Cold War, however, formerly curious Western readers and publishers of SF have turned away from the Second World. This is largely due to problems of translation: only about 3% of books published annually in the US are literary translations, and SF tends to be crowded out of this limited market. If you want pulp, we have local pulp; if you want serious lit, well... does SF count as serious lit? Even if today's Czech or Polish or Russian or Serbian SF is not as cerebral as the Strugatskys, it may demand more effort and engagement than American readers expect from genre fiction, or (God forbid) it might be depressing. The MacMillan series has gone out of print, though many volumes are still available used. Some of the best sources for Russian and East European SF today are journals, be they print or online: *World Literature Today* and Words Without Borders have recently produced admirable international SF issues that included Second-World works, and the 2009 Apex Book of World SF lists Zoran Živković prominently on the cover. It may well take Anglo SF fans time to emerge from their solipsistic universe, but with their rich tradition, imaginative response to Western SF and fantasy, and (sometimes) deep seriousness the Eastern European and Russian SF authors are well worth a look.

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Part 2
The Field Takes Shape
(1926–1936)

By the 1920s, the American magazine market was booming. Improvements in transportation, technology, and literacy, combined with much more limited entertainment options for most people, led to a growing number of "pulp" magazines (for the low-quality paper they were cheaply printed on) with lurid covers.

While pulp magazines tended to be geared to a specific audience, today's genre distinctions were still very much in the future: Not only was there no real distinction between SF, fantasy, and horror, but many science fiction writers were simultaneously writing Westerns, detective fiction, or nurse stories, or whatever else was in demand that week. Because of the thriving magazine market, the pay was better than today. At the height of the Depression, it was possible for a prolific writer to eke out a living from short stories alone, which is no longer the case.

With not much genre book market to speak of, writers would have to make a living from stories. Bookstores were uncommon outside of major towns, and books were more likely to be sold through catalogs or ads in the backs of magazines.

Out of this burgeoning pulp market, some genre-specific magazines began to appear. Hugo Gernsback began by publising magazines for electronics enthusiasts with some fiction scattered in, but in 1926 founded *Amazing Stories*, the first magazine entirely devoted to science fiction. *Weird Tales* was publishing H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and other writers who lived at the intersection of SF, fantasy, and horror. (Lovecraft's weird horror and Robert E. Howard's archetypal character Conan would make both writers posthumously famous, in the fantasy boom that would come forty years later, after the publication of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in North America.)

That's not to overstate the quality of the 1920s and early 1930s pulp magazines. While there were some gems and stories of lasting influence, the emphasis was on fast writing and formulaic stories; the overall literary quality was low. Gernsback paid his writers poorly (and sometimes not at all), so *Amazing Stories* was disproportionately stocked with reprints of older stories and newer work by writers who would work cheaply. But beyond the immediate impact of the early pulp writers, many of whom are deservedly forgotton today, was a generation of writers- and editors-to-be who grew up reading the pulps and loving the tropes of SF and adventure fiction. And that generation would go on to create science fiction's "Golden Age" in the late 1930s and 1940s.