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The DREAMS OUR STUFF IS MADE OF: How Science Fiction Conquered The World



Synopsis

From one of science fiction's most acclaimed novelists comes this engrossing journey through the books, movies, and television programs that have shaped our perspective of both the present and the future. In an uncompromising, often irreverent survey of the genre from Edgar Allan Poe to Philip K. Dick to Star Trek, Thomas M. Disch analyzes science fiction's impact on technological innovation, fashion, lifestyle, military strategy, the media, and much more. An illuminating look at the art of science fiction (with a practitioner's insight into craft), as well as a work of pointed literary and cultural criticism, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* reveals how this "pulp genre" has captured the popular imagination while transforming the physical and social world in which we live.

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Customer Reviews

I'd recommend this book to anyone who likes not only science fiction, but the idea of science fiction. It is a bleak look at the genre, and utterly infuriating at times. The arrogance of Disch's tone in attacking the value of writers from Mary Shelley to Robert Heinlein to Ursula LeGuin will leave many readers shaking in anger. I think you'll love it, too. It is a book that begs an argument on nearly every page. Disch clearly has favorites, and he happily ignores good books from writers he's busy bashing - LeGuin's "The Left Hand of Darkness" gets passing mention, while he denigrates "Always Coming Home" repeatedly. Same for Heinlein - few of his juvenile books, almost universally considered his best, are in evidence. But while Disch's biases are pretty clear, the strength of his arguments, particularly on the popularization of the genre through Star Trek and the UFO mythology, are tough

to refute. What makes this book so very different from others on the genre is its willingness to see what science fiction means to people in general, not just a small elite who read the "literary-quality" science fiction. It's a refreshing change from the books that try frantically to justify the genre, all the time preaching to the choir. Disch almost goes a little too far from time to time - apparently, for example, if you don't like Hal Clement's scientific explanations, you're just another idiot who should go back to watching Star Trek. But I promise you, this book will make you think. And who doesn't love a good fight?

Mr. Disch, a well regarded science fiction writer, poet, playwright, and critic, here gives us a critical history of the scifi genre that resembles nothing so much as a drive-by shooting. When he's done, the field is lettered with the shattered reputations of the field's hacks (from John Norman to Newt Gingrich), quacks (from L. Ron Hubbard to Whitley Streiber), feminists (Ursula K. LeGuin & company), fascists (Robert Heinlein), technophiles (Greg Egan), proselytizers (Orson Scott Card), and so forth and so on. Among the offenses cited, besides bad writing, are a tendency to pander to the ... fantasies of young men, a willingness to exploit things like UFO crazes and apocalyptic beliefs, extreme right-wing politics, extreme left-wing politics, dumbing down for the mass audience, jargoning up for the academic crowd, employing ludicrous science, jingoism, racism, ... speciesism, etc. Hardly anyone comes off well--himself, H.G. Wells, Philip K. Dick, J.G. Ballard, Iain M. Banks, Joe Haldeman and a very few more, plus Edgar Allan Poe gets an ambivalent nod, given credit not only for inventing science fiction but for embodying it entire in his work, both its good and its bad aspects. Mr. Disch is particularly drawn to Poe as perpetrator of hoaxes, a talent he thinks central to science fiction. In fact, he believes lying to be central to our national character: America is a nation of liars, and for that reason science fiction has a special claim to be our national literature, as the art form best adapted to telling the lies we like to hear and to pretend we believe. In Mr. Disch's view, Poe and his successors mastered the art of telling people what they want to believe. And in stories like *Mesmeric Revelation* and *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, he finds Poe to have anticipated nearly every theme that would be developed by subsequent writers: 1. Mesmerism 2. Dreams come true 3. Chip-on-the-shoulder superiority 4. Genuine visionary power 5. Great special effects 6. Sophomoric humor 7. Divine madness Over the course of the book he shows how these themes have been employed for good and ill, by various writers, the overwhelming majority of whom he believes have exploited their readers' dreams without living up to the admonition that forms the title of Delmore Schwartz's first collection of poems, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, which Mr. Disch alludes to in the title of this book. Too often he finds his subjects dodging responsibility in

favor of popularity, easy money, fadishness, and personal political predilections. Inevitably the folks who come off worst here are the fans who let authors get away with this stuff. At best Mr. Disch portrays them as kind of reminiscent of the guys from your high school's A.V. club, with delusions of superpowered children, women who want to be dominated and alien races just waiting to be wiped out. At worst, they're militiamen like those from the Oklahoma City bombing or the members of the Heaven's Gate or Aum Shinrikyo cults. That is, they're totally gullible, susceptible to either homicidal or suicidal suggestion. And always they're the oft-caricatured geeky losers who attend Star Trek conventions. As you can tell by now, this is a very dark vision of science fiction--one of the rare bright spots (according to Mr. Disch anyway) coming when it helped us learn to live with the atom bomb. Equally bleak is his prediction for the future, when movies and television, now that their effects can match our imaginations, take over from books. In the end what keeps us reading, even as he's telling us that most of what we're reading about is junk, is the quality of Mr. Disch's analysis and the sheer bravado with which he attacks his own peers, predecessors, and heirs. There's something here to alienate just about every reader, but the very equal opportunity nature of the drubbings he administers makes it hard to stay mad. If he's laying into an author you like or a political philosophy you admire, have no fear, on the next page he'll have moved on to authors and ideas you loathe. One admires the high moral seriousness to which he summons science fiction, but despairs as he says it's not happened in the past and isn't going to happen in the future. He kind of reminds you of the American colonel in Vietnam who opined: "We had to destroy the village to save it", except that Mr. Disch adds that the village is doomed anyway. This may be too upsetting for scifi fanatics but for the casual fan or the merely curious reader it's an enjoyable performance to behold. GRADE: B-

There are only a few published books that treat science fiction as something worthy of notice and critical evaluation. This book attempts to go even further by trying to prove a hypothesis that science fiction has become so invidiously entangled in the everyday world that is now a given, an everyday component that shapes many of the cultural tropes and the thought processes of Joe Everyman. Disch starts by examining the beginnings of science fiction as a separate literary genre, starting with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the works of Edgar Allen Poe. He does an excellent job of examining the themes and ideas that Poe originated, making a strong case that Poe should be considered the ancestor of SF, rather than the more commonly cited Shelley. But in his examination of Shelley Disch displays the first evidence that this is not a work of critical evaluation of the first rank, as he dismisses her book merely because "An unread author is no one's intellectual

ancestor", ignoring both the possible influence on other writers some seminal works have, commonly read or not, and the fact that Shelley is far from an 'unread author'. This same sloppiness is exhibited in some of his research on other authors, most notably Robert Heinlein and Ursula K. Le Guin. While he correctly presents the oddity that Heinlein, normally considered a strong conservative, at one point in his life ran on the Democratic ticket for a California State Assembly seat and was heavily involved with EPIC, the socialistic movement championed by Upton Sinclair, he repeats (in multiple places) the gossip that Charles Manson was a Heinlein disciple, something easily disprovable by examining the court records of Manson's trial. Le Guin is lambasted as a militant and underhanded feminist, with little examination of her extraordinary influence and place in the SF world as a strong literary writer whose themes include far more than just the battle of the sexes. In his chapter on religion and SF, once again he seems to be incomplete, showing a lot of material on L. Ron Hubbard, Dianetics, and Scientology, but completely ignoring things like the Church of All Worlds, which originated from Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and the fact that the two writers were well acquainted with each other and had discussed the practicalities of 'inventing' a new religion. There are places where Disch is insightful, such as his exploration of the idea that the Star Trek societal model can be taken as a restatement of the perfect modern office culture, uni-sexed and culturally blind. But far too often he seems to ride off on his own personal hobby-horses, from UFO adherents to the Heaven's Gate cult to Reagan's SDI initiative, straining desperately to tie these phenomena to the mainstream of science fiction writing. Many of his bald statements caused me to approach a near-apoplectic condition as they were totally contrary to my own knowledge of events and the science fiction field (and I've been reading the stuff for forty-five years), while only a few brought a nod of agreement. In terms of proving his initial thesis, he is only partially successful, mainly succeeding at the lowest denominator level of Hollywood movies and the apathy of the average American to space exploration as 'old hat', but failing miserably at any good criticism of the literary value of science fiction and its influence on other forms of writing and the world at large.

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