

Pulp Readers, Reader Departments, and Reader Perceptions of Genre in *Astounding*

Zi-Ling Yan

National University of Tainan, TWN

Abstract

American pulp magazines of the 1930s often maintained reader letter departments, some of which extended to multiple pages per issue. These departments not only served to voice reader preferences but also to debate more esoteric concerns. In this study, I first examine attitudes towards American pulp audiences in the thirties through a survey of contemporaneous scholarship, trade journals, memoirs, and private correspondence bearing upon the perceptions of critics, editors, and authors. The second part offers an analysis of the letter department in the influential sf pulp *Astounding* from 1930 to 1939. Attention is given to how readers, sometimes in conjunction with editors, articulate positions concerning the ‘proper’ balance of scientific and imaginative content. Employing Patrick Parrinder’s paradigmatic model from ‘Science Fiction: Metaphor, Myth or Prophecy?’, I read this division as an engagement between prophetic-positivist and mythic-relativist modes of scientific representation. I further argue that this developmental thread demonstrates reader attraction to this mythic dimension almost from the inception of the sf pulps.

Keywords: Pulp Magazines, *Astounding*, Reader Letter Columns, Science Fiction, Genre Formation

Introduction

The arts are a cooperative social undertaking, which in the twentieth century entail complex productive, distributive, and consumptive practices requisite to their emergence and recognition. This process is especially visible in American pulp magazines, a vast enterprise encompassing hundreds of titles and persisting as a viable industry until the 1950s. The pulp designation refers at once to the low-grade wood-pulp paper used in the magazines' manufacture and to the magazines' content, which offered inexpensive escape and vicarious thrills. Although associated with young, often working-class readership, they functioned to entertain a more sizeable segment of the American population. The pulps comprised a staggering array of subgenres appealing to a spectrum of interests and, at their highpoint in the 1930s and 1940s, drew audiences in the millions each week (Duffield, 1933: 26; Jones, 1938: 35; Earle, 2009: 9). In Quentin Reynold's phrase, the pulps were a 'fiction factory' with many of the depersonalised, even machine-like, features of high-volume industrial production in full view. Appraising the array of forces underpinning the industry's workings demands evaluating the relative roles of authors, readers, editors, publishers, agents, and distributive networks, as well as numerous mitigating factors like the availability of raw materials, postal regulations, and economic fluctuations, all responsive to ideological forces that helped determine the heft of any component within the pulp economy. The focus of this study concerns how readers impacted editors and authors, and to some degree determined the direction of the science fiction (sf) genre in the pages of *Astounding*; to achieve this aim, I examine a limited corner of pulp readership in pulp letter departments, again with close attention to *Astounding* during its first decade of production.¹

Though not a universal feature of pulp magazines, letter departments were common; they varied considerably in scope, types of engagement, and degree of editorial intervention. Clayton and Street & Smith, both publishers of *Astounding*, produced many letter-heavy titles across genres: crime/mystery (*Clues*), westerns (*Cowboy Stories*), adventure (*Danger Trail*), general fiction (*Five-Novels Monthly*), love (*Ranch Romances*, *Rangeland Love*), and weird menace (*Strange Tales*)—all had active departments, with some running to multiple pages each issue. In one of the few sustained academic treatments of such columns, Carey Snyder and Leif Sorensen (2018: 123) remark that public correspondence had a range of functions, most importantly, 'for reader feedback, mechanisms for building brand loyalty, and sites for public sphere debates'. This last point in particular is relevant to the disputes over science fiction genre boundaries, which involved not only dissension between readers, but guidelines imposed through the less visible workings of editorial decisions. That said, editors' frequent claims that readers had the power to direct the magazine's content must be viewed skeptically, given the market-driven bottom lines informing publishers' decisions. In this regard, John Rieder (2021: 311) warns that 'an excessive emphasis on the community of writers, editors, and fans in the early pulp milieu encourages an illusion of voluntary control over genre formation that is certainly exaggerated'. Pulp historian John Locke (2018: 204) also cautions against overdetermining common devices like reader surveys, remarking how *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright used

¹ *Astounding* refers throughout to all the magazine's 1930s titular variations: *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, *Astounding Stories*, and *Astounding Science-Fiction*.

‘the pretense of a poll to let the readers think that they had democratically chosen what in reality was the inviolable dictate of the man in charge’. Whatever influence readers wielded, the columns did afford opportunities to construct public identities vis-à-vis interests, with the caveat that, like all popular letter columns, the attitudes expressed therein were ‘indicative of what those readers motivated enough to write thought about the magazine’ (Farrell, 1998: 152). While cognizant of these limits, I take the position that readers had meaningful things to say about their chosen reading material, and that their correspondence comprises a body of analysable texts within coherent discursive boundaries. Ultimately, the impact of letters may be ‘unmeasurable’ (James, 1994: 130), James’s sense being that they are fused with other elements to the degree that their force cannot be precisely determined (i.e., on story selection, editorial policy, taboo or slant, marketing strategy). Nonetheless, pulp readers’ statements offer more than delusions prompted by hegemonic manipulation or orchestrated by representatives of some (petite) bourgeois ideological apparatus. Therefore, I concur with sf scholar Gary Westfahl (1999: 7) that the dismissal of the pulps and their reader- or editor-based epitextual components is the critics’ wish ‘not to dirty their hands with the genre as it existed in history’.

The reconstruction of reader attitudes, however, requires something more than the inspection of letters; in the first section, I examine wider attitudes towards American pulp audiences in the thirties through a survey of contemporaneous scholarship, trade journals, writer memoirs, and private correspondence bearing upon the *perceptions* of critics, editors, and authors. This part provides context on how letters were framed, as well as the processes subtending their appearance, namely, the complex, hidden correspondence that did not get published. The second part is narrower and offers an analysis of *Astounding’s* letter department in its various incarnations (‘Reader’s Corner’, ‘Brass Tacks’, and ‘Scientific Discussions’) from 1930 to 1939. Attention is given to how readers, sometimes in conjunction with editors, articulate positions concerning the ‘proper’ balance of scientific and imaginative content—the clarification of the genre’s purpose, at least in the pages of *Astounding*, displays what one letter writer termed the science fiction reader’s ‘illogical double-track mind’ (24.2/1939/155).² This self-division stages a confrontation between the prophetic-positivist and mythic-relativist modes of scientific representation, paradigms delineated by Patrick Parrinder (2000) in ‘Science Fiction: Metaphor, Myth or Prophecy?’ In light of this debate, the first decade of *Astounding* letter columns is an incubation chamber for a more coherent vision of the mythic mode of science fiction writing that was to emerge more visibly in the post-WWII era.

Contemporaneous Reader Scholarship

American reading scholars of the thirties, authorities like William Gray and Douglas Waples, repeatedly condemned the pulps. Gray and colleague Ruth Munroe (1929: 101, 112, 89) berated ‘trashy story papers...filled with emotionally exciting serial tales’, claiming that pulp magazines attracted ‘those of low native intelligence’ and calling young women readers of formulaic romance ‘retarded’. With co-author Bernice Leary, Gray (1935: 177) speculated that poor reading

² To streamline citation, I reference issues of *Astounding* as follows: (volume.issue/year/page).

skills were to blame for the pulps' popularity, coupled with their readers being 'too indolent to learn to like anything better'. Gray also maintained that readers consciously made poor reading choices, worrying that semi-pornographic and vicarious thrill-oriented garbage would enervate the populace (Gray and Munroe, 1929: 68), a claim that had some years earlier been floated by noted child psychologist William Healy (1915: 305) when he likened the pulps to an addiction that heightened criminal propensities among its youthful enthusiasts.

Stephen Karetzky, in his assessment of Waples's work, remarks that Waples viewed adult readers of the pulps as manifesting atrophied mental development, though acknowledging that such readers were generally uneducated and socially deprived: 'the hardest hit victims of the Depression' (Karetzky, 1982: 114-115). To counter these alarming trends in readership, Waples, with fellow-researcher Leon Carnovsky, advocated the 'value theory' of library acquisitions—the idea that if good books were on the shelves, they would be read, thereby shifting the onus for 'poor' reading habits onto institutions. William Rasche, though anti-pulp, went farther by accusing the publishing industry of undermining the educational potential of both literature and film; instead, these media were 'exploited...by profiteers who are unscrupulous in their willingness to offer literature and pictures of the lowest character the public is willing to pay for' (Rasche, 1938: 64), a position less forcefully expressed in Waples and Carnovsky (1939: 2-3).

The prejudices voiced by scholars were not supported by extensive interviews with readers to determine how the pulps functioned in their lives or what prompted them to prefer such reading material to canonical literature and non-fiction. This lacuna raises difficulties for researchers in that the sources available to us are neither unbiased nor methodologically consistent. G.A. Finch, writing in 1980, submits that what remains—raw circulation data and accounting reports about the magazines—'tell us very little about the minds of the readers'; he also voices doubts about the utility of reader letters, which he regards as too subjective to be of much value (Finch, 1980: 112). Instead, Finch argues that the task of reconstructing audience perceptions and psychological tendencies must proceed through textual analysis. Literacy scholar Carl Kaestle echoes Finch, further suggesting that the content of formula fiction permits audience reconstruction with greater ease than, say, the Modernist novel—the 'closed text' with its 'predictable and unambiguous' form delimits the reader's range of textual experiences. Kaestle maintains:

We cannot know how reading materials fit into a reader's life, nor can we predict what an individual reader's interpretation of a work was, no matter how formalized. But the conventions of these formula genres do provide us with knowledge of the expectations of the readers as a group, and we therefore have more basis for asserting that the readers of a given formula genre were a community with regard to those conventions. (Kaestle et al., 1991: 69-70)

This caution must extend even to readers' self-ascribed motives and beliefs in letters, given that these communications represent a fraction of total readership and were subjected to an opaque editorial selection process. By the late 1930s, Isaac Asimov (1981: 113) maintains, the majority of sf readers 'were casuals...who came and went and were content to be silent'. Contributors to letter departments might be perceived as the most enthusiastic devotees of the genre, but author Jack Williamson contended that they did not necessarily reflect reader norms, that

‘fans...have never been representative readers’ (Elliot, 1983: 14). In fact, the true fan, according to sf author-critic Sam Moskowitz, looked askance at frequent letter writing, a practice regarded in the nascent fanzine community as ‘an excessive display of egotism’ which would be ‘satirically commented on’. Nonetheless, he contests Williamson’s position, holding that ‘by 1938, letter columns were well representative of the opinions of the average reader—as opposed to the active fan—although editors to this day [1954] delude themselves into believing that this is not the case’ (Moskowitz, 1954: 13).

Statistical information about sf readership is problematic in that surveys were generally conducted by ‘biased fans working with self-selected samples’ (Berger, 1977: 1). Even when pursued by magazines, the data lack sociological rigor (Fleming, 1978: 294; Menadue and Jacups, 2018: 2). The dearth of demographic profiling contrasts sharply with the well-informed picture of readers assembled by slick publications, indicating advertising’s different role in the smooth and rough paper industries. The pulps relied heavily upon newsstand sales; scant advertising revenue insured indifference towards detailed market research (Blassingame, 1931: 26; Smith, 2002: 130; Earle, 2012: 202). The wide consensus has been that readers tended to be working class, a claim partially borne out by the limited investigations of publishers in the thirties (Smith, 2000: 205), but not exactly in line with contemporaneous sources. The absence of comprehensive survey data is partly mitigated by writing industry trade journals, author and editor memoirs, and correspondence between publishers, authors, and agents.

Editor, Trade Journal, and Author Perspectives on Readers

Editors across pulp genres frequently claimed that letters impacted their decision to accept manuscripts. Hugo Gernsback (1930: 92), founder of the first sf pulp *Amazing Stories*, dismissed the idea that reader contributions were mere filler, stating in one of his other publications that they were ‘read, filed, cross-indexed, and [their] contents tabulated for reference when the policies of the magazine are under discussion’. Editor Harry Bates (1932: 277), in *Astounding’s* sister publication *Strange Tales*, termed letter writers ‘our “associate editors”’. Less overtly promotional statements appear in trade magazines and private correspondence. John Gallishaw (1933: 135), contributing to the trade journal *The Writer*, stated that men’s pulp editors strive to know their readers, ‘who indicate by their praise or dispraise just how desirable is the work of any author’, and who then act accordingly. Pulp editor Ed Bodin (1931: 5) in a contribution to another important trade, *Author & Journalist*, holds the editor to be ‘guided in his manuscript purchases by the letters he receives from readers’. Lest this also be understood as marketing hype, private correspondence frequently corroborates this belief. For instance, pulp literary agent Lurton Blassingame, in a letter to his client Carl Jacobi, observes that editor Rogers Terrill at Popular Publications was forced to make changes to *Terror Tales* because ‘the readers were protesting’ (Carl Jacobi Collection, Box 12, 6/11/1935, subsequently abbreviated CJC), a remark echoed in communications with other editors. Indeed, it would be illogical to assume letters had no import, given that they were sometimes actively solicited and awarded cash prizes (e.g., by popular books like *Detective Fiction Weekly* and *Black Mask*), despite editors being on record as

receiving far more letters than they could print.³ For *Astounding*, editor John Campbell remarked the department's impact on his decisions, stating that 'those which do not reach print have their effect.... Because those unpublished must, necessarily exceed in number those for which there is room, the unpublished letters have greater total influence than those appearing'. He goes on to claim that the magazine is three-tiered: authors, editors, and readers, and that 'Brass Tacks' is the best measurement of reader preferences (20.4/1937/159). Campbell also likened the magazine to a democracy, governed 'by the readers' votes, the editor serving as election board official. The authors are the candidates, their style and stories their platform' (21.2/1938/125). Again, we must take a measured view of these statements since they contrast with accounts of behind-the-scenes attitudes and practices (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 80-81, 134, *passim*).

Further indications of reader influence appear in private correspondence between authors, perhaps most strikingly in their campaigns to sway editors through 'fan' mail in the belief that praiseful letters impacted acceptance rates. Jacobi's correspondents, pulp authors Hugh Cave and August Derleth, state as much in regard to *Weird Tales*. Cave writes that its letter department, 'The Eyrie', is the best resource for determining reader tastes (CJC, Box 3, Folder 18, 11/4/1932), but also used it to curry favour with Wright. Jacobi composed several pseudonymous letters in praise of Cave (CJC, Box 3, Folder 18, 26/4/1932), who promised to reciprocate (CJC, Box 3, Folder 18, 2/6/1932). Later in the year, Cave remarked that when his friend's stories appear, he would guarantee 'at least four...first class letters—from different parts of the country—for each Jacobi appearance' (CJC, Box 3, Folder 18, 25/8/1932). To evade detection, he varied the names to prevent editors from uncovering his subterfuge (CJC, Box 3, Folder 19, 3/7/1933). The Jacobi-Derleth correspondence reveals similar efforts; Derleth promised 'to jerk up some of the gang and have them write in about [Jacobi's] story. Then [Farnsworth Wright] may take the piano story on the strength of reader letters' (CJC, Box 4, Folder 4, 28/12/1931); he requests the same support from Jacobi (CJC, Box 4, Folder 7, 7/7/1932). Their belief in the efficacy of fan mail was not unfounded. Literary agent Robert Hardy wrote to his client Will Jenkins (pulp writer Murray Leinster) in 1929 about editors' favouring regular submissions because 'such stories bring in letters from readers. The regular contributor is the one who is likely to get the best rates' (Will Jenkins Papers, Box 5, Robert Thomas Hardy folder 3).

Often, the life cycle of the letter did not simply begin with the reader and end with the editor. Reader letters were forwarded to authors with requests for elaboration or justification; these responses were sometimes published in the magazine, but more frequently were posted directly to readers who then might pursue private correspondence with writers. A glimpse of this network is afforded by the Theodore Roscoe Papers (TRP) housed at Syracuse University; the

³ Readers sometimes questioned the veracity of letters (e.g. 18.2/1936/157), but Reynolds (1955: 116), referring to Street & Smith books, dismisses such suspicions. And whereas Harold Hersey (2002: 15) admitted that he had authored some of the fan mail appearing in his journals and Campbell occasionally wrote pseudonymous letters to his own magazine's column 'whenever he wanted to write an unofficial editorial' (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 73), science fiction editor Jerry Westerfield (1940: 19) (*Amazing*) stated that the magazines 'get far more letters in one month than they can print in a whole year'—about 350 per month for his own publications in 1940. This was true of other genres. Powers (2018: 83) claims that *Love Story* editor Daisy Bacon received about seventy letters a day, the reading of which 'gave her plenty of insight into the minds of readers, their concerns, their dreams, and what they had to contend with on a daily basis'.

energies expended by all parties support the view that reader letters garnered serious scrutiny and was understood to be an aspect of the writer's responsibilities. Editors of the Munsey pulp *Argosy* (in this case, Harry Bates, Archibald Bittner, and Fred Clayton) forwarded reader letters to Roscoe, some complimentary, but most posing specific questions or criticisms. Sometimes, they were chatty: the amiable Roscoe, in response to an editor's forwarded letter, wrote a 600-word response to a young man, impressed by Roscoe's adventure tales (based to some degree on his own colorful life), informing him in detail on how to get a job as an able-bodied seaman working on oil tankers—replete with addresses on where to apply and what kinds of clothes to pack (TRP, Uncollected fan mail folder, 11/5/1929). In a more typical example, editor Bittner asks Roscoe to follow up on an ostensible error (TRP, *Argosy* folder, undated letter [1929] in response to Bittner's letter 26/11/1929). When civilly criticised, Roscoe penned contrite replies to placate readers, but when unreasonably attacked, he went on the offensive. In one instance, Roscoe wrote a heated two-page response to Clayton's request for comment (TRP, *Argosy* folder, 13/9/1935), and a longer and more antagonistic thirteen-point rejoinder to a critic of a *Far East* magazine story (TRP, Uncollected fan mail folder, 12/4/1931). Roscoe's annoyance, and the critical timbre of his correspondents' multi-page engagements with his work stand in contrast to the medium's supposed cultural marginalisation; on the business end, it also shows the time and effort invested in a single customer.

The tiny fraction of extant correspondence in the archives, despite the insight it grants, nonetheless limits our capacity to generalise about pulp readers, a problem amplified by the size and diversity of the magazines' audiences. Contemporaneous critics, frequently hostile to these publications, understood pulp audiences to be composed of young men and women hoping to escape the drudgery of their lives (Jones, 1938: 36; see also MacMullen, 1937: 98; Hurst, 1929: 402). Industry insiders sometimes made similar claims, holding that editors pitched their products to teenagers, the adventure pulps in particular catering to 'the age of hero worship' (Martinsen, 1927: 7). Possibly, the most common word appended to crime/adventure/sf pulp readership is 'juvenile' (Farley, 1932: 10; Wright, 1935: 6; Hersey, 2002: 5; Moynahan, 1936: 22; Blassingame, 1937: 15). An examination of reader letters, even acknowledging their limits, disputes this characterisation. Editor-publisher Harold Hersey (2002: 4), for instance, suggested that pulp audiences were 'unimaginative' rather than 'unintelligent'. But Farley (1935: 7), contrary to his comment above, held pulp magazines to appeal to 'intellectuals who like their literature to have a chew to it', who want something 'into which they can set their teeth'. He also understood 'slumming' in the pulps as a reaction to the bewildering collapse of plot in Modernist writings. Specific pulp magazines, too, were regarded as having more sophisticated readers—John Campbell states in an *Astounding* market blurb that its readers 'are either adults, often with keen scientific interests, or younger people with keen imaginations and advanced brain power' (Bradfield, 1937: 24), and in the magazine itself that it 'is made for a higher class of readers than most of the pulp mags that are sold today' (24.1/1939/99). The evidence of *Astounding's* reader departments, to which we now turn, in fact suggests the level of sophistication he claims.

Surveying *Astounding's* Readership in the Thirties

Astounding was launched in 1930 as a Clayton title. Its first editor, Harry Bates, who introduced the 'Reader's Corner' in April 1930, admitted in retrospect that the little he knew about the genre was gleaned from Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, founded four years earlier (Rogers, 1964: xi). Clayton's bankruptcy in 1933 precipitated the magazine's sale to Street & Smith, whose first issue appeared in October, edited by F. Orlin Tremaine. The letter column, rechristened 'Brass Tacks', did not recommence until December of that year. The magazine became the most successful sf pulp of the thirties, with circulation reaching 50,000 by 1935 (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 77) and, according to Moskowitz (1954: 195), 80,000 by 1938—though actual readership was certainly greater given sharing between its cash-strapped clientele. The department continued until February 1937, when Tremaine replaced it with 'Science Discussions', a column devoted almost entirely to technical scientific questions and virtually no analysis of fiction. John W. Campbell, Jr.'s editorial tenure, beginning in December 1937 (he became sole editor in March 1938), witnessed the revival of its predecessor, a hybrid department 'Science Discussions-Brass Tacks'. Facilitated by editors, this hybridity clarified the terms of a dialectical process concerning genre boundaries, pitting positivist against mythic predilections among readers—this argument is resumed in the next section.

Based on an examination of all *Astounding* issues over the decade (104 of 109 contain letters), a total of 2100 letters were printed comprising 678 pages of text, with 1937 registering the single-year high (357 letters). The breakdown by sex confirms the heavy male readership: 83.9% were authored by men, 3.5% by women, and the remaining 12.6% indeterminate, signed with initials and lacking internal clues as to the author's sex.⁴ Of the total, 163 letters originated in foreign countries, 102 from undisclosed locations; the remaining 1835 were domestic. Based on the U.S. letters alone, the highest-contributing states, in descending order, were New York (359/18.5%), California (193/10.5%), Illinois (169/8.7%), Pennsylvania (120/6.2%), and New Jersey (105/5.4%)—the top five states accounted for 49.3%. Although contributor totals roughly correlate with population down the list, the top five contributors represented a disproportionate amount of the total population, which, according to census data from both 1930 and 1940, would have been about 32%.⁵ The disparity likely reflects complex factors that are hard to quantify:

⁴ An accurate count of women readers is difficult: some respondents maintain published letters significantly underrepresent female readership (e.g. 9.3/1932/425; 16.2/1935/159; 18.1/1936/158); one writer claims that some letters are written by women who sign with men's names (24.3/1939/159).

⁵ *Detective Fiction Weekly* and *Weird Tales* were surveyed for comparison. For *Detective Fiction Weekly*, a review of 441 issues (85% coverage of the 520 issues in this period), registered 1687 letters (extrapolating 2000 for the decade)—69.5% from men, 18.1% women, and 12.3% indeterminate. The geographical rankings differ somewhat from *Astounding's* (New York, 340/22.5%; California, 151/10%; Illinois, 97/6.4%; Pennsylvania, 81/5.4%; Massachusetts, 73/4.8%). Again, while populous states are prominent, they overrepresent their share of the total population against census records. Another interesting distinction concerns reader occupations, very scantily mentioned in *Astounding*, but more frequent in *Detective Fiction Weekly*: eighty job categories are named, of which seventeen are in the professions. As for *Weird Tales* (100% coverage), the decade yields 1831 letters, of which 67.2% men, 16.8% women, and 16.1% indeterminate—these numbers depart from the 1923-1929 period (800 letters) of 60% men, 19% women, and 21% indeterminate. For the thirties, most letters originated from California (210/12.8%), New York

more populous states with urban concentrations favoring more newsstands and more tax revenue to support better educational systems and higher literacy rates, hence more readers with easier access, more cultural resources, and overall more developed markets with cheaper distribution systems.⁶ An analysis of these social and economic factors is beyond the scope of this paper.

Other constraints pertain to letter content: we rarely have access to the original letters or knowledge of their total number or exact form. Neither do we know how letters might have been edited for length or clarity. Editorial criteria for letter selection likely aligned with a coherent and preconceived plan, especially since according to Gary Wolfe (2003: 96) the editor's role in sf considerably outstripped that in other genres. Genre innovations were tied directly to this exercise of power as expressed in 'deliberate editorial intervention' as well as 'editorial position papers and even manifestoes' (Wolfe, 2003: 96)—Gernsback, Tremaine, and Campbell all penned such statements in their magazines. Nevala-Lee buttresses this claim, viewing the bottleneck of editorship and editors' personalities as exerting significant influence. The youthful Campbell, situated at the right place and time, fortuitously engaged and favoured a number of important writers (e.g., Asimov, Heinlein, Hubbard, Burks, Pohl), whose stories in turn exerted an outsized effect on the genre's direction. Given *Astounding's* premiere position in the 1930s, Campbell

assumed the role of a gatekeeper who controlled access to the top of the genre, in which the pulps were the only game in town. Science fiction, which was still defining itself, was changed forever by his whims, prejudices, and private life. (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 7)

To be sure, many letters take positions against stated editorial policy, and many more are critical of other readers (often to the point of libel), but even here there is much opportunity for editorial intervention, or more importantly, calculated juxtaposition. No doubt, the placement, virtually back-to-back, of diametrically opposed reader viewpoints capitalised on the entertainment value of disputes. Editors undoubtedly understood that the annoyance provoked by partisan positions generated interest, giving credence to Farah Mendlesohn's (2003: 1) description of the sf fan scene as 'a battleground', even though the battle was in some measure contrived.

Notwithstanding editorial manipulations, the sf community has also been described as an 'extended family' (Del Rey, 1979: xi) and 'a form of "collective writing"' between authors, editors, and fans (Fleming, 1978: 289). This cohesion was prompted in part by science fiction magazines being a 'specialist market' (Ashley, 2005: 61), targeting 'a very particular sort of reader', whom Adam Roberts (2016: 262) characterises as 'youngish, male, randy, open to the beguiling fantasy that there might exist another world, or another time, in which he would be more of a sexual and individual success than is the case in his actual life'. Reader interconnectedness was nurtured by

(208/12.5%), Illinois (151/9.2%), Pennsylvania (148/9%), and Massachusetts (84/5.1%)—the same disproportions evident in the other books apply here. *Weird Tales* letter writers mention of sixteen professions and six working-class jobs.

⁶ We should also note that individuals could exert real influence on the data—frequent letter-writer Jack Darrow (Clifford Kornoelje) is the prime example: his forty-one letters printed between 1930 and 1936 represent about 2% of *Astounding's* total.

letter departments which published respondents' addresses, instigating a flurry of private correspondence that eventually led to the formation of clubs in the 1930s, chiefly in large cities. The fan groups were small and contentious (sometimes politically radical), and, according to Nevala-Lee (2018: 101), 'the most devoted members were usually young, obsessive, and confrontational'—they were also overwhelmingly white and male. Initially supported by Gernsback, fan clubs were also cautiously encouraged by Campbell and Thrilling Group editor Leo Margulies, though these men considered them promotional vehicles that provided insights into market composition. Moreover, Campbell's public enthusiasm for fandom, generally opportunistic (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 175-76), did not translate into accepting manuscripts from members of groups he disliked (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 109).

The masculine coding of the genre went beyond male-dominated fan clubs and editorial idiosyncrasy; rather, as Helen Merrick (2003: 241) notes, it reflected the pervasive, culture-wide belief in science and its practitioners as male and, importantly, the object of scientific inquiry and exploration as female. The sexual dimension was psychologically complex, at least in the letters, as romance and love themes in stories were repeatedly denounced, probably inadvertently conveying the awkwardness of its readership, as being unscientific.⁷ Though collectively they may have been 'brighter than their peers' and 'particularly fascinated by science', Gary Westfahl (2011: 87) suggests many were 'socially inept loners', whose frustrations were projected into and resolved by the stories. Some diversification of the fan base appeared to develop in the 1940s, though still including few Black readers (Moskowitz, 1954: 10; Del Rey, 1979: 73) and relatively few women—though not as few as the letters suggest; female readership was on the increase over the decade (Del Rey, 1979: 139).

In the twelve surveys tabulated by Berger between 1948 and 1975, female readership ranges from 5% (1955) to 35% (1973) (Berger, 1977: 4). Moskowitz's historical account of developments in the thirties rarely mentions women. Of the thirty-five individual and group photographs in his book, only one contains women—two unnamed figures in the background looking on. Of the scores of individuals listed in his index, only fifteen women appear, and of these, only a few receive more than one mention. We cannot plausibly generalise from a few sources, but given Campbell's decision-making power, we still must consider the impact his attitudes had on submissions. At *Astounding* 'women were often regarded with suspicion, and even when they were welcomed, they could still be treated poorly...' (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 12, see also 365-366). These attitudes were not confined to the thirties; they characterised Campbell's stance after the Civil Rights movement was in full swing. But, to underscore the difficulty of obtaining a completely clear picture of bias, during the 1930s and beyond Campbell relied heavily on two women: his wife Doña in the manuscript selection process ('his unofficial first reader' [Nevala-Lee, 2018: 78]) and secretary Catharine Tarrant. Indeed, for thirty years the former 'handled the entire practical and administrative end of the magazine' (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 78).

⁷ The charge of sexism is indisputable (for particularly egregious examples, see 9.3/1932/425; 21.5/1938/162). The eighteen-year-old Isaac Asimov threw in his lot with the misogynists (22.1/1938/161; 22.3/1938/158; 22.4/1938/160-61; 22.6/1939/159-60), a sequence analysed by Larbalestier (2002: 117-135). Though Asimov's statements are indefensible, Nevala-Lee (2018: 90) attributes the young Asimov's 'hostility' to 'his nervousness around girls—he had never been on a date'.

Genre Boundaries in *Astounding's* Reader Columns

Despite *Astounding's* perceptible impact on the genre during the thirties (Attebery, 2003: 32) and important authors' deference to Campbell's formative influence (Williamson, 1975: 20; Asimov, 1981: 124), Gernsback's antecedent tripartite vision of sf as romance (i.e., adventure), science, and prophecy (Westfahl, 2021: 106-107) remained seminal. To be sure, his orientations elicited different degrees of appeal or scorn among pulp readers, and the visible and varied proportion of these components in fiction created friction between participants, as evidenced in letter departments. In fact, Gernsback's categories, especially in the dispute between entertainment value versus serious scientific demonstration, was a re-articulation of a long-standing development rooted in American experience. Susan Branson (2021: 1), in *Scientific Americans*, offers the broad thesis that American political independence prompted a need to establish identity and economic viability, a process facilitated by infusing scientific and technological developments with ideological fervor. Possessed of hegemonic overtones, the public face of scientific demonstration had, from the late eighteenth, and increasingly in the nineteenth century, a strong entertainment element (Branson, 2021: 28-30)—the hot-air balloon, steam engine, or waterworks functioned as both life-changing innovation *and* spectacle. These changes were not without their darker side, its dystopian possibilities surfacing in speculative fiction, which in 'the early nineteenth century posited a vanished natural world replaced by steel, concrete, and robots' (Branson, 2021: 98). On a more intimate scale, though, nineteenth-century scientific entertainments—generally termed the wonder show—played to audience curiosity, rendering the boundaries between science and entertainment indistinct. Fred Nadis (2005: 8) argues that over the course of the century these displays lost something of their egalitarianism and suffered a loss of status among elites, especially in performances involving hypnotism and magic. We might argue that the sf writer was a species of 'wonder showman', who, along the lines of his or her nineteenth-century precursors, 'continually case scientific and technological breakthroughs in magical terms and a remnant of a magical worldview in scientific terms' (Nadis, 2005: 14). The upshot is a tendency towards divided tastes, which for some meant science part of the science fiction narrative demanded a technical and experimentally-sound foundation.

Darko Suvin's (1988: 15) assessment is relevant here: genre boundaries emerge as 'the common ground between the writer's production, the reader's interest, and the economically and ideologically crucial, channeling middlemen [e.g., editors]'. For editors and authors, finding a formula was probably mostly market-driven (and, often, a guessing game). But readership, Suvin (1988: 15) advises, 'is an heuristic construct highlighting how expectations clash and change when sufficiently specific clusters of social groups and classes clash in the social dialogue represented by literary genre'.⁸ The sociological implications lead to what he terms a 'group-consciousness' (Suvin, 1988: 18), though his general disparagement of the pulps suggests that *this* group of readers was peripheral and relatively powerless despite their role as consumers. Campbell's eventual management of the narrative, that is, his notion of correct proportions, was partly a consequence of his long-standing editorship, in which editorials and letter department

⁸ See also Evnine (2015: 5) on this point. Indeed, the way Harry Bates tells the story in Alva Rogers's *Astounding* memoir, suggests that accident and marketing pressures were as important as anything else (Rogers, 1964: xi).

selections became part of his toolbox. His engagement with ‘the psychological and sociological impact of an ever-changing technology on society’ (Clareson, 1990: 27) and attempts to move past Gernsback’s ‘didactic and educational’ focus (Frelik, 2011: 23) did not bridge the gap between disputants in the positivist-mythical debate. Arguably, Campbell’s response to this rift was the creation of *Unknown*, a fantasy- and horror-themed book serving as companion to *Astounding* from 1939-1943, in which supernatural phenomena were fair game. The short-lived pulp, axed due to wartime paper restrictions, served as an outlet for a segment of sf readership that hard science alone could not satisfy.

The prominence of science or romance and the relation of either to prophecy (Gernsback’s formula) led to imbalances that registered in reader letters. The disproportionate foregrounding of any element suggests differing strategies towards what John Clute (2021: 294) views as sf’s primary purpose, the restoration or setting right of the world. If the emphasis is hard science, then deliverance lies in tech- and theory-mediated solutions, if romance/adventure, then in psychologically-satisfying outcomes that evoked long-standing literary topoi. Perhaps a better term than *restoration* would be ‘domestication’, which Parrinder (1980: 58) understands as dis-estrangement and re-inscription within familiar epistemological boundaries; but here too, “domestication” of alien phenomena leaves the way open either for realism, or for a fantasy based on recognizable melodramatic patterns’ (Parrinder, 1980: 62)—essentially the same bifurcation. To some degree, Gernsback’s understanding of prophecy (noting differences with Parrinder’s usage) is a divided category, depending on its alignment with the other terms—if viewed as extrapolation from contemporaneous science, then it takes the weak form of prediction; if, in contrast, it was understood as analogy, then its projective function was in reality a self-critique displaced into the future or onto the alien. This distinction between prophecy as disingenuous extrapolation and analogy has been treated at length in Suvin (1979: 28), who cogently remarks ‘futuristic anticipation [extrapolation]’ to be ‘a fictional device and ideological horizon rather than the basis for a cognitive model’. Putting prophecy to one side for the moment, the letter columns, as a site of conflict between demands for hard science and romance might otherwise be expressed as advocacy for a positivist concept of scientific content in conflict with the appropriation of less technical, more imaginative scientific discourse as a vehicle for investigating the human condition.

Parrinder’s ‘Science Fiction: Metaphor, Myth or Prophecy’ establishes its baseline in nineteenth-century sf (prophecy), which emphasises ‘Positivism and scientific materialism’; this phase is succeeded by myth, characterised as ‘pragmatic cultural relativism’, and finally metaphor (unexamined here), which Parrinder (1980: 28) terms ‘a post-structuralist “conventionalism” or “anti-foundationalism”’. The prophetic, again differing from Gernsback’s usage, would be understood by most *Astounding* readers as hard science. Heavily influenced by Wells, the prophetic ‘presupposes a Positivistic space-time continuum in which natural diversity is accounted for and brought under the rule of universal laws’ (Parrinder, 1980: 25). This attitude was treated with deadly seriousness in the letter pages of *Astounding*—witness the lengthy and heated debates in 1934 and 1935 over the conservation of matter in Karl Van Kampen’s (pseudonym of John Campbell) ‘The Irrelevant’ or Donald Wandrei’s advocacy in his story ‘Colossus’ of the Lorenz-Fitzgerald theory instead of the Michelson-Morley ether-drift experiment. For Parrinder, the ‘scientism’ of the mythic mode repositions science within a belief-system ‘alongside other competing belief-systems’ (perhaps as magic might compete with

everyday empiricism). The primacy of narrative, while dispensing with the distractions of footnotes and in-text lectures, can result in ‘a growing carelessness towards scientific facts’ (Parrinder, 1980: 27); this tendency, however, betrays the repurposing of science as a medium for social and psychological inquiry. The self-conscious pursuit of social questions is subdued in reader letters, though Tremaine’s call for ‘thought-variant’ stories evokes self-aware recognition of the conditions subtending any system of thought. The mythic potential of this story type is indicated by Tremaine’s somewhat oxymoronic label ‘logical fantasy’ (12.4/1933/139). In the same issue a reader demands ‘more social-science narratives of the future’ (12.4/1933/142); such calls, though few, generally meant the projection and analysis of contemporary human ills into alien contexts. In the next issue, however, a respondent bemoaned how ‘the social sciences have been sadly neglected’, demanding stories that portray ‘future moral developments, changing relations between the sexes, psychology in the future’ (13.3/1934/159)—therefore, this self-conscious demand was not entirely absent.

Parrinder, citing Patricia Warrick, acknowledges that the mythopoetic dimension of sf took different routes: myth as storytelling possessed entertainment value, but also offered profound psychological (individual) and cultural (group) meaning (Warrick, 1978: 3). As such, it exerted a force of cohesion, drawing together a community of readers—or, as the case may be, sharpening distinctions between them. One reader dismisses weird fiction (understood by detractors to possess no scientific value) as ‘fascinating to its adherents, but therein lies its only objective—entertainment’. He acknowledges that sf ‘aims...to entertain, but also to instruct’, something weird fiction is incapable of doing (13.2/1934/159). But, myth-making, foundational to human social development, persists in a technologically-advanced age as a need, though for most readers it remains camouflaged, e.g., the heroic quest. For Warrick (1978: 5), sf reconfigures myth under the guise of a scientific model, highlighting the potential narrative dimension of such discourse. Writers who explicitly cross into fantasy, though, appear to violate the sanctity of the scientific method, hence the negative perceptions of weird fiction. Lovecraft is the exemplar; his few appearances in *Astounding* were met more frequently by detractors than admirers in the letter section. The phrase *Cthulhu Mythos* is instructive: Lovecraft’s tales are typically not erected upon a *novum* but a more radical paradigmatic shift.

Parrinder’s prophecy-myth relation is discernible from the letter department’s inception. To some degree, Bates helped to articulate reference points in the first issue by asserting that ‘stories will not only be strictly accurate in their science but will be vividly, dramatically and thrillingly told’ (1.1/1930/7)—that is, the variables of scientific legitimacy and dramatic interest. Three years later, near the end of the Clayton period, Bates expressed greater dubiety at the narrative emphasis, i.e., the ‘established “action” story policy’, favoring instead ‘one embodying more science’ (11.3/1933/297)—no doubt a concession to the volume of letters from hard science advocates. Stories that accentuated unrestrained imagination were denounced as ‘fairy tales’, a common term of censure. But despite Bates’s ostensible attempts at synthesis, editorial efforts continued to encourage conflict. One reader, disgruntled over a general lack of scientific precision, asks whether ‘anyone, save a young child or a moron, can read and enjoy such futile nonsense’. On the same page, another writes: ‘for our fiction magazines, let’s have it pure and unadulterated, the more improbable the better’. The writer adds: ‘We read stories to be amused, not for technical information...’ (5.1/1931/136). This type of discord, repeated scores of times with slight variations over the decade, was facilitated if not promoted by editorial decisions.

In the face of the hard science majority, a body of respondents, including several prominent authors, took up the cause of imaginative or mythic science fiction. Clark Ashton Smith, better known as a contributor to *Weird Tales*, remarked in 'Brass Tacks' that scientific content is usually circumscribed by present-day limits; stories that challenge this paradigm are derided as fantasy. Cogently, he stated: 'I think that people who read [*Astounding*], as well as Science Fiction magazines in general, are people with the ingrained human love for wonder and mystery...'; but the derogatory label 'fairy tale' is employed when the story 'is not couched in the diction of modern materialistic science, with a show of concern for verified credibilities' (7.1/1931/132). Kindred readers saw sf as 'that branch of literature that deals with the physically unexplored reaches of the human mind' (12.6/1934/139); this dispute would reach increasingly self-conscious and quarrelsome form in 1934 with the serialisation of Charles Fort's *Lo!* But even disagreement over the author's choice of scientific theory could raise controversy if it veered too sharply from established scientific consensus. The flap over Wandrei's story 'Colossus' was, as remarked, the centre of a contentious debate spanning several months. The exchange culminated in Wandrei's response to a hostile critic, whom he accused of practicing 'not science, but dogmatism; and not imagination, but actualism' (13.3/1934/156). The more common rejoinder though was that 'there is nothing imaginative about reading an engineer's handbook' (15.4/1935/155), which 'Science Discussions' certainly came to resemble. Others complained about the rise of 'mechanical, machinelike' stories—these, a writer claimed, 'belittle the universe, the forces of nature, time and space' (15.4/1935/158)—not in their quantifiable dimensions but in terms of their stimulus to imaginative wonder. Another correspondent, a laboratory assistant, contended that a narrow worldview reflected real conditions in 1936, in that experiments 'are so bound by conventional methods of procedure that they are rendered useless as concerns educational advancement'. He went on to complain that 'we are told what we are to believe in the field of science, and no room is left for individual thought' (17.2/1936/153). The internal fissure within the sf reader was voiced in a 1939 letter, which maintained that speculative fiction facilitates the emergence of an 'illogical double-track mind'. The solution for that writer, as for Campbell, was the launch of *Astounding's* sister publication, *Unknown* in March 1939. The implication is that science (or, more accurately, the representation of science) itself is a divided field—evidenced by the fact that both publications had the same editor and many of the same writers and readers. The *Astounding* reader, the writer claims, has faith in the subjugation of science to human needs. In contrast, the *Unknown* reader, attracted to 'the dark corners of the brain' (24.2/1939/155-56), touches a primal but insistent strain of human experience; the scientific attitude designates the limits where positive knowledge breaks down.

Respondents, then, who were self-conscious of this divide came to acknowledge 'two classes of science fiction fans' (14.6/1935/159)—those who favour hard science and those who demand imaginative innovation, though even here the latter were sometimes dismissed as escapist. Bates probably tipped the scales towards the positivist camp early on by disparaging any 'who would be so un-modern as to cling to the oft-told stories of the older science [i.e. outdated explanations of phenomena] and neglect the thrilling reaches of the new!' (3.1/1930/134). But more sober writers suggested that abstruse scientific theories were beyond the capacities of the average reader, that the 'great majority of them are really not scientifically minded, but are merely in search of exciting and unusual literature' (20.4/1937/159). By the end of the decade, the divide was smoothed over by a recurring claim expounded by one reader as

‘true science-fiction does not deal with the science of this era’ (23.1/1939/159), honorably reinstating the role of imaginative impossibilities. Campbell, too, paraphrased Bates in more carefully-chosen language: ‘Science-fiction rose when men reached that stage of civilization that looked forward gladly’ (23.4/1939/6).

Campbell, though susceptible in the 1940s to dubious theories (Nevala-Lee, 2018: 275-285), was devoted enough to a certain model of science in the thirties to restrict unrestrained romantic or mythopoetic tendencies in the pages of *Astounding*. To be sure, a contingent of readers believed sf ‘is adventure, thrills and romance, and when added to scientific theme we get Science Fiction’, one letter reads (11.1/1932/135). This position rarely involved much reflection on the social function of this need. The science-oriented writers represent a more complex range of positions. Tremaine defined science as ‘the selection and classification of knowledge’, adding that ‘super-science is the projection of inventive thought into the realm of unexplored realism’ (13.6/1934/7)—essentially, a mode of thinking conjoined to a mode of representation. But the notion of representation was itself rarely interrogated, and one writer claimed that sf ‘is a game that differs from science itself in but one fundamental respect: it is entitled to assume a successful outcome of the experiments it devises for the testing of its theories’ (13.6/1934/153). Probably, the majority in this camp regarded sf as quasi-educational, helpful in ‘initiat[ing] the amateur scientist to the right road...’ (11.2/1932/282), or it was argued as such to reduce the stigma of patronising a ‘dubious’ literary genre. Thus, good authors were measured by the ability to ‘develop plausible theories which are possible in the light of present-day science’ (14.1/1934/159). As an ‘elaboration of present and presumed facts’, and their subsequent explanation, sf ‘is the most practical field of writing ever attempted by man’ (14.4/1934/156). Underlying this orientation was a genuine longing for praxis. Tremaine gave voice to this need in his justification for replacing ‘Brass Tacks’ with a remarkable statement: ‘There is no reason why *Astounding* should not serve as an exponent of scientific advancement through the contributed discussions’; his rationale, he admits, is partly a response to the ‘unwarranted bias on the part of a large portion of the educational world against “pulp” magazines as a class’ (18.4/1936/152). He held the view, favoured also by Campbell, that readers, ‘each in our small way, may help to contribute vital thoughts to the general science, and *Astounding Stories* will be our medium of expression’ (18.5/1937/127). The limits of this vision are demonstrated by scores of boring technical letters likely understood by few.

Advocacy for the mythic came more frequently from writers themselves. Fan (and, later, author) P. Schuyler Miller averred early on that good writing should have ‘a skeleton of science...determining its shape’, while conceding that ‘the skeleton [to be] of less importance than the vision of the completed edifice’ (6.3/1931/419). The aesthetic dimension transcends a mere collation of facts or plausible theory; in the words of another: ‘The great masters of science-fiction have suggested rather than delineated the scientific aspects of their plots’ (15.2/1935/152). SF great Jack Williamson contributed his nuanced vision: ‘its purpose, I think—like that of any art—is to create a unified emotional response to its material. It deals...not so much with science itself, as with the *human reaction* to science’. Sound science is necessary, mostly because its contrary disturbs what Williamson terms the ‘aesthetic response to science’ (19.4/1937/157). This is the key point: the reader’s self-aware transition from science to the representation of science. The mythic did not ‘elevate’ sf to the status of science nor lose sight of science as a form of narrative. For insightful voices in the letter pages, that narrative, at its

best, employed the scientific discourse appropriate to modernity to reinvigorate fundamental human questions long-embodied in mythic traditions, but also held a mirror up to the processes transforming the human condition at the time of its inception.

Biographical Note

Zi-Ling Yan is a professor in the Department of English, National University of Tainan. His research focus is twentieth-century crime and mystery fiction, both in the ratiocinative and hard-boiled traditions.

Contact: yanziling103@gmail.com

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