Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction

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IN his first non-fiction book, novelist and longtime Analog contributor Alec Nevala-Lee tackles a daunting topic: a braided biography of the affinity group of science fiction writers that once centered on John W. Campbell Jr., the longtime Astounding/Analog editor who for a decade shaped a field that subsequently arrayed itself largely in opposition to him.

One must admire the feat of distillation this book represents. Nevala-Lee appends 83 pages of notes and an eight-page, 94-item secondary bibliography, but he also seems well acquainted with all the works of his notoriously prolific subjects, and the complete contents of 30-plus years of Campbell’s monthly magazines. In shaping this prodigious mass of material, Nevala-Lee’s storytelling skills serve him well. Throughout, he maintains firm control of his multiple narratives, and his pacing never flags.

Nevala-Lee acknowledges that he is “particularly indebted” (415) to Asimov’s three volumes of memoirs, to William H. Patterson’s two-volume Heinlein biography, and to Russell Miller’s Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard (1987). But the Asimov and Patterson books are forbidding tomes of layered minutiae that dissatisfy in different ways (Asimov by blithely ignoring the difficult material, Patterson by forcing his protean subject into a manageable libertarian box), while Miller’s bracing muckrake has been legally unavailable in the United States for decades thanks to Scientologist litigation. (If you’re content with a PDF, the robust anti-Church of Scientology web can fix you up.) Nevala-Lee’s judicious and clear-eyed sampling of these predecessors is thus something of a public service.

Every page of Astounding is engaging and thought-provoking, and even those familiar with the era will make discoveries here. Especially intriguing are Nevala-Lee’s character sketches of the women who eventually broke free of their husbands’
concentric macho orbits, one way or another; Dona Campbell, Leslyn Heinlein, and Sara Hubbard deserve a collective biography of their own.

Many of Nevala-Lee’s most compelling passages involve John Campbell, a confounding and ultimately tragic figure who understandably has eluded biographers until now. Nevala-Lee details Campbell’s unhappy adolescence and complex family life; the development of his lonely conviction that science fiction was somehow central to the 20th-century American enterprise; his ability to attract disciples and repel them in equal measure; and the racist attitudes that poisoned much of his later thinking.

Above all, Nevala-Lee explores Campbell’s genuinely “astonishing” capacity for self-invention, which often was indistinguishable from self-deception. That he infamously was given to identifying himself, without evidence, as a nuclear physicist pales beside some of Campbell’s grander claims, for example that he once pinned the hapless Asimov to a chair through sheer hypnotic will power, or that his biofeedback control of his own cell structures meant he could never die. Fans of Mary Roach’s and John Grant’s books on pseudoscience and fringe science will find much to appreciate here.

Nevala-Lee’s most poignant chapter details the grief-stricken Campbell’s characteristic reaction to his stepson Joe Kearney’s fatal 1955 car accident on the Pennsylvania Turnpike: a vow to solve the problem of “the relationship between the present human mental mechanism and the operation of high-energy, high-performance, extreme-endurance machines” (314). Nothing came of it, other than everything: “Joe’s death was too painful for him to abandon it entirely,” Nevala-Lee writes. “The answer, he decided, was psionics, which would serve as a source of objective data on the brain. . . . It was a turning point in the history of the genre, and although Joe was never mentioned again, he provided its unspoken motivation, haunting it to the end like a ghost” (315-316).

Nevala-Lee’s final hundred pages, though they climax with the science-fictional triumph of Apollo 11, comprise a long dying fall, as his principals go their separate ways from the 1950s onward. Heinlein turned to “slick” magazines, YA fiction, and eventual cult status in both the Haight and the Pentagon; Asimov embraced popular science and gained household fame as a go-to expert on all subjects; and Hubbard steadily faded from view behind the impenetrable cloud layers of the church he founded. Moreover, all of them largely kept their distance from their onetime
mentor, until Campbell’s death in 1971 triggered a spasmodic wave of nostalgia in the field for all that he once signified. He should have lived to participate in the tacky yet touching 1972 ocean cruise promoted as the Voyage Beyond Apollo, described in Nevala-Lee’s epilogue. I’m sure no participant ever quite forgot that voyage, much as they may have tried.

Nevala-Lee has a good story to tell, and he tells it well, but what is its larger meaning—other than perhaps to underscore the late Thomas Disch’s argument, in *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* (1998), that the history of science fiction is inextricably tied to cranks, charlatans, and hoaxers? On the last page of his back-of-the-book Acknowledgments, Nevala-Lee writes, “My greatest hope is that this book will inspire a larger conversation about the history of science fiction” (411). One could argue that the conversation is already under way, and that Campbell and company are not terribly relevant to it. Three recent brilliant pop-culture biographies—Julie Phillips on Alice Sheldon a.k.a. James Tiptree Jr., Ruth Franklin on Shirley Jackson, and Jill Lapore on Wonder Woman—make their eccentric 20th-century subjects seem quite timely, inspiring to a new generation of creators, and relevant far beyond genre borders. Can such a brief be made today even for Asimov and Heinlein, much less Campbell and Hubbard?

Packed with rich, weird details and told with a storyteller’s brio, *Astounding* is a welcome account of the field’s pulp origins. As I enjoy and admire it, I can’t help but wonder whether it hasn’t been published a generation too late.