Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction

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BACK in 1976 when the master James Gunn won two major awards for the first edition of this work with its Introduction by Isaac Asimov, vision and youth and optimism ruled in the genre. *Star Trek* was fresh in our heads with all of its visuals and color. Asimov was working at the top of his creativity and was beginning to speculate autobiographically about “golden ages” that were coming to a close for all of us. Large picture books of the colorful, pulp genre were selling, so Gunn provided one. Just at the same moment, of course, with John Clute and Peter Nicholls working on the *SF Encyclopedia* (1979) and with Neil Barron’s first edition of *The Anatomy of Wonder* (1976), the detail and the systematic accuracy in reference books increased to a new level for this literature. But the Gunn “illustrated history” was history with vision and purpose; it expressed the enthusiasm and sheer love for SF. There was a second edition that I failed to notice and, now, this handsome third edition. Much is still the same, but much has changed.

In the short space available here, I will describe what I see as changes as well as the ruling Vision and Purpose. In chapter one of both editions, Gunn uses the phrase “science fiction and the world.” The phrase is Romantic and purposeful, and the Gunn vision and sense of purpose fit well with the trending Asimov focus in his career, his obsessive sense of self and its awareness of Golden Age potentials. Expansive heroism and the youthful loneliness of real adventure that become muted a bit in the many years between the first edition and the third edition can be seen represented even in the cover art for the two books. On the 1975 cover, we see a classic and lonely rocket resting on its tail fins. The resting point seems to be one of the moons of Mars, with the huge red planet looming before it and dominating half of the cover in its lonely redness. The Third Edition cover shows a complex and populated space station in orbit above Earth or some similar planet that sports clouds, indicating water, and varied colors, maybe Gethen even, but certainly not the
Romantic emptiness of mysterious Mars. In the latter, I sense the presence of much greater complexity and dystopia, but more on that below when I get to the text in the book, as well as more on the sense of predatory competition in the genre. The latter notion seems to be ignored by the gentlemanly Gunn. But basically, I think, he is a hard fighter in his work who hopes to survive in the not-so-visionary Darwinian competition.

Even though he has been dead now for more than half the interval of time between the First Edition and this Third Edition, Asimov still provides Gunn with the laudatory Introduction to his Vision history—an early sign of Gunn’s Romantic denial of the possible predatory nature of death. The text has not been changed, of course. Gunn and Asimov have always seemed to me somewhat of an “odd couple,” even though Gunn did write an early study of Asimov’s work that was published by Oxford University Press (1982). But the men, about the same age, came from very different backgrounds. The males in Gunn’s family were printers and hawkers of short pulps of the classics called “blue books” throughout the Midwest (see his own autobiography, Star-Begotten: A Life Lived in Science Fiction, 2017). Asimov was a New York fan who grew into the genre as part of the Futurians and by writing fan letters to the pulps of the thirties. Asimov learned his craft in this way and by talking with Campbell. What they shared was the great Romantic vision of the expanding “American” potential for speculative and adventure storytelling. His Introduction in both editions I have before me is actually one of his autobiographical pieces about the meaning to him of SF—“a love affair.” He wrote this for Gunn a bit after his anthology Before the Golden Age (1974) and while he was working on his massive autobiography, the first volume of which appeared as In Memory Yet Green (1979). Note the rich color image in the Asimov title—so Romantic, so much Vision. The two editions of the Gunn history are rich in color.

For the practical use as reference books, however, the color and vision may often serve as a mirage. In both his original conception and, especially, in the later editions, Gunn seems to me a little cavalier in his handling of the details of black and white fact, and these moves relate to his Vision. The actual text writing does resemble the verve and energy we read in Billion Year Spree (1973) by Brian Aldiss. That book is a history, of course, coming a little before Gunn, and Gunn does mention it. But the important hard historical and research work done especially by Clute and Nicholls and by Neil Barron that Gunn was immediately competing with in his own
historical work simply is absent from this Third Edition. Gunn had done his own “Encyclopedia” shortly after the Clute and Nicholls work appeared in 1979, and the Gunn efforts had been completely “eaten up” by the success of Clute and Nicholls that now has become a huge database. In fact, this is the hard, predatory world of competition that does not fit well with the youthful energy and vision that both Gunn and Asimov believe in; the wonderful color and pictures hold the Vision. It is a vision we still believe in, and we are delighted to hold and admire this more compact but still lovely Third Edition. The work of James Gunn over his 97 some years of believing is, indeed, inspiring. But even his editorial choices, it seems to me, indicate a somewhat less Romantic scenario that also drives our work. We are grateful for all that the literature of science fiction gives us, both in hard detail and in Vision, even if the Vision itself must be a little predatory in ignoring its competition.