

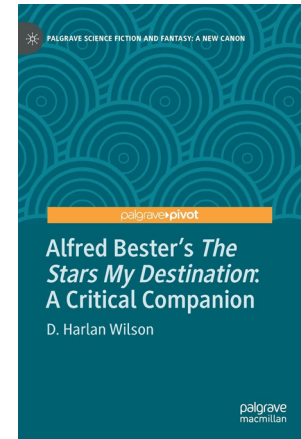
### *Alfred Bester's The Stars My Destination: A Critical Companion*, by D. Harlan Wilson



Michael Pitts

D. Harlan Wilson. *Alfred Bester's The Stars My Destination: A Critical Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon. Hardcover. 135 pg. \$49.99. ISBN 978-3030969455.

The *Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon* series sets out, as described by its editors, to rethink science fiction and challenge traditional “notions of *the canon*, so long associated with privilege, power, class, and hegemony” (v). In pursuit of these goals, the series posits two key questions in relation to the specific texts under consideration: “*Why does this text matter to SFF?*” and “*Why does (or should) this text matter to SFF readers, scholars, and fans?*” (v-vi). D. Harlan Wilson’s contribution to the series, a critical companion to Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination* (1956), skillfully answers these guiding questions through its focus upon Bester as a pivotal figure in the development of the New Wave and cyberpunk movements. As Wilson argues, Bester’s commitment to pushing science fiction beyond its pulp roots was fundamental to the development of the former subgenre while the particular novel in question acts as an early landmark of proto-cyberpunk fiction. In this way, Wilson’s critical companion emphasizes the radical impact of *The Stars My Destination*, which propelled the canon past the frequently childish inclinations of its earliest works and towards new terrain, including complex analyses of privilege, power, class, and hegemony.



Wilson’s critical companion centers upon the thesis that Bester’s novel “mapped new terrain in postwar SF” and that it “accomplishes what pre-1950s SF novels failed to do in terms of *style*, *structure*, and *attitude*” (17). It is divided into sections covering the author’s career and the novel’s historical context, intertextual relationships with earlier and later science fiction works, and the text’s coded commentary on class, gender, race, and religion. The first chapter focuses upon the inspiration and resulting legacy of *Stars*, provides a biography of Bester, illuminates his role as both a critical writer of SF and a harsh critic of its contributors, and underscores the recurring tropes of Bester’s fiction. After a synopsis of the novel in Wilson’s second chapter, chapter three explores the literary influences that shaped Bester’s writing style, which Wilson characterizes as dominated by literary tropes and allusions. It additionally considers how Bester’s fiction hints at the future of the genre. Focusing narrowly upon the intertextual parallels existing between the novel and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), chapter four considers these novels’ mutual interest

in “charismatic monsters and meta-referentially point to the inherent mad scientism of Shelley’s and Bester’s authorship as well as narrative itself” (17). The most pivotal of Wilson’s contributions in this chapter is his analysis of *Stars* as a palimpsest under which lie multiple undertexts whose relationships to Bester’s novel are worthy of consideration, including, in addition to Shelley’s novel, the archetypal monomyth and H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) (70).

Moving past these intertextual considerations, Wilson focuses his fifth and sixth chapters upon the commentary Bester includes in the subtext of his novel upon identity markers and religious belief. “Architectures of Psyche, Power, and Patriarchy” considers Bester’s social views and his encoding of them in *Stars*. Analyzing specifically the novel’s treatments of gender, race, and class, Wilson complicates readings of the text as simply conservative or, on the other hand, radically progressive. Through a careful analysis of the future Bester imagines and the ways the novel’s protagonist, Gully Foyle, embodies both this society’s values and capability of evolving, Wilson introduces welcomed nuance to his analysis of the novel’s subtext. As Wilson outlines, his key argument in this chapter is that Bester “was more evolved than his contemporaries and made strides toward greater equality despite his own construction and entitlement as a white male author” (75). In this way, he presents a balanced critique of Bester as a patriarchal reflection of the culture within which he wrote and as a writer who at times radically subverted widely accepted, conservative perspectives on race, class, and gender.

In the final chapter of Wilson’s text, he considers the pervasive nature of religion within the encoded message of Bester’s novel. In one particularly insightful segment of this analysis, Wilson outlines the textual and extratextual implications of Bester’s encoded critiques of religion as they relate to language. As the title of the chapter, “Speaking in Gutter Tongues,” signals, Wilson illuminates an important connection binding language and religion in *Stars*. More specifically, he illuminates how dialect and other linguistic elements signal religious affiliation in this imagined society. The protagonist’s “lower-class gutter tongue,” for example, underscores his lack of anti-religious identity (101). But, as Wilson keenly observes, this connection between religion and language works simultaneously as a reflection of Bester’s extratextual desires and intentions as a science fiction writer. Specifically, Bester, Wilson contends, takes on the religious mantle of an exorcist, a mantle similarly taken on by Foyle in the novel. Both Bester and his protagonist aspire to positively reshape “their respective worlds—one from the violence of upper-class tyranny and prejudice, the other from the limitations of SF writers who fail to live up to the genre’s great potential” (101). According to Wilson, language and religion remain, therefore, entwined both within and immediately outside of the novel. This underscoring of Bester’s commentary connecting language and religion within the novel’s plot and Bester’s perceived role as a linguistic exorcist of sorts makes up a pivotal strength of Wilson’s critical companion.

*Alfred Bester’s The Stars My Destination: A Critical Companion* is overall a valuable critical tool for a wide audience. It is well-suited both for students seeking a broad guide to Bester’s novel and scholars in search of an in-depth introductory analysis of its key themes, tropes, and encoded messages. Moving beyond a simple overview of *Stars*, Wilson utilizes theoretically sound

and sophisticated critical approaches to interrogate the novel's significance and impact upon the science fiction genre. With its emphasis upon the ways *Stars* challenged science fiction's trajectory and conservative political messaging, Wilson's critical companion is a strong addition to Palgrave's *New Canon* series.

**Michael Pitts** is lecturer at the University of New York in Prague. His first monograph, *Alternative Masculinities in Feminist Speculative Fiction: A New Man*, was published by Lexington Books in 2021. His research interests are positioned at the intersection of gender theory, speculative fiction, and utopian studies.