

The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction, ed. Grant Wythoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 359 pp.

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“It is easy to argue,” Brian Aldiss once wrote, “that Hugo Gernsback (1894-1967) was one of the worst disasters ever to hit the science fiction field.” For Darko Suvin in his foundational work of contemporary science fiction criticism, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), Gernsback similarly stands in as the chief architect of a deeply degraded pulp form of SF that keeps the genre alive “at the cost of starving, stunting, and deforming it.” Other Gernsback detractors might point to the fact that most of his publishing ventures were somewhat dismal failures, and that the bulk of what we now think of as science fiction actually derives from other, much more successful publishers and editors, most notably John W. Campbell (who edited *Astounding* from 1937 until his death in 1971)—or that some of Gernsback’s business practices were *deeply* questionable at best, leading many of the leading writers of the period to refer to him as “Hugo the Rat” due to very low, very late, or *non*payment.

And yet one of the most prestigious literary prizes in SF still bears his name: the Hugo Award, given in novel, novella, short story, visual media, and other categories at the fan convention WorldCon each year. Even the name of the genre itself, *science fiction*, comes from Gernsback, as his name for the genre he consolidated and promoted in the pages of his magazine *Amazing Stories* beginning in 1926 (after his first proposed term, the disastrous portmanteau *scientifiction*, didn’t take off). Gernsback’s legacy has come under strong reevaluation from academics in recent years, perhaps in large part due to the tireless championing of critic Gary Westfahl, who argues in *Hugo Gernsback and the Century of Science Fiction* (among other places) that Gernsback should be understood as a prime developer of SF whose contribution exceeds even the familiar stable of Founding Parents like H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Mary Shelley, and Edgar Allan Poe. What we now recognize as SF, Westfahl argues, is not what Wells *et al.* wrote so much as the publishing model that Gernsback created—both in terms of the sort of story that we recognize as SF but also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of the interactive discourse community of writers, editors, fans, and critics in perpetual conversation about the genre and its multiple visions of possible futures. It was Gernsback who made science fiction a *brand*. Gernsback is thus simultaneously the creator, savior, despoiler, and destroyer of SF, all at once, depending on who you ask.

Grant Wythoff’s inventive anthology *The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction*, published in a beautiful large-format prestige edition by University of Minnesota Press as the fifty-second entry in its “Electronic Mediations”

series, intervenes in this ongoing critical dispute over Gernsback's contribution and legacy with an unexpected sidestep that takes us away from "the literary" altogether into Gernsback's earlier, largely forgotten work as an editor and publisher of early technical and popular science journals. Citing Samuel R. Delany's famous claim that literature and SF must be understood as separate and distinct phenomena, Wythoff goes even further to argue that SF need not be understood as a primarily textual phenomenon at all: "Before it was a particular kind of story or plot," Wythoff writes, "science fiction was a way of thinking about and interacting with emerging media." Thus "science fiction" as a concept can be seen to far predate the founding of *Amazing Stories*; even before it was a publishing category or a marketing brand it was an ethos shared by amateur inventors, tinkerers, and radio enthusiasts reading the pages of *Modern Electrics*, *The Electrical Experimenter*, and *Radio News* (3). The close relationships between SF and film, television, video games, the Internet, and other forms of digital media are each just new twists on this same origin story; when we center Gernsback not just as editor but as inventor and enthusiast we see "these two nascent discourses, scientifiction and media culture . . . emerging from a single continuum" (4).

Wythoff's extended, nearly 60-page introduction—alongside his careful curation of foundational Gernsback articles, editorials, and short fiction from across his early career illustrated by photographs, drawings, logos, and diagrams from his life and his various publications—thus tell a unique history of science fiction as "gadget story" that has much more in common with nonfictional and even nonprofessional discourses about invention than has previously been recognized. I was especially taken—as someone who has thought a lot over the years about what exactly the "science" of "science fiction" is supposed to connote—with Wythoff's recovery of Gernsback's conflation of the concepts of "science" and "invention," particularly his small-*d* democratic valorization of the amateur over the figure of the professional scientist (17). Indeed, Gernsback often valorized a notion of tinkering—what Edison called "mucking," what in a contemporary context might be thought of as DIY or jailbreaking culture—that does not even rise to the level of creative invention per se. This tinkering extends even to his relationship with SF writing; Wythoff calls attention to Westfahl's description of Gernsback as someone who "almost certainly never read any contemporary book reviews, literary magazines, prefaces to literary works, or critical studies" (qtd. 51) and who yet nonetheless drew on his experience in the publishing industry to create a new mode of literary production more or less out of whole cloth.

Gernsback in Wythoff's hands thus becomes even more essential to a now even-wider history of SF, even as he sometimes recedes from view. Wythoff notes Gernsback was a prolific editorialist "writing two, sometimes three or more, articles a month . . . firing off ideas as they came to him, ideas that were pick up and discarded as utility demanded"

(27). In some of his publications, Gernsback as functioned as a “house pseudonym” who didn’t literally produce every word published under his name and who nonetheless stands today as “synonymous with his magazines” (24). Gernsback’s true genius, Wytoff suggests, may even lie precisely in the incoherence of his project: “It is precisely the novel coexistence of these diametrically opposed modes throughout Gernsback’s work—soberly technical and wildly speculative—that led to the explosive popularity of his ideas” (5). This sort of internal tension continues to reverberate through the genre of science fiction Gernsback helped inaugurate: his techno-optimistic vision of the ideal science fiction story as “a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision” (287-288)—designed to educate, inspire, and delight—was quickly challenged a cavalcade of apocalyptic disasters, dystopian nightmares, grim body horror, and deeply unscientific nonsense, even within the pages of the magazines he personally edited!

So far I have focused on Wythoff’s absolutely essential introduction, which at 60 oversized pages approaches monograph length just by itself (and which I suspect will be the prime locus of critical interest for many purchasers of *The Perversity of Things*, at least initially). But the bulk of the manuscript is actually a carefully curated anthology of Gernsback’s nonfictional and editorial writings, organized into seven sections: “Tinkering,” “History and Theory of Media,” “Broadcast Regulation,” “Wireless,” “Television,” “Sound,” and “Scientifiction.” Spanning the long arc of Gernsback’s early career from 1905 to 1932, the period when he was most influential, these texts are a terrific resource for people interested in or studying the development of postprint technologies in the early part of the twentieth century (as well as their relationship to the emergence of science fiction as a textual genre). These two tendencies combine in the final section of the book, “Selected Fiction,” which excerpts Part 3 of Gernsback’s best-known work, *Ralph 124C 41+* (“one to foresee for many,” 1911), as well as Part 5 of *Baron Münchhausen’s New Scientific Adventures* (1915) and three stories: “The Magnetic Storm” (1918), “The Electric Duel” (1927), and “The Killing Flash” (1929). As we approach the centenary of Gernsback’s greatest contribution to popular culture, the founding of *Amazing Stories* in 1926, *The Perversity of Things* offers a fascinating look back at a man who can be said to have quite literally dreamed up the future, though perhaps not quite exactly as he (or we) might have hoped.