

## The New York Nexus and American science fiction in the Postwar Period<sup>1</sup>

In 1999 Elizabeth Cummins published an article in *Extrapolation*, "American SF, 1940s-1950s: Where's the book? The New York Nexus." This article is a response to Cummins. The short answer to her question, "Where's the book?" is that I'm writing it. The long answer goes something like this:

In 1996, Judith Merrill told me that I should write a book about the Futurians and the Hydra Club (that is, the people she hung out with in NYC in the 1940s and 1950s) because "we were amazing."<sup>2</sup> Powerful though an injunction from Judy Merrill was, it was not the only reason I decided to undertake such a project. The idea of writing about the postwar period had been growing during my previous research project on the battle of the sexes in sf. It had become increasingly clear to me that the postwar period was pivotal to the development of American science fiction. This importance had also struck Elizabeth Cummins as she worked with Judith Merrill's letters in the National Archive of Canada in Ottawa. Cummins was working on a complete Judy Merrill bibliography, but what she found in those letters went far beyond bibliographical research. She worked with "numerous cardboard boxes of material that had been cursorily catalogued and filed" and describes the stimulating experience of "being immersed in the New York science fiction world of the 1940s and 1950s . . . I came away convinced that someone needs to write a literary history of that science fiction nexus" (314).

Judith Merrill never had any doubts about the importance of the period or her role in it. She began her memoirs because:

*some of my (male) friends and compeers began publishing politely laundered Autobiographies of their successes and I was snowblinded by the bleach in the detergent. Here were lists of stories sold, banquets attended, speeches given, editors lunched, even wives married and divorced, with never a shriek or tear or tremor or orgasm, and hardly a belly laugh anywhere. My memory (notoriously bad for facts and figures, but usually good for character and dialogue) insists that in those down and dirty days of ghetto science fiction most of us were young, passionate, frail, tough, loving, quarreling, horny human beings, testing ourselves against each other and the world. Somebody, I thought, should tell it like it was. (425)<sup>3</sup>*

She was also clear that scholars needed to do work on the period:

*the science fiction community I entered in New York in the early forties; that literary ghetto of the 1930s-1950s, with its brilliant and intricately interactive population and its clear/mad insights into both human and technological evolution (before the possibilities of wealth and mundane prestige brought in less intense practitioners), constituted a 'movement' (literary and sociological, as in 'Bloomsbury') of serious potential scholarly interest. (425)*

In 1999, the year Elizabeth Cummins's article was published, I was granted a three-year fellowship to write a book about the Futurians, the Hydra Club, and science fiction in New York City from 1938 to 1959. I immersed myself in the primary materials available at the University of Sydney's Fisher Library (an extraordinarily rich resource which includes Donald Wollheim's collection of Futurian fanzines). Then in September 1999, I made NYC my base and began my fieldwork. I decided to make talking to those who had been around during the period my first priority, and getting to archives—which aren't going anywhere, right?—second. As a result I did not get to Judy's letters in Ottawa, which had so inspired Elizabeth Cummins, until April 2001.<sup>4</sup>

I did not, in actual fact, read Cummins's article until earlier that year. When I came across it I found myself smiling. How often do you read an article that tells you to write the book that you are in the middle of researching and writing? It's a wonderful feeling. I too had been struck by the obviousness of it: anyone who has read the primary source material from that period would also recognize the need for such a book. Cummins's article made Judith Merrill's letters sound fabulous. Judy had told me several times in e-mail, insisted really, that I needed to go to Ottawa. Now I wish I had gone as soon as I arrived in North America. Instead I interviewed and worked through other primary sources, something else that Cummins has called for:

If the secondary material continues to perpetuate factual errors such as that Judith Merrill was responsible for calling the new 1960s science fiction "New Wave," or that one of her given names was Juliet, what other errors abound? As evidence of the new insights that occur when one goes back to the primary sources, we have the 1992 *Foundation* essays by Gary Westfahl in which he re-assessed John W. Campbell's contribution to science fiction. (315)<sup>5</sup>

In 1985 and 1989 Judy Merrill gave her papers, mostly correspondence, to the National Archive of Canada in Ottawa. During her lifetime they could not be quoted, and a proportion of them could not be consulted, without her permission. (Both Cummins and I had Judy's permission.)

The Judith Merrill fonds (archives) are approximately 15 metres in extent, contained in over 75 boxes. Some contain drafts of stories, cut-outs of early pulp publications, or newspaper cuttings but most are full of letters. Judy corresponded with almost everybody in the science fiction scene. Many of the Futurians are represented: Isaac Asimov, James Blish, Virginia Kidd, Damon Knight, Cyril Kornbluth, Frederik Pohl, Donald Wollheim; science fiction editors: Tony Boucher, John W. Campbell, Ed Ferman, Horace Gold, Mick McComas; sf writers: Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Algis Budrys, Arthur C. Clarke, Mildred Clingerman, Avram Davidson, Philip K. Dick, Carol Emshwiller, Philip Klass (William Tenn), Fritz Leiber, Katherine MacLean, Walter M. Miller, Mack Reynolds, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon. They range from passionate love letters to brief discussions of editorial matters.

In April 2001 I arrived in Ottawa and spent several days working around the clock, trying to get through all the letters in the few days I had. It was an impossible task but I had to make it manageable somehow. At first I decided I would only read through her correspondence with other well-known figures from the period, but a day's work barely made a dent on the Fritz Leiber files and the Walter M. Miller ones are even more extensive. At the same time I kept coming across detailed correspondences with people I'd never heard of. Merrill's letters to her fans and readers reveal just as much about her and science fiction during the time as do her correspondences with other writers and editors. For example, in this response to a reader claiming not to understand "That Only a Mother," she sets out a great deal of the thinking behind the genesis and writing of arguably her most famous story:

*October 5, 1948*

*Dear Mr. Swartz:*

*I seem to have left your letter at my office, where it was forwarded to me from the offices of ASF. I'll do my best to answer it from memory.*

*So many people have told me they don't understand the story, and almost always (as in your case), it finally turns out that they do, but just don't believe it. What you choose to believe possible, of course is your own affair. But yes, I did mean that the mother refused to admit to herself that there was anything wrong with*

*her child. And yes, according to at least four psychiatrists I know who have read the story, and an uncounted number of mothers who ditto ditto, the reaction is not only a possible, but even a plausible one.*

*Margaret, in the story, had been unable to have a child. She had been almost convinced that her husband's work with atoms had sterilized him. When she found she was going to have one, knowing as much as she did about it, she was terrified that it might be a mutation. She had wanted a child too long to be able to admit that possibility to herself, and other people—the doctor—the newspapers—all did their best to help her sell herself on the fact that her baby would be normal. Day after day, for nine months, or a large part of that time, she told herself her baby would be normal. So it is not impossible that she developed a mental block which made it impossible for her to admit that there was anything wrong with the child.*

*I may add that the story was written because I saw an article in the paper (mentioned in the story) about infanticides in Japan, and I wondered what the reaction of a mother to a mutated baby would really be. Then, as it happened, an incident occurred which forcibly brought to my attention the fact that my own little girl had a perpetually objectionable drippy nose—which I had never noticed. That gave me a clue to a possible reaction, and I based the story on it. As I said above, later, a number of psychiatrists who read it bore me out completely in my extrapolation.*

*OK?*

*But you did understand it, you see.*

*Sincerely,*

*Judy Merrill<sup>6</sup>*

There are a series of letters between her and Cyril Kornbluth (most from Merrill to Kornbluth) as they laboured to get *Mars Child* written for serialization in the May, June, and July 1951 issues of *Galaxy*.<sup>7</sup> At the time Kornbluth was living in Chicago. The writing always seemed to go a lot better when they were both in the same place. The following letter covers a number of Merrill's perennial worries: money, writer's block, love.<sup>8</sup>

*March 5, 1951*

*Dear Cyril,*

*So you're wondering by now why you haven't got Part III back yet?*

*I'm a sap. I should have come to Chi when I was thinking of it, mostly for the reason that I didn't come. The same reason, I mean.*

*I was having troubles, and was discouraged, yes.*

*Then came this stuff, about which Fred says he told you, of *Galaxy* possibly folding. For which reason I decided I shouldn't come and spend dough that might not come back so certainly after all. I was wrong; I should have come, and not stuck around here to get daily reports on the fluctuating health of World Editions. Monday, finally, as you know, they paid off on Part I—then I began getting more rumors that seemed to add up to Part I being paid for and in print, and no magazine after the May issue. I took time out to do an article for *Marvel* and just yesterday got back to *Mars Child*.*

Here, too, are market worries. It's easy to forget that magazines with such long runs as *Galaxy* sometimes looked like they would not be able to keep publishing. Indeed, World Editions, the publisher of *Galaxy*, ceased publishing it in September 1951 when the *Galaxy* Publishing Corporation took over. Merrill continues:

*Pardon me I should blow off steam in your direction, when apologies it's I should be making, but these gripes will out, and somebody ought to give my old man a course in Merrill-psychology. After studiously avoiding discussing the story per se*

*with him, because I know what he can do to my morale, I didn't think to protect my rear guard, and discussed Galaxy and sale possibilities with him. Better I should have been in Chicago, fighting plot with you.*

Her old man was Frederik Pohl. Things between them did not get better, and by the end of 1951 they were divorced:

*Anyhow, time is getting away from us. The moving finger has not writ, and if it hasn't writ enough to send you all I have been promising by Friday, then I shall make the earliest reservation and come too late with too little. No hotel rooms either.*

She is, as ever, struggling to get work written on time. Writer's block was a problem for Merrill throughout her career.

*I see what you mean about Part II being over-cut. Am restoring some; Fred did not go over it; he decided under the circumstances at World Editions, to sell it to Horace overlength as if it were 20,000, at 3c per, for fear that they would cut the rate on anything longer. So I might as well (since there is time; they're holding out on going to press too) put back stuff that should be back. You did a beautiful job, though—some really tricky verbiage pruning.*

*One way or 'tother, by Monday, the 12th, you will have either Part III, with ideas and suggestions in typescript, to come with, or me to ditto.*

*Who me? Depressed? What a silly thought!*

*The fact remains that the sooner it gets finished, a) the sooner we can submit to book publishers, b) the more chance there is of getting some money out of Galaxy, and c) the sooner we can start something else. Also, as of Saturday, Horace says whatever happens afterwards, the May-June-July issues have been made definite. (F. Pohl, my very own everloving husband, only looked wise and shrugged when I repeated same to him. But I'm working on believing what Horace says.)*

*Depressed, did you say? Bah!*

*So I shouldn't be hitting you with this probably. One of us on the skids is enough. Only I do owe you some kind of explanation, and that happens to be it and I'm not in the mood to think up any cheerful lies.*

*All will doubtless be for the best, and I feel better already.*

*It sez here.*

*By the way—did we tell you—we found a house. Near Red Bank, New Jersey.*

*Great big thing. Negotiations now going on for bank loan and such. Will move in mid-May if all goes well. Got to finish this damn novel and make some money.*

*Cheers and felicitations.*

*J. Merrill Pohl*

Money, or rather the lack of it, comes up over and over again. I was never under the illusion that science fiction writers in the 1950s lived in the lap of luxury, still, it was startling to this naive researcher to read of Frederik Pohl selling a story "overlength as if it were 20,000" in order to get a higher word rate. Almost all the other writers Merrill corresponded with suffered from the same lack of ready cash.

The experience of reading those letters, of getting into Judy Merrill's head, demonstrated my faulty thinking—if only I had read those letters before I interviewed so many 1940s and 1950s figures (some of whom I would not be able to interview again) I would have an entirely different set of questions. And, more importantly, I would have understood their answers differently, having a much better sense of who people were, what their relationships with each other were, how they felt about each other.

Cummins was right: reading those letters—again, there are boxes and boxes of them—makes that period come alive. As I read, I began to get a much better sense of the lives of these science fiction writers, editors, fans in the 1940s and 1950s, something that numerous interviews and second-hand accounts had not conveyed so vividly. For example, a letter from Les Cole made clear what some of my interviewees had implied—Judith Merrill had not been universally popular. In the letter Cole explains that:

*An anti-Merril fan is one who does not care for the Merrill personality. "I like her stories, mind you, but the times I've seen her I've had the definite impression she thinks her shit doesn't stink; you might say I resent being patronized." This is not a direct quote; as I remember he didn't use the word "patronize", but that was what he meant.*<sup>10</sup>

Why are Judith Merrill and her letters important to the history of science fiction? Because they throw light on a hitherto neglected area of science fiction scholarship. Neither Elizabeth Cummins nor myself are the first to draw attention to the importance of this period for the development of science fiction. Samuel R. Delany has several times called for more work on postwar science fiction that takes into account not just the stories and novels written and published but also the conditions under which they were published and their reception—that is, the culture of science fiction during that period (Delany 85).<sup>11</sup>

As Elizabeth Cummins points out, there is work on postwar sf. There are a "number of scholars [who] have written about the 1940s and 1950s New York science fiction scene. In histories, genre overviews, critical essays, and bibliographies" (314). However, no full-length work putting all of these previous efforts into context exists, and it should. A close examination of the period demonstrates that certain notions about science fiction's reception by the mainstream do not hold up. For example, the conviction that mainstream accounts of science fiction, and of science fiction fans in particular, have always been dismissive—"science fiction fans are written off as unsocialized, media-obsessed weirdos" (Gomoll 5)—has long been held. Researching the 1940s and 1950s, I found many positive (or at least not negative) accounts of science fiction and fandom in mainstream magazines. As early as 1939, an article appeared in Harper's Magazine that compared science fiction favourably to other genres in terms remarkably similar to those of Kingsley Amis's 1960 *New Maps of Hell*:

*A cowboy story could not possibly interrupt a stage robbery with a page of rhetoric about sunrise in Raton Pass, but the writer of science fiction can hold his audience enraptured with pages of talk about the FitzGerald Contraction, quanta, the temperature of distant stars, the molecular structure of minerals, and other matters which one would suppose to be far over the heads of the people addressed in the advertisements. (DeVoto 446)*

What he is praising in particular is the readers, the fans, who are "enraptured" by such high-falutin' concepts and are obviously smarter than the readers of westerns.

During the postwar boom in publishing, many important writers and editors and magazines, such as the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Galaxy*, made their first appearances. Science fiction criticism was taking its first fledgling steps, and science fiction was having its first major impact on the mainstream. All this is reported in a September 1946 article in Harper's Magazine on postwar science fiction:

*Never in America had there been such general interest in scientific fantasies—*

*television, radar, atomic power, super microscopes and telescopes, jet- and rocket-propelled planes, helicopters, robot-like electronic calculators—these and dozen of other marvels-turned-realities had all been forecast and their political, economic, and cultural consequences explored with startling fidelity by science fiction writers months and even years before. Suddenly more and more Americans bewildered by the seven league strides science had taken during World War II, were turning to science fiction for a hint of what the future might have in store. (Baring-Gould 283)*

Searching for articles on science fiction in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* for the years from 1926 (the first appearance of an all science-fiction magazine in English, Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*) up to 1950 is instructive. There are no articles until 1939, very few during the war years, and then from 1946 on there are several articles every year. In the 1920s and through most of the 1930s the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* did not have a term for the genre; by 1939 it was using "pseudoscientific stories" and then "science in literature." In 1953, the *Reader's Guide* began solely using the term "science fiction."<sup>12</sup> These articles appeared in such places as *Harper's Magazine*, *Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Life*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, *The American Scholar*, *Collier's* and *Publisher's Weekly*. Science fiction stories were published in *Collier's*, *Madmoiselle*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. Some of these articles were written by science fiction professionals like *Asimov*, *Campbell*, and *Heinlein*.

A 1949 article from the *Saturday Review of Literature*, "The S-F Phenomenon in Literature" by Claire Holcomb, gives a history of the field and then finishes:

*Today's s-f dreamer of utopia generally avoids the error committed by some of his literary ancestors, that of banning progress. Today we know that there must be change. Will that change be life-giving or life-destroying? Science fiction cannot give the answer. It can, however, be a tonic to the imagination and thus prepare hearts and minds to find—and accept—whatever answers there may be. (37)*

Holcomb's article emphasizes the great interest the genre holds for scientists. She writes that "near our big wartime weapons research centers" at places like "Oak Ridge, Los Alamos, Columbia University, Harvard Square, Berkeley" sales of science fiction magazines (*Astounding* in particular) were "exceptionally large" (9). She knew what she was talking about: the blurb following the article reveals that Holcomb "worked for a time on the Manhattan Project and later as New York field secretary for the Association of Scientists for Atomic Education."

Sf was taken seriously enough by the *Saturday Review of Literature* that it had a yearly round-up of sf. These round-ups by Fletcher Pratt are well written and researched and portray sf as a field of limitless commercial potential. For example, in his 1949 account of the field he writes:

*They are the people of space, refugees from the pulps. The books that chronicle their adventures are published by houses of unfamiliar names from such places as Providence, Sauk City, Wis, and Reading, Pa. Few of these books reached the regular bookstores at first and fewer still were noticed by the reviews. But old-line publishers who were moved to investigate this phenomenon discovered that these books were selling in quite unprecedented quantities to a public which had seldom or never bought books before but whose devotion to this form literally knew no bounds.... One of the regular publishers, desirous of experimenting inexpensively with this form of literature, offered to take some of a specialist publisher's remainders for reissue under the name of the larger house. "Remainders?" was the reply, "Listen, when one of our books gets down to where*

*it would be a remainder it becomes a rare book and we charge double for it." The big publisher was presently issuing a couple of science-fiction volumes on his own account. So have others; by 1949 at least seven of the familiar houses have science-fiction titles on their lists and more are in prospect. The prediction that the form would replace the detective story as the dominant type of escape literature has moved measurably toward realization. (7)*

These round-ups were written by a science fiction insider. Fletcher Pratt was a member of the Hydra Club who wrote science fiction and fantasy.<sup>13</sup> (He corresponded with Merrill from 1951 until his death in 1956.) But their publication in the *Saturday Review of Literature* proves that not only were the 1940s and 1950s important to sf, but that sf was important to the 1940s and 1950s mainstream.

Elizabeth Cummins ends her article by outlining her hopes that:

*the writer of this literary history would come to the project without allegiance to concepts such as "the golden age of science fiction" and without a belief that it must be defined and defended in order to ensure that it really did occur or in order to ensure its mythological continuance. Equally challenging would be the need to maintain critical distance from the writers, publishers, fans, agents, editors, reviewers who would be a major source of information - in their surviving papers, manuscripts, and publications or in current interviews that the writer of this book would conduct. (317)*

I have now spent years reading through their "surviving papers, manuscripts, and publications" in private and public collections across North America and in Sydney, Australia. I have interviewed and corresponded with Harry Harrison, Virginia Kidd, Damon Knight, David Kyle, Judith Merrill, Sam Moskowitz, Frederik Pohl, Julius Schwartz, Robert Silverberg, William Tenn (Philip Klass), and others. This project began with Judith Merrill. If I had not met her and received her injunction I'm not sure I would have undertaken it. I am aware of her failings, of the erraticness of her memory, her temper, her attention span. But she is one of the most compelling and wonderful people I have ever met. And reading her letters—so prolific and detailed that I now feel like I can account for almost every day of her life from 1944 to 1959—was like meeting her and being seduced by her charisma all over again. I'm not sure that I have the kind of critical distance that Cummins hopes for. I'm also not sure if it's necessary or even desirable. But I am sure that any history focussed through the lens of Judith Merrill's personality and keen observations will bring this vital period to life.

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### Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Scott Westerfeld for his invaluable comments on the various drafts of this article. Also thanks to Emily Pohl-Weary for permission to quote from the Judith Merrill fonds at the National Archive of Canada and to Anne Goddard of the Archive for all her assistance.
- 2 For details of my meeting with Judy Merrill, see my article, "Researching the New York Futurians," *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, No. 82 Summer 2001, pp. 45-52.
- 3 Judith Merrill's memoirs, *Better to have Loved*, have been completed by her granddaughter, Emily Pohl-Weary.
- 4 My (lame) excuse for coming to Cummins's article so late is that at the time I was so obsessively researching the 1940s and 1950s in New York City, reading only books written or published during that time period, particularly sf, listening only to music from the time, starting to dress in styles from the 40s and 50s—I do mean obsessive—that I was not managing to keep up with recent sf criticism.
- 5 It is a call I am very receptive to. My book, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*, details the debates about sex, men, women and feminism in letters and editorials in science fiction magazines.
- 6 National Archives of Canada, Judith Merrill fonds, Accession MG 30 D 326, vol. 10, *Astounding Science Fiction* folder, letter to Mr. Swartz, October 5, 1948.
- 7 The book version appeared as *Outpost Mars* in 1952.
- 8 Let's face it, they're the perennial worries of almost every writer.
- 9 National Archives of Canada, Judith Merrill fonds, Accession MG 30 D 326, vol. 10, *Mars Child* folder, letter to Cyril Kornbluth, March 5, 1951.
- 10 National Archives of Canada, Judith Merrill fonds, MG 30 D326 Vol. 37, Les Cole folder 2-2, letter to Judith Merrill, March 3, 1952.
- 11 Joshua B. Lukin and he have edited an issue of *Paradoxa* solely devoted to the 1950s.
- 12 Elizabeth Cummins also draws attention to this shift in terminology and the explosion of primary mainstream sources on science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s (Cummins 315).
- 13 His best known work was in collaboration with L. Sprague de Camp.

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