

STARBOARD WINE

more notes on
the language of
science fiction

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FIRST EDITION

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"Heinlein," as an introduction for *Glory Road* by Robert A. Heinlein, published by Gregg Press.

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"Science Fiction and 'Literature'—or, The Conscience of the King," in *Analog*.

"Three Letters to *Science Fiction Studies*," in *Science Fiction Studies*.

"Reflections on Historical Models," in *Science Fiction Studies*.

For
David Hartwell

Anyone who spends any time at all in the community of SF writers, SF editors and publishers, interested academics, or among the highly enthusiastic SF readers who put on and attend the more than 70 annual SF conventions or publish the more than 300 SF fanzines that appear in the United States each year must from time to time ask: "What am I doing here?" But this is just to say we have all come here from somewhere else. An attempt to sketch out one lane along one of the many possible highways into the SF world, the following was first delivered as a talk at the Harlem Museum in New York City in November, 1978, a few streets from the three story, red brick building whose ground floor was once my father's place of business and whose upper stories were my home till I was 15.

THE NECESSITY OF TOMORROWS

AT THE SOUTH CORNER OF THE BLOCK was Mrs. Dade's funeral parlor. Centered in the block north was Mr. Sterrit's. Between was Levy and Delany's, my father's funeral home. (*Undertaker* was a word he detested; he considered himself a funeral director.) When I was seven my father had the face of the building covered in red brick. Aluminum letters that stood out from the facade on little posts went up to replace the old sign—green neon letters in their tin shadow masks, the whole metal housing almost as big as I was. The workmen on their scaffold lowered it down over the door, first the *L* end, then the *Y*. Levy had died before I was born. Growing up with Levy and Delany, however, it was years before I thought to question why my father had kept the name of his former partner, whom he had later bought out. Originally friends, they had only briefly been in business together. (Years later my mother told me, laughingly: "Your father said he always owed Mr. Levy a great debt: he showed your father every way possible *not* to run a successful funeral business.") Still, I wonder, with my father dead twenty years now, whether the two of them found an irony in the suggestion of the Jew and the Irishman running what, by the middle of the '40s, was considered a rather swell Harlem funeral establishment. At any rate, the irony was misleading. Both were black men. Both owed their ethnic patronymics to the whites who had owned their grandparents, their great-grandparents.

On our left was Mr. and Mrs. Onley's grocery store, which the Onleys ran with their grown son Robbie. In summer, green wooden stands sat out under the awning, full of cabbage, carrots, green and red peppers—although what I remember far more clearly is the exotic autumn produce: bananas, kale, pomegranates, coconuts, sugar cane, mangoes. My childhood seems to have been continually punctuated with the refrain, "Would you run down to the store, Sam, and get me . . ." from my mother. After the few inevitable episodes of change accidentally dropped while lugging the brown paper bag back up the side steps to the kitchen, for several months, as Mrs. Onley stood implacably calm behind the counter in her alternating white, blue, or green smocks, my entreaty was an embarrassed and insistent: "Mrs. Onley, *please* don't give the change to me. You just put it in the paper bag. That way I don't have to even touch it so that upstairs they'll get it all!"

On our right was Mr. Lockley's Hardware and Houseware Store. Mr. Lockley was a thin man, slightly darker than wrapping paper, with white hair, a withered face, and a game leg I always used to wonder whether or not was hinged and wooden, like my cousin Jimmy's. Jimmy had lost his in the Second World War and played a pretty good game of chess. As the years went on, running the store was taken over more and more by Mr. Lockley's balding son, Albert, and his red-headed daughter-in-law, Minnie. In memory that space, always dim, seems to extend for blocks and blocks under the stamped tin ceiling and the first fluorescent lights in the neighborhood. Beside the narrow aisle, the square counter trays—the front ones of glass, those farther back in the store of wood—held rolls of black electrician's tape, piles of orange and yellow yo-yos, boxes of carpet tacks, rings of cardboard with walnut-size rubber balls in each central hole, starred about with 10 multichrome jacks; mousetraps (we had two under our kitchen sink), the larger versions of which, in my innocence, I had thought must be to catch cats; nails, screws, buttons, stacks of cheap plates so dusty I wondered who would eat from them; hammers, screwdrivers with clear yellow handles, pressboards full of thumbtacks, boxes of staples, Scotchtape rolls, the *rrrurring* key-copying machine; and small religious pictures in purple plastic frames, dusty as the plates.

Every evening Albert or Minnie would drag across the store window—full of bride dolls with chocolate brown skin, coils of black water hose, and beige boards displaying eight different styles of doorknob—the metal gate.

And the gate, oddly, is what I really want to talk about.

First of all, in those days Mr. Lockley's was the only store I knew of that had a gate. (We had gates on our back windows at home, in the kitchen and living room behind the ivory and purple draperies, but living with those,

day in and day out, I somehow hardly saw them.) Mr Lockley's gate had many vertical black shafts, hinged to the numerous diagonals with rollers at their ends, between. If you were out on the street in the morning just as the sun cleared the cornices on the far side of Seventh Avenue, the struts cut the light into gold lozenges webbed with shadow and laid them on the dusty splendor inside.

I guess I was nine.

It was a warm autumn evening, though at six o'clock the sky had lost half its light and doubled the depth of its blue. I watched Albert click the third big padlock to its hasp and turn away toward the stoop to his apartment house. I stepped onto the black metal cellar door, which shifted—*tunk!*—under my U.S. Keds. I walked to the gate, put my palm against one strut. It was cool and gritty.

I pushed a little.

The gate moved—only it didn't move like a rigid structure of bolted iron. It rippled, like a curtain. I put my face up against it, looked across it, pushed again. Although the bottoms and tops of the verticals were constrained in metal troughs, the movement across the structure clearly went out in waves. I could see it waving. And I could hear the rattle and watch the waves spread away from me out to the upper corners of the window. I put both hands against the metal, my face as close as I could get it, sighting across the gate, which from this angle seemed like a single sheet.

I shook it once.

I waited. I hooked my fingers around the struts and shook it two times.

I waited again.

Then I rattled it as hard as I could. And kept on rattling. The noise hurt my ears. The verticals tap-danced in their trough, and all pattern dissolved in the banging and racketing—

"What in the world are you *doing*? Stop that!"

I turned around.

"You gone crazy?" my father demanded, as he frequently did these days. He had heard the noise and stepped out of the funeral parlor door to see what his odd nine-year-old was up to. "You stop that and go on upstairs! You're going to end in the electric chair, I swear," which seemed to be his most common admonition to me over any and all infractions, minor or major, an admonition his father had used as frequently with him; and since my father had achieved some success under it he felt justified in using it with me—although frankly, to me it was both bewildering and terrifying.

I ran upstairs.

But later, as I lay in my bed on the third floor, listening to the night traffic whisking along Seventh Avenue, I thought again of that gate. Its rigid pieces,

some long, some short, were attached in such a flexible way that not only could it fold up during the day at the edge of the store window, but, when it was extended, motion to any part of it was translated across its breadth in audible and visible progression. The motion was passed from juncture to juncture. Each strut took up the motions of the ones that joined its near end and passed a resultant motion on to the ones that joined its far end. No matter how loud the clangor, it was a patterned and orderly process.

My childhood was not a typical Harlem childhood. For one thing, we lived in a private house and had a maid. My father's business was on the ground floor. We lived on the top two. For another, I attended neither the public school two blocks to the north nor the Catholic school around the corner. During my early childhood, every morning my father, or occasionally one of his employees, drove me down to a private school at 89th Street just off Park Avenue. The school's population was overwhelmingly white, largely Jewish, and educated the children of enough millionaires, literary lights, government officials, and theatrical personages to keep its name, with fair frequency, in the papers as well as in the gossip of New York folk interested in the osmotic properties of success.

In the '40s Harlem's southern boundary was much more abrupt than it is today: 110th Street, along the top of Central Park, delimited it with a sureness I could sense any time on my trip home I had to transfer from the Fifth Avenue Number Four bus to the Number Two, which would take me on up Seventh Avenue—waiting across from the corner of the park under the awning of some closed-down night spot reminiscent of Cole Porter days and the trampish lady who “won't go to Harlem in ermines and pearls.”

My twice-daily trip from Seventh Avenue and 132nd Street, between Mr. Onley's and Mr. Lockley's, to the private school just down the street from the construction then going on for the Guggenheim Museum, the change from the black children of subway workers, hospital orderlies and taxi drivers (my friends on the block) to the white children of psychiatrists, publishers, and Columbia professors (my friends at school), was a journey of near ballistic violence through an absolute social barrier.

I never questioned that violence.

Such violences youngsters accustom themselves to very easily.

But shortly after the incident with Mr Lockley's window gate I began to think—as you no doubt began thinking moments ago—of society itself as a structure very similar to that gate. Well, not so much a gate, but a web. A net. Each person represented a juncture. The connections between them were not iron struts, but relations of money, goods, economics in general, information, emotions. Any social occurrence over here invariably

moved, via these mediators, across the social net from person to person. This image of Mr. Lockley's window gate seemed a good model for the life around me on the streets of Harlem. It seemed as well a good model for the life around me at my school. And yet from my position as a nine-year-old going on 10, I wondered just how these two gates, two webs, two nets, connected. In gross terms, the white one seemed to surround the black, holding the black one to its place and keeping it rather more crushed together in less space. But what were the actual connections between them? There was me, who passed from one to the other twice a day, along with the 15 or so other black children who lived in Harlem and, with me, attended the Dalton School, half of them it seemed at that time relatives of mine. The economic ties that connected the two webs could even be faintly traced via the white landlords and absentee store owners who took money out of the neighborhood, money that, by and large, was able to come back in only through blacks working either directly or indirectly for whites. Certainly the goods in Mr. Lockley's store and most of the produce in Mr. Onley's eventually took money out of the neighborhood. But these still left the ties of information and emotion—without which the economic ties *had* to remain oppressive.

These ties were not there.

Their absence was the barrier I crossed every time I left for and returned from my school. Their absence *was* the violence.

What was the '50s for me?

It began with the electrocution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for treason. The parents of my liberal white friends were shocked, deeply, at what they saw as a clear emblem of something profoundly wrong in the land, regardless of whether they believed in the guilt or innocence of the gentle Jewish couple.

It was the murder of the fourteen-year-old Emmett Till by mysterious and terrifying white men somewhere in the south. From our front window we watched diagonally across the street where, before what had once been the Lafayette Theater (where Orson Welles had directed Canada Lee in *Blackbeth*; more recently it had been a Harlem supermarket, and was now a Baptist church), Harlem citizens rallied, made speeches, sang, and made more speeches.

It was the Supreme Court decision on integration. It was the first marches on Washington. It was Autherine Lucy. It was Sputnik and Little Rock, reported on the same September afternoon radio newscast. And from my rides to school each morning, I could see out the bus window that Harlem's lower boundary was not nearly so well defined as it had been. Some information and plenty of emotion had broken through. Some people had

even liked what they had learned; but most, on both sides, were more upset with it than not.

The '50s was also the decade I began reading science fiction.

Escape Reading was the term sometimes used for it, which lumped it with Westerns and romances—and the “Jalna” books, the “Claudia and David” novels, and the endless biographies of Eleanor Roosevelt my grandmother, who felt “serious reading” was bad for you, was given by her indulgent children and grandchildren for birthdays, for Christmas, and even, sometimes, for funerals. But what else was I reading? I read James Baldwin’s early essays that were to be first collected in *Notes of a Native Son*, and I thought they were as wonderful as . . . well, as science fiction. I also read Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Chester Himes’s *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, and they seemed . . . well, history. They certainly didn’t take place in the world of freedom marches and integration rallies. Did they explain them? They certainly said that the condition of the black man in America was awful—somehow the black woman in these fictive endeavors got mysteriously shortchanged in a manner suspiciously similar to the way the white woman was getting shortchanged in the work of Wright’s and Himes’s white male contemporaries. (The black woman was somehow always the cause *and* the victim at once of everything that went wrong with the black man.) But Wright and Himes seemed to say as well that, in any realistic terms, precisely what made it so awful also made it unchangeable. And they said it with a certainty that, to me, dwarfed the moments of interracial rapprochement one found in books like John O. Killens’s *Youngblood*, no matter how much more pleasant Killens might have been for us youngsters to read. One began to suspect that it was precisely the certainty that no real change was possible that had made Wright and Himes as popular as they were with those strangely always-absent readers who establish books as classics. At least that’s what I seemed to read in them in a world that was clearly exploding with racial change from headline to headline.

Did the science fiction I read at the time talk about the black situation in America, about the progress of racial change?

Isaac Asimov’s famous “Robot” stories certainly veered close. The series, available today in four volumes (the short story collections *I, Robot* and *The Rest of the Robots*, and the novels *Caves of Steel* and *The Naked Sun*), deals with a future where humans and robots live side by side, though the prejudice and disdain the robot detective R-Daneel (one of the two main characters in *The Caves of Steel*) experiences is clearly an analog of some of the milder sorts of prejudice we experienced from whites. And Asimov’s “Three Laws of Robotics,” famous to young SF readers the world over, essentially amount to: Robots shall not harm, disobey, or displease

humans—which, if you substitute *white* for *human* and *black* for *robot*, is clearly a white ideal of what the “good Negro” ought to be. And the stories, of course, gain most of their wit and interest from the ingenious ways the clever robots figure out to get around those laws without actually breaking them or getting into real trouble. Yet the stories touch on many other things beside, so that in the end the racial analog, rather than forming a central theme, seems more like a naked lightbulb on a loose cord, swinging back and forth, flickering on and off throughout the tales, sometimes illuminating the actions, sometimes clearly not in the least the concern of the writer.

Well, then, how does one read these tales today? I can only give you the way one black adolescent, who enjoyed science fiction very much, read these stories by a Russian-born Jew of liberal political leanings, who by that time had practically given up science fiction to write books and articles on popular science while teaching biochemistry at a Boston medical school.

It was precisely at those places in the story where the robot’s situation seemed to be most analogous to the situation of the American black that I always asked myself: Just exactly how does the situation of the robots in these stories *differ* from the reality of the racial situation of my world? After all, these were tales about robots living and struggling in a future world, tales whose whole delight lay in the fact that their world *was* different from our own. Under such a reading, the tales were certainly no *less* enjoyable. What I do think happened to me, from questioning the distinctions the more carefully the more strongly the similarities presented themselves to be viewed, is that I became a far more astute observer of our own racial situation than I might otherwise have been.

In the universities and high schools where science fiction is being used today as an aid to teach political science, sociology, and ecology, I hope stress is put on the difference between the science-fictional world and the real world: for those differences are precisely what constitutes the tales’ science-fictional aspect, and it is only *their* apprehension that can accomplish the mental honing the most outspoken advocates of science fiction claim it fosters.

In 1960 Robert Heinlein’s novel *Starship Troopers* took its Hugo Award for best SF novel of its year. It’s very much a boys’ book, a book about the way warfare can mature a young man—a tale hopelessly chauvinistic in the older sense of the word, rendered innocuous only by the similarity of its message to how-many ’40s and ’50s war movies and boys’ adventure books glorifying military life.

And yet it *is* science fiction—which means the distinctions are what concern us.

It’s a hundred years in the future. A hostile alien race has been discovered

which is out to exterminate humanity, and a war is on between humans and aliens that must go to the death. The young man who narrates the story tells of his enlistment in the military, of the use of fantastic superweapons, of body armor that renders the wearer practically a superman, of genetically mutated dogs who can speak and who have human intelligence and who fight alongside special soldiers. Such close relations develop between dog and man that when the master is killed, the dog is simply put to death as a matter of course; or when the dog is killed, the master is retired and often permanently hospitalized, because the emotional ties are so great the partner remaining can only crack up. Women have universally been given the job of spaceship pilot, because their reflexes test out fractionally higher than men's and their long-term endurance is better. It's a galaxy of marvels, and our young recruit describes each one in an astonishingly effective way. Also, for an SF novel in the late '50s, it was very long—almost 300 pages, well beyond the 157- to 197-page limit a disdainful paperback publishing industry set as the automatic tops for an SF novel in those days. Yes, things had certainly changed in this future world, this future war.

About two-thirds through the book, when our young hero, having survived the first 200 pages of dangers, is making the choice inevitable in such stories (whether or not to go on and take officer's training), there is a brief respite from the adventures. And there, in the lull, the narrator, as he prepares for a date with a pretty pilot in training, describes how he goes into the bathroom to put on his makeup—for in this future world all men use makeup, and it has completely lost the associations that restrict it to femininity. As he looks in the mirror, he makes a passing mention of the nearly chocolate brown hue of his face—

And I did a strange double take.

The hero of this book, who for 200 pages now had been telling me of his daring exploits and intimate fears, was not the blue-eyed, blond hero of countless RKO Second World War films. He was not caucasian at all—indeed, and it gets dropped in the next sentence, his ancestors were Filipino!

More to the point, among the many changes that had taken place in this future world that I had been dazzled by and delighted with, the greatest was that the racial situation, along with all the technological changes, had resolved itself to the point where a young soldier might tell you of his adventures for 200 pages out of a 300-page novel and not even *have* to mention his ethnic background—because it had, in his world, become that insignificant!

Only a handful of years later, a liberal white Doubleday editor was to push my 900-page attempt at a novel back across his desk toward me and ask: "How do you expect me to take seriously a novel in which I don't find

out that the main character's colored until page 18? That's very important. It should be on page one."

But there, in that Heinlein novel, this simple fact, placed where it was, in concert with all the accompanying technological and sociological changes, suddenly detonated an image, brief and bright, of a world where the two nets, the two webs, the matrix of black society and the matrix of white society, had become interwoven in such a way that an equitable interchange of money, goods, information, *and* emotions had somehow come about—so that in this world the specificity of a person's race was truly no longer the privileged information it is even today, suggesting as it does so much about experiences we may have had, about realities we may have known.

The image *was* brief. And it was only an image—not at all an explanation of how to accomplish it. But it made me realize that up until then, with all the efforts going on about me to "improve the racial situation," I really had had no image of what the "improved racial situation" was actually going to look like. Oh yes, *equality* was a word I knew; but what would it look like, feel like, smell like? How would I know it had actually come?

I have many times revised that image of what such a racially improved world might look like from that first bright flash that Heinlein tricked me—and probably many other young readers, black and white—into experiencing. This was 1960; the rashness of the decade's political leavening was still to come; and the backlashes of the '70s were not envisioned.

But one cannot *revise* an image until one *has* an image to revise.

The philosopher and aesthetician Susan K. Langer, in the two volumes that have appeared of her three-volume study, *Mind*, devotes most of her argument to the proposition that this initial experience of the image, a vision of something not yet real, is the impetus for all human progress, scientific, social, or aesthetic. If you don't see it, you can't work for it.

Image first. Then explanation.

And if science fiction has any use at all, it is that among all its various and variegated future landscapes it gives us images *for* our futures . . . as did the Heinlein novel.

And its secondary use, as in the Asimov stories, is to provide a tool for questioning those images, exploring their distinctions, their articulations, their play of differences.

"Do you believe in that science fiction stuff?" I'm all too frequently asked.

Well, if you mean it in the idiomatic sense—do I think that science fiction is a good thing and that people should read it?—then of course I do. Otherwise I wouldn't write it.

If, however, you mean, "Do you believe that all the things science fiction

has ever talked about—flying saucers, colonies in space, aliens living on other worlds, cures for cancer, and cloned human beings—will really come about?” then I have to stop and explain something to you about your question.

Let’s think of three good, exciting SF stories, all of them set in New York City in the year 2001.

The first is about life in a New York City that has become vastly overpopulated. No more luxury apartments on Park Avenue and Sutton Place. All of them have been broken up with wallboards into tiny cells. (Harlem itself, as the Cole Porter song commemorates, was once New York’s luxury white neighborhood.) Five and six to a room is the minimum anywhere in the city; the maximum can’t even be published. Packs of armed marauders roam the streets openly wherever food is rumored to be stored. Supermarkets? They no longer exist: their shelves have been pulled down and the homeless camp out in the buildings. A few large central food supplies—one at Battery Park, one at Bryant Park, one at Morningside Park, and another at St. Nicholas Park—are ringed with guards. The supplies are dropped in by helicopters daily; the lines weave around for miles as people queue up to get their rations, but it’s inefficient and there’s no assurance that you can make it home safely, even if you wait the necessary hours to get your government allotment of the few handfuls of dried seaweed, soybean meal, a container of milk and another of honey that the law says must go to each person every day.

It’s a very grim story, but it could be a very exciting one.

Now let’s think of another, also set in New York in 2001.

Over the years, the city has become almost abandoned. (As indeed much of Harlem is today.) In the rest of the country, through solar energy, miniature circuitry, increased transportation efficiency, and ecological advances, it is possible for everyone to live more happily in rural areas. New towns have sprung up all over the deserts of the South and Northwest, while the big cities of the Eastern Seaboard now lie more or less abandoned. Only a few groups of people have come into the city, or stayed. They seek homes in the empty ruins. Most of them are families of individualists and are well educated, including doctors and engineers. They have taken over some of the remaining public buildings, built their own farms in the city’s parks, installed their own solar heaters, and turned the subways near them into sewers. These few communal groups live, in their own way, a rather magnificent, if eccentric, life, making their own clothes, their own music, stories, games.

But one day the government decides to pull down the remains of the city. “You’ve got to go,” they say.

“We won’t go,” is the reply. “You abandoned all this. Nobody lives here now except us. We made it ours and we intend to keep it!”

“No, we want to pull down the place and turn it into another few small towns. . . .”

National Guards come in; perhaps there are even bombings. But the people who live there have their own methods of retaliation: they have their own planes, and towns across the country begin to be bombed as well. A war of national guardsmen and entrenched guerrillas begins in the deserted streets of New York. . . .

Such an underpopulated New York City could make just as exciting a setting for an SF story as the overpopulated New York City described in the previous scenario.

But let’s imagine a *third* SF story, again set in New York in 2001.

By 1985 a birth control method has been discovered that could be given to both men and women, once, at puberty—and it remains effective for the rest of one’s life. To have children, both the prospective mother and father merely have to take a pill to counteract the method, and pregnancy can ensue. The nation’s population is stabilized. Slowly the big cities of the country get themselves together, and with the decreased population and economic pressures the cities become the clean and elegant living arrangements they were once envisioned as. By 1995 the school population has been cut in half. Educational overcrowding is a thing of the past. And most education, anyway, is carried on in private study groups which children choose on their own and which they attend on Mondays and Fridays, the public school week now cut down to Tuesdays through Thursdays. But with the increased space, leisure, and good living, a certain languor comes in. Persons with really new ideas are suddenly seen as threatening to this fine way of life. Almost all the changes consist of new freedoms people may now indulge in. Yet every time someone comes up with a really new idea, people say, “Next thing you know they’ll be wanting to cut the birth control methods out.”

In this world, a group of young psychologists, men and women, living in one of the elegant mansions that dot the rolling greenery that has been planted over the former site of the St. Nicholas Houses, decide that they—and just they—should try, as an experiment, living for 10 years without the universal birth control methods, merely to record and explore what it was like. With so few people, it should be no threat at all. Most of these young psychologists were born in 1978, 1979. But the older ones remember what the overcrowding was like, remember the tenements and the rats and the garbage on the streets—and a great split starts between the older generation and the younger. . . .

This is just as good a 2001 story as the previous two.

Now there's no way that all three could happen at the same time in New York City in the year 2001.

Yet all three could make good SF stories, fun to read and conceivably enjoyable to write. And my experiences as a black growing up in the very real New York City of the '40s, '50s and '60s will certainly contour my particular vision of each of my three tales.

Which one do I actually believe?

I think aspects of all of them are possible; other aspects of all of them strike me as impossible.

And if I *did* sit down to write an SF story right now, set in New York in 2001, it would probably be different from them all.

Science fiction is a tool to *help* you think; and like anything that really helps you think, by definition it doesn't do the thinking for you. It's a tool to help you think about the present—a present that is always changing, a present in which change itself assures there is always a range of options for actions, actions presupposing different commitments, different beliefs, different efforts (of different qualities, different quantities), different conflicts, different processes, different joys. It doesn't tell you what's going to happen tomorrow. It presents alternative possible images of futures, and presents them in a way that allows you to question them as you read along in an interesting, moving, and exciting story.

Science fiction doesn't give you answers. It's a kind of writing that, at its best, can help you learn to ask questions—or, as perhaps the greatest modern SF writer, Theodore Sturgeon, has put it, to ask the *next* question—in a world where both doing and not doing, thinking and not thinking are, for better or worse, different actions with different consequences.

There are a number of questions I'm asked so often that, before we get into a general question-and-answer session, I just might use them to prompt you with.

Is there a sizable bunch of stories that might be considered specifically "black" science fiction?

To date, no. There isn't.

Out of a dozen science fiction novels I've published in the last 15 years, two have had specifically black central characters (*Nova*, *The Einstein Intersection*), one has had an Oriental central character (*Babel-17*), one has had a half-breed American Indian central character (in my most popular novel, *Dhalgren*), and two have had specifically white central characters (*Triton*, *Empire Star*); the others have been set far enough in the future so that I thought it was reasonable to presuppose a general racial interblending until everyone looked . . . well, more or less like me.

Could there be a specifically black science fiction? There could be if there were more black SF writers.

How many black SF writers are there?

Currently there's me; I've been working in the field for just over a decade and a half.

There's Octavia Estelle Butler, whose first novel was published four years ago.

There's Charles R. Saunders, who writes a kind of heroic fantasy in an African setting.

And there's Steve Barnes, a young man whom I only met for the first time at the world science fiction convention in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1978, whose first stories appeared a few years back.

In short, not many—for a field that makes up some 15% of all new fiction published in the United States.

Should blacks write more science fiction?

Science fiction is currently a seller's market. People want to read it—all kinds of people. Publishers want books and stories to fill up their lists. The market for mundane fiction is, by comparison, contracting. When editors of mundane fiction (that's what we in the SF field call ordinary, present-day fiction) say they want "something new," they also want something "safe," a good gimmick and a known gimmick to jack up sales—which are sagging somewhat overall.

The SF editor can tolerate and actively seek new and interesting story approaches.

Any writer who likes to read science fiction, who feels at home in the field and comfortable among its conventions, whatever that writer's race or color, is missing out on an exciting and worthwhile experience by not trying her or his hand at an SF story or novel.

We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most.

Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images of the *many* alternatives, good and bad, of where one *can* go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly.

And nothing gives such a profusion and richness of images of our tomorrows—however much they may need to be revised—as science fiction.

—New York, November 1978