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Review
Reviewed Work(s): Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964. (Contributions to the study of science fiction and fantasy, no. 95) by M. Keith Booker
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Amanda Cockrell

Booker, M. Keith. *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001. (Contributions to the study of science fiction and fantasy, no. 95). 196 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 0-313-31873-5. $65.95.

Anyone who ever participated in the surreal schoolroom drill of "duck and cover"—crouching beneath our desks, hands above our heads, in preparation for nuclear attack by the godless Communists—will immediately love this book. Those too young to have had that experience will be enlightened by it. In the period that M. Keith Booker terms the "long 1950s," embracing "the great period of American Cold War hysteria, beginning soon after World War II and ending sometime around 1964, when nuclear and anti-Soviet paranoia in the United States began noticeably to decline" (3), American science fiction produced monsters still indelibly imprinted on our national cultural consciousness, from the incipient postmodern to the plainly cheesy, Dr. Strangelove to the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

In *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War*, Booker, a literary scholar with a social scientist's eye, offers us a look at the relationship between the science fiction of the long 1950s and the rise of late capitalism, the breakdown of dualistic thought and concurrent rise of postmodernism. Professor of English at the University of Arkansas, Booker has published numerous books on dystopian fiction and the film and fiction of the political left, and he writes with an admirable mixture of scholarly authority and affection for his subject, covering all the ground from the serious post-holocaust novel to the output of Hammer Films. It is a gift to be able to write affectionately about a movie like *Attack of the Giant Leeches* ("radiation emanating from atomic rocket tests at Cape Canaveral contaminates a Florida swamp, causing ordinary leeches to grow larger, sprout arms, and generally begin to look a lot like men in cheap plastic leech suits" (145]) and discuss with a straight face the gender issues of *Wild Women of Wongo*.

As Booker says, it is his "thesis in this volume that the science fiction of the long 1950s, in both novel and film, closely parallels the social criticism of the decade in terms of its critique of American society—and in the ultimate limitations of this critique" (16). Science fiction allowed leftist writers a way to fly under the radar of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and writers on the political right a vehicle in which to work out their (and our) fears of the "other," the bug-eyed monsters which stood for both the Soviet Union and the Third World countries which might appear any day at our doorstep, demanding their share of our growing prosperity.

Following a substantial introduction, Booker considers his subject from four angles: the science fiction novel as social criticism, post-holocaust novels and films, space exploration and alien invasion films, and the monster movie. In the first of these, "Politics in the American Science Fiction Novel, 1946-1964," he examines science fiction's defamiliarizing technique: "this

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notion suggests that science fiction is not primarily concerned with distant times or distant galaxies, but instead uses these unusual settings to provide fresh perspectives from which to view the author's (or reader's) own time and place" (27). Examining the work of Philip K. Dick, Isaac Asimov, Frederik Pohl, Kurt Vonnegut, James Blish, and Ben Barzman, among others, he discusses the opportunity offered by the genre for leftist writers to make their points in ways that might go unnoticed by the conservative political establishment, precisely because of science fiction's "defamiliarization" or "cognitive estrangement." Criticism of the government of a distant planet proves less dangerous than criticism of our own—Barzman, for instance, was a blacklisted screenwriter whose novel *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* found publication in the U.S. at a time when he was unable to work in Hollywood.

Booker contrasts these authors with contemporaries whose politics leaned to the right, including Robert Heinlein, "who seems often to have been motivated by a desire to produce anticommunist propaganda" (48) and who also produced *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which, through one of those charming collisions of political ideology and popular culture was "still politically right-wing, but seemingly pro-drugs and sex, [and so] was adopted as a sort of fictional manifesto of the presumably leftist 1960 counterculture" (49). He concludes this section with a consideration of Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination* as predecessors of cyberpunk as well as links to the genre discussed in the second section, the post-holocaust novel.

"The Beginning or the End? Post-Holocaust Novels and Films, 1946-1964" considers the ways in which we played out our darkest fear—that the human race was bent on destroying itself—in fiction and film. Among those he examines are *Shadow on the Hearth* by Judith Merril, a story of Cold War tensions producing the inevitable nuclear strike, which pits the disgraced physicist Levy (blacklisted for his anti-war statements) against Turner, local representative of the repressive American civil defense forces; Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, whose "vision of coming nuclear war is in no way a cautionary tale. For Miller, the threat of nuclear holocaust does not arise from the specific global political situation of the Cold War. Instead, such holocaust is simply inevitable, so there is no reason to warn against it" (90); the novels of Philip K. Dick, "satirical fictions that use their post-holocaust settings merely to provide a fresh perspective from which to critique the already dystopian character of contemporary American capitalist society" (90); and the films *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*. In *Fail-Safe* (with a script by formerly blacklisted screenwriter Walter Bernstein) the U.S. accidentally bombs Moscow, and in the hope of placating the Soviets, takes the good-faith step of bombing New York as well.

In *Fail-Safe*, as in *Shadow on the Hearth*, total destruction is averted. In Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, the renegade general Jack D. Ripper, "unhinged by his extreme anticommunist paranoia (which leads him to believe that communist conspiracies are seeking to 'sap and impurify all our precious bodily fluids')" (101) through fluoridation, orders a strike on the Soviet Union that ultimately triggers that nation's "Doomsday Machine" and the end of

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both countries and the world. Booker finds in *Dr. Strangelove* "the end of an era in post-holocaust fiction and film.... After the postmodern turn of *Dr. Strangelove*, it would become increasingly difficult to produce post-holocaust films...with a straight face. In particular, after Kubrick's definitive statement on the absurdity of the arms race, film could no longer perform its established function of soothing and softening nuclear fear" (104).

It does, however, provide a strangely logical lead-in to the third section, "We're There and They're Here! Space Exploration and Alien Invasion Films of the Long 1950s." In this section Booker reflects on science fiction film's efforts to both capitalize on the fears of the decade and allay them at the same time. What I like about this book is that it offers an equal-opportunity analysis of the genre, from good to bad to completely peculiar. Booker tackles classics like *Forbidden Planet* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* but gives equal time to contemplating the cultural significance of efforts like *Red Planet Mars*, in which the earth is saved from communism and from itself generally when it makes contact with the technologically advanced citizens of Mars, who are apparently all evangelical Christians led by Jesus Christ.

In this section, Booker develops his theme of invasion films and monster movies as playing to the fear that the Other is going to get our planet, our women, our precious bodily essences, if we are not vigilant. Aliens having sex with human females is a classic theme in these films, but sometimes all it takes to call out the army is their mere presence. In his discussion of *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, Booker points out that the aliens in those saucers "do not seem all that evil, other than the fact that they hope to come to earth to live, their own planet having been rendered uninhabitable. But, of course, this in itself is a frightening prospect, just as Americans of the 1950s were widely hostile to the idea of all those Third World masses moving here to take our jobs and use our resources" (125-126).

Booker continues with this theme, as well as some interesting observations on gender, in the fourth section, "The Creature from the Cold War: Science Fiction Monster Movies of the Long 1950s." These films combine the idea of the invading Other with the fear of nuclear destruction—many of the monsters are products of escaped radiation or other science run amok—to produce the giant, germ-infested dinosaur of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and the irradiated ants of *Them!* They also provide an interesting contrast as well as a lurking similarity between the "girl scientists" who are almost always someone's assistant and cheerfully explain that "science is science but a girl must get her hair done" (147), and the monstrous women of *The Leech Woman*, *The Astounding She-Monster*, and *The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*, all of whom are so (sexually) threatening that they must be destroyed for the good of civilization. Films of this vintage tend to portray male monsters, such as the Gill Man of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* series and *The Amazing Colossal Man*, with a bit more sympathy before their inevitable demise.

He ends with a consideration of the growing instability of identity in the 1950s, observing that "the anxiety over the opposition between the Self and Other in the decade was so radical that even the opposition between humans

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and monsters was difficult to maintain, resulting in humans who became monsters (such as the Teenage Werewolf) or in sympathetic monsters (such as the Creature from the Black Lagoon) who seemed more human than the humans to whom they were opposed" (164).

This is a book to appeal to the scholar of science fiction, the social historian, the movie nut, the student of popular culture—and anyone else with an eye on why we do what we do, and how it shows up in our art. Highly recommended.

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