

BOOK REVIEW

Psience Fiction: The Paranormal in Science Fiction Literature by Damien Broderick. McFarland, 2018. ix + 235pp. \$45.00. eISBN 978-1-4766-3197-4.

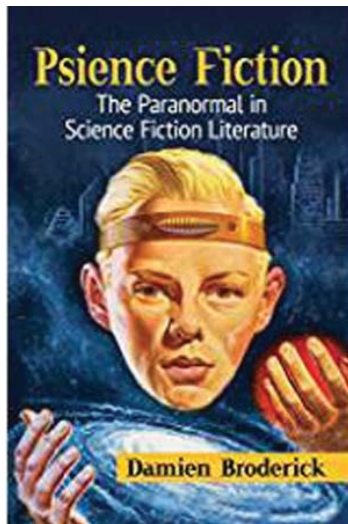
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Psience Fiction: The Paranormal in Science Fiction Literature is a book that really needed to be written. In an abundance of hubris, I once played with the idea myself (and I was probably not alone in the thought). But now Damien Broderick has done it, and much better than I could have even approximated. Given his background as a science fiction literary critic and author himself, no other writer could be better-equipped.

Psience Fiction is exactly the right title to encapsulate Broderick's chosen topic. As he notes in one passage, his purpose here is to explore "the varied representations of the paranormal in science fiction" (p. 68)—though by paranormal he refers neither to ghosts nor mediumship nor UFO-related phenomena, but strictly to "paranormal" as it relates to putative mental powers that transcend the scientifically presumed, neuro-physical limits of our minds and brains. He refines that still further in noting that what he wants to consider is ". . . the give and take between the science fiction paranormal and the real-world kind, tested and tallied by psi researchers" (p. 5).

This book is probably most easily described as a book of book reviews (though a few relevant short stories are also considered). Authors covered run the gamut from Olaf Stapledon, E. E. "Doc" Smith, James Blish, and Theodore Sturgeon, to Zenna Henderson, John Wyndham, Robert Heinlein, Ann McCaffrey, Octavia Butler, and John Brunner, plus many more. For a literary work to be included, it must incorporate some aspect of psi as an integral plot element; a mere mention of extrasensory perception or psychokinesis does not suffice.

Since Broderick is focusing on the developmental history of psience fiction, he has to be discriminating in the texts he chooses to consider out of the myriad there are to pick from. He rightly concentrates on the youth to middle age of the genre. Writings from the 1930s through the 1970s are heavily represented, with just an occasional dip into the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s later in the book. More recent books with significant



psi elements, such as Justin Cronin's *The Passage* (2010) await some future sequel to Broderick's survey.

Importantly, though, Broderick does point out that compared with earlier eras, there has been somewhat of a paucity of substantial psi-connected science fiction in recent decades. As he notes ". . . the proportion of at least moderately significant books of this kind sagged, with an astonishing Quiet Zone of 23 years prior to 2011" (p. 185). Part of the reason for this, Broderick suggests, is the ascendancy of the fantasy genre, the wild popularity of which today tends to suck the oxygen out of the room for somewhat more cerebral fiction such as the science-informed sci-fi.

It's a lot easier to write (and read) fiction that doesn't have to follow any rules but the ones the author makes up for his or her fantasy world.

I did find one omission puzzling. As far as I could tell, there is no mention of the prolific Andre Norton, whose career began in 1934 and spanned 70 years. Starting very early, much of her work was suffused with telepathy and other forms of ESP that would seem to justify her inclusion in the pantheon of pioneering psience fiction. But Norton's fare appeals solidly to the young adult market, so perhaps that's why she was passed over for this study.

Broderick conscientiously alerts us that "because this book is a study of the interaction between scientific studies of paranormal phenomena and their representation in science fiction," there will be spoilers. "LOTS OF SPOILERS" he intones in uppercase, just so we can't say we weren't forewarned. "*THIS BOOK IS MADE OF SPOILERS!*"

Don't let the presence of plot spoilers deter you. I found them generally unobjectionable, and I still feel motivated to seek out and read those tales he reviews that piqued my interest. I hasten to add that, though Broderick threatens spoilers, his writing often conceals as much (or more) than it reveals—perhaps in an attempt to make amends for having to disclose crucial plot developments necessary to his analysis.

Though book introductions are often "flyover country" for the casual reader, Broderick's book Introduction provides important context and interesting narrative as to how and why psi made its inroads into sci-fi. Particularly enlightening was the legendary John W. Campbell's role in

making it all happen very early in the modern era of the genre. As in so many other non-psi-related cases in which Campbell verged on actual prescience as he pioneered the unfolding of science fiction publishing, he seemed to “get” psi and how it fit into the scientific world of the time—and even still today. “It is not *demonstration* that is lacking, but *explanation*,” says Campbell, as quoted by Broderick (p. 15). This is precisely the state we find ourselves in today: We can present copious evidence for ESP and its relatives. But because no physical explanation is available—if one ever will be—psi is still left out in the cold (an intentional bow to the first of Broderick’s books about psi!).

Often, Broderick’s own writing style electrifies us with its imagery. In leading out his discussion of Bester’s seminal work *The Stars My Destination*, Broderick remarks:

Alfred Bester’s strategy was always to lead the reader a merry dance, not to say a danse macabre, to leap from concealment with shouts and firecrackers, to lurk and entice and disguise . . . and unmask! Explosion! Concussion! When he was in form, his pace, attack, payoff were exemplary, dazzling. (p. 83)

That passage alone made me want to read Bester’s book!

But no book is without its warts. Occasionally Broderick can be a little opaque. In his enthusiasm for the topic, he sometimes covers too much ground, perhaps, while trying to be economical in his words.

There are gaps that he perhaps is hoping the reader will be able to fill from their own familiarity with the material under review. But I think it would have been safer to assume that the reader had been exposed to none of the material, and work from there. But if this is the only complaint to be lodged against *Psience Fiction*, it is a small one indeed.

I should also mention the two appendices that add further substance to the book. The first is a nicely compact summary of paranormal research since its formal beginnings in the late 19th Century. The second appendix continues the theme of the paranormal in science fiction literature, but the focus here is psi and death survival.

Psience Fiction is a must for anyone who enjoys science fiction and has an interest in psi phenomena. Broderick is engaging, informative, witty, and stimulating as he brings us to understand more about the heritage that psi enjoys in the body of literature that has in many ways inspired—and predicted—the modern world in which we now live.

—**PAUL H. SMITH**
U. S. Army, Major, retired