

DAYS OF FUTURES PAST

As I write this, I am awash in the flood of published reminiscences about *Back to the Future Part II*'s journey into the future. This is because there is a time delay between the penning of my editorial (circa October 21, 2015) and its appearance in *Asimov's* February 2016 issue. If you peruse the magazine as soon as it appears on the newsstand, drops onto your electronic device, or shows up in your mailbox, there's a chance that you're actually reading this essay in January 2016. By then, October 21, 2015, will be history.

Most of these ruminations seem to be rather disappointed with the real 2015 and oncoming 2016. The authors all seem peeved that the products showcased in the movie—self-drying clothes, power shoelaces, hoverboards, and flying cars—aren't a part of our everyday lives. They claim that these special effects from a late eighties flight of fantasy were somehow promised to all of us, but the future didn't deliver.

I've seen these sort of complaints levied at science fiction on numerous occasions. Robots don't have positronic brains, dilithium crystals are not a thing, and settlements on the Moon and Mars remain a distant dream. Yet anyone who's at all conversant with SF soon realizes that most science fiction is descriptive rather than predictive. Although SF writers may look at today's societies from upside down and backward, they are still caught in the now. It's very hard, if not impossible, for one author, or even one movie, to realistically imagine the future in all its complexities.

The best comments I heard about *Back to the Future Part II* came from an NPR interview with the film's production designer—Rick Carter. In the interview Mr. Carter indicated that time travel tales are really about their own era. It can be argued that *Back to the Future Part II* was produced during an optimistic time. “[The movie] was about projecting from a very exuberant sense we had at the time being young until now.” According to the article, “creating the future wasn't about predicting. It was about making the present seem better.”

Dystopic science fiction is very good at modeling the scary scenarios that could develop “if this goes on.” Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis* examined the divide between the working class and the elite, reflecting some of the anxieties of Germany's Weimar Republic. Judith Merrill's 1948 story, “That Only a Mother,” looked at the devastating effects of radiation poisoning, and John Brunner confronted overpopulation in his 1968 Hugo-Award-winning novel, *Stand on Zanzibar*. Although we escaped the dictatorship of 1984, George Orwell's concerns have not disappeared, and today authors like Paolo Bacigalupi, Nancy Kress, and Kim Stanley Robinson take on many of the possible consequences of climate change.

Naturally, we don't complain when some of these more dire “predictions” turn out to be false. The author's goal is not to be a sooth-sayer. Books and stories are written to entertain, and sometimes to warn us about a future that could develop if we don't take heed. Science fiction writers will extrapolate exciting possibilities from known science and technology, but that doesn't mean that we will get to where the author is going on schedule. And even if the author gets all the science right, society is destined to change in unpredictable ways. A perceptive writer may think up some of these upheavals, but unless she's really a time traveler in disguise, it's impossible for any one author to get all the finer points right.

Yet this complexity doesn't stop an imaginative author from getting the details right from time to time. It's always fun to stumble upon those clairvoyant moments. One that has stuck with me since middle school comes from a 1962 flash fiction by

Isaac Asimov that I encountered around 1970. His opening to “My Son the Physicist” reads, “Her hair was a light apple-green in color, very subdued, very old-fashioned. You could see she had a delicate hand with the dye, the way they did thirty years ago, before the streaks and the stipples came into fashion.” I was thrilled by this limning of a style—already dated—that was completely different from anything I’d ever encountered. It certainly gave me the sense that the story’s events would not be taking place anytime soon. Indeed, it would be many years before primary and secondary color hair dyes became trendy in real life and we still have a long way to go before they become passé.

Still, for all his forward thinking, Isaac was as much a product of his time as any writer. Although he eventually became an outspoken advocate for women’s rights, his early fiction described a society that wasn’t very different from his own. The *Foundation’s* Hari Seldon works with fifty male mathematicians, and thirty thousand men contribute to the Encyclopedia Galactica. Women are only mentioned in passing as wives who go along for the ride to Terminus. Some of the political jockeying could have come right out of today’s headlines, but gender social roles are not unlike the roles that Isaac would have been most familiar with in 1951.

While I’d love to have an FTL drive that would take me to Terminus and Trantor, I don’t want the future to look like the world of 1951, and I don’t expect it to look like 2016. I don’t fault the young man who created that society unaware of the actual changes in mores and social structure that lay ahead anymore than I’d fault today’s writers for not getting their future facts straight.

I’m glad that our prospects are still unknown. I wouldn’t mind a jetpack, but I’m happy that so far we aren’t standing on Nevil Shute’s beach waiting for death from nuclear fallout or from Racoona Sheldon’s screwfly solution. I’m glad I still have time to discover the new ways that authors will find to destroy us and uplift us. And, I’m looking forward to the real future, too.