

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

FLASHING BEFORE MY EYES

They say that when you're dying your whole life flashes before your eyes in a matter of seconds. Maybe so, though I wonder how the reports of that phenomenon get back to us. In any case, last year in London I experienced a pretty serious medical event, which in many instances can be fatal, although, as you see, that isn't how things worked out for me. What saved me was a bit of very good luck indeed—the fact that it happened in the presence of a couple of expert medical technicians who brought me through the whole affair swiftly and effectively. For thirty seconds or so I may well have been on my way to the next world—and then I was back, and here I am, and I hope to stay around for a while.

But what about that business of my whole life flashing before my eyes? No, didn't happen. *Nothing* flashed before my eyes. I was simply out cold and unaware for a few seconds, and then I was conscious again and trying to find out what had happened. Of course, it would have been a big job to run instantaneously through the writing of a whole bookshelf of novels and hundreds of short stories, let alone everything else I've done in the course of a busy eight decades, but I didn't get even a flicker of any of that. (Also no white light, no spiritual visions, no sensations of levitation, no nothing. As I said, out cold and unaware.)

However, as I was flying home a few days later, I *did* have some chunks of my life unroll like a movie before my eyes as I sat, fully conscious, in my comfortable seat aboard a transatlantic airliner heading from London to San Francisco. What I found myself reviewing was a period of my life in late adolescence, a time when I wanted to be a science fiction writer as much as I have ever wanted anything, and was beginning to think it was never going to happen. This was upward of sixty years ago, when dozens of science fiction magazines were being published, and I was studying them all with the intensity that a scriptural student gives to Holy Writ, struggling to find the secret that would allow me to sell just one story to any one of those multitudinous magazines.

I have artifacts of that era spread out all over my desk now—the magazines that floated into my mind as I daydreamed about the early days of my career aboard that Boeing 747, the ones that I looked at so intensely in the days when, as I have so often said, I stood outside the world of science fiction publishing like a small boy with his nose pressed against the toy-shop window, yearning to get inside.

You probably have never seen or even heard of most of these magazines. Here's the November 1951 issue of *Marvel Science Fiction*, a small, rather dainty-looking item that lasted for five issues between 1950 and 1952. I was a high-school student then, writing science fiction stories on the weekend and sending them off to the magazines of the day with high (and invariably frustrated) hopes of getting one accepted. *Marvel*, which is now about as forgotten as a magazine can be, was actually quite good: the issue in front of me has stories by Isaac Asimov, Jack Vance, and Ray Bradbury, three writers already quite famous who would later be named as Grand Masters by the Science Fiction Writers of America, along with work by such significant writers as Richard Matheson (a brilliant novella), William Tenn, and the long-time veteran Raymond Z. Gallun. Tough competition for a novice like me, but *Marvel* was such a pretty little magazine that I longed to see a story of mine in it. That winter I sent one in, but by the time it got there *Marvel* had already reverted to the cheap and very

unpretty pulp-magazine format of an earlier era, and that one pulp-format issue was its final one. I got my story back right around the time I received my high-school diploma.

Here's the first issue of *Orbit Science Fiction*, undated but published around September 1953, just as I was beginning my sophomore year at Columbia. It's another of the small, neat magazines that came and went so quickly back then, and its contents page shows a couple of recognizable names of the time—Robert Abernathy and Mack Reynolds—and some very minor ones, mostly writers I had never heard of before. Nor was the editor's name—Jules Saltman—familiar to me. It seemed to me that this magazine might be a promising market for an unknown writer like me, and off went a story. To no avail, because writers like Philip K. Dick, Jack Vance, Michael Shaara, Gordon R. Dickson, and Chad Oliver were competing for slots in the upcoming issues. (And so were “Martin Pearson” and “David Grinnell,” both of them pseudonyms for Donald A. Wollheim, a powerful figure in the SF field who was the behind-the-scenes editor of the magazine, choosing the stories that Jules Saltman published under his own editorial byline.) Five issues and *Orbit* was gone, unable to hold its own in the overcrowded SF field of the early 1950s. No one remembers it now except a certain nostalgic aging writer who tried in vain to sell stories to it long ago.

Another of the multitude of new magazines that came upon us then was *Fantastic Universe*, a chunky item of 192 close-packed pages without illustrations, and somehow I felt sure that that one would enable me to break through the publication barrier, simply because it would need to acquire so much material. The editor was Sam Merwin, Jr., who had previously been in charge of those excellent pulp magazines *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. A couple of years before, when I was about fifteen, I had visited Merwin at his office; he had received me cordially, praised a story of mine (that he didn't buy), and expressed confidence that I was going to be a successful writer. Now I thought I had a very good chance of selling a story to Merwin's new venture.

I was wrong, of course. I have the second issue, August-September 1952, before me now. The cover, showing the Statue of Liberty buried chest-deep in sand, mysteriously foretells the famous final image from *Planet of the Apes* of more than a decade later. And the contents page lists stories by Clifford D. Simak, Eric Frank Russell, Richard Matheson, Evan Hunter, and many another well-established figure. That should have provided a reality check for me. Science fiction was primarily a magazine medium in the early 1950s, with only a handful of book-length works being published every year. The best writers of the field—and there were dozens of top-notchers at work then—wrote short stories, bushels of them, more than even the numerous magazines of the time could absorb. With famous figures like Simak and Russell compelled to sell their surplus work to a relatively low-paying new magazine like *Fantastic Universe*, what chance did a new kid like me have? Merwin once again was kind when I sent him a story, but back it came. I did eventually sell stories to *Fantastic Universe*, quite a few of them, but my breakthrough there didn't come for another three years, an eternity to an aspiring teenage writer.

One magazine I didn't even dream of sending a story to was the elegant *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, still with us today and still, as it was then, a mainstay of the literary side of science fiction. The February and March 1953 issues are on my desk: beautiful covers, fine typography, and stories by such brilliant newcomers as Philip K. Dick and Robert Sheckley, along with many veteran writers. It seemed a waste of postage for me, a college sophomore that year still struggling to learn his craft, to send stories across the country to *F&SF's* California-based editors, Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas. I knew that that was a magazine for my future, if ever, but that I

wasn't ready for it yet. (And I was right. Editor Boucher, fascinated by the youthful prodigy that I was, began encouraging me to send him stories a few years later, and actually accepted one late in 1956, with others to follow. But by 1956 I was an established professional myself, after a hectic three-year apprenticeship; in 1953 I would have had no business sending stories there, and I didn't.)

Likewise with John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*, whose successor, *Analog*, is still being published, and Horace Gold's glossy *Galaxy Science Fiction*. These were the two top magazines, where all the top writers gathered—Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, Alfred Bester, Fritz Leiber. I bought them, I read them, I tried to imagine what it would take to create something that their demanding editors might buy. But I knew I didn't have the conceptual strength to come up with something worthy of Campbell, nor the sort of deep emotional reach that Gold wanted for his fiction. Campbell actually believed that it was possible to teach, and even to develop, significant ideas about the nature of the universe through science fiction. Maybe so, but at sixteen I was in no position to teach anyone anything. As for Gold, his life had been difficult—he had returned from wartime military service with a bad case of agoraphobia, and almost never left his Manhattan apartment—and he wanted the fiction in his magazine to explore the complexities of human emotion. I knew plenty about the complexities of being a teenager, but that was not what his readers were looking for. Besides, both magazines were crowded with the sophisticated work of my elders and betters, the greatest SF writers of the time. So I stayed away. My best hope, I knew—that boy with his nose pressed against the toy-shop window—was to land a story with one of the bottom-rung magazines, and gradually to work my way up from there as my skills matured.

And so it happened; and so it all came back to me during that long flashback as I flew home from London last fall. In January 1954, still in my teens, I sold a short story, "Gorgon Planet," to the obscure Scottish magazine *Nebula*. It netted me \$12.60, but I was on my way. Four long months later the American magazine *Future Science Fiction*, whose editor, Robert W. Lowndes, specialized in buying first-rate stories for third-rate prices, bought my little story "The Silent Colony" for a resounding \$13.50. *Future* had been one of the shoddiest-looking of the SF magazines, but the issue dated October 1954 that contained my story came out in a handsome new format that made it as attractive as any of its contemporaries and better than most. And there I was on page 111, in the same issue as stories by Philip K. Dick, Algis Budrys, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and other stars of the time. Within a couple of years my work would be published by all the other magazines, too—even the lofty *Astounding* and *Galaxy*.

All of which passed quickly through my mind as I sat daydreaming aboard that San Francisco-bound jet after that nasty but fortunately brief hospitalization in London: the hungry, ambitious years just before the start of my career, and the fulfilling of all those teenage fantasies soon afterward. It's been a rich and rewarding life, and I'm glad that I'm still here to be looking back on it.