

LIFE IN THE FUTURE

I went to Europe recently, and as takeoff time approached I settled back in my seat and opened the hefty book I had chosen to read on the long flight—an old paperback edition of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, which I had last read during my college days, nearly sixty years ago.

The flight attendant, checking to make sure I had fastened my seat belt, smiled and said, "Imagine that! You're actually reading a real book instead of a Kindle."

She was smiling. She was simply being playful, I think—my white beard instantly marks me as being a member of the pre-Kindle generation. But maybe she was genuinely surprised to see such an archaic artifact as a *book* in use in this twenty-first-century cabin. A glance around at my fellow passengers showed them to be staring into bright screens everywhere—Kindles, iPads, and other kinds of tablet-style gizmos. I was the only one who had an actual book in sight, a book which was, a matter of fact, fifteen or twenty years older than she was. I returned her pleasant smile and said something like, "Yes, a book. They're a wonderful invention, books."

Kindles are wonderful inventions too. So are iPads and Nooks and their ilk. I've seen my friends using them and I'm filled with admiration for the technological ingenuity that allows you to load a whole library of books on a device that will fit in an overcoat pocket, and carry it around the world with you. It happens that I don't own one, not because I don't think they are wonderful and tremendously useful and all that (I carry two or three thick travel guides with me on my overseas trips, and how convenient it would be to have them on my Kindle instead of creating big bulges in

my suitcase), but simply because I don't want to bother with learning the ins and outs of yet another gadget, and remembering to keep it charged, and trying not to lose it as I travel from place to place, and so on and so on. Call it gizmo fatigue, I guess. I've reached an age where I'm content not to live on the cutting edge.

I wasn't always like that, of course. I'm a science fiction writer, and science fiction writers are supposed to have an interest in the future. In order to write convincingly about the future, a writer needs, at a bare minimum, to stay up to date with the present, right? And so I did, for most of my life. I have never, until recently, turned away from futuristic gadgetry. I had a tape recorder when tape recorders were startling new gadgets, back in the 1950s. I bought one of the earliest electronic calculators—you would be amazed at how big and clunky it was, and how much it cost—when I got tired of adding up numbers by hand in long dreary rows. When Mazda, the Japanese auto company, came out with its revolutionary rotary-engine car in 1971, I bought one of those. I was the second person I know to buy a video-cassette recorder, circa 1978. (The first person I knew who bought one was Harlan Ellison, who was such an early adopter that he bought a Betamax, Sony's technologically superior but badly marketed version of the VCR, which soon was made obsolete by the VHS model that rapidly established itself as the industry norm. Harlan had to buy one of those, too, because the Betamax vanished from the marketplace.)

And I was one of the first science fiction writers to do his work on a computer. I began shopping for one as far back as 1978, but the computers that were

available back then were crude things that used tape decks for their memories, and experts advised me to wait a little while to buy, since the state of the art was improving so swiftly. By the time I did buy, in 1982, the tape deck was history and my first computer sported a magnificent ten-megabyte hard disk. I acquired many another fascinatingly futuristic gadget as the microprocessor revolution went churning along. A wireless telephone unit to carry in my pocket as I moved around the garden. A pocket-sized tape recorder to carry in the car, so that I could make memoranda about story ideas that occurred to me while I was driving. A Walkman to provide me with ambulatory music. (The term "Walkman" may mean nothing to you: think iPod and you'll know what it was.) An electric toothbrush. A TIVO video recorder and a DVD player, which together made the old videocassette recorder seem as antiquated as writing on clay tablets. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I was never one to shun a useful new device.

But time does pass, and the gods have granted me the favor of longevity, and here I am living in the far future I used to write about, and, well, I just don't *feel* like keeping up with all that stuff any more. Though most days I have trouble believing it, I'm closer to eighty than I am to seventy, and the thought of coping with one more user's manual now gives me the willies. (They don't even provide the manuals any more, anyway: generally you have to look for them on line.) And so—for the time being, anyway—I have shrugged and let the Kindle and its cohort pass me by. I tell myself that I can get along perfectly well with old-fashioned books, even if they do make my suitcase bulge. Poor old Bob Silverberg, you are thinking. He's had it. Once upon a time he was really something, but he's just a pathetic old geezer now, angrily waving his cane as the twenty-first century passes him by. Well, maybe. But let me quote one of my favorite bits of wisdom about getting old to you. It comes

from Robert Sheckley's introduction to his 1979 short-story collection, *The Wonderful World of Robert Sheckley*. (Never heard of Sheckley? You should investigate him: the author of some of the cleverest SF stories ever written, whose work is just now emerging from a long period of unfair eclipse.) What Sheckley said was,

The current audience for science fiction is a young person's audience. I am not a young person, curse the luck. I was writing these stories when a lot of you weren't even born yet, or were crapping your diapers. Please don't hold that against me. I don't like being old any more than you will.

There's a marvelous dagger-thrust at the end of that paragraph: "I don't like being old *any more than you will.*" Mocking the old simply because they're old is not only cruel, it's dumb, because the young, if they are lucky enough to survive a few years, will find themselves old themselves one day, just as weary, just as puzzled, just as obsolete as today's geezers are right now. Nobody starts off with an oldster's attitude toward the modern world, but everybody gets there, sooner or later. Even science fiction writers like Sheckley or Silverberg or X or Y or Z, who once were so sassy and edgy, and who lasted long enough to find Kindles and iPads unnecessary in their current lives. That doesn't mean that the science fiction they wrote when they were in their twenties and thirties (or forties or fifties or sixties, for that matter) is irrelevant and obsolete today. Sure, the characters don't use smartphones, and some of them smoke cigarettes, and their slang isn't the kind of slang you speak. You have to make allowances for that. Nobody in Shakespeare has a smartphone, either, but that doesn't mean Shakespeare has nothing to say to modern readers. The stories that the quick-witted young Robert Sheckley wrote in 1952 and 1955 and 1960 still hold plenty for today's SF audience, even though Sheckley himself, over the decades,

grew old and wrinkled and ill and eventually died. That happens to everybody, and, as Sheckley obligingly points out, it will happen to you. But only Sheckley could have written the stories of Robert Sheckley.

I think that my own work has some value for modern readers, too, and, ancient and crotchety though I may now be, I'm eagerly making it available for the new devices that I myself am able to get along without. If you check the current listings of books available for the Kindle, you will find whole handfuls of Robert Silverberg novels ready for downloading. (When I was in the hospital a few months ago for some minor repairs, a technician in the operating room discovered who I was and gleefully downloaded three of my novels to his Kindle *while the procedure was going on*, as he was delighted to inform the very groggy me.) Not only my novels are available for him, but six or seven volumes of my Collected Short Stories, too. And, bit by bit, I'm putting just about everything I've ever written, which is quite a lot, out there for sale on the various electronic media. Just because I have chosen not to partake of those media myself doesn't mean I'm dumb enough to withhold my work from the rest of you, because the rest of you will be reading books via download long after my print-media library is dust.

I do remain mired in my own twentieth-century ways, of course. I can't help that (any more than you'll be able to avoid getting mired in your own twenty-first century ways when the super-cool successor to the Kindle comes along, the one that downloads books right into your mind, and you find it too scary to use.) Although Subterranean Press, the publisher of my Collected Short Stories, has put them all up for sale in electronic form, and I'm quite happy about that, I've been nagging the Subterranean publisher, Bill Schafer, to do them as paperbacks too. It isn't that I don't know that the Kindle editions will outsell any paperback edition by ten or twenty to one.

But some obstinate part of me insists on thinking that the paperback is the *real* book, and the electronic edition is just some ghostly phantom, lacking in tangible substance.

I suppose I'll remain incorrigible in that belief. A couple of years ago, editor Sheila Williams asked me for permission to use my story "Enter a Soldier: Later, Enter Another" in *Enter the Future*, an anthology of stories from this magazine she was compiling. Well, that was nice to hear: I love seeing my stories reprinted in anthologies. I've been in hundreds of them and on dark, gloomy days I get much pleasure from looking down the long rows of them on my shelves. But the twist here was that this particular anthology would appear only in a Kindle edition, which meant that there'd be no new volume for those shelves—indeed, I would never even get to see the book at all.

I may be stuck with one foot in the past when it comes to electronic editions, but I am nobody's fool when it comes to a reprint deal, and of course I told Sheila that I'd be delighted to have my story in the anthology—adding that I'm mildly disappointed not to be able to look forward to a print edition to fondle, but *c'est la vie moderne*, etc., etc. I have no illusions about the shape of future publishing, which in fact is already becoming the shape of present publishing. I will stick to my quaint old paperbacks, I guess, to the continued amusement of airline flight attendants. But it's obvious that electronic reading devices are taking over, and so be it. I will gladly sign up with any e-anthologist who offers me a reasonable fee to reprint one of my stories in an on-line edition, because those who don't bow gracefully to the inevitable get run over by it. I'm all for the new media—except where it comes to my own reading habits, that is. And so my books and stories are out there on them, and it will not upset me at all to see people reading my stuff on their Kindles.

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