

# REFLECTIONS

## REREADING SIMAK

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Clifford D. Simak, who lived from 1904 to 1988, was one of the giants of editor John W. Campbell's 1939–43 Golden Age, when Campbell's magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* created and defined what we know as modern science fiction. Unlike such of Campbell's writers as Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Theodore Sturgeon, and Jack Williamson, though, Simak's work has not fared particularly well in today's publishing world. Some of it, mainly the novels and stories that appeared in the 1950s in *Astounding's* great rival, *Galaxy*, still can be found on sale. But while Heinlein and Asimov were establishing their names in the Campbell era with their Future History and Foundation stories and novels, Simak wrote mainly short stories and novelles for Campbell (there was only one novel, 1939's rather creaky *Cosmic Engineers*), and most of those have slipped into oblivion today. The big exception is Simak's *City*, a collection of eight short stories (seven of them published by Campbell between 1944 and 1947, and an eighth that appeared in a pulp magazine called *Fantastic Adventures* in 1951). Simak strung those eight stories together into a sort of chronicle-novel that was published in book form in 1952. A year later it won the International Fantasy Award, the most significant science fiction/fantasy literary award at that time, as the best SF novel of the year, and it has been included in virtually everybody's hundred-greatest-science-fiction-books list ever since.

I first read the *City* stories piecemeal in the 1940s (not in the right order, because I was picking up back issues of *Astounding* second hand), then read the complete book when it appeared as a paperback in 1954, and read it again in 1995 in order to write an introduction to

it for a limited-edition reprint. Last year my friend Alvaro Zinos-Amaro, who was taking part in a panel at the World Science Fiction Convention on classic SF of the 1950s, asked me what I thought of it, and, after a lapse of nearly twenty years I read it one more time, to see whether my 1995 opinions had changed at all. And I discovered that they hadn't.

This is what I had to say about Simak in that 1995 essay: "He was a stocky, white-haired Midwestern newspaper editor when I knew him, a man of gentle mien with twinkling eyes and a warm smile and a calm, unpretentious manner. Since he tended to write stories set in the world he knew best, which was that of Wisconsin in the 1920s, it was easy to think of him primarily as a folksy, homespun kind of writer, science fiction's own cracker-barrel philosopher. The ostensible setting of his fiction might be the eightieth century, or a parallel universe, or a strange world of some other galaxy, but somehow, in one way or another, it was always fundamentally Wisconsin in the 1920s there, a world of farmers and dogs and fishing-holes and rocking-chairs on the porch. And so it was all too convenient to categorize Clifford D. Simak's work as mere nostalgic rhapsodizing for a time of lost innocence—simple, gentle fiction by a simple, gentle man. *City*, his most highly regarded novel, is the best evidence I know that this is a vast oversimplification.

"In understanding Simak, it might be useful to consider the career of another American writer with whom he has more than a little in common: Robert Frost. Frost celebrated the vanished world of rural New England in straightforward, unadorned, colloquial verse,

telling apparently artless little tales of hired men and mended fences and crows shaking snow out of hemlock trees. Those who wanted to see in Frost's work merely the cheery countrified affirmations of an American bumpkin-bard saw only that and nothing more, and for a long time he was popularly regarded by casual readers as a cheerful spinner of the sort of verse often found on greeting cards; but those who were willing to take a closer look at his poems discovered that behind the Currier-and-Ives surface lay a cold, clear-eyed vision of the fullness of life, realistic and uncompromising even unto the ultimate darkness and bleakness.

"So too with Simak. He was, by my unvarying experience and that of his other colleagues, a genuinely good and kindly man, benevolent and lovable, a thoroughly *nice* person. (Frost, so I understand, was not quite as nice.) And he did, in his fiction, recapitulate again and again his woodsy boyhood world, so different from the one most of us have experienced. . . . Simak never is afraid to express sentiment, but he is no sentimentalist; the country boy learns early that life is real and life is earnest, and that after the rich crops of summer come the inevitable cold blasts of autumn's winds and the silence of the winter snows. Those who go to his fiction—the best of it, anyway—for bland reassurance are likely to come up against disturbing surprises. *City* is a prime case in point."

We see Simak's rural background on display in the first of the *City* stories, "City," from the May 1944 *Astounding*. He said in an autobiographical essay, "I sometimes think that despite the fact my boyhood spanned part of the first and second decades of the twentieth century that I actually lived in what amounted to the tail end of the pioneer days. I swam in the big hole in the creek, I rode toboggans down long hills, I went barefoot in the summer, I got out of bed at four o'clock in the morning during summer vacations to do the morning chores. . . ." In "City" the story, he draws on his memories of that rural world of what is now nearly a century ago. Unfortunately, it's the weakest of the group, relying as it does not on the inwardly felt experiences of his life but on folksy clichés out of some *Saturday Evening Post* story. It was received in most quarters with indifference. The ho-hum opening lines—"Gramp Stevens sat in a lawn chair, feeling the warm, soft sunshine seep into his bones"—offer nothing very compelling. Nor does the extrapolative content of the story sit very well with our knowledge of the overcrowded urban world of modern times. His profound nostalgia for a vanished America had led him, in the opening story, to show how the world of the early nineteenth century could be recreated by way of post-World War II technology—hydroponics, atomics, cheap private planes—leading to a withering away of urban culture by the late twentieth century. That did not happen, nor is it likely to, nor do I think Simak really believed it would. What he shows us is a fantasy: a decentralized United States of the near future in which city life has broken down and the Wisconsin of the 1920s is returning, a world of farmers and dogs and fishing-holes and rocking-chairs on the porch, which even Simak could not have found a very plausible prediction. Making much use of hackneyed phrases like "danged fool" and "that dadburned lawn mower," it attracted very little attention in its own time and provides the book with a slow, stale opening today.

The sequel, two months later, "Huddling Place," carried the premise of its predecessor into new and unsuspected somber territory, as Simak demonstrated that one of the consequences of the dismantling of American urban life would be a crushing sense of agoraphobia. It became clear at once that Simak did not intend to dish up a stale serving of warmed-over nostalgia, but in fact intended to create a poetic fantasy of an imaginary time that he must never seriously have expected literally to come to pass,

a steadily deepening vision of an ever stranger future Earth. He is writing about the loss of community in a world altered by technology, and the strange manifestations of the communal spirit that might emerge once our present mechanistic society has been swept away by the forces we have set in motion. His folksy opening, Gramps and his "dadburned" lawn-mower, widens and widens in the succeeding stories until a breathtaking personal vision of futurity is revealed, informed on every page by the deep compassion that was integral to Clifford D. Simak's character, but innately pessimistic as a view of humanity's future on Earth. *City* is no humanistic hymn to the enduring spirit and worth of the human race. Far from it.

By the time the series reaches its seventh story in 1947, it has traveled an immense distance from its deceptively underplayed and cliché-ridden "by cracky" opening. By gradual steps Simak has gone on in his quiet way to lead us from that opening to one rich and vivid SF concept to another and another, unveiling a startling mélange of robotics, immortality, extraterrestrial exploration, and parallel-world mysticism, all stemming in unforced sequence from his original premise of a decentralization of urban civilization.

"The series was written in a revulsion against mass killing and as a protest against war," Simak declared, many years afterward. "The series was also written as a sort of wish fulfillment. It was the creation of a world I thought there ought to be. It was filled with the gentleness and the kindness and the courage that I thought were needed in the world. And it was nostalgic because I was nostalgic for the old world we had lost and the world that would never be again. . . . I made the dogs and robots the kind of people I would like to live with. And the vital point is this: That they must be dogs or robots, because people were not that kind of folks."

And so, surprisingly, it turns out that the literary masterpiece of this warm and good and loving man is basically an excursion into misanthropy—the quiet cry of someone who has lost patience with his own species. We see mankind—focused, for simplicity's sake, through the single family of the Websters—making a series of decisions, often disastrous ones, that cumulatively obliterate our history, our culture, everything familiar, and even, eventually, our ties to Earth itself, the planet being abandoned by its human population, which migrates to Jupiter (a process initiated in the splendidly eerie middle story, "Desertion"), and left to sentient dogs, to wise old robots, to mutant supermen, and—ultimately, in the bleak finale that Campbell refused to publish—to the ants.

*City* shows how thoroughly we misjudged Simak, mistaking his kindly, gentle manner for a bland, nostalgic, superficial lament for a lost rural America. Nostalgic he was, yes, and kind and gentle, and surely he did yearn for the simpler Wisconsin of his turn-of-the-century boyhood. But—as was true of that other superficially simple artist, Robert Frost—he had a clear view of the darkness that lay beneath the human surface. He once wrote of *City* as "seeking after a fantasy world that would serve as a counterbalance to the brutality through which the world was passing. . . . It has been said that the tales were an indictment of mankind, and while I may not have thought in such terms at the time, I can see now that they were."

The world in which we live today was born in the grim years of World War II and the atomic explosions that concluded it. Reading *City* once again, I see it still as one of the finest works of science fiction of its period, a haunting fantasy that is still capable of speaking to us today.