

REFLECTIONS

REREADING PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

Robert Silverberg

There had been rumblings all through the spring of 1952 that *Startling Stories* was going to publish something special that summer, a truly startling story indeed, a taboo-smashing novella by a brilliant newcomer named Philip José Farmer. *Startling Stories* had emerged in the previous few years as one of the leading SF publications, having transformed itself from the juvenile action-adventure magazine of the wartime years into a serious contender for the top rank. Its special feature was a policy of running a lengthy lead novella—thirty-five thousand to sixty thousand words—complete in each monthly issue. I was a teenage fan at the time, yearning for a career as a science fiction writer; I read all the magazines, I studied the news of the field intently, I kept alert for all the latest trends. Oh, yes, the advance word about this man Farmer and his game-changing novella caught my attention. It certainly did.

The first hint of something special ahead came in the April 1952 issue, when *Startling's* editor Samuel Mines called for greater sexual frankness in science fiction. Not for “exploitation,” Mines pointed out. He would never ask a writer to “put some sex” into a story. But “if his story deals with people of different sexes, and they get themselves into a spot where a certain amount of sex interest is likely to spark between them, we see no reason why that should not be admitted. . . . There’s the beginning of a policy for our science fiction. Let’s print stories about people as real as our authors can make them. Let’s deal honestly with their problems, their characters, and motives—and be limited only by good taste.”

Modern readers, accustomed to graphic sex scenes and four-letter words in fiction, can have no idea how radical this statement of policy was in 1952. Federal laws prohibited the distribution of such strongly erotic works as D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and the novels of Henry Miller, and a brief upsurge of “spicy” pulp magazines in the 1930s had led to a program of official suppression that left all American magazines that published fiction as clean as *Peter Rabbit*. What, then, was Sam Mines leading up to here?

The June 1952 *Startling* gave us the answer: “We have just bought a story which came in cold—unheralded, unsung, unagented. It is called *The Lovers*, by a name new to science fiction, Philip José Farmer, but it is a story, we think, which begins the career of a fine new talent. It is fresh, vital, shocking, etched with acid. Your reaction to it is apt to be violent, one way or another.”

I couldn’t wait. And didn’t. When the August 1952 issue of *Startling* that featured “The Lovers” appeared, I began reading it at once. And read on and on, awed, overwhelmed, even, by the vigor of its prose, the ingenuity and inventiveness of its concepts, the headlong energy of Farmer’s storytelling, and—yes—the unabashed frankness of the erotic content.

And now, after sixty years, I’ve reread Farmer’s pathbreaking story—the original magazine novella, not the novel that he made out of it long afterward. I was afraid it wouldn’t stand up to my youthful memories of it. But it did. It certainly did. It’s not subtly or smoothly written, something I may not have been capable of noticing in 1952. But why should it have been? Farmer was a novice then, a brilliant novice but a novice nevertheless. And throughout his long, distinguished career he never hesitated to push his way headlong through a scene that he needed in order to establish

a plot point or a chunk of world-building background, even if it brought forth some fairly awkward prose. So the novella is a bit awkward. It's also quite astonishing. This time around I found it exceedingly hard to believe that it was a beginner's work.

Farmer drops us down in a strangely altered future universe where Israel and a Bantu-Malay federation seem to be the major powers on Earth. Everybody else seems subject to a fiercely puritanical new religious cult that is pushing humanity out into the stars to conquer and convert the natives of all inhabited worlds, of which there are a multitude. A little of this background material he tells us straightforwardly, in expository chunks, but he leaves most of it for us to pick up as best we can as we go along. It's a story marked by remarkable intellectual generosity: the amazing abundance of invented speculative material, held in back-story reserve and gradually released to the reader with unusual skill for a new writer, makes "The Lovers" a rich feast for readers who admire the workings of a cunning extrapolative mind.

To find out why so much of the back-story is kept from the reader, I dug out a 1953 essay Farmer wrote for a little magazine called *Fantastic Worlds* and discovered that the original manuscript had been much longer—too long for *Galaxy*, the leading magazine of the day (and the top-paying one), which Farmer hoped would publish it. "So I cut hell out of it," he wrote. About a third of the story ended up on the cutting-room floor. And so what remained of it is unusually sophisticated in technique, a dazzling demonstration of Robert A. Heinlein's pathbreaking practice of letting background information in a story be revealed by action rather than by exposition. It might not have seemed so sophisticated had Farmer not felt impelled to slice his novella down to fit a magazine's arbitrary thirty thousand-word space limit.

But *Galaxy*, though it prided itself on its indifference to taboos, rejected the story anyway. Had the sexual content been too strong even for *Galaxy's* editor Horace Gold? No, as it turned out. Farmer himself explains, in that 1953 article, that Gold had no problem with the sex, but objected to Farmer's use of a dictatorial far-future society that had developed as an outgrowth of Judaism. "Whatever my attitude toward minorities might be," Farmer wrote, "the story itself was dangerous [in Gold's view]. It, in effect, justified discrimination because minorities *might*, if they ever achieved domination, become dictatorial." Gold had wanted the story rewritten to eliminate the link to Judaism. Farmer found Gold's objection far-fetched, and he balked at another suggestion of Gold that he move the setting of the story to Earth, thus eliminating the carefully delineated alien background Farmer had so lovingly invented. "To carry that out would have meant wiping out Ozagen, Fobo, the tavern beetles, etc.," said Farmer. "I wasn't a world-wrecker. I couldn't do it." He thanked Gold for his input, sent the story in its cut-down form to Sam Mines of *Startling*, and his career was launched. As for all the background material he had slashed, it wound up in the lengthy sequel to "The Lovers," "Moth and Rust," which *Startling* published the following year, a much less successful work that has been reprinted now and then under such titles as *A Woman a Day* and *Timestop*.

"The Lovers" is a whale of a story, a very special kind of love story, a trailblazer, a pioneering work. That was how I found it in 1952, and how it still seems to me more than sixty years later. It's sexy, yes, and certainly that caught my teenage interest back there in 1952, but it's the *way* the story is sexy that matters most.

It's not just a tale of "people of different sexes" who had generated "a certain amount of sex interest between them," as Sam Mines put it in his editorial. The "sex interest" involves a human man and an alien woman, a form of miscegenation that was astonishingly daring in an era when state and federal legislation still governed who could go to bed with whom. And Farmer's description of the sex act is something

that never before had been seen in the pages of a science fiction magazine. “She insisted on keeping her eyes open, even during the climax,” we are told. *Climax*? Very clinical talk indeed; such sex as there had been in the spiciest of the old pulps had been nothing more than an embrace and a line of asterisks. The boldest of the SF writers of the 1950s—Fritz Leiber, Theodore Sturgeon—had approached Farmer’s degree of sexual frankness, but had never quite reached it at that time.

Farmer had an even bigger surprise in store. She keeps her eyes open in that big moment not merely to provide Farmer’s readers with a bit of titillating detail, but because Farmer has worked out a perfect *science fiction* rationale for keeping her eyes open—and when he comes to his explanation of it, he uses words like “intercourse” and “orgasm” that surely had never been seen in the pages of a science fiction magazine before. I can’t possibly communicate the impact that those words had for the SF readers of 1952. And, just as Mines had promised, the sexual content of the story is in no way exploitative: everything that happens between Farmer’s two protagonists had a rationale splendidly grounded in speculative biology, a magnificent science fiction invention. When it ends, it ends tragically, and the tragedy too is not extrinsic to the plot but grows organically out of Farmer’s startling SF premise.

Quite a story, yes. It earned Farmer a Hugo in 1953—the year that the first Hugo awards were given out—as Best New Writer, which is certainly what he was, even against the tough competition (Philip K. Dick, Robert Sheckley, Algis Budrys, and more) that that boom-time year provided. The science fiction field was never the same after “The Lovers.” With his very first story Philip José Farmer had launched a revolution.