

Sophie Beaulé  
Saint Mary's University, Halifax

**Ashley, Mike. *Transformations: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1950 to 1970, The History of the Science-Fiction Magazine volume II*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005. 410 p. ISBN 0853237794.**

*Transformation* is the second volume of a meticulous and richly detailed three-volume history of science-fiction magazines. In the first volume, *The Time Machine*, Mike Ashley studied the emergence and development of the sf magazine, from *Amazing Stories* founded by Hugo Gernsback in 1926, to the dying of the pulp and the appearance of Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*. The second volume starts with the new magazines *Galaxy* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (F & SF)*, both of which transformed the sf field, and it ends in 1970. The last volume, *Gateway to Forever* will bring the sf magazine evolution up to now.

Ashley discusses in great detail the editors of each American and British magazine, commenting on their editorial choices and their positioning in the sf milieu, market, and socio-political environment. Every magazine, the long-lasting and the short-lived, is scrutinized with objective eyes. The result is that the reader understands in depth each magazine's personality and its success or difficulties in the market. Ashley doesn't forget the writers, of course. He chooses to provide the reader with an overview of the production rather than with a deep analysis of literary content, which would be out of keeping with the goals he set for his sf history. Ashley simply notes and summarizes the most important short stories of the writers he mentions, and underlines their importance in the magazine's aesthetics and in their creator's evolution. Ashley provides abundant information about the writers themselves, in a chapter devoted to them, along with insight into their aesthetic choices. The reader learns interesting details about, for instance, Philip K. Dick, whose talent wasn't recognized before the seventies, Robert Sheckley and Poul Anderson on the American side, John Wyndham on the British, and Judith Merrill among the emerging female sf writers.

*Transformation*, according to the author, sums up best the period 1950-1970, since the genre witnesses a roller coaster shaped market with a succession of rises and a fall due to shift in thematic and formal contents, as well as in the physical medium. In the American fifties, the boom of 1950-1954 (really starting in 1952), which Ashley calls the Golden Age of science fiction, is followed by a decline between 1954 and 1960, the lowest ebb being in 1955. The author declares that the period 1950-1965 "was arguably the most fertile period in science fiction's history. (...) The 1950s saw the greatest flowering of science-fiction talent the field has ever seen." (p.105) Ashley denies the general assumption that the golden age started with the Campbell revolution during 1939-1942 and declares that the history of sf

magazines is almost the history of the entire genre itself.

At the beginning of the 1950s, *Astounding*, conducted by Campbell, is no longer the most important magazine in the field, because of the editor's own prejudices and literary preferences. *F & SF*, with its "softly-softly approach", and *Galaxy* which shows the most immediate effect on the milieu, are the 'new masters'. In fact, *Galaxy's* success was the primary cause that led to the 1952-54 boom year. The end of the boom coincides with the death of the pulp magazines, especially in 1957, and can be explained by a saturated market, the bankruptcy of the distributor, American News Company, the divergence between fictional content and public interest, poor decisions by money-oriented publishers, the emergence of television, and the competition of paperbacks and comics that caused the fragmentation of the readership. The statistics are impressive: in 1957/58, there were 20 American SF magazines, but only six three years later - and those six had to change significantly.

The sf market in Great Britain in the 1950s was very different. While in the States, issues of sf magazines outnumbered science-fiction paperbacks, the situation in Britain was reversed, because of paper rationing during the Second World War. According to Ashley and other researchers, the growth of the genre was not a British development, but a reflection of the American production. However, British writers quickly showed a wider interpretation of sf's thematics and aesthetics, which would lead in the sixties toward the revolutionary New Wave. *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy* were the two most important ones among the British magazines. Ashley mentions the negative repercussions of opportunistic publishers, along with the positive (or not so positive) influence of the editors on writers like Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard, and on the magazines.

"*Transformations*" defines the sixties as well. After the painful fall of the sf magazine market, the American field wakes up in 1964, with Frederick Pohl's excellent work at *Galaxy's* wheel. Two other magazines, Campbell's *Analog* (formerly *Astounding*) and Gold's *F&SF* also play an important role in the market. Ashley focuses as well on the "amazing" *Amazing*, with its shift towards quality, thanks to Editor Cele Goldsmith, and the series of anthologies *Orbit* and *Dangerous Visions* which prompted other publishers' interest in this type of publication.

The true revolution comes from Great Britain, with the New Wave conducted by Michael Moorcock and J.G. Ballard. As he does in the other chapters, Ashley relates in interesting detail how, through financial decisions, Moorcock became the editor of *New Worlds*. Barriers in culture and politics were coming down, and more and more American writers found in this magazine a less restrictive market. But the magazine still saw itself isolated, suffering prejudice not only from the mainstream market but also from the sf fraternity whose rejection denied "the field its growth and maturity." (248) This is why Ashley calls the magazine venture a "misunderstanding" (252) rather than a failure.

The author analyses a factor apart from the New Wave which significantly influenced the American sf market. During this decade, the public turned its interest toward fantasy fiction, including that generated by Robert E. Howard's Conan books, and Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring*. For a long time alone in its open-mindedness, *F&SF* was now facing competition from British magazines and from *If*, which answered to the fantasy boom, as well as from the return of space opera with the popular

television programs *Dr Who* and *Star Trek*. One thing remained constant through the two decades, though: *Analog*, which continued to offer hard science fiction and kept the highest circulation.

At the end of the sixties, the revival of interest in fantasy and space opera brought an increase in the number of titles available, as in the early fifties. But the situation was somewhat different. Fewer publishers were involved, and, Ashley says, the magazines didn't make any impact on the market. Only some of them survived after a few issues. In 1970, the market went through an apparent boom period without the boom. According to the author, "Sf, certainly in the American magazines, seemed to have come to a halt." (299) In fact, according to Ashley, the sixties are the last real Silver Age of the sf magazines, after the Golden Age of the early fifties. In the seventies and beyond, sf magazines will have to adapt to survive against competition from movies, cable television, punk revolution, e-zines from the internet... The genre itself will mutate and shift into cyberpunk and slipstream. But this is the subject of *Gateway to Forever*, the last volume of Ashley's trilogy.

*Transformations* closes with a series of interesting and useful appendices. First, Ashley gives an overview of markets for sf magazines outside Great Britain and the United States. In a short but quite complete summary, the author recounts the growth of sf magazines in France, Mexico, Argentina, Spain, Italy, Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Roumania, Yugoslavia, and Japan. Those magazines offer mainly reprints from British and American sources, but also their own production. Ashley nuances here the argument, based on American and British examples, that sf magazines ghettoize the genre. Even if this argument has some basis in fact, the sf field in other countries show that its ghettoization results from different socio-political cultures. Ashley also demonstrates that most countries underwent the same problems as Britain and America to achieve a stable place for sf magazines within their markets. The next appendix gives a summary of the magazines with their periodicity, mentions of publisher and editors, while the following one focuses on magazine publishers and editors, which allows the reader to keep track of the constant movement in the magazines due to the market. A list of magazine cover artists, a selected reference bibliography, and an index conclude the work.

Mike Ashley offers an enlightening history of sf magazines. The reader, whether he is learned in the field or not, will discover interesting details about the magazines and perhaps revise her assumptions on the field thanks to fact-based - but sometimes opinionated - commentaries. When completed, the trilogy will no doubt be the definitive history of sf magazines.