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Dale Knickerbocker, editor. *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction From Around the World*. U of Illinois P, 2018.

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Abstract

Review of Dale Knickerbocker, editor. *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction From Around the World*. U of Illinois P, 2018.

Keywords

Science Fiction, sf, Dale Knickerbocker, Liu Cixin, Angélica Gorodischer, Jacek Dukaj, Jean-Claude Dunyach, Boris Strugatsky, Arkady Strugatsky

Dale Knickerbocker, editor. *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction From Around the World*. U of Illinois P, 2018. vii + 236 pp.

In early 2019, China landed a spacecraft on the far side of the moon, something no nation had done before. With plans for a human-led moon mission by 2030—and with the U.S. planning to withdraw from the International Space Station by 2025—China could be poised to become the new leader in space exploration. Like its real-world science programs, China’s science fiction (sf) profile is also undoubtedly on the ascendency. In 2015, Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* (translated by Ken Liu) made headlines as the first non-English novel to win the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Novel; *Death’s End*, the third book in Liu’s trilogy, was a finalist for the same award. Now, a new anthology of scholarship on “global” sf, *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction From Around the World*, edited by Dale Knickerbocker, aims to bring a wide range of non-Anglophone writers—including Liu Cixin—into the orbits of English-language readers and academics.

In his introduction, Knickerbocker establishes the book’s polemic against “the persistent belief that any science fiction worthy of the name can only be written in the most technologically advanced nations” (viii). These attitudes are especially ironic, he notes, since “the themes of exploration and encounters with others” are at the very heart of sf. It’s an enormously popular genre. Earlier this year, Adam Rowe reported in *Forbes* that “book sales in the genres of science fiction and fantasy have doubled since 2010,” once self-published and Amazon-published ebook sales are included. Many colleges and universities now offer dedicated sf literature courses, and a handful of established, peer-reviewed academic journals are devoted to the genre (in addition to *Science Fiction Studies*, Knickerbocker notes the Finnish journal *Fafnir*, the Brazilian *Abusões*, on whose advisory board he serves, and others). Until relatively recently, however, sf remained largely the province of English-language authors and audiences; perhaps this isn’t surprising, given that the U.S. and the U.K. combined represent more than one-third of the global publishing market.

Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction From Around the World seeks to redress this by introducing readers—primarily academics, given the scholarly nature of the book—to sf authors of eleven different nationalities: Cuban, Polish, French, German, Argentinian, Japanese, Chinese, French Canadian, Finnish, Nigerian American, and Russian. The authors treated span the gamut from the “hard” sf coming out of China to the “soft” sf represented by Angélica Gorodischer of Argentina, whose work, according to Yolanda Molina-Gavilán, “eschews hard science in favor of philosophical ideas that have a sociopolitical reach” (78). This added sense of diversity—not only in terms of nationalities but also in terms of subgenre and thematics—is one of the book’s strengths. As Yvonne Howell points

out in a note to her essay on Russian sf writers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, the term “science fictional” describes not only a genre but also a “mode of awareness”: “the cognitive paradigm we use to confront an everyday reality that is universally shaped by technoscience” (217). Thus, the collection serves as a reminder that science fiction—like science itself—is a process as well as a product.

Unfortunately, many of those products are still difficult to find in English translation. Poland’s Jacek Dukaj—whom Paweł Frelik describes as “a true heir to Stanisław Lem”—is also essentially unknown to Anglophone readers because only two works, one of them a short piece of juvenilia, are available in English (23). This means that some of the most intriguing sf treated in *Lingua Cosmica* can do little for now but tantalize—though, as Knickerbocker relates in his introduction, several newly established awards for translating sf are helping to remedy this situation. The scholars in this collection have taken pains to ensure that, without too much digging, interested readers can locate enough to keep them busy for some time.

Two collections by Jean-Claude Dunyach, for example, are easily available in both print and ebook: *Night Orchid: Conan Doyle in Toulouse* (2004) and *The Thieves of Silence* (2009). Dunyach, a major player in France’s burgeoning sf scene, combines “the hard-science approach with the supernatural and the fantastic,” according to Natacha Vas-Deyres (39), who offers detailed and helpful connections between Dunyach and Anglophone sf writers most will recognize: J. G. Ballard, Samuel Delaney, Ray Bradbury. An illuminating chapter on Andreas Eschbach by Vibeke Rützou Petersen situates the author’s work within the context of German sf’s struggle, in the first half of the twentieth century, to establish itself in the face of fascism and its aftermath. *The Carpet Makers* (1995), Eschbach’s debut novel set in a faraway galaxy, represents “a reimagining of our commodity-producing society where we produce ad infinitum for someone else’s benefit,” while the more recent *Lord of All Things* (2011) takes place on our world and explores the potentially disastrous repercussions of emergent technologies (57).

Other chapters focus on the work of Japanese writer Sakyo Komatsu (whose novel *Virus: The Day of Resurrection* anticipated Michael Crichton’s *The Andromeda Strain* by several years); Laurent McAllister, who is actually a “symbionym” of Yves Meynard and Jean-Louis Trudel, the French-Canadian authors of the space opera *Suprématie*; Johanna Sinisalo, whose award-winning sf writings are “part of the rule-breaking ‘Finnish Weird’ genre” (184); the Nigerian-American filmmaker Olatunde Osunsanmi (in a fascinating chapter on the implications of race and the “Transatlantic Apocalypse” of the slave trade in sf); and the late Strugatsky brothers, Arkady and Boris, whose Cold War-era works were sometimes banned in their native Russia. Knickerbocker has done a service with this collection of essays not only to fans of science fiction eager to explore new frontiers, but perhaps more importantly to academia at large, which

historically has been reluctant to embrace speculative fiction as a serious subject of scholarly study.

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