

## Books in Review

**Ace G. Pilkington,**

*Science Fiction and Futurism: Their Terms and Ideas*,  
McFarland & Company Inc., 2017, pb, 222 pp, \$35.00  
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Reviewed by **Scarlett Cunningham**

Published as part of Donald E. Palumbo and C.W. Sullivan III's series *Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Ace G. Pilkington's volume is the first reference volume to be included in the popular series that is known for critical essay collections and monographs. However, as David Brin puts it in the foreword, Pilkington's *Science Fiction and Futurism: Their Terms and Ideas* "is not another SF encyclopedia" (2). Instead, the volume's aim and scope are far broader. While certainly providing impressive coverage of science fiction issues related to history, genre, production, reception, and content, the project stakes a critical claim on the definition and boundaries of science fiction and futurism from the outset in the foreword, preface, and introduction.

Pilkington's near-comprehensive overview of the historically competing definitions of science fiction both summarizes and engages with the long-standing debate between those who locate science fiction's origins in the fantastic and those who identify the genre's roots in scientific progress. Pilkington's primary arguments regarding the genre—that science fiction is closely connected to science and that science fiction constitutes a specifically future-oriented genre—plant him squarely in the camp of those who view it as connected to scientific pursuits. In connecting science fiction to futurism, he takes this implicit connection to science a step further by stressing the genre's predictive function, which he describes as, at times, "startlingly prophetic" (18). Pilkington argues that science fiction serves as "an encouragement for the new uses of science in the world and for the changes that inevitably follow" (12).

This stance, introduced in the framing sections of the book, is sustained in the alphabetized entries of Parts One ("The Terms of Science and Its Fictions") and Two ("Genre Terms"). For example, Pilkington again reiterates his definition of science fiction as predictive in nature in his explanation of the term "Alter Ego," noting that E.T.A. Hoffman's fiction influenced Freud's formulations of psychic doubles and psychological projections in psychology, to the point that an active dialogue may have existed among science fiction writers and psychology professionals. The author does not limit this claim to psychology. Pilkington forges connections between the predictions of science fiction and the actual creation of inventions and theories throughout, citing, for instance, Martin Cooper's invention of the cell phone 20 years after Captain Kirk of the original *Star Trek* was seen with his communicator.

The copious literary, pop cultural, and historical examples cited to elucidate definitions of each term serve as the book's greatest strength. The length of entries varies, the shortest being the brief paragraph given for "He's Dead Jim" and the longest being the five pages devoted to "Deep Blue." At times, this variance can seem arbitrary and the more developed entries are the most satisfying for the reader.

In the case of "Deep Blue," the author uses his experiences as an educator to enliven his discussion of the infamous chess player Garry Kasparov's loss to the machine intelligence Deep Blue. Pilkington contextualizes the event by analyzing the bet between himself and his students on the outcome of

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the match, with the students' faith in Kasparov mirroring that of popular news outlets in the desire for a human victory. Pilkington won the bet against the students and insists that he continues to "side" with the machines of the future, predicting that they will be instrumental in positive developments of benefit to humanity, perhaps even ensuring human survival. However, in response to the "technophobes" who fear the takeover of humans by machine, Pilkington deems the artificial intelligence that Deep Blue paves the way for to be primarily dangerous to the human psyche, potentially affecting of how humans define and represent themselves as central to the proper functioning of the universe.

As an alphabetized encyclopedia of terms relating to science fiction and futurism, the text can be used in college courses and personal libraries as a reference. The second section, "Genre Terms," would

be especially useful for teaching an introductory level science fiction course or for creative writers aiming to discover or defy genre conventions. However, the volume is equally gratifying for science fiction aficionados of all stripes who wish to process current debates in the role of science fiction in popular culture, history, and the future-oriented project of human progression through science.