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Books in Review

Jörg Matthias Determann
Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World
I.B. Tauris, 2020, hb, 288 pp, $103.50 / $82.80,
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Reviewed by: **Joan Grandjean**

Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life is closely related to the growing interest that both readers and scholars have been exhibitng towards science fiction (SF) made in the "Global South"—i.e. non-European and American SF—as referenced by *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, edited by Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link (Cambridge University Press, 2018). Over the last few decades, numerous studies on Middle East/North African/South Asian (MENASA) and Muslim SF have been conducted internationally: *Qisas al-khayal al-'ilmi fi al-'adab al-'arabi: dirasa fi-ta'sil al-shakl wa-fanniyatih* by Muhammad Najib al-Talawi (Dar al-Mutanabbi, 1990), *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba,* written by Ada Barbaro (Carocci, 2013), Ian Campbell's *Arabic Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), and *La littérature d'anticipation dystopique et l'expression de la crise dans le monde occidental et arabe* by Kawther Ayed (Éditions universitaires européennes, 2020). It is also worth mentioning some doctoral research carried out on Arabic SF such as Ali Ahmad Yusri Fuhayd's (2010; Alexandria University, Egypt), as well as Khurshid Eqbal's on Urdu SF (2012; University of Burdwan, India).

Jörg Matthias Determann (Assistant Professor of History at Virginia Commonwealth University, Qatar) knows these references very well and quotes them regularly throughout his book. The aim of the science historian of the Middle East is not to write another history of SF literature, but to study how images and theories have been thought of in what he termed the "scientific imagination," echoing Gerard Holton's ideas about the place of science in our culture (1998). In addition to be the literary translation of the MENASA languages for SF (30), scientific imagination allows Determann "to refer to products as different as science fiction films, journal articles in astrobiology, and books about UFO[s]" (29), without omitting their historical contexts. By associating two fields—astrobiology and alien culture—the book's *leitmotiv* is to organize the major trends of these two subjects echoing each other in the different Muslim countries and their global community from the 19th to the 21st century.

Determann's book is composed of six chapters, including the introduction (chap. 1) and the conclusion (chap. 6). The chapters are case studies organized chronologically. It starts from the end of the 19th century with the emergence of scientific journals and popular magazines (chap. 2). From Western missionaries in the Ottoman Empire to Muslim "religious entrepreneurs," Determann explains how global astronomical exchanges shaped different discourses in astrobiology and its representation in popular culture. The author then compares this phenomenon to SF film productions made during the Cold War period, mainly in Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt (chap. 3). His analysis shows how they were mostly adaptations of global productions. However, by adapting SF Western culture (hero, romance, ray gun, UFO) with a vernacular aesthetic, such as "local religious and ethnic elements and occasional political commentary" (104), they build a film industry of their own, with its codes and its public. The author then investigates SF textual production in Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu, termed as "Islamic UFO religions" from the 1960s onwards, such as the Nation of Islam's agenda, the influence of Swiss author Erich von Däniken, and the emergence of ufologists in the Middle East and South Asia (ch. 4). The following

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chapter pays attention to fiction texts, including those written by Ibne Safi and Muhammad Zafar Iqbal from Bangladesh, Nihad Sharif from Egypt, and Eliza Vitri Handayani from Indonesia (chap. 5). These authors have become widely known and largely contributed to the SF genre in their respective countries. By creating heroes that entire nations could identify with, SF literature became part of the mainstream, generating new, more empowering types of postcolonial spaces. To tackle these issues from an individual and a collective perspective, the final chapter touches more broadly on imaginations in a variety of formats, such as research in exoplanets and its development in literature, visual art, and video games (chap. 6). The originality of the latter lies in the treatment of futurisms since the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, especially regarding the development of new technologies on Earth as well as in other planets in the Muslim world and its diaspora.

Over the past few years, Determann's research has highlighted the different networks of biological and evolutionary research in the Gulf states (I.B. Tauris, 2015), and the history of space science in the Arab world (I.B. Tauris, 2018). His study on astrobiology and its culture in the Muslim world adds another stone to the edifice of his research on the history of sciences in the MENASA region. Contrary to his previous books, which took a national and a regional perspective, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* adopts a religious perspective in order to separate his research from a governmental and a political standpoint. By using a religious and a cultural prism on the global Islamic community, he offers an unedited historiography of "scientific imagination." Readers who have read *Space, Science and the Arab World* will find an original opening in this latest book, including scientists, cultural productions, and research approached from another scientific domain, providing new reading grids. Determann's research methodology is interesting because he succeeds in combining the study of astrobiology and the Muslim world while mapping the cultural representations associated with it. Even if the only frustration felt was the desire to learn more about some of the works presented, this book is a valuable reference that draws up a corpus that has never been assembled before. It emphasizes how "scientific imagination" does not necessarily belong to the hard sciences. It is part of a whole. All in all, this book is a good work for both the historian of science and the historian of cultural productions, and offers interesting avenues to analyze how Muslim scientific imagination—from the scientist to the creator and the consumer, and vice versa—operates through history and its multifaceted geography.

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