

N25 Reflections: Science Fiction Predicts the Future

By Robert Silverberg

The moment I looked at the contents page of the November 1949 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* I knew something very strange was going on.

I was a sophomore in high school and I had been reading *Astounding* since the beginning of that year. It was a small, neat-looking magazine, unlike all the other science fiction magazines of the time, which were shaggy, uncouth-looking pulps. And the fiction in *Astounding* was a cut above what the other magazines were publishing, too—sleek, complex stories, some of them going right over my barely adolescent head, but obviously better material than the competitors were offering. I began buying *Astounding* every month, and I started picking up back numbers, three for a quarter, at Jackson's somewhat disreputable secondhand magazine shop in a grimy corner of Brooklyn.

What was strange about the contents page of that November 1949 issue was that the names of nearly all the stories were mysteriously familiar:

“... And Now You Don't,” by Isaac Asimov
“Gulf,” by Robert A. Heinlein
“What Dead Men Tell,” by Theodore Sturgeon
“Over the Top,” by Lester del Rey
“Final Command,” by A.E. van Vogt
“Finished,” by L. Sprague de Camp

I had seen them somewhere before, unlikely as that was. But where? And how? Had *Astounding* simply reprinted some earlier issue, one that I had recently picked up at Jackson's secondhand table? No, that was impossible. Magazines didn't reprint themselves, and *Astounding* in particular would hardly have done any such peculiar thing. I knew by then that *Astounding* had been the leading science fiction magazine for more than a decade under the editorship of John W. Campbell. (I had already bought a couple of hardcover science fiction anthologies and had noticed that nearly all the stories in them had originally been published in Campbell's magazine, a sure sign of how far beyond the other magazines it was.)

And then I remembered. About six months before, I had acquired a second-hand copy of the November 1948 *Astounding*, and bells began to ring. There was, in that issue, a letter from one Richard A. Hoen of Buffalo, New York, that began this way:

“I just finished reading my copy of the November issue and I felt compelled to write in and congratulate you. I have no doubts that this issue will rate tops for the year 1949.”

1949? Yes, that was what the man said, in a letter that had to have been written no later than the summer of 1948.

Hoen went on to praise the cover by Hubert Rogers, Campbell's regular cover artist in those years, and then to single out “We Hail” by Don A. Stuart as the best story in the issue. (“Stuart,” as was well known, was the pseudonym under which Campbell had written some extraordinary stories in the years just before he became editor of *Astounding*, but it was also well known that he had given up writing when taking on the editorial mantle.)

Next best, said Hoen, was “Gulf,” which he attributed to a pseudonym of Robert A. Heinlein, while at the same time noting that he was aware that the pseudonym belonged to Heinlein. Then came van Vogt's “Final Command,” del Rey's “Over the Top,” and . . . well, you get it. Hoen's spoofing letter had reviewed an imaginary issue of *Astounding* that was still one year in the future.

Campbell's editorial reply to the Hoen letter was, “Hm-m-m. He must be off on another time track. 'Fraid it's not THIS November '49.”

Campbell was often thought to be ponderous and humorless, but I can testify from personal experience that he did have a sense of humor, heavy-handed though it sometimes could be. And, I realized back there in 1949, he had begun to think about the Hoen letter and had come to think that it would be a really good gag to round up precisely the group of stories that Hoen had “reviewed” in 1948.

Of course, there was not going to be a Don A. Stuart story. He had taken over the editorship of *Astounding* in 1937, and the last significant Don A. Stuart story was the memorable “Who Goes There?”, published the following year. He had abandoned the writing of fiction after that, and he was not going to go back on that decision. (He had had a few stories published after that, but they all had been written long before.) But the other putative contributors to the Hoen issue—Heinlein, van Vogt, del Rey, Sturgeon, and de Camp—were all very much active and regular contributors to Campbell's magazine. (It is interesting to note that all of them except Sturgeon, who died too soon for the honor, were eventually named Grand Masters by the Science Fiction Writers of America when that award came into being.)

So Campbell got in touch with his five star writers, explained the joke, told them the names of the stories they would have to write, and they got to work. Sturgeon and del Rey would later be notorious for failing to work to deadline, but this time they did, and so did the other three—Heinlein even coming through with what would be a two-part serial. Rogers painted a cover, and the predicted November 1949 issue came into being right on schedule, minus the Don A. Stuart story but including, as a sort of bonus, the first installment of an Isaac Asimov novel (the fifth Grand Master of the issue).

Campbell presented the issue with a straight face—no coy little references to the year-old Hoen letter—but he did provide one little hint, in the form of an editorial entitled SCIENCE FICTION PROPHECY. It was a typical Campbell editorial of the period, one page—later they got much longer and quite verbose—and briefly discussed the various methods by which science fiction writers attempt to predict the future—for example, not simply saying that we will travel to the planets (still a fairly far-fetched notion in 1949), but speculating about how we will do it. The column ends, though, with one small sly reference to the November 1948 Richard Hoen letter:

“Generally, a desirable, practicably attainable idea, suggested in prophecy, has a chance of forcing itself into reality by its very existence.

“Like, for example, this very issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*.”

That was all. No nudge-nudge-nudge references to the Hoen letter. But the readers of *Astounding* were, by and large, a clever bunch, and many of them caught on immediately to Campbell's little stunt, though one grumbled in a letter in the March 1950 issue about the inclusion of a second serial installment, by Asimov, that Hoen had not predicted. (Campbell explained that Hoen had required both Heinlein's “Gulf” and a Rogers cover, but Heinlein had not finished “Gulf” in time for Rogers to illustrate it, whereas a Rogers cover for the Asimov novel was already on hand, so he was forced to the unusual expedient of running two serials in the same issue.)

One who was pleased by the November 1949 issue was Richard Hoen, then a twenty-year-old student at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York. As he told *Time* magazine, which ran a piece about the special issue, he had forgotten all about his letter until he received a copy of it, signed by Campbell and all the predicted writers. Not only that, he had been surprised upon opening the November 1949 issue that Campbell had been able to assemble so many notable writers for it, failing to recall his own letter until a more observant friend had brought the “remarkable coincidence” to his attention. He said, in a letter published in the March 1950 issue, “My copy of the November 1949 issue of *ASF* was even better than winning first prize in a quiz show. That autographed issue along with your letter are going to take their rightful place as my most treasured possessions as soon as I can find a safety-deposit vault to keep them in.” And he noted also, “My face was even redder for reading the last paragraph of your editorial and wondering what you meant.”

In the March 1950 issue, Campbell ran what he called The Analytical Laboratory, the reader popularity vote, and the November stories came out this way:

“Gulf,” Heinlein

“... And Now You Don't,” Asimov

“What Dead Men Tell,” Sturgeon

“Final Command,” van Vogt

“Over the Top,” del Rey

Hoen's own ratings of the issue, after having actually read his predicted stories, were published in his March 1950 letter. This time he awarded the Sturgeon first place, saying he had done it an injustice in his original letter, called the del Rey a close second, and placed the van Vogt third. He did not rate the two serials because he had read only their initial installments.

Richard Hoen died in 2010, just short of his eighty-second birthday, and his famous 1948 letter is apparently his only contribution to the history of science fiction. Campbell himself continued as editor of *Astounding* until his death in 1971. *Astounding* is still with us, the oldest science fiction magazine still published. Born in 1930 under the gaudy name of *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, it became just plain *Astounding Stories* a few years later. After Campbell became its editor he swiftly renamed it *Astounding Science Fiction*, rechristening it the more chaste *Analog Science Fact and Fiction* in 1960. (It is still going strong under the somewhat revised title of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* as the companion magazine to *Asimov's*.)

Campbell has been gone from the science fiction scene for more than fifty years now, and though he was once a towering figure in the field, he is remembered these days mainly for the blunt right-wing views he often expressed in his later editorials. But he had a playful side too—manifested, notably, by the light-hearted tongue-in-cheek fantasies that were typical of *Astounding's* now legendary sister magazine, *Unknown Worlds*, that he edited from 1939 to 1943. And so one should not be surprised by his predicted-issue caper, about which he said, in a reply to a reader's letter, “Rigging that November 1949 issue was fun!” m