“Faithful to thee, Terra, in our fashion”

Stories about science fiction, fandom and community

In this chapter I describe the development of science fiction as a community and the emergence of discourses which have shaped this development. In the first section I look at the articulation of these discourses as they are shaped in early science fiction magazines such as Amazing Stories and Science Wonder Stories. In the second section I examine the emergence of fandom out of the letter columns of these and other prozines. Finally I look at the self-conscious placement of science fiction as an active participant in the particular discourse of scientific knowledge.

1926: Gernsback and Amazing Stories

If Hugo Gernsback had stayed home, everything would have been different.

(Knight 1977: 1)

Science fiction as a community, and certainly science fiction as a publishing category, begins in the United States in 1926 with the first English language, science fiction magazine, Amazing Stories. The front cover of the first issue appears opposite. Frank Cioffi argues for Amazing’s importance:

[Starting with Hugo Gernsback’s publication of Amazing Stories in 1926, the science fiction pulps gradually assumed a position of importance in the pulp fiction market... What before had been isolated stories, curios, or, more often, original ways of approaching fairly traditional literary endeavors, became in the thirties a self-conscious and discrete genre (Cioffi 1982: 6).]

1 Amazing Stories is frequently referred to as simply Amazing. I will employ both usages throughout.
Samuel R. Delany also argues strongly for the 1920s and 1930s as the beginning of the science fiction field as opposed to much longer science fiction genealogies that have been proposed (Aldiss 1973; del Rey 1979). However, Delany broadens Cioffi's notion of 'genre' to include the practices of reading and writing texts as well as the texts themselves:

[by] "science fiction" I don't mean the 19th-century didactic fables that include not only Victorian utopian writing but also the scientific romances Verne and Wells wrote in response to the 19th-century information explosion. I don't mean the "fayned histories" and "fayned voyages" of the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, before bourgeois science separated themselves out from another set of discourses differently organized - discourses primarily concerned with instruction, moral or factual. I mean the first intrusion of the modern 20th-century scientific imagination into the very texture and rhetoric of a pre-existing fictive field in the pulp magazines of the '20s and '30s, which, taking advantage of that fiction's paratextual status, developed a new way of reading language - a new way of writing it to take advantage of this new way of reading, i.e., a practice of writing, a discourse (Delany 1984: 165).

This practice of reading and writing, this discourse, is beginning to be articulated in the editorials and letter columns as well as the stories of Amazing Stories, Air Wonder Stories and Science Wonder Stories in the 1920s and in what the Fancyclopedia refers to as the "big three" of the 1930s, Amazing Stories, Wonder Stories and Astounding Science Fiction (Speer 1944: 7). In the 1930s this discourse of science fiction flows into fanzines and conventions and fandom generally. In fact one effect of emphasising the importance of 1926 and Amazing as the site of the emergence of the new discourse of science fiction is to make fandom a part of the emerging field of science fiction. This is what many histories of the field do not do. For example, Aldiss and Wingrove in Trillion Year Spree: the History of Science Fiction, are explicit about writing a history of written texts - "our concern is to present SF as a literature, not as social activity" (Aldiss & Wingrove 1986: 346). My concern is to present science fiction as a "social activity," or rather a series of social activities.

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2 Astounding Science Fiction is also referred to as Astounding and ASF. I use the latter two forms throughout this chapter.

3 Aldiss and Wingrove are adamant about rejecting the pulp tradition:
   [to set science fiction down as something beginning with Hugo Gernsback's lurid magazines in the nineteen-twenties, as some histories have done, is a wretched error (Aldiss & Wingrove 1986: 142).]
Amazing Stories was published and edited by Hugo Gernsback. For many members of the early science fiction community Gernsback was the inventor of science fiction. Sam Moskowitz has called him "the Father of Science Fiction" (Moskowitz [1963] 1974: 225-242). The centrality of Hugo Gernsback is reflected in the amateur or fan awards for science fiction which are given in his honour.4 Officially they are called the Science Fiction Achievement Awards but they are universally known as the Hugos. They have been awarded every year at the World Science Fiction Convention since 1955 and are the oldest and best known science fiction awards (Clute & Nicholls 1993: 595-600).

Gernsback's science fiction magazine publishing and editing career lasted from 1926 until 1953. During that period Amazing was not the only prozine Gernsback published. In fact, Gernsback was Amazing's editor for only three years, losing control of it in 1929. He went on to found other science fiction magazines, such as Science Wonder Quarterly, Scientific Detective Monthly, Air Wonder Stories and Science Wonder Stories. In 1930 the last two were amalgamated to form Wonder Stories. Gernsback remained in control of Wonder Stories until 1936. His publishing endeavours after this date had far less influence on the field, and throughout the 1920s and 1930s the editorial work on these magazines was done by T. O'Conor Sloane, C. A. Brandt and Wilbur C. Whitehead as well as Gernsback (Clute and Nicholls 1993: 490-91; Tymn & Ashley 1985: 14-57). This means that Gernsback did not necessarily write all or the majority of the editorial comments during the periods in which he was the publisher and editor of magazines like Amazing Stories and Wonder Stories. However such is the mythic force of Gernsback, the founding father, that in the majority of the work I have read on this period he is spoken of as though he wrote every word of editorial comment in the magazines he published. 'Gernsback' has

4 Gernsback is not the only science fiction editor to be canonised. Science fiction has a history of treating many of its editors as being as important as writers. Indeed John W. Campbell, who edited Astounding/Analog from 1937 until 1972, is still probably the most famous editor within the science fiction field.
A NEW SORT OF MAGAZINE

By HUGO GERNSECK, F.R.S.

ANOTHER fiction magazine! At first thought it does seem impossible that there could be room for another fiction magazine in this country. The reader may well wonder, "Aren't there enough already, with the several hundreds now being published?" True. But this is not another "bottom line" magazine. AMAZING STORIES is a new kind of fiction magazine. It is entirely new—entirely different—something that has never been done before in this country. Therefore, AMAZING STORIES deserves your attention and interest.

There is the usual fiction magazine, the love story and the buy-a-copy type of magazine, the adventure type, and so on, but a magazine of "Scientific fiction" is a pioneer in its field in America. By "scientifiction" I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision. For many years stories of this nature were published in the sister magazines of AMAZING STORIES—"SCIENCE & INVENTION" and "RAO NOVA." But with the over increasing demands on us for this sort of story, and more of it, there was only one thing to do—publish a magazine in which the scientific action type of story will hold forth exclusively. Toward that end we have laid elaborate plans, sparing neither time nor money.

Edgar Allan Poe may well be called the father of "scientifiction." It was he who really originated the romance, cleverly weaving into and around the story, a scientific thread. Jules Verne, with his amazing romances, also cleverly interwoven with a scientific thread, came next. A little later came H. G. Wells, whose scientific romances, like those of his forerunners, have become famous and immortal.

It must be remembered that we live in an entirely new world. Two hundred years ago, stories of this kind were not possible. Science, through various branches of science, chemistry, electricity, astronomy, etc., enters so intimately into all our lives today, and we are so well versed in this science, that we have become rather prone to take new inventions and discoveries for granted. Our entire mode of living has changed with the present progress, and it is little wonder, therefore, that many fantastic situations—impossible 100 years ago—are brought about today.

It is in these situations that the new romancers find their great inspiration. Not only do these amazing tales make tremendously interesting reading—they are also always instructive. They supply knowledge that we might not otherwise obtain—and they supply it in a very palatable form. For the best of these modern writers of scienfic fiction have the knack of imparting knowledge, and even inspiration, without once making us aware that we are being taught.

And not only that! Poe, Verne, Wells, Ballamy, and many others have proved themselves real prophets. Prophecies made in many of their most amazing stories are being realized—and have been realized. Take the fantastic submarine of Jules Verne's most famous story, "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea." For instance. He predicted the present day submarine almost down to the last bolt! New inventions pictured for us in the scienfic fiction of today are not at all impossible of realization tomorrow. Many great science stories destined to be of an historical interest are still to be written, and AMAZING STORIES will be the medium through which such stories will come to you. Pessimism will point to them as having blazed a new trail, not only in literature and fiction, but in progress as well.

We who are publishing AMAZING STORIES realize the great responsibility of this undertaking, and will spare no energy in presenting to you, each month, the very best of this sort of literature there is to offer.

Exclusive arrangements have already been made with the copyright holders of the entire voluminous works of ALL of Jules Verne's immortal stories. Many of these stories are not known to the general American public yet. For the first time they will be within easy reach of every reader through AMAZING STORIES. A number of German, French and English stories of this kind by the best writers in their respective countries, have already been contracted for, and we hope very shortly to be able to enlarge the magazine and in that way present always more material to our readers.

How good this magazine will be in the future is up to you. Read AMAZING STORIES—get your friends to read it and then write us what you think of it. We will welcome constructive criticism—for only in this way will we know how to satisfy you.

The first Amazing Stories editorial, April 1926.
come to operate as synonymous with the magazines he founded, whether he was actively contributing to them or not. I will continue this practice allowing ‘Gernsback’ to stand for the editorial house voice.

*Amazing Stories* and the other early science fiction magazines did not come out of nowhere. There had been a long publishing history in the USA of general fiction magazines as well as science, technical and mechanical magazines which had published what Gernsback refers to as ‘scientifiction.’ Gernsback opens his first editorial for *Amazing*, which is reproduced opposite, by referring to the overwhelming number of fiction magazines at the time: “Another fiction magazine!” (Gernsback April 1926: 3). Pulps - as many of these magazines were called for the poor quality of their paper\(^5\) - were very popular. There were, among others, western, detective, crime, occult, sex, true confessions, as well as boys’ and girls’ adventure pulps (Ashley 1974; Tymn & Ashley 1985; Clute & Nicholls 1993).

Gernsback makes several claims for his new magazine in this first editorial which I now consider in some detail.\(^6\) Gernsback explicitly distinguishes his new magazine from these other magazines which he refers to as the “usual fiction magazine, the love story and the sex-appeal type of magazine, the adventure type and so on.” They are “usual” not “different” or “new”. The word “new” appears seven times as well as phrases like, “entirely different”, “never been done before in this country”, “a pioneer in its field”, “the new romancers”, “blazing a new trail” and “the first time.” Once the newness of *Amazing Stories* is established Gernsback then explains “scientifiction.” His ‘explanation’ underlines the indeterminacy and slipperiness of what Gernsback is trying to name. He

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\(^5\) *Amazing* was not, strictly speaking, a pulp, originally being published on better quality paper of thicker stock than the pulps proper (Ashley 1974: 22). As I have read through the early issues of the magazines they have not crumbled in my hands as some “true” pulps have, and are in amazingly (pun intended) good condition compared to others of the same period or even more recent times. The wartime pulps are in particularly poor condition because of paper restrictions.

\(^6\) All the quotes that follow are from this first editorial in the April 1926 vol. 1 no. 1 issue of *Amazing Stories*.

\(^7\) This nominal group “new romancers” sounds like the title of William Gibson’s influential 1984 novel *Neuromancer*.
slides between a variety of phrases as he tries to explicate just what his
“scientifiction” is and what this new magazine will be concerned with. The limits
of the discourse are not yet overdetermined. They are, in fact, being shaped as he
writes. According to this first editorial, “Scientifiction” consists of, “the Jules
Verne, H. G. Wells type of story”, “a charming romance intermingled with
scientific fact and prophetic vision”, “clever romance [with] a scientific thread”,
“amazing romances”, “scientifiction stories”, “stories of this kind”, “amazing
tales”, “science stories”, “this sort of literature” and “stories of this kind.”

Scientifiction it seems can be located in a body of pre-existing texts by
writers such as Poe, Verne and Wells. Gernsback argues that Poe “may well be
called the father of ‘scientifiction’”. However the choice of modality here, “may
well be called”, together with his use of the term “romance” to describe what Poe
wrote, undermines Gernsback’s own claim. He has Poe and Verne writing
“romances” but his unnamed “modern writers” produce only “scientifiction” and
“science stories”.

After providing his “scientifiction” with a lineage, Gernsback then points to
the shaping force of modernity: “we live in an entirely new world. Two hundred
years ago, stories of this kind were not possible.” And this new world has been
made possible by “science”. Gernsback makes “science” and “progress”
synonyms. Science and progress are directly responsible for “stories of this kind.”
because “[i]t is in these situations that the new romancers find their great
inspiration.”

Gernsback’s next claim is a critical one to the discourse of science fiction as
it was to develop in the next few decades. This “sort of literature” is not only
entertaining but also “instructive” “supplying knowledge that we might not
otherwise obtain...in a very palatable form”. This idea of science as being good
for us, and science fiction as the ideal way to instruct us in its merits, has been a
persistent one which I examine in more detail in the third section of this chapter,
“The Science in Science Fiction”.
For Gernsback, at the same time that the discourse of science and scientific knowledge enables "scientifiction", "scientifiction" also enables scientific change in the form of prophecy. An example of the latter is Verne's prediction of "the present day submarine almost down to the last bolt!" The use of the idea of prophecy and prophets shapes this new field of "scientifiction" as a quasi-religion of science fiction locked into a magical union with science proper. The knowledge that "these modern writers of scientifiction" impart thus becomes divinely inspired and is passed on to disciples in the form of the readership of Amazing. Gernsback is well aware of "the great responsibility of this undertaking." Its centrality is underlined in the motto which appears above each editorial: "Extravagant Fiction Today ---- Cold Fact Tomorrow."

The editorial ends with a call to its prospective readership to "get your friends to read it and then write us what you think of it." Many readers did and in their letters they took up many of the claims that Gernsback makes for "scientifiction" in his first editorial. All become part of the shaping of the discourses of science fiction and of fandom.

Many of the claims of this first editorial are taken up by Gernsback in subsequent editorial comment. For example his method of defining "scientifiction" by pointing to predecessors like Verne and Wells is one he returns to in later editorials. The word "scientifiction" might be new but its referent, Gernsback wants to say, is not. In the editorial, "The Lure of Scientifiction," Gernsback declares that:

Scientifiction is not a new thing on this planet. While Edgar Allan Poe probably was one of the first to conceive the idea of a scientific story, there are suspicions that there were other scientifiction authors before him. Perhaps they were not such outstanding figures in literature, and perhaps they did not write what we understand today as scientifiction at all. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), a great genius, while he was not really an author of scientifiction, nevertheless had enough prophetic vision to create a number of machines in his own mind that were only to materialise centuries later. He described a number of machines, seemingly fantastic in those days, which would have done credit to Jules Verne (Gernsback June 1926: 195).

However, his claims are tentative, "suspicions," modified with "perhaps" and "probably" and the statement that Da Vinci "was not really an author of scientifiction." This is an unstable genealogy but one that Gernsback attempts to
The contents page of the first issue of Amazing, April 1926.
shore up with his choice of stories and serialised novels in his new magazine. As is demonstrated by the contents page opposite, the first issue of Amazing consisted entirely of re-prints including a story each from the three fathers, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe, invoked by Gernsback in the first editorial.

While Gernsback maintained that "scientifiction" was "not a new thing on this planet" (Gernsback June 1926: 195) and had its antecedents in Poe, Verne and Wells, the newness of it was also part of the discourse. As early as 1930 one reader, Hegory Joywater of Brooklyn NY, writes that:

[science fiction is a new endeavour. Until the advent of Mr. Gernsback, it was strongly individualized, resting in such luminaries as Wells, Verne, Poe etc. But Mr. Gernsback knew that imagination was inherent in everyone; that suitable expression could be moulded by just a little coaxing or incentive. So from all America he culled the outposts of science fiction writers (Science Wonder Stories May 1930 vol. 1 no. 12: 1142-1143).

Gernsback responds:

It is true that Science Fiction is in its infancy, and that the publishers of this, and our sister magazines, spend hundreds, perhaps thousands of dollars in advertising for Science Fiction writers, advising them, often teaching them the finer points and sometimes the fundamentals of their craft.

But to a great extent we are aided by the readers of these magazines, amongst whom are many well-known scientists, and all of whom are above the average in mentality and intelligence (Science Wonder Stories May 1930 vol. 1 no. 12: 1143).

Sam Moskowitz notes that fans responded to this characterisation of the reader of science fiction:

Hugo Gernsback did something for the science fiction fan that had never been attempted before: he gave him self-respect. He preached that those who followed this sort of reading-matter avidly were not possessed of a queer taste, but actually represented a higher type of intellect (Moskowitz 1964: 4).

According to Malcolm Edwards in his entry on Gernsback in The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Gernsback "gave the genre a local habitation and a name" (Clute and Nicholls 1993: 491). Actually, Gernsback gave "the genre" two names: scientifiction and science fiction. In the first few issues of Amazing Gernsback's editorials refer to the material it would publish as "scientifiction". Gernsback admits to nursing a "secret hope that some day it [the word "scientifiction"] might appear in a standard dictionary" (Gernsback April
1928: 5). When he first aired the possibility of a fiction magazine devoted to this kind of fiction in 1923 he planned to call it just that - *Scientifiction*. In Gernsback’s editorial in the first issue of *Science Wonder Stories* dated June 1929, Gernsback refers to “science fiction”. Mike Ashley suggests that Gernsback coined “‘science fiction’” in an effort to disassociate himself further from his old magazine [*Amazing Stories*] and thus the term ‘scientifiction’ that he had used before” (Tymn & Ashley 1985: 746-747). The two terms ‘science fiction’ and ‘scientifiction’ remained interchangeable for many years with ‘science fiction’ eventually gaining the ascendancy.

The place Gernsback gave the genre was his magazines, like *Amazing Stories* and *Wonder Stories*. In the pages of *Amazing Stories* fans begin to discuss their longing for this particular kind of writing which was unnamed before *Amazing*. The existence of the magazine allowed them to speak of their desire as well as to fill it. In this way the discourse of science fiction formed around these magazines and their readers and the interactions between the two. Before the existence of *Amazing*, regular readers were forced to look for these stories in the

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8 In the September 1926 issue of *Amazing*, Gernsback discusses readers’ criticism of the magazine’s name:

> A number of letters have reached the Editor’s desk recently from enthusiastic readers who find fault with the name of the publication...

> These readers would greatly prefer us to use the title “Scientifiction” instead. The message that these letters seem to convey is that the name really does not do the magazine justice, and that many people get an erroneous impression as to the literary contents from this title.

> Several years ago, when I first conceived the idea of publishing a scientifiction magazine, a circular letter was sent to some 25,000 people, informing them that a new magazine by the name “Scientifiction” was shortly to be launched. The response was such that the idea was given up for two years. The plain truth is that the word “Scientifiction” while admittedly a good one, scares off many people who would otherwise read the magazine.

> ...After mature thought, the publishers decided that the name which is now used was after all the best one to influence the masses, because anything that smacks of science seems to be too “deep” for the average reader (September 1926 vol. 1 no. 6: 483).

9 This was not the first use of the term “science fiction”:

> “Science-fiction” (with a hyphen) had earlier been coined by William Wilson, a totally forgotten Victorian writer, in a book entitled *A Little Earnest Book Upon a Great Old Subject* (London: Darton, 1851). It would be over 120 years before anyone rediscovered that book, during which time Gernsback and *Wonder Stories* had popularized the term independently (Tymn & Ashley 1985: 747).

10 In the stories of science fiction, names and naming become a site of contention. This happens most especially from the 1950s onwards with the popular appropriation of the much hated, but fan-coined neologism, “sci-fi”. Prior to that, the terms “scientifiction” and its abbreviation “sf,” and “science fiction” and its abbreviation “sf,” were the terms most commonly used to refer to this kind of fiction.
popular all-fiction magazines like Argosy$^{11}$ and All-Story,$^{12}$ or in a more specialised fiction magazine like Weird Tales,$^{13}$ or in the fiction of Gernsback's earlier, primarily non-fiction, technical magazines Radio News, Science and Invention, as well as in published books such as those of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne. While these readers may have found stories that they could retrospectively label 'scientifiction' they did not have the discourse that enabled them to talk about these stories until the advent of Amazing Stories.

The place Gernsback provided grew into the set of complex relations comprising and constituting science fiction communities. Jack Williamson, who began writing and publishing science fiction in the late 1920s, talks about this process:

My own way into it [science fiction] wasn't opened until 1926, when Hugo Gernsback launched Amazing Stories, the first magazine that was all science fiction...A friend loaned me a copy of it that fall, but it was the next spring before I wrote for and received a free sample copy of my own. Money was scarce, but Jo [his sister] helped me pay for a subscription. It was a cheaply printed pulp with lurid but wonderful covers, the early issues filled with the reprinted classics of Poe and Verne and Wells and Merritt. Completely infatuated, I began dreaming up and writing my own (Williamson 1979: 10).

Frederik Pohl, science fiction writer, editor and New York Futurian,$^{14}$ expresses similar sentiments:

at some point in that year of 1930 I came across a magazine named Science Wonder Stories Quarterly, with a picture of a scaly green monster on the cover. I opened it up. The irremediable virus entered my veins (Pohl 1978: 1).

In the next section I examine the spread of this "irremediable virus" and the concurrent growth of science fiction communities.

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$^{11}$ Argosy which first appeared in 1896 was the first all-fiction pulp magazine (Tymn and Ashley Science Fiction, Fantasy and Weird Fiction Magazines 1985: 103).

$^{12}$ The first issue of All-Story appeared in 1905.

$^{13}$ The first issue of Weird Tales appeared in 1923. Its area of speciality was 'weird' fiction - a kind of precursor to the contemporary genre category of horror, but more general than that: "the stories were a mixture of sf...horror stories, sword and sorcery, exotic adventure, and anything else which its title might embrace" (Clute & Nicholls 1993: 1308-1309).

$^{14}$ The New York Futurians was a fan group which was active from 1938 until the mid forties. Many members of the Futurians went on to become editors, agents, publishers, writers and critics of science fiction or all of these. The final Appendix is a brief account of the Futurians.
THE LURE OF SCIENTIFICITY

by HUGO GERNERACK, P.R.S.

SCIENTIFICITY is not a new thing on this planet. While Edgar Allan Poe probably was one of the first to concoct the idea of a scientific story, there are suggestive that there were other scientific authors before him. Perhaps they were not such outstanding figures in literature, and perhaps they did not write what we understand today as scientificity at all. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), a great genius, while he was not really an author of scientificity, nevertheless had enough prophetic vision to create a number of machines in his own mind that were only materialized centuries later. He described a number of machines, seemingly fantastic in those days, which would have done credit to a John Verne.*

There may have been other scientific prophets, if not scientificity writers, before his time, but the past centuries are so bracketed, and there are so few manuscript of such literature in existence today, that we cannot really be sure who was the real inventor of scientificity.

In the seventeenth century there also lived a Franciscan monk, the amazing as well as famous Roger Bacon (1214-1292). He had a most astounding and prolific imagination, with which he foresew many of our present-day wonders. But as an author of scientificity, he had to be extremely careful, because in those days it was not "heuristic" to predict new and startling inventions. It was necessary to disguise the manuscript—use cypher—as a matter of fact, so that it has taken many great modern minds to unravel the astonishing scientific prophecies of Roger Bacon.*

The scientificity writer of today is somewhat more fortunate—but not so very much more. It is true that we do not behold him or throw him into a dungeon when he dares to blame forth with, what seems to us, an impossible tale, but in our inner minds we are just as infatuated today, as were the contemporaries of Roger Bacon. We have not learned much in the interval. Even such a comparatively tame invention as the submarine, which was predicted by John Verne, was greeted with derisive laughter, and he was denounced in many quarters. Still, only forty years after the prediction of the modern submarine by Verne, it has become a reality. However, there are not many written by our scientificity writers, frankly impossible today, that may not become a reality tomorrow. Frequently the author himself does not realize that his very fantastic yarn may come true in the future, and often he himself does not take his prediction seriously.

But the seriously-minded scientificity reader absorbs the knowledge contained in such stories with avidity, with the result that such stories prove an incentive in starting some one to work on a device or invention suggested by some author of scientificity.

One of our great surprises since we started publishing AMAZING STORIES is the tremendous amount of mail we receive from—shall we call them "Scientificity Fans"?—who seem to be pretty well orientated in this sort of literature. From the suggestions for reports that are coming in, these "fans" seem to have a hobby all their own of hunting up scientificity stories, not only in English, but in many other languages. There is not a day, now, that passes, but we get from a dozen to fifty suggestions as to stories of which, frankly, we have no record. Although we have a list of some 600 or 700 scientificity stories. Some of these fans are consistently visiting the book stores with the express purpose of buying new or old scientificity tales, and they even go to the trouble of advertising for some volume that has long ago gone out of print.

Scientificity, in other words furnishes a tremendous amount of scientific education and fires the reader's imagination more perhaps than anything else of which we know.
Science fiction communities

Oh, yes, letters, lots of letters, and probably they were the most interesting things in many of the magazines. Some fanzines, like the long-lasting West Coast Voices of the Imagi-Nation, printed nothing else.

(Pohl 1978: 33)

The most important location Amazing Stories provided for its readers was the appropriately named letter column, “Discussions.” The column was launched in the January 1927 issue with the following announcement:

In this department we shall discuss, every month, topics of interest to all our readers. The editors invite correspondence on all subjects directly or indirectly related to the stories appearing in this magazine. Only letters of interest to all of our readers will be published, and discussed by the editors (January 1927 vol 1, no 10: 970).

However, readers had begun to take up a visible space in the magazine as early as the second issue when Gernsback discusses letters from readers in his editorial headed “Thank You!”:

The first issue of Amazing Stories has been on the newsstands only about a week, as we go to press with this, the second issue of the magazine; yet, even during this short time, we have been deluged with an avalanche of letters of approval and constructive criticism from practically every section of the country (Gernsback May 1926: 99).

In the third issue Gernsback uses the word “fan” to refer to the passionate readers of his magazine. The editorial is reproduced opposite. This is the first appearance of the word referring to science fiction readers.

These fans who had their letters published in Amazing Stories were becoming part of the field of science fiction. Once part of the field they were part of the process of constituting that field. One instance of this is the search for antecedents that Gernsback refers to. Finding “old scientifiction tales” is part of constructing a history of scientifiction.

In the sixth issue Gernsback has this to say about Amazing’s readership.

We knew that once we could make a new reader pick up Amazing Stories and read only one story, our cause was won with that reader, and this is indeed what happened. Although the magazine is not as yet six months old, we are already printing 100,000 copies per month, and it also seems that whenever we get a new reader we keep him. A totally unforeseen result of the name, strange to say, was that a great many women are already reading the new magazine. This is most encouraging. We know that they must have picked up Amazing Stories out of curiosity more than anything else, and found it to their liking, and we are certain that if the name of the magazine had been “Scientifiction”
they would not have been attracted to it at a newsstand (Gernsback September 1926: 483).

This extract is typical of the editorials, the authoritative tone, the emphasis on the literature being discussed as more than mere entertainment but as serious, important and educational. Gernsback views his readers as disciples and continues the evangelical tenor of the first editorial when he writes of “capturing” readers. He shows gratitude for even the most ‘unlikely’ converts, “strange to say...a great many women are...reading the new magazine”.

This reference to women reading *Amazing* is not the only evidence of a female readership. Gernsback quotes readers, such as Michael H. Kay of Brooklyn NY, who share their magazine with daughters and wives:

[you will generally find that when one has read your magazine he will become so enthusiastic, so elated over his discovery, that he will deem it a pleasure to extol its virtues to his friends. Even now my wife is anxiously waiting for me to finish this first issue, so that she may read it herself (Gernsback May 1926: 99).

Women were part of *Amazing* from the first issue, though their participation was mainly in the margins. On the cover of the very first issue, reproduced at the beginning of this chapter, there are figures clad in fur and skating, some of whom appear to be women. This is a tenuous presence, just a possibility, and all the figures are overwhelmed by the looming presence of the huge planet, Saturn, and by the huge *Amazing Stories* logo.

Less tenuously there were also letters by women published in “Discussions”. These are clearly signalled as anomalies with titles such as the following, “A Kind Letter from a Lady Friend and Reader,” by Mrs. H. O. De Hart of Anderson, Indiana who ends her letter:

Well, I’ve written Mr. Wastebasket a rather lengthy letter this time, but I do not really expect you to clutter up your columns with it. I am only a comparatively uneducated young (is twenty-six young? Thank you!) wife and mother of two babies, so about the only chance I get to travel beyond the four walls of my home is when I pick up your magazine (*Amazing Stories* June 1928 vol. 3 no. 3: 277).

The editorial response focuses on the fact that this “very interesting letter is from a member of the fair sex” (*Amazing Stories* June 1928 vol. 3 no. 3: 277). Marking the letter in this way makes it appear that it is “interesting” because it is by a
woman and undermines Gernsback’s earlier claim that there are “a great many women” readers of the magazine.

Mrs L. Silverberg of Augusta, Georgia, states flatly that she thought she was the only woman reading *Amazing*. Again her letter is signalled as being from one of “the fair sex” with the heading, “A Lady Reader’s Criticisms”:

It is the letter of Mrs. H. O. De Hart in the June issue of your publication that is the cause of my writing my little say. For more than a year I have been a reader of this magazine, and this is the first time I have seen a letter from a woman reader. In fact I was somewhat surprised as I had believed that I was the only feminine reader of your publication. However, it is with pleasure that I note that another of my sex is interested in science fiction (*Amazing Stories* October 1928 vol. 3 no. 7: 667).

The editorial response is almost identical to that which Mrs. De Hart received:

We are very glad to hear from one of the fair sex and would be glad if more of the weaker (?) sex were contributors to our Discussions Column (*Amazing Stories* October 1928 vol. 3 no. 7: 667).

A further letter comes from Mrs. Lovina S. Johnson of Lysite, Wyoming:

In the October issue of *AMAZING STORIES*, I noticed that a woman reader is heard from. I was glad to know that there are other women readers of my favorite magazine, than myself. Glad, also, to hear her reactions to the magazine (*Amazing Stories* March 1929 vol. 3 no. 12: 1140).

The editorial response reassures her that she is “not the only member of the fair (and voting) sex who writes us nice letters and contributes to our discussion columns” (*Amazing Stories* March 1929 vol. 3 no. 12: 1140).

In a similar vein is a letter in the January 1930, *Science Wonder Stories*, one of Hugo Gernsback’s new magazines, after he lost control of *Amazing*. The letter is titled “No Discrimination Against Women.” Mrs. Verna Pullen of Lincoln, Nebraska writes:

I have noticed that you print more letters written by men than by women, so I suppose this won’t get in. Nevertheless, I wished to let you know how much I enjoyed your new magazine (*Science Wonder Stories* January 1930 vol. 1. no. 8: 765).

Gernsback is horrified:

As you see, we are printing your letter. We have no discrimination against women. Perish the thought - we want them!15 As a matter of fact, there are almost as many women

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15 I'm not sure that the Gernsback editorial voice was capable of irony.
THE READER SPEAKS
(Continued from page 6)

touch with someone who can construct a good story, but lacks the story material. We could compose a story back and forth through the mails and maybe come up with something. I can supply outlined plots on everything from humor and murder to war and rockets.

Do you think anyone would care to try it? I have read that some people use mechanical gadgets to obtain plots. I have a drawer full.

Any help you care to give to this matter will be greatly appreciated.—043 Robinson Court, Texarkana, Texas

Your problem is now a world-wide problem. Writers everywhere are hereby invited to worry with you or to collaborate with you as they may choose. Just one of the services supplied as part of the entrance fee by this incredible column.

I REMEMBER MAMA
by Lula B. Stewart

Dear Sam: Way back then, circa 1928, I read a science-fiction mag, and was infected. This chronic derangement might have culminated in the virulent stage known as acid-fandom at a very early date had not fate intervened to save me. While I was madly advocating over my first epistle— it had to be both significant and stimulating—another disaster occurred.

That dwelling undoubtedly saved my hide, but, Gosh! what happened to the other poor maidens? It shouldn't be done to a diptych! I can still hear the primitive screams of the mass-mailing school down the corridors of time. The rage of that mob was something awful to behold. Not only was I witness to that early kill, but covered in my cape as other few were permitted to run the gauntlet. (You male fans who wait patiently, "I can't see why the gals are so high-spirited—"

I see many of these early reader columns. G'wan, I dare ya.) Yes, I listened, shivered, and hastily swallowed back all those witless and criticisms that are the birthright of a sci fan. For, the First Law is SURVIVAL! Now, at last, in the dawn of a new era, I dare speak forth, and claim my heritage of epoq. In the interim I have entered wedlock, produced two offspring, and survived the arrows of outrageous fortune soaring to each other. This Spartan training welded a will of iron, and hammered out a hide impervious to attack. So, at last, backed by a formidable phalanx of fandom, I dare speak up, brave liar that I am.

Purify me one last look at the long, thin line of both gems and gristles that have flowed from the pens of our splendid staff authors through the years, and afforded hours of incomparable reading pleasure. There was Leigh Brackett's DANCING GIEL OF GANYMEDE, wonderful, memory-stirring mood piece—and so many whose titles are lost in the mist of time.

Oh, to think of all the praise I might have meted out—and didn't! Ah, to remember the unmuttered howls of protest (just kissing my hand, boy—stop thanking me). "Tk true, the saddest words of tongue, or pen."

(A laugh, please Sammy, that I may wipe the dewy drop from these dim old orbs—after you, dear boy, after you.)

Ah, well, frustrations gone. I, too, am a genuine, true carol, too-tap, and contributor to that great, new, all-female Fanzine (who's trying to sneak it in a plug?). Once fandom appeared over the far horizon as a strange, uncharted land, but all that is changed, and I feel as at home. This familiarity to the trend the moment I learned, with unblushing glee, that fandom, like all the rest of good old aberrated humanity, has its rigid social structure, too—a pyramid of subtle gradations that culminate in that awesome capstone, the mighty BNF (Big Name Fan, to you ignorant uninitiates).

Remember the Big Name back in kindergarten—the kid who always bit and hit the firstest with the mostest? Or, the Jackson in high school who sported the loud attire, and louder larynx? Well, the older and wiser adults use no such trifling yardstick in electing our Big Nos—ah, Nancy—a BN of the robotics is judged strictly by the intr-

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THRILLING WONDER STORIES

(acy of his TV antenna these days)

So, here's to fandom's BNF—be it him or her (especially if her name ends in Bradley):

I've never captured a BNF (pronounced B-nuff) And if I did, I'd lose one.

They get excited, too.

That's still true, I'd rather see him be one!

You may not print this one, Sam, you maddled old misnomer, but just the same, you'll be mine one day. This feudin', insolent' fan-fan is mighty heady stuff for us old timers.—G.U. Omond, N. D. #7, Harmony, Penna.

This fascinating bit of tribal history has touched us upon a tender spot—one of the few tender spots we have left. The days when the occasional femulanowered in fear of the wolf pack are only part of our wistful folklore. Now the once lordly male takes to cover as the Amazon side. And drunk with power hampered out the deadly cacophony with which the female has, from time immemorial, subdued the surly male. Ah, yes, power corrupts and hell hath no fury like a woman scorned and—by the way, have you dug slit trenches and rigged up the barbed wire around your post office yet?

Letter from Lula B. Stewart, Thrilling Wonder Stories, August 1953, p. 133.
among our readers as there are men. The only difference is that our male readers usually bring up some point of scientific interest, while the ladies content themselves with general expression of approval or disapproval. We are always glad to hear from our feminine readers (Science Wonder Stories January 1930 vol. 1. no. 8: 765).

Another difference is that, if the numbers are nearly equal as Gernsback claims, women still had far fewer letters published than the male readers. Certainly the women who became actively involved with fandom were far fewer than the men. This could perhaps have been because, as Gernsback implies, women were less interested in science and therefore in science fiction than men, or it could be because their letters were less frequently published. At least one reader of the period thinks there are other reasons. The letter which appears opposite gives a history of one woman fan’s involvement with fandom. The letter is from Lula B. Stewart of Harmony, Pennsylvania (Thrilling Wonder Stories August 1953: 133). Stewart here figures the letters columns of the prozines as a battlefield. Across this field the two sexes engaged in an uneven battle in which the women were outgunned until the 1950s. Her experience of a fandom where women are not equal and are only accepted on sufferance is echoed by Robin White’s much later “Are Femme Fans Human?” where a femme fan’s humanity depends on how male fans “accept her and treat her” (White 1968: 53). I examine the letter columns as the battlefield for the war of the sexes in more detail in chapter five.

Lula Stewart begins her letter by talking about her “infection” with science fiction. The infection is contracted through reading a science fiction magazine (in 1928 this could only have been Amazing Stories). Stewart only avoided entering “the virulent stage” by not writing into Amazing. Letters into prozines were the beginnings of fandom because readers’ addresses were printed with their letters and soon many of them started corresponding and meeting. By 1929 science fiction clubs began to be organised and by the late thirties science fiction conventions were beginning to be held.

These kinds of activities and, indeed, fandom itself, bear out the words of de Certeau:

But whereas the scientific apparatus (ours) is led to share the illusion of the powers it necessarily supports, that is, to assume that the masses are transformed by the conquests
and victories of expansionist production, it is always good to remind ourselves that we
mustn’t take people for fools (de Certeau 1984: 176)

Fans are not passive consumers. Many of the letters I read in prozines and
fanzines constitute reading as creation, compulsion, consumption, and belonging.
Fandom begins with the act of reading. It was, and is, at once an articulation of a
passionate involvement with texts, as well as being that passionate involvement.
The letters to Amazing Stories and other science fiction magazines like
Astounding, whose first issue appeared in 1930, give flesh to de Certeau’s
observation.

Fandom is a shifting set of relationships. The relationship to consumption of
the science fiction reader who becomes a fan who becomes a professional and who
frequently remains all three is exceptionally complicated. Marion Zimmer
Bradley discusses her own involvement with the field thus:

Letters from the readers. Pages and pages of intelligent discussions of the stories, the
authors, the science in the stories...and a column of reviews of fanzines. Little magazines
published by readers, fans in my new language...Within a week I had written off for a
dozens of the little magazines, within six months I had started my own, and was writing
voluminously to fans all over the United States. My pocket money went for magazines -
yes, and sometimes my lunch money too. I took the train to New York City, all by myself
on the spur of the moment, called up a fan I’d exchanged letters with, and he took me to
a conference where a hundred fans sat in a room and listened to a group of scientists talk
about the possibility of man on the Moon before the year 2000 A.D (Bradley 1977-78: 13).

Marion Zimmer Bradley became an extremely successful science fiction and
fantasy writer. Until very recently the story of a comfortable transition from
fandom to a professional engagement with science fiction has been a dominant
one. So much so that there is a slight tone of annoyance when someone does not
follow this transition. For example, long time active fan, Jeffrey Smith in his
interview with James Tiptree, Jr. in his fanzine Phantasmicon also subscribes to
this notion of an evolution from fan to pro:

[n]ot only do you have a magical sf place, but you find yourself in one of the upper
echelons. You are a respected writer...You never even spent your apprenticeship as a fan,
but as a non-fan reader. It smacks of fantasy, Tiptree (Smith 1971: 12).

By skipping fandom altogether Tiptree is going against what was, in 1971, still
the accepted story of how an sf writer emerges. The overwhelming impression
that I received from reading accounts by pros in fanzines and prozines and books
Dear Mr. Campbell:

I picked up the latest issue of Astounding today, and was immediately elated. Your cover, to put it mildly, is swell. Let's have more from H. L. Brinsen; he has proved himself an accomplished artist from the start. It's easily the best cover I've seen in months.

Maybe I'm wrong, or else the magazine I bought was a freak, but I'm comparing this February issue with the others in my complete collection. I find that it is about one fourth of an inch thinner. Am I right? Well, whether it stays that way or not, it suits me to a T. The magazine, in the past twelve months, has grown stronger, more compact, and has developed its personality wonderfully, and it has a personality all its own.

Making the magazine a little smaller makes it easier to handle and better to look upon. Of all the pulp magazines on the stands, Astounding looks more like a newspaper and reads more like one than half of the slicks do. No matter what kind of paper you print a magazine on, it still develops a slick personality if given the right stories to grow upon, and that's what you've done.

Glancing through the magazine, I've read such names as Williamson, Seaborn, and Gahan from the old days, and then an author with a good descriptive sense recently came to science-fiction, Fred Ashcraft. I've never read a story about the "Lorelei of Space," and here is a new writer that I enjoyed by the name of Wiler. This story struck a chord with me.

Paul Ernst should write many more science-fiction stories than he does. His visas are all too infrequent, judging by his superb "Nothing Happens on the Moon." Some of his descriptive scenes struck me very nicely to my "writer's mind." (Yes, I'm a writer myself—amateur, so far: give me time—you'll get a barrage of manuscripts before long.)

Where in tuck was bold this issue? I liked his illustrations for the January issue, but he's not up this time. However, to pods! Get rid of those blinder cartoons that hang onto paper—more of Wiler—less of blinder, pat-tea.

Thanks a million for putting out Unknown. I can hardly wait to read it. It's what many of us have been waiting for. (Incidentally, I've been on a fantasy kick for about two months, and have all read my sister's book, which I'm very much enjoying, and I'm hoping it will be out soon.)

Good luck with the new magazine. I hope it is as good as you've made Astounding in one year, then it will be wonderful—Ray Douglas Bradbury. Science Fiction League, Los Angeles, 1941 South Manhattan Place, Los Angeles, California.

Letter from Ray Bradbury, Astounding Science Fiction April 1939, p. 159.
of the period was of an almost effortless slide from fan to pro. This impression supports Smith's idea that fandom is a kind of professional apprenticeship, an apprenticeship which Tiptree failed to serve. At the same time 'fan' and 'pro' are placed in an oppositional relationship, as characterised by the well-known term 'filthy pro' with its implication that to become a pro is to abandon and betray fandom.

Evidence of sf professionals serving their apprenticeships in fandom is thick in the professional science fiction magazines of the period. There are letters from people who went on to become well-known science fiction practitioners. I read letters by Isaac Asimov from the late 1930s which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. I found letters from Ray Bradbury, including one reproduced opposite. I read letters by Damon Knight (Astounding July 1939); Harlan Ellison (Thrilling Wonder Stories June 1952) and an extremely long letter from George Turner in which he says he has been reading 'sf' since he was nine years old (Astounding January 1940: 155-57). In the late 1940s and early 1950s there is a letter from Marion Zimmer (who became Marion Zimmer Bradley) in almost every issue of Startling Stories. In the December 1952 issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories she refers to herself as a BNF (big name fan) and a veteran of six years (December 1952: 130). There are many other examples of letters from fans who went on to be professionally engaged in science fiction as writers and editors and publishers. Many continued to write to science fiction magazines and fanzines even after they had become 'filthy pros.'

In the 1930s and 1940s, collecting professional science fiction magazines and writing in to their letters columns was an essential part of being a fan. The following examples articulate the importance for fandom of these letters to the editors. The first comes from Langley Searles of NYC, NY:

I got to thinking the other day. I do little correspondence with fellow fans, but almost without exception - when I do, that is - the fans mention in their reminiscences something like this: "Say, remember the reader's columns in the old Wonder?" or: "Now take the old Wonder Stories, they had a reader's department to be proud of!" (Startling Stories January 1940: 110).
By the late sixties some readers were nostalgic for the reader’s columns of the 1940s. Edward M. Osachie of Vancouver, Canada asks that an entire issue of the magazine be devoted to letters:

Can you see the idea? Well, if not, let’s have some fun like that in the old Thrilling Wonder and Startling Stories. They had grand old letter departments (If November 1969: 156).

The importance of the letter columns for the formation of science fiction fandom became more apparent as fandom grew. By 1952 letters like the following example by Marion Mallinger of Pittsburgh, Pa. appear regularly. Mallinger is explicit about the recruitist potential for fandom of the letters column:

The letter department of your magazine is good. I may go so far as to say as good as some of the stories. Instead of finding the stories rehashed, I find good, interesting letters that are worth reading. This is a good drawing card to people who have only now started reading S.F. If they find letters that talk about previous stories (this was good, that was bad) they lose interest and skip the section. Here maybe someone who would have turned into an active fan is lost. But in writing letters to the editor that actually discuss interesting questions a lot of people get pleasantly excited, talk about it and so spread the growth of S.F. a little faster (Thrilling Wonder Stories October 1952: 134).

At the same time, however, many fans were ceasing to read prozines altogether. The Fancyclopedia argues that the relationship between fan and the prozines is a changing one:

Quite a few long-time fans have at times completely given up reading the pros thru disgust, or preoccupation with fan and other activities. The course of fan history has varied form close to sileonnexion with the pros, and the wish has often been expressed that we could get along without the pros as a recruiting medium. This is principally a fansationalistic manifestation, however; the average stefnist eats up good sfantasy, has an exaggerated idea of its literary merit, and will leap to defend it against detractors (Speer 1944: 68-9).16

Another place that was created to accommodate fandom was the convention. Conventions were and are places where the communities of sf fans can make themselves visible. In convention spaces the fan’s sense of being one of many ceases to be imaginary and becomes actual. Conventions are a visible manifestation of what is, for the most part, a virtual community which stays in

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16 All spelling is as it appears in the Fancyclopedia.
touch via written texts although with the advent of the internet that communication is substantially faster.

Ten years after the appearance of Amazing the first convention was held. Joe Siclari writes that the "so-called" first sf convention was held on the 22nd of October 1936 when some New York fans, including Frederik Pohl and John Michel, caught the train to meet with some Philadelphia fans (Siclari 1981: 91-2).17 The entry on conventions in The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction by Peter Roberts and Rob Hansen argues that "the first formally planned sf convention took place in Leeds, UK, in 1937" (Clute and Nicholls 1993: 261). In 1939 the first WorldCon was held in New York in conjunction with the World's Fair. The WorldCon is now the biggest science fiction convention in the world and is held annually.

The convention swiftly became very important in the fan world - so important that by the fifties there were fans who were exclusively interested in conventions. By 1940 the form of the science fiction convention was more or less set:

One of the principal features of sf fandom, conventions are usually weekend gatherings of fans and authors, frequently with a program of sf discussion and events. In fan language conventions are usually referred to as cons. They are informal not professionally organised, and with no delegated attendants or, usually, paid speakers. Typical activities include talks, auctions, films, panel discussions, masquerades and banquets (Clute and Nicholls 1993: 261).

del Rey describes the WorldCons thus:

auction, banquet, masquerade - and numerous speeches from fans and professional...More than any other activity, the worldcons gave a feeling of unity and common goal to all the elements of the world of science fiction (del Rey 1979: 147-148).

Or, as was said on many occasions at WisCon 20 held in May 1996: "a coming together of the tribe". The tribe being on that occasion not just del Rey's "world of science fiction" but the world of feminist science fiction.

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17 For more information about this debate see Robert Hansen's The Story So Far...A Brief History of British Fandom 1931-1987 (Hansen 1987: 4-5 & 48-50).
The science in science fiction

Fans are Slans! (Fan slogan)

Science was simply an accumulation of facts, and the deductions of conclusions from those facts. And who better could bring divine order from intricate reality than the mighty-brained, full-grown, mature slan?

(van Vogt 1953: 95)

As I argued in chapter one, the notion of ‘science’ has always been one of the constraints within which science fiction texts are produced. Arguments about the relationship between science, science fiction and readers and fans were an important part of the discourse. The notion of ‘science’ itself was a contested issue, as I discuss later in this section. The June 1926 editorial of Amazing Stories ends with the following paragraph:

Scientifiction, in other words, furnishes a tremendous amount of scientific education and fires the reader’s imagination more perhaps than anything else of which we know (Gernsback June: 195).

The only reason for an obsession with scientifiction was to educate yourself scientifically and perhaps become a scientist. Andrew Ross argues that “in Gernsback’s view, sf was more a social than a literary movement” (Ross 1991: 103). Gernsback was particularly keen to proselytise to the young:

if we can make the youngsters think, we feel that we are accomplishing our mission, and that the future of the magazine, and, to a degree, the future of progress through the younger generation, is in excellent hands. Once upon a time the youngsters read Indian stories, which were not at all educational; nowadays it is scientifiction, which is an education in itself. All we can say therefore is “More power to the young men, and let’s have more of them” (Gernsback October 1927: 625).

Amazing’s rhetoric was about progress and improving the world which was inextricably linked with science. This was a religious project as Gernsback makes clear when he refers to “our mission”. Fandom, growing out of its pages, would create a space in which “fans” could find others who were interested in fictional representations of scientific inquiry and endeavour. Gernsback’s pronouncements on the subject begin in the first issue of Amazing where he stresses the connection between this kind of fiction and science:
Not only do these amazing tales make tremendously interesting reading - they are also always instructive. They supply knowledge that we might not otherwise obtain - and they supply it in a very palatable form. For the best of these modern writers of scientifiction have the knack of imparting knowledge, and even inspiration, without once making us aware that we are being taught (Gernsback April 1926: 3).

Another example:

There are few things written by our scientifiction writers, frankly impossible today, that may not become a reality tomorrow. Frequently the author himself does not realize that his very fantastic yarn may come true in the future, and often he, himself, does not take his prediction seriously.

But the seriously-minded scientifiction reader absorbs the knowledge contained in such stories with avidity, with the result that such stories prove an incentive in starting someone to work on a device or invention suggested by some author of scientifiction (Gernsback June 1926: 195).

Gernsback and his magazine have been frequently identified with an idealist, naive science worship and certainly he published many letters that supported his views of science and reinforced his vision of science fiction as a recruiting tool for the scientists of tomorrow. Ted Mason of Los Angeles, California writes that the "science in most of the stories is an inspiration to me in my studies in electrical engineering" (Science Wonder Stories October 1929 vol. 1 no. 5: 467). Gernsback responds:

We are glad to get this letter from a student, and to learn the value to him of the science contained in our stories. He will find that the stories are written by men who are not only well-trained in science but who have a mastery of it. The instinctive understanding of scientific principles is necessary to a writer of science fiction. For his lack of understanding becomes painfully apparent to our critical readers (Science Wonder Stories October 1929 vol. 1 no. 5: 467).

Indeed the bulk of letters received are from readers pointing out the improbability of the science in a given story. The accuracy of the science in a story is, in these debates, the sole criterion for whether it is a good story or not. A large part of these readers' pleasure in science fiction is in debating the plausibility of the stories with other readers.

The obsession with scientific 'accuracy' is spoofed by John Wasso, Jr. of Pen Argyl, Pa. who threatens that

[o]ne of these days I'm going to write a yarn so chockful of deliberate errors, flaws, contradictions and impossible science that it will drive all you error-mad hunters NUTS!!! (Astounding Science Fiction October 1940: 152).
There were also many letters published that echoed Gernsback’s recruitist hopes for science fiction. The following letter from Earl B. Brown of Amesbury, Massachusetts, is typical:

Science is good for everyone. If everyone knows a little science, the world will be better off, and will advance more quickly. But, if everyone delved a little into science, something else will happen. They will begin to think. My high school chemistry professor, when I first began that course, said to me, and to the class, “You are taking chemistry to learn how to think.” I have never forgotten that. And I have found that he was right. There are too few people in this world who do a little thinking (Amazing Stories February 1927: 1078).

The linking of science and progress and the strong belief in the onward upward impulse into a glorious future is often imputed to the early fans of science fiction - and indeed to many current fans. Henry Jenkins in his work on MIT Star Trek fans argues that they are part of “a long tradition of science fiction fans acting as arbiters of the scientific validity of popular fictions” (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995: 217). This tradition began with Amazing Stories.

There are not many letters which discuss what science fiction or scientifiction is in the early years of pulp science fiction magazines in the 1920s and 1930s. Everyone knew what ‘it’ was - it had something to do with ‘science’ - but everyone seemed to have a different notion of what constituted ‘science’. What does and does not belong to the universe of science fiction and who has the rights to make these decisions? What science fiction is, the genre, is taken for granted in the letters, but the texts, the instances of this genre, are not. So that the attempts at setting limits to the field are through a series of test cases about which there is not always agreement. By the 1950s, however, definitions of science are expanding and a letter such as the following from Virginia Winchester of Grimsby, Ontario is much more common. She asks,

[has any criterion been established to determine if a story is ‘Science Fiction’? What takes a story out of the pure fantasy category and gives it the title “science”? Science embraces many fields: physiology, archeology, history, crime detection etc. that this very diversity prompts this question (Thrilling Wonder Stories August 1952: 128).

In the 1930s and 1940s there were raging arguments among some members of fandom about the nature of science and progress and what kind of future was being and should be shaped. The connections between science, technology and
progress were not and are not unproblematic ones. The proponents of science and technology as the way of remaking the future were of a variety of political shades. Within fandom there were anarchists, communists and fascists who all subscribed to the idea of science as humanity’s saviour. One of these debates is summed up in this entry from the *Fancyclopedia*:

Gernsback delusion - (Michelists)\(^\text{18}\) - The purpose, imputed to Gerns, of making scientifiction fans into scientists by putting accurate scientific information into sf stories - sugarcoating it. This was proved wrong, said the Michelists, by the failure of the ISA,\(^\text{19}\) the purpose of science-fiction should be to make active idealists. Some fans who were working in or studying science replied that they believed s-f had stimulated their interest in science a great deal. Another reply was that Uncle Hugo never expected his readers to turn scientist wholesale, but that reading s-f puts the scientifictionist well ahead of the average man in understanding science (Speer 1944: 42-3).

The debates within fandom among the mostly very young and very male membership were part of debates taking part in the wider community. Andrew Ross argues in his chapter “Getting Out of the Gernsback Continuum” that

many of its [early pulp fiction’s] salient features, often considered to be ‘naïve’, were linked to central elements of progressive thought in the first three decades of this century (Ross 1991: 102).

Ross argues that “the national cults of science, engineering, and invention, [and]...technocracy’s role in the social thought of the day” were crucial to “North American SF genre formation” (Ross 1991: 103). Without going into Ross’ arguments in detail, his attempt to historicize the emergence of science fiction as a socially located genre in the USA stands in stark contrast to accounts, like that of Aldiss and Wingrove’s *Trillion Year Spree* (1986), which construct the genre as primarily a collection of books having almost no interaction with the social context in which they were produced.

\(^\text{18}\) The Michelists, named after John Michel, were all members of the Futurians who espoused John Michel’s version of socialism.

\(^\text{19}\) The International Scientific Association. An organisation from the late thirties which, according to the *Fancyclopedia* consisted of a group which sought to combine amateur scientists and fans, and found the latter becoming dominant. It was scarcely international, the chief branches being the NYB-ISA [New York Branch of the ISA] and the PSFS [The Philadelphia Science Fiction Society] (Speer 1944: 50).
However, by the 1950s many long-time fans of science fiction felt that the centrality of their notion of science to the field was being eroded. William Atheling, Jr.\(^2\) wonders why John W. Campbell, editor of Astounding finds it necessary to print an article about the science background of a story he had earlier published:

Why does Campbell want his readers to know that writing a long science-fiction story takes careful preparation before the more obviously fictional elements of the story are filled in? First, because he assumes that his readers don’t know it. In itself this is a revolutionary assumption. There was a time in the development of magazine science fiction when the most vocal part of the readership insisted upon minute attention to detail, and as much accuracy as the known facts of a given would permit. This is not a prejudice fostered by Campbell. It was implicit in T. O’Conor Sloane’s delight in listing every degree and academic honour his authors (or he himself) had ever earned... It was equally visible in Gernsback’s practice, and in Gernsback’s last magazine, Science Fiction Plus, the emphasis upon the scientific qualification was even more nakedly paraded, and sometimes even more dishonestly. Everybody once knew that to be a good science-fiction writer you had to Know Your Science (Atheling [1964] 1974: 46).\(^3\)

Many fans saw their engagement with science fiction and with science as marking them as different and more intelligent than those in the mundane world. Atheling’s comments here are a lament for the way science fiction once was.

The discourse of difference was an important one in the emergence of the science fiction community. While science fiction is a marker of the sf person’s difference it is also the reason that person turns to science fiction in the first place:

Damon Knight says that, as children, all we science-fiction writers were toads. We didn’t get along with our peers. We had no close friends and were thus thrown on our internal resources. Reading, particularly science fiction, filled the gaps. A more charitable explanation might be that most science-fiction readers were precocious kids who got little reward from the chatter of their teen schoolmates and looked for more stimulating companionship in print. Either way Damon was hooked and so was I, and so were some ten or twenty thousand people all over the world who comprise the great collective family called “science fiction” (Pohl 1978: 2)

This sense of difference was summed up in the well-known fan slogan quoted at the beginning of this section: “fans are slans”. In the entry in the Fancyclopedia on “slan” the following claim is made:

Because the central character in the story was a youth in unsympathetic surroundings, and because of the obvious similarities to fans’ dreams of greatness, the unserious claim

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\(^2\) William Atheling, Jr. is the pen name for the critical writings of sf writer James Blish.

\(^3\) These comments were first published in the Spring 1953 issue of the fanzine Skyhook.
The cover of the October 1940 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* illustrating A. E. Van Vogt's "Slan". The cover is by Rogers.
to slanhood has become the Third Fandom parallel to the Second Fandom’s half-serious Star-Begotten\textsuperscript{22} claim (Speer 1944: 81).\textsuperscript{23}

The slogan comes from *Slan* by A. E. van Vogt, which first appeared as a serialised novel in *Astounding Science Fiction* in the September, October, November and December 1940 issues. The October 1940 cover based on “Slan” appears on the facing page. The novel became a firm part of the early fans’ conception of themselves. I quote the jacket blurb from the 1953 English edition:

Jommy Cross was a Slan. Human beings had killed his mother, fearing the whole race of Slans as freaks, artificially created monsters.

Alone and friendless, Jommy set out to solve the mystery of his own existence. He knew that his own kind had been almost wiped out in the Slan wars, which had left civilisation in the grip of an autocratic world-wide police state. Only by the slim tentacles that gleamed, half-concealed, in the hair of Slans, could Jommy recognise his race.

How to organise resistance, how to free the world from the frightening hold of the police, these were Jommy’s problems (from the 1953 edition published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson).

The text engages with ideas of science and it is Jommy’s mastery of various different technologies, as much as his physical superiority, that sets him apart. Many fans read this as an analogy for the way in which their engagement with science fiction set them apart. The blurb goes on to say that

*Slan* is recognised as one of the major classics of modern Science Fiction. First published in 1945, it was so much in demand that readers were willing to pay many times the published price to obtain a copy.

Now A. E. van Vogt has somewhat revised his story - although he found his earlier predictions about the uses of atomic energy had proved amazingly accurate (from the 1953 edition published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson).

In the thirteen years between its first appearance in *Astounding, Slan* has become a ‘classic’ and has proven to be prophetic - one of Gernsback’s marks for identifying the “most amazing” scifi stories.

The volume of mail received by *Astounding* after *Slan* appeared was phenomenal. All four parts (the first part was equal first with “Blowups Happen”

\textsuperscript{22} According to the entry by Elmer Perdue in the *Fancyclopedia* “Star-Begotten” comes from the novel of the same title by H.G.Wells:

And, since the ‘Star-Begotten’ are those people with abnormal intelligence, produced thru the direct or indirect agency of [sic] beings upon another planet, and since these ‘Star-Begotten’ are misunderstood, intuitive, brilliant people, stfandom has adopted the name as a collective title for [sic] themselves (Speer 1944: 85).

\textsuperscript{23} According to the *Fancyclopedia* the term “First Fandom” was coined by Speer and describes the period up to 1936. He says the “Second Fandom” covers the period October 1937 - 1938 and “Third Fandom” covers the period from September 1944 on (Speer 1944: 37, 77 & 87).
ANALYTICAL LABORATORY

As of noon, December 2nd, at which time this issue went to press, “Slan” had set a definite and unchallenged record. The whole December issue of Astounding had drawn an unusually heavy number of reader votes, with “Slan” itself apparently the reason for the unusual number. The record lies in this: every voter had placed “Slan” in number-one position. So the scores stand:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Slan”</td>
<td>A. E. van Vogt</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fog”</td>
<td>Robert Willey</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Old Man Mulligan”</td>
<td>P. Schuyler Miller</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Legacy”</td>
<td>Nelson S. Bond</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Spheres”</td>
<td>D. M. Edwards</td>
<td>5.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Fog,” incidentally, was the only other story to get any first-place votes; two readers tied it with “Slan.”

I expect to wait a considerable time before another story comes along on which there is such surprising unanimity of opinion; apparently “Slan” merited the praise I gave it.

The Editor.

AST—5

The “Analytical Laboratory” vote on the last instalment of “Slan: from Astounding Science Fiction, February 1941, p. 67.
Faithful to thee, Terra, in our fashion  53

by Robert A. Heinlein) were voted first in the "Analytical Laboratory" (ASF: November 1940: 63; ASF December 1940: 112; ASF January 1941: 73; ASF February 1941: 67). The vote on the last part occasioned the editorial comment which appears opposite.

The following letter from Carl H. Anderson of Traverse City, Michigan is typical:

there is, it seems, a man named Van Vogt. The fellow apparently owns a type-writer, ten fingers well-skilled in its operation and a mind of a brilliance that has not been directed at the field of science-fiction since the halcyon era of Weinbaum-Smith-Campbell-Williamson and the zenith of imaginative writing.

This chap, who, within a single twelve months had written three or four of that year's ten best, had apparently finished a thing called, "Slan." Again the effusive blurb - the extravagant promise - the kind of thing we've grown used to in a year of such tactics. "Ah, yes, the bonnie Campbell laddie is awa' again."

Ah, yes, and the bonnie Campbell laddie was right again.

"Slan" is good. It is definitely great stuff. It is the stuff which is called classic. It is the unforgettable - the brilliant - the ultimate. It is the kind of thing that justifies science-fiction (ASF Feb 1941: 156).

All the letters in the February 1941 issue have extravagant things to say about Slan though there are some letters in earlier issues that are less enthusiastic. Edward Sumers of Long Beach, N.Y. writes that "Slan is not living up to all the advance publicity you have given it" (ASF December 1940: 113).

The discourses of science fiction precede, condition and constrain fandom so that it is difficult to separate the two. The slan-fan emerges from the fan's engagements with a particular science fiction text, Slan. The slogan "fans are slans" is a recognition of fans' difference from the mundane world and it is a location of this difference in the world of science fiction. The superior fan, the slan-fan, and their access to scientific knowledges gives them an access to discourses which allow the fan speech and a position from which to speak.25 Discourses of science thus become particularly enabling. Atheling is lamenting changes in these discursive relationships which he argues began in the 1940s.

24 The Analytical Laboratory listed the rankings the readers made of the stories of previous issues of Astounding.

25 Like rocketry and space travel which the fan knows will happen one day - fans' accounts of the moment when 'man' landed on the moon are more about a vindication of faith than anything else: "we always knew it would happen".
Science fiction, however, never attained the universally high standards of scientific accuracy that Atheling implies was the case. Although many fans who identify strongly with the science in science fiction articulate a dissatisfaction with the woeful scientific standards of the majority of science fiction they also demonstrate a great deal of pleasure in pointing out in minute detail the many scientific inaccuracies. Their pleasures in science fiction are not just in discovering the rare scientifically accurate stories, though this is a very real pleasure, but also in pointing out their absence.

There were other fans who did not take up these particular discourses. The scientific authenticity of science fiction was not the crucial shaping factor for them. In the midst of all the letters criticising the inaccuracy or praising the accuracy of the science of particular stories in Amazing there are letters praising stories for being a cracking good read. Bradford Butler, a "Counsellor at Law" of New York NY writes:

once a month it [Amazing Stories] turns an otherwise amiable and attractive household into an inferno of selfishness - son against father, daughter against mother, and each against the field - each seeking to pre-empt the copy of the magazine to learn how Gerald got out of the mountains of Mars or how Octavius saved the fair Olivia from the machinations of the super-heterodyne monster of the Moon (Amazing Stories February 1927 vol. 1 no. 11: 1977).

Indeed, a strict definition of science fiction where a story is not considered to be science fiction unless the science is accurate, would mean that few of the stories in Amazing or Astounding were science fiction at all. Most of the stories offend against the known science of their time and are full of faster than light interplanetary travel, of humans being able to breathe unhindered on Mars or

26 The editorial response makes much of this: "Here is a man of learning, an attorney at law" (Amazing Stories February 1927: 1077).
27 This idea that the science in science fiction has to be accurate is still central among some fans and consumers of science fiction. Henry Jenkins in his chapter on Star Trek fans at MIT found that science was a central discourse for their understanding and enjoyment of Star Trek:

The MIT students draw upon their textbook knowledge of real-world science to test the series' technical claims, often relishing their superiority over the writers' "pithful" errors. Roberts, a senior physics major, protested, "sometimes they go a little far afield of science fiction. They keep getting Neutrinos wrong!" (1995: 225)

Jenkins notes that "[t]hese MIT students follow a long tradition of science fiction fans acting as arbiters of scientific validity of popular fictions" (1995: 217).
Venus and of humans who in just a few centuries have evolved wings. Edgar Rice Burroughs was a staple of *Amazing* and many of his stories would today be classified as fantasy.28

Many fans had an obsessional engagement with the kind of 'weird' and fantastic fiction published in *Weird Tales* and other magazines that had little or no interest in science and its benefits for 'mankind'. In the *Fancyclopedia* the general field is called fantasy and then divided into the trinity of "science-fiction, weird fiction, and pure fantasy" (Speer 1944: 33). All three areas were of interest to the fan, and there were many fans who were more interested in weird fiction and fantasy than science fiction.

In this chapter I have set forth the emergence of the field of science fiction in order to shape the context in which the battle of the sexes, which I examine in the following chapters, took place. The majority of the stories which I discuss in the next two chapters, "Mama Come Home" and "Painwise" were first published in the science fiction magazines like *Amazing* and *Astounding* and they and other ideas about the relations of men and women to each other and to science fiction were debated in the letter columns of these magazines as well as fanzines. These stories and debates are the focus of the following chapters.

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28 The distinction between the two genres was already beginning to be made. The division between fantasy and science fiction begins with the arrival of *Amazing*. It took up the space of the science fiction magazine and the existing *Weird Tales* became the home of fantasy and weird (a precursor to the contemporary category of horror) fiction. Fantasy as a fully fledged commercial genre does not begin to emerge until *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954-55 (Attebery 1992).