

BEYOND SCIENCE FICTION

JUDITH MERRIL AND ISAAC ASIMOV'S QUEST TO SAVE THE FUTURE

by

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Abstract

Critics and historians of science fiction widely recognize the genre's importance as a forum for political ideas during the 1950s. But the political role of science fiction diminished during the 1960s, overshadowing the ongoing involvement of sf writers in future-related debates. This paper employs biography, autobiography, memoir, archival papers, recordings, and secondary sources to demonstrate that sf writers continued to discuss the future and its potential problems after the 1950s. Judith Merrill and Isaac Asimov, two giants in science fiction, form the core of this paper's focus. Merrill and Asimov began to discuss the future in essays, interviews, and documentaries in the 1960s. By the early 1970s, Merrill and Asimov were examining the then-emerging problems of overpopulation and planetary ecology in mainstream non-fiction. Merrill and Asimov demonstrate that sf writers still addressed political and social issues in the 1960s and early 1970s – even if their involvement increasingly took place outside the boundaries of science fiction literature.

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Beyond Science Fiction: Judith Merrill and Isaac Asimov's Quest to Save the Future

Introduction

Over the last sixty years, science fiction has become widely accepted as a roadmap of things to come. Science regularly delivers gadgets first imagined by sf writers and handled by fictional space heroes. A recent article in the *Boston Herald* reveals the modern blurring between science fiction, science, and the future. The *Herald* reports that the Boston Museum of Science declined the Benjamin Franklin Tercentennial Exhibition in favour of a *Star Wars* exhibit. The museum's spokesperson, Carole McFall, justified their decision to host *Star Wars* by arguing that it was not actually science fiction: "There is real-world technology in the exhibit."¹ But this technology was futuristic in 1977, when the original *Star Wars* film appeared in theatres. *Star Wars* possesses "real world" technology only because we have, in some ways, caught up to the ultramodern world(s) of *Star Wars*. We live in a present that was once imagined in science fiction, allowing the Boston Museum of Science to explore current technology with old science fiction.

However, science fiction is more than a predictive field. Some sf writers engage in extrapolation to prevent possible futures and critique current social and political trends. The use of extrapolation for this purpose started accelerating after the United States revealed its possession of atomic weapons in 1945. The role of science fiction in foretelling atomic weapons indicated that it could accurately predict developments in science and society – but sf writers went a step further after the war. They used the genre to question contemporary policies and future directions. Critics and historians of science

¹ Associated Press, "Museum Picks Science Fiction over the Real Thing," *Boston Herald*, May 19, 2005, <http://news.bostonherald.com/localRegional/view.bg?articleid=83899>.

fiction have written extensively on science fiction's political voice during the early Cold War. But a small group of sf writers speculated about the future in the mainstream media during the early 1970s as well. Driven by their interest in politics and the future, they commented on society and discussed the problems of tomorrow in speculative non-fiction.

This paper demonstrates that sf writers contributed to political debate about the future in fiction and non-fiction from the 1950s to the early 1970s, using two giants in the field, Judith Merril and Isaac Asimov, as outstanding examples. Judith Merril was an internationally recognized New York sf writer in the 1950s, and a sf editor, critic, and reviewer during the 1960s. Isaac Asimov was a celebrated contemporary of Merril who remains one of the best-known writers in American science fiction. Merril and Asimov used their stories in the 1950s as political commentaries on society and the future – but they went beyond the genre in the early 1970s. Merril and Asimov discussed the then-emerging problems of overpopulation and planetary ecology in mainstream non-fiction. Their speculative non-fiction is evidence that even when science fiction's value as a literature of political ideas began to decline in the 1960s, sf writers were not relegated to the margins. In fact, Merril and Asimov's movement to the mainstream attests to the growing importance of sf writers in debates on the future. North Americans saw these writers as agents of change.

The involvement of sf writers in popular discussions of politics and the future after the late 1950s appears to be a surprisingly understudied topic. Critics and sf writers recall that the genre became increasingly tired in the 1960s, as it failed to keep pace with the decade's radical social developments. The diminishing political importance of science

fiction in the 1960s has overshadowed the continued involvement of sf writers, such as Merrill and Asimov, in future-related debates. One could counter that going outside the boundaries of science fiction was not new for sf writers, particularly for Merrill and Asimov. Merrill had already written a popular science article called "Mars – A New World Waiting" by 1951, and Asimov was a professor of biochemistry at Boston University from 1948 to 1958.² However, Merrill and Asimov were unique in that they discussed the future only in non-fiction during the 1970s. And to understand Merrill and Asimov's reasons for discussing overpopulation and the environment exclusively in non-fiction, we need to consider what motivated them to write science fiction in the first place.

Common Roots and Disparate Goals

Merril and Asimov were political throughout their lives, but they treated politics and the future differently in their sf writings. In many respects, Merrill and Asimov represented opposite ends of a science fiction-political spectrum. Overt social and political criticism found a place in few of Asimov's stories. More often, Asimov's political ideas appear as peripheral elements in his science fiction. He believed that scientific ideas and the effects of science on society should be the focus of "real science fiction."³ Merrill did not limit her political expression in science fiction in the same way. Liberal to left-wing politics inspired much of Merrill's science fiction, and it even played a role in her decision to stop editing and anthologizing science fiction, for the most part, in 1968. She believed that

² Merrill's science column appeared in *Marvel Science Fiction*, 1951. The duration of Asimov's stay at Boston University is summarized in John Clute and Malcolm J. Edwards, "Isaac Asimov," in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute and Peter Nichols, (London: Orbit, 1999), 56.

³ Isaac Asimov, "A Literature of Ideas," in *Today and Tomorrow and...*, ed. Isaac Asimov, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1973), 313.

science fiction should reflect on current social and political issues, which did not always mesh with Asimov's view of the genre.

Merril considered her life "a history of significant alternate/subversive movements."⁴ As a high school student, she joined the Young Person's Socialist League, making Trotskyism her first subversive movement.⁵ Merrill's active interest in Trotskyism began to ebb in the early 1940s, but she soon found the sf community. In her memoir, *Better to Have Loved* (2002), Merrill identifies science fiction as the second significant political affiliation of her life. In this case, Merrill was not only referring to the sf literature that she produced. Her political involvement in science fiction encompassed the entire sub-culture of the genre, including her engagement with the Futurians in the early 1940s, the sf anthologies she edited in the 1950s and 1960s, and the New Wave writings she brought from London sf circles to North America in the late 1960s.

Politics did not dominate Asimov's youth and his early involvement in science fiction to the same degree, but he had liberal interests. In volume one of his autobiography, *In Memory Yet Green* (1979), Asimov recalls staying awake during the night of the 1936 American presidential election. *The Literary Digest* predicted a massive Republican victory, and Asimov listened to the radio while the votes were calculated – hoping that Franklyn D. Roosevelt would be re-elected for a second term.⁶ Asimov's moderate liberal sentiments remained intact during the Great Depression of the 1930s, making him an oddity among his fellow sf fans and writers. Many people in science

⁴ Judith Merrill and Emily Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merrill*, (Toronto, Between the Lines, 2002), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁶ Isaac Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green: The Autobiography of Isaac Asimov*, (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 168.

fiction belonged to polarized or radical political groups in this period, which was the case within the ranks of the Futurians as well.

Merril and Asimov took different approaches to politics early in their careers, but they also had common roots in the Futurian Society of New York. The Futurians were politically-minded sf fans and writers that existed in a society from 1938 to 1945, when it was torn apart by infighting.⁷ For its seven years of existence, the group's membership displayed a wide range of ideological beliefs. Many Futurians were left of centre, including a contingent of communists and socialists.⁸ But the society was not only a stronghold of the left. Sf writer James Blish, a self-labelled "book fascist," was also a Futurian.⁹ Blish agreed with fascist theory but not its application in Europe, prompting Merrill and Blish to "antagoniz[e] each other on sight."¹⁰ Speaking with Damon Knight, a former Futurian and historian of the group, in 1976, Merrill recalled that she had the same political argument with Blish every week.¹¹ She also recalled that Blish always lost.

Asimov was a founding member of the Futurians in 1938, but his involvement declined after 1941.¹² He claims in *In Memory Yet Green* that he never "fit the mold."¹³ He casts the Futurians as a corrupt group that lived recklessly, which caused him to slowly drift away. However, the source of his unease likely stemmed from the Futurians' deep involvement in politics. Although Asimov was a liberal, he did not possess the same passion for political ideas and debate as other members. After Merrill joined the Futurians in 1944, her epic ideological battles with James Blish became a memorable event at the

⁷ Damon Knight, *The Futurians* (New York: John Day, 1977), viii, 18.

⁸ Merrill and Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 45-46.

⁹ Knight, *The Futurians*, 155.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 319.

¹³ Ibid.

group's weekly dinners.¹⁴ On the other hand, Asimov was remembered for uninteresting conversation.

Asimov wanted to interact with others who lived in the imaginary but rational worlds of science fiction. However, the Futurians were often indifferent, and occasionally hostile, to what Asimov said. Donald Wollheim, a Futurian and a sf writer, remembers throwing Asimov out of meetings for being "noisy:"

After about half an hour we couldn't take him. Dirk [Harry Dockweiler] and myself, or Dick Wilson and Bob Lowndes would simply take him and heave him through the door. We couldn't stand him, you know.¹⁵

Frederik Pohl, Asimov's friend and fellow Futurian, later told Damon Knight that Asimov gave the impression of having "absorbed a lot of information without thinking much about it."¹⁶ It appears that Asimov did not perform well in Futurian debates. Perhaps this is what made him feel uncomfortable among the Futurians, rather than the drinking that allegedly took place when they met.

Political debate was a major Futurian activity, and it was considered their "mighty mission."¹⁷ The Futurians regularly challenged each other's politics, as well as the political beliefs held by people outside of the society. In the American Cold War era, ex-Futurians, such as Frederik Pohl, Cyril Kornbluth, James Blish, Isaac Asimov, and Judith Merril, led the way in commenting on society and politics in their sf stories. Despite their differences, Merril considered herself and Asimov colleagues during the late 1940s and the early 1950s. They were both Futurians, and later, in the 1950s, they belonged to the Hydra Club – a New York sf writers group started by Merril and Frederik Pohl.¹⁸ Merril

¹⁴ Merril and Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 58.

¹⁵ Damon Knight, *The Futurians*, (New York: John Day, 1977), 29.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 15.

¹⁸ Merril and Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 254.

and Asimov reviewed each others' stories, and they addressed political issues in their science fiction. But Merrill and Asimov went in separate directions at the end of the decade, as their involvement in science fiction began to change.

Whereas science fiction of the 1950s earned a reputation for its timely and sharp criticism of political issues in Cold War America, the genre did not have the same effect in the 1960s. Sf writers still addressed political issues; both Merrill and Asimov continued to comment on society and the future. But they discussed the future and society mostly outside of sf stories. Merrill increasingly focused on sf anthologies and essays of criticism, and she attempted to reinvigorate the genre's capacity for political commentary. Meanwhile, Asimov retired from the genre in 1958 to concentrate on non-fiction. In the 1960s, he opposed Merrill's efforts to introduce radical British New Wave science fiction to North America. And in the middle of their disagreement over science fiction and its future, Merrill and Asimov positioned themselves in the mainstream media.

Although Merrill's output of sf literature ceased after her space story "Homecalling" in 1965, she was still able to use science fiction to distribute her political views. She was a powerful editor and anthologist, and she employed her twelve "Year's Best" anthologies from 1956 to 1968 to highlight and circulate ideas she considered important. Merrill looked for a number of qualities in the stories she selected for her anthologies, which included literary style and underlying social commentary. Merrill was strongly interested in the literary development of genre, but she would occasionally select stories entirely for their social message. In a 1972 interview that took place in Japan, Merrill admits:

There have [...] been stories I have selected specifically because of what they said.... They were chosen because they made some comment on society, or on people's behaviour, that I agreed with very strongly, and felt had been made very forcibly.¹⁹

Through the process of editorial selection, Merrill felt she was able to successfully promote ideas she thought relevant. However, science fiction did not remain Merrill's preferred forum for political criticism – particularly in the late 1960s. She believed that science fiction was mired in the mentality and the problems of the previous decade.

Merril attempted to recover the genre's ability to engage in relevant social and political criticism as "Books" editor for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (*F&SF*). *F&SF* was the premier sf magazine during the 1960s, and Merrill used its prestigious "Books" column for more than reviewing the latest sf stories. Instead, she reviewed the genre as a whole and she analyzed contemporary social and political trends. Merrill observed in a 1967 column that science fiction – once considered *avante garde* for its political criticism – had hit the inflexibility of middle age. She thought that the themes of science fiction and its narrative style were becoming increasingly stale in the revolutionary sixties.²⁰ Merrill, who had stayed current with the changing social and political climate, referred to many sf stories as the "Old Thing." The "Old Thing" dealt with the major issues of the 1950s, including the bomb, nuclear war, and conformity – but these problems had lost their resonance by the sixties. Science fiction, which primarily consisted of the "Old Thing," had not forged ahead.

Merril attempted to push American science fiction forward by promoting British New Wave science fiction, or "The New Thing" (cleverly abbreviated as "TNT"), in her

¹⁹ Judith Merrill, interview by a Japanese radio station, Judith Merrill Tape #9, 1972. Toronto Public Library Merrill Collection. Transcribed by Michael LeBlanc, p. 2. Judith Merrill Research Project.

²⁰ Judith Merrill, "Books," *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 33:11 (November 1967), 31-32.

“Books” column.²¹ She believed that new social developments, such as drug use, the pill, sexual liberation, second wave feminism, and “black power,” were largely ignored in American science fiction. Merrill thought that science fiction required a paradigm shift, and she presented British New Wave science fiction as the model to follow in her groundbreaking anthology, *England Swings S-F* (1968). British New Wave science fiction centred on the London-based sf magazine *New Worlds*, and it addressed many of the issues that appeared in 1960s counterculture. British New Wave also took a distinctly pessimistic view of the future.²² John Brunner’s *Stand on Zanzibar*, which is a notable example, speculates about ecological catastrophes and population crises that will take place in the near future. Merrill wanted American science fiction to tackle these difficult and pertinent issues as well, and she hoped that New Wave would lead to a renaissance in the genre.

However, New Wave became a source of contention in American sf circles. While some American sf writers embraced it, such as Harlan Ellison, their rendition of New Wave bore little resemblance to British New Wave. Others vehemently fought against New Wave, particularly Isaac Asimov, who attacked it wherever possible, from Frederik Pohl’s *Galaxy* magazine to the essays he wrote for mainstream journals. He thought that New Wave extracted the science from science fiction, transforming it “from real science fiction to the tasteless pap of the mainstream.”²³ In “A Literature of Ideas,” Asimov argues that “real science fiction” describes the interaction between future

²¹ Merrill introduced “The New Thing” in her November 1967 “Books” column in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

²² Peter Nichols, “New Wave,” in Clute and Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 866.

²³ Isaac Asimov, “A Literature of Ideas,” in Asimov, *Today and Tomorrow and...*, 313.

technology and society.²⁴ He believed that well-written New Wave stories could be interesting, but they were a distraction from the scientific ideas that should appear in science fiction.²⁵

But Judith Merril saw New Wave as science fiction's best opportunity to regain its lost social relevance. The opposition to New Wave frustrated her, and she expressed her anger with the sf genre, and the backlash that Asimov's opposition represented, in her *F&SF* "Books" column for June 1968. Merril outlined why New Wave sf was important, writing that science fiction no longer performed the political criticism that made it so valued during the early Cold War. Merril argued that sf, as it was in 1968, played a negligible political role: "Today, the science fiction [field] is actually far behind the 'underground' and even much of the mainstream, in the extent and intensity of its criticism of the status quo."²⁶ For a woman who had deep roots in politics, the growing political irrelevance of the genre was intolerable.

Politics was at the forefront of Merril's mind in 1968; it was also the year she gave up on the American political system, and left the United States for Canada. Merril abandoned her search for political change in the US after weathering the riots of the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention. She arrived at the convention with her daughters and their friends to support the nomination of Eugene McCarthy, a congressman from Minnesota who proposed to pull the United States out of Vietnam. Despite McCarthy's appeal to those who opposed the Vietnam War, Hubert Humphrey carried the vote. Most liberals and progressives were disappointed by Humphrey's meekness as Vice President. Tom Lehrer, a satirist song writer and mathematician, produced a song in 1965 about

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Judith Merril, "Books," *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 34:6 (June 1968), 48.

Humphrey (“What Ever Happened to Hubert?”) that reminisced about Humphrey’s “once fiery spirit,” which was long since gone. After spending a week with rioting students and combative police, the nomination of Humphrey was the final step for Merrill; she began to distance herself from both science fiction and the United States.

Merril’s “Books” column in December 1968 not only details her experiences in Chicago; it starkly highlights her divergence from Asimov in the 1960s. Asimov wrote non-fiction for political ends, but it was to encourage scientific endeavours, such as space exploration. Not long after Asimov cheerfully discussed the necessity of lunar colonization in a *New York Times Magazine* article, Merrill used her “Books” column in *F&SF* to recall the student protests, unrest, and police brutality at the Chicago Democratic Convention.²⁷ Merrill’s column describes gassed students, medic teams, and later conversations with publishers who did not want to “believe it the way it was.”²⁸ She implies that science fiction was disconnected from the social and political crises occurring in the United States. And Merrill concludes by condemning sf’s peripheral role in sixties politics – claiming that science fiction had become “Great Escapism.”²⁹

Merril co-opted her “Books” column in the late 1960s for political critique, and to indicate which social and political issues sf writers should, in fact, be writing about. She believed that sf writers would respond to the call, as the former Futurians had in the 1950s. By December 1968, Merrill realized that sf stories would not address the urgent social issues of the sixties. But new avenues for social and political criticism opened for her in the early 1970s.

²⁷ Asimov argues for lunar colonization, and outlines general approaches for it, in his 1967 article “After Apollo, a Colony on the Moon,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 28, 1967.

²⁸ Merrill and Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 169.

²⁹ Judith Merrill, “Books,” *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 34:12 (December, 1968).

From the Margins to the Mainstream

The late 1950s and 1960s was a transitional period for both Merrill and Asimov. They repositioned themselves as writers – crossing from the marginal arena of sf stories and sf publications to the mainstream media. Merrill's decision to emigrate from the United States and her disillusionment with science fiction prompted her to seek new forums for social and political criticism. She still wished to change the world, but she realized that her efforts would have to include the world outside American science fiction. Asimov's movement away from science fiction, which was firmly entrenched by 1958, was not politically motivated. He thought that he had achieved his peak in science fiction in the mid 1950s; it was time for him to move on.³⁰ Asimov quickly found a new and more prominent niche for himself as a writer of non-fiction science articles and editorials. Merrill and Asimov's separate decisions to leave sf literature set the stage for their higher-profile discussions on pollution, the environment, and the future in the 1970s.

Merril's involvement in science fiction began to decline after she immigrated to Toronto from the United States. She no longer wrote her "Books" column after 1969, and her last regularly published "Year's Best" anthology appeared in the same year. Merrill did not entirely break away from science fiction; she remained active in the sf community and she worked in Japan translating science fiction during the 1970s. But the majority of Merrill's work in this period was outside of science fiction literature. Merrill curated the massive sf collection she donated to the Toronto Public Library, gave frequent talks, and, as a free-lancer, she wrote and produced a number of documentaries for CBC-Radio. Merrill began working with the CBC in 1971 when Robert Zend, an experimental

³⁰ Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 707.

Canadian writer, asked her to speak on a segment he was producing for *Ideas*.³¹ The CBC was impressed with her contributions, and it asked her to begin producing her own segments. By the early 1970s, Merrill was a writer-broadcaster and a “documentarist” rather than a sf editor.³²

Merril’s view that the genre had lost its ability to discuss novel ideas contributed to her decision to work outside the genre after she moved to Toronto. In an essay draft for Japan’s *SF* magazine, dated 1972, Merrill claims that the “new kind of world” in which people lived demanded new ways to approach, comprehend, and discuss global problems.³³ Merrill writes that she found herself with a strong sense of “urgent immediate concern about the future of life on our planet, and an incurably optimistic belief that the prospects can be improved.”³⁴ She hoped to improve these prospects through “translation” – or communication – between individuals, groups, and countries. At the same time, her efforts to translate Japanese science fiction provided her with new tools for expressing ideas in her native language – a technique she called “talking Japanese in English.”³⁵ Using the process of translation, in her broader sense of the term, Merrill attempted to address the crucial pollution and overpopulation problems facing the planet with non-fiction.

Merril’s immigration to Canada and the shortcomings she saw in science fiction only partially explain her decision to stop editing anthologies, and writing articles for *F&SF*. Her decision to become a writer-broadcaster and a documentarist involved other

³¹ Merrill and Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 203.

³² CBC *Ideas* segments featuring Judith Merrill introduce her as a “writer-broadcaster.” Damon Knight states that Merrill was a “documentarist” in the 1970s in Knight, *The Futurians*, 244.

³³ Judith Merrill, Untitled essay draft for *SF* magazine, 1972, mg. 30, series 326, vol. 33, p.5, The National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 6.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

significant factors. Merrill was tired of wielding power as an influential editor and critic in science fiction.³⁶ At the same time, in the late 1960s, Merrill had discovered that radically different ideas no longer needed to be submerged in the framework of science fiction: "People would listen if I just presented my ideas by saying, 'This is what could happen. This is how things might be.'"³⁷ Her move to Canada, with its different cultural climate, enabled Merrill to speculate about the future on CBC Radio. It was a more public medium for her views than the pages of sf literature. But her old Futurian colleagues, particularly Asimov and Pohl, were central to her 1970s agenda.

While Asimov's liberal beliefs influenced his writings in fiction and non-fiction, it seems that they did not play a role in his decision to increasingly write non-fiction. His slow departure from sf literature began in the early 1950s, when he discovered that people were willing to buy his non-fiction, as he admits in his memoir, *I, Asimov*. However, Asimov's non-fiction writings did not take off until the end of the decade, when he learned that non-fiction was easier to write and it was more publishable than his science fiction.³⁸ The market for popular science articles grew in the late 1950s, after the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 created fears about a "science gap." American editors sought out accessible science articles and Asimov was only too happy to provide them.³⁹ Even *F&SF* offered Asimov a monthly science column, which Asimov wrote from 1958 to 1991 – producing a total of 399 columns.⁴⁰ Confronted with these new possibilities

³⁶ Merrill and Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 161.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

³⁸ Asimov, *I, Asimov: A Memoir*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 172.

³⁹ Isaac Asimov, interview by Terry Gross, "Fresh Air," National Public Radio, September 25, 1987.

⁴⁰ John Clute and Malcolm J. Edwards, "Isaac Asimov," in Clute and Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 57.

Asimov officially retired from science fiction to focus on his “science fact” articles, books, and *F&SF* science column in 1958.⁴¹

The appearance of Sputnik and the resulting demand for popular science articles were not the only forces that caused Asimov to shift away from science fiction. By 1958, Asimov had been writing science fiction for nearly twenty years and the author of his “unauthorized” biography, Michael White, claims that Asimov had, at last, run out of ideas.⁴² Whether or not White is correct, it is clear that Asimov could feel the centre of the genre beginning to shift away from hard science. New sf writers, such as Philip K. Dick, were using science fiction to explore philosophical questions and the human condition. Asimov, on the other hand, largely focused on the interactions between people and technology. In the 1960s, when Harlan Ellison asked Asimov to write a new story for *Dangerous Visions* (1967), his American New Wave anthology of original stories, Asimov politely declined:

[...] I couldn't face trying to write a story that would pass muster in the 1960s, when such talent I had suited the 1950s. I felt that I didn't measure up any longer and I didn't want to prove it.⁴³

Asimov was a legend in science fiction; he did not want to dispel his mythic status by writing a sub par story. Perhaps Asimov's doubts about his abilities fuelled his opposition to New Wave science fiction. Science commentary offered Asimov a safe and financially lucrative field – a place where he did not have to test his fiction against the more exacting standards, and experimental approaches, of the 1960s.

Merril and Asimov stopped creating new science fiction for different reasons, but the forces that influenced their fiction remained in place. Politics and a deep concern for

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Michael White, *Asimov: The Unauthorized Life*, (London: Millennium, 1994), 143.

⁴³ Isaac Asimov, *In Joy Still Felt: The Autobiography of Isaac Asimov 1954-1978*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1980), 417.

the future lay at the heart of many of Merrill's writings, and these two dynamics continued to affect her after 1968. Asimov's stories, in contrast, were overtly political only on occasion. But Asimov's liberalism is present in his stories. It did not vanish after he retired from science fiction in 1958, nor did his interest in future science, technology, and society. Mainstream non-fiction writings gave him a larger audience, and greater flexibility to address issues that he could not tackle in fiction. Merrill had a similar experience. She was no longer constrained by the outmoded conventions of science fiction; Merrill could freely speak on crucial future problems as a writer-broadcaster.

Changing the Future in Speculative (non-)Fiction

Although Merrill and Asimov had diverging ideas about science fiction in the 1960s, and different goals for their non-fiction, they converged again in the early 1970s. Influenced by the seminal works of Paul Elrich and Rachel Carson, Merrill and Asimov used mainstream media to discuss their bleak visions of an overpopulated and polluted millennium. Now only thirty years away, the year 2000 and the future had risen to the forefront of popular thought. Large and primarily government-supported think-tanks, such as RAND and the Hudson Institute, had reached a new level of prominence in policy-making circles. But these think-tanks strove to predict the future. Merrill and Asimov, on the other hand, approached the future in their speculative non-fiction as they had done with their earlier Cold War sf stories. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Merrill and Asimov were among the sf writers who encouraged readers to prevent nightmarish futures by changing the present. Merrill and Asimov's efforts in the 1970s were directed towards the same end. They strove to raise public awareness of overpopulation and

ecological damage, hoping to mitigate the future effects of these potentially disastrous issues.

Merril and Asimov's concern for the environment stemmed from a new awareness of pollution and overpopulation as global threats in the 1960s. The appearance of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) helped launch the green movement in North America and beyond.⁴⁴ In *Silent Spring*, Carson draws a connection between pesticide use, environmental damage, and declining wildlife populations. The public widely read Carson's book, leading to environmental legislation and activism. The United States created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970, which proceeded to ban DDT – a chemical pesticide thought to kill birds – in 1972. In Vancouver, Canada, the Don't Make a Wave Committee began with five people dedicated to preventing an American nuclear test from making a wave on the west coast.⁴⁵ The Committee became the Greenpeace Foundation in 1972 as a tribute to Asimov's Foundation novels.⁴⁶ In Asimov's classic Foundation series (1942-1953), the Foundation is an institution that will lead humanity towards a more enlightened age – a goal the founders of Greenpeace shared.

Asimov's decision to sound the alarm, particularly with respect to overpopulation, was likely triggered by Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968). Ehrlich's book was a best-seller that encouraged people to discuss and prevent the "population explosion" that he foresaw. Ehrlich purposely avoids heavy statistics in his book, but he implies that

⁴⁴ Frederik Pohl, "The Politics of Prophecy," in *Political Science Fiction*, ed. Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 10.

⁴⁵ "Greenpeace," *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenpeace>

⁴⁶ Rex Weyler, "Waves of Compassion: The founding of Greenpeace. Where are they now?", *Utne*, http://www.utne.com/web_special/web_specials_archives/articles/2246-2.html

Earth's 1968 population will have at least doubled by the year 2000.⁴⁷ According to Ehrlich's projections, Earth's rapid population growth will result in a Malthusian catastrophe, and demand for food will outstrip production.⁴⁸ Ehrlich also touches on the environmental pressures of overpopulation, such as soil erosion and pollution, rendering the possibility of increased food production unlikely. The book concludes with a grim solution to overpopulation: a "triage" approach to foreign aid.⁴⁹ The American government would spend its finite resources providing aid to countries that could still be helped.

Many of the themes from Ehrlich's book reappear in Asimov's speculative non-fiction from the early 1970s. Like Ehrlich, Asimov was a "doom-crier" who foresaw a crisis and few acceptable solutions. Asimov pessimistically launched his campaign to save the future with "The End," an article that appeared in the January 1971 issue of *Penthouse Magazine*.⁵⁰ The presence of Asimov's speculative article in this mass circulation men's magazine is an example of sf writers reaching into the mainstream – beyond the genre science fiction's limited audience.

"The End" outlines Asimov's bleak views on overpopulation. The article's dark title is not a hook to draw in the reader; it was Asimov's attempt to wave a sign proclaiming that the end was near. "The End" has two purposes: to show Americans that the world's population was growing at an unsustainable rate, and, secondly, that it was most likely (but not entirely) too late to prevent the impending crisis. In this respect,

⁴⁷ Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*, (New York: Ballantine, 1968), 27-28.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁰ Asimov's first article on overpopulation appeared in 1958 ("Carrying Population to the Limits"). However, there was a thirteen year gap between this article and "The End." After Asimov wrote "The End", he discussed the issue of overpopulation with more regularity. His next article on overpopulation also appeared in January 1971, called "Can Man Survive the Year 2000?"

Asimov's essay resonates with Ehrlich's book. However, Asimov takes a different approach to conveying the horrifying trend of population growth. While Ehrlich relies on description, Asimov allows math to make the point for him. He uses ominously large numbers to prove that human population growth is unsustainable. And he pointedly argues that the last years of human existence will not be orderly or dignified.

Asimov concludes his essay by speculating on how an overpopulated Earth will detrimentally affect the environment and society. He argues that increased use of fossil fuels, propelled by population growth, will result in ecological damage as elevated levels of carbon dioxide bring about global warming.⁵¹ Asimov estimates that the Earth's oceans could rise 200 feet, rendering Earth's densely populated low-lands uninhabitable.⁵² At the same time, Asimov claims that overpopulation will change human society. A lack of personal space will result in antisocial behaviour and eventually anarchy. Asimov asserts "that by the year 2000 or possibly earlier, man's social structure will have utterly collapsed."⁵³ After this collapse, there will be no chance of recovery. Asimov contends that modern society, in its death throws, will begin a final nuclear war. This would spell "the end" for humanity – unless, of course, radical population controls were implemented before 2000.

To someone in the twenty-first century, Asimov's "The End" seems to be an alarmist – and grossly inaccurate – vision of the future. The article's forecasts have proven to be wildly inaccurate, and it fails to provide any potential solutions to the issue of overpopulation. Asimov's use of statistics and demographics makes his article resemble a futurological work, and the abundance of numbers gives his predictions a

⁵¹ Asimov, "The End," in Asimov, *Today and Tomorrow and...*, 248.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 250.

sense of authority. But Asimov's statistical extrapolations are also the reason why his predictions are so inaccurate. It would be an easy matter to overlook the significance of this article. However, "The End" is a critical example of negative prophecy – an effort to change the future – in non-fiction. Although Asimov believed that his vision of the future would come to pass, this article was part of his effort to inspire change while there was still time.

Merril and Asimov, whose careers intersected in the 1950s, found themselves working on the same project again in the 1970s. But Merrill did not expend as much energy as Asimov describing the problems of overpopulation and ecological damage. Instead, she was interested in finding interdisciplinary solutions through collaboration and discussion. Merrill was determined to save the planet.

In 1973, Merrill began work on a five-hour series for CBC Radio's *Ideas* called "How to Face Doomsday without Really Dying." Merrill knew the obvious solutions to the planet's population and environmental problems: smaller families and less pollution. However, Merrill often stated in her series that she wanted to know "how to get from here to there." She sought ways to bring about the required changes, and to this end she interviewed a number of intellectuals on intercultural communication, behaviour modification, government initiatives, religion, and the lessons that could be learned from other cultures. She believed that a synthesis of these areas could lead to new methods for understanding, and resolving, the extraordinary problems facing humanity.

The sf community, including Asimov, played a crucial role in constructing "How to Face Doomsday without Really Dying." Merrill spoke with sf writers, former sf writers, and intellectuals who were connected to the genre. Her series included interviews with

Asimov, Frederik Pohl, former editor of *Galaxy*, Father Arthur Gibson, a priest and a professor at the University of Toronto, and Psychologist James McConnell of the University of Michigan. Gibson and McConnell offered insight into the roles of religion and behaviour modification in catalyzing social change, but they did not participate simply because of their professions. They were science fiction aficionados. Gibson taught a course on religion and science fiction in the early 1970s, and McConnell edited an sf anthology in 1971.⁵⁴

Merril had access to these people because Toronto hosted the World Science Fiction Convention (Torcon2) in the summer of 1973.⁵⁵ She had an afternoon set aside at the convention for sf writers, editors, and fans to discuss the Earth's ecology.⁵⁶ The panel allowed Merrill and Asimov, among others, to discuss ecological issues in front of convention attendees. It also provided Merrill with an entry point for her later one-on-one interview with Asimov. The theme of the panel, and of her interviews, was the central question of her documentary: how could humanity survive its future? An audio recording of this extraordinary gathering, thanks to Merrill's sf connections and her practice as a documentarist, has only recently come to light at the Toronto Public Library's Merrill Collection. The interview is worth examining here in some depth.

The recorded discussion between Merrill and Asimov at the Torcon2 panel reveals their distinct approaches to the future's problems. Asimov appears to have presented two courses for humanity to take in the near future: a voluntary reduction in population growth – or a reduction in population brought about by nature. When a Torcon attendee

⁵⁴ In the early 1970s, McConnell edited a sf collection with Marlys Schutjer called *Science, Sex, and Sacred Cows: Spoofs on Science from the Worm Runner's Digest*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

⁵⁵ Asimov, *In Joy Still Felt*, 654.

⁵⁶ Merrill and Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 204.

asks Asimov about the prospect of interplanetary colonization during the question session, Asimov does not seek escape to the stars or other unlikely near future scenarios. Instead, Asimov emphatically states that population control will always remain a necessity:

It turns out in 6000 years you filled all the planets in all the cosmos in all the, all the galaxies. You filled them all as full as Earth is now.... [W]e've got to stop the rate at which we're increasing. No matter what we do, there's no way out. We've got to stop.⁵⁷

This statement is reminiscent of “The End,” but Asimov makes an addition afterwards – noting that that purpose of the session was to discuss humanity’s survival. He states that mandatory sterilization would be the most practical method of ensuring population control. Asimov does not sound optimistic about humanity’s chances for surviving doomsday, but he is willing to entertain the idea. However, his solution is not well received by Merrill.

Towards the end of the session, Merrill encourages Asimov to consider other possibilities for population control. Merrill understands, as her later interviews show, how difficult it would be to enforce mandatory sterilization – especially in non-Western cultures. Merrill offers Asimov the idea of “semi enforced” sterility, in which a chemical or device would render people sterile unless conscious action is taken to negate its effects.⁵⁸ Asimov dismisses her suggestion; he does not believe that the necessary technology exists. He does not realize that his solution is even more unrealistic from a social standpoint, because other cultures would not find it acceptable. By providing an alternative idea for population control, Merrill highlights her role as a facilitator. She has her own thoughts on how the planet could be saved, and she uses her interviewees as a

⁵⁷ Isaac Asimov, Torcon2 panel recording of Isaac Asimov, Merrill Tape #209, 1973. Toronto Public Library Merrill Collection.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

springboard for them. At the same time, Merrill encourages her guests to reconsider their proposed solutions to the environmental and population-related problems at hand.

For Asimov, however, the prospect of human survival was not an idea that came naturally. Although he articulated future problems very well, he had trouble imagining solutions. Merrill conducted a one-on-one interview with Asimov after the panel to further explore his views on population growth and sustainability. Asimov begins the discussion by arguing that unless a population plateau is reached, the planet's population will continue to grow until energy shortages cause mass starvation and social disorder.⁵⁹ At the same time, he asserts that North America is based on energy consumption; it needs to become a society based on conservation. Asimov reasons that changes in energy use and population growth can only be accomplished through the creation of a single world government. But Asimov does not describe how to install a world government – which causes Merrill to ask: “What can we do to get from here to there?”⁶⁰

Merril states that it is a simple matter for a sf writer to dream of a utopia where the problems of population growth and energy consumption have been solved. She says that the final objective exists, and she wants to know how humanity can reach it within Asimov's time limit of thirty years. To which, Asimov replies: “I can't honestly say I think we can.”⁶¹ Asimov's pessimism continues throughout the interview, and finally, near the end, Merrill shouts at Asimov half-jokingly: “I want – I want a solution. Tell me how we can win!”⁶² Asimov, obviously frustrated, replies:

⁵⁹ Isaac Asimov, interview by Judith Merrill with Isaac Asimov on overpopulation and planetary ecology, Judith Merrill Tape #126, 1973. Toronto Public Library Merrill Collection.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

God! – for goodness sakes, when people live and die on the streets of Calcutta, why are they content to do so? I.... You know, it despairs you. It makes you think that the human race isn't evolved to the point where it can survive.⁶³

Asimov wants the human race to survive, but he does not believe that people will save themselves. In desperation, at the end of the interview, Asimov rhetorically asks why there cannot be fewer and better people. When Merrill asks how this could be accomplished, Asimov merely claims that nature “will do it for us.” In other words, the inevitable problem of food and energy shortages will reduce the population without human intervention. Despite Merrill's best efforts, the interview ends with no possible solution in sight.

However, Merrill continued to search for a path that would lead humanity from the crisis she foresaw. After interviewing Asimov, Merrill spoke to Frederik Pohl and Father Arthur Gibson. Merrill's interview with Pohl and Gibson focused on intercultural communication as a necessity to bring about a resolution to overpopulation. In particular, Merrill was interested in how the West could overcome cultural barriers and convince the rest of the world that population control was necessary. She argues, in her talk with Pohl and Gibson, that technology does not hold all of the answers; it can carry words across vast distances, but it will not convey meaning. There are communication problems that need to be solved, and she asks Pohl and Gibson how people in different countries and continents could effectively exchange ideas.

Frederik Pohl outlines for Merrill a way out based on human self-interest and rationality. He believes that intercultural communication is problematic because there is not a great deal at stake. However, intercultural communication would become a priority if people in different countries and cultures discovered that they had an urgent common

⁶³ Ibid.

interest. Pohl tells Merrill that he feels that a catastrophe will bring people together. He does not propose an irrecoverable catastrophe, as Asimov describes, but a disturbance adequate to open lines of communication:

My dream is that sometime, not too far in the future, there's going to be a major disaster in the United States or Canada or Western Europe and there's going to be, say, in London, there'll be a major strike of all the transportation workers... And when things get so bad that people have to realize that things must be changed... they'll change them.⁶⁴

Pohl assumes that a unifying event will take place before conditions become so poor that the situation cannot be rectified. People will begin speaking to each other and cooperating because they realize that such actions would be to their mutual advantage. The end result is a peaceful, secure, and less crowded world founded on human self-interest rather than altruism.

Gibson provides Merrill with a different solution to the problem. As a Catholic priest, Gibson had a distinct view of humanity, and he dismisses Pohl's response during the interview with "partial contempt." According to Gibson, people need to recognize the common humanity of everyone before effective intercultural communication can take place. He seems to believe that an underlying racism prevents people from understanding each other. But once humans see themselves as being of "one blood," these barriers will disappear. Gibson argues that organized religion, in spite of its problems, could help people understand that certain essential qualities tie all humans together. When people recognize their common humanity, it will be possible to engage in intercultural communication.

Merril's interviews with Frederik Pohl and Arthur Gibson, more than her conversation with Asimov, demonstrate the objectives she had for the "How to Face

⁶⁴ Arthur Gibson and Frederik Pohl, interview by Judith Merrill on intercultural communication and future problems confronting the planet, Judith Merrill Tape #13, 1973. Toronto Public Library Merrill Collection. Transcribed by Michael LeBlanc, p. 4. Judith Merrill Research Project.

Doomsday without Really Dying” radio series. The issues of overpopulation and ecological damage had been circulating since the mid 1960s; she was not presenting the world with a startling revelation. However, she was providing humanity with something new – a method to achieve the impossible and avoid certain destruction. Through her careful questioning, Pohl and Gibson offered Merrill a way “to get from here to there.” Pohl and Gibson did not provide easy solutions, but Merrill understood that easy solutions did not exist. Suggesting sterilization for all women, as Asimov did, was an impossible answer – just as much as intergalactic colonization. Sterilization would be possible only if people in the West were able to communicate the need for birth control across cultural barriers. Merrill’s speculative non-fiction is valuable for her nuanced approach. Asimov presented the future’s problems and very broad solutions; Merrill took a closer look at the solutions and asked how they could be brought about.

Moving Beyond Science Fiction and Planetary Destruction in the 1970s

Judith Merrill and Isaac Asimov were among the first professionals in science fiction to depart from sf literature and, almost exclusively, discuss the future in non-fiction. Their ability to make this transition indicates that the perception of science fiction was changing; the sf view of the future was increasingly recognized as fact rather than fiction. North Americans first began to consider science fiction a preview of the future after World War II, and its reputation continued to improve throughout the 1950s. No longer focused on technology, science fiction began to speculate about – and critique – social and political trends. By the 1970s, sf writers did not need to carefully fit their ideas on the future into the structure of science fiction stories. Merrill and Asimov demonstrate that sf

writers could establish themselves as futurists, able to forecast the future in mainstream articles, interviews, and presentations.

But Merrill and Asimov were not content with predicting the shape of things to come, as futurologists did at RAND. In *Better to Have Loved*, Merrill wrote that she produced speculative fiction because she wanted to change the world.⁶⁵ She produced speculative non-fiction for the same reason – and Asimov did as well, to a lesser degree. Merrill's "How to Face Doomsday without Really Dying" series does more than discuss future problems – it proposes ways to solve them before they come to pass. Her speculative non-fiction is an example of negative prophecy, as are Asimov's interviews and articles, in spite of his pessimism. Charles Elkins in "Science Fiction versus Futurology" refers to sf protagonists as "heroes of change" who do not shy away from novel situations and unprecedented challenges.⁶⁶ In a sense, Merrill and Asimov became heroes of change in the late 1960s and early 1970s. No longer producers of sf literature, they confronted the problems facing the planet in non-fiction.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that Merrill and Asimov had broken away from science fiction. The same forces that drove them to produce science fiction continued to motivate them after they began working in other fields. Merrill and Asimov still had a strong interest in politics and future science, technology, and society. This interest led them into speculative non-fiction. The recently uncovered tapes at the Merrill Collection indicate the extent to which Merrill and Asimov embraced the causes of environmentalism and population reduction in the early 1970s. These tapes also reveal their desperate efforts to communicate the problems of overpopulation and pollution, and

⁶⁵ Judith Merrill and Emily Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved*, 172.

⁶⁶ Charles Elkins, "Science Fiction versus Futurology: Dramatic versus Rational Models," *Science Fiction Studies*, 6:1 (March 1979), 28-29.

potential solutions, to a popular audience. Listening to Merrill and Asimov, one can hear concern and occasional resignation in their voices. They wanted to save the future, and they were not certain that even doomsday could convince people to change their ways.

The contributions made by Merrill and Asimov to the urgent debate on overpopulation and the ecology in the early 1970s have not been well remembered. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* does not discuss what Merrill and Asimov did during the early 1970s, nor do other histories of science fiction, such as Aldiss's celebrated *Billion Year Spree* (1973). Yet Merrill and Asimov's efforts to influence opinions and policy on population control and ecology represent an important moment for the science fiction community. In the 1950s, sf writers attempted to criticize contemporary politics and steer society away from undesirable futures with negative prophecy. Merrill and Asimov were able to engage in a similar project during the 1970s. They looked into a troubled future and tried to lead humanity away from it with lectures, interviews, and articles rather than sf literature. In other words, they were able to take the political mission of science fiction and transplant it to a more popular and accessible medium. Merrill and Asimov had become respected futurists, but they remained – by virtue of their friendships, interests, and actions – science fiction writers.

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