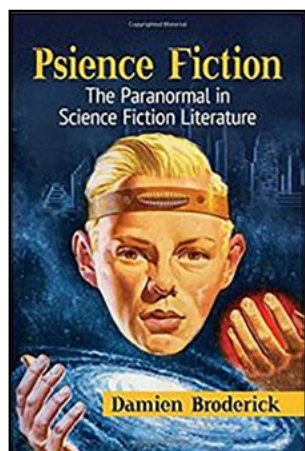


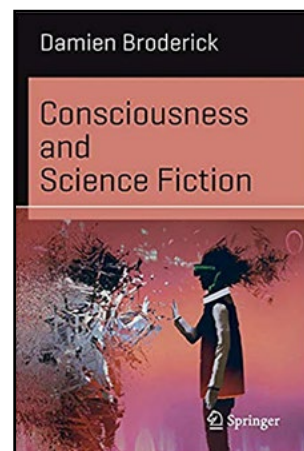
More than Fiction? Psi, Consciousness, and Science-Fiction¹

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Reviews of the books by Damien Broderick:
Psience Fiction: The Paranormal in Science Fiction Literature. McFarland, 2018. Pp. 235 (paperback) \$45.00 ISBN 9 781476 672281.
And

Consciousness and Science Fiction. Springer 2018. Pp. 196 (paperback) \$27.99. ISBN 978-3-030-00598-6



One must vacillate when attempting to define *science-fiction* (SF). The *science* component, even if implying developments not currently reached, undergirds much but by no means all SF, and even the *fiction* aspect is contestable. Consider, for instance, the novels of the great writer Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale* and the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy are, by her own admission, extrapolations or *speculative fiction* (her preferred term) of events and trends very much present in our days (Atwood, 2011). More classically, some SF has partly anticipated technological advances, from the various works of Jules Verne to the nightmarish life-in-death mental filtrations in dead people conserved in large containers of Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*, which recent work on reviving brain cells (Vrselja et al., 2019) seems to make terrifyingly plausible.

Damian Broderick, a scholar and extraordinarily prolific SF writer and editor, has an astute way to deal with the conceptual fuzziness of SF by mentioning major tropes of the genre: interplanetary or interstellar voyage, monsters from other planets, future scenarios, and the whole array of psi phenomena (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, PK, communications with the dead).

I learnt my first letters under the vast shadow of *The Star Beast*, the book by Robert Heinlein (1954), which my father used to teach me to read. Although my father's preference for SF literature did not quite rub off on me, in my youth I still counted two SF novels, *More than Human*, by Theodore Sturgeon (1953), and *Childhood's End*, by Arthur C. Clarke (1953), among my favorite books. Both works are considered SF classics and treat psi phenomena as a given. Sturgeon's novel is an intimistic account of

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how a small group of gifted outsiders create, partly through psi, a *homo gestalt* to replace their isolated existence. The work by Clarke makes reference to telepathy and precognition, but as comparatively minor processes on the road into an evolution/dissolution of humanity into cosmic consciousness.

Both novels, along with more than 50 other SF works, are discussed in *Psience Fiction*, an erudite overview of the presence of psi phenomena (or the *paranormal*, as per the title) in SF. Of the two books reviewed here, *Psience Fiction* is the more felicitous for a simple reason. Broderick is not only an expert in SF but also in psi, on which he has written or edited well-received books (e.g., Broderick, 2007; Broderick & Goertzel, 2015). In contrast, his knowledge about current work on consciousness is sketchy, as I will point out below.

Psience Fiction includes a preface, an introduction, two appendices, and the central section consisting of critical summaries of more than 50 SF novels and short stories that have had psi phenomena as a central theme, from the 1930s through 2016. The array of psi phenomena is vast, from Donald Macpherson's "electroplasm," through mutations tied to a great increase in psi abilities (e.g., Stapledon's *Odd John*, Van Vogt's *Slan*), to psi as a metaphysical marker of a transformation into a different form of being, as in Clarke's *Childhood's End*. Broderick explains that part of the great interest in psi in the "golden age" of SF, between around the 1930s-1950s, can be traced to John W. Campbell, Jr., the very influential editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* and SF author himself (his novella *Who Goes There?* was adapted into two SF movies titled *The Thing*). Campbell corresponded with J. B. Rhine and encouraged the term psionics, coined by Jack Williamson for psi "energy," particularly as related to technology, and of continued currency (Tremmel, 2016). Probably explainable by self-selection, but augmented by the literature they read, in a survey 38% of SF readers stated that ESP "definitely exists" (Bainbridge, 1986, in Lowentrou, 1989).

Now to Broderick's other book. *Consciousness and Science Fiction (CSF)* starts off with an attempt to summarize recent positions on consciousness, held by neuroscientists, psychologists, philosophers, and others. This endeavor would be foolhardy even for a specialist in the field given the complexity of arguments and evidence, and, Broderick, not a specialist, is not quite up to the task. He mentions many of the usual suspects (Damasio, Dennett, Nagel, Searle, etc.), but the complex material is not very well organized and Broderick often meanders into trivialities rather than explaining matters more deeply. He also provides some inaccurate information, such as stating that hard synesthetes occur one in 10 million, which, even granting the rarity of the phenomenon, is still a tremendous overestimation (Marks, 2014). Just to give another example, he writes that David Chalmers claims "that consciousness is what he calls a 'hard problem'" (p. 2). Not quite. Chalmers (1995) specifically states that there are "easy" problems of consciousness, and its "hard problem" refers specifically to how neural, material processes can give rise to the qualia of conscious experience. There are other problems relating to consciousness, some of them arguably as tough to resolve such as the unity of conscious experience (Natsoulas, 1981). An explanation of these differences would have helped the reader understand better the issue than writing that: "Chalmers was not a desiccated Jesuit or bald pipe-smoker in a tweed jacket, but a strikingly good looking young man with flowing heavy-metal hair" (p. 2).

As in *Psience Fiction*, the main section of *CSF* provides summaries of many works of SF, in this case exploring alternative forms of consciousness, with titles such as "What Is it Like to Be a Patchwork Mon-

ster” (for Shelley’s *Frankenstein*), “What Is It Like to be Brain-Colonized” (for Slonczewski’s *Brain Plague*), or “What Is It Like to Be a Zombie” (for Sawyer’s *Quantum Night*). Each of these subtitles precedes the discussion of a particular work, and they are organized under categories whose nature sometimes escaped me. The categories were at times chronological (e.g., The Second Gold Age), thematic (e.g., Radically Different Minds), or just abstruse (e.g., *L’Être et le Néant*, which makes reference to the essay by Sartre for reasons that escape me). Non-SF authors, of course, have also imagined different perspectives than the human one, as in Paul Auster’s poignant 1999 novel *Timbuktu*, the world seen from a dog’s perspective.

Broderick brings his vast knowledge of SF to his books, and I appreciated his inclusion and discussion of various female SF writers, who have been mostly erased out of SF history (Rudick, 2019). Nonetheless, the books share some common weaknesses. The most important is that I found the few chapters summarizing plots of work under overarching topics to be of greater value than the central descriptions of dozens of works that, after a while, become a blur. Instead of having general discussions of SF topics only as introductions or appendices, I would have preferred them to be the central part of the books, and to have the brief summaries of the plots as appendices.

Another limitation is that the books are monolingual, only covering the SF literature in English, even though there have been important contributions to the genre in other languages (see, e.g., Bergier, 1963; Parkinson, 2015). Broderick does not discuss very important and relevant works in translation, such as the Polish Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris* or *The Futurological Congress* (the latter turned into the phantasmagoric movie *The Congress*, see Cardeña, 2014). Nor does he mention literary masterpieces such as the epic rueful poem *Aniara* (1956), by Nobel prizewinner Harry Martinson, in which the computer Mima exhibits emotions, self-reflection, and, arguably, clairvoyant abilities, or the short story *Las Ruinas Circulares* (The Circular Ruins, 1944/1997), by Jorge Luis Borges, a literal rendition of Prospero’s reflection that “We are such stuff as dreams are made on” in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. And despite his experience as a creative writer, Broderick could have used an editor to curb his romance with multiple adjectives, alliterations, and academic jargon (e.g., “Those uptown intellectual boulevardiers - with their difficult and frequently derided jargon of antihumanism, subject positions, discourse formations, deconstructions and disseminations- turn out to have an eerie resemblance to Dennett’s down-home empiricists,” CSF, p. 9), and help him prune his overwrought prose.

Consciousness and Science Fiction must be approached tentatively with respect to the statements about consciousness and cognition research, but the SF literature reviewed shows an abundance of imagination and empathy into potential alternative forms of sentience. *Psience Fiction*, the better work in my estimation, is a welcome example of how psi phenomena have percolated into culture. Jeffrey Kripal’s (2011) strikingly illustrated book on the paranormal in comics and SF supplements it very well.

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