

James Woody Faw Calhoon

English 252

Sister Moen

5/21/12

Hugo Gernsback

Father of Science Fiction or Fraud?

Iron man, Superman, Spock, Optimus Prime, all of these characters come from the genre of storytelling known as Science Fiction, a popular type of literature that usually deals with imaginary, but plausible content such as future settings, aliens, and space travel. This exploration of scientific innovations and possibilities has led many to refer to this genre as a “literature of ideas” (Gilks). However, despite the multiple stories, ideas, and authors that can be found within the realm of science fiction literature three men are considered to be the founding fathers of this expansive genre; those who set down the very basic elements of science fiction that are still used by writers today.

These men, who helped shape the genre as it is today, are Jules Verne, who entertained readers with fantastic tales of balloon trips around the world in eighty days, submerged 20,000 leagues under the sea with Captain Nemo and the Nautilus, and dared to journey to the center of the earth. H.G. Wells, whose famous story “The War of the Worlds” accidentally sent an entire generation into fear and panic. And Hugo Gernsback, who was responsible for bringing about many of the earlier science fiction magazines as well as coining the phrase “Science Fiction” itself. However despite the work each of these individuals put into transforming the genre into

what it is today there is one whose candidacy as a “father of science fiction” is up for serious debate, and that is Hugo Gernsback.

Hugo Gernsback (1884-1967) was born in the Bonnevoie neighborhood of Luxembourg City, Luxembourg on August 16. Gernsback quickly migrated to the United States in 1905, at the age of twenty-one, and wasted no time in gaining full citizenship (Hugo Gernsback-Summary Bibliography). Before making his contributions to the realm of science fiction, he was an entrepreneur in the electronics industry, helping to import radio parts from Europe into the United States as well as popularizing the amateur “wireless” radio, more commonly referred to as the “ham” radio. Gernsback began founding his magazines in 1908 with his first magazine *Modern Electronics*. From there he would go on to produce many other magazines including *The Electrical Experimenter*, an electronics magazine that would later go on to become *Science and Invention* the magazine that would become his first major contribution to the genre of science fiction. It was here that he began publishing many science fiction short stories, bringing them into the public view for the first time.

Gernsback’s role as a father of science fiction should be called into question because, when compared to Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, he did very little for the advancement of the actual science fiction genre. His only notable contributions to the genre were the foundation of the science fiction fandom, and being the first to accurately predict a few inventions of the twenty-first century, such as the television and the rough equivalent of an I-phone. These predictions were made in his novel *Ralph 124C 41+*, which ended up being badly criticized by many critics and was one of only two books he wrote in his entire lifetime. Other problems that are brought into question when discussing his role as one of the founders of science fiction include the shady business practices he used while running his magazines, and the fact that he

was despised by many of his fellow writers, to the point that world renowned writers, H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith commonly referred to him as “Hugo the Rat” (Sprague deCamp 298).

In early April of 1911 Hugo Gernsback began producing a twelve part-serial in his own *Modern Electronics* magazine entitled *Ralph 124C 41+*. These collections of stories were later compiled into a novel in 1925, a novel that is widely panned by critics and that few people read today. The novel, while admittedly providing many common aspects of science fiction today, is commonly referred to as “a “tawdry illiterate tale” and a “sorry concoction” (Aldiss 203-204). The novel, as it turns out, was mostly unreadable with many grammatical errors and a widely unappealing aesthetic. Also of note is that while the other “founding fathers” were known for writing a plethora of novels Gernsback only wrote two. Gernsback was more commonly known for writing short stories that “... were largely sorry mixtures of dime novels and popular science articles, with traces of other generic influences.” (Westfahl, *Science Fiction 's*) If this is the case and Gernsback’s writings were appalled by critics and only read by few people than why should he be considered one of the “founding fathers of science fiction?” When, in comparison, the works of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne were loved by many to the point the Verne is regularly placed among the top five most translated authors in the world.

When debating Hugo Gernsback’s validity as a founder of science fiction his extremely questionable and shady business practices are also usually brought into the discussion. But, one may ask what do shady business practices have to do with Gernsback’s role in raising up science fiction as a genre? Under normal circumstances the answer would be nothing, but when fellow authors, and even fans acknowledge that Gernsback would use writer’s materials in his magazines without asking or even compensating for them they tend to be brought up. Barry

Malzberg, a famous and popular science fiction writer, had this to say on the subject of Gernsback's business practices,

“Gernsback's venality and corruption, his sleaziness and his utter disregard for the financial rights of authors, have been so well documented and discussed in critical and fan literature. That the founder of genre science fiction who gave his name to the field's most prestigious award and who was the Guest of Honor at the 1952 Worldcon was pretty much a crook (and a contemptuous crook who stiffed his writers but paid himself \$100K a year as President of Gernsback Publications) has been clearly established.”

(Resnick 43.5, 27-8)

If Gernsback was so willing to take the work of other author's without permission or without paying them what right does he have to be called “A founding father of Science Fiction?”

However, while there are many reasons Gernsback's role as a “science fiction founding father” should be called into question there are, in fact, a couple of reasons that the title may be applicable, and those will be addressed for the sake of a fair argument. One of these reasons is that, while he may have done nothing for the development of the actual genre, Hugo Gernsback was largely responsible for the forming and founding of the science fiction fandom. It was during the nineteen twenties when Gernsback was producing the magazine *Science and Invention* that he began printing fan letters in his magazine, hyping praise on the science fiction short stories that he had published inside the publication. These letters allowed the fans of the stories to know that there were others out in the world who shared their particular interests and soon they began contacting each other and began forming together to form large groups of fans that would

continue to write into Gernsback's magazine. It was around this time that Hugo Gernsback is credited with coining the term "Science Fiction" which is what the genre is known as today.

Although his book *Ralph 124C 41+* was widely panned by critics for being unreadable and using an awful aesthetic the book is notable for introducing many concepts of science fiction that the genre still uses even today, and is even considered by some as "one of the most influential science fiction stories of all time." (Westfahl, *The Mechanics* 135) During his research paper entitled "*This Unique Document*": *Hugo Gernsback's Ralph 124c 41+ and the Genres of Science Fiction* Gary Westfahl puts forth that "Ralph was the first work consciously written to display the characteristic style and content of both fiction and scientific writing," meaning that Hugo Gernsback's was the first story written that actually involved scientific understanding and invention being used together with fiction (Westfahl *Unique Document* 95t). However, one could argue that the advanced submarine "The Nautilus" in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* could have fulfilled this role. But, regardless of the debate over its status as the first "real" science fiction story *Ralph* is at least known for introducing numerous ideas that are still used in science fiction today including weather control, laser blasters, universal translators, and domed cities.

Despite his inability to provide any major contributions to the literature of science fiction, and his extremely shady practices, the fact is, Hugo Gernsback is still considered by many to be one of the three founding fathers of science fiction. This undeserved respect is so high that the highest ranking science fiction award, the Hugo, was named after him, and is awarded to people on a yearly basis. Unfortunately this feeling of respect runs so deep in professional and fan circles it appears as if there will be nothing that can be done except continue to make more and more people aware that this man may not be as deserving as he seems.

Works Cited

“Hugo Gernsback-Summary Bibliography.” *isfdb.org*. 4.0. n.p. n.d. Web. 19 May. 2012

Aldiss, Brian W. and David Wingrove. *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. New York: Atheneum, 1986.

Gilks, Marg, Paula Fleming, and Moria Allen. “Science Fiction The Literature of Ideas.” *Writingworld.com*. n.p. n.d. Web. 19 May. 2012.

Resnick, Mike and Barry Malzberg. *Resnick and Malzberg Dialogues XXXXVI: The Prozines (Part 1)*. Vol. 43. The SFWA Bulletin, 2009-2010. Print.

deCamp, L. Sprague *Lovecraft: A Biography*. Doubleday, 1975.

Westfahl, Gary. “Science Fiction’s Amazing Story and True Story.” *Science Fiction Studies*. 36.2 (2009): 202-203. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 19 May. 2012.

---. “The Mechanics of Wonder.” *The Creation of the Idea of Science Fiction*. U of Liverpool P, 1999.

---. “This Unique Document: Hugo Gernsback’s Ralph 124C 41+ and the Genres of Science Fiction.” *Extrapoliation*. 35.2 (1994): 95t. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 20 May. 2012.