

H. A. Hargreaves and Canadian Speculative Fiction

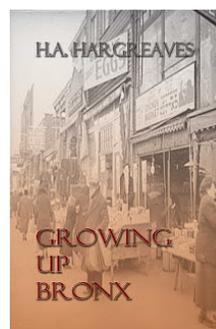
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Adapted from Runté, Robert, “Afterword” in H.A. Hargreaves’ *North by 2000+* Neustadt, Ontario: Five Rivers Publishing, 2012. ISBN 9780986642395

I first read *North by 2000* nearly 40 years ago. I must have read three or four thousand other short stories since: so why is it that “Dead to the World” and “Cain” and “Tee Vee Man” and “Protected Environment” and “More Things in Heaven and Earth” are the stories that keep surfacing in my memory? Why is it that when I’m trying to explain what makes Canadian science fiction *Canadian*, these are stories that jump to mind as the exemplars? Why is it when I wrote my own first novel, I suddenly recognized that the opening was a direct (if unconscious) steal from the automat scene in “Dead to the World”? What is it about these half dozen, quiet, unpretentious stories that makes them so influential, so compellingly *memorable*?

The answer, I think, is that Hargreaves tapped into a Canadian mindset, a Canadian way of thinking about things, that resonates with Canadian readers. Again, it’s a bit ironic that I should be saying that about an American-born writer whose other story collection (*Growing up Bronx: A Memoir of My Shapers and Shakers*) is about how his formative years in the Bronx shaped who he became. But I think it is fair to claim Hargreaves as a Canadian writer: all these stories were written after he had emigrated to Canada—he had been here 28 years when *North by 2000* was first published; all his SF stories are set in Canada; and all his protagonists (even the bad guys) behave like Canadians, address Canadian themes, and

come to Canadian-style endings. And Hargreaves’ fiction was never published in the States: all his stories before 1979 were published in England; after that, Canada. It is not my intent to discount Hargreaves’ American roots; indeed, I would argue that one common characteristic of Canadian SF writers is that many of them (Fredrik Brio, J. Brian Clarke, Michael G. Coney, Dave Duncan, Pauline Gedge, William Gibson, Matthew Hughes, Crawford Killian, *Edward Llewellyn*, Alberto Manguel, Judith Merril, Spider Robinson, Sean Stewart, Andrew Weiner, Edward Willett, Robert Charles Wilson) came from someplace else. It’s our immigrant backgrounds that explains half of what makes Canadian SF distinct. (More on that in a moment.)

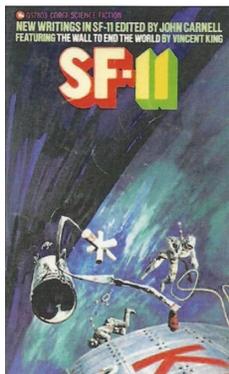


H. A. Hargreaves’ *Growing up Bronx: A Memoir of My Shapers and Shakers*. Neustadt, Ontario: Five Rivers Publishing, 2012.

Hargreaves’ SF—with its police robots, televised classrooms, communication satellites, and so on—could be classified as ‘hard science fiction’ (that is, SF based in the ‘hard sciences’), which is essentially an American genre. But there is also a lot of

sociology, psychology, parapsychology, and criminology (that is, the ‘soft’ sciences) in here too, which is more typical of the British version of the genre. Canadian SF (like much else that is Canadian) tends to be some amalgam of British and American traditions.

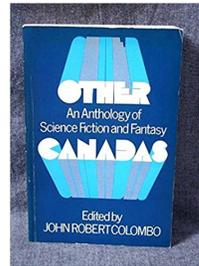
Of course, any attempt to characterize a nation’s literature is doomed to simplistic overgeneralization that ignores the individuality of the author; and yet, we are all influenced by the culture milieu in which we find ourselves, and one can perhaps discern certain trends. The typical story in John W. Campbell’s *Analog* (for over 30 years the dominant American SF magazine) had an engineer land on a planet, be confronted with a technological problem, solve it, and thus make space safe for America. The British in the same period, by contrast, tended to write more downbeat, dystopian fiction, with only the occasional foray into “Empire” SF. The post-modernist, “New Wave” SF of the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, found its home in the highly respected British magazine, *New Worlds*.



The volume edited by John Carnell in which “Dead to the World”, Hargreaves most influential story, first appeared.

The stories in *North by 2000* were all originally submitted to *Analog*, but then published in *New Worlds*, or similarly-oriented British anthologies (see above). In each case, the legendary Campbell returned Hargreaves’ submission with extensive personal notes for how it would have to be rewritten to fit into Campbell’s vision for

Analog; and in each case, Hargreaves would choose not to compromise his own vision, and instead sent the story off overseas. Campbell apparently considered this perfectly appropriate, because with the last story, Campbell ended his notes with the comment that instead of taking his advice, Hargreaves should just once again send the story to *New Worlds* and have it published as it stood. Campbell clearly admired Hargreaves’ writing, just did not see his stories as *Analog* material. It is tempting to suggest it was because Hargreaves’ stories were too Canadian.



John Robert Colombo, ed.
Other Canadas: An Anthology of Science Fiction and Fantasy. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson; First Edition edition (1979)
ISBN-13: 978-0070829534

So, what characterizes Canadian SF? In his preface to *Other Canadas* (1979), the first multi-author anthology of Canadian SF, John Robert Colombo identified three themes as typically Canadian: (1) the “Polar World”; (2) the “National Disaster Scenario”; and (3) the “Alienated Outsider”. Colombo also observed that Canadians tended to write more fantasy than science fiction, but in Hargreaves’ case, it is all science fiction.

Colombo’s “polar world” theme has mostly been dismissed as an example of circular reasoning, since Colombo *defined* as “Canadian” anything set in the Canadian North. Unlike Hargreaves, who set “Tangled Web” and “Protected Environment” in the North (though not, strictly speaking, in the arctic), few of the current generation of Canadian writers show any interest in the polar world. Perhaps that makes Hargreaves’s SF doubly Canadian, but it would probably be more accurate to suggest

that these stories exemplify the Canadian view that humans are subordinate to nature. Where American protagonists tend to be larger than life and dominate their worlds, Canadian protagonists tend to be overwhelmed by their surroundings. In Canadian literature, when one goes forth to challenge the elements, as in “Protected Environment”, one generally loses. Similarly, what elevates the actions of Hargreaves’ protagonist in “Tee Vee Man” to heroic status is the absolutely routine nature of his actions in the face of an unrelentingly hostile environment. In this instance, the protagonist survives, but at cost, and his only reward is to have lived another day, and to be allowed the privilege of doing it all again tomorrow. It is a pretty good metaphor for life.

This sense of subordination to the environment may also explain why Canadian writers, including Hargreaves, tend not to create vast interstellar empires. We live in a country in which enormous areas are virtually uninhabitable and population centres are separated by immense distances. Flying up north or driving across the prairies at night may not be a perfect parallel to space travel, but it reminds us what ‘distance’ *really* means. If it is this difficult for someone in Ottawa to relate to conditions in Halifax or Victoria, then how much more ridiculous to expect the bureaucracy to manage a colony on a planet circling some distant star? Thus, in Hargreaves’ one nod to interstellar travel, “Infinite Variation”, the colonial official is left isolated at the end of a too long line of communication, forced to actions he does not want to take, evoking consequences he does not want to consider.

The “national disaster scenario” can also be found in Hargreaves’ work. Although it would be decidedly *un*Canadian to indulge in the sort of patriotic fervor found among Americans, or even the Brits, the more

nationalistic among us might feel that Hargreaves’ projection of Americanada itself represents a political disaster. I do not think that can count, however, since Hargreaves himself clearly underplays the matter: one cannot claim that the stories are about the fall of Canada, or that Hargreaves depicts the matter as one of particular import. But “2020 Vision” is clearly an apocalyptic vision, with Central Canada gone, and the rest thrown back a hundred years. Similarly, “Tee Vee Man” manages to narrowly avert a national disaster somewhere on the Africa Continent; and the world in “Infinite Variation” is inexorably sliding into its own global (albeit spiritual) crisis.



Hank Hargreaves
his 70s.

The theme of “alienated outsider”, however, is the key to understanding both Hargreaves’ canon and Canadian SF in general. Much of 20th century literature addresses the theme of alienation, of course, but what struck me while listening to Hargreaves read the ending of “Dead to the World”, lo these 40 years ago, was that this was the first time anyone had hinted that alienation might be a *good thing*. Cut off from his identity as a living citizen, totally and irretrievably isolated from the community around him, Joe Schultz achieves a lifestyle and contentment that would have been impossible in his former role as participating citizen. In the end, Joe Schultz realizes that he is quite literally, better off ‘dead’.

That being an outsider might be preferable, is a concept that could only resonate with a Canadian. I attribute this to

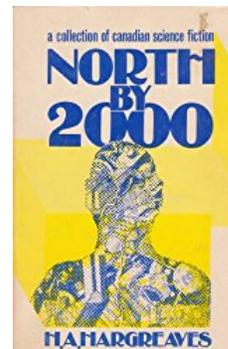
two factors: first, our central mythos (whatever the reality) of multiculturalism; second, our proximity to the United States. Whereas the American melting pot attempts to assimilate everyone into a single culture dynamic, the official Canadian policy of multiculturalism attempts to preserve a mosaic of interacting but distinctive cultures. Remaining outside the mainstream, then, is a Canadian cultural imperative. Canadian SF writers get this, because—like Hargreaves—many of them are in fact immigrants. By the same measure, even the Canadian-born often feel economically, politically, and culturally overwhelmed by our American neighbours. Consigned to the hinterland of (North) American civilization, we often perceive ourselves isolated from the people and events that are shaping the world and the future. Sometimes it seems as if the only thing all Canadians have in common is the vague feeling that whatever is important in the world, it is not to be found here. With practically every Canadian belonging to a minority group different from that of their neighbours, and with a national population too small to achieve a consistent presence in international affairs, the “alienated outsider” is ultimately all Canadians.

This universal Canadian sense of alienation from the mainstream has three implications for Canadian SF.

First, the “prevalence of fantasy over science fiction” in Canadian SF that Colombo noted may be explained by the fact that, unlike the nation of pragmatic technocrats to the south, Canadians tend to be more concerned with preserving our past—our separate cultural ties and heritages—than with our somewhat dubious future. Most ‘hard’ science fiction in Hargreaves’ era was essentially the literature of expanding economic and technocratic empires, the outgrowth of an America confident that the future belonged to it. In contrast, as Elisabeth Vonarburg once

pointed out, it is more difficult for an author from Quebec to take seriously that the people staffing the space station fifty years from now will be named Jacques-Yves and Marie-Claude.

Second, the concept of “hero” in Canadian literature is different from the traditional image of heroism in SF. Because Canadians are accustomed to feeling like the underdog, Canadian writers tend to concentrate more on ordinary people muddling through ordinary lives, rather than the all-capable, all-conquering Hero of Campbellian SF. Canadian protagonists are rarely ‘alpha males’; they bumble more and are self-effacing (“like the writers”, Hargreaves once said). Our ‘heroes’ tend to be victims, or losers with occasional wins; any victories that such a character achieves will be hard won and indecisive, since one is always at the mercy of time and the elements.



H.A. Hargreaves, *North by 2000*. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates (1976). The original collection, and the first ever to be marketed as “Canadian Science Fiction”.

Take Hargreaves’ “Tee Vee Man”: he’s the archetypal Canadian hero, precisely because he isn’t the Captain or the Chief Scientist or the gun-toting hero; he is just the guy that does the repairs. Tee Vee clearly sees himself at the bottom of the totem pole, as having made a wrong decision in coming to the station. His victory over the elements is both costly and temporary (because he has to do it all again, tomorrow), though his self-esteem and job satisfaction do improve in the end. Similarly, the protagonist of “Tangled Web” is the mild mannered

Scroop, exiled to a utility closet in the inhospitable North for trying (and failing) to help Joe Schultz. Even Joe Schultz, in “Dead to the World”, setting out to reclaim his identity and life, achieves a happy ending only in the complete failure of any of his actions to achieve the goal for which he was actually striving.

On the other hand, when protagonists try to behave as alpha males in Canadian fiction, the results are usually traumatic. Again, Hargreaves’ stories provide absolutely typical illustrations of the principle: When the villainous protagonist of “In His Moccasins” tries to overcome the odds, take charge of his situation, and impose his will on those around him, he fails utterly; indeed, he ends up out in the cold, alienated even from his own body, forced to view the world from someone else’s perspective. Similarly, Mel Colter, the macho hero of “2020 Vision”, is forced to the realization that he is fighting a losing battle, that the world has moved on, and that ultimately he has become no better than the enemy that destroyed his wife.

Rather than Campbell’s traditional larger-than-life Hero, then, Canadian SF is more likely to take the point of view of the bystander. The narrator in “‘Fore’ – Eight – Sixteen”, for example, is not the inventor, but merely one of his sidekicks. Tee Vee Man ends a political crisis and saves (an African) democracy, but he does so unknowingly as a kind of distant bystander to the main events of the day. Similarly, the letter-writer in “Infinite Variation” sees himself as essentially a powerless bystander in a situation in which he has no choice or control. Jason Berkley in “Cain” grows and matures, but it is the system that has shaped Jason, not the other way around; he is acted upon more than he acts. Even, Alan Hamilton, the protagonist in “More in Heaven and Earth”, self-confident and self-assured though he may be, relies on his

committee: ‘the Unit’ is successful under pressure because the team members, Alan included, are able to submerge their individual egos into the collective. The ultimate expression of the team’s unity is achieved thanks more to shy newcomer Janet, than to Alan’s leadership; and their enemies fail not because of any action on Alan’s part, but because they made the fatal mistake of trying to behave like alphas....



Dr. Runté (right), Senior Editor, Five Rivers Publishing, introduces Dr. Hank Hargreaves (left) at the launch of *North by 2000+*, the expanded re-release of *North by 2000*, at Calgary’s When Words Collide Festival, Aug. 2012.

This orientation to the average citizen as protagonist, or the bystander point of view, often means Canadian SF tends towards introspective character studies rather than action-adventure. This in turn tends to give a rather bleak aspect to much of Canadian fiction, an aspect enhanced by the tendency to slow-paced action and thought-oriented stories. The rip-roaring, supercharged fun of *Star-Wars*-style space opera is primarily an American motif, out of the stories of the Old West. In contrast, in Hargreaves’ writing the action is often almost entirely cerebral. “Infinite Variation”, for example, is a letter seeking advice that cannot possibly arrive in time. It is not just that the point of view is that of an official who abdicates any responsibility for what is coming, and instead takes on the role of helpless bystander, but that the letter format itself removes the reader from directly observing the action. The story is entirely an abstraction, a thought experiment in

colonialism and bureaucratic ethics.

Similarly, in “Fore’-Eight-Sixteen”, the reader is isolated from direct observation of events by hearing an after-the-fact account in interview format: another thought experiment, though in this instance, the intent is to be humorous. In “Tangled Web”, the central crisis is triggered by a peaceful death from natural causes, and the resulting action is entirely bureaucratic, the combatants quoting regulations at each other rather than crossing lightsabers. Not exactly a seat-of-the-pants actioner, and yet, oddly satisfying. Similarly, Joe Schultz’s adventures in “Dead to the World” are existential rather than physical, and what actions he takes are entirely ineffectual. Yet it is a great story, a classic, frequently reprinted and eminently memorable.



Dr. Hargreaves was in hospital when his CSFFA Lifetime Achievement Award was announced at V-Con 41 in Vancouver. Consequently, Cliff Samuels, CSFFA Awards Coordinator (left), and Robert Runté, Senior Editor at Five Rivers Publishing (right), presented Dr. Hargreaves (center) with his plaque at his home in Calgary, Dec.7, 2015.

Which brings us to the third characteristic of Canadian SF arising out of our uniquely alienated national identity: adopting the position of outsider or taking the point of view of the bystander allows one, as the detached observer, a certain independence of thought. Certainly, “Dead to the World” is an excellent example of a sardonic commentary on bureaucracy and

modern life. I particularly loved how Hargreaves foreshadows the ending by revealing Joe Schultz’s slightly larcenous tendencies early on, when Joe appropriates that poor woman’s dessert. The invention of the robot police is obviously a necessity for the satire to work, but the end result is Joe Schultz blowing a great big raspberry to our dependence on the digital environment, three decades before ‘identify theft’ became a household phrase.

On the other hand, in spite of our national identity being grounded in a vague sense of alienation, there is nevertheless an underlying optimism to both Hargreaves’ writing and Canadian SF in general. We believe ourselves (again, whatever the reality) to be a bit nicer than others, to be focused on ‘doing the right thing’ (though others may not always see things the same way), and above all, to be able to endure. Can anyone read “Cain” and not wish that our penal system were more like that? Tough love, but, you know: nice! “Tee Vee Man” and “More Things in Heaven and Earth” are about nice guys persisting in doing the right thing, even in the face of difficulties. All three stories are somewhat utopian, but even the much darker “2020 Vision” and “In His Moccasins” are optimistic in their way: civil society is starting to rebuild and the bad times are coming to an end in “2020 Vision”; and the villain gets his just deserts in “In His Moccasins”—though admittedly that last is more of a stretch on the ‘niceness’ dimension. Even here, however, one gets the sense that both protagonists will endure. Certainly that is the case for Joe Schultz, who muddles his way through in the end, though not necessarily to the goals he thought he was pursuing. Completely abandoned by society, he nevertheless survives and likely prospers.

I would argue, then, that the reason *North By 2000* resonated with me and my

fellow Canadians so strongly—why those stories remain so memorable after 40 years—is that they are quintessential Canadian literature. They capture and reflect back to us our national identity, our self-image, in a way that Campbellian or Wellisian science fiction may not. They address the themes and issues that matter to us as Canadians, and they do so in the low key, understated action of real life—my life—rather than some future projection of the gun-slinging heroes of the American frontier or the dashing gentleman spy of a decaying British Empire. Above all, of course, they succeed because they are well-constructed, well-written stories.

There is also another way in which Hargreaves has been a major inspiration to

me. Hargreaves set aside one week every couple of years to write short fiction. The result was the *North by 2000+* collection. The moral, for me, is that even if one cannot afford the luxury of becoming a full-time writer, one can still produce an impressive canon of significant and influential work over the course of a lifetime. That Hargreaves is a favorite among Canadian readers can be seen in his having been twice nominated in the “Lifetime Achievement” category for the Aurora Awards (the Canadian equivalent of the Hugo Awards) and in 2015, inducted into the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association's Hall of Fame. Not bad for a total of ten short stories written over twenty-six years.



The Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association's Hall of Fame acknowledges outstanding achievements that contribute to the stature of Canadian science fiction / fantasy. Inductees receive a plaque and their names are inscribed on a two-sided trophy. H. A. Hargreaves was inducted in 2015 and is seen here with the statue, on display at the Fish Creek Public Library, Calgary, for the When Words Collide Festival. The two back-to-back faces of the trophy are in the spirit of Janus, Roman God of doorways, of decisions and of beginnings and endings. They look forward to the future, as much of Science Fiction always has, and back to the past, which is the home of most of Fantasy. The female face shown here is timeless, a homage to the sub-genre of Time Travel. Her helmet is a retro space helmet, referencing the traditional role of Space in Science Fiction.

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