Tante Margaret Just Wants to Have Fun. Margaret Atwood. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. New York: Nan A. Talese, 2011. 272 pp. $24.95 hc.

In Other Worlds collects Margaret Atwood's miscellaneous writings on sf-related fiction, some short sf vignettes of her own, and a lengthy opening essay that reworks her Ellman Lectures in Modern Literature delivered at Emory University in 2010. Most of the short pieces are reviews and introductions to classic sf texts (Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* [1726-35], Haggard's *She* [1887], Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* [1896], Huxley's *Brave New World* [1932], Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949], Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* [1976]) and some contemporary literary slipstream works (Bryher's *Visa for Avalon* [1965], Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* [2005]). They appeared in major Anglophone media venues such as the Modern Library, Penguin paperbacks, *Slate,* BBC, *The Guardian*, and the *New York Review of Books*. The earliest date from 2002, the latest from 2011—which is essentially the span between the publications of *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). It is clear that *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood's second foray into sf after *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), was treated by the literary establishment as one of those significant moments when an Olympian writer brings a popular genre out of the slums into the Court of Quality. *Oryx and Crake* was short-listed for the Booker Prize, and in the decade since its appearance Atwood has been invited by media and academic institutions to be the genre's spokesperson, its sponsor in polite company.

All in all, it has not been a pretty sight. It is glaringly obvious to anyone in the field that Atwood does not know very much about sf; she has not thought about it very much; and she has not read very much of it. Her writing on sf has been striking in its lack of curiosity, its laziness, and its conventionality. And yet, here it is, the magisterially titled *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. That this childish and banal collection of personal reminiscences and critical platitudes claims to explain a genre that Atwood still disavows (she writes "speculative fiction," which depicts only "things that could plausibly happen")—must give one pause. The only writers worth her mention are safe chestnuts (More, Swift, Verne, Wells, Gilman, Bellamy, Huxley, Lewis, Bradbury, Wyndham, Gibson, Sterling, Le Guin), feminist writers of the second wave (Russ, Piercy), and some iffy elders (Haggard, Hudson, Tolkien)—names that the literati consider sf writers only by accident. No Stapledon, no Dick, no Butler, no Delany, no Heinlein, no Clarke, no Tiptree (fer cryin' out loud!). Of bona fide sf works, she mentions nothing published after 1984.

This alone should raise the suspicion that Atwood does not consider sf to be truly worth her attention. And sure enough, there is not a word about historical changes in the field, technoculture, or sf's role in modernization. Sf is all about two things for Atwood. The first is the retelling of archaic folktales and myths. Those myths are the primal stories, the really valuable ones, and they fascinate the primal people: the ancients who invented them and children who create fantasy from them. The second is Margaret Atwood. Atwood's Ellman lectures

rely on reminiscences about her own childhood fascination with superhero comic books, gaudy sci-fi outfits, and her own prattling stories about flying bunnies. These provide the basis for connecting comic-book superhero tropes with classical myths: Wonder Woman is updated Diana, super-tools are descendants of fairy- and folktales' magical devices, the recurrence of superhero doubles is just Jung in action.

The display of pulp Jungianism (and a similarly vulgar gesturing to Northrop Frye, who Atwood claims was her teacher) is the author's excuse to parade a seemingly inexhaustible store of platitudes that require absolutely no evidence or reflection. X is always the modern answer for Y, where Y is an "eternal urge" for something or other; A is always the modern version of the more original B. "Gene splicing is the modern answer to the eternal urge to make a more perfect model of ourselves" (132); the nanopocalypse is the fresh version of The Sorcerer's Apprentice. And on and on. Apparently unconscious of the superhero industry or the boom in comics scholarship over the past thirty years, Atwood enlightens us about Superman's, Batman's, and Wonder Woman's classical ancestry.

Atwood knows that she has been invited as a celebrity writer, not as an initiate or scholar of sf culture. We can assume that she knows her audience, readers of middlebrow "quality" writing who are utterly ignorant of sf. They came to hear about Margaret, and she delivers. Her arguments—such as they are—are pretexts for meanderings down memory lane, full of breezy digressions, jokey anecdotes, and superficial opinions told in a singsongy, glib voice, like an old aunt you have to listen to patiently as she ruminates about her happy childhood—which was, you know, so much more interesting than yours. Where she engages in the history of what she calls "modern wonder tales," it is usually to deliver clichés and received wisdom.

Atwood's writing about writing about has always been affably vain. In *In Other Worlds*, however, this reaches new heights. Evidently, science fiction—as a mode and a subject—has allowed her to relax her language and her attention, and to lie back in the hammock of thought. She clearly enjoys that she does not have to pretend to be serious and to work hard. The most troubling aspect of this attitude is that the genre itself becomes linked with her childishness. For Atwood, sf is a simple matter that evokes simplistic, and finally simple-minded, thinking. Atwood does not explain why she moved from dogmatic realism to "speculative fiction" or what challenges artists might encounter in making the move. Reading *In Other Worlds*, it is hard to dismiss the notion that she has found a way to combine social conscience with a return to narcissistic childhood naïveté—certainly not an advance in intellectual sophistication. The maddening recurrence of coy, qualifying conditionals for her claims—"possibly," "perhaps," "may well," "in part," "definitely seems," "a certain," throughout the book—indicates that Tante Margaret is not at all sure that she knows what she is talking about, but she may put one over on the children.

Not everything in the book is quite so juvenile. A reader who wants to be introduced to sf without pain will find solid information and comfortable theories. Some of the introduction and miscellaneous essays are informative. I

use the Penguin edition of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* largely because of Atwood's introduction (included here). The essays on Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Bryher's *Visa for Avalon* are worth a read. But for folks familiar with sf's rich philosophical and artistic heritage, *In Other Worlds* is much like Atwood's own drawings on the book's endpapers: cute, silly caricatures appropriate for kids' pajamas.**—Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., *SFS***

Theoretically Informed, Richly Detailed, and Wonderfully Manic. Mark Bould. *Science Fiction*. ROUTLEDGE FILM GUIDEBOOK. New York: Routledge, 2012. vi + 239 pp. £16.99 pbk.

Mark Bould's handy little volume is a lot more than the "film guidebook" it is pitched to be. The book does indeed offer a large amount of information about sf cinema of all sorts. Its scope is amazing, ranging as it does from the beginnings of the genre (Georges Méliès) to the present day, from costly spectacles such as *Avatar* (2009) to ultra-low-budget knockoffs such as *The Wasp Woman* (1959), from the high art of *2001* (1968) to the deliberate kitsch of *Frankenhooker* (1990) and the earnest awfulness of *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959), and from English-language movies familiar to British and American fans to the sf cinemas of Russia, Eastern Europe, and East Asia that are far less known in the West. It seems as if Bould has seen every science-fiction film ever made—and also, even more impressively, that he vividly remembers pretty much everything that he has seen.

But for all its awesome erudition, Bould's book is not anything like an encyclopedia or a list of what is worth seeing. It is neither a bunch of entries in alphabetical order, nor an historical narrative of the genre's development. There are no rankings of zero to four stars, and no "thumbs up/thumbs down" recommendations or warnings. At one point, Bould argues against the received wisdom that *Blade Runner* (1982) must necessarily be of higher aesthetic value than the 1980 version of *Flash Gordon*. But his aim in doing this is not to reorder the sf canon; rather, he seeks to suggest that judgments of artistic "quality" are entirely beside the point. Other things are in fact far more important: the ways in which an sf movie affects its audience cognitively and emotionally, the social and technological conditions from which the movie extrapolates, and the ideological positions that it endorses or subverts. It is on such levels that Bould works through the corpus of science-fiction cinema.

In order to address these concerns, the book is organized conceptually instead of historically. There are three large chapters, each of which focuses on one important feature of science fiction as a genre. The first chapter is about the relation between sf cinema and science. By this latter term, Bould refers not only to actually existing scientific discoveries and doctrines, but also to the ways that science works in the world as a practice and as an institution, and to the ways that it is apprehended by the larger society. This allows Bould to discuss such matters as the fictional value of "bad" or incorrect science, the depiction of science in movies as both a source of supreme truth and as a danger to our very existence, and the persistence of gender inequities in both the practice and the popular representation of science.