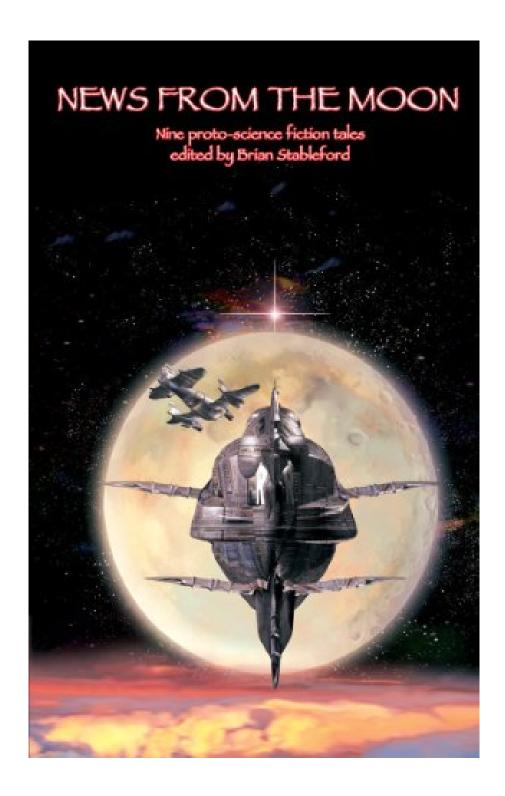


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This collection of nine proto-science fiction tales, translated and edited by renowned science fiction writer and scholar Brian Stableford, ranges from Louis-Sébastien Mercier's 1768 opening tale, in which the hero communicates with the dead through a beam that anticipates a modern-day laser, to an 1887 story by Guy de Maupassant that speculates on Martian life. In between, we have tales of a heart transplant, a device that can see through time and an alien dragon. The book also includes Albert Robida's classic novella "The Monkey King" in which Saturnin Farandoul, shipwrecked as a baby and raised by apes on a Pacific Island, visits the Mysterious Island and joins forces with Captain Nemo to battle the savage pirate hordes of Bora-Bora. The stories gathered here exemplify the manifest intention of writers from the 18th and early 19th centuries to create a new genre of modern, imaginative fiction, distinctively different from the Utopias and occult romances typical of the times. This edition includes a historical introduction and notes by Stableford.

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We come to understand French speculative fiction is a distinct tradition

By Glenn Russell

After centuries dominated by the church and after the 18th century's age of reason, there was an explosion of imagination in the 19th century. From the romanticism of poets and painters such as Byron, Keats, Delacroix and Turner to the philosophy of such visionary thinkers as Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, from Darwinian evolution, Marxist economics, Freudian psychoanalysis to the astonishing new scientific and technological discoveries, human nature, history, society and the universe came to be seen in unique, fresh and sometimes disturbing ways.

Brian Stableford's 14 page introduction provides the historical and literary context for the 9 French protoscience fiction stories in this collection, including how the French writers have the longest standing history of speculative fiction based whole or in part on scientific ideas. Among the better known authors examined within the world of French literary-scientific fiction are Jules Verne and Théophile Gautier and Victor Hugo. We come to understand French speculative fiction is a distinct tradition not to be limited or confused with what we traditionally think of as science fiction. Here is a brief review of 5 of the 9 tales:

News from the Moon – Louis-Sebastien Mercier

Although written in 1768, the spirit of this tale is very much part of 19th century romanticism beginning with

the first sentence: "The account I am writing is perfectly true, although the reader might deem me a madman." A truly remarkable account – communicating with a departed friend living in more rarefied form and answering questions from his position on the moon. By way of example, here is what his friend has to say, "Science, uncertain on Earth, is supported here by the clearest evidence. There is no object that our eyes cannot easily penetrate . . . ". Ah, proto-science fiction! A man living in a form beyond the grave underscores how his experience is supported by the evidence of science.

The Future Phenomenon – Stéphane Mallarmé

With uncanny and almost eerie foresight, Mallarmé anticipates the genre of post-nuclear war fiction with this short-short story. The symbolist poet/author pens how in some barren, dusty, earth-scorched future husbands and their bald, ghastly-looking wives enter a tent erected by the 'Showman of Past Things' to see a display of a beautiful naked women with a full head of blond hair. "When all have contemplated the novel creature, a relic of some earlier accursed age – some indifferently, for they will not have the power of understanding, but others heart-broken, their eyelids moist with tears of resignation – they will look at one another." "Mallarmé invites us to reflect on what life would be like in a future completely devoid of beauty.

The Metaphysical Machine – Jean Richepin

Instead of an inquisitive English scientist exploring the future as we find in H.G. Well's 'The Time Machine', Richepin's short tale features an obsessed French madman exploring metaphysical truth by a machine that looks something like the Englishman's time machine but with two important differences: a dentist's drill rigged up to produce excruciating pain in his hollow tooth and a mechanized scroll enabling the Frenchman to write as he undergoes his torment. Sounds crazy? It is crazy, although the narrator repeatedly insists he is not mad. At one point in his frenzied telling, our philosophical pioneer exclaims, "Besides the external senses and the internal senses, there is another sense, internal and external at the same time, knowing its object as the external senses do, immaterial as the internal senses are, but having absolutely nothing in common with either of them – and that is the SENSE OF THE ABSOLUTE." Now, where does all this lead us? Does the French visionary survive his adventure as does Well's English scientist? Let me just say this tale is taken from a collection of Jean Richepin stories entitled 'Moris bizarres' (Bizarre Deaths).

The Monkey King - Albert Robida

A tour de force of imagination, this rollicking 130 page adventure tale has our hero lost at sea as an infant before being washed ashore on an island where he is then raised by a community of warmhearted and wise apes. There are all sorts of fabulous happenings when the hero moves back to the world of men and eventually becomes a courageous and creative ship captain. Here is an example of the dozens of adventures, when the hero, Saturnin Farandoul by name, and his companion, wear diving gear and explores the ocean: "Armed to the teeth with hatchets in hand and two pistols operated by compressed air in their belts, along with sharp knives, the mariners threw themselves upon the slimy rocks and ventured into caverns inhabited by monsters unknown to man, which only the most deranged imagination could have dreamed up: six-meterlong lobsters, sea-crocodiles, torpedo-squids, crabs with a thousand feet, sea serpents, finned elephants, giant oysters and so on." Albert Robita's tale is not only sheer adventure in the tradition of Odysseus and Sindbad but prompts us to reflect on our human interaction with the planet and other species.

Martian Mankind - Guy de Maupassant

A pint-sized, bespectacled mousy visitor enters the study of the gentlemanly narrator and excitedly discloses many scientific facts about the planet Mars and mixes in details of the appearance and movements of the Martians, all the while insisting he is not mad. The visitor then goes on to relate his own first-hand experience of a Marian expedition to Earth. We read, "I perceived, directly above me, very close, a luminous transparent glove, surrounded by immense beating wings – at least I thought I saw wings in the semi-

darkness of the night." Hardly an isolated sighting, fiction or real-life, in the 19th century's explosion of imagination.

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