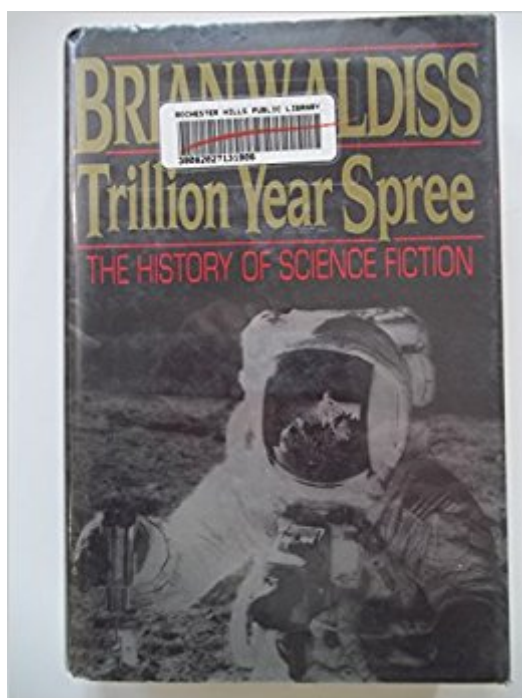


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# Trillion Year Spree: The History Of Science Fiction



## Synopsis

Book by Aldiss, Brian Wilson, Wingrove, David

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Although the history of imaginative literature formerly was the province of academicians, practitioners of the genre have themselves now begun to turn their attention to their roots. James Gunn, Frederik Pohl, Donald Wollheim and Brian Aldiss, who has written arguably the best work of the lot. With the help of Wingrove, Aldiss has expanded his 1973 *Billion Year Spree* and produced a book that is at once scholarly and witty, thoughtful and opinionated. He maintains his positions on several controversial points that drew criticism in the earlier study: specifically, that "modern" science fiction can with certainty be dated from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and that Hugo Gernsback, editor/publisher of the pioneering *Amazing Stories* magazine, did more harm for the field than good. This is an entertaining and lively work and, for those seriously interested in the subject, necessary. Illustrations not seen by PW. Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is an updated and greatly expanded version of Aldiss's highly respected *Billion Year Spree* (1973). The first ten chapters remain the same, with six new chapters added. Aldiss considers Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the first modern science fiction story and contends that all current science fiction has inherited its literary form from that novel and its Gothic offshoots. Besides Shelley, he examines the writings of Poe, Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs and John W. Campbell, Jr. Other

chapters explore the Victorian era, the major authors of the 1930s through the 1970s, and sf films. This is essential for all libraries having the original title and is highly recommended for any that missed it the first time around. Gary D. Barber, SUNY at Fredonia Lib. Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is not so much a true history of science fiction as it is a history-spanning piece of literary criticism of SF. Which is to say it's more about Aldiss presenting his opinions of authors, stories, novels, editors, etc., than it is about laying out the who, what, and when of history. And this is not a bad thing, especially speaking from a time some 26 years after the book was published. As a history of an ongoing phenomenon, those missing years up to the present day would steeply diminish the value of this book. But Aldiss's opinions -- which are thoughtful, immensely educated, and based on a deep love of science fiction -- are not withered or staled by the age of this book. They're as informative, thought-provoking, and entertaining as ever. (Which is not to say that I agreed with all of them, nor that I think any single human being is ever likely to.) That said, I'll give over the rest of this review to a sampling of some of those opinions: About the love readers often have for authors they first read in their youth: "Konrad Lorenz has shown how young ducklings become imprinted by their mother's image at a certain tender age (when even a false mother will do the trick), after which they can accept no substitutes for her. The same effect is observed in many species, not excluding our own. Tastes in the arts may be formed in this way. It is hard to understand otherwise the furore that greeted the early works of Abe Merritt, Lovecraft, and Otis Adelbert Kline." "[H.G.] Wells is teaching us to think. [Edgar Rice] Burroughs and his lesser imitators are teaching us not to think." "Of course, Burroughs is teaching us to wonder. The sense of wonder is in essence a religious state, blanketing out criticism." "Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) created a brawny bone-headed hero called Conan, whose barbarian antics are set in the imaginary Hyborian Age, back in pre-history when almost all women and almost no clauses were subordinate." "On Olaf Stapledon: "Reading his books is like standing on the top of a high mountain. One can see a lot of planet and much of the sprawling uncertain works of man, but little actual human activity; from such an altitude, all sense of the individual is lost." "It is easy to argue that Hugo Gernsback (1894-1967) was one of the worst disasters ever to hit the science fiction field." "Gernsback's segregation of what he liked to call 'scientifiction' into magazines designed to contain nothing else, ghetto-fashion, guaranteed the setting up of various narrow orthodoxies inimical to any thriving literature." (As Aldiss notes, this opinion "aroused fury" when Billion Year Spree (the predecessor to Trillion) was released.) "On science fiction magazine editors: "A few of them have been very good, many have been competent,

and a lot have brought to their craft the creativity of a toad and the intelligence of a flatworm. John [Campbell] stands above them all." "Ray Bradbury was the first to take all the props of SF and employ them as highly individual tools of expression for his own somewhat Teddy-bearish view of the universe." About Asimov's Foundation novels and "psychohistory": "This highly mechanistic sociological reductionism -- a kind of quantum physics applied to human beings -- has been developed with one aim only: to prevent a ten-thousand-year Dark Age wherein the Galaxy might fall into technological barbarism." Neither of these ideas bears moderately serious investigation.[...]" Very often Asimov didn't even bother with the grand visual aids -- his is a non-sensual universe. We see little of it. We can't touch it. His principal actors talk much more than they act, and notice very little of their surroundings." On Robert Heinlein: "More nonsense has been written about Heinlein than about any other SF writer. He is not a particularly good storyteller and his characters are often indistinguishable. There is always a mouthpiece in his later work. His style is banal, highly colloquialized, and has not changed in its essence in the forty-odd years he has been writing." On the British vs. the U.S. versions of "New Wave" SF: "for all the mumblings and grumblings of the 'Golden Age' writers, Ellison's mock revolution [the Dangerous Visions anthology] was accepted without too much fuss, while most of what [the UK magazine] New Worlds attempted was -- at least in immediate terms -- rejected out of hand. Put it all down to showbiz razzamatazz, perhaps, but the emergent fact was clear: experiments with style were fine, perhaps even fun. Experiments with a style that reflected content matter was ... well, it was different, unacceptable to most of the traditional readership." On the shortcomings of fantasy vis-a-vis SF: "And, because such fantasies are always unsatisfying, it is also the reason why publishers need to keep up the supply of the drug, month by month. The Gor novels are for addicts, not adults." On Stanislav Lem: "There is a coldness of intent, a weakness in characterization, and an overall inability to engage the whole of what we are, which makes Lem's writing much less significant than it ought to be. Lem's intellect may be vast. It is also cool and unsympathetic."

Probably the most concise history of SF there is. You can read it from the beginning, or choose the chapters you like. I've done both on a regular basis.

Before you can write a history of Science Fiction, you have to define what it is. Aldiss defines it in such a way that the first SF story is definitively "Frankenstein". You want to know why, read the book. From there the history progresses, sometimes jerkily, through to end up in the mid 1980s (when *The Billion Year Spree* was revised and reprinted under the new title). I found the tone to be

sometimes overly condescending, and that Aldiss was too smug about his own work. There was some clear indications of sniping in print at other critics, sometimes extremely rudely. Since I only got to see one side of this presumed exchange of disrespect I can't really comment as to the whys and wherefores. The writing is, of course, couched in an academic voice rather than a popular writer's one, which can convey a tone of condescension if one is not aware of the difference. Even so, I found Aldiss layering it on with a trowel in places. As a work of critical examination of the field, I doubt there is anything still in print that attempts such a wide sweep, such an ambitious task. One useful way of using this volume is as an indicator of worthwhile works still to be read by the reader, though that isn't what this book is trying to do. In order to get better value from the critical aspect of the work one should be prepared to hunt down other referenced critics' works, notably those of Damon Knight, J.G. Ballard, Joanna Russ and Samuel R Delany. The Delany works (*Port Wine*, *The Jewel Hinged Jaw*) will also have their own reading lists from my personal experience. Of course, *The Trillion Year Spree* is now a quarter of a century out of date. The trends identified at the books end sometimes ended up being passing fads and the book missed the birth of the World Wide Web by 10 years. References to "fiction today" and "modern trends" are apt to be seen to be quaint in that light. My copy was obviously from a library (as I expected) and had been underlined in pencil by a student apparently taking some sort of course in SF history. Only the first and last chapters seemed to have such underlinings, and the passages called out were fairly simple statements that lacking context would not represent what Aldiss was saying most of the time. I smiled at this as I had recently purchased a copy of a famous Unix system V internals textbook, and that had been given the same freshman treatment. The meat of both works was of no use to these two students. I digress. If you can pick up a copy for a reasonable price (and only you can say what that price is) you should have many thought provoking hours ahead of you if you want to study classic SF from a critical standpoint. You can also get involved in the fundamental questions of "what constitutes SF, good SF and worthwhile SF" on a more informed basis. If that floats your grav-platform. Cover to cover, for the non-student and non-critic, it's a bit of a dry read. Grab a pencil and some post-its and be prepared to mark up your copy so you can find the bits that pique your interest. I'm going to re-read in this way and I \*never\* mark-up books. This is the first time I've been intrigued and motivated enough to contemplate such vandalism. Recommended. Resources: *New Maps of Hell* - Kinglsey Amis' review of SF from an Anglocentric point of view at the end of the 1950s. An interesting read, if dated, and Amis was not perhaps firing on all cylinders stylistically. I also found his "wish list" to be self defeating vis-a-vis SF as a genre. *YMMV*. *Hell's Cartographers* - Aldiss and Harrison present six essays from major authors forging the SF of the

1970s. *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* - Samuel R Delany's seminal work attempts to develop a critical mode that "works" for all types of literature. Challenging but recommended especially for the cutting-edge reading list (for it's day) and in-depth analysis of the works referenced. *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* - Delany extends and expands upon his thesis. I found this more accessible than *The Jewel Hinged Jaw*.

I read the 'Billion Year Spree' and wanted the rewritten later edition too. I just think these books are superbly researched and intelligently written and by someone who I admire in his own right as a science fiction author!! I especially love the chapter on Mary Shelley. Excellent run down on the genre that everyone interested in sci fi ought to expose themselves to.

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