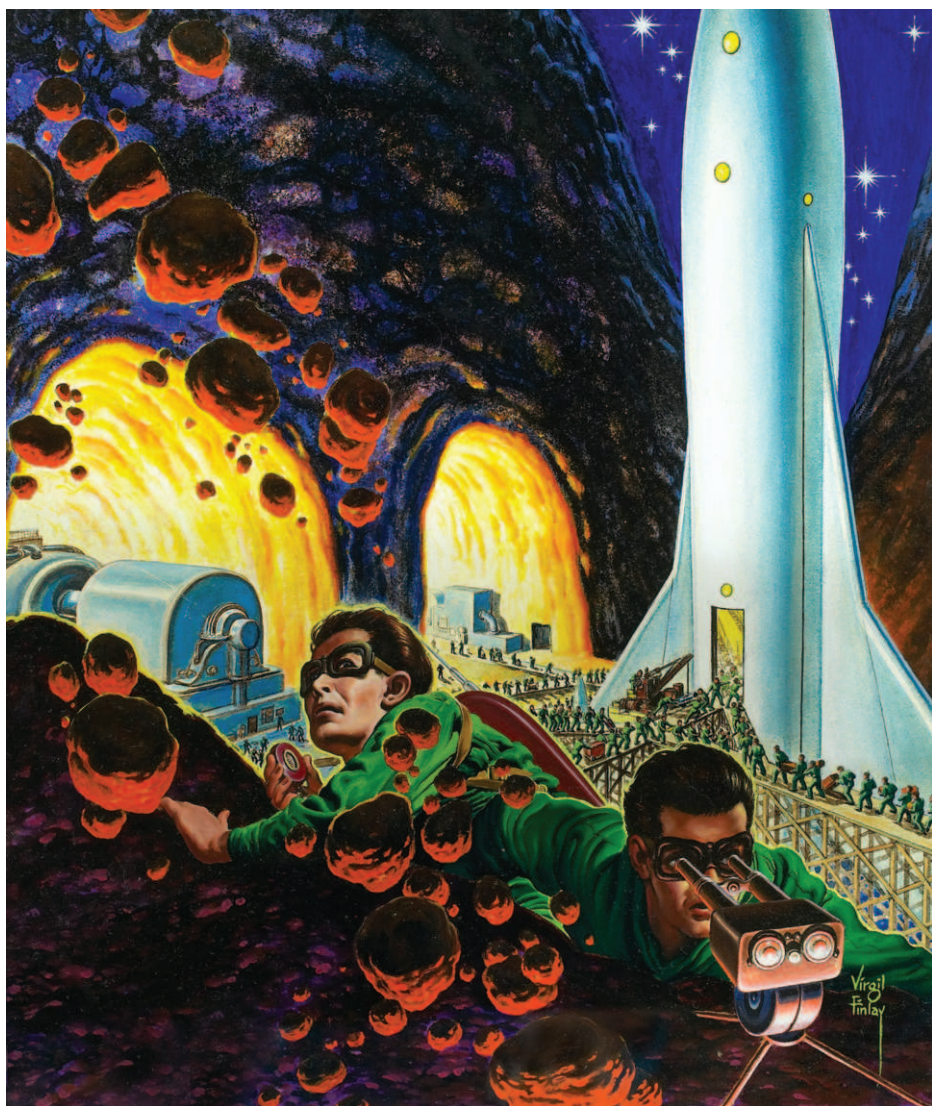




Cover illustration by Virgil Finlay for the 1954 World Publishing Edition of
The Stars Are Ours! by Andre Norton.

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WHEN GENRES COLLIDE:
“THE LAST NIGHT”
AS SCIENCE FICTION

MICHAEL L. SHUMAN

JOHN W. CAMPBELL, EDITOR OF THE MAGAZINE *Astounding* and its later incarnation, *Analog*, was perhaps the dominant voice in the science fiction community as the genre endeavored to attain legitimacy. For more than three decades, between 1937 and his death in 1971, Campbell offered an aspirational venue for writers who wanted to combine speculative inquiry into scientific and technological advances with fictional plots that were engaging enough to command a paying audience. Campbell's editorial policy, maintained by providing plot ideas to prospective authors and the liberal use of his editorial authority to suggest revisions, demanded that fiction should be grounded in scientifically plausible developments that would withstand an engineer's close examination. "As an editor," writes Alec Nevala-Lee, "he wanted good writing, accurate science, believable characters, and stories that logically accounted for multiple variables" (79). The era of popular fast-paced adventure stories, emphasizing ray guns and action, was nearing its end. The approach worked, attracting an extensive readership of technical professionals. One legend common within the science fiction community maintains that, in the early 1940s, Campbell could tell that some grand scientific project was underway as his office received a rush of change-of-address forms with a post office box in Santa Fe—near Los Alamos—as the new address. The tale may well be apocryphal, but Nevala-Lee's account of the rumor does much to affirm Campbell's attention to his subscribers as well as his readership of scientists and engineers (197).

The scientific authority of stories published in *Astounding* supported

Campbell's defense of science fiction amid critical claims that the genre consisted of little more than escapist imaginings, a common late-1950s perception sustained by the monster-and-space-suit covers of pulps and comic books lining newsstand shelves a decade earlier. The real escapist literature, he maintained in a 1959 editorial, was fiction published in popular, slick-paper magazines and consumed by mainstream readers unaware of the implications of technological advancement. "It happens that science fiction's core is just about the only non-escape literature available to the general public today," he maintains, emphasizing that scientists writing reports on manned space stations, bases on the Moon, and antigravity devices have a nearly emotional connection to the social changes ahead. The authors of these technical reports, according to Campbell, "find themselves grimly, terribly, forced to face the woeful reality that things change, and new factors come into action . . . there is no security in knowing all the answers to all the known forces . . . because new forces arise." Campbell flips the prevailing notion of popular fiction on its head, and then spins it around a few times for good measure. Mainstream literature, he argues, is based upon what he calls The Ancient Fundamentals, and thus is "almost one hundred per cent purely escape literature" given the pace of technological advancement (6).

General circulation magazines of the mid-twentieth century, indeed, mostly avoided science fiction and instead published, in Campbell's reckoning, only "soft, almost formless, nearly pointless stories" predicated on certain principles of life that were deemed unchanging by authors and editors (6). Men's magazines were the exception, as presumably their target audience intersected with the readership of magazines such as *Astounding* and their editors sometimes were science fiction professionals working outside of genre. A notable example is Harlan Ellison, the celebrated *infant terrible* of the science fiction world, who began editing *Rogue* in 1959 and published an extensive list of science fiction authors, including Algis Budrys, Alfred Bester, Arthur C. Clarke, and J. G. Ballard. *Rogue* founding editor Frank M. Robinson, whose 1950 short story "The Maze" was published in *Astounding*, later edited *Cavalier* and, in the early 1970s, disbursed witty guidance as the author of "The Playboy Advisor," a *Playboy* column with dedicated readers no doubt unaware that their mentor in the ethics of masculinity happened to be gay. *Playboy* also published science fiction authors such as James Blish, Fredric Brown, and Robert Sheckley, although sometimes these stories fit more comfortably in the categories of horror and the supernatural. *Esquire*,

perhaps emulating the example set by the popular press, published only such prominent science fiction authors as Ray Bradbury, whose “The Dragon,” “Mars is Heaven,” and “The Playground” are good examples of the twelve Bradbury short stories published in *Esquire* during the early 1950s.

Mailer’s own, often volatile relationship with *Esquire* began with the April 1953 publication of “The Language of Men,” a short story about an Army base cook that conforms with the expectations of mainstream fiction and would fit comfortably between the covers of a *Saturday Evening Post* or an issue of *Cosmopolitan* from that era. But “The Last Night,” written in 1962 and published in the December 1963 issue, is a curious combination of science fiction, politics, and environmental concerns presented as an example of Mailer’s experimental nature and his interest in film. In his prefatory note, Mailer acquaints readers with the notion of a film treatment, a narrative devoid of authorial style and intended to convince studio executives of the marketability of a story idea. He then offers a treatment that is unabashedly science fiction, a remarkable departure from Mailer’s work at that time.

Mailer is intentionally vague about the date of the treatment’s action, noting only that the events take place sometime within the next one hundred years. The plot presents a world nearly uninhabitable due the radioactive fallout from atomic bombs. “[E]ven the apples on the trees turn malignant in the stomach,” he writes. “Life is being burned out by a bleak fire within, a plague upon the secrets of our existence which stultifies the air.” Mailer emphasizes that this dire situation was created by a series of apparently trivial decisions by government officials attempting to conceal the truth of eventual global catastrophe, “ten thousand little abuses of power, ten thousand moments in history when the leaders had decided that the news they held was too unpleasant or too paralyzing for the masses to bear” (151, 275). In a rare adoption of worldwide legislation, each country dedicates all its economic and scientific capitol toward building a fleet of spaceships as a caravan to Mars, where a small colony of astronauts have succeeded in building a self-sustaining base. The process of selection would be emotionally brutal, with just one hundred thousand of the remaining one hundred million citizens accepted for the life-saving journey to the Martian base. As the narrative advances, government officials discover that no planet in our solar system has survived the effects of extreme radiation, and therefore the plan is altered to carry human beings and their culture to another star.

The essential plot elements of spaceship migration from a dying Earth,

while not exactly common in science fiction of the era, nevertheless has several notable precursors. *When Worlds Collide*, a novel by Edwin Balmer and Phillip Wylie, was first published serially in six issues of *Blue Book* magazine in 1932 and 1933, later appearing in book form and, in 1951, adapted into a movie produced by the prominent science fiction filmmaker George Pal. The novel dramatizes the approach of two rogue planets, Bronson Alpha and Bronson Beta, toward Earth and the anticipated destruction caused by the twin bodies' gravitational pull. Bronson Beta appears inhabitable and likely to avoid damage from the cosmic collision, and Cole Hendron, an American physicist, begins to direct a team of workers building an enormous spaceship that will carry only a few of them to safety. Scottish novelist J. T. McIntosh's "One in Three Hundred," a short story published in the February 1953 issue of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, similarly deals with a natural catastrophe, this time from an occurrence of solar flares predicted to boil away the Earth's oceans. Hundreds of spaceships are constructed to make an escape journey to Mars and, as with Mailer's story, the emphasis is upon the moral and ethical decisions that government officials must make when selecting passengers from a cohort of citizens who have earned their chance for consideration through a national lottery.

Both of these examples deal with escape to a planet relatively close to Earth, but Mailer's notion of a generational starship—an interstellar vehicle capable of supporting human life during its centuries-long journey to another solar system—is the central plot of Robert A. Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky*, originally published as two stories in separate numbers of *Astounding* in 1941 and collected in book form in the United States in 1962. Heinlein examines the psychological and political ramifications of such an extended, multi-generational journey and explains that an eventual mutiny onboard created such a chaos in leadership that, hundreds of years later, the ship's residents had forgotten their original mission and had reverted to a superstitious, nearly-medieval culture. The ship, to its residents, had become the universe, with only a surviving cluster of mutants vaguely aware of its original purpose. Arthur C. Clarke's "Rescue Party," from the May 1946 issue of *Astounding*, once again deals with Earth on the threshold of destruction from the exploding sun. The story is cleverly narrated from the point of view of aliens who, aware of the impending disaster, come to Earth in faster-than-light ships to rescue as many humans as possible, only to find that the planet's population already has built a fleet of chemically-fueled genera-

tional starships for their own salvation. J. G. Ballard, one of the first authors to successfully navigate the divide between science fiction and mainstream work, is preoccupied in his early novels with the various ways that Earth may come to an end. *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962), and *The Crystal World* (1966) all have a characteristic style and narrative sophistication that, later, appeared in notable and often controversial works such as *Crash* (1973), *High-Rise* (1975), and *Empire of the Sun* (1984). Ballard's own generational starship story, "Thirteen to Centaurus," was published in the April 1962 issue of *Amazing Stories* and, in an inversion of Heinlein's narrative, involves a crew of three families who believe they are aboard a generational starship, when in fact they inhabit a sealed dome on Earth as an experiment to test the feasibility of a centuries-long trip to Alpha Centauri. In addition to the psychological effects of multi-generational travel, Ballard also explores the governmental challenges, with one crew member becoming an incipient tyrant while, on Earth, public opinion and budgetary concerns lead to the eventual termination of the project.

Disasters, both man-made and nature-borne, may be a common motivation in escape-from-the-planet narratives and, as with Mailer, generally there is an emphasis upon the ethical considerations of choosing members of a population for survival. Mailer's one hundred thousand out of one hundred million becomes McIntosh's one in three hundred, neither being comforting odds to the individual submitted to that singular survival lottery. Some authors, however, choose to take a more familial approach, with small groups of families trying to avoid some form of certain destruction caused by headstrong world leaders. "The Million Year Picnic" by Ray Bradbury, part of his collection of integrated stories published in 1950 as *The Martian Chronicles*, relates the story of a politician fed-up with corruption and public complacency and certain that world destruction is imminent. He takes his family to Mars on an implied fishing trip, ultimately to join another family intent upon leaving the corruption of Earth permanently behind and, taking the place of an extinct race, they become the new Martians. Richard Matheson's "Third from the Sun," similar to Bradbury's story in plot and theme, first appeared in *Galaxy Science Fiction's* inaugural issue in October 1950 and, a decade later, was filmed as an episode of Rod Serling's influential TV show *The Twilight Zone*. The story concerns the chief test pilot for a new spaceship, a man unnamed in Matheson's story, who is certain that nuclear war is imminent. He colludes with a neighbor to steal the ship and es-

cape, with their families, from their doomed world to begin new lives on another planet, thus continuing their race. This episode of *The Twilight Zone*, unlike Matheson's story, centers on emotionally intense scenes where the plan is likely to be discovered by officials, thus emphasizing the destructive political and scientific short-sightedness that Mailer underscores in his own treatment. In a plot reversal ideal for *The Twilight Zone's* narrative approach, Matheson at the end reveals that Earth, in fact, is not the planet doomed to destruction but rather the absconding families' destination, a new world to populate with their alien kind.

Perhaps the best example of science fiction anticipating Mailer's narrative, however, is *The Stars Are Ours!*, a novel by Andre Norton first published in hardcover in 1954 and later reprinted, without the titular exclamation point, as a paperback from Ace Books. Norton describes a politically divided Earth with a subjugated class of scientists resisting political, racial, and religious divisions advocated by predominant nationalists. Following the near-total destruction of the planet when a renegade group captures a space station, turning it into a giant weapon, the surviving population becomes even more fragmented, devolving into a nearly feudal social order dismissive of science and technology. One scientist, Lars Nordis, manages to escape with his family to a small farm and there works with others to build an interstellar ship that, they hope, will take them off-planet and to safety. Instead of intending a generational voyage, as with Heinlein, Clarke, and Ballard, the team develops a system of suspended animation that allows individuals to survive an interstellar voyage. The cover of the first edition, by the iconic science fiction artist Virgil Finlay, not only accurately portrays the nick-of-time launch of the scientists' spaceship in Norton's book, but also is a remarkable representation of the events in Mailer's treatment. Finlay's painting illustrates, in a distinctive and colorful style reflecting his pulp magazine background, the science fiction motifs of Mailer's story. We observe the launch pad concealed among underground tunnels, a patch of starry sky above looming mountains; the imposing spaceship and the dynamos providing power to the facility, both testaments to the scientists' technical capability; the boarding passengers, all selected geographically by the President's agonizing deliberation; the falling stones, red hot, implying the impending destruction of Earth; and the square-jawed scientists themselves, their sensible safety-glasses above distinctively high cheek bones indicative of good judgment and noble intent.

Mailer's treatment not only shares science fiction artifacts with Norton's novel but, at the same time, emphasizes the political corruption and treachery central to both Norton's and Ballard's stories. In "Thirteen to Centaurus," Dr. Francis proports to be a member of the starship crew but, in fact, is one of the researchers assigned to observe the thirteen test subjects who believe they are on their way to another star. Moreover, the entire population of the earth apparently is aware of the experimental ruse and only later exhibits the moral courage to demand the termination of the project. Dr. Francis vindicates himself in the end, but Mailer's Anderson Stevens, the President's most trusted technical advisor, remains duplicitous for much of the narrative. Stevens, we learn, has known all along that the entire solar system was polluted with radiation and is thus uninhabitable, yet conceals this singularly important finding, believing that "the general despair would be too great and would paralyze the best efforts of his own men to find another solution" (275). He also conceives of, and conceals, the unimaginably audacious plan to explode the earth as a way of increasing the thrust of the spaceship's acceleration and, in perhaps the ultimate treachery against his country and the president he serves, first recommends it to the Russians. Mailer notes the eventual extent of this treacherous secrecy as "hundreds and then thousands" of scientists and engineers working on the spaceship project conceal, from a worried public, the impossibility of surviving on Mars as well as their own efforts to construct a vehicle for escape. "So an atmosphere of secrecy and evasion began to circle about the capital," Mailer writes, "and the mood of the nation was effected" (276). Unlike the complicit public in Ballard's story, the citizens of Mailer's narrative remain completely unaware of the situation and powerless to voice an objection, surviving in an environment of unease and suspicion nearly as caustic as the poisoned air around them.

Most of Stevens's plans are as suspect, technologically, as his unaccountable secrecy and duplicity are ethically. Mailer's science, indeed, is wonky throughout the treatment and no doubt would have been subjected thoroughly to Campbell's editorial pen had Mailer submitted the work to *Analog* rather than *Esquire*. Mailer, at various points in the story, suggests that nuclear fallout produced by detonating atomic weapons on our planet would inevitably spread throughout the solar system. In fact, any such radiation would remain primarily in the Earth's atmosphere, nor would enough fallout be produced by any number of nuclear explosions to corrupt other planets. The scientists in Mailer's treatment also suggest that, to reach another

star, all the thrust producing momentum must be generated during the initial ascent, not considering that, once in the vacuum of outer space and away from atmospheric resistance, the amount of propulsion necessary to maintain or even increase that momentum is virtually negligible. Such a questionable determination also extends to the construction of the starship's hull. "No metal existed," Mailer writes, "which could withstand the heat of the excessive friction created by the extreme velocity necessary to blast a ship through the atmosphere and out beyond the gravitational attraction of the sun and its planets." Stevens's plan to dig a ten-mile long tunnel into the Earth's surface to increase the rocket's momentum, while later revealed as a ruse to test a more nefarious proposal, is similarly misguided. The scientists theorize that "the tunnel would act like the muzzle of a rifle and fire the rocket as if it were a shell," and "taking advantage of the earth's rotation about its own axis and the greater speed of its rotation about the sun, the rocket ship might then possess sufficient escape velocity to quit the gravitational pull of the sun and so move out to the stars" (276). Gregory Benford, an astrophysicist and award-winning science fiction author, dismisses the idea as scientific gobbledygook. "Even using a ramp to accelerate," Benford says, "like [the film] *When Worlds Collide*, is little help unless you have very low thrust. Von Braun laughed, I hear, at the idea."

Mailer, whose research skills and attention to detail is inarguable, certainly could have verified scientific details of his treatment if they were important to the goals of his work, but apparently they were not. His primary intention here, aside from developing his familiarity with an important aspect of film production, is to offer his warning about the dangers of too much secrecy, too much governmental good intentions that go awry amid human frailty and misguided decisions. Mailer's language at times even appears to violate the rules he lists for a successful treatment, with emphasis on evocative and poetic expression at odds with his notion that the form should be devoid of character introspection and rhetorical style. "Perhaps we shall find a way to drive a tunnel into the center of the earth," the Russian Premier says at one point, "in order to burn all impurities out of ourselves" (276). Mailer assumes the role of prophet rather than technical expert in a medium of communication intended for a readership of film producers creating an after-all commercial form of art rather than a population anxious for prophecy. "Assume then," Mailer advises in a headnote to the treatment's appearance in *Cannibals and Christians*, "that the errors in reasoning and/or

judgement you have detected for yourself in these pages are equaled only by the numerous errors you failed to detect. That, scientist and friends, is bound to be the measure of the error in the next prophecy" (380).

Reading Mailer's story, whether in that 1963 issue of *Esquire*, or reprinted in the 1966 collection *Cannibals and Christians*, or now, in *The Mailer Review*, the challenges of filming Mailer's action with the film technology available in the mid-twentieth century seem nearly insurmountable. *When Worlds Collide* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, both released to theatres in 1951, did admirably well representing one spaceship and one robot, each, with the special effects technology of the time. *This Island Earth* (1955) ranged a bit wider, with credible aliens, a flying saucer, and action transpiring on two different planets, but the lower budget and pulpy action eventually intrudes, leaving the impression of a film intended for a Saturday afternoon matinee rather than an example of mature cinematic science fiction. Even the early 1960s television dramas *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, while frequently offering stories with significant themes and philosophical implications, suffered at times from unconvincing visual effects. Mailer's tunnels, ten miles deep into the earth, his cannon-fired missiles and his massive starships, certainly would have required a budget beyond what even his impressive literary stature could have commanded at the time. The only apparent option would be to present the drama as more of a stage play, restricted to the characters' interaction as they describe fantastic events occurring off-screen. This approach, however, would inevitably eliminate the sense of grandeur, the perception that we are witnessing events of a cosmically-significant and mythical nature. Mailer was working outside genre, incredibly so, and *The Deer Park*, written just a few years later and adapted by Mailer into a play produced at the Lucille Lotrel Theatre in early 1967, is more consistent with his body of work. So, why did Mailer choose a science fiction context for his treatment at all?

The answer, I suspect, is that Mailer is looking for a context of myth and fable, a method of accentuating his notion of the human defects, small and large, that every day contribute to the destruction of our planet. Mailer mythologizes the ultimate rebellion against a mother-world that seeks to nurture us but is rejected as we try to find independence and, somehow, maturity. Just as today's prominent films attempt to find relevance in the quasi-mythical format of superheroes and uncanny villains, archetypes of ancient figures adapted from mythology and extended to reflect the concerns of a

technological century, Mailer is trying to integrate his prophetic warnings into a new context, an environment of myth appropriate to a new era of technological advancement. Mailer is seeking to understand and employ the “new forces” notion of Campbell’s editorial commitment. The world must be at eminent, physical risk for Mailer to effectively make his point, a wide stage for archetypal heroes and their antagonists to struggle with a threat of cosmic proportions.

The ambiance of myth or prophecy indeed saturates Mailer’s work, from his syntax and structure to the even pace of the film scenes recounting the events of the story. The rhetorical constrictions necessary for a successful treatment, in fact, promote the sense that we are hearing a grand story somehow outside of time and apart from the actual physics of the natural world. The effect is much like the narrative accounts of gods and heroes summarized by Thomas Bullfinch and Edith Hamilton, intent upon relating the mythological foundations of our culture without embellishment or individual style, film treatments from another age. Although Mailer’s criteria for an effective treatment warn against permitting too much introspection, his characters often talk in the rhetoric of myth and heroism. “If even a few of us manage to live,” the President says near the end of Mailer’s story, “our seed will be changed forever by the self-sacrifice and nobility, the courage and the loss engraved on our memory of that earth-doomed man who was our ancestor and who offered us life. Man may become human at last” (250). Such words may have been spoken by Odysseus to his crew during the long journey back to Ithaca, or by Moses leading the Exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt, or of Jesus, the implied “earth-doomed man” in the President’s prophetic comment, bringing salvation to a people who have lost their way. In the original *Esquire* printing, the religious and mythological significance of Mailer’s work is emphasized by the Charles O’Glass illustration printed on the verso page facing the beginning of the story. O’Glass, who contributed a dozen *Esquire* drawings between 1960 and 1968, depicts three wise men riding camels holding bottled gifts in their hands while observing a bright star in the night sky. The style at once evokes both a cartoon and holiday card or Christmas tree ornament, and a caption below quotes another pilgrim, apart from the others: “I know a shortcut” (150). The illustration perhaps would be appropriate for any December *Esquire* issue from that era, but is particularly inspired in conjunction with Mailer’s story. The President, a savior obviously based upon John F. Kennedy at his most heroic, is

served by the betrayer Stevens, the duplicitous Judas whose infidelity ultimately is discovered and punished. The bright star appearing to the men as they travel to offer their gifts in O'Glass's illustration may well be our exploding Earth, offering a warning to another planetary civilization of the dangers of imprudent decisions.

Thus the President's final plan for attaining the thrust necessary for a starship to leave the solar system, a more audacious and technically questionable method than advanced previously and one that resonates with the O'Glass illustration, involves nothing less than the destruction of the Earth. "With proper timing," Mailer writes, "the force released by blowing up the planet would more than counteract the gravitational pull of the sun" (217). The irony of obliterating the planet to save mankind accentuates the bit-by-bit ravages inflicted upon the planet by human beings too self-centered, too selfish for comforts and gratification to respect their cosmic home. Mailer implicitly wonders if this final act of matricide, following a century or more of unconscionable abuse, will serve to heal mankind or perhaps only represent the final, most violent transgression of all. He also suggests that faith in technology, in fact, may be part of the hubris causing us to ignore the healing value of spiritual contemplation. Arthur C. Clarke's remarkable short story "The Nine Billion Names of God," first published in *Star Science Fiction* #1 in 1953, emphasizes the essential ignorance of modern science as it confronts mysticism and religion, an effective anticipation of Mailer's thoughts. In Clarke's story, scientists who assist the members of a religious order in their attempt to find the nine billion possible names of God, thinking that discovering those names is the ultimate goal of mankind, are astonished when their computer completes its calculations and the stars in the nighttime sky begin blinking out.

Mailer's prophetic warning, written nearly fifty years ago, not only anticipates the environmental destruction and global pollution caused by mankind's inattentive stewardship of the earth's resources, but also explains the current coronavirus pandemic disrupting the world's population. Our planet perhaps is rebelling against the presence of destructive parasites, human beings, that consume the resources of its host without substantial concern for its future. COVID-19 may be the Earth's method of self-protection, a reaction similar to the human body increasing the production of white blood cells to combat a life-threatening infection. Rather than bringing individuals closer together while experiencing an event with potentially

catastrophic results, this pandemic has forced us apart, preventing the intellectual and emotional connections with our family and friends that, in the past, had been taken for granted. Considering that the Internet, an apparently endless resource for content, began our retreat to solitary confinement over a quarter of a century ago, the isolating effects of the novel coronavirus are especially unnerving. At one point Mailer considers that our race may not be at all compatible with our planet. “Man may have been mismatched with earth,” he writes. “In some fantastic way, perhaps, we voyaged here some millions of years ago and fell into a stupidity equal to the apes” (279). Matheson’s “Third from the Sun,” with its implication of Earth as a destination for alien repopulation, gains further credibility in Mailer’s apocalyptic mythos.

Campbell’s emphasis upon change as an important aspect of science fiction, a principle ignored by mainstream authors relying upon the inviolate truths of the world, eventually affected the literary genre he helped to define. “Science fiction might have evolved into a viable art form with or without Campbell,” Nevala-Lee writes, “but his presence meant that it happened at a crucial time, and his true legacy lies in the specific shape that it took under his watch” (8). Stories identified as science fiction in an earlier time are now more commonly considered “speculative fiction,” a general term that includes fantasy, horror, alternate history, and any other fiction predicated upon characters and events outside our natural experience. John W. Campbell may have been perplexed at this development, and perhaps annoyed that, now, mainstream authors incorporate the elements of science fiction in their works without acknowledging an indebtedness to the genre. Campbell, too, has become *persona non grata* due to his apparent views on race and gender, and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, recognizing the foremost science fiction writers and their works since 1973, has now been renamed to celebrate the magazine he edited rather than the man himself. In fact, Campbell’s decline began with his acceptance of dianetics, L. Ron Hubbard’s conception of a new science of the mind, and his support of an improbable reactionless space drive invented by a mortgage appraisal executive, Norman L. Dean, both quasi-scientific conceptions that many *Analog* readers viewed with suspicion. The 1960 publication of a new magazine, *Galaxy Science Fiction*, further contributed to Campbell’s decline, becoming popular with a new generation of science fiction readers as its editor, H. L. Gold,

emphasized social issues and humor in the stories he selected, bringing the genre closer to the mainstream and to maturity.

Mailer's treatment first appeared at an important point in the development of modern speculative fiction and, in many ways, demonstrates both the early condition of the genre and how a great author may combine traditional literature's considerations of the human heart with the cosmic implications of Clarke, Heinlein, and Norton. "The Last Night" helps to merge science fiction with mainstream literature, two genres colliding in Campbell's era, into a single form capable of informing a technological culture. Mailer's questionable science, along with the indeterminant time of the story's setting, contributes to the aura of myth and heroism that that transforms the work into a document of prophecy. The Earth may not long survive, he warns, if its population continues the ignoble contention between nations, the governmental secrecy, and the treachery and infidelity that informs our relationships with each other. Perhaps, if we listen closely, Mailer's mythic warning, outside of tradition and time, may save us yet.

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