

“BARBARIANS? SURE”: AN APPRECIATION

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

BARRY N. MALZBERG, A PROMINENT SCIENCE FICTION AUTHOR, editor, and critic, has published over 50 books and more than 250 short stories. His most recent critical work, *The Bend at the End of the Road* (2018), provides an illuminating overview of genre’s literary challenges and accomplishments. *Washington Post* book critic Michael Dirda has identified Malzberg as science fiction’s “institutional memory” and cites his “seemingly eidetic recall for everything that has ever happened in science fiction’s garish, slightly down-at-the-heels cabaret.”

In “Barbarians? Sure,” Malzberg draws upon his foundational knowledge of science fiction to present a short stylistic experiment imagining an early 1950s science fiction story that Norman Mailer may have submitted to *Astounding* or *Planet Stories*, two prominent post-war publications featuring accomplished authors such as Arthur C. Clarke, C. L. Moore, and Damon Knight. *Planet Stories*, in particular, featured the type of planetary romance Malzberg imagines here, with contents pages sometimes including Ray Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles* stories and Leigh Brackett’s space opera tales of Eric John Stark.

Malzberg’s alternate-world Mailer, an author using his talents to create commercial fiction, combines Mailer’s boyhood exploration of the science fiction genre in the unpublished juvenilia, “The Martian Invasion,” with the Martian barbarian fantasies of Edgar Rice Burroughs’ John Carter novels and the artificial Martian moon conceit employed by genre authors such as Donald A. Wollheim in his 1955 Winston Science Fiction novel, *The Secret of the Martian Moons*. Readers also will find genre-based references, such as Malzberg’s allusion to “The Specter General,” a 1952 *Astounding* short story

by Theodore Cogswell dealing with militarized planetary colonization, Philip José Farmer's speculation upon human-alien miscegenation in "The Lovers" (1952), and the implied literary anticipation of Apollo astronaut Neil Armstrong's culturally resonant words inaugurating humankind's first step toward interplanetary travel.

Consider "Barbarians? Sure" as the irreverent resignation to commercial genre fiction by a celebrated literary author, as the title implies, or as a satire on some of science fiction's lasting milestones and memes. Either way we may appreciate this stylistic homage, by a major science fiction author, to a Mailer we never knew.