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Science Fiction Studies

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Anthology of Criticism on "Genre Authors."

Bruce Cassiday, ed., *Modern Mystery, Fantasy, and Science Fiction Writers*. A Library of Literary Criticism. NY: Continuum Publishing Co., 1993. x+673. \$85.00.

This reference work is the latest addition to the more than two dozen anthologies already published by Continuum in their Library of Literary Criticism series. Earlier volumes include *Modern American Literature* (5 volumes), *Modern British Literature* (5 volumes), *Modern Arabic Literature*, *Modern Black Writers*, *Modern Latin American Literature* (2 volumes), and others.

In his introduction to this collection, compiler and editor Cassiday states: "Unlike others in the series, this volume represents a new dimension, inasmuch as it features genre works exclusively, deliberately departing from the traditional procedure of concentration on authors involved in mainstream literary efforts. One generally underestimated advantage of genre writing is the ability of its practitioners to reflect accurately and perceptively the moral values and attitudes of their contemporary world, since genre works tend to hold a true and unflawed mirror up to life as it is seen by the general reader" (viii). The more sophisticated SF reader might well object to Cassiday's apparently naive and elitist use of terms like "genre writing" and "its practitioners" as well as his highly questionable assertion that such "genre works" somehow mirror more closely than other literary forms the basic morality and values of what he calls the "general reader." But, his own literary views notwithstanding, he seems to have done a very good job in collecting and presenting an impressive cross-section of literary criticism (over 800 items) covering some 87 authors, all

presented in alphabetical order and followed by a Works Mentioned index and an Index to Critics.

Such anthologies stand or fall by the quality of editorial selection. I am in no position to make judgments about the mystery and fantasy writers featured in this collection. But, contrary to what its title would seem to suggest, several of the 26 or so SF authors included--e.g., Poe, Verne, Wells, et al.--are not "modern" at all (however one chooses to define it). And, by contrast, many of the truly modern SF writers--e.g., Philip K. Dick --remain conspicuously absent. Similarly, the literary criticism tends to highlight those articles written by older "big name" authors and critics (Wells on Verne, Stevenson on Poe, Borges on Wells, Mary McCarthy on Atwood, etc.). Such commentaries are interesting in the historical sense, but they do not necessarily represent the very best in modern critical exegesis. Of course, the total number of critical extracts permissible in a book of this sort is very limited, and it would be practically impossible to quote *every* insightful or influential piece of literary criticism written over the past 100+ years on each of these SF authors. And, to be fair, Cassiday's selections are most often pleasingly varied, ranging in time from the mid-1800's to the early 1990s and in sources from newspapers to monographs to the pages of SFS itself. But it is nonetheless interesting to note the number of times that one particular critical source is quoted: excerpts from Cassiday's own earlier publication *The Illustrated History of Science Fiction* (NY: Ungar, 1989)! Worthwhile and recommended for most students of SF, especially for all undergraduate libraries.

--ABE.