

Editorial Introduction: The British SF Boom

Author(s): I. C. R.

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Editorial Introduction: The British SF Boom

What makes a Boom a Boom? Sometime in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as cyberpunk was fading into the light of common day, an explosion of creativity in sf ignited in the UK. Many of us have come to call this the British Boom. Though the logic of the metaphor requires that this boom must eventually go bust, British sf artists continue to sustain the pace, producing work of great quality and interest in fiction and criticism. Not since the New Wave have British writers held such a commanding position in the genre. It is to recognize and trace this development that we have put together the first special issue of *SFS* devoted to British sf.

Things have changed a lot since the New Wave. The writers who have come into their own in the Boom—the best known of whom include Gwyneth Jones, China Miéville, Ken MacLeod, Iain M. Banks, Stephen Baxter, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Jeff Noon, Justina Robson, and Kim Newman—do not have a manifesto, or even a common position against the literary sf establishment. They are connected less by shared ambitions and aesthetic programs than by that most intangible quality of literary booms, the shared spirit of doing good and exciting work under fortunate circumstances.

Boom is not a writer's or critic's term. It is a metaphor from the capitalist market cycle, evoking the culture-culture *bourse* of intellectual capital. In the art world, a Boom actually is indistinguishable from galleries' and auction houses' supply-side manipulation of investables. A literary Boom does not work that way. Sales receipts may not tell the main story. A literary Boom is an explosion of creativity, not of profits.

What makes a Boom a Boom? Using the best known of such moments, the explosion of innovative Latin American prose in the 1960s known as *La Boum*, let us make a stab at a definition. A Boom is not a movement, it is a moment. It is not intended, it happens. It happens at the moment it is widely recognized that an unusually large number of like-minded, mutually supporting, contingently connected writers and thinkers are producing work of high value. This energy is then shaped into a creative field by publishers, critics, journalists, and ministries of culture, who may of course also inflate and manipulate the constellation of energies for their narrow interests. Booms also involve congenial and creative exchanges between artists and critics; each group sees its interests served by encouraging the work of the other. In general, hostility abates among different literary constituencies—authors, critics, connoisseurs, broad publics, cultural bureaucrats, publishers, and academics— and a vague sense of serving a larger cultural community emerges. The Latin American Boom, though it included writers of opposing political views (e.g., Gabriel García Márquez and Maria Vargas Llosa), was universally considered an assertion of Latin American cultural pride in the face of global neglect and underestimation.

Why these moments happen is not so easy to say. The case of the British sf Boom is made even more interesting by the fact that the UK was, at the same

moment, also the scene of creative explosions in fantasy writing, and in techno-music. The latter is especially interesting, since techno-music represents a parallel, alternate line of sf art—that of Afrofuturism. Saturated with sf-elements, techno-musical culture in the UK of the 1990s was arguably the most influential contemporary current of popular music after hip-hop. In Kodwo Eshun's book, *more brilliant than the sun* (1999), it also produced one of the most original approaches to sf criticism.

Why Britain in the 1990s? In this issue, Andrew M. Butler, Mark Bould, and Roger Luckhurst each offer different, complementary takes on the world in which the Boom has unfolded. For each, the Boom comes out of a particular historical moment when British culture navigated between powerful opposing tides: Thatcherism and anti-establishment resistance, the American umbrella and the EU, the conservatism of literary culture and the rich mix of immigrant cultures, technoscientific imperialism and anti-hegemonism, latecoming and closeness to the cutting edge, and between what Butler calls the “can't do” spirit and the “just do it” of remix culture. Many of the best works of Boom sf are examples of the postmodern remix ethos, while concealing that fact with literary craft. As Matt Hills shows in his article on Kim Newman's “counterfiction” and Joan Gordon in her article on hybridity in China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2001), British Boom writers conserve and demolish equally.

Observers often identify Booms with one or two leading artists. García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, and Julio Cortázar had this role in the Latin American Boom. Gwyneth Jones, Iain M. Banks, and Ken Macleod might be invoked for the British sf Boom, but no recent writer has become more identified with it than China Miéville. He not only represents the Boom, but was formed by it. In his interview with Joan Gordon, Miéville gives his thoughts about how sf has become a central expression and mediator of contemporary British culture, and the role of his own work in sf.

In the past few years, established British sf writers have produced exciting new work, the 1990s generation has responded to the respect the Boom has brought with it, and doubtless new talents have begun to emerge in the midst of it all. But Booms must end. There are signs of darkening horizons. The favorable publishing environment may be closing down. Britain has been carried by its government into an unpopular war and geopolitical confusion. These changes may unravel the context that has allowed recent British sf to flourish. Then again, they may strengthen it, extending the Boom into an Age.—ICR