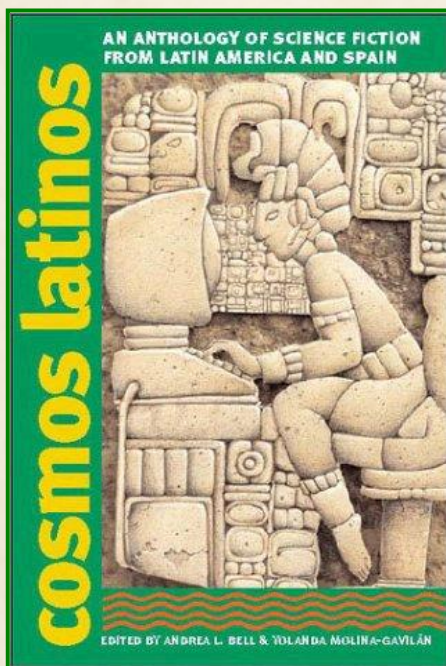


Cosmos Latinos: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain

by Joe Sutliff Sanders

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Review of the anthology edited by Andrea L. Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 2003) that includes Chaviano's story *The Annunciation*.



This new collection is a godsend for people who want to see what a large part of the rest of the world is doing with science fiction. It's full of stories that are very much science fiction, not magical realism –whatever that means this week– or fantasy or ghost stories. The collection is put together by two outstanding women, both of them with the chops to do the subject justice. Andrea L. Bell has great credibility from her print scholarship and from her tireless work as international Division Head for the yearly International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts. And it's hard not to respect Yolanda Molina-Gavilán, whose published scholarship on many of these authors is cited throughout the collection.

The book is obviously intended for use in a classroom –after all, the publisher is a university press– but the editors have been careful to keep the packaging and layout friendly to the casual reader. There are no discussion questions or anything so intrusive as that in the book, but the introduction gives an amazingly detailed (and brief) history of science fiction in the Spanish-speaking world. The introduction even identifies some major themes in the field and sketches them in quickly so readers know how to read the stories better. Each story is preceded by a short bio of the author, placing the story in the context not only of that author's career, but also of Spanish language science



fiction. The critical apparatus is, as said, obviously intended for use by a student in a science fiction or Spanish language literature classroom, but it will also help people who want to know more about non-English language science fiction understand and enjoy the stories themselves.

There are minimal complications to this arrangement. First of all, there are the endnotes, in which the editors provide (only a few) comments on translation issues and proper nouns the readers might not recognize. The comments are welcome and helpful, but Wesleyan prints these at the end of the book, which means the reader has to stop reading, find the note buried at the end, read the note, then go back to the story. Footnotes would have been a much better choice, though I should point out that few academic presses agree. The only other problem with this scholarly layout is that the first few stories in the collection are also the earliest historically, and, like the earliest English-language science fiction, the least enjoyable for modern readers. Fans of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells won't know what I'm talking about here, but stories high on didactic social commentary and far-fetched speculation about the future –the kinds of stories at the beginning of this collection– make for a foreboding entrance into the world of Spanish-language science fiction. These stories aren't bad; they're just very low on plot, character, and dialogue, the things contemporary readers want in their fiction.

But the stories quickly become more enjoyable, and though I moaned only a few lines ago about didactic social commentary, later stories in the collection demonstrate that science fiction with a social consciousness can not only be good, it can be the best. Consider Jerônimo Monteiro's "The Crystal Goblet." At the very end, the story turns didactic, but up until then it's a riveting story of what a completely average man recovers from his nearly-average childhood: a window into what might be the future. As he chooses carefully with whom to share his secret, the future unfolding in the glass becomes both more frightening and surer. Eduardo Goligorsky's "The Last Refuge" is one of the many examples of utopias and dystopias in the collection, and the palpable fear of the protagonist as he runs from and oppressive police state rings all too true in the context of the author's own experience as an Argentinean. As the story chronicles his flight away from the city and toward what looks an awful lot like a UFO, we get a glimpse of the extraordinary hope science fiction and its icons have for people living under the thumb of oppressive regimes. In fact, the thread of political commentary running through this story and others makes real the vitality of science fiction for these authors, who are not borrowing icons but inventing a science fiction whose heart pumps hard.



These authors give new life to tropes that have become stale in English-language science fiction, especially Christian mythology. One subtle example is Magdalena Mouján Otaño's "Gu Ta Gutarrak" (We and Our Own), a story that reinvents the Adam-and-Eve story, one of the most familiar of science fiction's clichés. The story is one of those gems that not only has to be science fiction in order to work –if you tried to tell this story in the mimetic mode, it would fall apart– but has to be told by someone like Mouján Otaño, who is Basque. The story pokes fun at Basque prejudices even as it explains them. The story isn't just satirical, though; the characters are likable, and the ending brings a smile. Another nice reinvention of religious tales is the smooth and erotic story "The Annunciation", by Daína Chaviano. The subject matter is probably obvious from the title, but the take on it isn't, and frankly I'm wondering why no one worked this angle of the story before. It, too, is moving, though the organ it moves rests significantly lower than the smile. Anglophone science fiction has worked over Christian imagery to the point where I wince when I read yet another instance of the subgenre, but these stories are fresh and interesting.

Another way these stories help us see "our" world anew is through the attention given to the return of the repressed. Hugo Correa's "When Pilate Said No", obviously fits in with the religious stories I spoke of above, but it's more pointedly a story about how smug technologically advanced cultures can be about the cultures they're stomping all over. When the inhabitants of an evidently backwards planet realize they're outgunned in this story, they fight back with legend and superior fictions... just the kind of thing science fiction fans love. Guillermo Lavín's "Reaching the Shore" is much less direct, but it's just as powerful. On the day before Christmas, a young boy has to deal with the realities of technology and addiction as imported to Mexico by American industry, not just in the abstract but as they affect his own family. The exploitative practices of American foreign policy come under unblinking scrutiny, coded into fiction through the tools of science fiction and told in impassioned tones in a very convincing setting.

And then there's the time travel story, wearily familiar by now to English-speaking fans. But my favorite story in the collection, Richard (sic) de la Casa and Pedro Jorge Romero's "The Day We Went through the Transition", reinvigorates that subgenre, too. The logic of the story is tight, with real science woven in where most of us would just wave our hands to distract the reader from how goofy our explanations are. Its real power, though, comes from the heart-wrenching love story at its center. The story is powerful because the convincing science in the foundation allows a fragile romance to be constructed on top.



The stories in this collection are wonderful –as they should be, considering how many nations the editors had to choose their stories from- and enjoyable as fiction in their own right. But they also give Anglophone readers something we cannot get from science fiction written by people who grew up where we did: a look at the things we consider part of our world as seen through someone else's eyes.

