



The Rediscovery of Man: The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith

Cordwainer Smith, James A. Mann (Editor), John J. Pierce (Introduction)

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The third story in this volume takes place 16,000 years in the future. When you realize that the 33 stories are ordered chronologically, you begin to grasp the scale of Cordwainer Smith's creation. Regimes, technologies, planets, moralities, religions, histories all rise and fall through his millennia.

These are futuristic tales told as myth, as legend, as a history of a distant and decayed past. Written in an unadorned voice reminiscent of James Tiptree Jr., Smith's visions are dark and pessimistic, clearly a contrast from the mood of SF in his time; in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s it was still thought that science would cure the ills of humanity. In Smith's tales, space travel takes a horrendous toll on those who pilot the ships through the void. After reaching perfection, the lack of strife stifles humanity to a point of decay and stagnation; the Instrumentality of Mankind arises in order to stir things up. Many stories describe moral dilemmas involving the humanity of the Underpeople, beings evolved from animals into humanlike forms.

Stories not to be missed in this collection include "Scanners Live in Vain," "The Dead Lady of Clown Town," "Under Old Earth," "The Crime and the Glory of Commander Suzdal," "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons," and the truly disturbing "A Planet Called Shayol." Serious SF fans should not pass up the chance to experience Cordwainer Smith's complex, distinctive vision of the far future.

--Bonnie Bouman

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The Rediscovery of Man: The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith Details

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From Reader Review The Rediscovery of Man: The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith for online ebook

Marc Alan says

From these short stories alone I'm willing to say that I think Cordwainer Smith is the greatest science fiction author of all time. The writing, as in almost all great science fiction, can seem a bit stilted at times, however the stories and ideas paint the only future I could even begin to believe if mankind were to exist another 20000 years.

Chris Gager says

Been waiting for this for a few weeks. My local librarian finally got it from the Mt. Holyoke College library. Doesn't look like it's been read very much - if at all. I read "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard" not too long ago in a SF collection titled "Machines That Kill" and was smitten. I had a vague recollection of the name of the author and the character C'mell from previous reading (probably anthologies), however, as I've been a sci-fi fan since about 8th grade (1959-60) or so. I'm not going to list all the titles of the stories - too many for that. There's a LOT of historical back and forth in these stories as CS bounces between some LONG time gaps. Sometimes with time travel. This makes me think of "The Time Machine" in particular. As the introduction points out and the very high rating indicates, CS is a one-of-a-kind writer with plenty of fans. He has his own little corner of the sci-fi pantheon to himself!

The first dozen or so stories are those of "The Instrumentality of Mankind" series of linked stories that cover many thousands of years. The editor has arranged them in chronological order (i.e. by plot-time order) rather than by order of publication. Last night I read "Scanners Live in Vain" (1948), the story that really put the author on the map - sort-of. It's way, way ahead of its time in emotional-spiritual resonance. There's just something sort of other-worldly about CS's prose style. Hard to pin down, though a number of readers call him the greatest sci-fi writer of all. The thing is, he has only a superficial interest in details of science. No long-winded explanations of how some fictional/speculative star drive works. He goes WAY beyond all that to writing about emotional/cultural/spiritual issues in the far-ahead human future. It's just ... different.

Is CS "better" than Jack Vance??? JV was way more prolific, of course as CS had a serious career going AND died quite young. The two writers are similar in prose skill but JV is the cleverer while CS is more emotionally intense.

- The cat thing ... I wonder if cat-lover Haruki Murakami has read CS?
- From "Scanners Live in Vain" - the vote is reminiscent of "The Ox-Bow Incident."

Last night I read "The Lady Who Sailed THE SOUL" and was just knocked out. Such a great story and again ... VERY different. I have to take back (sort of) my statement that CS doesn't talk science and space drives. He does that a bit in this story that's nominally about those humongous space-sails. They're so big that one of them blotted out the sun for a while and made the earth air smell bad! There's not a LOT of humor here but what's there is sly and funny. At the end I got a bit teary-eyed!

- CS refers to his future human society as "genitally sophisticated"!

- animal-toys, abortion ...

- Looks like he was wrong about the weight of a computer but those things happen in older sci-fi. This story isn't about such details, it's about love and courage.

Another crazy story last night. All sorts of made-up words, based on Chinese, I think. Possibly meant as a warning of Chinese invasion of America????

I said I wasn't going to list all the stories in this volume but here I am with another great story to talk about: "Think Blue, Count Two" It's so easy to see how CS influenced more recent writers. Iain M. Banks come to mind right away(must read more of his stuff!). A problem(for me) in "reviewing" a story like this one: it's tough to come up with a clear description of what its all about. As in other tales the author gives us a sketchy description of some crazy technology, - a semi-immortal plastic laminated mouse brain, for instance - but neglect to explain how it all works. What happens on that sail-ship out in deep space is stunning and amazing, but pretty much a crazy-moving mystery to me. I wonder if this will be my first ever 5* rating for a sci-fi book?

"The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-at-All" - Last night's story(I'm reading them in order) was a let-down. I see by the copyright date that it is far later than the previous tales and after the author's death. It definitely smacks of the religiosity that he apparently acquired later in life. One wonders also if this is one that his widow meddled with. The initial problem is typically interesting and weird but the resolution is abrupt and unconvincing. Basically ... God(whoever/whatever that is) fixed things. Sorry, I'm not buying it! If there are too many like this one I'll have to stick with 4*, and withhold the cherished 5*!

- I looked back and saw that I'd already read a couple of these "later" stories already without understanding about their status in the canon: "The Queen of the Afternoon" and the re-written "War No. 81-Q"(originally a piece of juvenilia but re-written in this form). You can tell the difference!

Ah, back to the good stuff with the classics: "The Burning of the Brain" and "The Game of Rat and Dragon." So ... in spite of what I said before, Mr. CS has actually spent a fair amount of time in these two stories dedicated to "explaining" how his advanced systems of space travel work. HAH! We should be so lucky! I love what he writes but I couldn't explain what he's writing about even though I love it. From "The Burning of the Brain" -

"Wu-Feinstein, finest ship of its class, had no need for metal walls. It was built to resemble an ancient, prehistoric estate named Mount Vernon, and when it sailed between the stars it was encased in its own rigid and self-renewing field of force. The passengers went through a few pleasant hours of strolling on the grass, enjoying the spacious rooms, chatting beneath a marvelous simulacrum of an atmosphere-filled sky. Only in the planoforming room did the Go-Captain know what happened. The Go-Captain, his pinlighters sitting beside him, took the ship from one compression to another, leaping hotly and frantically through space, sometimes one light-year, sometimes a hundred light-years, jump, jump, jump, jump until the ship, the light touches of the captain's mind guiding it, passed the perils of millions upon millions of worlds, came out at its appointed destination, and settled as lightly as one feather resting upon others, settled into an embroidered and decorated countryside where the passengers could move as easily away from their journey as if they had done nothing more than pass an afternoon in a pleasant old house by the side of a river."

- And there you go - d'ya think Frank Herbert might have read that?

- "Rat and Dragon" = serious cat love!

Last night: a funny/weird digression from the "flavor" of earlier stories as Earthlings manage to turn away an unwelcome invasion of alien gluttons. "From Gustible's Planet" ...

Last night I read "Himself in Anachron," another "new" story but not bad. Kind of a foggy conclusion, however. Then came "The Crime and Glory of Commander Suzdal," a ripe oldie that once again has time-foolery in the center of the plot. And cats ...

"The Golden Ship Was - Oh! Oh! Oh!" - great title for this brief and rather amusing tale. There's even another cat shout out. Once again we get a lot of very mysterious time-travel and shifting around. Some not so nice stuff too. The far future ain't gonna be all sweetness and light ya know!

- "Lord/Prince Lovaduck"! Is CS making light some of sci-fi with this one?

- More suggestions of Iain M. Banks here. And ... a connection to "The Demon Breed"(AKA "The Tuvela" by James H. Schmitz)- check it out!

The next story, "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" is probably the longest story in the collection and therefore qualifies as a relative epic in the history of the Instrumentality. And that's how the narrator treats it. By the way, the narrative perspective so far has been from the distant future AFTER these events have taken place. The event that this story covers is the beginning of the revolt of the humanimals(or whatever they're called - "under people" I think) that will lead to the thousands of years ahead civilization coming in later stories. The whole thing is kind of fantasy-fanciful and vague but wholly captivating. As another G'reads reviewer put down "No one writes like this dude"! As with "Macbeth," it's not so much about the plot as it is the poetry.

- This story would make a great animated movie - Miyazaki? No ... he's retired.

- This one reminded me of Spielberg's "A. I."

- The old sweeping machine - a reminder of "Wall-E"

- D'Joan = Joan of Arc - obviously ...

- The whole human vs under people thing is very much about slavery, abuse and domination. About those persisting attitudes of "special-ness" that humans adorn themselves with.

Last night it was "Under Old Earth," another totally wacky tale about ... whatever! The defense of Earth from some sort of psychic invasion that might have actually been a friendly overture from a lonely distant world. And the introduction of a character in a future tale. The writing is beautiful/ mysterious(as usual) and brings to mind "Silently and Very Fast" in it's other-worldliness.

- Loved the bit about Murkins(Americans) and their relict super-highway system:

"Think of the millions of vehicles that ran on those roads, the people filled with greed and rage and hate, rushing past each other with their engines on fire. They say that fifty thousand a year were killed on the roads alone. We would call that a war."

- The epigraph: What's dog spelled backwards?!?!

"Drunkboat" is very similar to "The Colonel Came back from the Nothing-at-All" and was apparently written much earlier. I'm not sure why the second one was released by his widow as this one is much better. The whole endgame is appropriately crazy and connected to the history of the Instrumentality. Once again some crazy-assed space/time travel is involved.

- Rambo = the hero's name!
- Meeya Meefla = Miami, Fla
- One of the themes of these stories is the history of humans reaching for ever greater God-like power.

Another classic last night and our first visit to Norstrilia(Old North Australia) in "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons." This story is a bit more conventional and visits several planets in The Instrumentality. There are strong hints here of yet-to-come Jack Vance Demon Princes stuff(one of the planets is named Viola (something) as well as an early whiff of something spice-like(called stroon) that Frank Herbert likely glommed onto, perhaps w/o knowing it. "Dune" - here we come(about ten years later)! The story is rather nasty in places, with the sharpest edges so far. You'll want to avoid those cuddly kittons - when they're awake! Next up ...

"Alpha Ralph Boulevard" - one of CS's best known stories and most frequently anthologized. A bit of awesome and unique sci-fi. So ... my second read of this classic was in some ways better than the first, though missing the initial psychic jolt of newness/craziness. Now we are 14,000 years into the future of mankind. Earth is called Manhome and the Lords of the Instrumentality, seeing something lacking in the lives of their childlike dependents(humanity), have decided to make life more "real" and this tale is about some folks dealing with the change. The title pathway is a relic of 10,000 years duration and a perilous path to travel indeed - there lies the bitter truth of reality and experience, with an enigmatic, fortune-telling computer at the end of it. The narrator is different in this one, being one of the protagonists instead of a god-like future tale-spinner.

"The Ballad of Lost C'mell" - The homunculi remind me of Brian M. Stableford and H. G. Welles' "The Island of Dr. Moreau."(are we not men?) while The Lords of the Instrumentality remind me of the immortals in "The Eyes of Heisenberg" by Frank Herbert.

- The author provides both a frustrated romance and a political history of the gradual emancipation of the under-people.

"A Planet Named Shayol" - THIS is perhaps the weirdest and cruelest sci-fi story I've ever read.

I read two stories yesterday as I'm in race to finish before I need to turn the book back in. Not that anyone at Mt. Holyoke College is waiting for it! The stories were "On the Gem Planet" and "On the Storm Planet," which are stories 1 &2 of the three-part story of Casher O'Neill. These stories do resemble Jack Vance's Kirth Gersen series: "The Demon Princes" and seem to be at least a bit closer to "normal" sci-fi. Still ... it's all pretty weird! These two also include the Jesus-y stuff that other reviewers have mentioned. It seems pretty awkward. Love, apparently is the ultimate weapon. That reminds me of the odious 4th installment of Dan Simmons' "Hyperion" series "The Rise of Endymion" - UGH! Still, these are worthy, if a bit rambling, tales.

- CS names the god-like girl hero of this story T'ruth. A bit obvious - eh? Evidently, she's a Jesus-squeezer.

- The nasty environment of this planet is reminiscent of the Jupiter of "City."
- Reading these stories is like being continuously mentally unsettled and unnerved!

I actually haven't quite finished this yet but will this afternoon so I can return it on time. I did finish the "Instrumentality" stories and a few random ones remain. The final stories in this series are "On the Sand Planet"(the almost final adventures of Casher O'Neill), "Three to a Given Star"and "Down to a Sunless Sea." These last stories include the famous/infamous mentioning of Christianity in the far future and are not exactly enhanced by the author's late-in-life interest in Jesus. All three stories have "happy" endings with the triumph of good over evil etc. I detected a whiff of that Camelot questy mysticism. I suppose the author felt that in the VERY distant future that he envisioned that Man had to keep advancing towards some kind of positive metaphysical goals. Or something ...

- Some connection here to Philip Jose' Farmer's World of Tiers in the imagination of some pretty strange planets.

- So ... how does/did Casher not know of these interesting new places on his own home planet???

- Crossing the river - an old symbolic act - the Styx etc.

- The sand planet(Wizzer) = Dune???

- There's a bit of the ole "Wizard of Oz" thing in "Three to a Given Star." And ... chicken-people???

- More cats at the end. One very special cat - Griselda! - as well.

- The final stories are not included in the "Instrumentality" series though one of them does mention "the up and out." "Nancy" reminds of "Cast Away" and of another sci-fi story with a non-human female companion for a lonely space traveler. "The Fife" seems like standard sci-fi along with "Angerhelm," while "Goodfriend" hearkens to the authors background in psy-ops.

I guess I 'll leave my final rating at 4.5*, which rounds down to 4*. Reading this book was a unique experience for me. I toyed with a 5* rating, something I've only done for "Dune"(looking back - first read). Can't do it because it's a genre book.

Esteban Ruquet says

Un libro estupendo, poético en su manejo del lenguaje de la CF. Provoca sensaciones elegíacas similares a las de Tolkien, aún en su lejanía. Cabe destacar lo bien elaborado del Universo Ficcional, y su manejo de la tradición literaria norteamericana y china. "Under Old Earth" es sencillamente una obra maestra, y los demás cuentos apenas le van a la zaga.

MB Taylor says

Finished reading *The Rediscovery of Man* (1975) by Cordwainer Smith today on the bus home. The majority

of Cordwainer Smith's work was published from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties. This collection contains 12 of his stories published between 1950 and 1966. It includes his first published SF Story "Scanners Live in Vain" (1950) [or at least the first published under the name Cordwainer Smith] and the last he wrote "Under Old Earth" (1966). All the stories are from his Instrumentality future history.

I've known of Cordwainer Smith for years, but had never read any of his work before. Part of the problem was his name. What kind of name is Cordwainer, anyway? It's a pseudonym, and (I didn't know this until I started doing a little research on the fellow) it's a real word, meaning someone who makes shoes and other articles from fine soft leather.

Cordwainer also has (at least for me) an unfortunate connotation; Harlan Ellison has for years used the pseudonym Cordwainer Bird to alert fans that something he wrote has been turned to crap by others (usually by Hollywood). He's giving the bird to the work or perhaps to the offending others.

Cordwainer Smith, however, is not Harlan Ellison. It's the pseudonym of Paul Linebarger. According Wikipedia (oddly enough in the Harlan Ellison article) Linebarger choose Cordwainer to imply the industriousness of the pulp author. Personally I think it's the parallelisms: "cord" & "line" and "wain" (wagon) & "barge".

But be that as it may, not too long ago I picked up this collection and Smith's only novel *Nostrillia*. And shortly after I read the first few stories in *The Rediscovery of Man*, I picked up another of his collections *When the People Fell* (2007). There's a fair bit overlap between the two collections (7 stories) but between them I think I have all the Cordwainer Smith stories. Or at least all the ones listed at the internet speculative fiction database (isfdb.com).

The stories in *The Rediscovery of Man* are amazing. The collection starts out with a bang. "Scanners live in Vain", chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America as one of the finest short stories prior to 1965, is excellent and very hard to describe. The last story in the collection, "A Planet Named Shayol" (1961) is just as excellent and as weird. It was included in *The 7th Annual of the Year's Best S-F* (1962).

The same is true of nearly every story in this collection; I had an amazing sense of wonder reading this collection that I haven't had reading SF for years. I only have two regrets about reading it. First, I've now read more than a third of Smith's total SF story output; I want there to be more! Second, it made me realize how bland and predictable a lot of the SF I read really is.

If you crave some classic original SF find some of Cordwainer Smith's work and read it. It's so good, I'm violating my rule about reading consecutive books by the same author and have already started reading *When the People Fell* and I'm thinking of reading *Nostrillia* after I finish that.

Karen says

I love space, space2, and space3. I love the love stories and the hyperbole and the whole world. I have not met a vaguely Christian sci-fi writer's vision of the future that I would like to inhabit more. I can even get into the mystical personality-overlapping revolution of the underpeople. But I CANNOT HANDLE any more dude writers with their 7-12 year old sexual/not sexual redemptive innocent girls with budding breasts and big limpid sweet eyes saving everything with their sexual/not sexual transcendent Goodness. They will

make me officially hate men! Also, the grossy dude sitting across from me at another table and leering at me as I sucked the extra tapioca out of my boba tea through the fat pink straw while I just wanted to read a library book at lunch alone will make me officially hate men, but that is not really fair to include in literary criticism of an annoying archetype. I am about to start Identity and I need a real Kundera woman, stat. Come through for your gender, man.

Kaila says

This book contains all of the short stories written by Cordwainer Smith, who died rather young (50 or so) and before the full blossom of his career could occur.

The first third of this book is full of absolutely brilliant stories. Not every one was a hit, but I was so impressed as I went through them. My favorites are *Scanners Live in Vain*, *The Game of Rat and Dragon*, and *The Lady Who Sailed the Soul*. They were so, so good. But somewhere along the line, they stopped being good, and started being repetitive and a little weird. Unfortunately the weird was not in a good way.

For example, there is some definite love for cats going on here. In *The Game of Rat and Dragon*, I thought the love for cats was sweet and rather endearing and sad. But then cats and characters love for them became beyond what a human should feel for a cat. The guy obviously REALLY LIKED CATS. It's creepy.

A number of the stories start having this almost prophetic cadence to them. They tell you how important the story you're about to read was to the timeline of mankind. Things like "Many actors later would try to recreate this scene, but no one could quite embody it," or something like that. It makes me want to be really impressed with the story when that's how it starts, and then disappointed when it's something not very impressive, or takes too long to get there. I'm thinking specifically of *The Dead Lady of Clown Town* here.

Some of the stories at the end get very strange and Christian. It took me completely by surprise and I did not find it pleasant. (the phrase "The God nailed high" was used more than once)

Unfortunately, out of a almost 700 page book, I only enjoyed the first 200 pages.

Jay says

NO ONE ELSE writes like this dude. His titles are great: "Mother Hitton's Littol Kittuns," "Alpha Ralphi Boulevard," "The Burning of the Brain," "Under Old Earth," "Golden the Ship Was- Oh! Oh! Oh!," "The Game of Rat and Dragon." Science fiction that draws on Chinese myth and a sense of immense, immovable age. Stories that make me feel whirling and small.

Michael Battaglia says

What are the chances that a professor with a PhD in political science and an expertise in the Far East would be able to write even one excellent science-fiction tale? There's probably a good chance that he might be able to crank out one or two decent ones in his spare time, but what if he was able to churn out over thirty of them in the course of his relatively short career, not only making each one noticeably different but also putting

together a rather detailed future history on the sly, the scope and texture of which was only apparent when you read a whole bunch of them at once?

That probably only describes one person, and that person has a fake name of Cordwainer Smith.

Born Paul Linebarger, he wasn't the most prolific of SF authors (probably due in part to the day job, I imagine) but his thirty-odd stories have an astoundingly high hit-miss ratio, enough to propel his relatively slim repertoire of SF tales (for comparison's sake, Theodore Sturgeon, who had a longer career but also was apparently a writing machine in human form, has a complete stories series that numbers into the double digits) to one of the top collections the genre has ever seen, ranking up there with the greats like Sturgeon and Kornbluth/Pohl despite only kicking around for ten or fifteen years. He's one of those authors that is pretty close to being essential and while he's not a household name like Heinlein or Asimov, it's probably fair to say that you won't completely understand SF without having at least a passing knowledge of his stories.

But what makes them so essential? A lot of it comes down to the construction of them, not just the stories themselves but the framework they rest in. Unique to a lot of authors working at the time, all of his stories exist in the same universe, just at different points in a timeline that extends tens of thousands of years into the future, to the point where humanity has been dispersed over the stars. At some point, the Instrumentality rises and starts to bring everyone back together again (hence the "Rediscovery of Man" title) and you get to see all the wackiness that occurs when everyone gets separated by large distances and centuries (imagine a family reunion with very little common ground, or to make it easier, just imagine a family reunion).

Meanwhile the Instrumentality, run by people who can live for centuries, attempts to keep everything in order and more often than not succeeds, either by being craftier or just one step ahead of everyone. But a lot of times they seem to do things just to see how it plays out. The closest setting I can compare it to is Iain Banks' Culture series, which has the same spirit and feel of a boundless future where some rather unpleasant things are capable of occurring (even if the underlying politics might be slightly different) but even after the first few stories it becomes clear that Smith's stories are their own animal entirely.

To me what gives them a different feel is the mythological structure that many of them take (something that is probably the influence of Linebarger's Asian studies), coupling that with the overall scope gives them a flavor that seems completely out of place for the times. A number of them are presented as histories, with character names from one story appearing as an aside in a later story to give the impression that it's all part of the same fabric, as well as implying a general progression of events due to actions seen in earlier tales. Smith apparently put a lot of thought into this and the best stories are the ones obsessed with the progress of time and culture, showing how a people might get from one point to another, even if he has to carry those elements from one story to the next (most notable with the animal based underpeople, who are treated as second class citizens early on and gradually get more freedom as the stories go on). But what's fascinating about his approach to the history is what he doesn't say, showing us the results of actions through oblique asides and letting us fill in the blanks. We aren't presented with a strict timeline of what happened (although those exist) but are allowed to sort of look in the spaces he's coloring in and figure out where the lines are. It's a remarkably change from other future histories (like Heinlein's or Poul Anderson's, or even big thinkers like Stapledon) where we can figure out from the course of things when people left Earth and when colonies were established. Here it's both clear and jumbled at the same time.

But by far the most impressive aspect of these stories is how deeply strange they are. The most famous story here "Scanners Live in Vain" was infamous rejected by several editors (among them John Campbell, who reportedly said it was too extreme) and you can almost see why as it depicts a future where space travel is so physically painful that the pilots have to have their sensory perceptions severed from their brains in order to function and are only able to feel like regular people in certain schedule moments. It pretty much sets the

tone for what you're going to experience in later stories . . . absolutely fantastic elements and mad ideas that border on the brutal set in an extremely grounded future that mixes optimism (most of these stories have happy endings of some sort) with deep, deep cynicism at a universe that even lets matters get this far. What's amazing is how Smith can take a seemingly tossed off idea and use it as a background element amongst other background elements (planoforming, the underpeople, mental powers, the entire weird planet of Nostrilia, intelligent surveillance cameras hidden inside idiots), mixing and matching and bringing those elements forward as he sees fit, giving you a cohesive experience over the course of a bunch of stories that were never meant to be read all in a row.

Smith's writing has a playful poetic quality that works well for the mythological slant the stories take and gives the best stories an eerie and claustrophobic feel, whether you're watching people fight terrifying invisible space dragons ("The Game of Rat and Dragon") or invaders ("Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons") with the best use of cats you'll see outside the Internet, or he's breaking your heart with a love with between time and species ("The Ballad of Lost C'Mell), or he's just being psychedelically weird before it was cool ("Drunkboat"), or he's messing with gender norms (the bizarrely extreme "The Crime and the Glory of Commander Suzdal") . . . and even if you've gone through all those without blinking or batting an eye and ignoring the fact that most of these were published in the relatively conservative 1950s where they must have seemed the product of an insane person if they weren't so well done . . . even after all that, nothing can prepare you for "A Planet Named Shayol" which takes probably the most messed up premise I've ever seen in SF (criminals are sentenced to a planet where the inhabitants continuously cause them to grow extra body parts, including baby heads, which are then sawed off and sent back for medical purposes) and turns it into a rousing optimistic tale despite most of it being as bleak as anything you'll ever read. It makes "Scanners Live in Vain" seem like one of those small books with the chewy covers that babies like in comparison . . . it's one of those stories upon which reputations are made and the fact that he wrote plenty of other ones that are nearly as good and as shocking makes him as close to a genius as SF will see.

Later stories delve into the mythological elements further (the four "Quest of the Three Worlds" stories) while also sneaking in a persistent Christian element, which suggested that he was going to start tackling the place of older religions in this new future where people were rediscovering everything (with hints that the Instrumentality was trying to keep it somewhat suppressed). Unfortunately, he died before he ever got to pursue those ideas further in his future milieu (if he was ever going to). But his balance of cynical brutality and hopeful optimism in a future that suggested we'd always still be around, if not always happy about it, along with the sometimes experimental subject matter and structures prefigures a decent amount of SF that would come along later and even if those weren't directly influenced, a lot of writers can certainly point to him as a spiritual antecedent. He's not the kind of writer that they go and make bombastic sexy movies out of his stories but it's difficult to say you'll be able to understand SF (or at least the branch that deals with the possibilities of humanity's future) without having some passing acquaintanceship with him and frankly it's probably safe to say that he's so quintessentially what you want SF to be about that if you don't like him, then it may not be the genre for you.

Biafra says

The Rediscovery of Man is set in the *Instrumentality of Mankind* universe, one with many mysteries and insights. Throughout the myriad and excellent short stories, Cordwainer weaves a tale about mankind and its future that rivals the best and is unique in both its scope and creativity. From "pin-lighters" to "Go-captains", Underpeople (persons of non-human animal stock who have been made to look and act human), and ingeniously realized planets such as Shayol—where the Instrumentality sends people who are punished but

where their partnering faction running the place also has...alternative goals—the universe is full of grin-inducing tales. While there is a certain detached coldness permeating the stories—an impression that one is both viewing a wondrous universe but also one where the cold, harsh reality of space and human nature are fully appreciated and realized—the (unintended?) humor and writing ability of the author keep things interesting and engaging.

Chronologically ordering the book by each story's rough position in the Instrumentality universe's timeline really helps the reader follow the general progression of the universe, the introduction of new technologies/ideas, and how they (along with major events) are received and then later used. It also causes one to re-read older short stories with knowledge of how things played out in the future. There is a refreshing lack of specific details for many events, from how man went from the initial discovery of what appears to be telepathy in "*No, No, Not Rogov!*" (and its potential connection to another short story in the book "*Under Old Earth*") to the creation of Scanner-humans who can survive space and the discovery of planoforming (a kind of hyperspace for faster than light travel by going through Space2) along with other technological marvels. This lends a mystery to the universe that the reader is free to fill in, which complements other aspects of the stories.

As hinted at before, many of the stories appear to be underlined with a certain, maybe dark (?), humor that often derives from the somewhat ridiculous-on-the-face-of-it nature of the scenarios at hand. For example, in *On the Storm Planet* Casher O'Neill, a recurring character, encounters a young, teenage woman whom he is sent to kill. Their initial interaction is confusing, both for the reader and character, but within that confusion, and how the girl talks and continues on without sarcasm or a hint of being in on the joke, lies a bit of mirth. The same can be said of the disturbing "When the People Fell", in which the Chinese come up with a solution that effectively solves a particular Venusian problem, but would disturb many (of Western sensibilities). This tension throughout many of the stories between the seriousness of the topic being explored, the sometimes ridiculous at face value nature of many stories's setups, and the interaction between the characters is often pulled off perfectly. This is also seen in one of the planoforming stories, where the idea that cats are being used to defend spaceships against extradimensional dragons is ridiculous on its face, but, once accepted, both makes sense in an odd sort of way and leaves the reader smiling.

The background myth of an expansive, ancient universe that pervades the stories adds great depth and Cordwainer's lack of detail about all aspects of the Instrumentality allows readers to imagine the vastness of the regions they control, the problems they faced, and all manner of things that are only hinted at. The Underpeople and their plight/problems are explored several times (e.g. in *The Ballad of Lost C'Mell* and *The Dead Lady of Clown Town*); however, a far future story that gave more details of the changes in Underpeople-human relations eons after the short-lived rebellion or successful gaining of limited rights would have been interesting. Alas, it seems Cordwainer never quite got around to it, but as it appears he was trying to parallel the situation of the lower/middle class in today's society, it might be apt that in both cases (to some) the struggle isn't finished and has a long way to go.

In a manner, the *Instrumentality of Mankind* resonates with me to such a degree because of the parallels with a book/short story series I have wanted to flesh out in a similar vein called Filugori. That was supposed to tell the tale of Humanity's expansion over many millennia, with news snippets, short stories, and longer narratives from different eras that would give an overarching view of how humanity changed in response to specific events. However, while that tale was focused on man's innate fear of loneliness, at the crazed mindset that would emerge if the deeply horrifying reality came to pass in which we explored the entire galaxy and found *no* alien life, Cordwainer's instead focuses on man rediscovering his adventurous spirit and desire for life that was lost in the pursuit of eternal life and efficiency1. In a sense, that sentiment was expressed in a short story I wrote over 7 years ago, *Humanity's Gold*, which hinted at the lull that humanity

encountered when there was no *Grand Adventure* (in that case, the search for ever more gold) waiting on the horizon. Given the way society is talked about today in terms of GDP, efficiency, and how much economic productivity new and existing citizens bring to society, rather than what *spirit* and *ideals* people embody and live by or grand goals they are striving for, Cordwainer's overarching premise and stories are more appropriate now than ever before.

As I continue to ply the depths of old science fiction universes, this one will remain the gold standard due to its inventiveness, execution, and flair. Without reservation, this is a must read for any science fiction fan. Even for those who are not, there is a sense of wonder, awe, and vast scope that place this collection among the best that I've come across in a while.

Footnotes

1 Note: after having read Jacques Ellul's **The Technological Society**, the Instrumentality appears to be a perfect case of the end point when technique is applied to its logical and most efficient conclusion.

Robert says

This really is a fantastic collection of short stories. A little background - Cordwainer Smith is a pseudonym for Paul Linebarger. He was a preeminent military psychologist - he wrote a classic text on psychological warfare. His life story is really interesting; advisor to Chiang Kai-shek, the President of Nationalist China in the 20s, he spoke six languages, was a foreign policy advisor for JFK..

His scifi is much more focused on large sociological structures and individuals in repressive societies than 'hard' scifi. This has been one of the most enjoyable short story collections I've read.. most of the scifi I like isn't very focused on "hard" science.

Kevin Bell says

Cordwainer Smith is a writer like none other. His prose leaves an entirely different effect on the reader than any of the other masters of science fiction. His imagination is terrifying, and stories like "The Crime and Glory of Commander Suzdal" will leave your eyes wide open and your palms sweating. Excellent, excellent writer.

Stephen says

5.5 stars. I have not read all of the stories in this collection, so my rating is based on the stories reviewed below (I will update periodically as I read additional stories):

Scanners Live In Vain - Classic short story set in the universe of the Instrumentality of Mankind and arguably Smith's best story. Set around 6000 A.D., interstellar travel has been discovered to cause great pain and suicidal tendencies in people. This problem was resolved by having passengers travel stored in cold sleep, while the crew of the spaceship is composed of Habermans: convicts and criminals who have undergone medical mutilation to have the brain severed from all sensory input except the eyes. This

procedure allows them to travel in space but also completely alienates them from society. The Habermans are supervised in space by Scanners, who have voluntarily agreed to undergo the same medical mutilation and are respected by all of society for their sacrifice and their role in uniting mankind through space travel. The Scanners lives are difficult and very lonely and their only joy comes from "cranching" — brief intervals where they use a device that temporarily restores normal brain connectivity. The story itself involves the apparent discovery of a new method of space travel that will eliminate the need for scanners and habermans and make space travel available to everyone and the reaction of the Confraternity of Scanners to that discovery. A well-written and hugely original science fiction short story. 5.5 stars.

Ballad of Lost C'Mell -Another classic "Instrumentality" story, this one centered on a Lord of the Instrumentality and a member of the Underpeople (animals that have been evolved to have human-like intelligence and appearance) who devise a plan to improve the rights of the Underpeople. 5.5 stars.

Jason Farley says

If I had to pick just three authors works for the rest of my life. I would pick Cordwainer Smith. This particular volume has every short story that he wrote. He became a Christian partway through his career, and some of his great stories are concerned directly with the faith and with what conversion means in the modern world. Some of my favorites: "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" "The Lady who sailed the Soul" "Scanners live in vain"

Terence says

(Written September 2010): I am at an impasse. I have an enormous pile of fiction on the To-Read pile but I can't figure out which one to go with - Mieville? Sabatini? Himes? Warner? Winterson? Kleist?, und so weiter.

In the interim, while this existential struggle goes on, I have been rereading this collection of short stories from Cordwainer Smith (aka Paul Linebarger). It's hard to characterize Smith. Like Gene Wolfe, he's an author who I either really like or I really don't. The Shadow of the Torturer, Free Live Free, and Soldier of Arete are some of my favorite novels but I couldn't get through The Knight and stopped after the first book of *The Long Sun* series.

In a similar way, I love Smith's justly famous "Scanners Live in Vain" or "Think Blue, Count Two," "The Game of Rat and Dragon," or "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons," and the very name "Instrumentality of Mankind" sets my pulse racing, but I can't quite get my head around stories like "When the People Fell" or "Golden the Ship Was - Oh! Oh! Oh!"

But I have found that multiple perusals of some of these stories make me appreciate them more, e.g., "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" or "Alpha Ralha Boulevard."

Check out "Scanners Live in Vain," and if you like it, check out Smith's other work; if you don't, he probably won't improve with further exposure.

Paul van der Bijl says

excellent so far. nearly done. i'll update when i'm finished. maybe some of the best scifi i've ever read
