

# THE SUN SETS ON MOON FICTION

Review by Tom Dillon

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**Ashley, Mike, editor. *Moonrise: The Golden Age of Lunar Adventure*. The British Library, 2018. Short Story Anthology.**

From the ancient Greeks to modern America; from the Moon aliens in Japanese folk tales to Nintendo's lunar farming game *Harvest Moon* (1996); the Moon has provided fertile ground for storytelling throughout history. In *Moonrise*, Editor Mike Ashley introduces us to several excellent short stories involving the exploration of the Moon, with an informative and detailed introduction which seeks to place the predominantly twentieth-century stories within a longer history of the dreams of Moon exploration, stretching from the ancient world to the Moon landing. However, the stories are constricted rather than contextualised by the narrow focus on the scientific veracity of preceding texts which Ashley presents in the introduction. Rather than seeing the Moon as a complex and ambiguous symbol, reflecting a wide range of cultural meanings with social issues and desires projected onto a visible but unreachable heavenly body, the Moon for Ashley is a place to be understood and rationalised within a strictly limited Western canon and history.

Ashley begins his introduction discussing the meaning of the Moon over time. The Moon has universally fascinated humanity due to both its visibility and inaccessibility. This interest, Ashley argues, led scientists and writers to speculate about this celestial body and specifically how to reach it, culminating in the Moon landings in 1969. For Ashley, the period from around the beginning of the twentieth century through to the first steps on the Moon is to be considered 'The Golden Age.' The increasing accuracy of the imaginative voyages, based on up-to-date scientific data, in turn influenced scientific developments, bringing Moon exploration from fiction to fact.

The specific focus on scientific accuracy makes each of the stories forerunners of the Golden Age; or as Ashley puts it, each story is "a rung on a ladder" which took our "imagination and later humans to the Moon" (30). This scientific veracity then becomes of the highest importance and the unscientific must be excised or denigrated so that the 'ladder' can be seen more clearly. For instance, Johannes Kepler's scientific rigour in his description of the Moon is for Ashley "unfortunately [...] wrapped up in a story of daemons and witchcraft" (14). Another text is let down as "unfortunately the rest of the work is a satire," while the first use of anti-gravity in a lunar adventure is, apart from this innovative scientific speculation, "unfortunately, [...] a lunar travelogue and satire" (21). For Ashley, Fantasy, satire, and travelogue, are embarrassing deviations from the straight scientific ladder (or should I say space-rocket) to the Moon.

Such a restrictive history severely limits both the texts discussed but also the breadth of the

canon itself. For example, as Darko Suvin and John Rider have shown, the travelogue and satire are genres central to the development of Science Fiction (SF), while the distinction between Fantasy and SF pre-twentieth century has been increasingly questioned. These forerunners are themselves taken from a strictly Western tradition. If the Moon has been a catalyst for the imagination the world over as Ashley suggests, why are there only white Western writers discussed and anthologised? One of the earliest recorded Japanese folk tales, "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," includes Moon entities descending to the earth (the first instance of extra-terrestrials visiting our planet), while Huangjian Diasou's *Tales of the Moon Colony* (1905), an important landmark in Chinese SF, though ending before the promised visit to the Moon, is, from the title, clearly the aim of the narrative. The stories of *Moonrise* are presented in no discernible order, except perhaps starting and ending with the strongest: "Dead Center" (1954) by Judith Merrill, and "The Sentinel" (1951) by Arthur C. Clarke. There is roughly a fifty percent split between American and British stories, ranging over a seventy-year period from the earliest published in 1894 ("Sunrise on the Moon" by John Munroe) to 1963 ("After a Judgement Day" by Edmund Hamilton).

Reading the American stories, I was struck not by the utopian impulse to reach the Moon but by the sense of personal loss in pursuit of national power and prestige, which comes with space exploration. For instance, in the excellent "Dead Center," the Moon is a complex symbol of family tragedy. Jock Kruger, the first man on the Moon, crash lands and Ruth, his wife and designer of the rocket, blames herself for his death. Ruth, convinced as a child of the reality of the "man in the moon" (46), is overcome by the irony that her husband has become that very myth, while her son Toby is haunted by the idea that his mother will also go to the Moon and leave him behind on Earth. The rocket is described on a number of occasions as a "beast" (35, 41), imbuing the scientific similitude of the story with a disquieting fantastic, foreshadowing the trauma of the narrative. In "Whatever Gods There Be" (1961) by Gordon R. Dickson, Major Greene sacrifices himself on the Moon to save a crashed space ship, and in "After a Judgement Day" (1963) by Edmund Hamilton, Martinsen and Ellam remain on the Moon, desolate and lonely, after the Earth is overcome by a plague.

At the heart of the British stories is the Moon as a symbol of empire. They move from George Griffith's techno superiority in "A Visit to the Moon" (1901) in which Lord Redgrave and his new wife, Zaidie, literally have a 'honeymoon,' through Wells satirical critique of colonialism in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) – the narrator Bedford remarks to Cavor on reaching their destination "We must annex this Moon" (78) – to a post-imperial wish fulfilment. In John Wyndham's "Idiot's Delight," (1958) the British build a Moon base in order not to be seen as "dwindling into their sunset" in the face of declining power in the era of the Cold War (289). In "The Sentinel" by Clarke, the narrative projects post-imperial melancholy from Britain onto the Moon. The narrator Wilson will not at first "take the final humiliating plunge" (344), in acknowledging that humanity (read Britain) is inferior technologically to an alien race that builds a watchtower on the Moon to keep an eye on Earth (here perhaps read cold war superpowers the US or USSR).

In these stories then, the Moon emerges as a symbol of national prestige, personal tragedy, satire, colonialism, and decline, each story using the Moon as a mirror to a particular desire or

anxiety. Ashley's introduction, though informative, does not do the stories justice, as it transforms the universality of the Moon, a common repository of symbolism accessible everywhere and by anyone, into one owned by a single tradition for a singular aim.

#### **BIONOTE**

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