

**Donald L. Lawler.**

**APPROACHES TO SCIENCE FICTION.**

**Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978.**

**560 pp. \$9.45 (paper). Instructor's Manual: \$.60.**

For those of us who believe that science fiction as a corpus is a perfectly valid, if not prophetic, form of literature that demands serious attention in our schools, Donald Lawler's *Approaches to Science Fiction* is an attractive addition to the growing list of anthologies appearing on the market.

*Approaches* has two weaknesses which I consider to be of lesser importance. Firstly, it lacks attractive packaging: it is nondescript in appearance and it looks and feels like the usual school textbook — rather gray. Given the nature of the subject matter, one finds it difficult to imagine precisely why the publishers did not provide it with a format students would find more attractive. Secondly, while the overall selection of stories is very good, the editor has chosen to include several which, while widely recognized, can already be found in a variety of less expensive anthologies on the market. Among these stories are A.C. Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God," T. Godwin's "The Cold Equations," and Ursula Le Guin's "Nine Lives."

On the other hand, what is particularly significant about Lawler's text is that it offers a uniquely structured approach to the subject of science fiction which makes the book a very practical instrument for the novice teacher. In his preface the editor states that he gives science fiction "as much substance and underpinning as the scope of an introductory text allows." In addition, he has "attempted to draw out of the critical terminology of science fiction its literary, cultural, and intellectual associations as they are applicable." And in the body of his introduction he achieves his goals. In effect he legitimizes the study of science fiction, establishes with the aid of a "Time Capsule" the literary and historical roots out of which it grew, and offers a credible argument that "SF itself has become an integer of change that exercises its own shaping power on our culture." Further, he formulates an authoritative definition for science fiction which he then proceeds to explain with very great care. Finally, he identifies the five broad sections with their various sub-sections under which science fiction should be studied and which he employs in the text. They are *Nineteenth Century Background*; *Fantasy Science Fiction*, including "The Space Opera," "Speculative Fantasy Science Fiction," "Weird Science Fiction," and "Time Travel and Parallel Worlds"; *Hard Science Fiction*, including "Speculative Hard Science Fiction," "Aliens," and "Robots"; *Soft Science Fiction*, including "Speculative Soft Science Fiction," "Utopias and Dystopias," and "Social Science Fiction"; finally, *Science Fiction Mixtures*, including "Mystery and Horror Science Fiction" and "Comic Science Fiction." With each section and sub-section Lawler provides knowledgeable introductions, and each story is prefaced by a brief biographical sketch of the author and analytical notes. At the

end of each story he adds several good standard questions which might prove to be of some assistance in initiating classroom discussion.

In short, then, Lawler has put together a rather complete science fiction starter kit for teachers and students alike. An *Instructor's Manual* is also available which not only convinces the teacher of the editor's great enthusiasm for the field, but also includes even more useful supplementary information related to stories in the text.) But there are real dangers in having so much information supplied, for even though, as Lawler suggests, the stories and novellas in the text should only be used as a jumping off point for further study of novels and stories — Lawler supplies a fairly complete bibliography — much of the possible initiative has already been wrested away from the teacher, who will find that the breadth and sophistication of the approach developed in the book about as much as, if not more than he can handle. Hence, at what level this book would be best employed is also a rather important question.

From what I can understand, Lawler's intention was to have *Approaches to Science Fiction* employed as the basis for a full-blown course. As a text it would be prohibitively expensive for anything less (\$9.45 excluding *Instructor's Manual*). And yet few teachers of English at the secondary level are in a position to offer such a course even for half an academic year. Also, it is too much of a book for inclusion in a modular program. Probably, then — and I say this with regret — the ideal role for *Approaches* is as the core text for an optional course at the CEGEP or Junior College level.

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