



Microworlds

By Stanislaw Lem

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In this bold and controversial examination of the past, present, and future of science fiction, Lem informs the raging debate over the literary merit of the genre with ten arch, incisive, provocative essays. Edited and with an Introduction by Franz Rottensteiner. Translated by Rottensteiner and others. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

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Editorial Review

Review

Ten essays, 1971-83: ranging from autobiography through analyses of the underpinnings of sf to examinations of specific authors and works - delivered in thunderous yet calculated tones, and a welter of academic polysyllables. The autobiographical piece is most engaging and revealing - with Lem candidly discussing his upbringing, his Jewish heritage, the German and Russian occupations of Poland, his own sf. Elsewhere, he demonstrates his formidable intellect and his self-imposed conceptual limitations: he finds fiction without intellectual challenge boring (and has no patience with the notion of fiction as entertainment); in his view, sf works in which neither the objects nor the ideas have any basis in reality are merely "empty games." Later, however, Lem cogently discusses sf's various time-travel motifs - notwithstanding his previous denunciation of "empty games" where "impossible time-travel machines are used to point out impossible time-travel paradoxes." "The primary unsolved problem" of sf, he writes, is "the lack of a theoretical typology of its paradigmatic structures" - yet he fails to demonstrate why this lack is so damaging. On the incestuous nature of Western sf, he's devastating: "critiques are not produced independently, but are written by either the authors or the editors of anthologies, who evaluate each other's works." (He also blasts publishers and editors for camouflaging advertising as criticism.) For all these reasons, sf is trashy and apt to remain so. Moving on to specifics, Lem shows himself to be a penetrating but often arbitrary and petulant critic. Just about the only Western sf author he approves of (Ballard and Bradbury rate a maybe) is Philip K. Dick - who "tries to probe the neglected, latent, untouched, as-yet-unrealized potentialities of human existence." A. E. van Vogt's work is condemned as "stupid lies" without a shred of evidence or analysis; Borges, Lem determines, "has suffered from a lack of a free and rich imagination." He criticizes Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* for what Leto thinks Keyes' should have written; the Strugatsky brothers' *Roadside Picnic* - which Leto not only analyzes brilliantly, but finds enjoyable - comes in for similar treatment. Clearly, there's some ax-grinding going on. In sum: guaranteed to offend and provoke. (*Kirkus Reviews*)

About the Author

Stanislaw Lem is the most widely translated and best known science fiction author writing outside of the English language. Winner of the Kafka Prize, he is a contributor to many magazines, including the *New Yorker*, and he is the author of numerous works, including *Solaris*.

Users Review

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