

## STILL SEARCHING: REVIEW OF LOST MARS (2018)

Review by Katie Stone

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**Ashley, Mike, editor. *Lost Mars: The Golden Age of the Red Planet*. The British Library, 2018. Short Story Anthology.**

From H. G. Wells' "The Crystal Egg" (1897) to J. G. Ballard's "The Time Tombs" (1963), *Lost Mars* offers "a whistlestop tour" (9) of almost one hundred years of Science Fiction (SF) set on, or centrally concerned with, the "red planet." The short stories which Mike Ashley has collected in *Lost Mars* are vivid, engaging, and productive of a vast array of Martian imaginaries. Unfortunately, the editorial content is disappointing in comparison and readers are left with a somewhat confused anthology in which Mars's promise as an exciting stimulus for SF remains obscured.

The critical framework which Ashley utilises in his introduction to the collection is one of increasing familiarity and growing disillusionment. The argument which he puts forward is that the advances in astronomy and, ultimately, the establishment of government-funded space programmes in the twentieth century, brought travel to Mars into the realm of, increasingly mundane, possibility. Where in Wells's story the reader can only glimpse Mars, "as a child might peep upon a forbidden garden" (41), through the titular crystal egg, as early as 1933 did P. Schuyler Miller, in "The Forgotten Man of Space" depicted Mars as a mining colony, and by 1963 was Ballard writing of Mars as home to a derelict society of tomb robbers who earn their livelihoods by pillaging the graves of the now-extinct Martians.

The strength of the collection is in the diversity of responses to the planet that it provides. These range from studies of Martian/human communication in George C. Wallis' "The Great Sacrifice" (1903) and Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" (1934), to harrowing contemplations of the potential exploitation of labour offered by an industrialised Mars, as seen in E. C. Tubb's "Without Bugles" (1952) or Walter M. Miller Jr.'s "Crucifixus Etiam" (1953). Even within these groupings difference flourishes. For example, Wallis' depiction of human communication with Mars is reserved to astronomical charts sent by the Martians to warn Earth of a meteor shower which could have disastrous consequences for both planets, while, in contrast, Weinbaum's "Odyssey" follows the playful "shenanigans" of an early explorer of Mars who attempts to speak with an emu-like Martian in "a language you have to make up as you go along" (134, 137).

This kind of diversity can also be located in the varying alterity with which Martians are presented in the collection. Although Mars may seem to grow closer as the collection progresses its inhabitants do not necessarily become more human: the collection ends with Ballard's protagonist

staring forlornly at the holographic projection of a Martian woman who died centuries ago and who is now “an empty skin” who denies any possibility for communication (302). The move from “planetary romance” to “harsh reality” which Ashley discusses in his introduction must therefore be understood as offering only one of the many potential models available to the reader of this collection, with some of the alternative readings directly undermining this supposedly linear progression (8).

Given the wild variation in these various authors’ approaches to Mars, and the fact that Ashley describes the collection as “a selection of the more diverse science fiction that has been set on Mars” (8), it is deeply disappointing that this same interest in diversity was not evident during the process of selecting which writers’ work to showcase. Marion Zimmer Bradley’s contribution, “Measureless to Man” (1962), is the only entry by a female writer and Ashley has chosen to include no stories by people of colour or writers who identify as queer. His broad definition of the ‘Golden Age’ means that this omission cannot be justified via an appeal to an unavailability of material. For example, Ashley himself draws attention to Leigh Brackett as “the thinking-person’s writer of planetary romance” in the 1940s (181); a decade from which none of the stories in *Lost Mars* hail. As the editor of such collections as *The Feminine Future: Early Science Fiction by Women Writers* (2015), in which he attempted to correct the “misconception ... that until recently few women wrote science fiction” (1), Ashley seems well placed to draw attention to marginalised voices within science fiction. It is a shame, then, that *Lost Mars* fails to provide any remedy for this prevailing misconception about the field. A very cursory attempt at uncovering the work of other women writing during this lengthy ‘Golden Age’ reveals C. L. Moore’s “Northwest Smith” stories, all of which are set on Mars, as an obvious example which could serve to redress the gender bias of the collection, but Ashley’s encyclopedic knowledge of the field would have presumably provided examples from far more obscure authors who now, sadly, remain lost in the long and untold history of women’s SF.

This is not, however, merely a question of representation for representation’s sake. The inclusion of only one writer who is not a white man limits the anthology’s range in far deeper ways. As has previously been noted, the theoretical framework which underpins Ashley’s collection is that of astronomy, with his ‘Golden Age’ bookmarked by the observations of Mars undertaken by Giovanni Schiaparelli, which “leaked into the public domain” in 1882 (7), at one end, and the *Mariner 4* voyage of 1965, in which the first close-up photographs of the planet were taken, at the other. The assumption upon which this time frame is implemented is that Schiaparelli’s discovery of the “canali” or ‘channels’ on Mars’ surface cast Mars as a planet capable of supporting intelligent life while the *Mariner* mission “put an end to the centuries of speculation that there might have been life on Mars” (7). Despite the fact that Tubb and Miller Jr. depicted Mars as uninhabited a decade prematurely, according to Ashley’s calculations, he remains confident in this direct connection between science and fiction, whereby astronomical discoveries are seen to determine the possible fictional responses to Mars.

I do not intend to suggest that the history of astronomy which Ashley provides is uninteresting. Certainly, the floating cities of W. S. Lach-Szyrma’s “Letters from Mars” (1887) demonstrate an obvious debt to the popular mistranslation of Schiaparelli’s ‘canali’ as ‘canals’.

However, this astronomical framework is only of varying and often questionable relevance to the stories themselves. Indeed, it often serves to distract from the other potential critical lenses through which to read them, as seen in Ashley's cursory comments on the pressing ecocritical concerns of the collection - which stretch back as far as Lach-Szyrma's interest in Martian terraforming and clean energy production. The colonial implications of the collection's various mining colonies, never mind the Marxist critique raised by their concern with workers' rights, receive no mention at all.

This single-mindedness in Ashley's editorial approach, along with the racial and gender uniformity of the writers he has selected, can at least partially be ascribed to the binding definition of SF Ashley uses to justify his astronomical framework. In his introduction, which gives a history of Anglophone fiction about Mars, Ashley appears to view stories as "genuine science-fiction" to the extent that they are rooted "in as scientific a basis as contemporary knowledge allowed" (10). The idea that scientific discovery is tied directly and deterministically to the development of SF not only excludes any more fantastic responses to Mars, along with those of writers who might feel disenfranchised from the military-industrial space programme, it also woefully misrepresents the stories in this collection. For example, to cast Ray Bradbury's "Ylla" (1950) - in which he depicts the luxurious and strange lifestyles of his Martians, who spend their time vividly dreaming and eating the golden fruit which grows out of the walls of their crystalline palaces - as a response to developments in astrophysics in 1950 stretches the boundaries of credulity. Similarly, Bradley's disembodied Martians, whose mental stability has been variously impacted by centuries of inhabiting plants, seem to provide a very different function to the prediction of what life on Mars might 'really' be like which Ashley's framework suggests; one which photographic evidence of the planet's surface is unlikely to curb.

*Lost Mars* is a collection of excellent stories, some of which - such as Miller Jr.'s tale of a labourer who, due to Mars's lack of breathable atmosphere, has the choice either to continually suffocate himself to encourage his body to breathe or to allow his muscles to atrophy, meaning that he cannot speak unaided - will undoubtedly provoke powerful critical and affective reactions in their readers. However, although both Ashley's eye for a good story and his knowledge of the history of fiction about Mars as a response to astronomy are beyond question, the anthology's editorial material is essentially disappointing. Despite the many satisfying stories which Ashley has collected, one gets the impression that a further, more diverse, history of imaginings of the red planet is yet to be found.

#### BIONOTE

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