

# REVELATIONS

*A Paranoid Novel of Suspense*



BARRY N. MALZBERG

*Introduction by D. Harlan Wilson*

**AOP**

ANTI-OEDIPUS PRESS

*Revelations*

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ISBN: 978-0-99-915354-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020934879

First published in the United States by Warner Paperback

First Anti-Oedipal Paperback Edition: March 2020

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Cover Design by Matthew Revert

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Anti-Oedipus Press

Grand Rapids, MI

[www.anti-oedipuspress.com](http://www.anti-oedipuspress.com)

**SF**  
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## PRAISE FOR THE WORK OF BARRY N. MALZBERG

“There are possibly a dozen genius writers in the genre of the imaginative, and Barry Malzberg is at least eight of them. Malzberg makes what the rest of us do look like felonies!”

—**Harlan Ellison**

“Malzberg makes persuasively clear that the best of science fiction should be valued as literature and nothing else.”

—*The Washington Post*

“One of the finest practitioners of science fiction.”

—**Harry Harrison**

“Barry N. Malzberg’s writing is unparalleled in its intensity and in its apocalyptic sensibility. His detractors consider him bleakly monotonous and despairing, but he is a master of black humor, and is one of the few writers to have used science fiction’s vocabulary of ideas extensively as apparatus in psychological landscapes, dramatizing relationships between the human mind and its social environment in a SF theater of the absurd.”

—*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*

“The writer who attempts to use the SF mythos as Malzberg has is bedevilled by the inappropriateness of the ‘rules’ pertaining to the production and consumption of mass-produced fiction.”

—**Brian Stableford**

“Malzberg is a true hero.”

—*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*

“There is no one, with the possible exception of Philip K. Dick, whose works, each one of them, are so unpredictable or so outrageous and outraged.”

—**Theodore Sturgeon**

“Barry Malzberg is one of science fiction’s most literate and erudite writers.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

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*The Falling Astronauts*

*Confessions of Westchester County*

*The Spread*

*Horizontal Woman*

*The Social Worker*

*Revelations*

*Beyond Apollo*

*Overlay*

*In the Enclosure*

*Herovit's World*

*The Men Inside*

*Phase IV*

*Underlay*

*The Destruction of the Temple*

*On a Planet Alien*

*The Sodom and Gomorrah Business*

*Conversations*

*The Day of the Burning*

*Tactics of Conquest*

*Galaxies*

*Guernica Night*

*The Gamesman*

*Scop*

*The Running of Beasts*

*The Last Transaction*

*Acts of Mercy*

*Chorale*

*Night Screams*

*Prose Bowl*

*The Cross of Fire*

*The Remaking of Sigmund Freud*

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*Out from Ganymede*  
*The Many Worlds of Barry Malzberg*  
*Down Here in the Dream Quarter*  
*The Best of Barry Malzberg*  
*Malzberg at Large*  
*The Man Who Loved the Midnight Lady*  
*The Passage of the Light*  
*In the Stone House*  
*On Account of Darkness and Other SF Stories*  
*The Very Best of Barry N. Malzberg*

## NONFICTION

*Breakfast in the Ruins*  
*The Engines of the Night*  
*The Business of Science Fiction*

*For Joyce, Stephanie Jill, and Erika Cornell*

Drowning beneath ice, I see  
Possibility; just  
Breathing would keep me:  
I'd melt it, have my breath.

I lack  
That animal eye that sees  
Everything, blinks,  
And then opens the camera in sunlight.

Lovers  
Skate out my face. Effortless  
That scribbling in the close cold; whole  
Bahamas of the blood beneath their coats.

—Trim Bissell: *Inside*, 1968

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## INTRODUCTION

### BARRY N. MALZBERG AND THE GRAVITY OF SCIENCE FICTION

*D. Harlan Wilson*

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Nobody can finesse a semicolon like Barry N. Malzberg . . .

We barely remember what a semicolon is anymore. I have been a college professor for twenty years, and my students don't know what to do with this weird article of punctuation. All they know is that it forms the eyes of a primitive emoji when it's juxtaposed with a parenthesis. Like so:

;)

Removed from the parenthesis, all hell breaks loose. And hell is best ignored. This cryptic symbol located beneath the colon on computer keyboards—if we recognize it at all, we abjure it.

At some point in our schooling, we learn (and immediately forget) that semicolons function like periods; the only difference is that they link together two independent, inter-related clauses, as in this very sentence. Semicolons are also

used to divide lists of items that contain commas in their syntax: in this instance, they function like commas. They are the shapeshifters of the punctuation world, evolved and fluid, multi-purpose dogpoets in a maelstrom of singularities. But semicolons are not lawless. Like all punctuation marks, they abide by fixed rules of conduct.

Throughout his career, Malzberg unfixed these rules and scattered them across the canvas of his milieu with the same wild abandon as he dismantled the rules of the science fiction genre.

The semicolon can mean or do anything in a Malzberg novel. He makes the semicolon his own, deploying it for a dramatic pause, a frenetic cue, an existential talisman, a means of syntactic inscription that empowers and innovates the identity of a sentence . . . Likewise did he make SF his own. The genre didn't care. It cares even less today, especially in light of how the anvil of reality has usurped so many of its machinations, turning what was once the so-called "genre of ideas" into the junk of naught.

Science fiction belongs to the twentieth century.

As a genre of ideas, two movements distinguish SF: the New Wave of the 1960s and cyberpunk of the 1980s. Everything else is noise, spin, and riff—even cyberpunk, to some degree, which extrapolated the avant-garde efforts of the New Wave. All this presumes the validity of a "movement." As Malzberg has noted, there are "no literary movements, merely a bunch of writers sometimes hanging out together and trying to do their work" ("Fifties" 55). These days, movements are almost invariably marketing ploys. That's fine; if nothing else, authors sell a few more books, and scholars have something to write about. In the case of the New Wave, however, the term was borrowed from French experimental film criticism, then applied to

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a bunch of writers by reviewers and critics, with the first usage belonging to P. Schuyler Miller in his book-review column "The Reference Library" in 1961 ("New").

Everything coalesced in the New Wave, a speakeasy that subverted the prohibitions of pulp and Golden Age SF. It was the apex of SF as a source of genuine innovation, and cyberpunk was a stylish coda. In his famous preface to *Mirrorshades: A Cyberpunk Anthology*, Bruce Sterling foregrounds the influence of New Wave authors:

The cyberpunks as a group are steeped in the lore and tradition of the SF field. Their precursors are legion. Individual cyberpunk writers differ in their literary debts; but some older writers, ancestral cyberpunks perhaps, show a clear and striking influence. From the New Wave: the streetwise edginess of Harlan Ellison. The visionary shimmer of Samuel Delany. The free-wheeling zaniness of Norman Spinrad and the rock esthetic of Michael Moorcock; the intellectual daring of Brian Aldiss; and, always, J.G. Ballard. (x)

No mention of Malzberg. No Philip K. Dick either, although Malzberg's closest American counterpart is invoked later in the preface.

Spurred by Moorcock's editorship of *New Worlds*, the New Wave took flight in the United Kingdom. It bled into American culture most pointedly in the *Dangerous Visions* anthologies edited by Harlan Ellison. The second volume, *Again, Dangerous Visions*, featured Malzberg's "Still-Life," a story published under the pseudonym K.M. O'Donnell that Ellison called "a new kind of fiction . . . I wish I could invent a term like 'neorealistic' or 'fabulated' . . . but frankly I cannot even devise a category" (281). Herein lies one of

Malzberg/O'Donnell's great powers: the deflection of category (i.e., the author as a genre in himself), an angle of repose and inimitability that few authors enjoy or have the sand to actually beget. Elsewhere, Ellison had this to say: "There are possibly a dozen genius writers in the genre of the imaginative, and Barry Malzberg is at least eight of them. He makes what the rest of us do look like felonies!"

Despite this much-deserved praise, Malzberg proved to be too much of a rogue even for the New Wave. After a burst of productivity in the genre that included over 20 books and 150 stories ("Rage"), he had all but eaten the sunset by the time Sterling, William Gibson, Pat Cadigan, et al. had made their mark. The engines of the night rusted away. All that remained was breakfast in the ruins . . .

Wary of the raw potential of SF, "a dangerous literature represent[ing] the beast born in the era of enlightenment to snarl at the heart of all intellectual and technological advance," but consistently frustrated by the "hostility of the culture, the ineptitude of many of its practitioners, the loathing of most of its editors, the corruption of most of its readers"—which is still very much the case today for the few people that continue to write and read SF, or anything—Malzberg cultivated a literature that was distinctly, unapologetically, unwaveringly *his own*, recognizing that the problem with the genre was (and remains) its relative malleability and consequent indefinability ("Number" 17). "It is an ambivalent genre and I have been, perhaps, its most ambivalent writer," he admitted in 1979. "The career and Collected Works, the life itself, have been a mausoleum to schism. The field is one thing and yet it may be the other. I am one thing and yet the other. I, the field, may be both but somehow I doubt it. One cannot embrace multitudes; one can barely (and only then if life is lived well) embrace

oneself. There is simply no conclusion” (“Science” 86). Self-aware and self-effacing, as the best writers are, Malzberg had a clear idea about where SF should go if it wanted to make good on its prerogative to be the supreme literature of the imagination, but there were too many short-sighted, short-shrifting, shit-eating Little Men in the way. And the Little Men got their way.

(NOTE: If you don’t know what constitutes a Little Man, you are a bona fide Little Man.)

In “Something Is Broken in Our Science Fiction,” Lee Konstantinou catalogs the long list of punk SF subgenres that have materialized in the wake of cyberpunk, such as “steampunk, biopunk, nanopunk, stonepunk, clockpunk, rococopunk, raypunk, nowpunk, atompunk, mannerpunk, salvagepunk, Trumppunk, solarpunk, and sharkpunk.” Like a successful TV series whose producers will do anything to milk it for as many seasons as possible, this “proliferation of SF punks is what you’d expect from the overproduction of popular culture,” but all “postcyberpunk” formations—post-modernism, poststructuralism, postindustrialism, or post-whatever—are egregious markers of lethargy, idiocy, failure, and ultimately death: the prefix “post” simply means that a group of category-mongers (usually intellectuals, authors, and artists trying to make a name for themselves and their work) don’t know what to do, where to go, or who they are, because there’s *nothing* beyond *post*.

If they were intended as sheer satire and burlesque, punk and post subgenres might be worth some attention. Unfortunately, most of the authors and editors involved with these formations (and with SF on the whole) are dead serious. It is a deficiency, this seriousness, this *gravity* that pulls them down, gluing them firmly in place, this *affect* that symptomatizes their anxieties and insecurities about

their imaginative output. They are so grave about SF, they fail to see that the genre is just that: in the grave, rotting, where they put it.

Konstantinou suggests that contemporary SF lacks the glint of newness visible in the novels and stories of numerous authors associated with cyberpunk (and, by extension, the New Wave):

It's easy to see why some writers, editors, and critics have failed to think very far beyond the horizon cyberpunk helped define. If the best you can do is worm your way through gleaming arcologies you played little part in building—if your answer to dystopia is to develop some new anti-authoritarian style, attitude, or ethos—you might as well give up the game, don your mirrorshades, and admit you're still doing cyberpunk (close to four decades later). But if this is your choice, if you're writing science fiction that decides on its attitude toward the future in advance of doing the work of imagining that future, you're not heeding the most ambitious calling of the genre. You've substituted the hunt for a cool new market niche for the work of telling compelling stories that help us think rigorously about how we might make a better world, or at the very least better understand where our world might be heading.

Konstantinou presumes that good SF must be futuristic, which, of course, isn't always true. He also doesn't account for the degree to which modern technology has leveled the playing field so that Team Reality (or Team Nonfiction) has become indistinct from Team Science Fiction. This seems to have escaped some readers and writers. Overall, it has little to do with the innovative abilities of the genre. In

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the year 10,000 A.D., if we're still around, SF will harbor the same potential that it does today. The problem is that almost nobody harvests that potential.

The problem, in other words, is the people who inhabit the desert of science fiction.

Over the years, I have come to know many SF writers. Writers in general can barely put their pants on by themselves, let alone tell compelling stories, thanks to the ogres of Anxiety, Insecurity, and whatever or whoever else damaged them when they were children. (Many of my academic colleagues exhibit the same degradation.) The SF writer may be the worst of them all, addled as he is by various slights of personality, misperception, and self-unawareness, by involuntary tics and twitches, constant throat-clearing noises, simian grunts and storklike chirps, among many other awkwardnesses and general states of corporeal and emotional disrepair. How can we expect these Morlocks to understand how to make words fit together in interesting ways? They would be better off becoming engineers, if they aren't already, evacuated of all feelings and social facilities. Then they might produce something meaningful—or at least something that works.

In a 1992 meditation, "On Decadence," Malzberg says that cyberpunk (a term he dislikes) is just another response to cultural forces (e.g., late capitalism, MTV, VCRs, home computers, the Cold War, etc.), but not without significant effects. Cyberpunk

made narcissism a true and functional value and managed to link that narcissism to the continuing skein of the field, find antecedents in the bulkier computer and cyborg devices of the 40s and 50s . . . and drag the work toward a context which was found identifiable by

a lot of people who were not otherwise writing science fiction. That is one form of irresolution masquerading as resolve; another would be the explosion of alternate histories, alternate worlds, alternate historical placements. (259)

What he doesn't mention—and what matters more to me, and what Malzberg himself was doing—is how cyberpunks amped up the literary project initiated by the New Wave via *the art of language*, further distancing the genre from the crummy writing that has plagued and dominated it since its inception. Language is as good a novum as any other science fictional artifice, be it tangible, intangible, or in this instance, rhetorical. In my view, it's the best novum. Technically it's the *only* novum: there is no writing without words, after all. And unlike 99% of his peers, the art of language—not just how it looks, but how it moves, how it flows, how it blusters and wallows and burns—is another one of Malzberg's terrific strengths.

I discovered Malzberg when I was working on my M.A. in Science Fiction Studies at the University of Liverpool, a program that is, sadly, now defunct (academia seems to be mirroring the SF genre's decay). While it wasn't part of my coursework, a fellow graduate student recommended *Beyond Apollo* to me, and I was hooked. In retrospect, it was the palpable sense of the absurd that resonated with me. Malzberg wasn't just a terrific writer, he was funny, too. Published in 1972, *Beyond Apollo* features a recurrent Malzbergian trickster: the mad astronaut. The novel satirizes the bureaucratic machinery of NASA's Apollo program with a Kafkaesque flair unmatched by any other SF author (even Philip K. Dick, maybe the most important postwar SF author, yet a far inferior wordsmith). The subject matter is

serious business, but Malzberg wears it like a cape, plunging into weird, unreal, and erotic interzones that his more earnest, unsmiling peers wouldn't dare touch. Other classic SF novels published in the early 1970s include Larry Niven's *Ringworld* (1970), Philip José Farmer's *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* (1971), Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1974), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), and J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975)—all significant books, but none of them came close to what Malzberg did in *Beyond Apollo*. I can't speak for Malzberg's authorial intent or frame of mind. It's clear, however, that he was taking risks.

Notwithstanding *Beyond Apollo*'s biting tone, graphic sexuality, unreliable narrator, aggressive ambiguity, icy nihilism, and negative representation of the space program, the novel won the first annual John W. Campbell Award. I like to think that it was too distinctive, absorbing, and well-written to ignore or turn away, but I suspect there were political motives. According to Irish SF novelist Bob Shaw, "Malzberg's *Beyond Apollo* is, to me, the epitome of everything that has gone wrong with SF in the last ten years or so" (qtd. in Pringle 36). In fact, it was one of the only things to have gone right.

I wrote my M.A. thesis on decidedly non-Malzbergian material: Dan Simmons' *Hyperion Cantos*. At the time, I was interested in Simmons' appropriation of Romanticism, especially Keats. I continued to read Malzberg on the sly, moving from *Beyond Apollo* to *Galaxies* (1975), *The Falling Astronauts* (1971), *Herovit's World* (1973), *The Remaking of Sigmund Freud* (1985), and *Revelations* (1972), all of which had gone out of print. This was in the late 1990s; Amazon and eBay were still in diapers, and obscure books were hard to come by. Luckily, the University of Liverpool had one

of the largest SF collections in the world. I could access primary and secondary texts that otherwise would have been out of reach to me. Books in the collection couldn't be checked out, and I specifically recall taking notes on *Galaxies* in the basement of the university library.

In subsequent years, I read and reread more Malzberg, including his SF as well as his crime fiction, erotica, and nonfiction. Whatever the format or genre, I found consistent inspiration for my own stories and novels. Above all, perhaps, I'm drawn to the metafictional techniques that galvanize and deepen his sizable body of work, particularly when those techniques take the form of critifiction levied against *The Little Men Who Deserve It*.

When I founded Anti-Oedipus Press in 2013, one of my primary objectives was to republish special editions of exceptional yet unconventional books that had been taken out of print. Malzberg was at the top of the list. As a result of his persistent nonconformity and avant-garde dash, his oeuvre has been widely underappreciated and ignored, and yet I have never met or talked to anybody about Malzberg who didn't love him. He might be the SF genre's greatest anomaly. At the very least, he amassed a cult following that still has teeth.

In 2014, Anti-Oedipus Press republished *Galaxies*. This was our third release. In 2015, we brought *Beyond Apollo* back into print, then *The Falling Astronauts* in 2017, and now *Revelations*, which was written between these two novels and shares common themes. Together they form a loose trilogy in which the protagonists face similar existential crises driven by bureaucratic assholery and venomous media forces. *Revelations* in particular anticipates the media pathology that has come to roost in the form of reality television and social networks where people go to

any length to turn themselves into celebrities. The gods of war now exist on Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat. They have no talent, no brains, no shame, and limitless power. Welcome to *Revelations*: I'm Marvin Martin, your antagonist and parasitic host . . .

*Revelations* satirizes talk shows popular in the 1960s and early 1970s, probably *The Tonight Show* more than anything, with Marvin Martin parodying Johnny Carson, but the novel also gestures towards paparazzi culture and mass-media warlords like TMZ. In this regime, anything goes, anything can be done, anybody can be violated and hung out to dry, sans taboo, sans decorum or accountability, all in the name of consumer-capitalism and the Terminal Image.

Reviewers have said that Malzberg's novels are too confusing, too nonlinear, too nebulous, too dense, too rude, too unscrupulous, and ultimately too "weird."

Science fiction doesn't know what weird is. None of the speculative genres know what it is. Even Weird and New Weird fiction doesn't have a clue. The problem is they *think* they do. Nearly all speculative fiction has always adhered to a transparent morality of staunch conservatism and crass, incessant, anti-innovative capitulation. Throughout history, the SF authors to whom this rule doesn't apply can be itemized in minutes, possibly seconds.

Objectivity is a myth. Everything is subjective. I can only speak for myself here, and I can only view the world and make sense of it through these eyes, with these neurons, although I've read and studied and written about thousands of books, and in the narrative of my subjectivity, objectivity is a meek antagonist, a Little Man's sidekick at best. I recognize that most readers don't like what I like. For instance, I really enjoy short novels with stylized prose, flat characters, and mosaic plots that confuse me and thrive

on nonsense, reifying Kurt Vonnegut's (dis)avowal that "in nonsense is strength" (10). In general, most readers of any genre enjoy the antithesis of everything I just mentioned when they read a book. They like longer novels with idiomatic prose, round characters, and straight-shooting plots that make sense and are easy to follow. And there's books aplenty for them to read that are written this way. Millions of them. But this isn't literature. It's a pastime, silage for the proles, something to do in airports and doctor's offices. Literature makes readers think, challenges their expectations and ideologies, probes the psyche and grapples with the Unknown, unlocks and exposes the mysteries and wonders and hilarities of the human condition, and it does these things through the medium of language that is carefully constructed, if not rhythmic and musical. Literature also preserves its roots, nostalgic for its own kind and a time when an author's m.o. wasn't solely to write books than can be easily adapted into movies.

In short, "good" writing that is truly "weird" is literature, which exhibits an inherent pursuit of innovation. In stride with his modernist precursors, New Wave contemporaries, and cyberpunk successors, Malzberg wrote literature.

*Make it new.*

In 1928, when Ezra Pound's famous slogan first appeared in his translation of *Da Xue*, he wasn't thinking about SF or what was called "scientific fiction." Two years earlier, Hugo Gernsback turned SF into a portmanteau word in the debut issue of *Amazing Stories*, christening it "scientifiction," but Pound and company were out of the loop and didn't realize that the potential for innovation dormant in SF was cut from the same elemental cloth that they were spinning for their own work. As I have discussed, it wasn't until the New Wave and cyberpunk that a meaningful collision of

inventiveness would come to bear. Finally, SF seemed to be primed to blast off to the stars, but it's been mostly downhill since the 1980s. Gravity has had its ways with the genre.

Don't get me wrong. The modernists are vastly overrated. Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is a terrible book, despite being thoroughly science fictional and novum-centric—contrary to the scholarly mythos, it's tedious, affected, kind of stupid, poorly written, and nowhere near as clever as it thinks it is. Stein is even more boring and plodding: the ennui generated by *The Making of Americans* (1925) requires an anti-depressant prescription. Pound's writing is so pretentious and forced that I can hear his cravat flapping in the wind even as I plod through his Big Poems. Faulkner: dry as dust. Beckett: not funny enough. Hemingway: I still can't believe *The Old Man and Sea* (1952) won the Pulitzer—how did it even get published? Eliot: I like it when "Prufrock" ends and everybody drowns. Ellison: overrated. Fitzgerald: meh. Okay, Kafka and Woolf are great, but who cares? The point is, they were all writing literature, trying to make it new in their own unique ways. Such a collective effort not only doesn't exist anymore, the very idea of it is treated with scorn and trepidation. We disdain what we fear and don't understand, and the modernist project escapes almost everybody who lives in our science fictional reality, whether they read the Good, the Bad, the Ugly, or nothing.

Regarding twenty-first-century SF's cryo-generic state of rigor mortis, I'm not going to badmouth anybody by name. I'll take the heat for it, just as Malzberg did when Thomas M. Disch called him out for not fingering the riffraff in *Engines of the Night*, preferring to talk "in vast, gasping generalities about the swamp and pity of it all" ("Engines" 211). I will say that, with a few proverbial exceptions—most of whom aren't even considered SF writers, and they certainly don't write

hard or genre SF—I condemn all contemporary practitioners as a whole. “They are silly, childish people” (434)—Alfred Bester’s 1961 thesis in “A Diatribe Against Science Fiction” still holds true today. The only authors trying to making anything new in 2020 were among the few authors trying to make things new in the twentieth century. And for the most part, they’ve stopped trying. No worries. Netflix and Pornhub are infinitely more important than science fiction literature.

For you unborn Zarathustrians who prefer the screaming Twilight to the hollow Idols of image-culture, however, I invite you to start here, with *Revelations*, as fine an introduction as any into the House of Malzberg. Like all good anti-oedipal ventures, one may enter the House from any doorway, at any speed or angle of incidence, dressed in a tux or undressed altogether, happy and content or angry, deranged, and feral. What you will encounter is unrivaled feng shui that, in the words of our founding fathers, “imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do” (Deleuze 5).

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