



Magic

Isaac Asimov

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From Reader Review Magic for online ebook

Diana says

Repetitive in the fiction side. The analysis side is better but still not up to his usual standards. And he dwells too much on the problem of critics.

Neil Cake says

What I was hoping would be a collection of fantasy stories has turned out to be a hastily cobbled together selection of writings. There are, in reality, very few actual short stories here. Most of them are what would be called "Azazel" stories. After reading the first of these, my immediate impression was, "well, that was a bit shit", then after reading the second, "that was pretty much the same as the last story". Once you get to the third and fourth however, you realise that these stories are examples of Asimov experimenting with a form. Much as his robot stories are logical puzzles that are built around his ingenious 3 laws, the Azazel stories are variations upon a formula in which a problem is postulated, and a solution discussed. The solution then works too well, and the outcome is kind of a reverse of the initial situation. Once I realised that these were essentially writing exercises, they became more interesting.

There are two other stories that are in the fairy tale type mould - princes, princesses and dragons and that, and they are diverting enough, though it isn't hard to guess the outcome well before each story's end.

After the stories you've got a collection of writings on the genre of fantasy, and finally a collection of writings on science and other general ruminations. These have essentially been collected from editorials in Asimov's magazine, so you're not getting anything that hasn't been published in some form before, but it's still stuff you probably haven't read. And for their part, the articles are clear and well-reasoned, touching on religion, race, politics, evolution, history and a whole host of other topics.

Overall then, I've given this 3 stars because it was diverting enough, interesting and enjoyable. I might be being a bit generous, but anything less would probably feel harsh.

Habib Zreik says

the only book by Isaac Asimov that I read and didn't like, it's the first time I read other than his science fiction stories and I was disappointed, the puns on critics are the only funny parts when comedy was intended, the mystical creatures created and the popular-tales-like stories were naive and never amused me. sorry Isaac, you still are my favorite author though!

Arun Divakar says

At some level of reading, the line between Sci-Fi and Fantasy seems to merge is what I have been given to understand. My reading into both these genres has not been extensive enough to validate this theory either.

Both these genres to me are flights of fantasy in varied levels. When Tolkien tells us that Gandalf banishes the trolls with his staff we called it fantasy and when Crichton told us that Dinosaurs could be created again through cloning we called it Sci-Fi. Each has its own share of fans and detractors and life goes on. What then happens when a much renowned and well grounded author of Sci-Fi tries his hand at fantasy ? If I were to go with what Asimov came up with here, then the results are not very interesting to look at !

The book is divided into three parts with the first dealing out eleven short tales. Asimov builds a series called the George-and-Azazel stories in which a jolly good gentleman named George summons an extraterrestrial imp named Azazel to deal with domestic problems in the lives of individuals he is acquainted with. These stories are straight as arrows and barring this imp in them who while having an important role is still a cameo appearance, there is nothing that makes them a fantastic tale. Eight of the eleven tales are of this plot. Of the remaining three, my pick would be the tale 'Northwestward'. This has zero connection to fantasy and only the publishers would know how this tale found its way here. This is a tale of Asimov's amateur (and arm chair) detectives, the black widowers and is quite a delightful one. The remaining two tales are standard fable material - princes, kings, dragons, princesses and happily ever after. Coming from a seasoned writer as Asimov, these were not what I anticipated and as far as unsupported expectations go they all left me dissatisfied.

The second half of essays deals with topics as Tolkien, Howard's *Conan* series, criticism of Spielberg's *Close Encounters*, Space Opera and other such points on Sci-Fi and Fantasy. Here is where the book comes really close to fantasy but then again none of this can be attributed to Asimov for he talks about the works of others. The third part of the book are the essays on topics as the Bible, theory of evolution, space travel, IQ, superstition in America and quite a lot of such topics which have absolutely zero connection with fantasy. Interesting to read but not what I was looking for.

The rating of two stars is for the absolutely misleading title and the contents which are as far from fantasy as can be. Asimov is too much of a lover of logic that he cannot take that plunge into fantasy is what I felt.

The following line at the start of the book should have warned me off but failed to :

Even his [Asimov's] wizards were logicians, even his dragons obeyed the laws of thermodynamics.

Scott Holstad says

Asimov is real hit or miss for me and this was a definite miss. With a capital M. It purports to be a book of fantasy short stories, as well as essays on the topic, but the vast majority of the stories are of a writer, possibly himself, talking over drinks or dinner with a friend named George who can summon an extraterrestrial demon imp named Azazel to deal with various domestic problems in the lives of people he knows, often with horrifying results. Hate to tell ya this, Ike, but that's not fantasy. It's closer to sci fi or perhaps can just be labeled as speculative fiction. There's nothing remotely fantasy-like in these stories. In fact, virtually nothing at all even happens in these stories. They're all rather stupid. There are a couple of other stories that read like fairy tales, but that's it as far as the stories go.

The essays are short and critical and seem dated. There's one that's hugely critical of the movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. He crucifies it. But Star Wars is okay. Um, yeah. The final part of the book is more essays on random crap that have nothing to do with fantasy.

Asimov was prolific, no doubt, and wrote some excellent novels, true, but in my opinion, he was vastly overrated as a writer and this, to me, is just another example of how he can't write -- fantasy, in this case -- worth shit, much of the time. Sure, as he got older and matured as a writer, his writing improved. He actually learned what transitions are. He learned a little bit about plot and character development. But he never did learn how to write realistic dialogue. Perhaps he could have benefited from some creative writing workshops? Heh.

If you're into fantasy, avoid this book like the plague. If you're into Asimov, consider it, but be wary. I think it's crap and you might too. Not recommended.

Aiyana says

Every so often, I run across a book that is so good that before I am halfway through, I am already mourning the fact that it must eventually end. This is one such book.

The first half is devoted to short stories, and they are some of his most amusing, the "George and Azazel" collection, an excellent homage to the works of tongue-in-cheek masters such as P.G. Wodehouse and Jerome K. Jerome. The second half comprises nonfiction, with essays drawn from his various editorial columns. It is unnerving how many of his commentaries on politics, race, education, and society generally are relevant today, at least two decades after they were written.

This is Asimov at his best (although, really, when isn't he?): witty, enthusiastic, insightful, intelligent (even as he debates the definition and relevance of intelligence), and outspoken. I am terribly sad that I never got to meet the guy.

Quotes:

"What characterizes the value of science, however, is /not/ the particular conclusions it comes to. Those are sharply limited in number and guesswork will get you the 'right' answer with better odds than you'll find at the racetrack.

"What characterizes the value of science is its /methodology/, the system it uses to arrive at those conclusions...

"Scientists... begin with observations and measurements and deduce or induce their conclusions from that. They do so in the open and nothing is accepted unless the observation and measurement can be repeated independently. Even then the acceptance is only tentative, pending further, better, and more extensive observations and measurements. The result is that despite controversy in the preliminary findings, a consensus is arrived at eventually." p238-9, in "The Right Answer"

"No one wants to search out superiors to one's self-- only inferiors." p256, in "Knock Plastic!"

"The whole world over, there are confrontations between sections of humanity defined by race, nationality, economic philosophy, religion, or language as belonging to different groups, so that one is not "neighbor" [in the Biblical "love thy neighbor" sense] to the other.

"These more or less arbitrary differences among peoples who are members of a single biological species are terribly dangerous and nowhere more so than here in the United States where the most perilous confrontation (I need not tell you) is between white and black." p270-1, "Lost in Non-translation"

I'd like to quote almost the entirety of "Thinking about Thinking" too, but let's see if I can pick just the best bits:

"What, after all, does such an intelligence test measure but those skills that are associated with intelligence by the individuals designing the test? And those individuals are subject to the cultural pressures and prejudices that force a subjective definition of intelligence." p 295

"This is similarly true of tests of mathematical knowledge, of logic, of shape visualization, and all the rest. You are tested in what is culturally fashionable-- in what educated men consider to be the criteria of intelligence-- i.e., minds like their own." p295

"The whole thing is a self-perpetuating device. Men in intellectual control of a dominating section of society define themselves as intelligent, then design tests that are a series of clever little doors that can let through only minds like their own..." p295

In response to a study showing Black students to have lower IQs: "What we are saying is that black culture is substantially different from the dominant White subculture and that the Black values are sufficiently different from dominant white values to make blacks do less well on the carefully designed intelligence tests produced by the whites." p297

Katsuro Ricksand says

A fine collection of essays and stories. But it's Asimov--what else did you expect?

Stephen Stewart says

A strange mashup of a series of fantasy short stories and critical essays. I personally enjoyed the analysis of what is fantasy and Tolkien, but the addition of just Asimov's essays on American and education, while interesting, just didn't mesh with the other material. Still, it's Asimov and fun to read through it all.

Kat says

I haven't read much of Isaac Asimov, and the stories that I have read were all science fiction, so I was really pleased to check out this book of uncollected fantasy stories. Half of the book consists of these short stories and the other half are several essays composed by Asimov on fantasy and science fiction, so it was an interesting mix. Several stories have a common theme of the author having lunch with his friend George (who seems to be a bum), regaling each other various tales. George apparently has a little extraterrestrial demon friend Azazel who performs various tasks for him, often with unintended consequences. The stories tend to be on the light, amusing side, so it's nice, light reading. My favorites, however, were the more traditional fairy-tale-like stories, "The Fable of the Three Princes" and "Prince Delightful and the Flameless Dragon." There's also an interesting one called "Northwestward" involving Batman (although not how you'd expect.) I think that, in this particular collection, the essays were probably more interesting than the stories, and probably had more impact for me. "The Reluctant Critic" was my favorite of the essays. All in all, a fun read.

Dushyant Shetty says

Before my review, some disclosure... Isaac Asimov is my favourite among authors in the science fiction genre, which is also my favourite genre. This ensures that when I pick up an Asimov title, I have great expectations from it. I have never been disappointed by any of Asimov's books, and this book wasn't bad either. But first up, Magic is not a science fiction book, it deals with the world of fantasy. What's the difference, you ask? Read the book for an essay on this subject. Yes, an essay! Though this book is marketed as a collection of Asimov fantasy stories, nearly half(or maybe a little more) of it is dedicated to immersive essays by the author on a variety of subjects, somehow related to fantasy. Though the stories were interesting, in an irreverent way that is Asimov's trademark, I was far more impressed by the essays in the book, some are extracts from editorials that he wrote for his magazines. The stories primarily describe the actions of Asimov's little devil-like alien, Azazel, and the funny effects thereof on people's lives. There are a couple of "fairy tale"-ish stories that are funny and engrossing. The essay's, though are an amazing insight into the thought processes of arguably the best and most prolific science fiction writer ever. His essay "Concerning Tolkien", an honest tribute to Tolkien J.R.R. and his influence over storytelling, both his own as well as generally, is a masterpiece in itself.

If you read Asimov only because you're a fan of "hard" science fiction, you may not enjoy this book, but if you pick up a book, because it was written by Asimov, you won't be disappointed.

Mohammad Ali Abedi says

The book seemed more interesting than it actually was. It is called "Magic: The Final Fantasy Collection" and is supposed to be a collection of fantasy stories by Asimov. Now Isaac Asimov is my favorite science-fiction author and...no wait, Asimov is probably my FAVORITE author in general. I love his stories, I love his writing style, and I frankly, love his personality.

But I did not know Asimov wrote fantasy, so this collection should have been interesting. The book is divided into three sections. The first section contains the short stories in the collection. It has eleven fantasy stories, but it is not as expected. Eight of them deal with the same characters, a series of stories about a man and his tale of a small demon, Azazel. Two of the other three stories are not exactly adult fantasy, and are just fairly-like stories, and the final one hardly seems to count as fantasy (its Mystery!)

The second part is a series of articles from Asimov on the genre of fantasy, and how it relates to science-fiction. Because it seems these articles are taken out from his introduction to his sci-fi magazine, there is actually a bit of overlap sometimes.

And lastly, the third section has Asimov's articles on...other subjects. No fantasy. It almost feels like the editor of the anthology run out of ideas and material and shoved random stuff in it.

The introduction to the anthology is, "*ASIMOV...FANTASY? As almost everyone on our planet knows, Isaac Asimov was the most prodigiously talented, productive, and renowned science fiction writer who ever lived. As everyone perhaps DOESN'T know, he also delighted himself and his readers by writing fantasy stories throughout his fifty-year career.*" Well, the collection does not seem to really prove that statement.

Lindsey says

I'm sad to say that this is already a terribly dated collection. It is divided in three parts. The first part is predominately short stories that are in no way fantasy stories. At best, a few are barely fairy tales, but most are a moralistic sort of science fiction.

The second part, however, may be slightly worse. Although it is interesting from a historic perspective, Asimov's views on fantasy writing are so disparaging that it was hard to reconcile with his open-mindedness about other matters. Some of the essays are even written since many of fantasy's great authors began writing, making the tone of these essays all the more puzzling.

The third part, however, redeems the first two slightly, containing some of Asimov's later essays on a variety of topics. Not much about fantasy is covered in the third part and, much to the section's credit, it does not pretend to be about fantasy writing. These essays are an interesting insight into one of science fiction's great minds.

Overall, only recommended to fans of Asimov's body of work, rather than specific stories. The label "fantasy collection" is sorely misapplied.

Philip Bunn says

Don't be fooled by the low rating: This book was brilliant.

In both his fiction and his non-fiction, Isaac Asimov grabs the reader and engages them. Prior to this work, I had only read the first two books of Asimov's Foundation series, so I had not been exposed to a significant amount of his wit and humor. That changed with the George-and-Azazel stories. These delightful tales are reminiscent of P.G. Wodehouse's golf stories, where the Oldest Member forcefully imparts a tale to a protesting youngster. The misadventures and mishaps that happen as a result of the small imp's meddling in the affairs of humans are quite amusing. These stories make up the majority of the first section of the book, with the remainder being two princely fantasy tales of contests and combat, and a single story of the Black Widowers club that was a bit out of place.

The later sections of the book were devoted to a set of non-fiction essays penned by Asimov, many of them published in his self-titled science fiction magazine. These are on a variety of topics relating to fantasy, science fiction, science, and the Bible. They were all wonderful examples of Asimov's intelligence and comprehensive knowledge. As a conservative Christian, I disagree with his assessment of scripture and its merits, but Asimov certainly cannot be accused of having a mere cursory knowledge of the Christian Bible. He has studied and it showed. And, as someone who believes in the special creation of man, I wonder if it isn't a supreme irony that Asimov's essay in support of Darwinistic evolution is included amongst what is supposed to be a collection of his best fantasy works.

So why the low rating? Because the book, while brilliant, failed to deliver on its promises. A significant portion of this work was devoted to things that have little to no relation to fantasy whatsoever. The cover text and introduction make it sound as if this volume is packed full of brilliant fantasy fiction from a man who

normally wrote science fiction, and in fact, the fantasy is probably in the minority. The short stories collection contained the most fantasy, and there were certainly essays on the subject of fantasy literature, Tolkien and the like. But many of the essays left me puzzled by their dubious relevance to a fantasy collection.

Christine Jones says

I did not enjoy this book. The collection is split into three parts, the first is some of the short stories that Asimov wrote that deal with fantasy/magic through his unique view. The second part and third part is letters and essays that he has written over the years. I have enjoyed a lot of his work, and I like some of the stories and several of his essays but on the whole as a collected work it is disjointed and poorly cobbled together. It took me a very long time to get through the whole book and it is only 275 pages. I didn't hate it, and as someone who enjoys Asimov's work I do feel it fits well in my collection, but this is not a book I will recommend in general. That said, a few of the essays are pertinent to today's readers too. I should also note that the version I read is the out-of-print first edition. Perhaps later editions are better?

Annise says

Asimov has written some brilliant short stories, but alas this collection left me underwhelmed. The first third contained the actual stories, mainly of a series about the narrator's friend George and the demon, Azazel, whom he summons to do his bidding. In each case, good intentions predictably go awry. They're amusing, but too self-indulgent for my tastes. The stories that weren't part of this series were vanilla fairy-tale style stories that left me unmoved. The second part was a set of essays Asimov wrote on the subject of fantasy. They were okay, but repetition of points meant it got dull to read them all. The final section contained general essays, including some very interesting works and thought experiments that I thought were genuinely worth reading. Overall I'm not sorry to have read it, but the stories were not even on the same plane as Asimov's best work.
