

Science Fiction and the American Civil War

by David Sweetman

Science Fiction (SF), also known as Speculative Fiction, includes writings about many topics. Although science fiction story categories are often associated with “hard” science, e.g., physics, chemistry, biology; there are a significant number of “soft” science topics, e.g., sociology, psychology, politics, military, history. Within the SF history category are alternate history and alternate worlds. The American Civil War is a topic of great interest, because that war not only decided the fate of the United States, but the outcome to continue the republic was one of those decisive inflection points in world history.

The following is a list of some of the short stories and novels (as of 2006) that use the Civil War or characters from the Civil War as central to the theme of the SF tale. These writings can help us, in an entertaining way, to better understand the circumstances and other aspects of the people and the times than obtainable from standard history texts. Science fiction authors usually do a great deal of research into the field or fields chosen for the story; although the circumstances and characters may not be real, the speculations about what did happen or could have happened and why are not only entertaining, but provide a wider perspective when trying to understand what history actually recorded. A “story” often includes characterizations and descriptions of locales in much greater detail than is available from any single “historical” source.

No attempt is made to review these writings for entertainment or historical value. Not all SF writings on the Civil War are included, due to the author of this article’s ignorance. All books should be available either from used bookstores or by searching on the web. Some stories are in anthologies, which contain SF stories about other events. Publishers and date of publication are not included, because they are not necessary to find the books.

Although some may not consider strictly SF, the Civil War stories by Ambrose Bierce are as close to required reading of Civil War fiction (whether SF or not) as one can get. The best known is “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”, but all of the stories from *In the Midst of Life Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, contained in The Best of Ambrose Bierce are worth reading.

In the alternate history type:

1. Bring the Jubilee by Ward Moore. This is one of the first novels to explore what the world would be like a seven decades after the Confederacy achieved independence.
2. The Fantastic Civil War edited by Frank McSherry, Jr. An anthology of short stories about various Civil War subjects, e.g., units, people, events.
3. Stars and Stripes Trilogy by Harry Harrison. This 3-novel series is predicated on Union and Confederacy wars with Great Britain initially based on an alternative outcome of the “Trent Affair”. The time period of the trilogy extends past 1865.
4. Gettysburg, Grant Comes East, Never Call Retreat by Newt Gingrich, William R. Forstchen, and Albert S. Hanser (Editor). The question has been posed in

North & South Magazine (see special on Gettysburg), if the Confederacy had won at Gettysburg, what would change? These novels consider a probable outcome.

5. “How the South Preserved the Union”, “Now Fall the Cold, Cold Night”, “Lincoln’s Charge” all in Alternate Presidents edited by Mike Resnick. This is an anthology of short stories about what if presidential elections had different winners. The three identified stories all consider various aspects leading to the Civil War.
6. “The Charge of Lee’s Brigade”, “An Old Man’s Summer”, “A Hard Day for Mother” all in Alternate Generals edited by Harry Turtledove. An anthology of what some generals might have done in other circumstances, e.g., Lee in the Crimean War.
7. “Everything but Honor”, “Mules in Horses’ Harness”, “Abe Lincoln in McDonald’s”, “No Spot of Ground” all in What Might Have Been Volumes I&II edited by Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg. The title defines this anthology.
8. “Must and Shall”, in Roads Not Taken edited by Gardner Dozois and Stanley Schmidt. Another anthology defined by the title.
9. How Few Remain by Harry Turtledove. What if the “lost order” before Antietam was not lost and the Civil War ended differently?

In the alternate world type:

1. The Lost Regiment series (9 novels at least so far) by William R. Forstchen. This series places the 35th Maine (a regiment historically lost at sea) in an alternate world fighting fierce aliens as well as interacting with other human cultures from other times, e.g., Romans.
2. The Guns of the South by Harry Turtledove. What if the south received some AK-47’s early in the war?
3. The Lincoln Hunters by Wilson Tucker. Time travelers from the future visit the age of Lincoln for collectibles and entertainment.