

**Historia de la ciencia ficción latinoamericana I:
Desde los orígenes hasta la modernidad
[A history of Latin American science fiction:
From its origins to modernity]**

Edited by Teresa López-Pellisa and Silvia G. Kurlat Ares. Madrid/Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2020. Pp. 507.



Historia de la ciencia ficción latinoamericana I reevaluates the role of science fiction (SF) in the Latin American canon. Arguing that SF literature was common in a region that has long used literature to negotiate its relationship to science, technology, and modernity (pp. 10–11), the authors situate SF at the heart of nation-building projects (p. 14). The volume addresses the conspicuous lack of scholarly attention to SF through a transregional approach that interrogates the place of SF in the national letters of an array of Latin American countries. The collection of chapters hits the sweet spot between identifying new material, providing a theoretically rich analysis, and advocating for a more inclusive history of the region's SF.

Miguel Ángel Fernández Delgado's chapter juggles these tasks especially well. He cites key foundational studies in Mexican SF (Ross Larson, María Bermúdez, Ramón López Castro, and Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz), but he focuses primarily on identifying SF (and proto-SF) authors who wrote from the colonial period into the present. His rich analysis shows that Mexico's SF has long responded to its cultural referent. Nineteenth-century literature after independence followed a utopian schematic that lurched between optimism and pessimism as writers grappled with questions of national identity. His discussion of Nervo is especially valuable because it establishes this well-known author as a trailblazer in Mexican SF. Fernández Delgado's discussion of postrevolutionary SF is equally interesting, particularly as he situates authors like Eduardo Urzaiz, José Urquiza, and even José Vasconcelos as SF *letrados* who used literature to interrogate different aspects of the present. I especially appreciated Fernández Delgado's emphasis on popular literature (and film) from the 1940s into the 1960s. As his chapter masterfully shows, Mexico's SF—especially when one expands the canon—provides an invaluable lens from which to gauge national development.

Emily Maguire's chapter also embodies the volume's project as it traces Cuban SF from the nineteenth century to 1938. She begins by challenging those who would separate the concept of SF from "literature" more generally. In the Cuban case, SF (and texts that can be approached as SF) has been a natural genre from which to interrogate notions of national identity and modernity. Her discussion of Francisco Calcagno's *En busca del eslabón: Historia de monos* is especially important. The novel's decidedly

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racist narrative centers on a group of Cuban and U.S. doctors who travel to the Brazilian Amazon, Africa, and the South Pacific to find the “missing link” between humans and simians. The novel dialogues with Jules Verne and English-language authors of the time period (pp. 216–17), but it also engages the scientific discourses of the day, particularly those of anthropology, Darwinism, and even phrenology. Maguire’s discussion of Juan Manuel Planas’s alternative history, *La corriente del Golfo*, highlights how Cuban SF authors have adapted the popular texts of their day to their own context. The novel’s imaginative premise—Cuban rebels almost defeat Spain during the war for independence through scientific means (though they ultimately fail and the United States still intervenes)—alludes to the possibility for SF to imagine a preferred timeline from that of the present.

In interrogating the role of SF in all Latin American countries, the book even discusses those cases where SF has been almost nonexistent. In his chapter, Hebert Benítez Pazzolano notes that, unlike the rest of the region of the Río de la Plata—which boasts some of the earliest cases of SF in all of Latin America—SF never enjoyed significant diffusion in Paraguay (pp. 302–3). It was not until 1907 that Rafael Barret’s “Albérico”—the country’s first published SF text—came out in the literary journal *El Diario*. SF remained uncommon throughout the twentieth century, though several Paraguayan texts discussed science through literature (pp. 309–10). This chapter says very little about SF proper, but it contributes directly to the volume’s overall mission by showing the extent to which SF has *not* appeared in Paraguay’s national letters.

In conclusion, *Historia de la ciencia ficción latinoamericana I* provides a valuable literary history that will appeal not just to scholars interested in SF, but also to those who study the interface of science, technology, and culture more generally. The volume highlights how literature—and particularly SF—assisted in constructing and navigating a modern nation-state in countries throughout the region. This book will be of use to an array of scholars and projects for years to come.

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