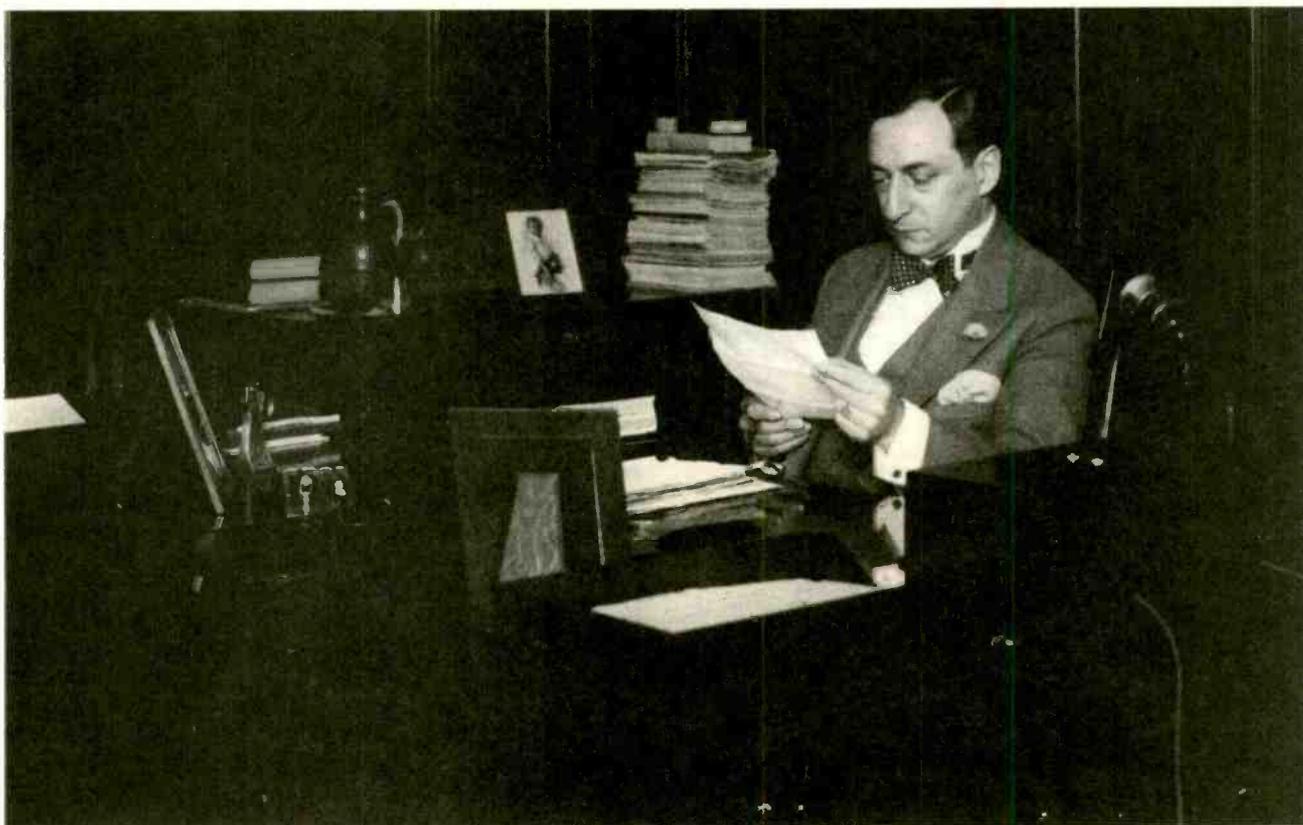


HUGO GERNSBACK:

The Inventor, The Prophet, And The Father Of Science Fiction

MARIA ORLANDO



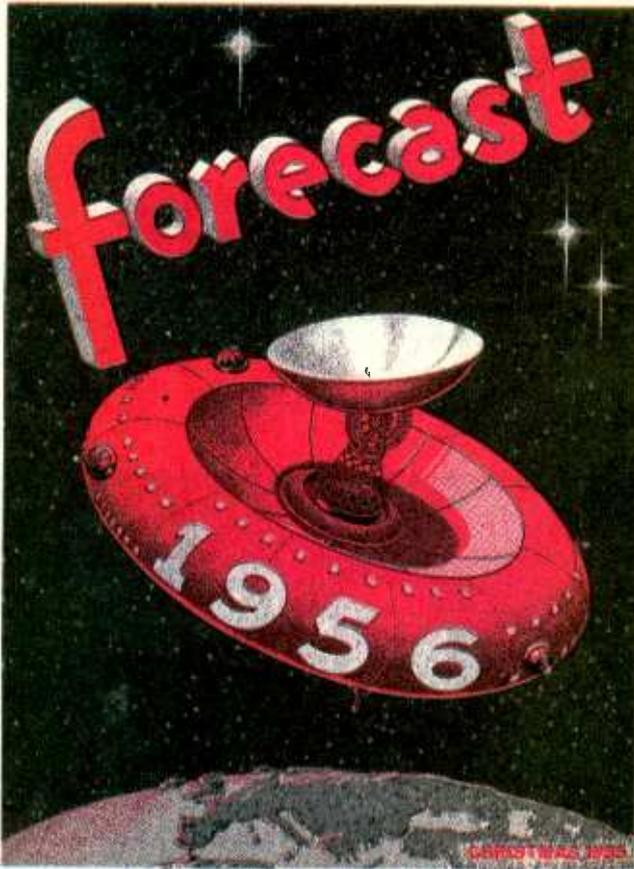
His extraordinary vision inspired experimenters and inventors to make their dreams become a reality.

Called a genius by many, a prophet by others, Hugo Gernsback was certainly a man with a remarkable vision and unique perception of the world of science.

First and foremost, Hugo Gernsback was a distinguished inventor with an extraordinary gift—the ability to predict the future. He also integrated science with philosophy and creativity, which set him apart from other experimenters of his time. Gernsback was extremely ambitious, and he was truly inspired by the potential wonders that awaited scientific discovery.

Gernsback managed to patent over 80 inventions in his lifetime; and although many of them were useful and practical, it seems that he is most known for the quirky, outlandish inventions he introduced to the world. To the surprise of many, however, a number of those “quirky” inventions actually laid the groundwork for future inventions and more advanced technology.

Gernsback—The Businessman. Hugo Gernsback was born in Luxembourg in 1884. He received his education at European technical schools until he immigrated to America in 1904 and became a naturalized U.S. citizen. Although he is most honored for his visions and developments in technology, Gernsback should also be recognized for being enterprising and industrious. His passion for amateur radio motivated him to start his first business venture in 1904—The Electro Importing



Hugo Gernsback was a prolific writer of speculative science. He often organized his numerous inventions and ideas into a pamphlet that he would print to share with friends and associates. Here is the cover to one particular collection entitled *Forecast 1956*.

Co.—which specialized in experimental electrical goods and radio parts. His intended market were his fellow radio hobbyists, and in 1906 his store sold the first radio ever offered to the public.

The Electro Importing Co. was a retailer and importer, as well as a manufacturer. Claiming to be the world's first company to specialize in radio materials, it grew rapidly; and the company had to relocate several times due to expansion and tremendous sales volume. The reason for its success, Gernsback maintained, was that the company offered value for their products. Their primary customers, experimenters and hobbyists who had little in the way of income, were not likely to spend exorbitant amounts of money on electrical parts and gadgets. Gernsback's company was proud to offer affordable products to a world full of radio and electrical enthusiasts, coining the motto "Enormous Value For The Money, And The Famous E.I. Square Deal."

His Influence On Science And Technology. Gernsback had a very strong influence on the technological advances of radio and television, because he envisioned their future and unlimited potential. He advocated the importance of both as major communication tools, and through his magazines (see sidebar) he promoted radio and television as social necessities. He forecast television's popularity, its physical characteristics, and its widespread use in the home.

He continued to pursue new inventions and experiments in the midst of his hectic life as editor, writer, and publisher. Although he patented some 80 inventions throughout his life, he claimed he didn't profit from a single one of them. Here is just a partial list of his inventions:

- A layer-built battery, his very first invention, and later dry-cell and dry-storage batteries.
- An apparatus on the ground to help airplanes land, with giant electromagnets to slow the planes down and lubrication to avert unnecessary friction, wear, and noise.
- The osophone, which is a device for transmitting sound vibrations through bones and teeth, to supposedly help the deaf hear.
- Several circuits, including the Interflex and the Peridyne, the first circuit to use non-magnetic metal in the field of a coil.
- A book condenser, used in early Crosley TV sets, with a compression-type variable capacitor.
- A hypnobioscope, an osmosis type-tool used for sleep-learning.
- His last invention, which he never patented, was a device for detecting the charge on an electret.

Metamorphosis: The "Wonder" Years. A profound event occurred in Hugo Gernsback's life that set the stage for his passion for science fiction. As a youngster, he read the book *Mars As The Abode Of Life*, written by the renowned American astronomer Professor Percival Lowell. He was astonished, and completely overwhelmed, at the premise that alien life could exist on other planets. For the rest of his young adulthood and throughout his entire life, he was compelled to take science as he knew it to another level—the far-fetched and fantastic world of science fiction.

Gernsback, called a "dreamer and misplaced inventor," had a knack for walking—and sometimes crossing—the fine line between hard science and science fiction. He stepped beyond the "hard facts" door and ventured into the realm of the unknown. He spent his life linking science and technology with imagination and flights of fancy. His love for science fiction grew from his high expectations of science exploration.

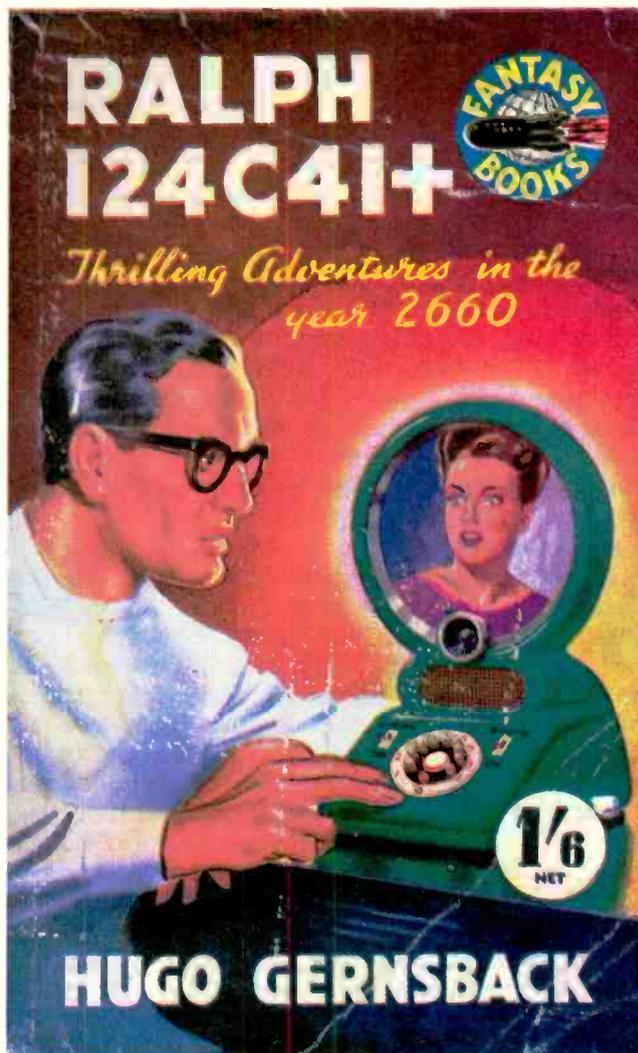
Although he did believe that most good science fiction should contain an element of feasibility in order for it to be authentic, there were many pieces he published throughout his lifetime that seemed pretty surreal and outrageous to readers at the time. When Gernsback published the article "Can We Radio The Planets" in *Radio News* in 1927, most readers enjoyed it as entertainment. However, when we eventually attempted radio contact with Venus years later, credit was given to Gernsback for suggesting the idea in the first place.

Though he was still very interested in hard science and technology, he had broadened his horizons and let his imagination roam far afield. He became an avid reader of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells and began writing on his own, as well. In 1911, he experienced a bout with writer's block while trying to finish an article for *Modern Electrics*. It was then that his novel *Ralph 124C41+* was born.

The book was not well-received in many literary circles, and it was chastised for its simplistic style and shallow characters by some. However, it was highly acclaimed for Gernsback's staggeringly accurate predictions, cleverly planted in his prose. The science-fiction novel describes the use of radar, plastics, tape recorders, fluorescent lighting, rustproof steel, and hydroponics, all of which are commonly used today.

Gernsback was not afraid to explore the unimaginable, and he believed that "wild stories" envisioned by writers of science fiction actually inspire would-be inventors to transform fantasy into reality. He postulated that the "germ of an invention" is often hidden in those works of fiction that at first seem preposterous and truly bizarre. The motto on the editorial page of *Amazing Stories* reads: "Extravagant Fiction Today...Cold Fact Tomorrow." Despite his conviction that unbelievable notions are the seeds of tomorrow's technology, he did consider genuine science fiction to possess an element of possibility. He also assumed that science fiction encouraged the progress of the world in a way that no other literature does.

His magazine, *Amazing Stories*, had an extensive readership; and its popularity was aided by contributions from such celebrated authors as Jules Verne, Edgar Allen Poe, and H.G. Wells. Gernsback cited an old adage "What Man Can Imagine, Man Can Accomplish," which was printed on the inside cover of *Amazing Stories*. He believed this to an extent, but he regretfully admitted that not everything conceivable is viable. "For instance," he said, "I can imagine that I blow out the sun, or grasp the moon in my hand, or cut off my head without dying."



The only Science Fiction novel penned by Hugo Gernsback was *Ralph 124C41+*. An original copy of this prophetic book exists in the Gernsback archive.

MAGAZINE TIMELINE

- 1908 *Modern Electrics*—his first publication, which finally became known as *Popular Science Electrical Experimenter* (became *Science and Invention* in 1920)
- 1918 *Radio News* (became *Popular Electronics*, currently *Poptronics*)
- 1926 *Amazing Stories*
- 1929 *Wonder Stories*
- 1929 *Radio Craft* (first became *Radio Electronics* and then *Electronics Now*))

Here are some of the many other magazines he published throughout his career:

- Amazing Stories Quarterly*
- Bizarre*
- Cookoo Nuts*
- Forecast*
- Quip*
- Scientific Detective Monthly*
- Science Fiction Plus*
- Science Wonder Quarterly*
- Tid Bits*
- Your Body*

Gernsback—The Humorist. What some may not realize about the late Hugo Gernsback is that he maintained a great sense of humor. His writing was very clever and teeming with satire; his wit and element of facetiousness often went unnoticed because of his involvement in earnest, scientific interests. Critics have said "Gernsback is a man of almost rapier-like wit, with a chronically mischievous gleam in his eyes and with the rare ability to joke about his own misfortunes."

Gernsback wrote a series of articles under the name Mohammed Ulyses Fips, in which he introduced inventions that were meant to be humorous—he always published them in April in honor of April Fool's Day. However, some of the devices he described were quite practical and even resemble some products in existence today. He poked fun while spinning yarns about gadgets like a Noise Neutralizer, a Snore Kill, a Cordless Radio Iron, and a Visie-Talkie.

Another notable "hoax" of a magazine was *Forecast*. For years he sent out this highly unusual Christmas card to colleagues, friends, and relatives. The pamphlet contained several of Gernsback's peculiar predictions for the future. These holiday issues of *Forecast*, although primarily intended for entertainment, featured views of the future that were not entirely impossible. In one instance, he wrote about the electronic brain, now known as the computer, and its capability to reason and solve complex problems. Another story described a two-wheeled car, a narrow-bodied automobile assisted by a gyroscope. Still other forecasts implied airmobiles, space-coffins, and extra-sensory perception.

Hugo Gernsback was the acknowledged Master of Science Fiction; in fact, the Science Fiction Association named their annual award for the best work of science fiction the "Hugo." Last year the "Hugo" was presented to J.K. Rowling, the author of the astoundingly popular *Harry Potter* series. Gernsback is also commonly known as the Father of Science Fiction.

Hugo Gernsback: An Unorthodox Innovator. *The New York Times* described his life admirably in his obituary, which appeared on Sunday, August 20, 1967. It read:

"Hugo Gernsback, an inventor, author, editor, and publisher, who has been called the father of modern science fiction....Mr. Gernsback described radar 35 years before communication experts bounced a radar signal off the moon in 1946 and sponsored the first television broadcasts in 1928....*Life Magazine* once called him the Barnum of the space age—the debonair Mr. Gernsback was honored by the radio industry in 1953 in recognition of his first 50 years of inspiring leadership in radio-electronic art."

Hugo Gernsback is remembered for all of his contributions to technology, science, and publishing, and most of all, his extraordinary visions that inspired experimenters and inventors to make their dreams a reality. **P**

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