

Alternate History

BY ANDREW BENEDICT-NELSON

What if Napoleon had won at Waterloo? What if Hitler had never been born? If the South had won the Civil War, what would the United States look like today? To revel in these speculations, we turn to the “alternate history” genre.

While historians focus on what actually happened in the past, authors who write alternate history explore what *could* have happened had events taken just a slightly different turn and historical figures responded just a little bit differently to their altered circumstances. Harry Turtledove, for example, widely acknowledged as the master of the genre, imagines in *Ruled Britannia* (2002) that the Spanish Armada defeated the British navy in 1588. Under the resulting fanatical Roman Catholic regime, Elizabeth I is taken prisoner in the Tower of London and underground resistance playwright William Shakespeare writes dramas that could win back England’s freedom—or spell his own death.

In other alternate history novels, authors envision a world where the Black Death wiped out European civilization; the Roman Empire never even stumbled; and the American Revolution was somehow averted. World War II is

undoubtedly the most popular “point of divergence,” or point at which the writer’s world becomes different from our own. One author even wrote a study of what these many stories mean for our culture (Gavriel D. Rosenfeld in *The World Hitler Never Made*). Other novelists, like some of the best writers in science fiction or fantasy, simply wonder at the possibilities of the universe. (Many alternate histories are, in fact, shelved with science fiction or fantasy.)

Alternate histories allow the author and his or her readers to celebrate the belief—or the fantasy—that a single person can change the course of human history and that every decision, no matter how small, matters. Many academic historians today tend to play down the actions of individuals and explain events through telescopic lenses. That may make for good scholarship, but it’s often no way to tell a good story. Here are a few of those good stories, organized by their points of divergence.

WORLD WAR TWO

The Man in the High Castle

By Philip K. Dick (1962)



Dick's novel was one of the first to explore a world where the Axis powers won the war, and it is still considered one of the classics of the genre. But unlike more recent books, Dick does not elaborately develop alternate geopolitics or posit a decades-long resistance to the Nazis. Instead, he considers the ordinary lives of Californians living under a Fascist puppet government—a reminder of the sad truth that human beings can acclimate to almost anything. Even readers who don't enjoy asking "what if" will appreciate the questions Dick raises about history's meaning—or the lack of it.

The Children's War

By J. N. Stroyar (2001)

♦ SIDEWISE AWARD FOR ALTERNATE HISTORY

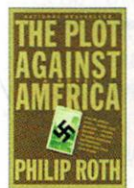


Stroyar's epic novel has been called one of the most detailed explorations of a world in which the Nazis won the war. The key players in the story belong to the Polish Resistance, which Stroyar spent years researching. After decades of fighting the Nazis, Stroyar's characters have little idea what they are fighting for. The lives of the principal characters—an English refugee with multiple identities and a Nazi official who is secretly a rebel leader—dramatize the emotional and moral dynamics of an exhausting but necessary resistance.

The Plot Against America

By Philip Roth (2004)

♦ SIDEWISE AWARD FOR ALTERNATE HISTORY, W. H. SMITH AWARD, SOCIETY OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS AWARD



Perhaps because of its family ties to science fiction and historical fiction, alternate history has often seemed too "genre" for literary types. But Roth's novel (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2004) of an isolationist America in the 1940s won acclaim from both highbrow critics and alternate history fans (Roth won the Sidewise Award for Alternate History even though he claimed to have never heard of the genre when he started writing the novel). Genre fans may be annoyed at some "literary" devices—the author appears as a character, for instance—but will still be fascinated by a world in which Charles Lindbergh defeats Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election. For another recent "literary" crossover, see *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon (★★★ July/Aug 2007).



The Summer Isles

By Ian R. MacLeod (2005)

♦ SIDEWISE AWARD FOR ALTERNATE HISTORY



The rise of Nazism often seems so singular that it's easy to forget its connections to earlier history. But Hitler himself wrote that he had borrowed ideas from the American eugenics movement and from British internment camps for Boers and black Africans in South Africa.

MacLeod reminds us of those connections by showing how Fascism could have arisen in an entirely different culture—a Britain that suffered the same military and economic defeats that Germany did after World War I. While MacLeod is clearly writing about Fascism, the frightening aspect of his novel is just how familiar and English he makes it seem. Originally a 1998 novella that won both the World Fantasy Award and the Sidewise Award for Alternate History, *The Summer Isles* was expanded to book length.

The Severed Wing

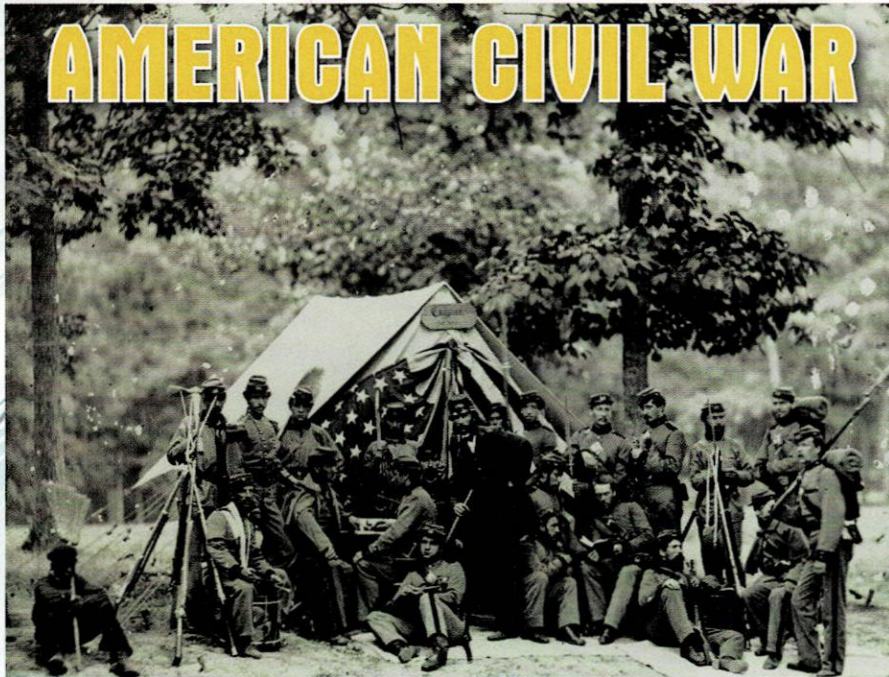
By Martin J. Gidron (2002)

♦ SIDEWISE AWARD FOR ALTERNATE HISTORY



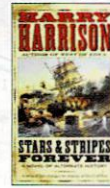
Alternate histories of World War II tend to focus on the military and political consequences for the major powers of the time while ignoring perhaps the most tragic event of the war: the Holocaust. Gidron fills the gap by creating a world where the major cities of Europe still have thriving Jewish quarters and languages like Yiddish and Ladino still flourish. But all is not well in this alternate world: not only has the West failed to reject anti-Semitism as it did in our reality, but more subtle and sinister forces threaten this era that could have been.

AMERICAN CIVIL WAR



Stars & Stripes Forever

By Harry Harrison (1998)



Most alternate histories of the Civil War begin with Southern victory. Harrison takes a more original tack. In the real world, the Union seizure of a ship bearing two Confederate envoys to the United Kingdom nearly resulted in a British declaration of war. Harrison supposes that it did, but through a series of diplomatic and military mishaps, the Union and Confederacy wind up as allies against a British invasion. *Stars & Stripes* and its two sequels, *Stars & Stripes in Peril* (2000) and *Stars & Stripes Triumphant* (2002), have been criticized for being unrealistic and rabidly anti-British; nonetheless, they tap into an irresistible theme: the explosion of total

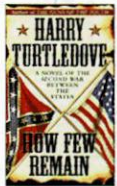
world war decades before our own era.

How Few Remain

A Novel of the Second War Between the States

By Harry Turtledove (1997)

♦ SIDEWISE AWARD FOR ALTERNATE HISTORY

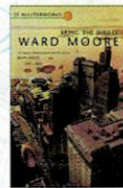


Lincoln lives, but the Union dies. That is the key twist in Turtledove's tale of the North and the South. Turtledove hinges his history on the lives of people who became great in our world—not just Lincoln but Samuel Clemens, Frederick Douglass, Theodore Roosevelt, and others.

As in many of his other novels, Turtledove considers how these great men's ambitions would have been reshaped by the broken Union and the America that resulted. *How Few Remain* is the prelude to Turtledove's magnum opus, ten additional novels that take the Union and the Confederacy through the tumultuous 20th century.

Bring the Jubilee

By Ward Moore (1953)



Like *The Man in the High Castle*, Moore's book was one of the first to put alternate history on the map. In his world, the Confederacy wins at Gettysburg and becomes a world power, while the United States misses out on the Industrial Revolution and remains a backwater vassal state. Hodge Backmaker, a young man trying to make the best of it in New York City, falls in with a radical Union nationalist group, the "Grand Army," though he only wants to be a scholar. When he finally realizes his dreams, he discovers that he may still have a chance to change history.

EVEN WEIRDER WORLDS THAT WEREN'T

If the outcomes of decisions by presidents and generals are just too mundane for you, maybe you'd like to read about a world where ...

PROTESTANTISM WAS CRUSHED AND ELECTRICITY IS BANNED

Pavane by Keith Roberts (1986)

NORTH AMERICA WAS COLONIZED BY BLACK SETTLERS AND WHITE SLAVES

Lion's Blood by Steven Barnes (2002; 2003 Endeavour Award)

PTOLEMAIC SCIENCE IS CORRECT AND GREEK SCIENTISTS TRAVEL TO THE SUN IN ORDER TO DEFEAT THEIR CHINESE RIVALS

Celestial Matters by Richard Garfinkle (1996; Compton Crook Award)

AN EVIL, SLAVING EMPIRE FIGHTS AGAINST THE FORCES OF FREEDOM THROUGHOUT HISTORY

S. M. Stirling's *Domination* novels

COUNT DRACULA MARRIES QUEEN VICTORIA AND BUILDS A VAMPIRELIKE EUROPEAN EMPIRE

Anno Dracula by Kim Newman (1992), the first in a series

THE CRIMEAN WAR CONTINUED FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, PEOPLE KEEP DODOS FOR PETS, AND STREET GANGS BATTLE OVER LITERARY DEBATES. OH, AND PEOPLE CAN TRAVEL INTO BOOKS AND CHANGE THE PLOT.

The Eyre Affair by Jasper Fforde (2001)

THERE'S NO MOON.

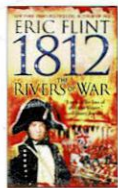
What if the Moon Didn't Exist?: Voyages to Earths That Might Have Been by Neil F. Comins (1993) ■



1812

The Rivers of War

By Eric Flint (2005)



Most Americans don't consider the War of 1812 as a pivotal conflict, if they think of it at all. But the survival of the nation was at stake for those who fought it, including larger-than-life figures like Andrew Jackson and Sam Houston. By tinkering with these men's fates, Flint creates a world where the Trail of Tears never occurred and an independent, multiracial republic arises in the region of Arkansas. Together with its sequel, *1824: The Arkansas War* (2006), Flint asks how the United States could have dealt with its racial divide sooner.

The Probability Broach

♦ LIBERTARIAN FUTURIST SOCIETY'S PROMETHEUS AWARD

By L. Neil Smith (1980)

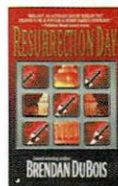


Every high school student learns how the Founding Fathers' brilliant statecraft and the Federalists' elegant and energetic prose saved the budding nation from anarchy. But Smith would have it otherwise; in his alternate world, the Whiskey Rebellion led to the collapse of the federal government and the reinstatement of the Articles of Confederation. The result is a world in which a lack of government intervention has accelerated North American industry, science, and medicine. While a bit optimistic about the fruits of libertarianism, Smith's series of novels are nevertheless considered a classic of the genre.

Resurrection Day

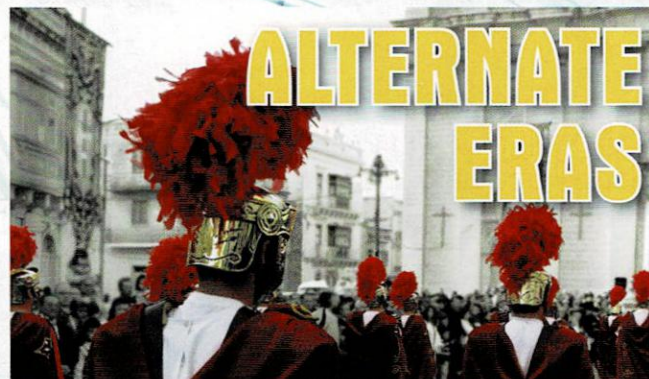
By Brendan DuBois (1999)

♦ SIDEWISE AWARD FOR ALTERNATE HISTORY



While DuBois may be better known for his Lewis Cole mystery novels, he proves equally skilled in this alternate history tale of nuclear war. In this imagined time, President Kennedy fails to prevent the Cuban Missile Crisis from erupting into a nuclear exchange. The United States survives, badly wounded, and Kennedy is remembered as the country's worst president rather than as one of

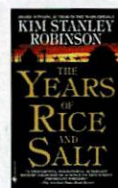
its finest. Yet the truth about those crucial days in October 1962 is not entirely clear; by playing to his strengths and structuring the novel as a mystery, DuBois allows the facts of his world to emerge naturally but with great suspense.



The Years of Rice and Salt

By Kim Stanley Robinson (2002)

♦ HUGO AWARD FOR BEST NOVEL NOMINEE



Robinson made his name with his Mars trilogy, which followed a group of colonists through centuries of fantastic development on the Red Planet. In this novel, he applies his considerable imagination to Earth, wondering what the world would be like if the Black Death had wiped European civilization off the map. Starting with the 14th century, a series of interconnected stories show readers a world where Chinese, Indian, and Islamic empires vie for supremacy while Christianity and the West remain a historical footnote.

A Different Flesh

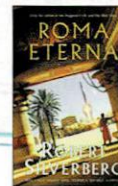
By Harry Turtledove (1988)



Turtledove is best known for novels that hinge on military decisions or other clear points in history. But this collection of stories addresses a more fundamental question of human identity. The author imagines a world where the land bridge between Siberia and Alaska broke sooner, leaving the Americas populated by *Homo erectus* rather than modern humans. By telling stories set in several different centuries after Columbus, Turtledove shows how this change in history would have altered the development of the Western hemisphere and people's concept of themselves.

Roma Eterna

By Robert Silverberg (2003)



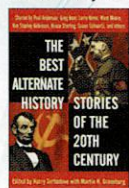
Few greater empires have ever existed than that of the Romans, but according to Silverberg's collection of short stories, the *Pax Romana* might have only been the beginning. Silverberg supposes that Rome could have continued to dominate if its Western and Eastern halves

had assisted each other militarily and, more fundamentally, if the cultural challenge of monotheism had remained dormant. (In this scenario, Jesus was never even born.) As a result, the empire simply never ends and faces challenges across the centuries, up to and including those of modern technology and space exploration.

ALTERNATE ANTHOLOGIES

The Best Alternate History Stories of the 20th Century

Edited by Harry Turtledove, with Martin H. Greenberg (2001)



Though alternate history purists may be disappointed by the amount of time travel going on in this anthology, the 14 stories include some of the more interesting takes on the genre. “The Lucky Strike” by Kim Stanley Robinson puts different sorts of crews above Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and “The Winterberry” by Nick DiChario shows why no conspiracy theories are necessary for one to still be disturbed by the Kennedy assassination. Other contributors include Paul Anderson, Greg Bear, Larry Niven, Ward Moore, Bruce Sterling, and Susan Schwartz.

Alternate Empires

What Might Have Been

Edited by Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg (1989)



Despite its title, not all of the stories in this anthology concern the rise and fall of ancient nations. Sure, we're treated to worlds where the Persians conquer the Greeks and the Assyrians sack Jerusalem, but we also find out what would have happened if Joe McCarthy had become president or if Robert E. Lee had accepted Lincoln's offer to fight for the Union. *Alternate Empires* is the first in a series of four volumes of alternate history.

If It Had Happened Otherwise

Edited by J. C. Squire (1931)



While not an anthology of alternate history stories as such, this famous 1931 collection of essays is still dear to many of those who appreciate the genre. Squire asked prominent historians and writers of his day to consider how history could have taken a different course. Contributors included Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, and, most impressively, Winston Churchill. In a sort of counterhistorical backflip, Churchill imagines the consequences of a Southern victory in the Civil War by pretend-

ing he is a historian in such a world writing an essay about a world in which Lee lost at Gettysburg (which, for those of you who are keeping score, is the real world). Whew!

ALTERNATE APPROACHES

While many stories of alternate history simply ask “What if?” and get on with it, others use various devices to examine how things might have been. These include ...

TIME TRAVEL. “Don't mess with the past” has always been a prominent theme of time travel stories. L. Sprague de Camp's classic *Lest Darkness Fall* (1941) sends a modern archeologist back in time to prevent the Dark Ages. In Harry Turtledove's *The Guns of the South* (1992), proapartheid South African terrorist time travelers go back to the Civil War and provide Lee's army with AK-47s, hoping the Confederacy will prove an ally to their cause in the future.

MISPLACED MODERNS. In Eric Flint's popular *1632* series (the first was released in 2000, and the series now includes ten books), an entire town from West Virginia is transported to Germany during the Thirty Years' War. In S. M. Stirling's *Island in the Sea of Time* (1998), the entire island of Nantucket is sent back to the Bronze Age. In these kinds of stories, the moderns struggle to survive at first, but they inevitably affect the future.

FANTASTIC HISTORY. History is different, but so are the rules of the universe. In Naomi Novik's *His Majesty's Dragon* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2006) and its sequels, the Napoleonic Wars are fought on land, sea, and air—with combating dragons and an aerial corps. Orson Scott Card's Alvin Maker series (starting with 1987's *Seventh Son*) describes a world where the English monarchy was never restored and people with “knacks” for the supernatural were exiled to America.

VIRTUAL HISTORY. Some people prefer their historical speculation sans characters and plot. Plenty of books explore alternate history in a nonfiction style, including the popular *What If?* (1999–2003) series edited by Robert Cowley, which presents counterfactual scenarios by historians; the more lighthearted *Almost America: From the Colonists to Clinton* by Steve Tally (2000); and *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1997), a collection edited by the eminent British historian Niall Ferguson. The ultimate example is Robert Sobel's *For Want of a Nail: If Burgoyne Had Won at Saratoga* (1973), a complete history textbook for a world in which the American Revolution was stifled. ■