

James Gunn On Radio: One Man's Fling With Aural Fame
By
Ryan Ellett

Acclaimed science-fiction writer James Gunn is a member of a dying breed, an old school writer who got his start publishing in the pulps. He turned to writing sci-fi in 1948, a year after graduating from the University of Kansas. In the sixty years since then he's had 26 books published, 100 short stories, and edited 18 books on top of that. He is probably one of the few writers still active today that had a firsthand connection to old time radio.

Between 1956 and 1957 Gunn had four stories published in *Galaxy Science Fiction* magazine which were subsequently adapted to the prominent old time radio series *X Minus One*. How this came about is somewhat a mystery to Gunn; He made no effort to interest NBC in his work. The show "had an arrangement with *Galaxy* to use its stories for adaptations and included a promotion for the upcoming new issue. Nobody asked for permission, as I recall, and no author had any input on the final product." In return Gunn received fifty dollars per story and a recording of the program on a transcription disc. He had to send the record to Kansas City station WDAF for transfer to a standard record because, of course, he had no equipment for transcription discs.

Even though television had overtaken radio by the late 50s, it was still a thrill for the young author to hear his work on the air. Gunn clearly still has a fondness for the adaptations, even fifty years later:

So radio was still a force [in 1956], and getting my first dramatization was great! And it was even better that the dramatizations were effective - more so than later TV or film adaptations. They were more faithful, better written, and more evocative from their audio dimensions rather than the concrete images of film.

In recognition of Mr. Gunn's connection with the fondly remembered *X Minus One*, I thought it would be interesting to compare his four stories that were chosen by NBC and the final *X Minus One* productions to see how faithful - or not - the script writers were to the original published work

The Cave of Night

Published: *Galaxy Science Fiction*, February 1955

Broadcast: *X Minus One*, February 1, 1956

This short story is not one that would grab a reader's attention with a short blurb: an astronaut is trapped in an immobile space ship. Can the earth command team rescue him before oxygen runs out? Yawn. Yet two pages into the story one cannot put it down. Via first person narrative Gunn pulls you into the moment as the spaceman's plight is followed in every minute detail by a spellbound public. Though written fifty years ago, he masterfully captures the mania of the contemporary 24-hour news cycle that follows a hot story with excruciating detail. The short, clipped sentences of the narrator pull the reader into the breathless pace of the government workers as they race to construct more space craft capable of reaching the heroic Rev McMillan. With one page to go Gunn sets the reader up with the seemingly dramatic anticlimax the astronaut dies; the rescuers

were too late. But then, wait! The “deceased” spaceman is spotted years later by the narrator, anonymously mingled in a New York City crowd. How far, the narrator is left to wonder, will a government go to convince the public to support an expensive, controversial spending program? So far as to fake a hero’s death? Apparently so.

How should the script writer work this story? Originally done in first person narration, there is little dialog except McMillan’s radio messages to earth below on a radio set that does not allow him to receive and broadcasts from below. Ernest Kinoy, the network writer, cleverly disguises the narration as the script of a newsman (created for the radio version) rehearsing for an upcoming broadcast. Liberty is taken with the goings-on of government bureaucrats and the reaction of the general public, and Gunn’s narrated text is recast into interview and press conference snippets used on the news program.

Interestingly, Gunn’s original story creates more sense of urgency than the aural adaptation. Without demeaning the scripter, even with the advantages of music, sound effects, and skilled vocal actors offered by radio, the adaptation does not create as compelling a story as the original. The script stays very faithful to the text, with just a few scenes created for the audio version, such as a description of a prayer service and an altered final scene which does not affect the spirit of the story. Much of the stranded McMillan’s one-way dialog is lifted straight into the radio play, though rearranged at times.

A curious note: The radio play features a “shout-out” to the AFL-CIO labor unions involved in constructing the rescue rocket, a detail not included in the original text. Perhaps there was a real-life labor issue the dialog was meant to reference.

The Cave of Night is reprinted in:

SF: The Year’s Greatest Science Fiction and Fantasy, ed. Judith Merril, Gnome 1956

Station in Space, Bantam 1958

Where Do We Go from Here?, ed. Isaac Asimov, Doubleday 1971

Some Dreams Are Nightmares, James Gunn, Scribner’s 1974

International Relations Through Science Fiction, ed. Martin H. Greenberg & Joseph D. Olander, Franklin Watts 1978

Wherever You May Be (Also titled “The Reluctant Witch” in reprint)

Published: Galaxy Science Fiction, May 1953

Broadcast: *X Minus One*, June 26, 1956

This novella by Gunn skirts the edges of science fiction and really would be more appropriate under the umbrella of fantasy or supernatural stories. The story follows Matt Wright, an aspiring psychology graduate student from the University of Kansas, driving to a remote Missouri cabin for the summer to work on his manuscript explaining seemingly paranormal events.

Along the way he meets a back-country rube named Abigail. Much to his fascination he comes to realize she has unexplainable powers to move objects with her mind, instantly transport objects from one place to another, and even to read minds. In order to more fully study these strange abilities Matt strings her along, encouraging her to believe she’s finally found a man that will marry her. When she discovers his duplicity

Abby turns her full powers on the hapless young man, tormenting as he attempts to escape back to Kansas.

Unable to sleep and eat because of Abby's telekinesis and unable to end his misery through suicide because of her telepathy, Matt resigns himself to the inevitable and agrees to marry her.

Gunn's story might today be described as a dark comedy though he keeps the mood light and fun, avoiding the darker elements a more contemporary storyteller may have included. The moodiness, violence, and revenge are kept in check, keeping the story from devolving into a true horror story which it easily could have been.

Adapter Ernst Kinoy had his hands full turning this novella into a radio script. First, being a novella the story is considerably longer than the other Gunn stories. Second was the challenge of bringing Abby's psychic powers - which were a visual phenomena - to the aural medium.

The original story has a steady stream of characters so new ones are not necessary, even to provide dialog opportunities. As would be necessary, the textual narration is transferred effortlessly into dialog between the characters, mainly the primary two of Matt and Abigail.

Abby's actress is coy and playful, hinting at some of the sexual overtones found in the original story which likely would have raised eyebrows even in mid-50s radio. Kinoy's dialog is crisp and the scenes move quickly one to the next, but even his skills can't squeeze the entire story into a half hour show. An important sequence in the story, in which Matt takes the naïve country girl to the "big town" of Springfield and subtly convinces her of his romantic interest is omitted and only briefly referenced in some dialog after the fact. Similarly, the entire final sequence in which Matt attempts to flee Abby and is tormented by her all along the way is deleted. Instead, he realizes without the torment that marrying Abby - and her paranormal powers - is his only choice.

Of the four adaptations, this is perhaps the weakest, only because the story's length prevents a fully faithful transition to the air. The radio version really lacks the building tension and suspense of the written counterpart. On a lesser note, giving the radio play more country/backwoods instrumentation might have added to the rural atmosphere of the play.

Wherever You May Be is reprinted in:

Five Galaxy Short Novels, ed. H. L. Gold, Doubleday 1958

The Witching Hour, Dell 1970 (entitled "The Reluctant Witch")

Open Warfare

Published: Galaxy Science Fiction, May 1954

Broadcast: *X Minus One*, January 23, 1957

I don't like golf, neither watching nor playing. So I steeled myself as I began Open Warfare. The setting is the U. S. Open, the main character a golfer named Jim Pearson. An athlete with a history of quitting in times of adversity, Jim is determined to win \$50,000 on the tour in one year to win the hand of Alice Hatcher. With the Open championship under his belt (and the prize money in hand), Jim will have met his goal.

He's the odds-on favorite to win until a mysterious man dubbed Silent Saul appears out of nowhere and takes the tournament by storm, gaining a six-stroke advantage with one round to go. There's no twist-ending here; our hero wins with a bit of subterfuge.

The mood for this story is light and frolicsome, befitting a relaxed 50s golf setting. Ernest Kinoy, adapting his third story by Gunn, gives the task of narration to a cocky, street-wise sounding caddy named Pete while much of the dialog is lifted directly or indirectly from Gunn's original text. Pete's role allows portions of the story's narration to be performed as natural dialog, bringing requisite action to the story for the listening audience. He also describes the tense, final moments of the last hole in which Jim edges ahead of Silent Saul on the scoreboard. This is a very faithful adaptation, with no changes more major than using Pete to move along the narration.

Open Warfare is reprinted in:

Arena: Sports SF, ed. Edward L. Ferman & Barry N. Malzberg, Garden City, NY:

Doubleday 1976

Science Fiction A to Z, ed. Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg & Charles G. Waugh, Houghton Mifflin 1982

Tsylana

Published: Galaxy Science Fiction, March, 1956

Broadcast: X Minus One, September 19, 1957

Gunn's final story to be adapted to radio was the strangely titled *Tsylana*. The story is an Earth in which science - specifically statistical analysis - has alleviated humanity of all its ills. This is not an uncommon setting for sci fi, nor is the necessary story twist that inevitably disrupts the utopian society. Despite the story's humorous edge I found this the weakest story of the four. This theme is well-trod and Gunn's work here doesn't stray far enough from the worn path.

In this ideal world everyone's needs are perfectly met via the statistical supercomputer Kinder. Our hero here is a statistician named Norm - an irony noted by the character himself. Norm has found a statistical anomaly that threatens the entire societal structure: the computers report that a baby's candy has been stolen. He goes on to discover other thefts; a child's walker, a football, even the "virginity of a maiden."

Unsure of what to do with this dire information, Norm visits Andrew Rednik, Freelance Analyst and Public Headshrinker. The visit - and followup visits - seem to be leading Norm nowhere, even as he acknowledges his behavior is straying further and further from what is expected. He falls in love with his wife, inviting her to move in; he becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his work, though it is a perfect fit for his personality; he even cheats on the exam which will determine his next job placement.

The story wraps up unsatisfactorily with the revelation that Norm's shrink, Rednik, is in fact Kinder and the thief is his boss. This is a story that, perhaps, was better suited as a novella. Its themes are insufficiently developed here, appearing and disappearing throughout the story and never adequately wrapped up.

Of the four stories, this was perhaps the easiest to adapt. The writer, George Lefferts, uses first person, just as the original text does. There are enough extra characters - Norm's boss, his wife, Rednik the psychologist - to keep the story moving with dialog which sticks close to the written text. As with *Wherever You May Be*, the story's sexual overtones are cleansed from the radio play.

This adaptation perhaps takes the most liberties with Gunn's story. The relationship between Norm and his boss is cordial, even one of old friendship, unlike the book where the two are cool if not hostile to each other. Also, the radio version gives Rednik responsibility for suggesting that Norm cheat on the upcoming career placement exam, taking away some of his individual character development as originally intended in Gunn's story. The end is significantly changed: on radio the showdown between Norm and his boss does not end in the death of Norm's adversary as in the short story. It may be a coincidence that the only story not adapted by Earnest Kinoy is the most heavily edited. Regardless, any script adapter would have struggled to make this play interesting for the air.

Tsylana is reprinted in:
Future Imperfect, Bantam 1964

James Gunn continues to write and edit. He is Director of the Center for the Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas and was named Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master by the Science Fiction Writers of America in 2007. This article was originally published in Aircheck, Sept. 2009, the publication of the Radio Enthusiasts of Puget Sound (WA). The episodes of X-1 can be downloaded for free at www.archive.org.

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