



Steampunk Prime: A Vintage Steampunk Reader

Mike Ashley (editor) , Paul Di Filippo (Foreword)

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Discover original steampunk tales in this anthology of stories written before there were actual rocketships, atomic power, digital computers, or readily available electricity. The modern day steampunk genre is a reinventing of the past through the eyes of its inventors and adventures, but this collection is from real Victorians and Edwardians who saw the future potential of science and its daring possibilities. Steam-powered automobiles, submarines, and robots are featured alongside great airships and spaceships in these bold and creative stories of hope, triumph, and disaster.

Steampunk Prime: A Vintage Steampunk Reader Details

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From Reader Review Steampunk Prime: A Vintage Steampunk Reader for online ebook

Steve says

A collection of "vintage steampunk" stories; in other words, stories that were actually written in the late 1800's to early 1900's. It is an interesting concept, but it doesn't really hold up since very few of the stories have any kind of steampunk feel. They are just science fiction stories that happened to be written in a certain time period and about half take place well in the future of the steampunk era, and others are on themes such as alien invasion that don't inherently fit into steampunk. The stories themselves are almost all poorly written, which will make this only of interest to the dedicated modern reader. Ashley's introductions to the stories are interesting, however. The best stories are the Griffith, the Wallis, and the England.

"Mr. Broadbent's Information" - Henry A. Hering 3/5

A genetically-engineered creature seeks freedom. Good until the mad scientist shows up.

"The Automation" - Reginal Bacchus and Ranger Gull 3/5

A man seeks to foil a chess-playing robot. More of a ghost story.

"The Abduction of Alexandra Seine" - Fred C. Smale 2.5/5

Bad guy takes girl on a flying car chase. Cheesy

"The Gibraltar Tunnel" - Jean Jaubert 3/5

Disaster in the new train tunnel under Gibraltar. Decent action.

"From Pole to Pole" - George Griffith 4/5

Explorers traverse a natural tunnel through the Earth from pole to pole. Good adventure with bad science.

"In the Deep of Time" - George Parsons Lathrop 3/5

A man is frozen until the end of the twenty-second century. What he finds there is fairly silly.

"The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings" - L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace 2.5/5

Search for a kidnapped child. Barely seemed like SF.

"The Plague of Lights" - Owen Oliver 2/5

Alien lights infect and kill humans while searching for love. Dumb.

"What the Rats Brought" - Ernest Favenc 2.5/5

A plague sweeps across Australia. Not much story.

"The Great Catastrophe" - George Davey 3/5

Electricity goes wild and destroys London. OK disaster story.

"Within an Ace of the End of the World" - Robert Barr 2/5

Mankind depletes the nitrogen in the atmosphere and causes disaster. Silly conclusion.

"An Interplanetary Rupture" - Frank L. Packard 2/5

Mercury and Earth go to war. Unconvincing attack from space.

"The Last Days of Earth" - George C. Wallis 4/5

The last humans survey the dying Earth and prepare to colonize a new world.

"The Plunge" - George Allan England 4/5

Disaster on a giant trans-Pacific airship. Pulpy fun.

K. O'Bibliophile says

An interesting look at short science-fiction stories written during the Victorian era--capitalizing on the popularity of steampunk, but also reminding us how different the real era was.

It's a good look at how culture has changed, just by seeing what kind of vision of the future is popular. Most of those type of stories tell us that according to Victorian sci-fi writers in general:

***Women** were always the weaker sex, mostly gentle even through their intellect, and preferring to have a man to shelter them.

***Digital technology** will never exist; the heights of human ingenuity (even *thirteen million years in the future*) still require fiddling with knobs and dials and gauges, though we might evolve some form of telepathy.

***When the world is united** as one/other planets are colonized/etc., it will still be ruled by old white men, in the same style the England and America are. Speaking of those countries, the united world/universe will also have its seat in one of those countries and everyone will speak English. And no one will have a non-English name.

***The future** will be almost a utopia (if it isn't fully one). No one goes hungry or poor, wars are abolished, etc. etc. under the rule of a benevolent government (see above).

These common threads are interesting because they reflect the time they were written in; consider how similar stories written today feature more gender equality, increasingly micro and invasive digital technology, the rise of non-English entities (on earth or from beyond), and so forth.

So from a modern standpoint, these are interesting and quaint, but still make me want to go, "Awww, cute little dum-dum."

The stories themselves are a mixed bag; many are fairly interesting, but there are a few--one near the end is a short story about how the nation of the Earth (see above: entire planet united) must declare war on Mercury. Then they beat Mercury in five paragraphs of extremely wordy descriptions that don't actually describe much. Then they are sad and start writing out a peace treaty, the end. Or the one *thirteen millions years in the future* when the last two humans on earth are leaving. Coincidentally, society hasn't changed much, except crying is "archaic."

For the book itself, I appreciated the one-page intro into each story telling us about the author, and similar stories from the time. The downside: we didn't usually find out what year the story was written in, and the title was only given for the intro, not at the start of the actual story.

Richard says

Great fun. There's a nice mix of stories here, from fantastic inventions to airship disasters to grand explorations into the unknown. "From Pole to Pole" has the best explanation ever for why a tunnel would run right through the Earth, and you can't get through "The Abduction of Alexandra Seine" properly without reading the dialogue out loud ("Great Heavens! Eagle Malvowley, I might have guessed it, the fiend!" cried Bowden Snell.").

Actually, the whole thing works better than I thought it would. Some are quick reads--breathless and giddy even--and some are harrowing in their way ("What the Rats Brought"). "The Plunge" does 'the Titanic as airship' really well, and "Within an Ace of the End of the World" reminded me of the Big Agro corporations AND the final part of "A Princess of Mars" at the same time, and I doubt that will ever happen again.

Emma says

This is a collection of stories written in the era steampunk extrapolates from selected from the old sci-fi magazines. It's fascinating just for that and I did enjoy reading it. There were some lovely stories in here, "The Automaton" and "The plague of lights" stand out in my memory as good strong stories. "The plague of lights" in particular was a favourite.

The problem was, I feel that a lot of the stories chosen haven't aged well, and a few were too plot focused for me. Nothing turns me of quicker than a long-winded description of the propulsion system of your air car. Examples, "In the deep of time" involved a man running around the place giving technical descriptions of everything he saw and generally being a bit of a bastard to all the other characters. "The Abduction of Alexandra Seine" also stands out as something made entirely of cliché and the kind of dross that even a bad fanfiction writer can recognise as not worth publishing.

So, high notes and low notes. I also had a bit of a problem with the fact that this is published as steampunk. It felt very much like a gimmick to get me to buy the book and, while it worked, it didn't result in my having the book I wanted so it let us both down. Sure, there's Sci-fi in here extrapolating forward from Victorian times but I don't think all sci-fi written then is necessarily steampunk. There are certain trappings associated with the sub-genre and most of these stories just don't have them. A few, yes, I'll give you. But, for example, "The star shaped marks" (which, I should point out, is listed as "the brotherhood of the seven kings" in the index, though the author blurb clearly describes "the star shaped marks", so some kind of editorial crazyness has gone on here) is a decent detective story but in no way, at all, steampunk. Seriously. There's an x-ray machine in it, but that's about it. So, yeah, it annoys me when books explicitly promise something and don't particularly deliver on it.

Alessandra says

Steampunk Prime: A Vintage Steampunk Reader is an interesting and peculiar collection of futuristic science

stories originally published between 1897 and 1914. The science is thoroughly Victorian, and the gazing into the future is startling in what it predicts and what it presumes.

I guess the first thing I have to say is that what the stories have in common is that ... well, they're not very good, mostly. The characters are generally thin, overblown Victorian stereotypes, the prose tends to be florid, and few of the stories have much in the way of plot. There are good bits here and there, but overall it's not first quality.

However, the stories are fun reading for their insights into what people were thinking about and expecting a hundred years ago, and for musing on what sorts of things we might be missing in our thinking about our future.

In the future as foreseen in these stories there is no radio apart from one story's reference to reflected Marconi waves (can't remember which one because, darn it, I didn't make a note of it). In George Parsons Lathrop's "In the Deep of Time," people use the ingenious arrangement of hundreds of miles of copper cable wound around a massive iron deposit in Wisconsin to make a giant interplanetary telegraph with which they communicate with Mars!

There aren't computers in any of these stories; those are a later dream.

A couple of stories involve making artificial food out of nitrogen (vitamins were unknown at the time). In "Within an Ace of the End of the World" by Robert Barr, extraction of nitrogen from the atmosphere to make food depletes the atmosphere enough that everyone gets oxygen-drunk and silly, and civilization burns up. The idea that even with massive food production humans could make a dent in the Earth's atmospheric nitrogen content, let alone reverse its ratio to oxygen within five years, provoked giggles in my scientific friends.

In one of the better stories, "The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings," by L. T. Meade (really Elizabeth Thomasina Meade) and Robert Eustace, an x-ray machine is used as a secret attempted murder weapon, set up next door and pointed at a man's bedroom, giving him massive doses of radiation. Owing to the lack of knowledge of the time, this makes him deadly ill but not anyone else, and he recovers afterwards, neither of which is very likely.

And all of the characters are as Victorian as can be (the author Lathrop cites an African inventor, to his credit).

All of which gets me musing about what casual assumptions we are making about what people of the future will be like, what they will be interested in, how they will live, what will be important and what will be disregarded. What will they, looking back at us, see clearly that we are blind to?

These stories were obviously transcribed using an optical scanner, as the typographical errors are the sort which occur with that method -- long dashes for short, and vice-versa and the odd *very* strange misspelling, such as "tire" instead of "the" and the surreal "M.A.de" for "made." A little more copy-editing would do this book some good.

Amy Sturgis says

If I rated books, I'd want to give this one two separate ratings, one for content (4) and one for layout (1). As grateful as I am to see these lesser-known gems of Victorian and Edwardian science fiction gathered together in a single collection, I am in equal measure horrified by the poor production values of this volume. It seems as though someone scanned the original stories using OCR software and then never proofread the resulting text; exclamation points frequently are misrepresented as capital "I"s, quotation marks randomly appear or disappear with no regard to the beginning/ending of dialogue, periods and commas and apostrophes show up in arbitrary places (including in the middle of words), and glaring typographical errors ("pubic" for "public," etc.) constantly jolt the reader out of the rhythm of the stories. It's a shame, because these classic tales deserve much better.

For the content, however, this book is well worth reading. It includes fourteen "vintage steampunk" stories originally published between 1897 and 1916. All are fascinating from a historical point of view, but many remain quite entertaining for the modern reader. I especially enjoyed "The Automaton" by Reginald Bacchus and Ranger Gull (a dark psychological story about a chess-playing mechanical man), "In the Deep of Time" by George Parsons Lathrop (about a human who is kept in suspended animation for 300 years, and then revived, coincidentally, on the same day that the Martians send their ambassador to Earth), "Within An Ace of the End of the World" by Robert Barr (in which a new and inexpensive form of mass food production nearly spells the end for our species), and "The Last Days of Earth" by George C. Wallis (a chilling account of the last hope for - and sacrifice of - humanity). Helpful introductions by editor Mike Ashley set each story in its larger context with regard to the tradition of steampunk literature in science fiction.

Robert Stewart says

I would have to agree with most of the negative points other reviewers haven't mentioned. The bad editing of the OCR copy goes beyond simple typos. I've come across sentences that have been garbled.

Also, the writing itself leaves a lot to be desired. It's mostly of the sort found in the mass-market magazines of the time.

That said, I found Ashley's introduction and his set-ups for each of the stories very informative. If you want to find out what sorts of futuristic speculations readers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were exposed to, this is a very useful book.

Lizabeth Tucker says

Steampunk Prime edited by Mike Ashley

Mike Ashley has gathered together a collection of early science fiction writers, largely forgotten, who helped invent and define the steampunk sub-genre. There are 14 short stories in this collection. I would have to say that while the majority of the stories in this collection can be put clearly in the steampunk category, some are borderline and a few don't seem to fall there at all. But I would probably put that down to everyone's different definition of the term. An overall rating of 3.5 out of 5.

“Mr. Broadbent’s Information” by Henry A. Hering was first published in 1909. This is the story of automata, the term used for mechanical creatures before robot became commonly accepted.

James Broadbent is a writer of fiction looking to increase his yearly income with more writing. His desire for a peaceful hideaway is first interrupted by an escaped prisoner whose recapture leaves him with a broken arm. Then a neighbor’s manufactured creature comes to the door seeking shelter.

A fascinating little story, sad and all too possible based on the state of our sciences (and morals) today. I do wish it had been longer. The writing isn’t dated at all, the descriptions crisp and compelling, not to mention heartbreaking. 3.5 out of 5

“The Automaton” by Reginald Bacchus & Ranger Gull concerns a chess-playing automaton. In reality, there was one of these creatures all the way back in 1770, a world-famous device until it was revealed to be a fake while on tour in the United States. This fictional version first appeared in 1900.

Mr. Greet and his Automaton had toured throughout Europe’s major cities, winning every match against human players of all skill levels. After a long appearance in London as well as some of the major cities out in the provinces, Mr. Greet issues a challenge, backing his Automaton against any chess player in the world for a prize of two thousand pounds. Stuart Dryden, considered to be the leading chess player in England, had successfully refrained from engaging in any of the matches, but the Automaton was cutting into his income. Looking for refuge at his club, Stuart is persuaded to accept the challenge in this largest of all tournaments.

A story that is a mixture of steampunk, mystery, and horror, there is a twist at the end that should please fans of both Alfred Hitchcock Presents and Twilight Zone. Bacchus and Gull meander a bit, but do develop the concerns and fears of Dryden well. 4.5 out of 5

“The Abduction of Alexandra Seine” by Fred C. Smale is an old style mystery adventure that involves airships and other presumed inventions of the future.

Bowden Snell, a graphist for the Hourly Flash, had just completed coverage of a swiftly solved crime when the son of an old friend comes to request help in finding his abducted wife. The search reveals a surprise for Snell.

Terribly hokey and over-the-top dramatic, this is unfortunately what most people expect from stories of this type and age. 2.5 out of 5

“The Gibraltar Tunnel” by Jean Jaubert addresses what is now currently proposed, a tunnel between Spain and Morocco. Victorians were involved in hundreds of construction and civil engineering projects, from the small to the large. The first underground railway in the world was completed in 1863. The completion of most of the London Underground was in the early 1900s. The English Channel Tunnel was originally considered since the early 1800s and actually begun in 1881. There was a mile of tunnel completed on both sides before it was abandoned.

James Harward, engineer of the Gibraltar Tunnel Railway Company, tries to warn his boss that the tunnel is too unsafe to open without success. Forced to run the first passenger filled train through, Harward isn't surprised when the predicted disaster strikes. How will they make it out alive? Jaubert, an engineer in real life, knew what could happen and describes it in exquisite and frightening detail. A dollop of romance jacks up the danger while the reactions of both those on the train as well as the people waiting at the end of the tunnel are well displayed.

Extraordinary story, exciting and well written. This is a writer who knew how to weave his professional knowledge into a story of great danger and adventure. 4 out of 5

"From Pole to Pole" by George Griffith is based on the fascination the Victorians had with the idea of a passage through the center of the Earth, running from the North to South Pole. First proposed in 1818, it caught the imagination of writers and the public alike. Writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, and Edgar Rice Burroughs all wrote of discovering an underground civilization deep within the planet's core. In addition, the romance and adventure of polar exploration excited the general population. Griffith, another writer who died relatively young due to excessive drinking and its effects, was the first major regular British writer of science fiction. In this tale, he combines the romance of discovery with that between two strong individuals willing to risk their lives for science.

Professor Haffkin proposed a trip through the center of the Earth to his friend and financial backer, Arthur Princeps, one that began at the South Pole and would reappear, if successful, at the North. The Professor's niece, Brenda Haffkin, object of Arthur's affection, asks to join them.

Sadly dated, with pseudo-science that doesn't bear too close a look at. More melodramatic than I expected. 3 out of 5.

"In the Deep of Time" by George Parsons Lathrop deals with time travel in the aspect of suspended animation as well as space travel. Space travel has been a prominent part of science fiction from the start, but after it was claimed that canals were discovered on Mars in 1877, followed by book supporting that claim written by American astronomer Percival Lowell beginning in 1895, the interest among Victorians increased greatly. This story, completed before H. G. Wells' similarly posited story "When the Sleeper Awakes", was heavily influenced by talks by the author with Thomas A. Edison.

Gerald Bemis volunteered to be put in suspended animation for two to three centuries after being disappointed in love. When he awakes in a new world, he is dealing with surprise after surprise, including the first visitor from Mars.

This is a case of too much research information put into the story. Standard speculative fiction that weaves romance, adventure, contact with superior aliens, and how the more things change with the hearts of men, the more they stay the same. There was an interesting section on how the large cities were abandoned or converted to green space due the reactions of people when jammed together. The look at how people have developed and survived was an interesting tale that just needed some tighter editing. 3 out of 5

“The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings” by L. T. Meade & Robert Eustace uses the idea of a secret cabal ruling the world scenario that was so popular in the late Victorian period. One book published in 1890 suggested that by the end of the 20th Century, one small group of wealthy, ruthless plutocrats rule the Earth through control of the governments or the press. The loss of new Sherlock Holmes stories after Sir Arthur Conan Doyle killed off the detective at Reichenbach Falls forced The Strand to find replacements. One prolific writer was L. T. Meade (Elizabeth “Lillie” Thomasina Meade) who, between 1875 and 1914, wrote 280 books. She collaborated with Robert Eustace (Eustace Barton) on this story, part of a series about Norman Head and Colin Dufrayer and their attempts to defeat the evil schemes of Madame Koluchy. Each story also focuses on a new technological or scientific discovery. In this tale, published in 1899, the story hinges on X-rays, just identified and studied in 1895.

Widowed artist Loftus Durham’s young son disappears, putting the distraught father into a spiral of depression and illness. Colin Dufrayer and his friend Norman Head believe Durham’s last model, Lady Faulkner, is behind it, but can they prove it?

A bit dramatic and a rushed ending that, in many ways, isn’t an ending. It really is old style, but doesn’t seem as good as the Fu Manchu series by Sax Rohmer much less Sherlock Holmes. 3 out of 5.

“The Plague of Lights” by Owen Oliver is concerned with an invasion of the Earth. It comes out of the near paranoia of many in Britain over the possibility of an invasion from France or Germany and how unprepared they were. In fiction, it was invasion by aliens, most famously done by H. G. Wells in *The War of the Worlds* in 1898. Owen Oliver (Joshua Flynn) wrote many types of fiction, only a small percentage of which were science fiction. He focused on the various ways that Earth could be in danger.

Frank and his beloved Phyllis are caught up in a cascade of mysterious lights falling out of the sky and attaching to various humans. The lights appeared to be in pairs, wanting human couples if possible, but forcing a pairing if not.

Wow, not what I expected when I began reading. Inventive, frightening, extremely well written and unusual. A nice mixture of science fiction, dystopian fiction, and romance. There is no clear explanation, which is probably even more realistic. 4.5 out of 5.

“What the Rats Brought” by Ernest Favenc combines two favorite Victorian themes, world catastrophe and vampires.

A seemingly abandoned ship is discovered and brought to Australia despite the logbook entries suggesting the boat could be infested with plague. Despite taking all due precautions, including torching the boat, it isn’t long before illness and death spreads across the continent.

The basic premise was interesting, but would’ve been better served as a longer story that could be greatly expanded. In short form, it seemed too rushed, too jumpy. 3.5 out of 5.

“The Great Catastrophe” by George Davey is set in the future of 1912. This disaster tale reflects the growing

concern of many regarding the over-reliance on modern technology.

A first person recollection of the great electrical disaster that occurred in London, killing hundreds through the appearance of green lightning and flames. The ensuing panic and efforts to escape death lead to even more dying.

An interesting look at how electricity is so pervasive in our society that it wouldn't take much for disaster to occur. The results of people fleeing for their lives was well described. There is no real explanation for the events described, just a report of how it started. 3.5 out of 5.

“Within an Ace of the End of the World” by Robert Barr addresses the idea of synthetic food production to solve the worldwide famines, not a new idea. Nor is the concern over genetic engineering.

Inventor Herbert Bonsel discovered a way to make food and wine out of nitrogen pulled from the atmosphere. Within three years, there are no crops being naturally grown anywhere in the world. But some students in England worry about the consequences and try to warn those in authority. Ignored or ridiculed, they make their own plans for survival, warning their female counterparts from Vassar in America.

Truly a dystopian story showing how man's eagerness for the new can blind them to the possible consequences. Unfortunately that hasn't really changed. Well developed story, could've been even longer. 3.5 out of 5.

“An Interplanetary Rupture” by Frank L. Packard moves us far into the fourth millennium.

Relations between Earth and Mercury are deteriorating into war.

Although I do read some military science fiction, they are usually more character driven even in the midst of more technical story-telling. Unfortunately that isn't the case with this story. This is a recounting of the battles, focusing on the technical rather than the people. Wasn't too thrilled by it, sorry to say. 3 out of 5.

“The Last Days of Earth” by George C. Wallis jumps 13 million years into the future to tell the story of the last living man and woman on Earth.

Alwyn and Celia have watched their planet become colder and colder as the sun began to die. Now they know it is time to make the final escape.

Not a happy tale by any means, but interesting nonetheless. Dedication and sacrifice, hope and despair, love and duty are all a part of this story. 3 out of 5.

“The Plunge” by George Allan England is written by one of the pioneers of pulp science fiction, a contemporary of Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Joanne Hargreaves, traveling by airship, is bemoaning the lack of real adventure and excitement in the modern world. She is surprised to meet author Dr. Norford Hale, a man who also finds the world lacking. "Be careful what you wish for" should have been known to them as a meteor hits their airship shortly after they have this discussion.

Written in 1916, twenty-one years before the Hindenburg disaster, this story relays some of what the passengers on that doomed airship must have seen and felt shortly before their death or lucky escape. A tad preachy, it still resonates as a disaster and survival tale, even if the language used is dated. 3 out of 5.

Robin says

One day I will write a Steampunk unit -- it will begin with Frankenstein, and then have excerpts from this, and then branch out into culturally diverse offerings. It will include a lot of STEAM (pun intended) -- science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics), and it will be amazing. It's fun to see where the genre began and apply an historical approach to lit crit.

Jukka says

Steampunk Prime - Mike Ashley (editor)

This is really fun and thought provoking to consider. Don't expect the 'level' of the literature to be profound, these short stories were found in magazines done by 'B' writers. But the choices are great in that it shows a vanguard from a very interesting period at the century change in 1900, a favorite period of mine. If you want you can find the heavy hitters like H.G. Wells and Jules Verne yourself.

The stories here i like the most: In the Deep of Time, The Plague of Lights, The Great Catastrophe, The Last Days of Earth, The Plunge. 'In the Deep of Time' has a large number of steampunk style inventions, the author George Parson Lathrop consulted with Edison for technical guidance with this story. Also worthy of mention is 'The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings' a detective story sort of, written by the only female author in this collection, L. T. Meade. 'The Plunge' is the most lyrically 'steampunk', including the creepy romantic male dominant ending. Interesting how many of these stories were male hero to the rescue type stories, even including the snidely whip-lash villain.

Reading this book has me considering what 'steampunk' really is. That the ideas are limited by the technology of the day, is not something peculiar to the late 19th century. It's just that we can see it now because of the contrast in technology one hundred years later. I watched a Star Trek Next Gen recently and it is plain how silly technologically this will be not very long from now, if it is not actually already.

If you enjoyed these stories here's some others similar to look for:

Mellonta Tauta - Edgar Alan Poe (There are others from Poe too.)

Machine Stops - E.M. Forster (Yes that Forster, **Passage to India**, **Howard's End**, etc, in a whole different

style!)

Wired Love - Ella Cheever Thayer (About a 'Victorian Internet' -- phrase borrowed from Tom Standage.) Perhaps even in a way **The Debt** by Edith Wharton. Wharton is someone i think of as an early adopter, she loved her technologies. Still looking for other works from Wharton that falls more into a 'steampunk' style.

This book is a good source of strange period ideas and styles, for the writer.

David Ledeboer says

I could actually hear the full, long dresses swish against the railings of airships as these intrepid passengers sped along through the clouds. I also trembled in fear along with the professor as he gazed at the misshapen, cobbled and furred automaton whirring in front of him. Had I been transported back (or forward, far, far forward) in time to an alternative Victorian world? No, I had simply immersed myself in *Steampunk Prime*, a collection of short stories edited by Mike Ashley.

I am certainly a newbie when it comes to steampunk. Or maybe it's not so? Unbeknownst to me, apparently I have always been steampunk, before it ever became cool. The TV show, *Wild, Wild West* had long been a favorite of mine. I'm fairly certain I've seen every episode. I swooned at the brilliant teeth and lean figure of actor Robert Conrad in the lead role and fell for the charm and gadgets of his brilliant sidekick played by actor Ross Martin.

In *Steampunk Prime*, Ashley has gathered representatives of all of the perfect elements of this wild, wild genre. New marvelous inventions including machines, electricity, aircraft, aliens, world doom, world elation and even a bit of horror. The oldest story here was written in 1897 while the most recent, 1916. A far cry away from our recent fascination with all things "steampunk."

However, what makes this anthology so astounding is that these authors truly lived steampunk. The cogs and gears on which they relied weren't simply adornments for an outfit or the retro-fitting for an elaborate necklace. It was this new "steam" that powered their daily lives – whooshed them in half the time from place to place on behemoth trains or even cleaned their laundry with an unimaginable ease! When the sizzle of electricity snaked its way into these authors homes and routine places of business, they could only marvel in wonder or recoil in trepidation. They have given us such a unique view into how they saw the future of their world - where they imagined this industrial revolution might take them in 300 or 13,000,000 years in the future.

I can only say "Thanks, Mr. Ashley" for putting together in one place all these stupendous glimpses into real Victorian steampunk for us. Very well done.

MB Taylor says

Finished reading *Steampunk Prime* (2010) edited by Mike Ashley today. Subtitled 'A Vintage Steampunk Reader', this is a collection of fourteen stories originally published between 1897 & 1916. Today they would be classified as science fiction, a term that had not yet been invented. Ashley selected the stories in this collection because (according to his introduction) they 'create many of the concepts and images that have

come become associated with steampunk’.

Ashley’s concept of Steampunk is a bit more far reaching than mine; he’s included a few stories I wouldn’t classify as such, but most of the stories (some just in retrospect) have a Steampunk-ish feel.

My favorites stories were the first two, “Mr. Broadbent’s Information” (1909) and “The Automaton” (1900) and the penultimate, “The Last Days of Earth” (1901). All three stories were interesting, went in directions I did not expect and the characters seemed very Victorian to me, even in “The Last Days of Earth” which takes place on Thursday, July 18th, 13,000,068 AD.

“The Abduction of Alexandra Seine” (1900), “The Gibraltar Tunnel” (1914), and “The Plunge” (1916) are nice little romance stories decorated with a fantastic invention or two.

My least favourite story in the collection was “An Interplanetary Rupture” (1906), which I found for the most part lifeless and boring oddly coupled with a detailed (and, to me, boring) description of a space battle between the space fleets of Mercury and Earth.

The other seven stories I found mostly entertaining. As much as I enjoy works from this time period I wouldn’t go out of my way to track down other works by any of these writers, but I wouldn’t avoid them either.

What’s missing from all the stories is the feeling of almost nostalgia I get from contemporary Steampunk. Generally reading Steampunk I get a sense of longing for technology based on simpler concepts; a sense that the author has abandoned complex futuristic explanations, and simply let the inventions work without explanation. This feeling is somehow almost essential to Steampunk for me. Not too surprisingly, there’s none of that here.

Aaron says

While all the stories were written during the Victorian era, not all the stories were steampunk, unless a very loose definition is applied. To be honest, many of the stories are poorly written and boring, BUT, I really lovedlovedloved Mr. Ashley's commentary about the authors, their stories and why he chose to include said story in this anthology. That was, by far, the best part of this novel. I'd give his insight and historical knowledge 5 STARS, the stories get 2 STARS.

I appreciate his research and depth of knowledge!

Oleksandr Zholud says

I have to admit, I don’t know much about steampunk, it became popular roughly at the same time when I got a multi-year hiatus from reading fiction at all. However, I’ve read a few old speculative fiction books (1900-1950s) so it was not totally novel for me. The anthology collects texts from the early 1900s, often prior to radio invention or Wright brothers flight. Therefore, it shows future quite different from the one in even 1920s books. As Yogi Berra said “The future is not what it used to be”

The texts maybe a bit too unsophisticated and there are quite a few minor errors (text was OCR'd from old magazines and not fully cleared), but they are still a very unusual read.

Lorna says

What did the writers of a hundred years ago and more envisage as they looked into the future? Some authors have left lasting works we are all familiar with - War of the Worlds, for example, or The First Men in the Moon. But there is a wealth of other stories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, less well known, but still exploring the same themes.

There is a growing enthusiasm at the moment for the genre known as 'steampunk', not just in its literary form but also in the visual and creative arts. These days, steampunk is characterised by reinventing the past, but in this collection we see real Victorians and Edwardians exploring the possibilities of science, technology and exploration - though still with the dials and levers beloved of modern steampunk enthusiasts.

Each story in this collection is chosen because it exemplifies a particular theme - from artificial intelligence and chess automata to airships and alien invasions. The quality of the writing is variable, but each short story contains its own interest.

One irritant in this otherwise excellent volume is the proof reading. The stories have clearly been scanned from the original journals and contain errors which haven't been picked up and corrected - capital I's instead of exclamation marks, dashes as hyphens and vice versa. But that's a small price to pay for a fascinating and varied miscellany of 'steampunk prime'.
