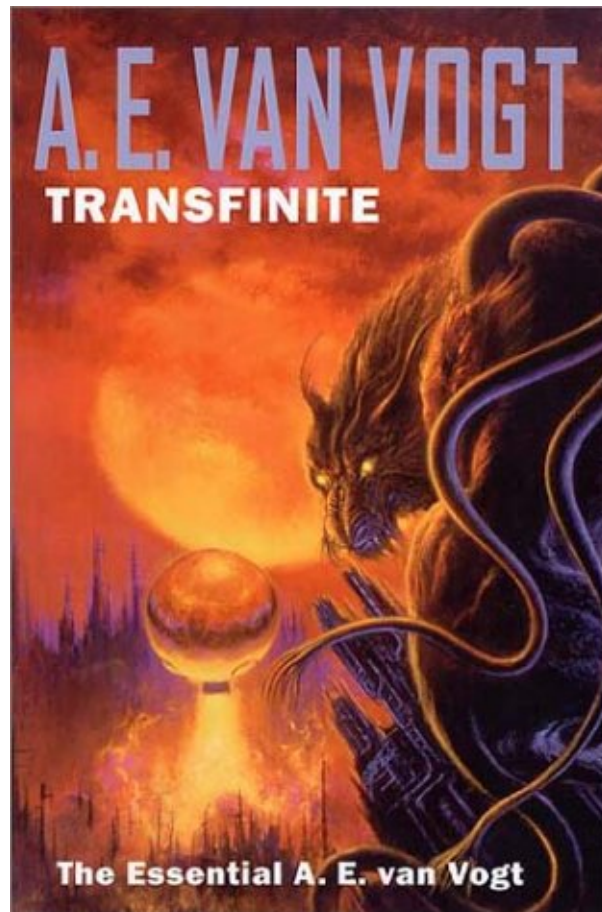
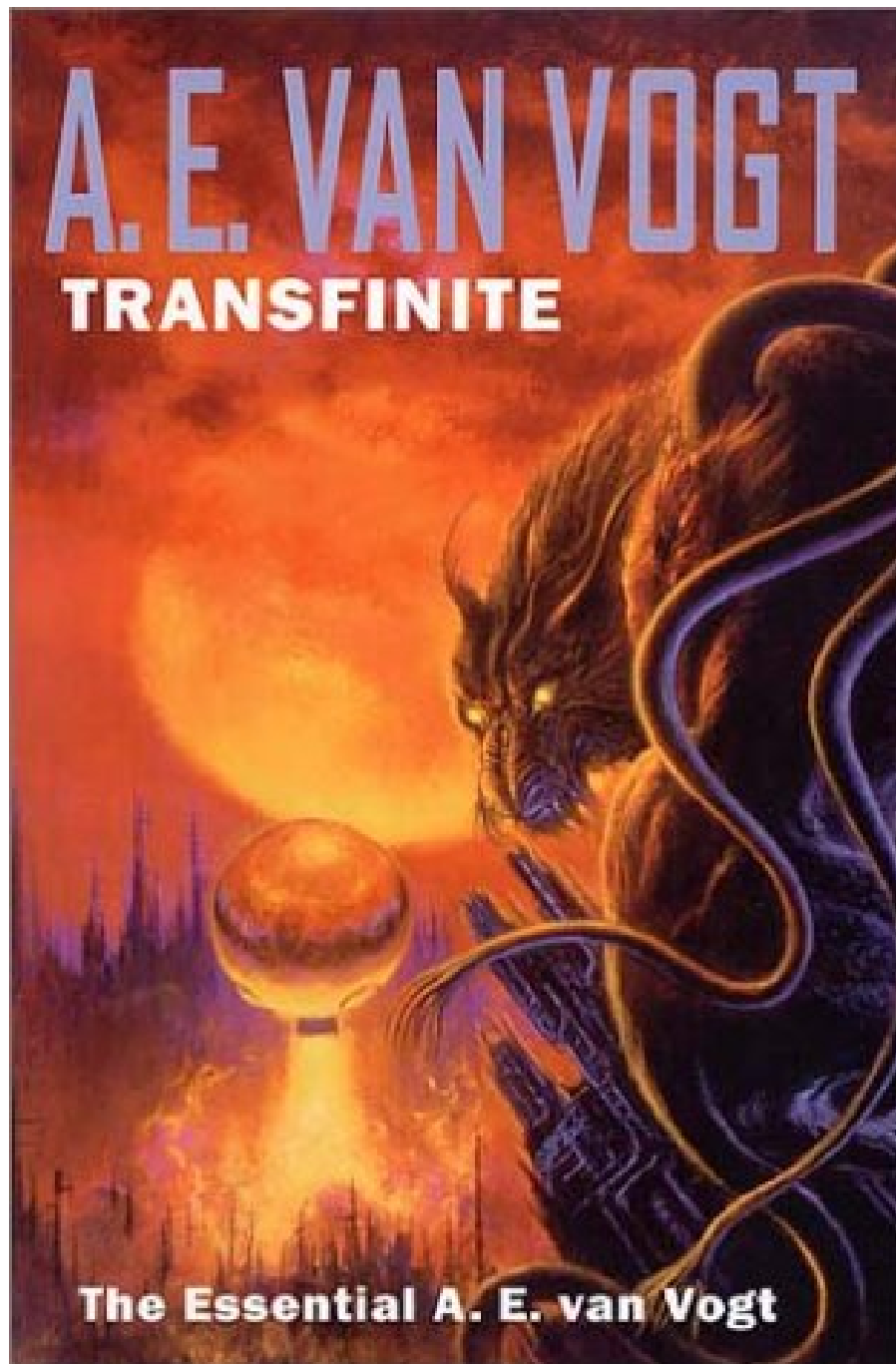


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One of sf's grandest old men, van Vogt (1912-2000) made history with the first story he sold. Editor John W. Campbell featured it on the cover of the genre-changing Astounding Science Fiction in July 1939, attracting future sf titans and mavens including, according to his introduction here, young collegian Harlan Ellison. That story was "Black Destroyer." It opens from the perspective of Coeurl, the single inhabitant of his world, to which humans arrive in a huge starship. The nonhuman insinuates its way into the ship, and a scenario unfolds that eventually played out--with modifications, to be sure--on the silver screen as Alien. Van Vogt created genuinely different aliens, endowed with extraordinary physical and mental powers as well as appetites, and the genre, including other stories here, has thrived on them since. An "idea" sf writer and a bit of a libertarian, van Vogt's nifty concepts also include distinctive futurist satire ("Future Perfect"), enduring World War II propaganda ("Secret Unattainable"), and entrepreneurial swashbucklers ("A Can of Paint").

Ray Olson

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Contains the most popular and important stories from van Vogt's wide and varied career.

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- 576 pages

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- Used Book in Good Condition

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Ray Olson

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Retrospective on an Early SF Giant

By James D. DeWitt

This collection of Van Vogt's short fiction (sometimes stitched together into longer works) reveals both the good and bad in his writing. The great John W. Campbell said of him, "The son-of-a-gun gets hold of you in the first paragraph, ties a knot around you, and keeps it tied in every paragraph thereafter -- including the ultimate last one." And that's mostly true. On the other hand, Damon Knight, as early as 1945 wrote, "Van Vogt is not a giant as often maintained. He's only a pygmy using a giant typewriter."

Van Vogt wasn't as flamboyant as, say, E. E. Smith, in his use of over the top adjectives. But he was pretty

careless with his facts. The opening story in this collection, "Black Destroyer," is the memorable tale of the alien Coeurl, who has a Chlorine-based metabolism. He breathes the oxygen atmosphere of the human starship just fine. The invading Yevd in "The Sound" are fluorine-based, but they, too, do just fine breathing our air.

Still, the stories are generally well-plotted, if you can suspend your disbelief. They are, in Le Guin's phrase, "careless of science," but great fun. Van Vogt's human characters tend to be very nearly perfect, if slow learners - they repeatedly bring the evil alien into the ship for example - and there is an annoying sexism that I suppose traces to the time the stories were written.

But these are unmistakably science fiction's roots. You can see "Alien" here, and bit of "Star Wars," and even the Starship Enterprise in its voyages of exploration. The roots may be a little worn and gnarly, but clearly the antecedent for the more modern stuff. The collection is worth a read and place on a collector's bookshelf; kudos to NESFA for getting them back in print. But the later, long novels like "World of Null-A" and "The Silkie" are better written and more fun.

Four stars for the great ideas nicely presented. But only four stars. Recommended.

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