

Science Fiction Serials

Roy Kinnard

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Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars (1938), The Crimson Ghost (1946), Atom Man vs. Superman (1950), Radar Men from the Moon (1952) and Panther Girl of the Kongo (1955)-these are just some of the 231 sound serials produced before the demise of the movie serial in 1956. The serials were the "cliffhangers" shown in weekly episodes (running 15 to 20 minutes each) in theaters across the country, usually with a younger audience in mind.

According to author Roy Kinnard, there were 32 science fiction serials, and he provides the producer, director, cast, chapter titles and story lines to all of them in his book, along with photographs and movie posters of the stars and their robots, space ships and "futuristic" outfits. The book is a hoot and should appeal to nostalgic "oldsters" and those with even a small dose of curiosity about these old serials, many of which are now available on videocassette. High-brow art they were not, says Kinnard, but most of them were pretty entertaining, despite their low budgets.

The author's research skills and eye for details adds depth to his unpretentious subject-for example, the costume used by the hero in King of the Rocket Men shows up again three years later on the star of Radar Men from the Moon, though the story lines are completely unrelated. And costumes and props from Mysterious Island were gleaned from the earlier Flash Gordon, The Spider's Web and Brick Bradford serials. He also sprinkles the book with interesting comments from some of the stars that were interviewed years later.

Today's modern science fiction movies and television shows, like Star Trek and Star Wars, owe more than a passing nod to the old science-fiction serials, Kinnard reminds us. We should be glad he has.

ALAN J. COUTURE (January / February 1999)

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