

Getting Up To Speed in Science Fiction

By Joyce Saricks

What is Science Fiction?

Science fiction is speculative fiction set in worlds based on plausible scientific theories. The genre traditionally describes future worlds and technologies, but past settings that are nonetheless rich in future technologies have grown in popularity. No matter the time and setting, science supported by known scientific principles drive the stories.

What happens in a Science Fiction novel?

Science fiction novels run the gamut from traditional action and adventure (with ray guns) to stories that incorporate moral, social, and ethical issues into explorations of philosophical, technical, and intellectual questions. Science fiction is fertile ground for the discussion of challenging and often controversial issues and ideas, and authors may use it expressly for that purpose.

Why do people like Science Fiction?

The genre is rich in physical and intellectual adventure, with something to please a wide range of readers, from fans of romance and mystery to those who appreciate literary fiction and even westerns. Science fiction is evocative and visual, filled with technical and scientific details. Readers prize science fiction for its ability to raise thought-provoking issues, whether intellectual, moral, or social. Science fiction deals with "why", philosophical speculations, as well as with "where", futuristic settings outside of the usual; with alien beings as well as alien and unorthodox concepts. It cherishes the unexpected, in terms of setting, characters, and plot, and it prides itself in its ability to raise challenging questions. Science fiction also affirms the importance of the imagination and of story in readers' lives.

Five key titles:

- Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* imagines a bleak future threatened by ecological disasters. In steamy Bangkok, a "calorie" man, seeking seeds thought to be extinct, encounters the genetically engineered windup girl in this elegantly written but grim near-future tale of greed, conspiracy, and violence.
- Orson Scott Card's classic *Ender's Game* is a layered story of a young boy's coming-of-age in a world beset by war. Moral, social, and intellectual issues frame the novel, which can be read and appreciated on many levels by a wide range of readers. Card has followed these

characters in this series and his Shadow series, which chronicles the life of Bean, Ender's friend.

- In *Ready Player One*, Ernest Cline transports readers to a future, dystopic Earth on which virtual reality gaming provides the only escape from grim reality. Geeky teen gamer hero Wade Watts joins the search for keys hidden in the virtual world Oasis; keys that will lead to power and wealth, in this imaginative, adrenaline-fueled adventure.
- Mary Doria Russell's novel of first contact, *The Sparrow* opened up the genre to thoughtful readers who might never have discovered it otherwise. This elegantly and densely written philosophical novel, peopled with multi-dimensional characters, has become a book discussion classic.
- Timothy Zahn's *Heir to the Empire* speaks to the ongoing popularity of Star Wars world and its characters, explored by multiple authors in novels, short stories, film, and graphic novels.

Five key authors:

- Ian McDonald's imaginative, provocative near-future tales combine elements of mystery, suspense, and historical fiction with intriguing characters and stylish prose in complex, compelling, and exotic tales. *The Dervish House* blends the lives of six characters with the rich history of Istanbul, nanotechnology, and the threat of a terrifying future.
- Kim Stanley Robinson writes issue-oriented novels rich in scientific detail and technology and often emphasizing ecology. Literary style and interesting characters enhance his novels, frequently set in the near future. Start with *Red Mars*, the first of his Mars trilogy.
- Neal Stephenson began his career as the heir to cyberpunk, popularized by William Gibson, with titles like *Snow Crash* and *Cryptonomicon* which feature computers, hackers, code-breaking, and a wealth of scientific and mathematical detail. His more recent Baroque Cycle is speculative, combining history and science with his trademark elegant language and style.
- Harry Turtledove's writing exemplifies the alternate history subgenre, which fully explores the "what if" appeal of the genre. He speculates on a range of possibilities from the Confederate States winning the Civil War to the Spanish Armada conquering England and more. *Days of Infamy* explores the ramifications of a Japanese invasion of Hawaii.
- Connie Willis has written a range of provocative, character- and idea-driven science fiction novels and short stories, from playful and sometimes romantic comedies like *To Say Nothing about the Dog* and *Bellwether* to darker explorations of time travel and contemporary issues in *Blackout* and *All Clear*. Polished prose, imaginative and cinematic story lines, and an engaging tone characterize her fiction.

How do I help Science Fiction fans?

- Fans of the genre are both elusive and outspoken. Although they rarely seek assistance, they are more than happy to advise us on what our collections lack. Unless you're a fan, listen to them talk about what they enjoy and use that information to introduce others to popular writers in the genre.
- Descriptions of movies and television series often provide insight into the type of books a reader might like.
- Classics remain popular choices and are frequently re-issued. Cherish authors like Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Frank Herbert, Philip K. Dick, Anne McCaffrey, and Ray Bradbury and offer them to established fans and those new to the genre.

A few more tips:

- Because of the complexity of the imaginary worlds they construct, authors tend to use them more than just once. This has resulted in a highly series-centered genre. Authors also share worlds, setting novels in an established universe. Since this can create location issues in your library, shelve these series titles under the world (for example, under Star Trek) rather than the author.
- Much science fiction is still published only in paperback. Keep and catalog these titles, and interfile them with hardcovers for ease in locating them.
- Short stories remain popular and are well-reviewed. They provide a good introduction to an author's themes and style for staff and readers.
- Fans start reading science fiction at a young age, and preteens and teens make up a large proportion of the readership.
- Science fiction crosses over with almost every genre, so there's likely a science fiction book that would satisfy every reader. Authors like Orson Scott Card, Ursula K. LeGuin, China Mieville, and David Weber write both fantasy and science fiction; others, for example Ray Bradbury and Robert McCammon, write science fiction and horror, making overlap through popular authors a useful strategy. Literary fiction readers will find many stylists like Margaret Atwood and Neal Stephenson among science fiction writers, and romance readers, too, will find authors like Lois McMaster Bujold who add enough romantic elements to science fiction to satisfy. Military science fiction by David Weber and the Star Wars series authors may also appeal to fans of thrillers and adventure novels, while mystery fans may appreciate the wacky adventures of detective Dirk Gently in Douglas Adams' series. Humor abounds in science fiction, and the works of authors like A. Lee Martinez,

Douglas Adams, and Robert Asprin (Phule's Company series) will likely please fans from other genres.

- Current Trends:
 - Steampunk combines science fiction, alternate history, and fantasy to create marvelous, sometimes whimsical adventures set during the Age of Steam but involving futuristic technology. Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*, Cherie Priest's *Clockwork Century* series, Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series, and China Mieville's *New Crobuzon* series are popular examples.
 - Alternate history (sometimes alternate universe) and time travel remain popular devices for expanding the scope of science fiction. Alternate history posits alternate pasts in novels by Harry Turtledove, Stephen Baxter, and others. Time travel technology allows scientists and others to travel back to the past and into the future. Kage Baker's *Company* novels and Joe Haldeman's *The Accidental Time Machine* are good examples. Both rely on authentic details, whether authentic history or future technology, as their springboard into imaginative possibilities.
 - Science fiction remains popular in multiple formats -- graphic novels, audiobooks, e-books -- and media -- games, television, and film. Fans move comfortably among formats and media, seeking the type of story they enjoy.
 - The Hugo Awards, the Nebula Awards, the Locus Awards, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award are among the prestigious awards for Science Fiction. RUSA's Reading List also names top Science Fiction novels for public libraries each year.
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*Joyce Saricks is a well-known Readers' Advisory consultant, presenting seminars around the country as well as online. In addition, Joyce has written several Readers' Advisory books, such as *Read On ... Audiobooks (Libraries Unlimited, 2011)*.*