

Speculative Fiction Genre Study Introduction to the Study

Lisle Public Library
February 4, 2016

Readers' Profiles

The first part of the [assignment for the first meeting](#) was [to create a Reader's Profile of yourself for the three genres within Speculative Fiction](#): Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. Because of the tremendous turnout, we went around the room allowing each member to discuss a single book they really loved or really disliked.

[The notes from all the comments can be found here.](#) The following is a short summary of themes and trends.

- Multiple people mentioned Justin Cronin and being huge fans of **The Passage**. It appeals to fans of Horror as well as Science Fiction. Additionally, it appeals to fans of Literary Fiction for its writing style. It also has huge appeal for fans of complex world-building. However, the world it builds is not too distant from ours. The apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes also create more fans.
- We included lot of fans of novels that create a scary, horror atmosphere, but without the blood and gore of pulp Horror novels. Stephen King and Joe Hill were both mentioned as creating a chilling atmosphere. Justin Cronin also creates this dread-filled tone, although he includes more graphic violence.
- World-building
 - For many, enjoyment of SpecFic depends on if you enjoy world-building or prefer your novels set in a reality close to ours where you don't have to learn new rules. For example, many enjoyed **The Shining** by Stephen King because the horror was so well mixed with reality. Also the *All Souls* trilogy by Deborah Harkness was a repeat mention.
 - For others, the world-building is the point. They want to escape into a novel's world, not stay in this world. As one person said, if they wanted real horror, they would turn on the news. The more immersive the fantasy, like **The Lord of the Rings** by J. R. R. Tolkien, the better.
- Multiple people didn't realize they had read as much SpecFic as they had until the group started naming titles. Also, many people quit considering classic literature as SpecFic.
 - While many loved the classics, like **The Lord of the Rings**, *Harry Potter* series, and **A Clockwork Orange**, others disliked these in equal measure. The reasons for one person enjoying a book or series were often the exact reasons other people hated that title.
- Many people find the more you can connect with the characters, or the humanity of the characters, the less the frame of SpecFic bothers many readers. Nonfans in particular need this connection to character.
- Multiple people mentioned their favorite SpecFic was actually the kind where you can forget the SpecFic elements and just sink into the story, for example the works of Connie Willis.

At the end, Annabelle also shared [Karen's Reader Profile](#). Karen is a huge fan, and her inability to limit herself to 3 books shows that. However, she also does show the appeal elements that motivate fans. It's a "fangirl" perspective. Annabelle also pointed out the references to "comfort food". It's an important part of doing a Reader Profile to know what books or types of book you turn to for comfort or when nothing else sounds good.

The discussion leaders also created Reader Profiles:

- [Annabelle's](#)
- [Megan's](#)
- [Becky's](#)

- [Karen's short version](#)

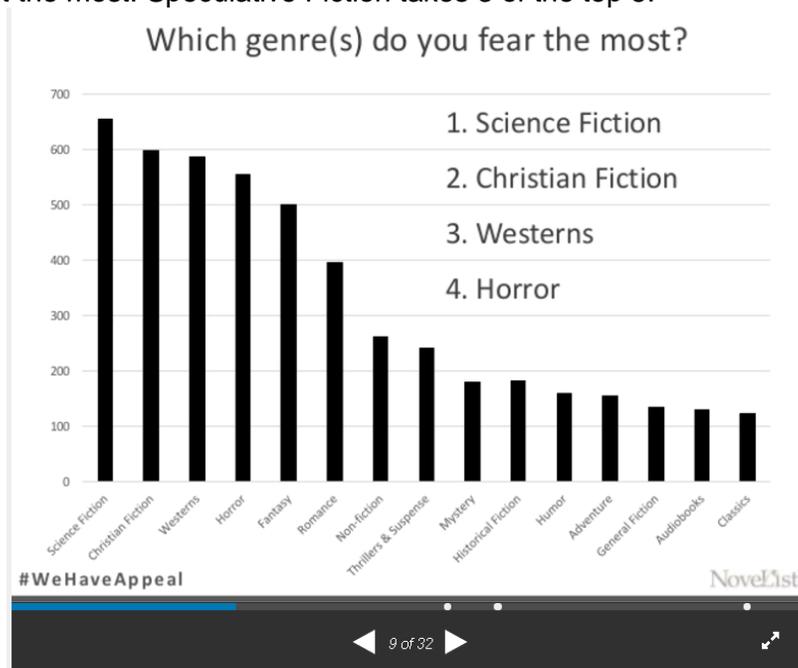
The main lessons and goals of creating the Reader Profiles were:

- Reader know thyself.
 - As with any genre, knowing what you like and dislike makes it easier to connect with other readers.
 - Creating a Reader Profile for yourself including all genres, or for any specific umbrella category, is a great RA tool in learning.
- We also wanted to identify hot button issues.
 - Knowing what study members love and what they hate will help the leaders shape the genre study and discussions.
- We wanted to emphasis just how broad SpecFic is.
 - With all the genre blending, it is sometimes hard to separate what is Science Fiction, Fantasy, or Horror.
 - However, the appeal elements spread across the genres.
 - Lots of different books and writing styles are SpecFic.
 - The breadth and depth of SpecFic also means there are a lot of different entry points for fans. Different people are fans for different reasons.

Why We Are Here

In NovelList's webinar [Appealing to Genre Readers](#), Joyce Saricks asked the participants what genres they feared questions about the most. Speculative Fiction takes 3 of the top 5:

1. [Science Fiction](#)
2. [Christian Fiction](#)
3. [Westerns](#)
4. [Horror](#)
5. [Fantasy](#)



When the Steering Committee evaluated the suggestions for Genre Study topics, this data just re-enforced the calling for a SpecFic genre study.

However, we are going to do this genre study a bit differently. Normally, ARRT genre studies feature:

- Introduction meeting, with benchmark for the genre
- Meetings broken up to follow [The ARRT Popular Fiction List](#), combining sub-genres to fit into

- 10-12 sessions
- Wrap-up meeting

However, this time the people who created the SpecFic portions of **The ARRT Popular Fiction List** (Annabelle, Becky, and Karen) weren't happy following this old way of doing things. We also wanted to be sure to incorporate what people told us they were looking for at the end of the Crime Fiction Genre Study.

We decided that appeal factors were more important in deciding what SpecFic readers would enjoy than specific subgenre pigeonholes. With all the genre blending today, a lot of SpecFic authors are really hard to fit in one genre, let alone one subgenre. (Plus, learning about most genre and subgenre tropes only takes a few minutes and can be done on your own.)

This [Genre Study will be organized a bit differently](#). The following few meetings will be organized around each major genre:

2. Science Fiction Boot Camp (assignment live on website) – Megan leading
3. Fantasy Boot Camp) – Annabelle leading
4. Horror Boot Camp) – Becky leading

In those meetings, we will take a look at each genre's specific characteristics, as well as benchmarks for the genre and top subgenres.

After those "Boot Camps", we will focus on appeal factors. We found thinking about Nancy Pearl's Doorways to be helpful. (We then added the appeal factor of Tone from Joyce Sarick's model.)

5. Doorway: Setting
6. Doorway: Character
7. Doorway: Story
8. Doorway: Language
9. Doorway: Tone

Finally, different formats matter as much in SpecFic as we found they do in Crime Fiction. But, Movies, TV, and Video Games are even more important than in any other genre for creating appeal.

10. Movies, TV, and Video Games
11. Audiobooks, Graphic novels, and YA (and maybe Children's)

Because of the tremendous feedback in favor of having Book Talks, as we did with Crime Fiction, we added that to our last meeting.

12. Lunch, Book Talks, and Wrap-Up

If you look over your Reader Profile, you can see how your likes and dislike fit into the Doorway models. The Doorways also allow for discussion of genre-blending in a more organic way.

In SpecFic, perhaps more than other genres, classic (and dead) authors are still actively read by casual readers as new people discover the genres. The masters of certain types are still currently discussed today. (See **The Man in the High Castle** as a prime example.) So, it's important to know the still-popular classics as well as the currently writing top-authors.

Speculative Fiction Overview

The ARRT Popular Fiction List defines Speculative Fiction as follows:

Speculative fiction explores the wide world of “what if.” The appeal for readers is in the other-worldly quality of the stories. They like to follow the characters into a setting where the impossible is possible. The intricate world-building in these novels often means the elaborate settings are used in long-running series. In speculative fiction the “what-if” could arise by magic, science that is not yet possible, a supernatural monster, or anything else the author can dream up. *The speculative genres and the authors who write them also have a tendency to overlap and blend with each other; however, most readers of these genres both understand and expect this.* The speculative fiction genres include: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror.

Genre-blending is rampant. Subgenres are becoming less clearly defined. But as the above (in italics) mentions, fans expect and accept these trends.

One of the reasons these genres are scary is that there is so much to learn. A lot of fans have been reading since they were kids, and it may feel like they know too much for you to help them. (Instead, look at those readers as resources you can learn from!)

Also, it may be easy to stumble into a “Holy War” scenario:

- Is it SF, sf, or Sci-Fi – some fans REALLY care about the abbreviation (and do not like the term “sci-fi”)
- Are they a Trekker or a Trekkie? Again, to some it matters. (Some Star Trek fans find the term “Trekkie” to be perjorative)
- Can you really call yourself a fan, or say you LOVE **The Lord of the Rings**, if you don’t speak Elvish?

So, if you’re a non-fans or extremely casual reader, librarians fear making a misstep.

Big Hairy Over-Generalizations (BHOGs)

- **SF** uses science (technology that does or could exist), while **Fantasy** uses magic
- **SF** explores complex contemporary issues in future settings, while **Fantasy** uses world-building to explore themes of good versus evil
- **SF** appeals to the intellect, while **Fantasy** appeal to the emotions
 - This is a controversial statement to make to some fans. Some SF is obviously also appealing to emotions, while some Fantasy is very thought-provoking.
- The point of **Horror** is FEAR – emotional appeal
 - Must create a sense of DREAD.
 - Must be speculative source of dread or fear.
 - Serial killer novels are not Horror, no matter how scary.
 - Having the speculative element be SF is a current trend. (This trend makes some fans very unhappy.)
- Genre blending puts all the above in a ringer and spins it out.
 - What is Literary Fiction with Speculative Elements, and what is SpecFic written in a Literary style? Think about
 - Michael Chabon
 - Cormac McCarthy
 - Margaret Atwood
 - Emily St. John Mandel
 - Is the writer consciously adding to the SpecFic genre? Or are they telling a story that happens to use tropes of SpecFic to further their themes?
 - Is the writer trying to reflect older or classic works? Are they creating a conversation with works from the past?

- Does it matter?
- If writers are doing all this genre blending, do we shelve it in general fiction or under a genre?

China Miéville: What Were We Thinking?

The leaders discussed whether to have a benchmark or two for the introductory meeting, as SpecFic is so varied. Also, SF doesn't really have "just one author" who is a global benchmark as Fantasy does with Tolkien.

Instead, we decided to pick the author who gave us the most trouble trying to pigeonhole into a genre when we created **The ARRT Popular Fiction List: China Miéville**. We actually debated naming a subgenre after him, and letting be a category unto himself. The Steering Committee aren't the only ones who think [China Miéville stands alone](#).

Miéville provides an interesting starting point because his body of works spans the broad world of SpecFic. His books are so different, no two feel like they were even written by the same author. He calls what he writes "Weird Fiction." His writing involves extremely dense descriptive language. Some of his books are a bit lighter than others, but mostly his works are all over the place. Some Miéville fans say start with his series, while others disagree. He's won virtually every major SpecFic literary award, including the Hugo Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Locus Award.

[Miéville is also just a cool guy](#). He has a PhD in International Relations. He is a Marxist Socialist. He has served in parliament, and was voted the Sexiest Man there. He is tattooed, pierced, and bald.

Nonetheless, the overall opinion was that the SpecFic leaders "inflicted Miéville upon us!"

Impressions of Miéville's body of works:

- You don't read Miéville to know what happened. It's more about the journey than the destination.
- Language is probably the best entry point.
- His writing is so unique, it's hard to figure out what else to give his fans.
 - The best read-alikes might be nonfiction read-arounds.
- How much you enjoy or like a Miéville work may be determined by how much you want to invest in the novel.
 - Figuring out the rules of the world he is building is part of the point. He doesn't lay out the world for you.
 - Miéville makes it hard to follow his worlds, and even his language.
 - Miéville's writing always makes you feel like "the author is smarter than you", and that can make you feel dumb.
 - Or you can take it as playfulness. Miéville is always trying to trick you.
- A common question was "Who am I going to give this to?" Answer was usually:
 - Someone who reads for language.
 - Someone who enjoys experimental fiction.
 - Someone who wants to experience the story.
 - *Experience* of reading – not the story itself.
 - All his writing is digressive, exploring language and introducing new themes more than delving into plot or characters.
 - Someone who enjoys "challenging reads" in all genres (think Thomas Pynchon or

Haruki Murakami)

- “Come with me, and I’ll show you how smart I am.”
- If he can mess with a librarian’s mind to this level, how are patrons going to take him? If he makes people feel dumb, you end up worrying about recommending him to patrons. Will we offend the patron?
- Each of his novels has a different theory or idea he is exploring. Maybe if the reader is interested in that concept, they will enjoy the book.
 - For example, **War of the Whales** by Joshua Horwitz tells the real life story of sonar testing causing problems for whales. A story like this makes one reader enjoy **Scar** all the more.
 - His stories can be more believable if you think about the real world implications of what he is exploring in his worlds.
- NovelList recommends these authors as read-alikes
 - Jose Saramago
 - Dan Simmons
 - K. J. Bishop
 - Ian R. MacLeod
 - John Crowley
- One fan said he always enjoyed Miéville’s books, but they still always frustrated him.
- Try doing the “read in 10 minutes” technique first so you see if you are getting what you think you are getting.

The City and the City

- His first to win “all the awards”
 - Locus Award for Best **Fantasy** Novel
 - Arthur C. Clarke Award (for best **Science Fiction** published in the UK)
 - World **Fantasy** Award
 - BSFA Award (British **Science Fiction** Association)
 - Kitschies Red Tentacle (SF & Fantasy)
 - Tied for the 2010 Hugo Award for Best Novel (SF & Fantasy)
 - Nominated for a Nebula Award (SF & Fantasy)
 - Nominated for John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best **Science Fiction** Novel
- Note:** Even the awards don’t know what genre to make this novel!
- Very highly regarded, but not all SpecFic fans love it, or him.
- Two different cities exist on top of each other.
 - Citizens of one city have to learn to “unsee” the buildings and citizens of the other city.
 - Miéville does a great job of expressing this ability to unsee.
 - If you see into the opposite city, Breach comes and gets you for breaking the boundary.
 - Its easier to conceive once you realize Miéville was playing with ideas from string theory.
 - Can also be read as a crime novel or a novel exploring the political differences in the two systems.
- Many found it hard to get into.
 - Some were not hooked by the story, only intrigued.
 - One of those books where you may love the premise, but you don’t love the book.
 - Was he writing in English all the time? His use of language makes you wonder if you are a native speaker of the language he is writing in.
 - Withholding the explanations of the world and handing them out piecemeal actually made it more difficult to get absorbed into the world.
 - Some stopped part of the way through, left wondering if it was worth the investment of time or energy to finish.
- Listening to it in audio made things perhaps less understandable.
 - If you were reading in paper, you could go back over a sentence or two – either if you loved

- the sentence, or if you got confused.
- If you get confused, it's not as easy to flip back pages to find the thread that will un-confuse you.
- May be better to listen to on a second read instead of on a first.
- Don't recommend you listen to this the first time while driving.
- Great layers and levels to the writing.
- Inspector Tyador Borlú reminded some of Harry Hole, Jo Nesbo's detective.
 - Some picked this one because they thought "it's a crime novel", but it doesn't read like a crime novel.
 - In part, if you become more focused on the cities instead the crime, you are left unsatisfied. You never learn how the cities became this way.

Scar (2nd in *New Crobuzon* series)

- Miéville has such a vivid imagination, reading him is like learning new words.
 - If your imagination can't keep up, you can feel left behind.
 - Couldn't visualize the city he keep describing.
 - Was he making up new words, or just using words I didn't understand?
 - Part of it is Mieville uses words you know in the "wrong" or very different ways
- He's writing is incredibly detailed, and dense.
 - Eventually, he ties everything together, one thing to another to another.
- Five weeks after reading, one person was left feeling like "What did I read?"
 - Another read it all, but wasn't sure she understood it.
- The writing itself is beautiful.
- Story full of pirates, sea voyages, and two very different political worlds.

This Census Taker

- One reader said, it captures you, but doesn't take you anywhere.
- You can visualize the setting, versus **The City and The City**.
- The story is told by a nameless prisoner in a war-torn country as he reflects back on his life. As a nine-year old boy, he sees this mother's death, and is left with a deranged father on an isolated hilltop. His life is changed by the Census Taker, who arrives and counts people and things. Slowly, the narrator peels back layers to show his life and family as he grows up amongst a dystopian milieu.
 - The tone is a mix of fairytale and Kafka.
 - High literary value.
 - In some places, Miéville write in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person all in the same paragraph.
 - Focuses on identity and who you are.
 - Theme drives the story.
 - The story constantly jumps in time, which build suspense, but may be a limiter.
 - The story captures you, but it doesn't really take you anywhere.
 - You are left wanting an ending, but you don't get it.
 - Perhaps recommend to fans of Psychological Suspense.

Three Moments of an Explosion

- As a short story collection, some people liked some of the stories. However, generally not all of the stories. In some stories, you just don't know what is going on.
 - Again, the story just ends in many of them. More vignettes than full stories. (So definitely not for people who dislike short stories because they are too short.)

- You may not know the rules or the background of the story. So you can't figure out what is going on.
- He does create interesting stories in interesting worlds.
 - Each story starts in the real world, but then Miéville throws in a speculative twist.
- But some of them are too experimental.
- Some of the collection just makes you feel dumb.
 - Miéville fries your brain.

Kraken: An anatomy

- Everything is so absurd, you are left wondering “what the hell is going on”.
- A preserved giant squid disappears, in the style of a locked room mystery. As the preservationist, Billy Harlow, searches for answers, you are taken into an underground London full of magic and cults. Everyone agrees that the squid heralds the apocalypse, but which one? Each cult has its own version of the apocalypse.
 - The character of Tattoo (a sentient tattoo riding on a carrier) is very reminiscent of Voldemort in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.
 - The absurd is taken seriously. You are constantly left wondering what's going on.
 - Because of the unpredictability, it can be exhausting.
 - However, this is one of Miéville's most accessible and most straightforward.
 - The rules of the Kraken world aren't that confusing once they are established.
- The language takes you in a first, but then you get immersed in the story.
 - It's a comedy. It's full of weirdness, but the more absurd things get, the more humor can be found.
 - The humour is as though Neil Gaiman married Douglas Adams.
 - Does have thought provoking elements – like the strike of the familiars as a call for socialism.
 - You just have to let go of trying to follow the plot. Just fall into the details and story.
 - The characters and building the characters are sacrificed for world-building.

King Rat

- Miéville's 1st book.
 - After listening to others talk, this one was pretty straightforward.
 - Very reminiscent of **Neverwhere** by Neil Gaiman.
- After his father is killed, Saul Garmond finds the hidden London underground. He meets and becomes friends with King Rat, who leads all the rodents of London. King Rat teaches Garmond to connect with his true heritage. Together, they fight off a takeover attempt by Piper of Hamelin.
 - The characters are human but rats, at the same time.
 - Retelling of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.
- Verges on Horror at points. Mostly, it's an urban fantasy novel – very dark and gritty.
- Again, no real ending.

Un Lun Dun

- Often considered a YA novel.
- Twelve-year-old Londoners Zanna and Deeba, discovers an alternate reality London. Together they need to defeat the villain Smog.
- You can enjoy Miéville's play with language and inventiveness in this piece.

- It's idea-driven, but fast paced and fun.
- Themes and language are major appeal factors.

Embassytown

- One person tried to listen to it. After about 10 minutes, they had to start over.
 - After investigating the story, they realized they shouldn't be listening to it.
- In the far future, humanity is negotiating with an alien race.
 - However, the language of these aliens affects everything about their world view.
 - Each alien has two, independent, mouths.
 - This is a story set in space, but its not about space.
- This story is really a contemplation of language. The plot doesn't really matter.
 - Enjoyed while reading it, but when finished, not sure what they read or how they felt about the entire novel.
 - The plot doesn't really matter. Language is all in this novel.
- Could recommend this story to fans of Jonathan Levithan's **Every You, Every Me**.

Railsea

- Imagine **Moby Dick** with giant moles

Resources

- Each meeting, we want to close by focusing on one resource. This time, we're talking about [Locus](#) magazine.
 - This magazine is the main one for SF and Fantasy. Also does a lot of cross over genres. If your library doesn't subscribe, it should.
 - *Locus* has in-depth interviews with authors.
 - Different columnists have different slants. You can find the columnist you enjoy the most, or who most matches your community.
 - If more than one of them recommends it, you should definitely buy it.
 - They really get into the nuts and bolts of the genre in their reviews.
 - Also good for general news about SpecFic genres, and where the trends are taking them.
 - The ads can be really useful to know what is coming and out there.
- *Locus* doesn't do a lot of pre-pub, but they are great for making sure you have what you should have.
 - May also include mainstream books, but excellent for small press books.
 - Also includes British books – books that will eventually come out in the states.
- In particular, the February issue each year does a “best of” which is excellent for Collection Development.
 - Great for making a reading list
 - Also a good short list from which to recommend titles to readers.
- Everyone should take a look at *Locus*, investigate it, and we'll talk about it next time.

What do you want to get out of this study? Why are you here? What do you want to have learned/experienced at the end of the two year study?

- Many libraries only have one person who is strong in SpecFic. Hopefully after this study, you'll be able to help that staff member.
- Want to be able to answer the “where to place a book” – in fiction or in a genre section.

- Want to explore the different levels of SpecFic that exist. Again, never thought of **The Discovery of Witches** is SpecFic.
 - We hope to achieve this goal by focusing on appeal instead of genre.
 - We are still going to introduce all the authors, and talk about different categories.
- List of current sure bets that we can talk about.
- Know the books that are influential and you need to know.

The [next genre study](#) will be
April 14th
at
Glenview Public Library
where we will start our first boot camp session
Science Fiction Bootcamp

Assignment is online. If you have time, take a moment to learn more about Ursula K. Le Guin as a person and author. Take a look at [her speech from Oregon about the power of libraries](#).

Remember, for June you'll have a lot of reading: The Fellowship of the Ring (extra points if you read all of The Lord of the Rings) and either A Game of Thrones or a Neil Gaiman book. Also, if you've never read Tolkien, Donna shared [this reading schedule](#) created for her by her son, a bit LOTR fan.