

Speculative Fiction Genre Study

Introduction to the Study

Glenview Public Library

April 14, 2016

Locus Magazine

At the end of our first meeting, everyone was asked to investigate *Locus* magazine ([and website](#)) as a resource.

- Loved the website for [portal to all the awards](#) – and so many awards! These lists are especially useful when talking to fans.
- Loved the recognition of genre-blends across all of SpecFic.
- Annual Recommended Reads was a favourite. (February issue)
 - The magazine contains more information than the website, and is even better for collection development.
 - An ePub edition is available as well, but you obviously can't add it to your stacks.
 - Conference List is also very interesting, even if you don't plan on attending. The variety of conferences available is staggering, and sometimes entertaining.
- *Publisher's Weekly*, *Kirkus*, and other review journals don't provide the sheer quantity of reviews. So if you have a lot of SF fans, you should really add this magazine to your collection for them to access.
- Each issue includes a *Locus Bestsellers* towards the end which is the best "highlights" in SF of any review journal known. [Website also has a "Weekly Bestsellers" section](#).
 - While a title might not make the national bestseller's list, it's important to know the bestsellers for this group of readers.
- The [Locus website's "World" Link](#) can also be useful when building collections in a foreign language or of titles translated from foreign authors.

Science Fiction Boot Camp

Megan kindly made [slides containing much of the information for the boot camp](#) portion. The following notes aren't going to repeat the content of the slides, so much as add to them some of the points that generated discussion. Read the following comments while looking at the slides.

- SF Big Hairy Over Generalizations, to keep in mind:
 - *True or Plausible* science – versus magic in Fantasy
 - Although in general, SF appeals to the intellect, there is a lot of heart and emotion in some of the stories.
 - Moreover, these stories generate a LOT of emotions, and emotional attachment, in their fans.
 - The basis of many stories is *What If* – in relation to humans.
 - Deals with BIG, complex concepts – in relation to humans or humanity. (Even in story told about aliens.)

- Megan gave multiple definitions of SF
 - Clarke's definition
 - Science fiction is something that could happen – but you usually wouldn't want it to. Fantasy is something that couldn't happen – though you often wish that it could.* —Arthur C. Clarke
 - doesn't always hold true. You might want some SF realities to come to life.
 - Card's definition
 - The difference between science fiction and fantasy ... is simply this: science fiction has rivets and fantasy has trees.* — Orson Scott Card
 - is especially true when judging a book by its cover.
 - Megan's personal favorite is:
 - Science fiction is hard to define because it is the literature of chance and it changes while you are trying to define it.* — Tom Shippey
 - because it captures the ever changing and shifting nature of the genre.
 - (Karen suggests looking up [Schrödinger's Cat](#), which reminded her of this definition – and how science can explain SF.)
- Trends in SF
 - Whereas SF started out with “old white male” authors, and generally Anglo-Saxon human characters, diversity is increasing. Seeing more African American, Hispanic, other ethnicities, and more LGBTQ. (Note that [women authors swept the 2015 Nebula Awards!](#))
 - Genre blending (mixing SF with fantasy or mystery) is increasing. Some SF purists don't like calling these blended stories SF. So ask what the patron views as SF.
 - Dystopian is on the rise, for adults as well as YA. Remember **Station Eleven**, by Emily St. John Mandel? Even books for adults are jumping on the bandwagon.
 - Multimedia crossover is part of why Philip K. Dick is one our reading list. So many of his works have been moved into movies or television.
 - The SF community is very strong. You may view SF as a manner of intellect, but when you listen to these authors, there is SO much EMOTION when they talk about what they love or hate.
 - With so many SF elements appearing in Literary Fiction, and other genres, this may in fact be a New SF Golden Age. It's just that people don't realize they are reading SF.
 - Hatchett even said they will be printing more SF in 2017.
 - 2015 saw the first [Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy](#) printed
 - NY Times Book Review has started a bimonthly review of SF
- Origins
 - Check out Bruce Sterling's SF entry in **Encyclopedia Britannica**
 - It will probably take you ½ hour to read, if you resist the urge to start following links.
 - SF rose with the Industrial Revolution
 - **Frankenstein**, by Mary Shelley used Science to cause reanimation. (But it is equally a story of humanity as science.)
 - Cautionary tale, but not really. Dr. Frankenstein created a monster, and then abandoned it. Goal is to get you thinking about what we are doing as a society.
 - Jules Verne mixed evolution into his works, including **20,000 Leagues Under the Sea**.

- SF classics still matter! (However, when something achieves “classics” status, the general public often quits viewing it as SF, e.g. **The War of the Worlds**, by H. G. Wells, which you will find on many required reading lists.
- Take a look at [Ward Shelley’s wonderful artistic view of the history of SF](#).
 - Start with Fear & Wonder
 - Have “wormholes” that take off into the realms of Harry Potter (Fantasy) and Stephen King/Anne Rice (Horror), as well as smaller wormholes to Crime-Mystery and Westerns.
 - Overall, it gives 500 authors you need to know, at least their names.
- SF Misconceptions
 - SF for men and boys – especial alienated and unhappy boys. Many well-adjusted readers of both sexes enjoy SF.
 - SF is for teens, and adult should grow out of it.
 - For teens, can be a nice introduction to reading; but some of the concepts only truly understood by Adults.
 - Also, look at all the fans of SF in multimedia. Wide range of ages!
 - You may think fans don’t want help, but that’s not true. Everyone wants to talk about what they read! If you are scared of SF, or don’t like reading it, talk to the fans even more. They can educate you!
 - “I don’t read SF.” If you talk to these people, you’ll find they enjoyed Margaret Atwood, **Fahrenheit 451** (Ray Bradbury), **The Martian** (Andy Weir). They may view books more as literary fiction, idea driven plots, or adventure.

We discovered the group was pretty evenly spread between people who read any SF, read some, and don’t read at all.

Subgenres

- Alternate History/Time Travel
 - Good for non SF fans, especially if they like Historical Fiction
 - **Kindred** (Octavia Butler) is more a historical book, even though it has time travel
 - **Doomsday Book** (Connie Willis) uses time travel as a mechanism, and some science involved, so is SF. But the meat of the book is historical (Black Death).
 - Harry Turtledove is the King of Alternate History, presently. A lot of his books start with the premise “What if this war had gone differently?” (He has series about multiple wars.) Fans of military nonfiction or fiction might enjoy these thought experiments.
 - **The Man in High Castle** (Philip K. Dick) is all the rage, and an alternate history. What if Germany & Japan won WW2? How would that future have played out?
- Dystopian (Here we are including Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic)
 - The world is bad, really bad, but you love reading about it.
 - No real “utopian” books, because utopias are boring.
 - **A Canticle for Leibowitz** (Walter Miller Jr.) is a classic, set years after a nuclear apocalypse.
 - **The Sparrow** (Mary Doria Russell) is another classic, which is especially popular with regular book clubs.
 - **When She Woke** (Hillary Jordan) is kind of like a cross between **The Scarlet Letter** (Nathaniel Hawthorne) plus **The Handmaid’s Tale** (Margaret Atwood)

- Cyberpunk
 - Really dark futures or near futures, when technology and conspiracy rule. Also, often jargon heavy.
 - William Gibson created the genre with **Neuromancer**. This is The Book (benchmark) for the genre. You'll be judged for not having read it.
 - Neal Stephenson has written some cyberpunk (**Snow Crash**) while other of his novels are more historical or time travel based.
 - You can often recommend these to people who like technology and computer games. One common trope is people are “jacked into” computers.
 - The plots may be confusing or jumpy. These books are not happy books, but are often fun.
- Hard Science Fiction
 - Expect pages and pages of descriptions of detail in science, engineering, or technology. You may be able to give these to Techno Thriller fans. (If Tom Clancy wrote SF, it would be this kind.)
 - Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke are the grandfathers of this genre.
 - Many who read **Ringworld** by Larry Niven found it easier if they skipped the pages of technical details.
 - On the opposite end, someone annotated a copy of **Ringworld** with integrals outlining the mathematics. So, fans come in all types!
 - **The Martian** (Andy Weir) can fit in here, but you can also ignore the science and still enjoy the book. Not true of some others of this type.
 - Some readers tend to think ALL SF fits in *this* sub-genre. This is the “catch all” in some people’s minds.
- Steampunk
 - The novels started all being set in Victorian era England, but now set in other eras too – esp. American “Wild West”. Contains the esthetics (and fashions) of the locale.
 - Very easy to give to teens, and they tend to love it.
 - **Leviathan** (Scott Westerfeld) is WW1 alternative history. England uses genetics to create things like an airship that is a living giant whale. German uses mechanicals. The story has history, action, magic, war, and a love story at the end.
 - **Boneshaker** (Cherie Priest) is perfect for middle schoolers, tweens and teens. It is set around the San Francisco gold rush.
 - All Steampunk seems to have mystery, romance, and other genres mixed in with it.
 - The novels are often humorous – fun of witty remarks and tongue-in-cheek asides.
- Military
 - While the setting is often on the war, the focus is often on the effect of war on humans.
 - You find series in all SF, but especially in Military SF.
 - **Old Man’s War** (John Scalzi) starts out a lot like **The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry** (by Rachel Joyce), both are stories of quests, it’s just that the journeys are very different.
 - You can give these novels to fans of Military Fiction.
 - Some fans of the *Horatio Hornblower* series by C. S. Forester enjoy the *Honor Harrington* series by David Weber. Both Forester and Weber wrote the major life events of their characters as homages to Lord Nelson.

- World Building
 - Almost always SERIES! It takes a long time to build these worlds, so authors write multiple books in the worlds they create.
 - **Dune** (Frank Herbert) set the stage.
 - Ann Leckie won multiple major awards in 2014: Hugo, Nebula, and Arthur C. Clarke.
- Genre Blends
 - Even Philip K. Dick wrote about relationships in his SF – just in a very paranoid way.
 - Neal Stephenson’s *Baroque Cycle* is a true blend. It is 3,000 pages long. You’ll have a long section that could be historical fiction for 500 pages, then it does something that will remind you it’s SF. This series is very cool, but read it when you have a few weeks off.
- Themes
 - Check out the titles for ones Megan couldn’t fit on other slides, but wanted to be sure were mentioned.
 - **Solaris** by Stanislaw Lem is a “Polish **Dune**”.
 - **Ready Player One** by Ernest Cline can be read just for the adventure, or can be read to make you think about future society.
 - **The Sparrow** by Mary Doria Russell is great for book discussions. The basic premise is “Jesuits in Space”, but their idea make first contact as well as to bring God to the aliens goes horribly wrong.
 - **Memory of Water** by Emmi Itarana is very literary. Details given of “new” tea ceremony – but water is the most expensive ingredient in the tea.
 - **SevenEves** by Neal Stephenson is Hard Science. The first half focuses on how to save civilization after the moon explodes. The second half jumps 5,000 years to see how things turned out. It’s all about the drive for survival, with a lot of emotion and character building.
- Doorways
 - Character
 - Reader follows characters through a series of adventures
 - A lot of military SF uses this doorway, but all subgenres have examples that do.
 - Language
 - Think about Douglas Adams.
 - Story
 - Idea driven story versus action centered
 - Setting
 - Particularly in World Building, but across all subgenres.
 - Tone
 - Again, varies across all subgenres.

Think about

How do you feel about the books you read? How do the books fit within the appeal factors for patrons? Which doorway is most important?

- Check out [Ursula K. Le Guin's acceptance speech](#) as a 2014 Medalist for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters
 - She talks about libraries, reading, freedom, and what it means to be a writer and science fiction writer.
 - Neil Gaiman introduces her.
 - A new biography will be coming about about her next year.
- The [SF Resources Document](#) Megan created can be found here.

The Left Hand of Darkness, by Ursula K. Le Guin

- *Basic Plot:* Genly Ai, a Terran male, is sent to Gethen (AKA Winter) as an envoy. The Gethenians are androgynous hermaphrodites who are neither male nor female (but *somer*) for roughly 24 days out of every 26 days. Only during *kemmer* do Gethenians gain a sexual designation, with each individual capable of being either the male or female in any new cycle. To the Gethenian, gender is irrelevant. Ai tries to make contacts within two of the largest governments, but has problems understanding the Gethenian culture enough to accomplish his mission, or even survive without help.
- Find the edition with Le Guin's forward
 - Talks about SF as cautionary tales
 - Introduces the idea of thought experiment
- This book requires a lot of attention and concentration. While you may have read it in High School, it's great to read again with adult eyes.
- There is a lot of world building, and it takes time to get oriented to the world. Some readers questioned whether it was worth the investment of time or work.
 - You are thrown into the world without much introduction.
 - It was hard to get oriented to the world, in part because of the gender. Like Ai, it's hard to view a people without gender.
- Called one of the "classics of feminism", as well as being a SF classic.
 - The feminist aspects may be harder to see if you didn't live through the 1960s, and know how the world was at the time it was written.
 - Feminism comes from Ai's struggle with his masculinity in a world without males.
 - Remember to place this work in the context of time when gender roles were trying to be figured out.
 - More revolutionary for its time.
 - Much more character driven and developed than what many 1960s SF writers were creating.
 - We understand matriarchies and patriarchies, but not a society that is neither. Even child care was approached in an "alien" way.
 - Characters never know if they are going to be male or female in the next cycle.
- Makes you look past your own world view, and what has happened since the time it was written.
 - Some got this, but still didn't enjoy this book.
 - There are a lot of works that wouldn't exist without Le Guin having written this book.
 - Some of the "new versions" of this same story are more accessible because the writing between plot, ideas, and character are more balanced.
- Language is an appeal factor – even though the style is old fashioned.
 - The sentences and words will appeal to Literary Fiction fans.
 - Mixes old with new in both language and themes.

- The most interesting parts were when Ai was suffering.
 - The harshness of the world.
 - How Ai didn't understand someone trying to help him because he was trapped in his own world view and prejudices.
 - The characters become more real and easy to connect with after they get on the ice.
- Other popular SF that plays with gender. (Social SF)
 - **Ancillary Justice** (Ann Leckie) played with gender, but is written in a completely different way from Le Guin.
 - **Euphoria** by Lily King includes the anthropology parts. Two cultures coming together and trying to understand each other.
 - Some commented that they read as a woman writing about relationships, and didn't expect the SF.
 - **Venus Plus X** by Theodore Sturgeon also plays with gender politics using hermaphrodites.
 - *Parable of the Sower* series by Octavia Butler has a narrator with gender issues.
- Who would you recommend to
 - Fans of *Star Trek* because of the different cultural views and importance of identity.
 - People to like reading about the arctic expeditions and survival stories.
 - Fans of **Dune** by Frank Herbert with all its politics, gender, and identity issues.
- If you liked it, try **Dispossessed** next.

Philip K. Dick

He is an author of ideas, but many of his books have been made into movies of action. Some think he is a big idea guy, but not so great of a storyteller. (William Gibson is the same.) Fans often enjoy "books that "break your brain" – love ideas, complex thought provoking ideas fans can think about for hours.

The Doorway to Dick is very much Tone. His books contain few happy moments, but lots of fear and nervousness. A lot of his work is "Paranoid SF". If you read his works as a psychology major, you start to think Dick has issues. When you read about him, you learn he did have issues. His personality is really reflected in his writing.

- **The Man in High Castle**
 - *Basic Plot:* What if German and Japan had won WW2? They are now ruling over America, resulting in life under totalitarian rule.
 - Harry Turtledove's **In the Presence of Mine Enemies** shares plot similarities, but is more accessibly written.
 - Can be read for history (as an alternate history)
 - Focuses more on the everyday lives of the people than expected. Thought there would be more war/fighting.
 - Give to fans of the show.
 - One reader LOVES the show, but didn't like the book. Found the writing dated and offensive.
 - For some readers, the ideas are good enough get you excited so that you overlook the negatives.
 - The last quarter of the book – left wondering what the hell just happened?
 - Didn't like how the Americans think the Japanese speak English. (Since Japan is the power, we should be trying to talk like them.)

- In other cases, people didn't act in logical manners.
 - Hard to distinguish between different characters
 - Is definitely dated
 - However, Juliana is a definite bad ass.
 - The audio has a bad narrator
- Short Stories
 - Very twilight zone, creepy
 - One little concept explored in a few pages
 - Get in and get out
 - *These make great movies because movie can take the kernel of the ideas and expand upon it.*
 - Even when not made into movies, his ideas appear in other shows – seeping into the cultures.
 - Don't get weighed down in the details
 - May be more accessible than books for some readers.
- **Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?**
 - Has bigger ideas that got left out of the movie
 - Religion of Mercerism
 - Empathy box – Who is really human and who isn't?; What definition should we use?
 - Dial your mood
 - You can see some of the ideas in modern life still
 - Thus new readers may like it because the ideas don't get as dated as those in some of his other books.
 - Others found the concepts cool, but still thought it felt dated.
 - Dystopian – menacing and dark
 - Overall feeling is heartbreaking, depressing, empty
 - Sometimes you look at your life and start wondering if your life has meaning
 - Concepts that are very chilling
 - Almost like horror
 - Makes you look at how you are living and the choices you are making
 - Wanted a spark of something uplifting, but never found it.
 - Teens may like especially if going through a mood of dark/depressing
 - Should give to fans
 - *Southern Reach* trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer
 - Who don't like clear endings – open endings
 - Who like “brain breaking” ideas
 - Mystery noir – very depressing – give noir mysteries from 1960s
 - Franz Kafka

John Scalzi

Overall, Scalzi is much happier to read. Scalzi adds humour to the mix, which similarly made **The Martian** by Andy Weir a hit. Truth is, most SF writers aren't **actually** funny. Scalzi (and Weir) are. Even if you aren't a SF fan, you can get into the irreverence and humor. Might also give to fans of Ernest Cline or fans of Douglas Adams (especially *Dirk Gently* series).

Scalzi's main Doorway is Tone. He has a much different tone and feel than previous authors. Scalzi can serve as a "gateway drug" to people who don't like SF, because can get them hooked on the ideas (and humour). He proves SF doesn't have to be about "all this technical stuff".

A number of people loved the audiobooks narrated by Will Wheaton. He is a great narrator, doing a lot of SF books recently.

- **Redshirts**

Basic Plot: A new batch of ensigns is assigned to the UUC *Intrepid* because so much of the crew has been killed off in previous missions. The new ensigns learn of the disturbing pattern that anyone assigned to an away mission with members of the senior officers dies at an alarming rate. The more senior officers on the mission, the more likely other away team members are to die. A recluse hiding in the ship's walls explains the only other ship to ever see this pattern was the fictional USS *Enterprise*. The ensigns then formulate a theory that they are fictional in another universe, and set out to talk their writers out of killing them.

- Would give to any fan of Star Trek.
- Easier to relate to this book than some of the previously mentioned – or even others by this author.
 - Even if you aren't a fan, you know the Star Trek universe enough to get it.
 - Debated whether would even consider this SF or more of a spoof.
 - Some liked the first 150 pages or so most where the humor dominated. We agreed this was more the "spoof" portion.
 - ❖ However, it does start to get old after a time. Can leaving you feeling too over-the-top "I'm funny", like reading Carl Hiaasen.
 - ❖ Zany is a good descriptor.
 - Then Scalzi brings in the ideas of String Theory and Parallel Universes, which made fans of the entire work sure it was as much SF as spoof.
- Because the characters are learning things as you are, the reader isn't dropped into a world that is already built. Aren't left to figure it out, after being thrown in the deep end.

- **Old Man's War** (series)

Basic Plot: All the 75-year-olds on Earth can join the Colonial Defense Forces and regain their youth, although becoming soldiers. John Perry enlists and is given a bio-genetically engineered, nanobot-augmented body complete with a BrainPal computer in his head. As part of the CDF, he fights in battles, loses friends (after having "lost" the Earth when he left), develops traumatic stress syndrome, then saves mankind. It's a high action Military Space Opera story that doesn't forget the toil of war on an individual's humanity.

- Enjoyed it more than expected to.

- Fixed all the problems another reader had with Orson Scott Card's **Ender's Game**.
- The writing is very grounded, while also accessible, and funny.
 - If you decide to read the entire series, not all volumes are as funny. When John Perry leads the action, but books contain more humour.
- If you enjoyed this book, try **Saturn's Run** by John Sandford and Ctein. It is also very relate-able Space Opera, with less Military in the sense of war.
- **Lock In** (series forthcoming)

Basic Plot: Twenty-five years previously, a disease (Haden's Syndrome) swept the nation (and world) leaving some of the population with their brains "[locked in](#)" to nonfunctioning bodies. Robots (Threeps) were created which could be controlled by victims of Haden's to give them functioning bodies. When an "Integrator" (person who can loan their body to a Haden's lock in) is murdered, a rookie FBI agent who uses a Threep assists a veteran agent (a retired Integrator) in solving the case. Politics and conspiracy form the backdrop of this Police Procedural.

 - Not as funny as some of the others.
 - Could definitely give to anyone who likes Mysteries or Thrillers, even if they don't like SF.
 - Like fans of J. D. Robb, where more science is involved in solving the crimes.
 - Could easily be a discussion book for a crime driven book club.
 - The world is recognizable, quickly. Don't need a lot of explanation or world-building.
 - The entire set-up you need to understand is given in a few pages of foreword.
 - SF forms the set-up, but the solving the crime drives the plot.
 - The science is believable. The fact that Locked-in Syndrome is real adds an element of terror.

Resources

- For our next meeting, take a look at io9. It's a [Twitter feed](#), [Facebook page](#), and a [blog](#).
 - io9 is proof that you don't need to read a the books to stay on top of a genre. You can read about it!
 - Warning: The tone is very irreverent, and uses strong language.
 - In particular, Charlie Jane Anders does a [great list of books you "need to read this month"](#). The comments others leave are in response to this list also a great learning tool!
- Bring your comments or questions.

The next genre study will be
June 2nd
 at
Lisle Public Library
 where we will start our next boot camp session
[Fantasy Boot Camp](#)

J.R.R. Tolkien

- The BBC did a dramatization of each volume of **The Lord of the Rings** in 1981. These dramatizations are wonderfully enjoyable, but not unabridged.
- Don't forget [the reading plan Donna shared](#) for reading **The Lord of the Rings**.
- If you try, **really try**, and fail to get into **The Fellowship of the Ring**, Annabelle will

accept watching the movies instead.

- Don't read **The Hobbit** instead. It's not comparable.

George R.R. Martin

- How he tells his stories are as important as the works themselves. At least look at a volume in the book series.
- If you haven't, try the television series.
- You might also peek at the graphic novel version!