

Speculative Fiction Genre Study

Doorway: Character

Glenview Public Library

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Featured Resource: Podcasts

One major comment was: just because you have a microphone, doesn't mean you can do a podcast!

- Don't Ramble
- Have a moderator
- Need many of the same skills as book club leaders
- Panels often don't work well on podcasts.

List of Podcasts:

- [Science Fiction Book Review Podcast](#)
 - Two moderators, both nerds
 - One is professional juggler, the other German woman
 - The contrast of two leads creates interesting conversations and ideas
 - Megan really enjoyed
- [Geek's Guide to the Galaxy](#)
 - Tone feels like listening to NPR
 - Has interview with authors
 - Very well done interviews
 - Most are one on one. Nice to sit and listen to the conversation.
 - Also good production quality
 - However, sometimes people commented on 1980s (classic) references as being too old to be worth discussing.
 - Brings out the "Get off my lawn" grumpiness in people who grew up with the 1980s
 - You know you are a "nerd" when they start disparaging ET or something else you are passionate about.
 - Also, some of that feeling that the moderators are too young to appreciate the foundations of genre and what they are discussing.
- [Science Fiction and Politics](#)
 - Not a regularly aired podcast
 - Most of them looked older
- [Sword and Laser](#)
 - The "cast" feel very young, and sometimes don't know the classics/benchmarks you may think they should know.
 - Feels less "insiders only" than some
 - Got some great book titles
 - Enjoyed Three Guys with Beards more
- [Speculate](#)
 - Supposed to be book reviews, but got tired of listening to the moderators before they got to the book review segment.
 - Had some of the problems with podcasts listed above.
- [This is Horror](#)
 - Lets you listen to short stories
 - The announcer is British, and sometimes hard to understand.

- Don't listen to while eating lunch! Graphic blood and gore are common.
- However, since they are short stories, the graphic blood and gore are as intense as if you were reading a novel.
- [Three Guys with Beards](#)
 - Multiple people enjoyed this podcast.
 - They Three Guys are simultaneously funny and informative.
 - Always have a guest, so really 4 people.
 - Great source of knowledge of pop culture.
 - Each episode starts by talking about
 - What they are reading
 - What they are watching on TV
 - What they have seen at the movies
 - Feels less like "insiders only"
 - Karen's favourite
- [Horror Show with Brian Keene](#)
 - Liked the newer shows better than the older ones.
 - One of the first podcasts, so the older shows have poorer production quality. Literally recorded in Keene's kitchen.
 - Each episode is 1.5 hours, which feels a lot longer than 45 minutes/1 hour norm
 - Very much focused on iconic of pulp horror tradition
 - Does emphasis Keene's works
 - Keene tells all about the inside dynamics of the horror publishing industry
 - Keene can come off as very brash and opinionated.
 - His personality can grate on some
 - Sometimes, his show has the feeling of "a boy's club" – like you are an intruder in a group of guys who always meet at the same comic book store
 - Becky's favourite (She is personal friends with Keene, and likes the industry insider knowledge aspects.)
- Podcasts on assignment list but not talked about:
 - [Drinking with Jason](#)
 - [SF Signal](#)
 - [SFF Audio](#)
- Podcasts talked about but not on list:
 - [Nerdist](#)
 - Interviews people in a casual conversational style
 - Good at directing and steering the conversation
 - [SF Squeecast](#)
 - Now defunct; ended about a year ago
 - Hosted by Women SF and Fantasy writers
 - Annabelle's favourite
 - [Lore](#)
 - All about storytelling, mythology, and giving knowledge to the listener
 - "True life scary stories"
 - Good for tips on writing books
 - You are going to find out what is coming out next
 - Not a "vanity" podcast, where you only hear about the people and their works
 - You will learn and get information

Character Doorway

- We took all these authors from the ARRT Popular Fiction List.
- In determining which Doorway to place the author, we looked across their entire body of work, not at individual novels.

Connie Willis

She is the current master of time travel novels. It is very common to hear patrons say, “I don’t read SF, but I like Connie Willis.” The time travel is generally logically consistent, but not very scientific. Willis does a lot of research into the history she travels back towards, which can make the novels favourites with fans of historical fiction or alternative histories. Her novels are generally not fast-paced. The novels start slow, so you get the set up, then more action and pacing builds.

Regarding suspension of disbelief:

- It was noted that people often have an easier time suspending belief for movies than for books.
 - e.g. The movie **Armageddon** – We are going to land on a meteor. We are going to train oil rig drillers instead of training astronauts...
- People needed to suspend disbelief to enjoy **The Circle** by Dave Eggers. However, it’s near future. This could happen in our lifetimes. Not hard to believe social media taking over our lives.
 - Kind of like believing Briddy Flannigan when she starts hearing voices – everyone’s voice – in **Crosstalk** (see below).
- **Doomsday Book**
 - For this novel, some felt the characters were not the strongest appeal, but instead:
 - Setting – with all the historical details after the time travel
 - Plot – with the race to survive disease in two time lines
 - Some people found it hard to be invested in the characters
 - Others did connect with Kivrin Engle, but not the other characters
 - Time Travel is a big draw
 - Kivrin trapped in the Middle Ages
 - Also the team in the near future
 - Dual timelines
 - Method of time travel is realistic and makes logical sense
 - Setting is draw
 - If you like learning about the Middle Ages
 - If you like apocalyptic stories
 - Makes you wonder where healthcare is going to be 10-15 years in the future, as you look at where healthcare used to be
- **Crosstalk**
 - Character is definitely the access point
 - The story revolves around the relationships between the characters
 - Genre blending of Romantic Comedy and Science Fiction.
 - Wacky, quirky characters
 - Writing style is also a strength
 - Great for fans of

- Sophie Kinsella
- Rainbow Rowell
- Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum
- **Eligible** by Curtis Sittenfeld
- Surgery is used to give people empathy so they can have relationships. The conflict comes from Briddy Flannigan being connected to a guy she thinks she hates...
- **Blackout and All Clear**
 - **All Clear** is a sort of sequel to **Blackout**
 - Both are historical, focusing on WW2 and the London Blitz
 - Time travel takes people from the future into the past
 - Writing style is very literary
 - Pacing is slower than in **The Doomsday Book**
 - Some people found the characters drew them into the stories
 - Others didn't like the characters
 - No excitement
 - Sounded flat
 - You have to be willing to suspend disbelief
 - The science is not firm, more hand-waving
 - Try for fans of **Kindred** by Octavia Butler

Lois McMaster Bujold

- *Vorkosigan Series*
 - Military Science Fiction series
 - The first two novels in the series are about the parents (including a touch of romance).
 - The remaining (13 and counting) star Miles Vorkosigan, their son.
 - Unfortunately, at some point, the Miles stories start to feel redundant.
 - These are definitely space opera, with a family focus, and all include some humor.
 - The covers are TERRIBLE...
 - You are going to get more cross-over fans from adventure-driven military novels into this SF series.
 - Maybe some cross-over fans from David Weber's *Honor Harrington* series (which also has terrible covers.)
- *Sharing Knife series*
 - Starts with **Beguilement**
 - Fantasy mixed with Romance
 - Slower Paced
 - Star-crossed lovers' trope
- *World of the Five Gods series*
 - Starts with **Curse of Chalion**
 - Fantasy version of medieval Spain
 - Adventure – faster paced
 - Intrigue
 - Romance
 - Magic
 - Religion
 - Strong World-building

Orson Scott Card

Perhaps one of those authors it is easier to enjoy if you don't know about him as a person. You will find people who don't want to read him after learning of his personal, political, or religious beliefs. His writing does seem to have gotten more political or extreme as he aged.

- **Ender's Game**
 - Iconic even "modern classic"
 - Has staying power none of this other novels seem to have captured
 - On most high school reading lists
 - However, few read the rest of the series, or the parallel Shadow series
 - People are passionate about **Ender's Game**
 - Some passionately hate it
 - Some passionately feel it is overrated
 - Other people love it.
 - We couldn't determine if maybe it was dependent on what age you were when you read it.
 - However, the "Golden Age for SF" seems to be when you are a teen
- *Empire* series
 - Very politically driven
 - Super-right wing conspiracy theory forms basis of plot
 - Note: He was writing a scenario specifically about an American civil war for some video-game developers
 - One character is a thinly disguised George Stephanopoulos
 - Hard to believe this series is written by the same author as **Speaker for the Dead** (2nd Ender's novel)

Naomi Novik

- **Uprooted**
 - Fairytale
 - A special class of Fantasy. Just have a different feel
 - Evil woods and corruption
 - Eastern European, vaguely Polish, roots and settings
 - Great Characters
 - Even the Dragon character
 - Very inventive and surprising plot
 - Might have been better as a trilogy
 - Feels a little rushed
 - The battle seems to go on too long
 - Wizards show up and then are gone
 - Feels like part of the story was cut
 - Even non Fantasy lovers enjoy
 - Recommend to Romance readers
 - Great language
 - Great World Building
 - Move from darkness to light
 - Does have action

- Would work for a book discussion: one participant used it for a library discussion that went very well.
- Audiobook is AWFUL
 - The accent is very halting, and disrupts listening
 - Narrator is Russian who doesn't do Polish well
 - Just too much of an accent
 - "I know Kristin Hannah's **The Nightingale** is set in France. Everyone who reads it doesn't need to have a French accent." (They don't in the audio edition.) This publisher could have learned from this lesson.
- Great for fans of *The Crown* television series
- **His Majesty's Dragon**
 - Charming
 - Takes the Napoleonic Naval War, and says "What if there were dragons, who formed an air corps?"
 - Handled very seriously, and just "Oh well, there are dragons in this world."
 - Some people loved it so much, they wanted to binge read.
 - However, the series can feel like it goes on too long
 - Novik only intended for it to be a stand-alone...then a trilogy...but then it just kept going.
 - Does relationships really well.
 - Can just "skip over the military stuff" if you want
 - It can be very dry
 - The dragons are some of the best characters
 - The dragons are strong, but not scary
 - You get VERY emotionally involved in the characters (and dragons)
 - Get to see the daily life of the dragons and the handlers
 - Who can you give it to?
 - Can give to historical fiction readers.
 - Just ask "Are you ok with talking dragons?"
 - Also might appeal to anyone who has pets who wish they could talk to you.
 - Does a good job with the sex scenes of the era
 - Could give to romance readers
 - WARNING: In the 1st book in the series, **a dragon dies**.
 - You will start crying!
 - His handler didn't love him
 - Simon Vance does the narration wonderfully.
 - However, some felt the battles were not as clear in audio
 - And it slows you down
 - Can't skim the military aspects, for example
 - Listeners versus readers can have a different perspective on the book
 - It's not so much "do you like audio" as the pacing changes

Jim Butcher

- *Dresden Files* series, starts with **Storm Front**
 - Urban Fantasy
 - Noir Crime
 - Intentionally tried to include all the noir crime tropes he could
 - Some played for their humour aspects

- Very fast paced
- Great variation in how much people enjoyed it
 - It's a favourite series of some
 - Others from the intentional "throw in the kitchen sink" of tropes annoying
 - Also, series turns darker – and less PI noir – as it continues
- Dresden as a character
 - Magician PI
 - Solidly likable character
 - Or too much of a smart aleck
 - Too annoying
 - Too full of himself
 - Tired of hearing about his trench coat
 - Develops an ensemble cast of characters around him as series continues
- James Marsters does the audio
 - Some of the early audio have lower quality
 - Could hear Marsters breathing
- A lot of humour
 - Weird hybrid of humour and seriousness
 - Noir with dark, sarcastic humour – or even light humour
- Plot is a big appeal factor
 - Gets himself out of impossible situation, which he then has to figure a way out of
 - Some people found Dresden annoying
- If you don't know a lot about Chicago, you can believe Butcher's Chicago exists
 - But if you know a lot about Chicago, annoyed by mistakes in layout
- Try giving to fans of
 - *Sookie Stackhouse* series by Charlaine Harris
 - Fantasy fans who also like crime
 - Kim Harrison fans
 - Fans of talking skulls (Bob is a great character)
 - Any [Urban Fantasy Detective series](#) (List by Karen, the addict, from 2011)
- **The Aeronaut's Windlass**
 - First in a new steampunk series
 - Expect it to be a very strong series with Butcher fans
 - Very strong, quirky characters
 - Including talking cats!

Kevin Hearne

- *Iron Druid Chronicles* series, starts with **Hounded**
 - Urban Fantasy based in mythology
 - Celtic Mythology to start
 - Moves to Greeks, Romans, Norse, Hindu, and growing
 - "Rick Riordan" for grown ups
 - Have given to older teens, but there is sex so not younger teens
 - Characters
 - Oberon, an Irish wolf hound, may be the most likeable character. Often steals the show.
 - Atticus O'Sullivan is a 2,000 year old Druid.
 - A lot of mythological characters take part

- Plot is also an entry point
 - Fast action
 - Feels kind of like he is throwing in the kitchen sink, just like Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files*
 - A lot of clichés
- Very funny
 - Very light-hearted
 - Good summer read
- There are sex scenes, but not romance
- Give to fans of
 - **American Gods** by Neil Gaiman

Brian Keene

- Very much pulp horror
 - Formulaic
- Characters
 - Tend to be one dimensional
 - Some seem to be tokens or stereotypes
 - Many said they didn't care about the characters in the books, so it was hard to care about what happened to them
 - Central tenant of horror is you need to care about the characters
 - Keene didn't make most of us care about the characters
- May be a lot of limiters for who you can give it to
 - Fans of
 - Gruesome, campy horror
 - Blood and gore, where everyone dies
 - Very plot driven horror
 - Jack Ketchum fans
 - Nick Cutter fans
- **Castaways**
 - *Survivor* (reality TV) type setup on an island
 - Females are captured by inhuman creatures
 - Creatures goal is to rape and impregnate females to continue the line
 - This is a real limiter. The rapes are graphic.
 - Dislike novels that use violent rape as "cheap entertainment"
 - Females are completely helpless
 - Also a limiter for some.
 - Very annoying trope in some horror
 - Characters are shallow
 - Throws in so much bad backstories for the characters as well
 - Lays on too much stuff
- **Dark Hollow**
 - Again, females seem to be there for sex and babies
 - Macho men go after the monster
 - A "guy's book"
 - Everyone dies
 - Parts are "quite distasteful"

- Writing quality is not up to Stephen King standards
- **Ghoul**
 - Females are useless
 - Ghoul's goal is to have sex with a woman
 - Ghoul is "pretentious"
 - Was written in 2007-2008, but feels like it is from the 1970s
- At next meeting, we'll ask Becky why Brian Keene chosen for character.

Ann Leckie

- **Ancillary Justice**
 - Jumps right into the story, and a world very different than our own
 - May be too much for a SF beginner
 - Too many leaps for them to understand what is going on
 - There are characters who used to be AI but aren't anymore
 - How comfortable are you at going along for a while without understanding everything?
 - Or are you comfortable "cheating" by reading ahead or finding spoilers, like on Wikipedia.
 - Includes gender issues, politics, religion, and a lot of ambiguity
 - Merge of **Dune** with Ursula K. Le Guin
 - Cultural war sets the back ground
 - Very strong world building
 - May have trouble buying into the world
 - But once bought in, and understood, really liked it
 - After reading the first, it's easier to read the rest of the trilogy because you understand the world
 - However, many thought the first novel was the best – probably because you were getting introduced to the new ideas.
 - Fast-paced and keeps you turning the pages.
 - Trilogy ties up, but also leaves room to write more in that world
 - Won all the awards in 2014
 - Not sure why the next two didn't do as well

The next genre study will be
February 2nd
 at
Lisle Public Library
 where we will start be our first Doorway Session
[Story](#)

Assignment

- Read a short story from [Clarkesworld](#)
 - Fiction and nonfiction
 - Many are VERY short
 - Short stories are very important within Speculative Fiction
 - More so than any other genre

- Very good authors
- Also have a [podcast of readings of the short stories](#)
- Read one story
- Look around the site
- Remember to look for other appeals and what genres you would use for the books
- May also want to [check out the project Patrick Rothfuss is doing with Lin-Manuel](#)