

## Speculative Fiction Genre Study

### Doorway: Tone

Lisle District Library

June 1, 2017

#### Featured Resource: The Booksmugglers blog

- A team of two women working in US and UK publishing:
  - They have a regular feature in *Kirkus Review*
  - The blog was nominated for Hugo Awards for Best Fan Zine
  - Known for featuring original publishing of speculative fiction.
- PROS:
  - It's been around for almost 10 years so it has a lot of content
  - They focus on speculative fiction but include other genres:
    - They include timely book reviews from various genres
    - A lot of YA writing.
  - A lot of book reviews:
    - Their writing style is fun and edgy
- Old School Wednesdays:
  - Discussion of books that are at least five-years-old
  - It's hard to navigate but there is a [Google Sheet](#) mentioning all past books
  - They solicit readers' suggestions making it into a very diverse and interesting list
  - Annabelle is following their updates by subscribing on Twitter instead of reading their blog
  - One of the women running the blog is also a co-host of The Fan Girl Happy Hour Podcast, which is a fun, snarky podcast on books, comics, TV/movies and general fandom
  - It's great that two women run the site, since men still tend to dominate the speculative fiction resources.
- CONS:
  - Difficult to navigate, find reviews, and mentions of specific books
  - Due to the wealth content and its navigational style, it feels overwhelming
  - It may be better to follow them on Twitter on Goodreads.

### Doorway: Tone

Tone is our last doorway in this genre study:

- It's technically not one of Joyce Sarick's original RA appeal factor, but she emphasizes it while describing each appeal factor:
  - She wrote a column in BookList in 2010 in which she emphasized that tone and mood matter greatly in RA
  - "Tone is vital in terms of appeal and ranks, with pacing, as one of the most important factor in recommending and suggesting titles."
  - "Tone is the mood that the author projects."

- Tone is the feeling the reader gets when they read the book (and what they want to feel when reading a book)
- Tone equals the questions: “What do you feel like reading today?”
- Some terms that we can expect in describing tone: bleak, realistic, humorous, suspenseful, paranoid, sarcastic, intense, etc.

## Terry Pratchett

- Everyone who read him for the study loved him:
  - It’s intimidating to start reading him because of the number of books in the *Discworld* series, but it’s worth it.
  - Karen loves [this visual of the order to read books in](#). (It’s all over the web, and original attribution is unknown to her.)

### Going Postal

- Someone read this one because it was recommended by Jennifer Crusie, and she trusted her romance writer’s perspective
- Hilarious satire with passages that could be used in memes about what’s happening in the world now
- One of the few books of Pratchett’s that has chapters, which is easier to read; also its [Wikipedia page](#) is helpful
- Paper version was easier to read for some because of the wealth of footnotes
- It’s book #33 so the world is set up already, but it is enough to know what is happening and you can understand the post office reality
- Why people read him?
  - For the satire but also for its silliness and hilarity:
    - Modern satire
    - Middle of the road satire (no obvious right or left leaning)
  - For the commentary on running a business, money as a concept, society, etc.
  - For the tone more than for the fantasy aspects
  - You don’t need to know exactly the rules of the system to enjoy it
  - Great for readers who like humor in their books but may not be as comfortable with deep fantasy.
- If you liked this one read:
  - **Monstrous Regiment** (*Discworld* #31) next: hilarious, good as a stand-alone, or
  - **Good Omens**: again hilarious, it has an excellent [Wikipedia](#) page, and a great full-cast audiobook production.
  - Here is Karen’s favorite site on the order of the *Discworld* books.

### The Wee Free Men (*Discworld* #30):

- It’s one of the *Discworld* books featuring Tiffany Aching, a young girl protagonist:
  - It’s intended for young adults but crosses over well to adult

- Popular with many YA readers who look for fantasy and strong female characters
- Funny and, again, the footnotes are great.
- Someone else read one of Tiffany Achin's books but the tone did not work for them and it had too much fantasy for them.

### **The Color of Magic (Discworld #1):**

- It's the 1st in a long-running series
- Funny but light on story (elephants, turtles, etc.)
- The order does not matter for most readers:
  - The fans and the NoveList Plus explain that you should not start with the first book because it's not like the rest
  - You can read titles out of order and not lose much
  - Still, it can be difficult for readers who like reading books in order.
- The entire series has good audiobook versions:
  - Great for family trips
  - Fun, entertaining, good productions, and you can listen in and out and still enjoy it
  - But, again, you're losing footnotes
  - Some paperbacks have covers that are too "jokey," which may repel some readers but hard covers are better.

### **Douglas Adams**

- Often compared to Terry Pratchett:
  - Known most often for *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series
  - Also known for Dirk Gently series.

### **Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy**

- Absurd, funny, enjoyable, satirical, silly in tone:
  - Too funny/silly for some but not for most
  - It's a beloved, highly-quotable book for many, especially for male readers
  - Some can take only a few minutes at a time because of its "intense" cleverness.
- The BBC audio version of the book is very well-produced:
  - Some tried both and preferred reading it
  - Fast-paced.
- There is a movie version:
  - Much different from the book
  - Martin Freeman is delightful but the movie is not too great.
- Can be compared to Monty Python-type of humor:
  - Funny and creative names of the characters
  - There are Wikis to help you keep track of references and characters

- Dry/emotionless/British humor
- Can be perceived as over the top, but it's mostly English type of humor
- Comparable to Very British Problems @SoVeryBritish twitter feed
- Humor can be tricky because it differs in tone/type and can be perceived differently depending on the personality and the age of the reader.
- The book can grow with readers:
  - Sometimes appreciated by younger readers for its silly humor
  - Read for deeper commentary by older patrons
  - Psychological vs. intellectual appreciation of humor.
- It's a go-to funny book at the library:
  - It's a cult classic
  - Constantly checked out and often replaced
  - Proclaimed by many patrons, often men and readers in their 20s but not always, as their favorite book
  - Appreciated for its "proclaimed anarchy"
  - Short and great to give to teens
  - Still has a strong fandom: quotes, t-shirts, towels, the Towel Day
  - People who like him, they LOVE him; no middle ground
  - It's a bonding book.
- Readalikes:
  - Terry Pratchett, Jasper Fforde, sometimes Christopher Moore.
- Must-read for librarians:
  - Scan for a few minutes, if it's not your type of humor
  - Or try reading his nonfiction, which is also humorous but less over the top
  - Could it be used as a discussion book?
    - Maybe: must talk about the history of the book and the fandom surrounding it
    - Funny books can be challenging discussion books sometimes
    - Humor is an individual quality-it's hard to discuss
    - It would involve a lot of quoting of favorite lines.

## **Gail Carriger**

### **Soulless**

- Tone: humorous, relationship-based, fun, romantic
  - 1<sup>st</sup> in the *Parasol Protectorate* series:
    - A plucky, independent, imperfect female protagonist
    - Some passed over werewolves, vampires and other creatures
    - A beautiful read for people who do not read speculative fiction often
    - Good title to recommend for steampunk readers or romance readers who can ignore fantastic creatures
    - Great for YA readers
    - Some wondered why having no soul had no effect at the personality of the main protagonist

- Others pointed out that the shape of the main character on the cover did not match the of her in the book
  - Super focused on genre blending.
- Read-alikes/watch-alikes:
  - Victorian Phryne Fisher
  - Elizabeth Peters-Amelia Peabody mystery series
  - Maybe even Twilight but with a humorous tone.
- One of the early super genre blended books: urban fantasy + steampunk + romance + fantasy + some mystery.
- Patron reception:
  - The series has a following
  - The 1<sup>st</sup> book seems stronger than some of the later ones and some patrons did not want to read later books as not to spoil the first book
  - Also a strong audiobook version: fun and light.
- *The Book Smugglers* did not like it
- There is a manga version for *Soulless*.

### **Etiquette & Espionage**

- It's the 1st book in the *Finishing School* series
- Tone: suspenseful, fun, YA
- Steampunk with some minor werewolves and other creatures in the background.

### **Romancing the Inventor novella**

- 1<sup>st</sup> in the *Supernatural Society*
- Self-published lesbian steampunk romance
- There is more interest in speculative fiction books with LGBTQ themes now
- Refer to the Fantastic Fiction to see all Gail Carriger's books and their order in the series.

### **Mercedes Lackey**

- Her writing is described as moody and atmospheric in terms of tone (NoveList Plus) but her books are also propelled strongly by story
- She is super prolific and wrote multiple series.

### **Arrows of the Queen**

- 1<sup>st</sup> book in the *Arrows of the Queen* series.
  - Tone: atmospheric, conversational, accessible, readable, sweet:
    - The tone may vary based on the series
    - Also, story-based.
  - Epic fantasy with twisting of some fairytale tropes
  - Karen says: the book has a lot of adventure, which may be a doorway for teenage girls coming off dystopias
  - For some who did not like it:
    - Readable but not very compelling or special
    - Some typos in the text.

## **The Serpent's Shadow**

- 1<sup>st</sup> in the *Elemental Masters* series but the books are not very connected and set in different time periods:
  - Most of the later installments have different time periods, places, and elements
  - Great design of book covers.
- Feedback: great, feminist, historical fiction with some magic:
  - A woman doctor who is trying to escape the evil that follows her
  - Mages, Earth/Fire/Air powers
  - A menagerie of animals
  - A little bit of romance
  - Recreation of a typical British class system but among mages.
- Tone: dark lightness or light darkness
- Mercedes Lackey is a very prolific writer.

## **Legacies**

- 1<sup>st</sup> in the *Shadow Grail* series
- Tone: brooding, menacing, feelings of teen angst:
  - It's a YA series about an orphan girl sent to a boarding school
  - She and her group of friends battle the evil that menaces the school
  - Very imbedded in a YA feeling
  - It's co-written with Rosemary Edghill.
- Readalikes:
  - Harry Potter-like but not as good
  - On the cover, the main protagonist looks just like the Buffy the Vampire Slayer.
- Mercedes Lackey's books in general:
  - For many years now she's been known for writing strong female protagonists
  - Her books just keep on coming
  - Her next *Elemental Masters* book is coming out in the fall of 2017
    - It's entitled A Scandal in Battersea (#12)
    - The person on the cover looks very suspiciously like Sherlock Holmes
  - She is considered a classic fantasy author:
    - But in some libraries she is not circulating well, necessitating weeding her books
    - It's also difficult because she has so many series and books
  - She is a very prolific/classic fantasy writer
  - Experimenting with shelf-talkers for the 1<sup>st</sup> book in the series (even if the library does have the 1<sup>st</sup> book).

## **Laurell K. Hamilton**

### **Guilty Pleasures**

- 1<sup>st</sup> in the *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series:

- Published in 1993
- The main character is a vampire slayer, a re-animator, and a detective
- One of the first genre mash-ups
- The plot did not work for some:
  - Some events did not make sense
  - It felt like it was a middle of the series
- Reminiscent of Jim Butcher series (published later).

### **Hit List (Vampire Hunger, #20)**

- The tone changes from romantic urban fantasy to erotica fantasy starting with the book #10:
  - Erotica, sarcastic, paranormal, sexy vampires, explicit language, urban fantasy
  - The first 9 books are very different from the rest of the Anita Blake series, here's why-check out <http://www.flamesrising.com/laurell-k-hamilton-interview-horror-author/> and search for Narcissus in Chains
  - Karen found some of it documented [here](#).
  - And apparently it's in this book, Reading Laurell K. Hamilton By Candace R. Benefiel (found discussion using Google Books)
  - The first 9 were inspiration for the Dresden files, that's why they are read-alikes. The rest of the series, not at all similar.
  - Check out <https://www.sfsite.com/08b/jb182.htm>, search for "long story short"
  - The whole story isn't on his website any more, but Wikipedia has some of it here<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Dresden\\_Files#Publishing\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dresden_Files#Publishing_history)>.
  - Some readers gave up on the series when it became more erotica-like
- Genre-blending:
  - Some libraries catalog her under Fiction others under SF/fantasy
  - The location often depends on the selector
  - Tone: dry humor but her books become progressively more sexy
- One of the readers met both Laurell K. Hamilton and Charlaine Harris at a church fundraising event.
- Readalikes:
  - Anne Rice, for the later titles
  - Twilight but more explicit
  - Jim Butcher, especially for the fans of the early titles
- She still has a lot of readers but it's uncertain if they are the fans of the original series or new readers of the erotically-forward titles
- In spite of the split tone of the series, her entire series is usually placed in the SF/Fantasy section
- Applying or not applying genre stickers becomes more complicated with growing genre blending.

### **Bloodsucking Friends**

- 1<sup>st</sup> in a *Love Story* series

- Tone: funny, romantic, irreverent, offbeat, quirky, witty but not outlandish:
  - An expected ending but with a little twist
  - Con: it has stereotypical minor characters
  - Some sensitive readers may find it offensive in tone
    - The main protagonist's girlfriend is a vampire and feeds on him
    - She is also fed on
  - The remaining two books in the series are also funny.

### **Lamb: the Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal**

- Tone: funny and irreverent but not disrespectful, balanced:
  - The author has great affection for the characters and the religious aspects but he has fun with it
- Cons: some juvenile jokes and references to sex with animals
- Who to give it to?
  - A great book for an older teenager
  - For readers who do not treat religion very seriously
  - The cover and the title could be a warning for people that may not find the premise funny.
- A successful book discussion book:
  - Especially if it's a discussion meeting at a bar or a group open to more unusual titles
  - You can use it in December for a holiday-type of book discussion.

### **Sacré Bleu: A Comedy d'Art**

- Tone: snarky, historical, sexually explicit but lighthearted:
  - Filled with historical figures, real-life painters, paintings making funny comments
  - Great read for readers interested in art
  - Beautiful cover
  - Very different from *Lamb*
- Overall, Christopher Moore's books are good reads for male readers (guy typical? All the painters are male) but not only for guys
- His books would be better served with a tone sticker (smile?) than a genre sticker
  - He is mostly shelved in fiction, in spite of his speculative elements.

### **Jeff VanderMeer**

#### **Annihilation**

- 1<sup>st</sup> in the *Southern Reach* trilogy
- Tone: creepy, foreboding, searching, building in tension, slowly paced, a little bit of very dark humor
- It involves a government expedition to the mysterious Area X, which already killed many people:
  - What type of evil is it?
  - Who is to be trusted?
- For the fans of the TV show *Lost*:



- For the environmental horror fans
- Slowly paced horror crossing over into literary fiction
- They are making a movie of the trilogy
  - It will be interesting to see how they will translate this lingering horror feel into a movie
  - It's directed by Alex Garland of *Ex Machina*
- Listening to the audiobook version will increase the feeling of dread
- It's easy to hand-sell it to patrons with "There is an expedition to Area X. Eleven previous expeditions never came back... This expedition will go and find out why." Most patrons will know by then if it's their type of book.
- The books are also short and have striking covers.
- VanderMeer's earlier books could be categorized as weird fiction (China Mieville-like)
  - His new book entitled *Borne* just came out
  - All his books have beautiful, striking covers.

## Wrap-Up

- How did you feel about using doorways to discuss speculative fiction?
  - It was easier because of frequent genreblending and meshing of genres in speculative fiction
  - We missed some stand-alones like *The Martian* by Andy Weir but overall it was a good set-up
  - It reflects how people read (for characters, story, language, tone, pacing), but sometime this does not extend into science fiction and fantasy
  - For book discussion books, many people select for character or story but draw a hard stop at SF and fantasy books
  - For some, doorways and not subgenres, are how they find books
  - It felt strange sometimes because science fiction and fantasy books are so different from each other
  - It was easier for some to avoid types of books they don't like (i.e. horror)

The next genre study will be

**August 3rd**

at

**Glenview Public Library**

where we will have our final Doorway Session

**Movies, TV, and Video Games**

Here is the assignment:

Check out the featured resources: Black Girl Nerds, IGN, NerdMuch?

Watch at least one of each genre (preferably something new to you). If you watch a TV show, try at least a couple of episodes.

SF

- The Arrival (2016)
- Ex Machina (2015)
- Blade Runner (1982)
- Battlestar Galactica (TV 2004-2009)
- Any Star Trek (movie or TV)
- Black Mirror (TV 2001-; skip first episode "The National Anthem")
- Alien (1979)

#### Fantasy

- Any Star Wars (movies or animated, just don't start with Episode I for heaven's sake)
- The Lord of the Rings trilogy (any film)
- Any Harry Potter film
- Pan's Labyrinth (2006)
- Spirited Away (2001)

#### Horror

- Get Out (2017)
- The Cabin in the Woods (2012)
- Rosemary's Baby (1968)
- Night of the Living Dead (1968)
- Penny Dreadful (TV 2014-2016)