

Speculative Fiction Genre Study

Doorway-Setting

Lisle District Library
October 6, 2016

Featured Resource Discussion-Tor.com:

- Announcement: notes on Becky's Horror Boot Camp were emailed to ARRT members and will be posted on ARRT's website
- Tor.com is a publisher of science fiction and fantasy fiction with Macmillan as the parent company, as well as a popular content provider on speculative fiction.
- Overall, attendees liked the site and thought it was filled with useful information. Here are some of the favorite elements mentioned:
 - A list of Hugo award winners
 - New Releases and Coming Soon titles
 - The blog and its variety of subjects
 - The site features both science fiction and fantasy titles
 - The site publishes original stories
 - You can sign up for a newsletter that will give you a weekly summary of featured content
 - Communal re-reads:
 - Provides a communal reading experience with commentary for a lot of major, more complicated series
 - Great for librarians who want to learn about more complex series
 - Great way to make virtual friends who share love of speculative fiction
- Other benefits:
 - The site is a credible site for science fiction and fantasy content
 - Although it's a publisher, it appears to be relatively independent and features books that are released by other publishers
 - It appears to be more like a fan site or a soft-selling site than a publisher
 - The website, with its clean design, is easy to skim.

Doorway-Setting

- Virtually every book has a setting as its element but it is especially important in speculative fiction where world-building and setting a story in a place that is not our own becomes especially important
- It's best to start our discussion about doorways with setting, since it's the main element in building and shaping of the world.

Dune by Frank Herbert

- *Dune* should be a benchmark book for a setting doorway but we've already assigned you a lot of big books in this genre study so we've decided to offer it as an option.
- *Dune* was a groundbreaking book that mixed science fiction and fantasy and created an immersive world that combined cultural, political and religious themes.
- Readers' feedback:
 - Most read it a long time ago
 - Many readers remembered it as being great but they did not like the sequels (especially by Herbert's son, Brian Herbert)

- In spite of its length, it's a pretty easy read:
 - It's not too heavy on science
 - It's leaning more toward fantasy (giant worms, "spice")
 - It has strong religious and philosophical themes
- Movie adaptations were far worse than the book:
 - 1984 adaptation by David Lynch was an "interesting disaster" with a good art director
 - It was also made into a mini-series shown on SyFy channel, which was described as "boring but pretty"
- The printed version of the book has a very helpful glossary and the audiobook version, with a full-cast narration, comes highly recommend
- Crossover titles and read-alikes:
 - The story is strong on political intrigue so it could be recommended for the *Game of Thrones* fans who like political themes
 - It was suggested that it could serve as a crossover title for Tom Clancy fans, due to its fast-paced writing style and revenge themes.
 - With its fantasy elements and strong historical feel, it could be recommended for the readers of *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* series by Stephen Erickson
 - "Dusty" and not "shiny" science fiction, similar to science fiction in Star Wars or Mad Max
- Some readers noted that they would be careful in suggesting it to patrons without making sure that the reader was ok with finding strong fantasy elements (giant worms, fantastical locations, etc.) in a book that is otherwise categorized as a science fiction classic.

Harry Turtledove

- An author of many books that include science fiction, alternative history, fantasy, and historical fiction.
- Where do you shelve his books?
 - Some place his books in science fiction because they deal with "what if" questions and can be categorized as alternative history, which are commonly considered science fiction.
 - Yet, others kept *11/22/63* by Stephen King (alternative history) in a regular fiction section because they did not want to separate books by the author who writes general fiction books.
 - Others could find some of his books in the regular fiction section and the rest in the science fiction section
 - Others still, placed him books in the regular fiction section only
 - Overall, location and genre classification of Turtledove's books varied greatly across libraries.
- *Guns of the South*:
 - It's about the Civil War but it also has aliens!
- *How Few Remain*:
 - It's an alternative history book (what if South won the Civil War?) so it fits within the science fiction genre
 - It features a wall with Mexico, making the book feel very timely
 - Alternative history based on an extrapolation on a reality that did not happened—usually labeled under science fiction

- *Give Me Back My Legions!*:
 - It's a historical fiction with a love story element
 - Only notes at the end of the book clarify that it's a historical fiction story with no alternative history element
 - Sometimes it's difficult to know what to expect from his books.
- *The Guns of the South*:
 - Lincoln loses the election but lives--time travel elements
 - It almost reads like *The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara (Civil War historical fiction)
 - It's difficult to detect the alternative history elements if you don't know history well
 - You need to know what's being twisted/alterd to fully appreciate what he's doing.
- *Fallout*:
 - *Fallout* (his latest book) is about a Cold War turning into a Hot War and a nuclear conflict
 - The book reads like a timely and a terrifying thriller
- *Ruled Britannia*:
 - In *Ruled Britannia*, Turtledove features Queen Elizabeth and William Shakespeare and alternates the real history while keeping the characters and the historical setting true to life
 - It's a stand alone title
- Who would you give Turtledove's books to?:
 - Readers of historical fiction books who are open to alternative endings
 - Readers who appreciate descriptions of historical settings and characters
 - Readers who like literary fiction and historical subjects
 - Readers who like books intricately plotted political books
 - Nonfiction readers, especially fans of Bill O'Reilly's historical books
 - YA readers who like history and would like to read about cool ideas and history happening differently
- NoveList ascribes the following genres to Turtledove's books:
 - Alternative history, fantastical fiction, historical fantasy, military fiction, science fiction
- Read-alikes:
 - His books have cool ideas and are perfect for readers who like to read about the history of the United States.
 - Readalike examples: books by Stephen King (historical), Michael Chabon (especially *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*), Philip Roth (especially *The Plot Against America*).
- What's historical fantasy?
 - Often true historical plots and settings with fantastic elements inserted
- Examples of historical fantasies:
 - Temeraire series by Naomi Novik--set during Napoleonic wars; the historical time, place and the navy are described realistically and in great detail. Plus, the books features air force on dragons (fantastic element).
 - Glamourist Histories series by Mary Robinette Kowal:
 - Jane Austen retellings with Regency times and setting but also a fantastic element of being able to manipulate glammers
 - May be good for historical fiction readers who can stretch into fantasy (Bernard Cornwell readers?)
 - Another reader enjoyed the romance elements and the mix of history and magic
- More on Harry Turtledove:

- Very strong on historical research
 - He brings together historical events and people that could have collided even if, in real life, they never did
 - His books feel modern in their emphasis on history repeating itself. Example: what would have happened if U.S. did not declare war against Hitler?
 - Collisions of characters and events but you need to know the history to appreciate the twisting/collisions/alternative resolutions
- Characters drive his stories
- His stories move quickly and sometimes jump around
- Unlike in historical books, we don't really know what will happen (suspenseful) and yet his stories are believable and relatable; he writes about this world
- His books are fun, enjoyable, full of action, and fast-paced
- Most of Turtledove's book covers look like a straightforward historical fiction
- Men are more likely to read Turtledove's books than women
- Most popular in the 1990's but his books experienced a resurgence and he is still in demand
- Here is an interesting article about Harry Turtledove and "what if" type of fiction: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/11/21/never-happened>
- His books worked great for a "What if" book display:
 - Incorporate a timeline
 - Include time travel, alternative history, slip stream books, but also more literary titles by authors like Philip Roth or Michael Chabon
- "What if" is an appeal factor but it depends which doorway you step through:
 - Time travel- *11/22/63* by Stephen King
 - Alternative history/literary/fantasy/African-American read- *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead
 - Time travel/thriller- *Dark Matter* by Blake Crouch
- Harry Turtledove wrap-up:
 - For most, it was their first time reading Harry Turtledove
 - It was an exciting conversation and most readers were surprised how much they enjoyed his books
 - He is "tried and true." His books circulate but he is not as popular as he deserves to be
 - Uchronia.net: a fantastic website about "what if" books and resources.

Neal Stephenson

- At many public libraries, he is currently the most popular science fiction writer with high holds and a devoted fan base
- For many patrons, he is one of the "I don't usually read science fiction but I like Neal Stephenson" type of authors
- *Seveneves*:
 - Synopsis: our moon explodes and its debris will inevitably destroy Earth in the next couple years. What will humans do? Who will we try to save? How? Why?
 - Readers' feedback:
 - The best book I read in a long time
 - It's all about the setting and characters
 - It goes out 10 years in the future
 - One of the characters seems to be based strongly on Neil de Grasse Tyson

- The audiobook version of the book narrated by Mary Robinette Kowal and Will Damron is highly recommended
- It's all about the lead up to how the human kind is saved
- It has a lot of hard science but the characters (seven women-seven Eves) and the setting are so mazing that it reads quickly
- It features a fascinating conversation about race and racism (seven Eves-seven newly-created races)
- It's long, in parts terrifying, and "think-y" but it's also fascinating, amazing and accessible
- *The Baroque Cycle*:
 - Eight books published in three volumes
 - Long, historical, filled with facts yet fascinating
 - Features historical figures (Benjamin Franklin, Louis IV), famous scientists (Newton), great women characters, information about the emergence of European banking, alchemy, and much more
 - As in many of his books, he combines science, science fiction, religion, history, philosophy, politics, and social commentary
- *The Mongoliad*:
 - Co-written with other writers
 - Historical fantasy with military and quest themes
- Neal Stephenson wrap-up:
 - His books are complex but well-written, well-researched, and rather faced-paced
 - High technology, political, some steampunk themes (*The Diamond Age*) and Gibson-like cyberpunk (*Snow Crash*)
 - He is very popular and still growing in popularity
 - His books are focused on world-building and he writes about everything
 - He is one of the "sure bet" writers
 - A good crossover for literary fiction readers who would like to try science fiction
 - He may be a good suggestion for the fans of Connie Willis
 - No one tried reading Neal Stephenson's book for a library book discussion but maybe it could be done with one of his shorter books (*Snow Crash?*) or by breaking up *Seveneves* into two meets.
 - Where are his books shelved? Again, answers differed.

Kim Stanley Robinson

- *Red Mars* (Mars Trilogy):
 - A world-building series about colonization of Mars
 - The book shows off author's interest in ecology, geology, natural sciences, psychology, and philosophy
 - His books describe the setting and develop the characters well but they are ultimately issue-oriented
 - Readers liked *Red Mars*. Characters were not as strong as in Stephenson's books but still impressive in their setting and plot
 - It was set in a not-too-distant future and it successfully described the challenges of space travel and colonization
 - The first book came out in 1993 but it aged well--Mars remains a subject of much interest for a lot of readers

- Thought-provoking, well-researched, long, each character tends to represent a different philosophy
- Can be compared to Neil Stephenson but with more science
- The Mars Trilogy could be suggested for the fans of *The Martian* by Andy Weir based on its setting (Mars) but not its tone
- Suggest it to readers who want to learn more about Mars but let them know that The Mars Trilogy has more science and is not as suspenseful and witty as *The Martian*.
- His newer books feature better-developed characters
- His latest book, *Aurora*, could be given to readers who liked *Seveneves*, but with a warning that *Aurora* has more science in it
- *Galileo's Dream*:
 - Synopsis: Galileo is contacted by people from the future who are trying to alter the history
 - It's a science fiction book with a strong historical setting
- Orange Country Trilogy (also known as Three Californias Trilogy):
 - Alternative history; dystopia
 - Set on the west coast in the aftermath of a nuclear explosion
- *Shaman*:
 - It's a story about a shaman living during the Ice Age
 - Fire is the biggest scientific event in this story so it almost reads like a historical novel with a quest and a relationship element
 - It's very different from his other science fiction books in that it almost reads like a nonfiction adventure story
 - It's a coming of age for an ice man story
 - It has interesting characters; the story is a little less flashed out than in other of his books but still interesting
 - It's also a science fiction book because Robinson is a science fiction writer but it's more about the evolution of man (evolution of men could be considered speculative in nature), human myths, with some magic-like elements
 - Because of its cold setting and philosophical subject, it reminded someone of *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin
 - NoveList describes it as coming of age stories, historical fiction, world building, richly-detailed and adult fiction. Kirkus called it: "a prehistoric bildungsroman" and did not like it
 - Should it have a science fiction genre sticker?
 - It's hard to justify a science fiction sticker but many libraries still apply it because he is a science fiction writer
 - It may be closer to fantasy because of some mythical/magical elements
 - You really need to read the description to see if it's the same type of book that he usually writes
- Kim Stanley Robinson read-alikes:
 - *The Water Knife* or *Ship Braker* by Paolo Bacigalupi with their post-apocalyptic focus on water and ecology
 - There is more hard science in Robinson's writing.

Cherie Priest

- *Boneshaker*:
 - Steampunk with zombies

- Some of the readers did not like the structure of the story and they did not find the characters interesting
- It's placed as an example of this doorway because it's very specific to the Pacific Northwest setting
- *Maplecroft* (The Borden Dispatches #1):
 - Historical fantasy with elements of horror
 - Super setting-specific and epistolary in nature
 - It has different points of view, a relationship between sisters, but also monsters
 - It is mostly about the sisters and the language/manners of the 18th century
 - The writing style was pretty good
 - Readers' feedback:
 - It received lukewarm reviews
 - It started well but became exhausting
 - The relations and manners were interesting but the characters were not terribly likable
 - It has a mystery element that but that part is underdeveloped and unbelievable
 - One reader recommended Priest's short stories instead
 - It also has zombie-like sea monsters but the zombies are not "very well-done zombies"; it's not clear why they are even in the book
 - Not clear why the series was so well reviewed when it was released
 - Best audience:
 - Recommended for steampunk readers or for readers who like books closely linked to a specific place or time
 - For teenagers and older middle school readers
 - For the fans of *The Leviathan* by Scott Westerfeld (the book has better developed relationships)
 - For readers who don't expect very well executed zombies
 - Participants questioned why the series is usually shelved in the adult section and not in YA. Some libraries had it in both.

Brandon Sanderson

- He is very popular and prolific
- He has many series but he also finished The Wheel of Time series after Robert Jordan died
- Mistborn series:
 - Characters gain powers by ingesting metals
 - The main character is a 16-year-old woman who grew up on the streets
 - Elements of oppression, rebellion, and other political and military themes
 - High on action and light on magic-it almost reads like a heist story
 - Read it for the setting, world-building and plot
 - The writing is good but accessible
 - Read-alikes:
 - *Uprooted* by Naomi Novik-both have strong female protagonists
 - It could be a crossover book for fans of superhero books and movies
 - All the books in the series are equally good (no bad second book phenomena) but the conclusion of the series is especially great
 - One of the readers described the ending as "surprising but inevitable"
- *The Rithmatist*:
 - Harry Potter-like mystery

- It's a teen book with alternative history and mystery elements
- It's a short and fun read.
- *Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarians*:
 - A middle grade series with a 13-year-old narrator who is an oculist and tries to stop an evil librarian from taking over the world
 - Fast-paced, narrated by an unreliable narrator, magical, a little silly but well-done, and super fun
- *The Emperor's Soul* (a novella):
 - To save her life, a female forger is given a task to create a copy of emperor's soul
 - It touches on questions of what makes a person. Can you replace a person?
 - Written for an adult audience
 - Very impressive; philosophical but fast-paced and a quick read.

N. K. Jamsin

- *The Fifth Season* (*The Broken Earth Series*):
 - She won many awards and her books stands up to the hype
 - The first book is *The Fifth Season* and the second *The Obelisk*
 - The audiobook is on audible.com only but it's a good production
 - Synopsis:
 - It's in the world that is not our own but could be if Earth was plagued with potentially catastrophic earthquakes
 - The story has orogenes who have powers to affect earthquakes and are feared/hated by regular people
 - The print version has a map that is very useful in keeping the reader oriented in this complex world
 - The audiobook was well-narrated but some listeners had to re-listen some parts; may be due to the complexity of the story
 - Geology science fiction:
 - It's hard to tell where science fiction ends and fantasy starts
 - Fresh catastrophe concept
 - Original and methodically-built world
 - It's a difficult but rewarding read
 - Second-voice narration and shifting locations/perspectives are a little disorienting at first but it all comes together in the end
 - It has fantasy and quest elements but instead of space as a setting it's using earthquakes and other geological elements
 - It's an example of science fiction and fantasy smashed together
 - It's post-apocalyptic:
 - The book has great, complex characters and it's using fresh and modern elements while intermixing old tropes making it feel completely different from other current science fiction/fantasy books
 - The second book, *The Obelisk*, is out and, per some readers, it is as good as the first one.

Justin Cronin:

- *The Passage* (#1):
 - A very original, post-apocalyptic zombie series

- Great setting, scenery, action scenes, horror elements, but more scientific than other post-apocalyptic books
- It's a great read-alike for the fans of *The Walking Dead* TV series
- The first book ends with one of the most awesome cliffhangers
- A spoiler: everyone seems to die at the end of first book but a 200-page prologue in the next book and reports from the future conference give us hope
- One of the great train action sequences
- Like in *World War Z*, you know that the world has come close to the end but revived; you get news from the future.
- *The Twelve* (#2):
 - The second book has a very small scope and many readers were disappointed by it when compared to the first book
 - It was suggested that the second book can be skipped for the third book to be fully enjoyed
 - The second book has much action but far less character development.
- *The City of Mirrors* (#3):
 - It features homesteading but also New York City; the city is abandoned but it creates a cool image of the city of mirrors
 - The third book explains the main evil guy of the story
 - It book resolved the series very sweetly, especially for a horror series
 - It's a good read-alike for the readers of Stephen King books
 - For people who get attached to characters, this book may not work because the author kills off "good" characters
 - The first book reads like a stand-alone horror book, except that you know it's a trilogy, which adds to the excitement of figuring out how the author pulls it all off.

Robert McCammon:

- *The River of Souls*:
 - Matthew Corbett series
 - Historical fiction with mystery elements
 - An adventure story
- *The Wolf's Hour*:
 - World War II fiction with werewolf spies
 - Fun and lovely
- *Boy's Life*:
 - A supernatural horror with a YA character
 - Coming of age story
 - It's all about the place and being young but pretty dark in tone
 - Becky S. recommends to start with this book when exploring Robert McCammon's writing
 - It feels Stephen King-like
 - Suggested if you like the movie *Stand By Me*
- Stephen King contemporary; writes various types of books
- *Swan Song*: another example of a dark horror; great for horror fans.

According to the group, the format of the genre study, with its focus on the reading assignments, worked well and generated a very interesting conversation. We'll continue by talking about character as our next doorway.

The next genre study will be on
December 1st
at
Glenview Public Library
where we will discuss the next doorway:

[Character](#)

Here's the [assignment](#) for next time:

Featured resource: Listen to a speculative fiction podcast (see some suggestions below or find another speculative podcast that you prefer):

[Science Fiction Book Review Podcast](#)

[Geek's Guide to the Galaxy](#)

[Science Fiction and Politics](#)

[Sword and Laser](#)

[Speculate](#)

[SF Signal](#)

[SFF Audio](#)

[This is Horror](#)

[Drinking With Jason](#)

[Three Guys with Beards](#)

[Horror Show with Brian Keene](#)

Reading Assignment:

1) Read a book from two different authors from the list below (two books total). Preferably, both authors will be new to you.

Connie Willis

Lois McMaster Bujold

Orson Scott Card

Naomi Novik

Jim Butcher

Kevin Hearne

Brian Keene

Ann Leckie

2) As you read, think about the genre/subgenre of the book, and write down three additional appeal factors for the book besides character.

3) Come ready to talk about other character-driven speculative fiction books you may enjoy and why.