



Getting up to Speed in...Science Fiction

Here's what Science Fiction is:

Themes and authors overlap with other genres, especially Fantasy, making Science Fiction difficult to define. Science Fiction posits future worlds and technologies which could exist. Science, rather than magic, drives the stories.

Here's what happens in Science Fiction:

Science Fiction is speculative fiction. There may be traditional action and adventure, or the action may take place more in the mind. These are books that consider moral, social, and ethical issues while exploring philosophical, technical, and intellectual questions. Science Fiction is fertile ground for the discussion of challenging and often controversial issues and ideas, and authors use it expressly for that purpose. Authors take an idea and explore it, often in a setting outside our own world or in a future time, but certainly out of everyday contexts.

Here's why people like Science Fiction:

This is a genre rich in physical and intellectual adventure, with something to please a wide range of readers, from fans of romance and mystery to those who appreciate literary fiction and even westerns. Science Fiction is evocative and visual, rich in technical and scientific details. Readers prize Science Fiction for its ability to raise thought-provoking issues, whether intellectual, moral or social. Science Fiction deals with "why", philosophical speculations, as well as with "where", futuristic settings outside of the usual; with alien beings as well as alien and unorthodox concepts. It cherishes the unexpected, in terms of setting, characters, and plot, and it prides itself in its ability to raise challenging questions. Science Fiction also affirms the importance of the imagination and of story in readers' lives.

Here are key titles to read:

- Walter M. Miller Jr.'s *Canticle for Leibowitz*, originally published in 1959, still resonates with readers as the classic post-apocalyptic novel.
- Frank Herbert's *Dune* initiated a long-running series (now continued by his son) of novels set on the desert planet of Arrakis. This is a coming-of-age story, filled with adventure and treacherous politics.
- Mary Doria Russell's novel of First Contact, *The Sparrow* opened up the genre to thoughtful readers who might never have discovered it otherwise. This elegantly and densely written philosophical novel, peopled with multi-dimensional characters, has become a book discussion classic.
- Orson Scott Card's classic *Ender's Game* is a layered story of a young boy's coming-of-age in a world beset by war. Moral, social, and intellectual issues frame the novel, which can be read and appreciated on many levels by a wide range of readers.
- In *I, Robot*, a collection of short stories, Isaac Asimov laid out the rules that all robots must follow. He then expanded robot lore in his Science Fiction Mystery novels featuring Elijah Baley.



Here are key authors to know:

- **Lois McMaster Bujold** includes wit and romantic touches, as well as humor, as she leads readers through political machinations and military adventures on the planet Barrayar and beyond in her popular *Vorkosigan Adventures*. Although second in the series, *Shards of Honor* with the meeting of Cordelia Naismith and Lord Vorkosigan is a good place to begin.
- The prolific **C. J. Cherryh** writes in both the Science Fiction universe of post-apocalyptic, alien and parallel worlds, and the Fantasy realm of magic, sword and sorcery, and quest-based adventure. Her *Foreigner Universe* series offers thought-provoking stories of cultures in collision, along with ramifications of technology and the consideration of what it means to be human. *Foreigner: A Novel of First Contact* starts the series.
- **Kim Stanley Robinson** writes issue-oriented novels rich in scientific detail and technology. Literary style and interesting characters enhance his novels, frequently set in the near future. Start with *Red Mars*, the first of his *Mars trilogy*.
- **Neal Stephenson** began his career as the heir to Cyberpunk, popularized by William Gibson, with titles like *Snow Crash* and *Cryptonomicon* which feature computers, hackers, code-breaking and a wealth of scientific and mathematical detail. His more recent *Baroque Cycle* is speculative, combining history and science with his trademark elegant language and style.
- **Harry Turtledove's** writing exemplifies the Alternate History subgenre, which fully explores the "what if" appeal of the genre. He speculates on a range of possibilities from the Confederate States winning the Civil War to the Spanish Armada conquering England and more. *Days of Infamy* explores the ramifications of a Japanese invasion of Hawaii.

Here's how to talk with Science Fiction Fans:

- Fans of the genre are both elusive and outspoken. Although they rarely seek assistance, they are more than happy to advise us on what our collections lack. Unless you're a fan, listen to them talk about what they enjoy and use that information to introduce others to popular writers in the genre.
- Descriptions of movies and television series often provide insight into the type of books a reader might like.

A Few More Tips:

- Science Fiction is series-centered, and because of the complexity of the worlds they create, authors tend to use them more than just once. Authors also share worlds, setting novels in an established world. Since this can create location issues, shelve these series titles under the world rather than the author.
- Much Science Fiction is still published only in paperback. Keep and catalog these titles, and interfile them with hardcovers for ease in locating them.
- Short stories remain popular and are well-reviewed. They provide a good introduction to an author's themes and style for staff and readers.
- Fans start reading Science Fiction at a young age, and preteens and teens make up a large proportion of the readership.



- Science Fiction crosses over with almost every genre, so there's likely a Science Fiction book that would satisfy every reader. Authors frequently write both Fantasy and Science Fiction; others write Science Fiction and Horror, making overlap through popular authors a useful strategy. Literary fiction readers will find many stylists among Science Fiction Writers, and Romance readers, too, will find many authors who add enough romantic elements to Science Fiction to satisfy. Military Science Fiction may also appeal to fans of Thrillers. Humor abounds in Science Fiction and will likely please fans from other genres.
- The *Hugo Award* and the *Arthur C. Clarke Award* are two prestigious awards for Science Fiction.

Joyce Saricks is a well-known readers' advisory consultant. In addition to presenting readers' advisory seminars around the country, she is engaged in updating her book, *Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* (ALA, 2001).