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Challenge the Boundaries: An Overview of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Anthony Wolk

Speculative literature goes back a long way. Doris Lessing has suggested that the current mode of “realistic” fiction of the last two hundred years is the aberration and that fantastic literature is the mainstream which has never run dry and still flows freely (1987, Address to the College of Arts and Sciences, Portland State U., 28 May). What is undoubtedly true is that writers over the last century and a half have not stopped to wonder what was and what was not literature. Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Karl Capek (who gave the word “robot” to Isaac Asimov)—all have used traditional science-fiction motifs in their writing; for example, technological extrapolation, future projection, “what if” scenarios.

More recently, science fiction has flourished both as popular literature and as serious literature. Science-fiction courses have been taught in American high schools and colleges since the late 1960s. None of this is surprising. Writers of the stature of Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, Stanislaw Lem, Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, John Crowley, Gene Wolfe, and Michael Bishop all find themselves comfortable writing in this medium, for it allows free rein of the imagination as well as an opportunity to write freely on personal and social relationships—which is what literature is inevitably about.

Intellectuals have been alert to the significance of this genre. On this continent, *Science-Fiction Studies* was founded at McGill University in the early 1970s; and in England at roughly the same time *Foundation* undertook to attend critically to this burgeoning field. These two journals are un-

usual because the critics themselves are frequently writers.

My own motivation to teach science fiction in the late 60s stemmed from a simple realization: given that students were already reading the literature, why shouldn't I provide them the opportunity to read and discuss writers such as Le Guin and Dick in the congenial atmosphere of an English classroom? It is a union that is dear to my heart. Soon I had writers coming freely into my classes: Le Guin, Vonda McIntyre, Anne McCaffrey, Frank Herbert, and others. When these professional writers came in the door, students became not only readers but writers as well.

What It Is: Some Distinctions

Just what is science fiction? And what is fantasy? What delicious questions to play around with! When pressed, I can't resist the temptation to say that when a writer feels called upon to alter the vital fabric of the universe, that's science fiction (not “sci-fi,” a term science-fiction writers avoid because it has the hallmark of the heavy-breathing Darth Vader and the BEM, or Bug-Eyed-Monster). For example, adding the person of Frederic Henry to the known world changes its molecular structure. Hence, *A Farewell to Arms* is science fiction. Enough whimsy.

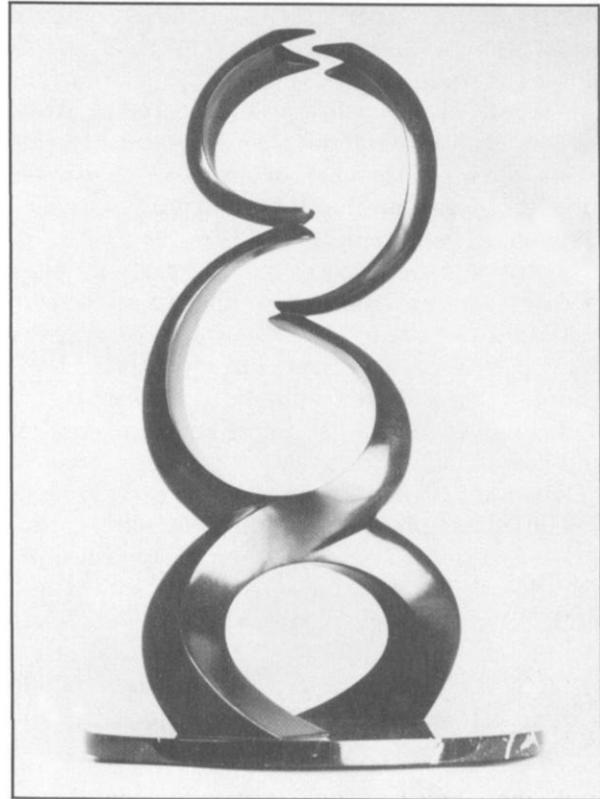
Let's assume that you do, in fact, pretty much know what science fiction is; so it's the boundaries that stand in need of definition. Mari Sandoz adds a bend to the Niobrara River in Nebraska for her novels—that's not science fiction. Nor does Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County yield science fiction. But Ursula Le Guin's *Orsinian Tales* (1976)

takes place in an Eastern European country called Orsinia which can't be found in ordinary atlases; yet the stories intersect European history as though the country has always been taken for granted geographically. And Austin Tappan Wright's wondrously mammoth utopian novel *Islandia* (1944) generates an entire subcontinent somewhere between New Zealand and South America. One name for this subcategory of science fiction is "alternate-universe" literature. *Gulliver's Travels* and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* are well-known examples.

Alternate-universe fiction has two branches: roughly speaking, science fiction and fantasy. In one, the world as we know it is specifically not changed by the writer's addition—no need to redo the history books. In the other, however, the changes are radical. In Keith Roberts' *Pavane* (1968), Queen Elizabeth I is assassinated in 1588, and a violent purge of English Catholics follows, leaving the country in disarray when the Armada comes up the Channel. As a result, the Reformation is crushed. The novel takes place, then, in the 1960s with everyone living under what at first seems to be an oppressive Catholic hegemony. Philip K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle* (1962) is set in 1963 when Japan and Germany have won WWII and are jointly occupying the United States. In Dick's novel, Hawthorne Abendsun has written *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, itself a "what-if" novel envisioning life in the US if the war had had a different outcome. Dick's characters at one point argue over whether or not *Grasshopper* is science fiction.

Another approach to defining the genre is to separate science fiction from fantasy and both from "realist" literature. (The term "mainstream" really is too arrogant; throw away those brown-paper wrappers and live dangerously.) If you can work out a chronology and construct a map to get from when and where you are to when and where the story is, that's science fiction. But J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, C. S. Lewis's Narnia, and Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea are fantasy. Lewis's on-again-off-again wardrobe is not what we usually think of as a boundary between countries. There are other rules of thumb. Dragons belong to fantasy, but Anne McCaffrey has a biochemical foundation for her dragons, and so Pern is a science-fictional world.

It's also interesting to put science fiction/fantasy in the balance with myth, pastoral, folk tale, as well



Larry Young *Genesis* 25" Bronze

as with realist literature. I tend to think that what makes the difference is the writer's temperament. The Scottish writer Naomi Mitchison, author of *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), says,

I like to present my characters—whether they are in the past or in the future—with interesting moral choices, and it seems to me that science-fiction writers are, or should be, the prophets and moralists of today. I am fairly well up on the biological sciences, but I am deeply uninterested in gadgets. A writer's job is to write about people with sympathy and insight. (Smith 1986, 516)

And Bob Shaw from Ireland says that his science fiction is "for people who don't read a great deal of SF," that he limits himself to a

minimal use of in-group jargon and a very firm emphasis on relating every fictional event to real characters of a kind that the reader can immediately recognize and identify or empathize with. (Smith 650)

At the same time, one cannot say that his "imagination is curbed" or doesn't deal with "fantastic concepts" (Smith 650). Neither Shaw nor Mitchison sounds much like a science-fiction writer, but both are. What distinguishes them from non-science-fiction writers is that when they put pen to paper,

out comes this other stuff. They have a kink or warp (though Einstein describes the great galactic curves as straight lines, relatively speaking). The stories of Calvino or Borges or Le Guin or Wolfe or Ray Bradbury will not follow the usual garden path. Their stories may not always be science fiction or fantasy, but they'll have that other quality. They can't help themselves.

Is this unusual? Every night, when you close your eyes and drift off to another brand of consciousness, you're in a fantasy world. Last night a pickup truck came out of nowhere, and I shouldn't have missed it but did. The week before I spent an evening with Albert Einstein, wondering how to talk to the great man. Finally, I asked, "Do you think they'll ever solve the even number magic square problem?" I found myself explaining everything I knew about magic squares until, breathless, I had to pause. Einstein smiled and said, "What's a magic square?" In her essay "Some Thoughts on Narrative," Le Guin (1989) offers the hypothesis that the origins of narrative, of stories, stem from the telling of our dreams eons ago (39-40). If those are the roots of fantasy, we've gone pretty deep.

I make one more useful distinction about science fiction, already touched on above, which I call the Verne/Wells Differential. Mitchison and Shaw see their role primarily as interpreters of the human condition—a social focus. This accords with the practice of H. G. Wells whose science fiction still has social relevance. Jules Verne on the other hand, to use Mitchison's term, did care about "gadgets." And so his stories are technological extrapolations of his era: undersea travel, space exploration, lighter-than-air flight. There is still that dichotomy in science fiction, with a focus on the technological/predictive versus the social/reflective. Arthur C. Clarke is a good example. He can be narrowly predictive—what lunar colonization will be like (*A Fall of Moondust*, 1961), though I prefer his exploration of the human psyche in *The City and the Stars* (1956).

We could take a different tack altogether and make intellectual demands on our genre, like Darko Suvin, who calls science fiction the literature of "cognitive estrangement" (1979, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale UP). Like Shaw and Mitchison—and Suvin—I like stories that enrich me, that remind me of a way of thinking I had forgotten, that direct my attention to one

of my many blindspots. Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1966), Anne McCaffrey's *Ship Who Sang* (1969), Philip Dick's *Martian Time-Slip* (1964) do just that, focusing our attention on mental retardation, paraplegia, and schizophrenia. The science fiction I like to read is *not* escapist.

Now that I've said that, is it true? Crowley's "Great Work of Time" (1989) roams through the last hundred years of British Empire via time travel but with the precision of a fine watch. Is the story edifying? Hmmmm. Well, no one would call chess an escapist game, would they? Isn't it one of the good ways to fine tune the brain?

How To Teach It: Some Approaches

As I said at the beginning, I began teaching science fiction with the thought, "why not give students the chance to 'work' on in school what they have already begun to do on their own?" I saw myself as a facilitator, someone whose training in literary analysis would be helpful. I was just beginning to read my way into the genre. Luckily I had a co-teacher from the sciences who was already there, Ted Michelfeld. What we discovered was an underground, as it were. "Here, have you ever read this book?" And so I read Walter M. Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz* (1980), originally published in 1959, and anything else by Miller I could get my hands on. It was that same process, only going the other direction.

Twenty years later that still happens, though by now, I've done a lot of reading: all of Dick and Le Guin, nearly all of Wolfe and Lem, and so on. Sometimes I can't help myself, and I buy the hardback edition because I can't wait the year for it to metamorphose into paper. The more I read, the better teacher I become. Naturally enough. So I suppose one of my sub-messages here is that in order to teach science fiction to your students, you've got to be reading it yourself. It's an analogue to the premise of the National Writing Project: if you're going to be a writing teacher, you'd better be writing yourself.

That brings up another topic, one I can only touch on at present—writing. Science fiction is a natural ground for letting students write. Why deprive them of a chance to do what they love seeing other writers do? They may already be doing it. I always ask that my students write at least one science-fiction story (I don't worry much about its length, whether it's one genre or another). Beyond that I let them write what I call "variations"

Wolk's Library of Openings

Directions: Either individually or as a group, write a story using one of the following leads. Under some circumstances, instead of as leads, the lines may be woven otherwise into the story.

1. I awoke to the sound of thunder and the sight of falling rain, but I had not been asleep.
2. I sit here to write but cannot help listening to them going back and forth, from one end of the hallway to the other—and nothing is written.
3. What a fool I was to stop for the three women. But shadows will lengthen, night will come, and the river runs only to the sea.
4. One friend is much like another, but no two enemies are alike.
5. The seasons follow in rigid sequence—summer to autumn, winter to spring. From the fork of her tree my sister says, "Not so." And thus her words take flight once again.
6. The old man paid me another visit last night, as though those years had never happened. We sat on the porch and chatted, if to speak of vast horrors might be called a chat.
7. "Demetrius, are you there?"
"Over here," came a voice from the other end of the salon.
"Demetrius, are you there?"
8. Something's wrong with the chessboard. My woman doesn't have any feathers. And your dart needs sharpening.
9. Lincoln's house in Springfield, with Lincoln and a younger son in the front yard, two small dark smudges.
10. Artificial somnambulism, robots walking in their off-phase. I tell you! What is this world coming to?
11. Barnum's animals—brown bear, hippopotamus, elephant, rhinoceros. Polar bear, tiger, rat, bison. Pass on the rat. Let's see, maybe I'll have a hippo.
12. "Over here," said the grizzled woman. "You're the storyteller, aren't you?"
13. I am Ezzo IV. My mother first glimpsed me in a story told by the White Wizard.
14. "Father, where's father?"

or "interventions." So not only do they write critically about Robert Heinlein, Clarke, or Kurt Vonnegut, but also they can imagine themselves one of those writers, trying out another ending or adding a new episode. What I say is, "If Jules Verne were in the class, I hope he'd be happy doing the writing," i.e., writing that's more than *about writing*—at

least some of the time. Finally, on occasion, I give pop writing assignments, maybe using Chris Van Allsburg's *Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (1984), or sometimes just handing out single words on 3 × 5 cards, two to a student (words like *dive, skin, shell, root, dark, lost, silent*, and so on), saying, either in small groups or individually, you have so many minutes to write a story. The example in the sidebar is one such exercise. Routinely, I find that the students are meeting out of class to polish their stories, to take one step further. Often the results are astonishing. Always, it's a kick—for the students and for me. I get one complaint: I don't do them enough.

What to Teach: Some Suggestions

Having characterized science-fiction readers as an unpredictable bunch, I'd like to mention a few books that might prove first enlightening texts for the uninitiated. While these may be suitable for readers at the younger end of the spectrum, they also work for older readers, as you will find out when you read them yourself. This is a good moment to mention *The Science-Fiction Encyclopedia* (Nicholls 1979) and *Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers* (Smith 1986), both of which provide quick insights into the genre and into specific works. *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, available as a trade paperback, is an especially rich introduction to the whole science-fiction field, not just its fiction. I also must add Le Guin's *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989), a collection of essays that sends me soaring every time I crack the cover. To find out about science fiction, go to its most exquisite practitioner.

I've already mentioned Arthur C. Clarke's *City and the Stars*, which unlocks the imagination in its portrayal of a young boy of the distant future whose curiosity sets him aside from every single person in his supposedly utopian community of Diaspar. Impatient with its sameness, he finds a way out, to Lys, a differently oriented community, in harmony with nature, not just mind. For his projections of future history, Clarke drew on Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), a philosophical novel with a time span that reaches 20,000,000 years from the present.

Phillip K. Dick's *Nick and the Glimmung*, written in 1966 but not published until 1988, is almost a children's book, but its wit and its irony make it a find for any reader. Nick Graham, alas, owns a cat

in a not-too-distant San Francisco when owning animals is forbidden.

For a long time now, Earth had been terribly overcrowded. Too many people existed now, more and more of them every year. No one lived in a house anymore; that, like owning pets, had become illegal. People here in San Francisco, and everywhere else, lived in giant apartment buildings which rose up floor after floor, and even descended down underground, where families with less money lived. As the number of people increased, food became scarcer; hence the new anti-pet law, and the appearance of the dreaded anti-pet man. (9)

When Nick's parents decide to emigrate to Plowman's Planet—well, what follows is vintage Dick—comic but provocative.

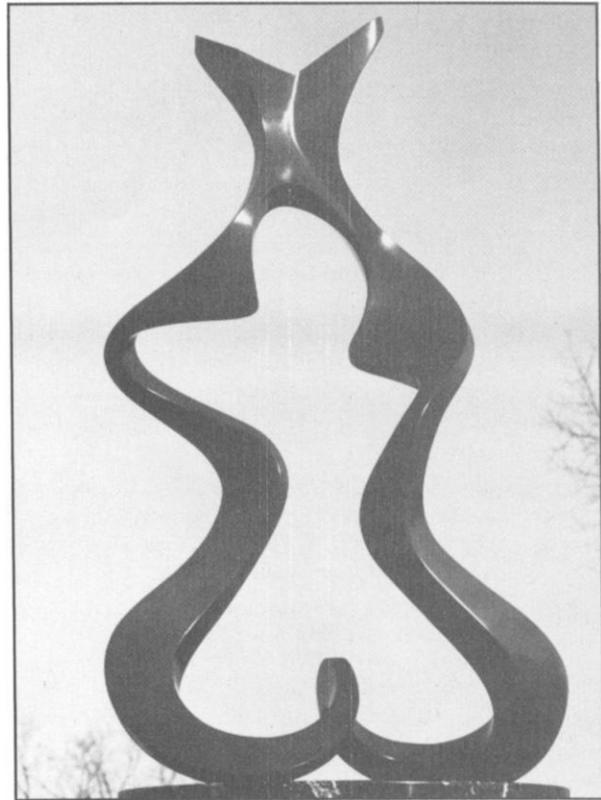
Outside the Gates by Molly Gloss (1986) is fantasy. A young boy, Vren, is expelled from his society when it is discovered he is "shadowed," that he has ESP powers (his mutual understanding with animals). In the wilderness, living with Rusche, a weatherworker, he comes alive. The crux of the novel involves another exile, Spellbinder, whose talent enables him to use others' power for profane ends. It is a novel of adolescence, of exile, of moral rather than physical violence.

Robert Heinlein's *Door into Summer* (1957) is a time-travel novel, rich in the paradoxes engendered by that sub-genre. It's also a revenge novel, in which the hero, frozen out of his own corporation, takes the "long sleep" and then awakes after cryogenic suspension, ready to manipulate the past. For me, this novel has the special advantage that it is not later Heinlein (post-*Stranger in a Strange Land*) and thus is free of political hectoring.

Dune (1965) needs little introduction. Frank Herbert's novel is light-years beyond the film, and though it may be "space-opera," it is also what Herbert has at times called "an environmental handbook." Thus it combines an exciting plot with the broadest of values. Though I personally don't care for its many sequels, I love *Dune*.

Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes chronicles the story of Charley Gordon, whose intelligence (an IQ of 68) is artificially increased to genius level. It is a sensitive and clearly written book. In this case, its film version, *Charly* (1968), represents the novel fairly and vividly.

Ursula K. Le Guin offers an excess of riches. Her Earthsea novels (1975, 1984, 1984) are masterpieces of fantasy, set in a world where magic operates with the precision of Newton's laws of



Larry Young *Introspection* 25" Bronze

physics. *The Beginning Place* (1980), for somewhat older readers, describes two youths, Hugh and Irene, who find their way across a stream and into a twilight land. Their dreary lives yield to a strange community, at first a relief but afterwards quite otherwise. Like all of Le Guin's work, it is a rich and satisfying novel.

Two other novels, Alexei Panshin's *Rite of Passage* (1987), which first appeared in 1968, and Vonda N. McIntyre's *Exile Waiting* (1975), are worth mentioning. Each tells the story of a young girl who must learn how to survive in a constricted society. Both stories are powerfully told.

Finally, a classic from 1949, George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1976), a disaster novel set in the aftermath of a virus plague that has annihilated almost all life in America, is a work that moves deliberately and carefully—is it worth the hero's while to keep his wallet? "The money would probably do him no harm," and besides he'd be "uncomfortable without it."

Since this essay is itself really a beginning, I offer no conclusion. If you're not already reading science fiction, here's your chance. If you are, I

hope you already know the special joy that comes from sharing it with your students.

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Recommended Works

- Asimov, Isaac. 1953. *The Foundation Trilogy*. New York: Avon. ISBN 0-380-00101-2
- Bishop, Michael. 1982. *No Enemy But Time*. New York: Timescape. ISBN 0-671-83576-9
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Note on Photographs

The photographs in this and the next three articles are sculptures by Larry Young and Heather Foote. Young's work was featured previously on the cover of the April 1988 *EJ*. Both artists balance traditional subjects and classical lines with contemporary design and imaginative celebration of space, weight, and texture. We submit that this balance is analogous to the craft of modern fantasy and science fiction.