

Science Fiction: What it is and what it does

A definition of SF:

a narrative in which the author either

1. alters the world with which we are familiar – usually through a technological change or innovation in the near or far future – or ...
2. presents an entirely new alternative world – either on another planet or through an alternative vision of the past or present reality on earth

“Good” science fiction uses the new and often alien world it constructs to comment on the real world in which it was written. It holds us a cracked mirror to its own culture and asks difficult questions about the social, economic and political issues of the day – questions that are too difficult to ask in a straightforward, realistic form of writing.

A note on fantasy: *Science fiction and fantasy have many similarities – and it is not important to have a rigid distinction between the two genres. In general, however, fantasy does not rely as much on technological change, the future or outer space as science fiction does. It creates alternative worlds often out of a mythic past or a post-apocalyptic future. Nevertheless, “good” fantasy does the same stuff that “good” science fiction does.*

Science Fiction:

Key terms and concepts

A few types of science fiction

utopia -- coined by Thomas More in his 1515 classic by the same name -- literally “no place” (Latin) -- now connotes **a perfect or ideal world** ... classic example (beside *Utopia*): Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*

dystopia -- the opposite of utopia -- but not exactly -- usually used ironically in the sense that it is a world that appears or purports itself to be a utopia but it actually a confining nightmare ... classic example: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*/George Orwell’s *1984*

alternative reality -- not set in the future but a vision of what the present might have been ... classic example: Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (also, think *The Matrix*)

apocalyptic -- narratives set during or after a massive destruction of the earth -- frequently connected with either a nuclear war or ecological disaster ... classic example: *Mad Max* film series

lost world -- the discovery of a new world out of time, place, or both... classic example: Edgar Rice Burrough’s *The Land That Time Forgot*

space opera -- think “soap opera” -- emphasizes romantic adventure, interstellar travel, and space battles where the main storyline is centered around interstellar conflict and character drama ... classic example: *Star Wars*

“hard” science fiction -- narratives characterized by an interest in scientific detail or accuracy ... classic examples: *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Arthur C. Clarke/*Mars* trilogy by Kim Stanley Robinson

feminist science fiction -- narratives that focus on questioning traditional gender roles and even the nature of human sexuality itself ... classic example: *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula LeGuin

cyberpunk -- narratives that often center around hacker culture, computers and information technology -- usually set in worlds dominated by mega-corporations -- taking place in subcultures that work outside the social order ... classic example: William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (also, think *Matrix*)

Some general conventions of science fiction
(each type of SF has its own conventions as well)

world-building

suspension of disbelief

aliens

mad scientist

male/scientist/narrator

Common questions science fiction asks us to consider

How do we deal with **difference** – with people who have values that disturb and challenge us?

How do we maintain **individuality** in the face of a very strong communal identity?

Are we heading toward **totalitarianism** in our country and our world?

Are we losing control over **technology**? Is technology controlling us?

What does it mean to be “**human**”? What distinguish us from animals or from complex machines? Do animals or creatures we create (such as robots or clones) deserve the same respect we give other members of our own species?

Are we heading toward an **apocalypse** – through nuclear war or an ecological disaster – that causes massive destruction or alteration of our species? How will we survive?