Elements of Science Fiction

- form of fiction (not true)
- contains some sort of scientific element, such as
  - outer space
  - medicine
  - technology
- within the realm of possibility
- characters have some believable traits/qualities

The Characteristics of Science Fiction

- Science fiction is often based on scientific principles and technology.
- Science fiction may make predictions about life in the future.
- Science fiction often deals with aliens or with life on other worlds. [http://www.kimskemeteacheratl.com]
- Science fiction can comment on important issues in society.
Definition of Science Fiction

Science fiction is a genre of fiction in which the stories often tell about science and technology of the future. It is important to note that science fiction has a relationship with the principles of science—these stories involve partially true partially fictitious laws or theories of science. It should not be completely unbelievable, because it then ventures into the genre fantasy.

The plot creates situations different from those of both the present day and the known past. Science fiction texts also include a human element, explaining what effect new discoveries, happenings and scientific developments will have on us in the future.

Science fiction texts are often set in the future, in space, on a different world, or in a different universe or dimension.

Early pioneers of the genre of science fiction are H. G. Wells (The War of the Worlds) and Jules Verne (20,000 Leagues Under The Sea).

Some well-known 20th century science fiction texts include 1984 by George Orwell, Brave New World by Aldous Huxley, and The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand. In addition, the four most-popular and well-recognized 20th century authors are Isaac Asimov, author of the Foundation trilogy and his robot series, Arthur C. Clarke famous for 2001, a Space Odyssey; Ray Bradbury, known for his Martian Chronicles, and Robert Hiehlein, author of Stranger in a Strange Land and The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress.

What is Science Fiction - Definition, Characteristics, Books & Authors

Lesson Transcript

Joshua

Joshua holds a master's degree in Latin and has taught a variety of Classical Literature and Language courses.

"20,000 Leagues under the Sea," "Frankenstein," "Star Trek" – it's all science fiction, but what does that mean? Find out in this lesson where you'll learn more about the genre and its characteristics, as well as encounter some authors and their works that have made science fiction what it is today.

A Nebulous Genre: Defining Science Fiction

What is science fiction? Or, how do you recognize the genre? At its core, science fiction is a genre that explores the nature and direction of human knowledge.

The Beginnings of Science Fiction

Jules Verne is often hailed as the "Father of Science Fiction," because of his works such as From the Earth to the Moon and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. Verne's works have had a tremendous impact on the genre, but as we will see momentarily, Verne's writing in the last half of the 19th century was not the first author to create work identifiable as science fiction. However, he made a great contribution to the genre by using real scientific principles and experimental believable in a fictional context, often so much so that his works of fiction have sometimes even inspired scientific reality, such as the submarine and laser weapon.

Verne's science fiction, the number of self-contained stories has skyrocketed and continues to grow. How many readers has only seen in literature, but also in television and film. It's important we recognize how exactly to identify them, let's look at some characteristics shared by stories in the genre.

Mary Shelley: Frankenstein

Mary Shelley originally set out to write a horror story, but while her work is Frankenstein is quite chilling, it's also an early precursor to modern science fiction. Originally published in 1818, a decade before Jules Verne's birth, Shelley's tale chronicles the monstrous experiments of Victor Frankenstein, to the destruction of his artificial life. Once successful, the monster must then find a way to cope with the consequences of his actions. Shelley succeeded in her work, the Monster Frankenstein, meticulously exploring the moral quandaries of human knowledge and invention represented in the Greek myth.
The difference between fantasy and science fiction

Articulating the difference between fantasy and science fiction can become surprisingly contentious as anyone who has witnessed furious debates about which books can enter science fiction awards can testify. However, there are a few key differences in the genres that can help us to separate one type of book from the other in the ‘science fiction vs fantasy’ debate.

- Science fiction deals with scenarios and technology that are possible or may be possible based on science. Some science fiction such as future space opera or time travel stories may seem implausible, but they are still not beyond the realm of scientific theory. On the other hand, fantasy general deals with supernatural and magical occurrences that have no basis in science.

- Fantasy is an older genre of literature than science fiction; in fact, fantasy is arguably the oldest genre. If we look back to the earliest surviving stories from human civilization such as the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh or the ancient Greek myths, we find stories of gods, monsters and magic. Science fiction is a relatively recent genre of the last century or so with origins going back only a few hundred years before that.

- Both science fiction and fantasy require rules. Just because fantasy is not based on scientific facts or speculation doesn’t mean that anything can go in fantasy. Certain laws must govern a fantasy world as well; the difference is that in fantasy, the author makes up the rules.

Surprisingly, science fiction and fantasy cannot always be distinguished by settings or other elements. Many would argue that Anne McCaffrey’s Pern series is science fiction despite the existence of dragons while others say the Star Wars films are clearly fantasy despite the space setting.

What do you feel is the the main difference between science fiction and fantasy?
Questions to Consider While Reading Science Fiction

SETTING (TIME AND PLACE)
- Do you think that the author accurately describes scientific principles in the novel? Why or why not?
- List some details from the novel that describe science and scientific principles.
- List some items from the story that can be found now. List some items that seem to be from the future.

CHARACTERS
- Explain the characters' involvement in the plot and story line.
- How are the characters important to the action of the novel?
- Are there any characters in the story who are different from those in other genres?

PLOT (STORY LINE)
- Does the plot focus on a particular area of science or scientific principle? Explain.
- Do the characters of the story participate in a documented or controversial area of science? Explain.
- Do you think the conflict of the story is real or fictional? Provide examples to illustrate your choice.

SUMMARY
- Why do you think the author chose to write about this particular incident?
- Why is this book considered to be science fiction?
- Do you think this novel is a good or bad science fiction text, based on the definition of science fiction?
- What scientific principle or technology does the novel reveal?
- How can this novel be compared to contemporary time?

Any other thoughts?