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A Sense of Wonder: An Introduction to Science Fiction

By Thomas Pool
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In this informational text, Thomas Pool discusses the genre of science fiction and how, since its creation, it has continued to emerge in art and culture. As you read, make note of the details that explain what science fiction is and how it has changed over time.

The Year Without a Summer

[1] Mary Shelley was just eighteen years old when she and her husband visited their friend Lord Byron at his villa in Switzerland in the summer of 1816. A year earlier and half a world away, Mount Tambora had exploded in Indonesia, the largest volcanic eruption in human history. The explosion pumped so much ash and dust into the sky that the world temperature plummeted, drastically, for over a year. The sun turned red, crops failed, livestock died, rivers flooded with rain, snow covered the fields, lakes froze in the depths of summer and the birds did not sing. Disease took thousands, starvation many thousands more. These were strange and scary times indeed, and there was not much for Mary and her companions to do except sit indoors by the fire as the icy rain rapped at the window panes and lightning streaked through the dark sky. The three were all writers and had decided that the best way to spend such a dark and dreary summer was to hold a friendly competition: who could write the best ghost story?



"The Tunnel" by Nathan Duck is licensed under CC0.

Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus, considered the first work of science fiction, tells the tale of an abominable monster created by a mad scientist who soon learns he cannot control his creation, and was written by Mary Shelley that cold, dark summer. Times of uncertainty, great adversity or catastrophe change the way we look at the world. What once seemed like a bright and certain future becomes dark and secretive. We do our best to make sense of these anxieties the way we have always done when the world we thought we knew reveals itself to be unknowable: we tell stories.

So who won the writing competition that cold and dreary summer? Well, just open your front door on a Halloween night to see the children with green face paint and fake scars and you'll have your answer.

Brave New Worlds

What is science fiction? Is it horror? Fantasy? Dystopia?¹ A ghost story? Science fiction, or sci-fi, as it's often called, helps us make sense of the mysteries of our world by exploring the mysteries of worlds we create. It can incorporate the elements of horror, fantasy, dystopia, folklore and others into its many subgenres. There is no one specific way to embrace science fiction in literature or film. It is a versatile² and dynamic³ genre and it's meant to be. Science fiction helps us find the answers to our problems in the stars of distant galaxies, in the minds of machines brought to life, and in the strength of the heroes who rise above adversity and save their worlds.

- [5] The American sci-fi author Isaac Asimov defined the genre as “that branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology.” We see how science fiction resurges with every great technological leap, from the industrial revolution, to the fear of nuclear annihilation⁴ after the Second World War, the hope of the first Moon landing, and the dawn of the Information Age. Throughout it all, science fiction helps us understand our ever-changing world through rich tapestries of stories, novels, songs, and films. The sci-fi editor David Hartwell states that science fiction's wide appeal “lies in [the] combination of the rational, the believable, with the miraculous. It is an appeal to the sense of wonder.”

Infernal⁵ Machines

While there are many historical works of literature and cultural artifacts that explore themes of science fiction, many writers and historians of the genre agree that Mary Shelley was the first sci-fi writer. Her story, *Frankenstein*, was written at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, just when it seemed that the leaps and bounds of technology could accomplish anything, even reanimating a corpse. Many writers felt the same as Shelley, and the first generation of science fiction writers soon emerged.

The Industrial Revolution, the era of great advancement in human technology due to the rise of factories and automation, created many new scientific fields and social changes and many new anxieties about the changing shape of the world. This was also the age of colonialism⁶ and

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1. an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic
 2. **Versatile (adjective)** able to adapt or be adapted to many different functions or activities
 3. **Dynamic (adjective)** characterized by constant change, activity, or progress
 4. **Annihilation (noun)** complete destruction
 5. **Infernal (adjective) relating to hell or the underworld**
 6. the policy of a country seeking to extend or retain its authority over other people or

empire. Empires like France, Germany, and Britain, having created new machines of war, were able to invade African and Asian nations and subject them to brutal colonial regimes thanks to the Industrial Revolution. H.G. Wells, an English writer in the late 19th century, saw just how easily and brutally the British were able to conquer other nations through the use of superior technology and he wondered how the same could happen to the English. In 1898 Wells published his famous novel, *The War of the Worlds*. In Wells' novel, the Martians have landed in southern England and destroy London with their superior technology. His characters, now refugees, flee the city and try to survive the death and devastation surrounding them. Wells wrote many other sci-fi novels and his mark on the genre is felt to this day.

Other writers cut from the same cloth as Wells, like Aldous Huxley and Jules Verne, also left their mark on the genre with their tales of the possible consequences of unchecked technological progression. Avant-garde films⁷ like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* emerged after the horrors of the First World War left many with the desire to create a new, harmonious society. These films explored how the best of intentions can have disastrous consequences.

Life on Mars

When the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki a new age of science fiction dawned. The world knew, for the first time, of a technology that could truly destroy the world. Japan, reeling⁸ from the devastation of the two nuclear bombings, gave the world its most apt sci-fi metaphor for the mayhem and destruction of the bombings: *Godzilla*. A new Atomic Era subgenre of giant mutant creature attacks was born. Primarily told on film, these stories helped navigate the anxiety that at any moment some unstoppable force could end the world. This trope can still be seen today in the *Cloverfield* series and modern remakes of *Godzilla*. It can also be found in the enduringly popular movies in which superheroes do battle with a threatening outside force in possession of a new, devastating technology or a large, unstoppable monster.

- [10] As the Space Race heated up, humanity looked towards the stars with a mix of hope and fear. We dreamed of a better future with *Star Trek*, which brought attention to issues of racial disparities happening on our own planet during the Civil Rights Era and the duties a just society has to all its citizens. *Star Wars*, which premiered in 1977, reminded a younger generation of the horrors of fascism that their parents fought against in World War II as George Lucas drew inspiration from Nazi Germany to create the Galactic Empire.

Science fiction is still alive and well today. Our current Information Age has advanced society at a speed not seen since the Industrial Revolution. Television shows like the Netflix series *Black*

territories

7. films that incorporate experimental or unusual ideas
8. **Reel (verb)** to lose balance or experience the feeling of being disoriented or bewildered due to a setback

Mirror explore the new anxieties developing around the rapidly changing technology that dominates every aspect of our daily lives.

Beam Me Up!

Science fiction has not only changed imaginary worlds, but it has had a significant impact on our real world, as well. Martin Cooper, an engineer at Motorola, invented the first cell phone. He was directly inspired by the 'communicator' in *Star Trek*. Virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa were also dreamt up decades earlier by science fiction writers. Sci-fi has become a multi-billion dollar industry: from *Star Wars* to the *Avengers* series, sci-fi is arguably one of the most popular and profitable film genres of today.

Expos like ComicCon draw thousands upon thousands of science fiction enthusiasts to their conventions every year, inspiring dedicated cult followings for modern science fiction authors, directors, and actors.

Sci-fi is a genre for everyone. It is a dynamic genre with a wide array of themes that is being propelled forward today by many new and exciting authors from many different backgrounds. In 2016, N. K. Jemisin, one of the most popular sci-fi authors of today, became the first African-American woman to win the Hugo Award, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the genre, for her novel *The Fifth Season*. Liu Cixin is a nine-time winner of the Galaxy Award, China's most prestigious sci-fi award, as well as the Hugo Award. Ted Chiang, also a multi-Hugo Award winner as well as four-time Nebula Award winner, was published in *The Best American Short Stories* anthology of 2016, a rare honor as it does not often publish sci-fi stories. Charles Yu was named "5 Under 35" author by the National Book Foundation and his book *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* was listed on *Time Magazine's* Top 10 books of 2010. He also is a prolific TV and film writer as well as a journalist.

- [15] As our world continues to change, surprise, and confound us, sci-fi isn't going anywhere. In fact, as many nations and private corporations start to invest in the idea of colonizing Mars and the Moon, the genre can give us new ways to imagine the consequences in the years to come. The sense of wonder, of awe at the great mystery of life, is what will keep us coming back to science fiction for all time.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is the central idea of the text?
 - A. Science fiction can lead to technological advancements in the real world.
 - B. Science fiction is often a reaction to what is happening in society and the world.
 - C. Mary Shelley was the first science fiction writer, even though that was not her intention.
 - D. Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" is her idea about what was possible at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

2. What does the word "abominable" mean as it is used in the text? (Paragraph 2)
 - A. pleasant to get along with
 - B. able to understand
 - C. revolting to look at
 - D. easy to talk to

3. How does paragraph 14 contribute to the development of ideas in the article?
 - A. It develops the idea that sci-fi has a diverse and wide appeal.
 - B. It develops the idea that sci-fi is a genre that has a lot of literary prizes.
 - C. It develops the idea that sci-fi books are often made into Hollywood movies.
 - D. It develops the idea that sci-fi mainly appeals to groups who have a special interest in it.

4. What connection does the author draw between "Godzilla" and today's superhero movies?
 - A. Today's superhero movies imagine the character of Godzilla in a fictional world, fighting an outside force.
 - B. They all explore the idea of an uncontrollable force that could end the world at any time.
 - C. They all have multiple remakes with each new generation of movie-goers.
 - D. Today's superhero movies are remakes of "Godzilla."

5. How does the author develop his central idea over the course of the text?
