

A Sense of Wonder: An Introduction to Science Fiction

By Thomas Pool

In this informational text, Thomas Pool talks about science fiction and how it has grown in art and culture. As you read, note the details that explain what science fiction is and how it has changed over time.

The Year Without a Summer

Mary Shelley was just eighteen years old when she and her husband visited their friend Lord Byron in Switzerland in the summer of 1816. A year before, Mount Tambora had exploded in Indonesia, the largest volcanic eruption in human history. The explosion put so much ash and dust into the sky that the world temperature dropped a lot for over a year. The sun turned red, crops failed, animals died, rivers flooded, snow covered the fields in the summer, and birds did not sing. Many people died from disease and hunger. These were strange and scary times. There was not much for Mary and her friends to do except sit indoors by the fire while it rained and lightning flashed. They decided to have a friendly competition: who could write the best ghost story?

Mary Shelley wrote "Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus" during that cold, dark summer. The book is about a monster created by a scientist who cannot control it. This is considered the first work of science fiction. Times of trouble and disaster change the way we see the world. What once seemed like a bright future becomes dark and mysterious. We try to make sense of our worries by telling stories.

So who won the writing competition that cold and dreary summer? Just open your front door on Halloween night and see the children dressed up as Frankenstein's monster, 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, helps us understand the mysteries of our world by exploring the mysteries of worlds we create. It can include horror, fantasy, dystopia, folklore, and more. There is no one way to write science fiction. It is a flexible² and changing³ genre. Science fiction helps us find answers to our problems by looking at distant galaxies, smart machines, and brave heroes.

The American sci-fi writer Isaac Asimov said the genre is about "the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology." We see science fiction come back with every big jump in technology, from the industrial revolution to the fear of nuclear war after World War II, the hope of landing on the Moon, and the rise of the Information Age. Science fiction helps us understand our changing world through stories, novels, songs, and movies.

The sci-fi editor David Hartwell said that science fiction's appeal is "in [the] combination of the rational, the believable, with the miraculous. It is an appeal to the sense of wonder."

Infernal Machines

Many people agree that Mary Shelley was the first sci-fi writer. She wrote "Frankenstein" at the start of the Industrial Revolution, a time of great technological advances. Many new scientific fields and social changes caused new anxieties. This was also the age of colonialism,⁶ when empires like France, Germany, and Britain used new war machines to conquer other nations. H.G. Wells, an English writer, saw how the British used technology to conquer others and wondered if the same could happen to the English. In 1898, Wells published "The War of the Worlds," where Martians destroy London with their advanced technology. Wells' characters try to survive the destruction. Wells wrote many other sci-fi novels and his influence is still felt today.

Other writers like Aldous Huxley and Jules Verne also wrote about the possible dangers of unchecked technological progress. Films like Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" showed how good intentions can lead to bad outcomes.

Life on Mars

When the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a new age of science fiction began. The world now knew of a technology that could destroy everything. Japan, recovering from the bombings, gave the world a new sci-fi metaphor: Godzilla. This subgenre of giant monster attacks showed the fear that an unstoppable force could end the world. This idea is still seen today in movies like the "Cloverfield" series and modern "Godzilla" remakes, as well as superhero movies where heroes fight a threatening force with new, dangerous technology.

As the Space Race heated up, people looked to the stars with hope and fear. "Star Trek" showed a hopeful future and addressed social issues during the Civil Rights Era. "Star Wars," starting in 1977, reminded people of the dangers of fascism, drawing from the history of Nazi Germany.

Science fiction is still popular today. The Information Age has changed society quickly. Shows like "Black Mirror" explore the new anxieties about rapidly changing technology.

Beam Me Up!

Science fiction has changed imaginary worlds and our real world. Martin Cooper, an engineer at Motorola, invented the first cell phone inspired by the communicator in "Star Trek." Virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa were imagined by sci-fi writers decades earlier. Sci-fi is a multi-billion dollar industry, with popular movies like "Star Wars" and the "Avengers" series.

Expos like ComicCon attract thousands of science fiction fans each year, celebrating authors, directors, and actors.

Sci-fi is a genre for everyone. It is diverse and exciting, with many new authors from different backgrounds. In 2016, N. K. Jemisin became the first African-American woman to win the Hugo Award for her novel "The Fifth Season." Liu Cixin, a Chinese author, has won the Galaxy Award and the Hugo Award. Ted Chiang, a multi-Hugo Award winner, was included in "The Best American Short Stories" anthology of 2016. Charles Yu was named a "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 is also a TV and film writer.

As our world keeps changing, sci-fi will continue to be important. It helps us imagine the future as nations and companies plan to colonize Mars and the Moon. The sense of wonder will keep us coming back to science fiction.

Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. What is the main idea of the text?

- (A) Science fiction can lead to real-world inventions.
- (B) Science fiction often responds to events 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" shows what was possible at the start 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 ideas in the article?

- (A) It shows that sci-fi has a wide appeal.
- (B) It shows that sci-fi wins many literary prizes.
- (C) It shows that sci-fi books are often made into movies.
- (D) It shows that sci-fi mainly appeals to special interest groups.

4. What connection does the author make between "Godzilla" and today's superhero movies?

- (A) Today's superhero movies feature Godzilla fighting an outside force.
- (B) They both explore the idea of an uncontrollable force that could end the world.
- (C) They both have multiple remakes for each new generation of viewers.
- (D) Today's superhero movies are remakes of "Godzilla."