

Definitions

PROPOSED DEFINITIONS of Science Fiction

Discussion: How others have defined and discussed Science Fiction

Meaning of each quotation -- breaking into discrete elements and then looking at as a whole again.

Compare each definition to personal definition and to one another. Elements in common?

Gregory Benford

SF is a controlled way to think and dream about the future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious. Anything that turns you and your social context, the social you, inside out. Nightmares and visions, always outlined by the barely possible.

James E. Gunn

Science Fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger. *Introduction, The Road To Science Fiction, Vol 1, NEL, New York 1977*

Sam Moskowitz

Science

fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of its readers by utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculations in physical science, space, time, social science, and philosophy.

Theodore Sturgeon

A science fiction story is a story built around human beings, with a human problem and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its scientific content.

Definition given by: William Atheling Jr., (James Blish) in The issue at Hand: Studies in Contemporary Magazine Fiction (Chicago, 1964)

William Wilson (1850's): "Campbell says that 'Fiction in Poetry is not the reverse of truth, but her soft and enchanting resemblance.' Now this applies especially to SF, in which the revealed truths of Science may be given, interwoven with a pleasing story which may itself be poetical and true -- thus circulating a knowledge of the Poetry of Science, clothed in a garb of the Poetry of Life." (quoted by Edward James in Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century, Oxford: 1994).

Darko Suvin: SF: "the literature of cognitive estrangement" with a radically political project against "bourgeois" mainstream novel; "SF is, then a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment." "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," College English, 1972

Kingsley Amis: SF "is mostly contracted in adolescence or not at all." "Science fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudotechnology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin." New Maps of Hell

Sarah Lefanu: "By borrowing from other literary forms [sf] lets writers defamiliarise the familiar, and make familiar the new and strange. These twin possibilities, apparently contradictory (but SF is full of contradictions), offer enormous scope to women writers who are thus released from the constraints of realism. The social and sexual hierarchies of the contemporary world can be examined through the process of 'estrangement,' thus challenging normative ideas of gender roles; and visions of different worlds can be created, made familiar to the reader through the process of narrative. SF narrative can be used to break down, or to build up. ... Contemporary science fiction offers this subversive potential, based as it is on an Einsteinian model of the universe with entropy as a central trope. SF offers a language for the narration of dreams, for the dissolution of self and for the interrogation of cultural order." Feminism and Science Fiction, Indiana University Press, 1988, 21-23.

Sam Moskowitz: "Science fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of its reader by utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculations in physical science, space, time, social science and philosophy." *Seekers of Tomorrow*

Natalie M. Rosinsky: speculative fiction combines fantasy and science fiction because "women's studies research and the new physics indicate that such conventional concepts of im/possibility are limited and value laden."

Brian Aldiss: "Science Fiction is the search for a definition of man [sic] and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science)"

Joanna Russ: "Science Fiction is 'What If Literature' because it 'shows things not as they are but as they might be, and for this 'might be' the author must offer a rational, serious consistent explanation, one that does not (in Samuel Delany's phrase) offend against what is known to be known." "What If ...' Literature" in *The Contemporary Literary Scene*, ed. F. V. Magill, 1973, p. 197.

Joanna Russ: "Science Fiction, like medieval painting, addresses itself to the mind, not the eye. We are not presented with a representation of what we know to be true through direct experience; rather we are given what we know to be true through other means -- or in the case of science fiction, what we know to be at least possible. Thus the science-fiction writer can portray Jupiter as easily as the medieval painter can portray Heaven; neither of them has been there, but that doesn't matter. To turn from other modern fiction to science fiction is oddly like turning from Renaissance painting, with all that flesh and foreshortening, to the clarity and luminousness of painters who paint ideas. For this reason, science fiction, like much medieval art, can deal with transcendental events. Hence the tendency of science fiction towards wonder, awe, and a religious or quasi-religious attitude towards the universe." *How To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, 1995, 9

Robert Scholes: SF can "create a modern conscience for the human race" but it is also "trivial, ephemeral works of popular fiction which are barely literate."

Miriam Allen Deford: "Science Fiction deals with improbable possibilities, fantasy with plausible impossibilities."

Gardner Dozois: "Science fiction can be a window on worlds we'd never otherwise see and people and creatures we'd never otherwise know, it can provide us with insights into the inner workings of our society that are difficult to gain in any other way, grant us perspectives into social mores and human nature itself mostly otherwise unreachable; it can be an invaluable tool with which to take preconceived notions and received wisdom to pieces and reassemble them into something new, it can prepare us for the inevitable and sometimes dismaying changes ahead of us, helping to buffer us against the winds of Future Shock; it can be terrifying and cautionary, it can be chastening and angry, it can be sad and elegiac, it can be wise and profound -- but sometimes it's just fun." *The Good Old Stuff*, 1998, xv.

Potter Stuart: "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it." (Actually he was talking about pornography -- but the quote still works...")

Frederic Jameson: "It would be a mistake to make the 'apologia' for SF in terms of specifically high literary values ... SF is a sub-genre with a complex and interesting formal history of its own, with its own dynamic, which is not that of high culture, but which stands in complementary and dialectical relationship to high culture and modernism as such."

Octavia Butler: "So then I write science fiction and fantasy for a living. As far as I know I'm still the only Black woman who does this. ... One of the questions I heard most often was, "What good is science fiction to Black people?" I was usually asked this by a Black person. ... What good is any form of literature to Black people? What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, of the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking -- whoever "everyone" happens to be this year. And what good is all this to Black people?" *Bloodchild and other Stories*, 1995, 134-135.

Edmund Crispin: "A science-fiction story is one which presupposes a technology, or an effect of technology, or a disturbance in the natural order, such as humanity, up to the time of writing, has not in fact experienced."

Michael Moorcock: "Science fiction is a form of fantastic fiction which explains the imaginative perspectives of modern science. "

Isaac Asimov: Modern science fiction is the only form of literature that consistently considers the nature of the changes that face us, the possible consequences, and the possible solutions.

Arthur C. Clarke: "Science fiction [is] the only genuine consciousness expanding drug."

Ursula K. LeGuin: "If Science Fiction has a major gift to offer literature, I think it is just this: the capacity to face an open universe. Physically open, psychically open. No doors shut. What science, from physics and astronomy to history and psychology, has given us, is a the open universe: a cosmos that is not a simple, fixed hierarchy, but an immensely complex process in time. All the doors stand open, from the pre-human past through the incredible present to the terrible and hopeful future. All connections are possible. All alternatives are thinkable. It is not a comfortable, reassuring place. It's a very large house, a very drafty house. But its the house we live in. And science fiction seems to be the modern literary art which is capable of living in that huge and drafty house, and feeling at home there and playing games up and down the stairs, from basement to attic." (90) ("Escape Routes")

Philip K. Dick: Science fiction: "It is our world dislocated by some kind of mental effort on the part of the author, our world transformed into that which it is not or not yet. This world must differ from the given in at least one way, and this one way must be sufficient to give rise to events that could not occur in our society -- or in any known society present or past. There must be a coherent idea involved in this dislocation; that is, the dislocation must be a conceptual one, not merely a trivial or a bizarre one -- this is the essence of science fiction, the conceptual dislocation within the society so that as a result a new society is generated in the author's mind, transferred to paper, and from paper it occurs as a convulsive shock in the reader's mind, the shock of dysrecognition. He knows that it is not his actual world that he is reading about. ... Now to define good science fiction. The conceptual dislocation -- the new idea, in other words -- must be truly new (or a new variation on an old one) and it must be intellectually stimulating to the reader; it must invade his mind and wake it up to the possibility of something he had not up to then thought of. ... The very best science fiction ultimately winds up being a collaboration between author and reader, in which both create -- and enjoy doing it: Joy is the essential and final ingredient of science fiction, the joy of discovery of newness.

Gregory Benford: SF is a controlled way to think and dream about the future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious. Anything that turns you and your social context, the social you, inside out. Nightmares and visions, always outlined by the barely possible.

Samuel R. Delany: "there are those people who won't read science fiction, and there are also people who really can't read it, and are to be distinguished from people who just won't read it. I know I've come across more and more people who've actually tried to read science fiction and can't make it make sense. When I actually worked with some people who expressed their goodwill, claiming very seriously they had tried this, that, the other science-fiction novel, and it just didn't make sense -- when we began to read the thing sentence by sentence, and you worked over it with them the way you would work with a child just learning to read, I began to discover that what they couldn't do is put the world together. They couldn't take the little hints, the little flashes, the little throwaways that any science-fiction writer uses, to make the world coherent, and make a world out of it. They were actually having difficulty, unless there was a page of exposition. All those little hints and what-have-you which are the essence of a science-fiction story--by which the author makes the whole thing vivid and makes the whole thing glitter--they literally didn't know how these were supposed to be read. And you'd also discover that by working with them through a science -fiction story literally phrase by phrase--you know, what does, and what does 'what does this mean about the world' mean about the story--you discovered they got better at it and eventually they learned it. But it is a language; in that sense science fiction really is a language; ..." (71) (Interview with Charles Platt printed in *Dreammakers: The Uncommon People Who Write Science Fiction*, N.Y.: Berkley, 1980)

Amit Goswami: "Science Fiction is that class of fiction which contains the currents of change in science and society. It concerns itself with the critique, extension, revision, and conspiracy of revolution, all directed against static scientific paradigms. Its goal is to prompt a paradigm shift to a new view that will be more responsive and true to nature.*The Cosmic Dancers* (New York, 1983)