

Dare to know

Science Fiction¹

Fiction that depicts imagined scientific or technological advances (e.g., time travel, artificial intelligence) and their impact on society.

This genre is often called the “literature of ideas” and can be written in two basic styles: “hard” science fiction and “soft” science fiction. Hard science fiction novels are those which concentrate on natural science concepts (e.g., physics, chemistry, astronomy), with less of a focus on character development or plot. This scientific realism shapes the aesthetic and becomes the defining feature of the story. These books relate stories from a perspective that conforms to actual scientific knowledge and physical laws. Great attention is paid to technological detail, although there may be some measure of plausible speculation. Soft science novels feature less focus on science and more on characters. When necessary, these stories usually deal with social sciences (e.g., psychology, anthropology, sociology), and are more concerned with human activity and affairs in a science fiction setting. The term “science fiction” was popularized, and possibly invented, by publisher Hugo Gernsback in the 1920s.

Isaac Asimov asserted in 1953 that science fiction consisted of three categories: the “gadget,” or the technology that is the end result of the plot; the adventure story that utilizes the gadget as a dramatic prop; or the “social” story that focuses on how the gadget influences the plot and affects people’s lives. A common trope of science fiction depicts humans coming into contact with intelligent extraterrestrial beings. These encounters can range from romantic to traumatic.

The “Age of the Pulps” (1920s to mid-1930s) in modern science fiction is characterized by the cheap, low-quality paper that comprised the majority of genre magazines. Due to low costs and high demand, stories were written and published quickly. Competition was fierce, and authors wrote plots that became increasingly formulaic and dramatic in the hopes of being sellable and noticeable. The “Golden Age” of science fiction (ca. 1938 to 1959) abandoned the dramatic, character-driven narratives of the pulp era, thoroughly developed single ideas, and pursued more linear storylines, scientific accuracy, problem-solving, and rigid storytelling. Found in “slick” magazines and novels, the Golden Age fostered a sense of wonder and a proactive attitude toward science and the cosmos. The “New Wave” of science fiction (1960s and 1970s) saw a

¹ Books belonging to the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* franchises are simply too numerous for a libguide of this nature, and their exclusion should not be construed as a negative opinion of their literary worth.

renewed interest in experimentation with the form, style, and aesthetics of stories, an innovative use of language, a greater inclusion of other literary styles, and an emphasis on the psychological and social sciences. Contemporary science fiction (1980s to present) is marked by the return to character-driven narratives, often bleak tones, and a connection to modern realities through themes such as rebellious youth cultures, environmental issues, and the influence of technology on culture and politics.

The Roman-Syrian satirist Lucian of Samosata wrote *A True History* (2nd century AD), perhaps the first science fiction novel in history. Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* (1634), Cyrano de Bergerac's *Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon* (1657), Jane C. Loudon's *The Mummy!* (1827), Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), Edward Abbot's *Flatland, Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), Edwin Balmer and Phillip Wylie's *When Worlds Collide* (1933), A. E. Van Vogt's *The World of Null-A* (1948), Isaac Asimov's *Pebble in the Sky* (1950) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* (1953), Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1954), Hal Clements's *Mission of Gravity* (1954), Harry Harrison's *Deathworld* (1960), Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961), Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Alexei Panshin's *Rite of Passage* (1968), Philip K. Dick's *Galactic Pot-Healer* (1994), and Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) are influential examples.

Common Elements

Speculative science
Advanced technology
Extraterrestrial lifeforms
Fictional worlds
Communications
Fear of the "other"
One's place in the universe
Intergalactic war

Faster-than-light travel
Hyperspace
Artificial gravity
Wormholes
Teleportation
Mind control
Worldbuilding

Benefits of Reading

Immerses readers in imaginative settings
Demonstrates to readers the creativity of others

Allows readers to consider new problems and contemplate novel way to address old problems

Sparks readers' imaginations and engenders flexible, creative thinking
Invites readers to explore challenges and opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked

Enhances vocabulary and language comprehension
Encourages readers to speculate about the future

Modern Literary Examples

<i>Ancillary Justice</i> (2013) by Ann Leckie
<i>Babel-17</i> (1976) by Samuel R. Delany
<i>The Beast With Nine Billion Feet</i> (2009) by Anil Menon
<i>Bellwether</i> (1996) by Connie Willis
<i>Beyond Sanctuary</i> (1985) by Janet Morris
<i>Blindsight</i> (2006) by Peter Watts
<i>Bluebird</i> (2022) by Ciel Pierlot
<i>The Bridge</i> (2000) by Janine Ellen Young
<i>The Broken Land</i> (1992) by Ian McDonald
<i>The Cobra Event</i> (1997) by Richard Preston
<i>Contact</i> (1985) by Carl Sagan
<i>Cowl</i> (2005) by Neal Asher
<i>Dead Space</i> (2021) by Kali Wallace
<i>The Dervish House</i> (2010) by Ian McDonald
<i>Diaspora</i> (1998) by Greg Egan
<i>Dragon's Egg</i> (1980) by Robert L. Forward
<i>Ecotopia</i> (1975) by Ernest Callenbach
<i>Emergence</i> (2018) by David Palmer
<i>Ender's Game</i> (1985) by Orson Scott Card
<i>Engine Summer</i> (1979) by John Crowley
<i>First Landing</i> (2001) by Robert Zurbin

<i>Foreigner</i> (1994) by C. J. Cherryh
<i>Gabriel's Ghost</i> (2005) by Linnea Sinclair
<i>Godel, Escher, Bach</i> (1979) by Douglas R. Hofstadter
<i>The Hercules Text</i> (1986) by Jack McDevitt
<i>House of Suns</i> (2008) by Alistair Reynolds
<i>Hunting Party</i> (1993) by Elizabeth Moon
<i>India's Story</i> (1993) by Kathryn S. Starbuck
<i>The Infinity Gambit</i> (1991) by James P. Hogan
<i>Jurassic Park</i> (1990) by Michael Crichton
<i>Killing Time</i> (2000) by Caleb Carr
<i>Kiln People</i> (2002) by David Brin
<i>Lilith's Brood</i> (2000) by Octavia E. Butler
<i>Limit of Vision</i> (2001) by Linda Nagata
<i>The Martian</i> (2014) by Andy Weir
<i>The Mount</i> (2005) by Carol Emshwiller
<i>One Second After</i> (2009) by William R. Forstchen
<i>The Passage</i> (2010) by Justin Cronin
<i>Reefsong</i> (1991) by Carol Severance
<i>The Remarkables</i> (1992) by Robert Reed

<i>Rendezvous with Rama</i> (1973) by Arthur C. Clarke
<i>Revelation Space</i> (2001) by Alastair Reynolds
<i>Ringworld</i> (1977) by Larry Niven
<i>Rocheworld</i> (1990) by Robert L. Forward
<i>Schismatrix Plus</i> (1996) by Bruce Sterling
<i>The Skinner</i> (2002) by Neal Asher
<i>Standing Wave</i> (1997) by Howard Hendrix
<i>Sundiver</i> (1980) by David Brin
<i>Super Extra Grande</i> (20212) by José Miguel Sánchez Gómez

<i>TekWar</i> (1989) by William Shatner
<i>Termination Shock</i> (2021) by Neal Stephenson
<i>To Your Scattered Bodies Go</i> (1971) by Philip José Farmer
<i>Venus on the Half Shell</i> (1988) by Philip José Farmer
<i>Vermilion Sands</i> (1971) by J. G. Ballard
<i>The Warrior's Apprentice</i> (1986) by Lois McMaster Bujold
<i>Up the Walls of the World</i> (1978) by James Tiptree Jr.