

THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION:

“Dinosaurs and B.-E. M.”

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The Age of Enlightenment brought decisive steps toward modern science, giving birth to the Scientific Revolution. During the 19th Century, the practice of science became professionalized and institutionalized, which continues to today.

So, upon this stage in the 19th Century strode the “Mother of Science Fiction,” Mary Shelley (1797-1851), whose Frankenstein of 1818 electrified the world! The promotion of the 1931 film featured a supply of smelling salts in theatre lobbies for those who might swoon!

The “Co-Father of Science Fiction” was H. G. Wells (1866-1946), whose War of the Worlds of 1898, as adapted on radio by Orson Wells on Halloween, 1938, sparked a mini-panic of alien invasion terror! His The Time Machine of 1895 and The Invisible Man of 1897 became best sellers. Hints of our future were depicted by aircraft, tanks, space and time travel, nuclear weapons, satellite television, and the World-Wide Web.

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The other “Co-Father of Science Fiction” was the commercially-successful French author Jules Verne (1828-1905). I remember watching, with wonder, the 1954 Disney film of Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea, of 1870. And I remember riding on the ride in Disneyland in California in the 1950’s. The 1959 film of Journey To The Center Of The Earth, starring James Mason and an unknown Pat Boone, featured an epic battle of dinosaurs, joining Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Lost World, of 1912, and the 1993 film Jurassic Park with dinosaur themes in science fiction.

The “Pulp Era” of science fiction, generally regarded as the 1920’s and 1930’s, included the *magazines* “Amazing Stories,” “Astounding Science Fiction,” and “Galaxy Science Fiction.” Pulp science fiction is noted for stereotypical female characters, un-realistic gadgetry, and fantastic monsters of various kinds, with lifeless stock characters and images, including works by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950). The pulp magazines were filled with intellectual ferment and excitement, but not sex, which was reserved for the garish artwork on the covers of scantily-clad women. The audience was usually young, male, and uninitiated into any literary culture; the audience was

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interested in the science and technology of the atom and of space travel, often in a sensational manner.

It was not uncommon for an editor to request a story about “Bug-Eyed Monsters,” which requests became known as “B.-E. M.” And so many authors took other identities that the book Who Goes There: A Bibliographic Dictionary of Pseudonymous Literature In The Fields Of Fantasy And Science Fiction, by Indianapolis author James A. Rock, requires over 200 pages to list all the stories and their authors. The contribution of Indianapolis was Catherine L. Moore (1911-1987), who broke into a male-dominated field, and later teamed with husband Henry Kuttner.

The attitude of bemused rejection---surely no one could be expected to take this stuff seriously---characterized the general reaction of mainstream literary culture, because so much early science fiction, including the pulps of course, was unsophisticated politically, shallow sociologically, lacking in rounded characterization of psychological depth, stylistically uninteresting, and, most of all, so

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unreal that a majority of educated readers has no interest in learning how to read the genre.

How many of us, in high school or in college English classes, read any science fiction? So rarely has a literature been judged exclusively by its worst examples!

The “Pulp Era” also encompassed mysteries, detective stories, and Western sagas.

The “Pulp Era” of science fiction was present in *newspapers*, with heroes such as Flash Gordon, Captain Video and Buck Rogers starring in space operas in comic strips. Flash Gordon ran from 1934 to 1992, finally defeating the evil Ming-The-Merciless! The adventures of Buck Rogers in later films, radio and television became an important part of our culture, with credit being given for bringing into popular media the concept of space exploration.

The “Pulp Era” of science fiction also was present in *film*, with a premier example of “The Phantom Empire,” a 1935 Western serial film, created in twelve chapters for viewing on Saturday matinees. Gene Autry (1907-1998) portrayed a Western singing

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cowboy in his first starring role, who stumbles upon an ancient subterranean civilization, Murania, complete with robots, ray-guns and advanced television. This Western musical, science fiction series wins the award for “pulp movie science fiction”!

The “Pulp Era” thankfully was eclipsed by “The Golden Age of Science Fiction,” often recognized as the period from the 1930’s to the 1950’s, when the public gained an appreciation of the genre. Numerous well-written, scientifically-literate novels were published by mainstream publishers. Higher-paying slick magazines, like “Collier’s,” “Esquire,” and “The Saturday Evening Post” printed short stories.

The term science fiction was coined in 1929 to signify the birth of a new genre, phoenixlike, from the ashes of an older term, “scientific romance.”

In a historic speech before the 1941 World Science Fiction Convention (actually a gathering of a couple of hundred American fans in Denver), Robert A. Heinlein proposed that the initials “SF” become the

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common abbreviation for science fiction, and SF it has remained!

The leader of the “Golden Age” was John W. Campbell, Jr., under his flagship magazine “Astounding Stories,” as he constantly provided leadership in improving quality of the submissions.

The best authors of the “Golden Age” include A. E. van Vogt (1912-2000), Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), and Robert A. Heinlein (1907-1988). Heinlein’s breakout from the pulp magazines into respectable magazines cannot be underrated in establishing the literary respectability of SF. By the early 1950’s, he was the most popular SF writer in the world.

Themes emphasized energetic visions of the bright future that science and technology would bring. This was so-called “hard SF,” exploring the physical sciences. Unlike the “Pulp Era,” biology, sociology, language, philosophy and politics of an alien civilization were surveyed in best-selling novels.

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“Golden Age” author Isaac Asimov wrote or edited more than 500 books and stories, including Foundation, Nightfall and I, Robot. In Nightfall, learning that the universe is far more vast causes everyone to go insane!

“Golden Age” author Ray Bradbury (1920-2012) excelled as a screenwriter and novelist, famed for The Martian Chronicles of 1950, and Fahrenheit 451 of 1953. Gifted in 2013, the Center for Ray Bradbury Studies, at Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis, is one of the largest single-author archives in the United States. Upon his death, *The New York Times* called Bradbury “the writer most responsible for bringing modern science fiction into the literary mainstream.” He wrote 27 novels and over 600 short stories.

The maturity of the “Golden Age” was enhanced by the creation of two awards, with The Hugo Award being the annual literary award for the best SF or fantasy works and achievements of the previous year, given at the World Science Fiction Convention and chosen by its members, now conferred in seventeen categories of written and dramatic works. First

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awarded in 1953, The Hugo is widely considered the premier award in SF.

The other awards are the Nebula Awards, begun in 1966, which recognize the best works published in the United States. The awards are organized and awarded by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, a non-profit association of professional writers of the genre. A category for film and television episode scripts has now been joined by a category for game writing in video and tabletop games. All the categories together are equivalent to the Emmy Awards for prime-time television shows.

SF did not become truly widespread until the 1970's, and today the term used to describe current works is the "New Wave."

So, dinosaurs from the pioneer days and B.-E. M. from the "Pulp Era" days!

Here's *my selection* of the best SF authors, and *my selection* of representative examples of their works:

Philip K. Dick (1928-1982), whose work often explored political themes. Do Androids Dream Of

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Electric Sheep? “Blade Runner,” of 1982, was based on that novel.

Isaac Asimov (1920-1992). The Foundation Trilogy. I, Robot. And many others!

Arthur C. Clarke (1917-2008). 2001: A Space Odyssey. Rendezvous With Rama.

H. G. Wells (1866-1946). The Time Machine.

Robert A. Heinlein (1907-1988). Stranger In A Strange Land. The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress.

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007). Slaughterhouse-Five. The Sirens of Titan. Outrageous wit and moral force.

Poul Anderson (1926-2001). The Man Who Counts.

Michael Crichton (1942-2008). Jurassic Park. Twister. The Andromeda Strain. Sphere. All of his major novels have been made into best-selling films.

Theodore Sturgeon (1918-1985). I always enjoyed his “Star Trek” scripts. TV series in the 1960’s.

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Andre Norton (1912-2005). Star Man's Son. Sea Siege.

Larry Niven (1938-). Ringworld.

Alfred Bester (1913-1987). The Stars My Destination. The Demolished Man.

A.E. van Vogt (1912-2000). The World of Null-A.

Samuel R. Delany (1942-). The Fall Of The Towers.

John W. Campbell, Jr. (1910-1971). Who Goes There? As editor of "Astounding Science Fiction," from 1937 to 1971, he introduced The Futurians, a group of professional SF writers with Marxist leanings.

Ray Bradbury (1920-2012). The Martian Chronicles. The Illustrated Man. I Sing The Body Electric.

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Frank Herbert (1920-1986). His 1965 Dune is the best-selling SF novel of all time, some twenty million copies. The story explores politics, religion, technology and, most notably, ecology. In the 1971 film Sir Patrick Stewart has a role, prior to his current fame as Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise!

Environmentalists have pointed out that Dune's popularity as a novel depicting a planet as a complex, almost living, thing, strongly influenced environmental movements such as the establishment of the international Earth Day. Dune remains my favorite!

Here's *my selection* of the best SF films, in chronological order:

“Metropolis.” 1927. In a futuristic city sharply divided between the working classes, the son of the City Master falls in love with a saintly working-class prophet. By Fritz Lang. German.

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“Things To Come.” 1936. A decades-long world war leaves plague and anarchy, out of which a rational state arises, and attempts space travel.

“Destination Moon.” 1950. The first serious U. S. SF film, in Technicolor, with the theme of going where Jules Verne went before!

“The Day The Earth Stood Still.” 1951. A rather handsome alien lands and tells the people of Earth that they must live in peace, or be destroyed as a danger to the beings on other planets.

“When Worlds Collide.” 1951. As a planet hurtles to a doomed Earth, a small group of survivalists frantically work to complete the rocket which will take them to a new home planet.

“It Came From Outer Space.” 1953. A spaceship from another world crashes in the Arizona desert, and only then does an amateur stargazer suspect alien influence when the local townsfolk begin to act strangely. From a screenplay by Ray Bradbury.

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“20,000 Leagues Under The Sea.” 1954. The Nautilus, commanded by Captain Nemo, causes sinkings in this Disney classic, starring James Mason, Kirk Douglas and Peter Lorre.

“Godzilla.” 1954. American nuclear weapons testing results in the awakening of a seemingly unstoppable beast. In Japan, Godzilla is a dragon-cum-dinosaur that is a mythical personification of natural destructive forces---earthquakes, tsunami and typhoons.

“This Island Earth.” 1955. Aliens with high foreheads and alabaster-colored hair come to earth to get help in winning their war.

“Invasion Of The Body Snatchers.” 1956. A small-town doctor, played by Kevin McCarthy, learns that the population of his community is being replaced by emotionless alien duplicates. Now a cult classic!

“Forbidden Planet.” 1956. The silence of a planet’s survivors reflect Freud’s “Monsters of The Id.” Relates to Shakespeare’s “The Tempest.” The charming and helpful robot “Robby” is introduced.

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“Earth vs. The Flying Saucers.” 1956.

Extraterrestrials traveling in high-tech flying saucers contact a scientist as part of a plan to enslave the inhabitants of Earth. Saved by a Sonic Weapon!

“It Conquered The World.” 1956. A well-meaning scientist guides an alien monster to Earth from Venus, so that he can rid mankind of feelings and emotions, but only death and sorrow result. Of the four films of 1956, only “Forbidden Planet” has any merit, the others being rated B-minus/C!

“The Incredible Shrinking Man.” 1957. When Scott Carey begins to shrink because of exposure to a combination of radiation and insecticide, medical science is powerless to help him.

“The Fly.” 1958. A scientist has a horrific accident when he tries to use his new teleportation device. Starring Vincent Price. Who can forget his cry of “Help me, help me” as the spider approaches?

“The Blob.” 1958. An alien lifeform consumes everything in its path as it grows and grows, with

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opposition from Steve McQueen, from Beech Grove, Indiana. Cheesy, drive-in theatre fare!

“Fantastic Voyage.” 1966. A scientist is nearly assassinated. In order to save him, a submarine is shrunk to microscopic size and injected into his bloodstream with a small crew. Problems arise, but a novel concept.

“2001: A Space Odyssey.” 1968. After the discovery of a mysterious artifact on Luna, mankind sets off to find its origins with the help, it seems, from the supercomputer H.A.L. 9000.

“Planet Of The Apes.” 1968. An astronaut crash-lands on a planet in the distant future where apes are the dominant species. Do you remember the closing scene with Charlton Heston on the beach?

“Barbarella.” 1968. Barbarella, an astronaut from the 41st Century, sets out to find and stop the evil scientist Durand Durand, whose Positronic Ray threatens to bring evil back into the galaxy. A wonderful example of camp with a scantily-clad Jane Fonda!

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“The Andromeda Strain.” 1971. A team of top scientists work feverishly in a secret, state-of-the-art laboratory to discover what has killed the citizens of a small town, and to learn how this deadly contagion can be stopped. Currently popular viewing again.

“The Omega Man.” 1971. Lone survivor, Dr. Robert Neville, struggles to create a cure for the plague that has wiped out most of the human race while fighting The Family, a savage Luddite death cult formed by the zombie-like infected to erase the past. What more could one ask for—Charlton Heston and zombies?

“Zardoz.” 1974. In the distant future, a savage trained only to kill finds a way into a community of bored immortals that alone preserves humanity’s achievements. Starring a non-Bond Sean Connery.

“Logan’s Run.” 1976. An idyllic future has one major drawback: life must end at 21.

“Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” 1977.
Selected for inclusion in the National Film Registry.

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“Star Wars.” 1977. The epic space opera continues with ownership from George Lucas to Disney. “May The Force Be With You!”

“Alien.” 1979. Who can forget the bursting appearance of the gestating alien? My daughters hid behind the theatre seats. I joined them.

“E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial.” 1982. Charming and widely-acclaimed by critics. “E. T phone home” still resonates.

“Blade Runner.” 1982. An older, grayer Harrison Ford returns in the equally-dark 2017 “Blade Runner 2049.”

“The Terminator.” 1984. Arnold Schwarzenegger travels across time to become a hunter....but later a savior in “Terminator 2: Judgment Day.”

“Ghostbusters.” 1984. With Dan Aykroyd and Bill Murray supplying the abundant humor.

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“Back To The Future.” 1985. Travels through time in a DeLorean car.

“Spaceballs.” 1987. By Mel Brooks, so of course a well-done parody. Now a cult classic. “May The Schwartz Be With You!”

“Predator.” 1987. Arnold Schwarzenegger encounters a nasty, hostile, trophy-hunting beast.

“Jurassic Park.” 1993. The wildlife park of de-extinct dinosaurs is quite fun.....what could go wrong? It was the highest grossing film ever at the time.

“The Fifth Element.” 1997. With Bruce Willis as a cab driver, defeating Zorg.

“Men In Black.” 1997. Starring Harvard-graduate Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith on a mission to protect the Earth from the scum of the Universe.

“Avatar.” 2009. Stunning special effects. Several sequels are in-the-works, of course. A hybrid human-alien called an Avatar is created to communicate with the indigenous people. Screened in 3D viewing, it won the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects.

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“Star Trek.” 2009. Followed by eight sequels in the series, and now by spin-offs. The original film in 1979.

“Arrival.” 2016. A thinking-person’s film. With focus on linguists, and the resultant communication.

Today SF has diversified (think of all the video games spin-offs!) and become firmly established as a major influence on global culture and thought. American SF has occurred alongside unprecedented technological progress and an unfettered popular press. American writers and film makers have invented tales of space travel sometimes as seen through the lens of Imperial appropriation, in which technological superiority brought about territorial conquest, even as recently as the film “Avatar.”

And extraterrestrials were sometimes a proxy for human beings of different creeds or races.

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In the period 1997 through 2019, the top-grossing films were all SF, or with elements of SF, only except “Titanic” of 1997!

All of these themes can be seen in mainstream culture, with “Star Wars” leading the way.

Which brings me to conclude that the geo-political themes are often with us in SF, as in Liu Cixin’s SF trilogy, Remembrance of Earth’s Past, begun in 2014. The models for the two competing planets are obvious—the U. S. and China. For the Chinese, achieving parity with the West is a most-desired goal, seen as a restoration of the Chinese Dynasties after the humiliation of Western occupations from 1839 to 1949, known as the *Hundred Years of National Humiliation*.

The trilogy has been translated into twenty languages, with sales of eight million copies.

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worldwide. In 2015, Liu became the first Asian writer to win The Hugo Award.

As Liu told the “Times,” “China is on the path of rapid modernization and progress, kind of like the U.S. during the “Golden Age of Science Fiction.”

Thus ends my survey of the History of Science Fiction.

J. Scott Keller
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