

100 MUST-READ

SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS

Foreword by Christopher Priest,
author of *The Prestige*

world. There were no more seasons or climates; the heat of the globe steadily increased and neutralized that of the sun. The vegetation grew to gigantic proportions, and I passed like a ghost among arborescent ferns, treading uncertainly on iridescent marl and mottled stone; I leaned against the trunks of huge conifers; I lay down in the shade of *sphenophyllas*, *asterophyllas*, and *lycopods* a hundred feet high.

Centuries passed, like days. I went back through a long series of terrestrial changes. The plants disappeared; the granite rocks softened; solid matter turned to liquid under the action of intense heat; water covered the surface of the globe, boiling and volatilizing; steam enveloped the earth, which gradually turned into a gaseous mass, white-hot, as big and bright as the sun.

In the centre of this nebula, which was fourteen hundred thousand times as large as the globe it would one day form, I was carried through interplanetary space. My body was volatilized in its turn and mingled like an imponderable atom with these vast vapours tracing their flaming orbits through infinity.

'What a dream this was! Where was it taking me? My everish hand noted down on paper the strange details of my journey and forgotten everything else – the Professor, the tide, and the raft. A hallucination had taken hold of me.

'What's the matter?' asked my uncle.

My staring eyes looked at him without seeing him.

'Take care, Axel, or you'll fall overboard!'

At the same time I felt Hans seizing me. But for him, I could have thrown myself into the sea, under the influence of my dream.

'Has he gone mad?' cried the Professor.

'What is it?' I said at last, coming to.

'Are you ill?'

'No. I've had a brief hallucination, but it is over now, everything all right.'

BLOOMSBURYGOODREADINGGUIDES

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SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS

Stephen E. Andrews and Nick Rennison

Foreword by Christopher Priest



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FOREWORD

If you're looking for a reliable guide to what science fiction is, you have come to the right place. This is a book that contains a list of the one hundred irreplaceable books from the science fiction genre.

But it is also rather more than just a list, because not only is each book lucidly introduced, summarized and placed in its general context, there are many 'read on' suggestions. These will take the interested reader down a number of sidetracks to distant literary places, some of which will come as a surprise to many people. The net that contains SF is a big one and fantastic literature can be cast over a wide area. Not everything is obvious.

Beyond even the recommendations, there is an argument that runs throughout the book. It gently explains, defines, promotes, defends science fiction, always with a civilized enthusiasm and from a position of authority.

When I discovered the genre long ago, late in my teens, there were far fewer SF books to read than there are now. In fact it felt (perhaps falsely) that with a little dedication it would be possible to sit down and read everything that had ever been published. I never attempted the

feat, although when I encountered some of the more serious science fiction fans I did wonder if they were trying it.

In the early to middle 1960s, most of the science fiction that then existed had been written for magazines. SF was predominantly a short-story form, and novels were comparatively rare. The few there were had almost all first appeared as serials, which is how many of the older novels on the main list in this book were published.

To return to the story of my own brief contact with reading science fiction, I devoured the books avidly for a few years, but by the time I was in my mid-twenties my tastes had become more complex and not long after that I stopped reading science fiction almost completely. (Almost completely, because for several years I was a publisher's professional reader, and throughout my career I have occasionally reviewed new books.) It always feels to me as if I gave up before I had seriously tackled the subject.

I was surprised to discover, therefore, when I read this long list compiled by Messrs Andrews and Rennison, that I had read almost half of the books here.

Naturally, they tend to be the older ones, but not entirely.

Do I agree with the choices on the main list? Yes and no. I would like to have seen J.G. Ballard's stories given prominence over his novels. He is still an under-rated writer, and that is because people judge him by his novels: on his scale, the B-list. There ought to be a Richard Cowper book here: *The Twilight of Briareus* or *The Road to Corlay*, or his stories. The same from Robert Sheckley, who was one of the finest 20th century short story writers, but whose novels weren't as good. I would have chosen John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* or *The Kraken*

Wakes over *The Midwich Cuckoos*. Aldiss's *Greybeard* rather than *Hothouse*. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.

What would I have left out? The Asimovs and the Heinleins, certainly, since in completely different ways they did much to distract everyone from the idea that science fiction should be written well. (This is a personal view – the consensus of the SF world is against me.) The novels by 'Doc' Smith, Jack Williamson and Raymond F. Jones are period pieces, and belong in a museum. Including two novels by Alfred Bester is including one too many, but *The Stars my Destination* is probably central to the entire SF argument. And H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is famous, while not being one of his best books.

On the whole, though, I go along with the selections here.

I have long argued that science fiction is not something that should be judged as a unitary form. Any generalized argument in favour of SF, no matter how well or strenuously mounted, can be instantly undermined by pointing at one of the genre's many, many embarrassments. (The opposite is also true, but not as subversively enjoyable to do.)

Much better to think of SF as a place where adventurous or original writers can take advantage of certain blessings practically unique in literature: an articulate, faithful and intelligent readership, an active professional market for short stories, a consistent commercial niche within publishing and bookselling, a body of literary criticism that is both knowledgeable about the literature and expectant of high quality. This is the sort of literary environment where writers can practise, where they can develop their individual voices and be heard, encouraged and soon relished.

That is the best way to read and understand this book: as an intro-

duction not to a genre that might or might not be to everyone's taste, but as a recommendation of the works of authors who are not known to many people outside the genre.

There are many surprises here, in that sense. Nearly one hundred of them, in fact.

Christopher Priest

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is not intended to provide a list of the 100 ‘best’ SF novels. A definitive list of the greatest SF novels is an impossibility – personal tastes in SF, as in any area of writing, differ and any ‘Best of...’ list is always unacceptably subjective. We have been guided instead by the title of our book and have chosen 100 books to read in order to gain an overview of the rich and diverse writing to be found in SF.

The Introduction, on the evolution and proliferation of SF, provides a useful background to understanding references in the entries to movements and moments in SF’s history – there is also a short glossary of definitions on page 176. The entries, arranged A to Z by author, describe the plot of each title while aiming to avoid too many ‘spoilers’, offer some value judgements and describe the author’s place in the history of SF and/or their other works. The symbol » before an author name (e.g. » **J.G. Ballard**) indicates that one or more of their books is covered in the A to Z author entries, suggesting to the reader the option of turning immediately to the relevant entries to explore that particular writer’s work and place in SF history.

Each entry is followed by a ‘Read on’ list, which includes books by the same author, books by stylistically similar writers or books on a theme relevant to the entry. We have also noted significant film versions (with

dates of release), where applicable. 'Read on a Theme' listings are designed to help you explore a particular area of SF in greater depth, and at the end of the book you will find listings relating to film, music and key awards. Space dictated that most entries be kept short, and for more detailed information on the writers you may like to consult *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (ed. John Clute and Peter Nicholls).

We aimed to produce a book that would be useful as a starting point for exploring the genre and, in order to do this, we decided that we needed to cover all the major themes of SF – from perennial ideas you might expect from experience of the mass media to more unusual concepts that rarely appear in the genre outside books. This is why some authors are not represented by what are usually considered their best books. It is also why most authors have only one book. This approach caused us some difficulties, especially in the cases of writers who are both prolific and brilliant. Robert Silverberg, for example, is one of a number of writers represented here who, it could be argued, deserves a second selection. Even authors of particular significance like Philip K. Dick had to be limited to two entries. Only H.G. Wells, we decided, whose status as the founding father of modern SF makes him unique, should have three entries. In our final choice of books, we focused on titles that we thought both representative of particular themes in SF and singularly important to the development of the genre.

We believe SF to be a genre that thrives on debate and we have excluded a number of canonical works and writers at the expense of books and authors whom we feel deserve greater exposure in the hope that this will stimulate it. We have also ignored the constraints of our title by including two short story collections, which we believe are

essential to a full understanding of the history of SF. In this, we were also influenced by the fact that the two writers (John W. Campbell and Harlan Ellison) have been regularly excluded from earlier lists, largely because their finest work is in short story form.

We have tried to select books that are reprinted regularly. A trip to your local bookshop armed with a list of your chosen titles should be enough for a bookseller to check their availability for you. We were delighted to find that a large number of classic SF titles were in print either in the USA or UK at the time this book went to press. However, the commercial reality of publishing is such that many classics do remain out of print for years on end, only reaching readers via the goodwill of committed editors at major publishers and dedicated fanatics at small presses. None the less, due to print-on-demand technology and the generally easy availability of out-of-print titles and imports via the internet, hours of scouring second-hand bookshops for that elusive masterpiece should only be an enjoyably serendipitous last resort.

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INTRODUCTION

Science fiction has always been an infamously difficult genre to define. Today, after decades of blockbuster movies and popular television series, defining SF (as I will refer to science fiction from now on) is harder than ever. Almost everyone has his or her definition of what SF is – and almost everyone's definition is inadequate. SF writing, in particular, is broader in scope and maturer in execution (as well as older) than anyone judging the genre solely on its manifestations in film and television would realize.

Popular misconceptions of SF are understandable, since much of it was published contemporaneously with the growth in the technology that has allowed both the mass media to flourish and SF itself to conquer extra-literary media. Written SF has, therefore, long been in competition with the more accessible 'sci-fi' of other media. Since the mid-seventies – a period when written SF reached a point of complexity and seriousness that belied some of its humble origins – the genre has been excessively dominated by cinema, TV and computer games. Less

visible to the majority of people in print than it has been in the mass media, SF has come to be defined, in the popular imagination, by its appearances in cinema and television. Books have been a neglected poor relation of competing media with more surface glamour. Ironically, written SF has become a victim of its own prophecies of all-conquering technologies. The seductive hi-tech of Playstation® and the CGI special effects of Hollywood blockbusters have made paperbacks look old-fashioned to generations raised on the immediacy of screens. Books involve more effort from their audience but they offer levels of reward and quality scarce in other media.

So, the current popular opinion of SF writing is that it is a literature of implausible adolescent entertainment, fixated on gleaming starships and absurd zap guns, gimmicky time machines, clunky robots and slimy aliens. This perception is a narrow and inaccurate one, based largely on ignorance. Written SF matured a long time ago; mass media SF often still seems to be wrestling with a protracted puberty. This is not to say there is no great SF outside books – directors like Stanley Kubrick and Ridley Scott, auteurs like David Cronenberg, scriptwriters like Nigel Kneale and rock musicians like David Bowie and Hawkwind are just a few examples of first-rate artists who have worked primarily in mass media SF. The focus of this book is on written SF but we have ensured that the books we have included in this guide are some of the most exciting and stimulating reads in the history of fiction, many of which will appeal to readers whose experience of SF is not predominantly literary. The term ‘novel’ has the same roots as the word ‘novelty’, something of which there is no shortage in SF. What follows in this guide will be far from dry, worthy and dull. We can be confident in claiming that you’re in for a wild ride.

Before attempting our own definition of SF, we need to examine its history. As the above makes clear, there has been a myriad of arguments over the decades about what SF is, and there is no consensus. This is healthy. Like all good fiction, SF is enriched by debate. My personal opinion is that it is the definitive literature of change itself. We have seen more of that in the past 200 years than in the whole of previous human history and it is into that past that we need to travel in search of the origins of the genre.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Some commentators have argued that SF first appears in antiquity, with works such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa 2000BC), which features flying machines and *The True History of Lucian* by the Greek author Lucian (circa AD140–180) which covers a trip to the moon and a war in space. However, these and other works of what has been called ‘proto-SF’ probably owe as much to mythology and magic as they do to technology. This places Lucian and other pioneers of astounding voyages to strange places firmly in the realm of fantasy writing rather than SF. The Greek legend of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and was eternally punished for the gift of knowledge he gave to mankind, could also be a template for some future SF writing. However, most people would argue that mythology and the supernatural are, by definition, unscientific. Since most proto-SF depends on one or the other, it may have to be excluded from the genre.

While the modern novel gradually emerged from medieval chivalric romances (which played a central role in the development of the fantasy genre), many writers continued to tell tales of voyages to other

worlds and some described perfect societies in philosophical works such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Some, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), satirized their own culture by using the metaphor of imperfect societies. (One of the best ways to try to understand the complex and sometimes absurd nature of our world is via a distorting mirror of reality that uses exaggeration to draw our attention to the pivotal events and assumptions of the society that shapes our lives. SF may often be set in the future or on other worlds, but it is often using these settings as symbolic of our present.)

However, many critics have argued that SF itself could not exist before the age of scientific method, when accurate observation, rigorous theorizing and repeated proof-making experimentation became the key to technological advance. Before the Enlightenment in the 18th century, tradition and organized religion had checked the forward momentum of knowledge, but the combined social impact of the French Revolution and the innovations of the Industrial Age created the ideal conditions for fiction truly conscious of science to flourish. (It is worth noting here that both social and technological change are central to SF, so to think of the genre only in relation to the 'hard' sciences of physics, engineering, biology and chemistry is a mistake. Other disciplines inevitably have an effect on human beings and SF can also encompass the 'soft' sciences of sociology, psychology, politics and philosophy.)

The final condition that set the stage for the arrival of 'true' SF was the major trend in early 19th-century arts: Romanticism. Romanticism was a reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment but it succeeded in incorporating some of the ideals of 18th-century thinking into its own

new outlook. Romanticism continued to encourage people to enjoy the new intellectual freedom the disciplines of science fostered but it insisted there should also be a focus on the sublime and the wondrous. Although the impact of Romanticism was most strongly felt in poetry and music, it had its effect on fiction, particularly on the form known as the Gothic novel. The power of Gothic writers lay in their willingness to dream and to encourage the kind of ‘sense of wonder’ that has coloured SF ever since the appearance of a book many commentators (notably **»** Brian Aldiss) have identified as the first true SF novel: **»** Mary Shelley’s 1818 *Frankenstein* (The entry on Shelley examines this argument.)

As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace, SF novels became more common. Speculations on future wars were particularly popular as the implications of more efficient machines and weapons became clear. Utopias also flourished as new political ideas such as socialism began to develop, notably *News From Nowhere* (1890) by the artist, poet and craftsman William Morris and *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler (1872). Other new sciences encouraged writers to work on fresh themes. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), for example, uses pharmacology as a basis for physical and mental transformation that allowed the author to meditate upon the balance of good and evil in man and the potentially destructive power of new knowledge.

Most significant in the formulation of what most people today would recognize as SF were the careers of the American author Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) and the Frenchman **»** Jules Verne (1828–1905). Poe was probably the most important writer in the history of genre fiction and

was a pioneer of detective fiction, horror and fantasy as well as SF. He wrote short stories almost exclusively (his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is a ‘hollow Earth’ SF story) in a dense Gothic-Romantic style that inspired writers interested in the bizarre. The emotional intensity of his prose and the melodramatic influence of his alcohol-induced depressions brought a decadent outsider element to the genre. Verne, meanwhile, produced numerous direct, optimistic and adventurous novels from the 1860s onward that had a massive influence over magazine writers to come. Verne dubbed his works ‘voyages extraordinaires’ and they include such classics as *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. The fact that many of Verne’s novels (*Around the World in Eighty Days*, for instance) are straightforward exploration stories with no SF elements and that many of his books were massive bestsellers explains how SF and adventure became synonymous in the popular imagination.

At the end of the 19th century, while Verne was the undisputed master of the as yet unnamed genre, the Englishman » H.G. Wells started producing the ground-breaking books that cemented his reputation as the father of modern SF. Wells described *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds* and *The Invisible Man* (among many others that helped expand what have become perennial themes of SF) as ‘scientific romances’ in order to distinguish them from the social and character-based novels that dominated the fiction of his day. Wells knew his fiction was not realism but, by using the term ‘scientific’, he was affirming that his work had its basis in the rational yet currently improbable, rather than in the magical and the impossible. He was

speculating and extrapolating from the knowledge of his day to suggest the possibilities of tomorrow. His excellent prose skills, the plausibility of his imagination, his fierce intelligence and his literary versatility (Wells was also a distinguished social novelist who explored the new middle classes, feminism and left-wing politics) have ensured that he remains the undisputed Grand Master SF writer for all time.

AMAZING STORIES

Some commentators (particularly » Norman Spinrad) have argued that the history of SF is the history of how it has been marketed, suggesting that if writing is published with the label 'science fiction' on its binding, then it is SF, and a book not marketed as such is not SF. This may seem an obvious point but it is a useful one to make. By the early twentieth century, the cheap magazines known as 'pulp' (named after the inexpensive paper they were printed on) flooded the news stands of America. The pulps covered genres such as crime, adventure and westerns. Between the Edwardian era and the end of the First World War, writers like » Edgar Rice Burroughs (*Tarzan of the Apes*), Robert E. Howard (*Conan the Barbarian*) and H.P. Lovecraft (The *Cthulhu Mythos* stories) were setting the standards for pulp writing in the fantasy genre and occasionally producing the odd SF tale. Meanwhile » E.E. 'Doc' Smith was starting to write 'space operas'. All the elements of *Star Wars*, the cultural artefact most people today would cite as an example of SF, were present in Smith's classic works, which is an indication of how far the cinematic and television versions of the genre have trailed behind written SF.

Publisher Hugo Gernsback took a decisive step by naming the genre

in his editorial for the first issue of his magazine *Amazing Stories* (1926). He called it 'scientifiction', using the works of Wells, Verne and Poe as examples of what he meant by this new word. By 1929, this unwieldy term had mutated into 'science fiction'. (Experts have identified European magazines up to fifty years older as exclusively SF magazines and have discovered that a poetry critic used the term even earlier but Gernsback deserves the credit as the first editor to label his publications as 'science fiction'.)

Gernsback was more interested in technological accuracy than literary quality. Verne's adventure writing, the themes of extraterrestrial life and time travel explored so eloquently by Wells and the lurid, verbose style of Poe came together in Gernsback's optimistic vision. Science fiction as a publishing category had finally appeared and, through the beliefs of Gernsback and his successor, » John W. Campbell Jr, magazine-based SF separated itself from mainstream fiction to become a distinct literary genre. Daring themes such as robotics, faster-than-light travel, ESP, computers, parallel worlds and so on became commonplace in genre SF. With notable exceptions, SF in the mainstream has been more conservative in its speculations.

Many believe this separation did more harm than good, turning the genre tradition into a ghetto, its stories regarded by general readers as a commercially driven, immature form of fiction (» Thomas M. Disch has even proposed the idea that SF is a kind of children's literature). There is some truth in this viewpoint. The poorer examples of pulp SF undoubtedly contributed to the popular idea, still dominant in the media, of SF as childish escapism. But genre SF still possesses a raw energy in its execution and an intellectual audacity in its themes that

can make most general fiction seem stilted and mundane by comparison. Some genre SF is very well written indeed. Literary snobbery and pseudo-intellectual ignorance have played their part in damning the magazine tradition as entirely unworthy of serious consideration.

Other commentators have expressed a wish to see genre SF rejoin the mainstream from which it diverged, claiming that it is a specifically American model. The true home of SF, in this argument, is Britain. The importance of Swift, Shelley and other writers such as Richard Jefferies (his *After London, Wild England* (1885) inspired the particularly English disaster novel popularized among general readers by » John Wyndham) in the formation of the genre adds weight to this argument. Writers working outside the pulps (such as » Aldous Huxley, Olaf Stapledon and » George Orwell) continued to produce Wellsian titles enjoyed by general readers and this tendency continues today. There is a huge list of SF novels that have been produced by writers working outside any genre tradition.

In 1937, John W. Campbell was appointed editor of *Astounding*, bringing a new discipline to Gernsback's vision. Campbell rivalled E.E. Smith as a writer of space opera but, despite his insistence on accurate science, he also had an eye for good prose and storytelling talent, encouraging and discovering the writers who are usually credited with defining modern genre SF. Our entry on Campbell details his significance as the architect of what fans now call the Golden Age.

Campbell's domination of SF continued until the end of the 1940s and the launch of two ground-breaking magazines that brought new levels of intellectual sophistication, literary style and more adult subject matter to the genre. *Galaxy* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science*