

“Science Fiction and Fantasy: Explore the Genre That Expands the Mind”

Workshop Notes from Julie E. Czerneda (for Southern Ontario Library Service)

I took a poll at the start of each workshop where to shelve Anne McCaffrey’s Pern/HarperHall novels, in fantasy or science fiction. The vote was for fantasy, though each time a very few disagreed. First published in Analog SF, these titles do belong in science fiction. The stories have no magic and are based on a science speculation about the future of humans in space. The rules and behaviour within the stories are consistent with what we know. They are often placed into fantasy because of the presence of dragons, the medieval clothing first seen on the covers, etc. In either location, they are books avidly read by both SF and fantasy readers. If they are found, does it matter where? Of course not. But the problem is to be sure books can be found by those who want them, and not all readers will look outside their expectations.

While both science fiction and fantasy are sometimes put together within a larger category, speculative fiction, there are meaningful distinctions between these major genres which are important to readers and helpful for you to know.

Defining Terms

Science fiction contains a speculation about something known in science or technology. There is a “What if ...” question being asked, with possible consequences explored within a story framework. It is a thought experiment. Science fiction can be contemporary or historical, as well as the more familiar far future or space settings.

Subgenres of Science Fiction

These aren’t “official” categories, but terms readers may use when asking for SF titles.

Alternate history - Readers are looking for books where an historical event is imagined to have happened differently, with the resulting changes in technology and society described. For example, Harry Turtledove’s 2nd world war novels. (While these may not seem SF These should, in my opinion, be shelved as science fiction, not in mainstream.)

Space Opera - This has become a less useful term. Originally, it was somewhat derogatory and referred to implausible adventure stories that involved traveling between stars. Space westerns, in a sense. Older readers may still use the term that way. Now, however, you’ll also find it used in the sense of “far future adventure” and no longer derogatory. As a reference from a reader, keep in mind the ideas of adventure and many worlds.

Military SF - One of the more recognizable categories, typically with book covers showing weapons and uniforms.

Humour, romance, mystery, horror, detectives - Science fiction contains all of these, sometimes in combination. Where possible, note which titles overlap.

Science Fiction Fantasy - You’ll see this on books where writers deliberately blend the genres. Magic on spaceships, vampires on the moon etc. Some are very good reads. Some aren’t. I wouldn’t offer them to SF or fantasy purists.

Hard SF - This is another evolving term. Originally, it identified stories with detailed, exact science as well as the speculative “what if ...” That science was most often physics, astrophysics, or technology. Many of the early classics were hard SF, and their plots involved puzzles or problem-solving. While there is still this type of SF being written, particularly in short fiction, the term has grown to encompass any science fiction where the science is detailed and exact, giving the reader confidence in the underlying speculation. All sciences are now included, from biology to sociology.

Note: This being said, you’ll find readers who ask specifically for “hard SF” may be after works that read as if they could be present day thrillers or, if set in the future, read as if they were manuals on how something may be accomplished. Heavy on the technique and science. You’ll also have readers who use the term “hard SF” in a negative sense to refer to books which sacrifice character and world building to detail. (I’m a good example. My work is, in my opinion, hard sf (biology). Some readers of space opera (traditional term) enjoy it because it’s adventurous and has many aliens. Some readers of hard sf (traditional term) call it space opera (traditional term) because it’s biology-based and not about the physics of space travel. You really can’t win if you use either term as absolutes. But they are useful guidelines along a spectrum of adventure <---> detail.

Fantasy contains speculation, but in the form of something “other” than what is familiar and/or known in real life. The “other” can be a completely new realm from this one or it could be this world, with the “other” being a person of unusual perceptions. It can be retellings of legends and myth. There are often characters with unusual ability or power, often, but not always, involving magic. The world and its rules are the creation of the author. The consistency is internal, ie. within that story. This is fantasy’s main distinction from science fiction. In SF, consistency (the rules of how things work or behave) matches what we know to be the case in real life, as much as possible. The author invents only what is necessary for the speculation.

Subgenres of Fantasy

These aren’t “official” categories, but terms readers may use when asking for fantasy titles.

Epic or Heroic fantasy - Readers are looking for stories with large scope, where events and actions affect entire populations or the world. These are often, but not always, series titles. There may be a quest.

Urban fantasy - One of the most recognizable categories, where the story takes place in an otherwise contemporary, real setting. For example, Charles de Lint’s work. Some readers would include paranormal/ ghost / horror stories in this category. Some won’t.

Medieval - Not a category so much as a desired setting by many readers. One of the easier to recognize and display as a group.

Anthropomorphic - Stories involving talking animals or shape-changing humans. Some of these fall under horror as well.

Retellings - Stories revisiting classic fairytales and myths.

Exotic/Oriental/First Nations - These can be identified through the settings, character names, and clues from the cover art/jacket description. They often overlap with retellings and/or urban fantasy.

High fantasy - In some ways, this is to fantasy what hard sf is to science fiction - the term that in a sense defines the entire genre. In a high fantasy, readers would expect to find magical creatures with powers and rules of their own, such as elves, faerie, the Sidhe, dragons,

etc. The world building is very important. The consequences of power, morality, etc are clear and intense. The language is typically (but not always) elegant.

Dark/Erotic - As the terms imply. Dark fantasy is close to horror in terms of emotion, but usually doesn't involve horror tropes such as ghosts. It's a fine line and readers of one may enough both. Erotic fantasy is what it says, being aware that fantasy may be more graphic than mainstream erotica.

Humorous fantasy - With the success of Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, there's been a sharp rise in the number of titles published in this category.

Sword and Sorcery - *Mighty warriors and magic users. An example would be Conan the Barbarian.*

Types of Readers

While there are always exceptions, you may find the following flagrant generalizations useful when dealing with readers:

- * Older readers will be firm on their likes/dislikes and cross genres less often.
- * Those who have never read fantasy and science fiction but express an interest may have difficulty with the vocabulary and assumptions. For older readers, the best choices for them in SF will be close-to-thrillers, mysteries, or speculations on current issues; in Fantasy, ask further before deciding to offer urban or high fantasy. For younger readers, anything will work, though I'd avoid older hard sf at first.
- * Those who read high fantasy particularly enjoy well-built worlds that are different from this one. Those who read urban fantasy and/or paranormal works are happier with real-world settings. I haven't seen many readers cross between the two.
- * Female protagonists (or authors) used to be problematic with some male readers. I haven't seen that for a few years, but you might come across it.

Some Display Suggestions

- * Put a note with DVD's if your collection contains the source (or derivative) novel or short story.
- * Display relevant science fiction novels with information on a current science issue.
- * Display "fantasy" artifacts with fantasy novels. Jewellery, castles, etc. are all attention-grabbers.
- * Make a quiz of "words from science fiction" with answers nearby. If available, link to the books in your collection.
- * If your SF and F collection is blended with mainstream, note that at the ends of shelves. You could also attract attention by listing the first/last SF/F author within a particular stack.
- * If you have a blended SF/F collection, consider a theme for a display that crosses both, for example: "dinosaurs and dragons," "travel to another world," or "immortality."

Don't Forget Short Fiction

Themed anthologies, containing a variety of authors writing to the same topic, are typically also written within one subgenre. They offer an excellent way to give a reader ten to twenty authors at one shot who might fit the bill.

(For the SF portion, participants did the What If ... activity. You'll find this under SF Classroom Resources.)

Fantasy Activity - Flavours of Fantasy

1. Listen to each passage read aloud.
2. Make your own decision as to the type of fantasy story you expect. Write that down.

Passage #	Type of Story I Expect

3. Compare your decisions with those of others in your group. Come to a consensus. Be prepared to explain your answers.

Flavour of Fantasy Passages with Results:

1. “Under his hands the ground seemed to shiver. Something shifted and the air darkened somehow. He couldn’t quite figure out what was wrong before a second wave hit. Instantly the woods around him changed. Vines appeared to erupt from the ground while trees leaned in toward each other. ... The clean air vanished and a dank smell of age flowed down cold winds ... He was in a Tangle.” (“Tangled Pages” by MT. O’Shaughnessy, *Summoned to Destiny* edited by Julie E. Czerneda, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.)

Most frequently generated terms: nature, magic, castle, change, ominous, other worldly

2. Purvis took a few steps into the tunnel and paused. “How do I see where I’m going? There aren’t any torches.” “Just wait a minute. They’ll wake up.” “They?” Purvis was about to ask just who ‘they’ were but stopped suddenly. All along the walls of the tunnel little lights started to shine. Slowly, and in pairs. ... “What are all those things?”... “Eyes.” (“Robes and Wands” by Janet E. Chase, *Fantastic Companions* edited by Julie E. Czerneda, Fitzhenry & Whiteside)

Most frequently generated terms: humour, quest, medieval, magical creature(s), adventure

3. The local pubs, bars, and coffee shops all had their front doors wide open, welcoming both the cool breeze and new patrons inside, while the patio tables and chairs were full almost to overflowing. As Lia walked, the sound of her sneakers against the sidewalk was lost beneath laughter, the murmur of conversation, and the clink of forks and glasses. ... Nor were these the only people populating the main street of [Kincardine], but its other inhabitants only Lia could see -- and she tried her best to ignore the ghosts. They were not so much the ghosts of a person or a thing, Lia knew, so much as the ghost of a moment. (“Safe Passage” by Karina Sumner-Smith, *Mythspring* edited by Julie E. Czerneda & Genevieve Kierans, Red Deer Press)

Most frequently generated terms: paranormal, contemporary, urban fantasy, person of power, unafraid, Canada, ghosts

4. The walls were thick and high, higher than the height of three men, and covered in gleaming tapestries that shimmered like the scales of a dragon. Here too was magic, even if it wasn't deemed such. No smells of onions and cabbage lingered in these halls; instead, they were perfumed with incense and the luxurious scent of burning wax candles. Here there were no simple tubs of fat with a wick, and the cooking and eating was done somewhere far away, not like in the small house I shared with Opa. (“Dragon Time” by Ruth Nestvold, *Fantastic Companions* edited by Julie E. Czerneda)

Most frequently generated terms: medieval, magic, apprehension/captive, awe/hopeful, youth, exotic scents, fairy tale.

5. Afterward, they went into a vast opal chamber with gleaming white walls that shimmered with blue and pink. Slides of packed dirt soared high above the floor, ending at the bottom in deep pools. Otters climbed to the top, then slid down steep curves and over sharp drops. Luke romped with them until his true-self was pleasantly numb with exhaustion. “I wish this weren't a dream.” “This is as real as the stars.” (“Riverkin” by K.D. Wentworth, *Fantastic Companions* by Julie E. Czerneda)

Most frequently generated terms: shapechanging, nature, paradise, optimism, youth/child, other world

6. Quebec's first monster was a loup-garou in Chicoutimi. At dusk on May 3, she was a middle-aged woman drinking coffee at the Tim Horton's in Place Saguenay; then the full moon rose, and the woman sprouted fur. Her nose grew, her ears turned pointy, and her fingers mutated into claws. Ten more seconds and she was three metres tall: a giant wolf-thing who threw back her head and howled before springing off into the night. Shortly afterward, a bunch of Goth teenagers showed up and ordered the same kind of coffee. (“All the Cool Monsters at Once” by James Alan Gardner, *Mythspring* edited by Julie E. Czerneda and Genevieve Kierans, Red Deer Press)

Most frequently generated terms: Canadian, urban fantasy, monsters and myth, humour/wit

Note: This should reassure you -- a quick read of a paragraph or two in a fantasy novel will give you valid clues as to its type and what a reader might expect.

Heroes in Science Fiction and Fantasy

Since this is your summer theme, I've gathered a few resources for you, with thanks to my newsgroup, who quickly provided most of the following suggestions of their favourite literary heroes.

See also: "A Historical Overview of Heroes in Contemporary Works of Fantasy Literature" by John L. Flynn. <http://www.towson.edu/~flynn/heroes.html> A very readable set of three short essays mentioning specific titles.

SF/F	Hero	Found in
Fantasy	Frodo Baggins, Sam Gamgee, Aragorn	Tolkien's Lord of the Rings
Fantasy	Vicky Nelson	Tanya Huff's Blood Books
Fantasy	Talon	Raymond E. Feist's novels
Fantasy	Meriweather	Alan Dean Foster's SpellSinger Series
Fantasy	John Aversin	Barbara Hambly's Dragonsbane series
Fantasy	Tristen	C.J. Cherryh's Fortress series
Fantasy	Aerin	Robin McKinley's "The Hero and the Crown"
Fantasy	Karigan	Kristen Britain's Green Rider series
Fantasy	Rani Trader	Mindy L. Klasky's Glasswrights series
Science Fiction	Ender Wiggins	Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game
Science Fiction	Pyanfar and Tully	C.J. Cherryh's Chanur Series
Science Fiction	Miles Vorkosigan and Cordelia Vorkosigan	Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan series
Science fiction	Paksennarion Dothansdottir	Elizabeth Moon's "The Deed of Pakseenarion"
Science fiction	Barlennan	Hal Clement's "Mission of Gravity"
Science fiction	Captain Pausert	James Schmitz's "The Witches of Karres"
Science Fiction	Bren Cameron	C.J. Cherryh's Foreigner series
Science Fiction (military)	Honor Harrington	David Weber's Harrington series