

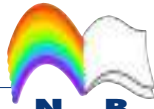
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R A I N B O W S

Tales from Outer Space



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R A I N B O W S

H. G. Wells, H. P. Lovecraft, I. Asimov, *et al.*

Tales from Outer Space

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Tales from Outer Space

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WHAT IS SCIENCE FICTION?

Stories which take place in the future or in which the contemporary setting¹ is upset² by an imaginary device, such as a new invention or the introduction of an alien being, are the main themes of a literary genre³ called **Science Fiction**.

With the appearance of the novel in the early 18th century, the possible worlds of literature became more or less the same as those of the real world of the reader, as opposed to the fantastic and unrealistic style of traditional **romance**. In a way, science fiction makes use of the fantastic trend of literature. It creates a possible world based on logical principles which do not apply to our world. Sometimes even physical or biological laws may be different, as in the case of alien beings, whose physical aspect and movement can be very different from those of humans. Very often, science fiction refers to scientific laws which are imagined rather than real, but in any case they reflect the role of science in modern culture.

The big difference between fantasy and science fiction is that while fantasy is usually set in a mythical past, science fiction is based on scientific and technological principles and takes place in a hypothetical future.

HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION

Although elements of science fiction appear in many stories of imaginary voyages, it was not until the 19th century that the advancement of science began to inspire a lot of work in this style.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a famous early example and science-fiction themes were also present in the works of **Edgar Allan Poe** and **Nathaniel Hawthorne**. In France, **Jules Verne's** adventure stories were great commercial successes and showed that an author could become very popular using this unusual material. In Britain, science fiction started towards the end of the century, when

1. *setting*: location.
2. *upset*: disturbed.

3. *genre*: particular style used in writing.

the technological applications of science reached all classes of society. A pioneer in this genre was **Herbert George Wells**. Thanks to his imagination and scientific knowledge, he wrote a series of classic scientific romances, including *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds*. This was a time when the traditional religious view of the world seemed to be replaced by a scientific perspective in which the Earth was a small atom in an infinite universe.

World War I had a deep effect on British futuristic fiction and in the years between the wars science fiction was dominated by the idea that a new war might destroy civilization, sending humanity back into a new Dark Age. This idea can be seen in the works of the new writers, above all **Olaf Stapledon** with his *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Odd John* (1935). The fundamental idea of this period was that a catastrophe was going to happen and that man would be replaced by a new, less brutal species. At the same time, a tradition of more literary science fiction novels began to develop. **Aldous Huxley** was a good representative of this genre with *Brave New World* (1932), an ironic portrait of an apparently happy society built on genetic manipulation⁴.

In the USA, relatively untouched by World War I, futuristic fiction was not influenced by these anxieties. Interplanetary fiction was in fashion thanks to the example of **Edgar R. Burroughs**, who used other planets as settings for adventure stories like *A Princess of Mars* (1912). A world apart was represented by the American writer **Howard P. Lovecraft**, author of horror, fantasy and science fiction, known then simply as “weird”⁵ fiction. Lovecraft’s major inspiration and invention was cosmic horror: the idea that life is incomprehensible to human minds and that the universe is fundamentally alien. *The Call of Cthulhu* (1926), which is about an extraterrestrial entity, is one of his best-known sci-fi short-stories.

American science fiction remained naïve in tone until the mid-1930s, but the Depression and the influence of John W. Campbell, editor of the magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*, encouraged a more realistic approach. The period between the 1940s and 1950s is often considered the “Golden Age of Science Fiction”. A new generation of writers engaged by Campbell included **Isaac Asimov**, **Robert A. Heinlein** and **Alfred E. Van Vogt**. In the 1940s, science fiction was mainly published in popular magazines and the most important American works of the period were often story series including Asimov’s robot stories: *I, Robot* (1950) and *Foundation* trilogy (1951-53), and Heinlein’s *Future History* series.

4. *manipulation*: use, control.

5. *weird*: very strange or unusual.

After World War II, the British tradition of scientific romance was almost coming to an end. Its pessimistic tone, intensified by Hiroshima, culminated in **George Orwell's** *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), a novel about a humanity controlled by an ever-present Big Brother.

The most successful of the British postwar writers of science fiction, **Arthur C. Clarke**, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), was strongly influenced by the American optimistic tradition.

In the USA, the popularity of science fiction increased with the publication of paperbacks⁶ and there was a change from the short-story form towards the novel, and then towards the novel series. The most important American writers in the 1950s and early 1960s were: **Ray Bradbury** with *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and **Robert Silverberg** with *Revolt on Alpha C* (1955).

Science fiction changed around 1960. There were more writers and readers, the subject matter was wider, the language and technique were more sophisticated.

Modern science fiction increasingly explored failures, limits, ends, and final things. In 1971, *A Clockwork Orange*, a 1962 novel by **Anthony Burgess** set in a dystopian⁷ future England, became a famous film by Stanley Kubrick. **Frank Herbert's** *Dune* (1965) was a detailed work of fiction about political intrigue⁸ in a future galaxy, strange and mystical religious beliefs, and the eco-system of the desert planet Arrakis. Other important modern sci-fi writers were **Kurt Vonnegut** with *Slaughterhouse-5* (1969) and **Philip Dick**, whose works include *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968).

By the early 1980s, as new personal computing technologies became an integral part of society, science fiction writers developed Cyberpunk fiction. These two elements, cyber and punk, suggest an artificial human with old and used clothes and spiky⁹ hair. This fiction, expressing the feeling that man is dominated by machines in a technological world, depicts¹⁰ a society alienated from nature. Cyberpunk authors like **William Gibson** turned away from traditional optimism and support for progress. Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) announced the cyberpunk movement to the literary world.

Today, classifying the genre is more difficult than before. Some novelists have begun to use elements of science-fiction in their work. This reflects a considerable evolution from the days when it was virtually an esoteric literary cult. Its metaphors are used throughout contemporary culture and have become familiar to everyone.

6. *paperbacks*: cheap books with a cover made of thin paper.

7. *dystopian*: see note 11.

8. *intrigue*: secret plan.

9. *spiky*: straight on your head.

10. *depicts*: describes, portrays.

MAIN THEMES AND CHARACTERS

Science fiction themes are many and varied. They range from cosmology and possible futures, such as the creation of the universe, ecology, parallel worlds or universes, the ultimate fate of the universe, alien invasions, apocalypses or world-wide disasters, post-apocalyptic life and the new societies that develop after such an event.

Other themes are based on military strategy and weapons, ray guns and space wars, or about the role of technology, with an optimistic or pessimistic point of view.

Science fiction also deals with other important topics: mind reading and mind control, political structures, such as galactic empires or interstellar federations of planets, utopias (outopias or dystopias¹¹ and eutopias¹²), totalitarianism vs. libertarianism, colonization of other planets, moons, asteroids, etc., space exploration and faster-than-light travel and communications.

Sci-fi stories are often populated by non-human intelligences: androids and gynoids, cyborgs, robots and humanoids, clones, extraterrestrial life, super-humans and mutants. Xenophobia or non-xenophobia are themes which are expressed through the attitudes of humans towards alien life forms. Some contrasting character archetypes are the absent-minded¹³ professor, the scientist or the mad scientist, the brave astronaut but even ordinary people.

POPULARITY OF SCI-FI IN FILMS OR TV SERIES

Science fiction films were immensely popular in the 1950s and the 1960s. They made a lot of money and audiences crowded the cinemas and asked for more. UFO sightings, reports of flying saucers¹⁴ or strange visitors from outer space became Hollywood commonplaces, such as in **Howard Hawks's** science-fiction film *The Thing from Another World* (1951). Many sci-fi films of the 1950s represented the human race as victimized and in the hands of mysterious, hostile, and unfriendly forces. *The War of the Worlds* (1953), the greatest alien invasion movie, is a famous example. Cold War politics contributed to suspicion, anxiety and paranoia of anything “other” or “un-American”, and the extraterrestrial invaders were a metaphor for the Communist threat¹⁵.

11. *utopia, dystopia*: negative utopia, i.e. a dreadful society.

12. *eutopia*: positive utopia, i.e. good, almost perfect society.

13. *absent-minded*: tending to forget things.

14. *flying saucer*:



15. *threat*: menace, danger.

Sometimes parasitic alien seed pods¹⁶ threatened to duplicate and transplant themselves as emotionless human clones like in **Don Siegel's** *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), which was a film about the risk of Communist infiltration and dehumanizing brainwashing¹⁷.

With the fear of destructive rockets and the atom bomb, a lot of films were produced about mutants or monsters created by nuclear experiments or A-bomb accidents. These menacing monsters were the direct result of man's interference with nature. *Them!* (1954) is one of the most famous films about the horrors of the Atomic Age.

Science fiction first appeared on television during the "Golden Age". In the US, important space adventure series of the early 1950s included *Flash Gordon*, *Space Patrol* and *Rod Brown of the Rocket Rangers*. *Tales of Tomorrow* was an anthology series about both classic and modern sci-fi themes (1951-53). *Science Fiction Theatre* was another early anthology series (1955-57), followed by *The Twilight Zone* in 1959 and *The Outer Limits* in 1963. *Lost in Space* (1965-68) also became very popular with audiences. It was followed by *Star Trek*, perhaps the most famous science-fiction programme of all.

In Britain, famous TV series were *The Quatermass Experiment*, *Pathfinders in Space*, *A for Andromeda* and *Doctor Who*.

16. seed pod:



17. brainwashing: forcing someone to believe your own ideas.



The author

Herbert George Wells



Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) was born in London, where his father was an unsuccessful shopkeeper. His early life is reflected in the struggles¹ of the main characters of his novels. After two unhappy years as an apprentice², Wells became a student assistant at Midhurst Grammar School. From here, in 1884, he won a scholarship to the Normal School of Science, London. Before taking a degree in zoology in 1890, he became a school teacher again. After an accident which damaged his kidneys, he decided that he would become a writer. His first full-length works were textbooks of biology and geography. In 1891 he married his cousin Isabel, but it was an unhappy marriage. His second marriage in 1895 to Amy Robbins lasted all his life.

He was, like his friend George B. Shaw, an active member of the Fabian Society and a man deeply interested in the political problems of his time. A brilliant, highly imaginative and productive writer, he published about fifty novels that can be divided into three groups corresponding approximately to three distinct phases in his literary career.

The first group are his scientific or fantastic romances, in the manner of Jules Verne, but on a higher level of artistic realization. His literary career began with the publication of his first major novel, *The Time Machine* (1895), followed by *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). These novels are about the impact of alien races or advanced science on established society and their heroes are often nameless and powerless in the face of natural forces. Because of their satire and their implicit note of warning, these

1. *struggles*: fights, efforts to achieve something.
2. *apprentice*: a young person who works

for an employer for a fixed period of time in order to learn the particular skills needed in their job.

works can be considered an early sign of Wells's later worry about the social and political situation.

The second group includes comic novels, such as *Love and Mrs Lewisham* (1900), *Kipps* (1905), and *The History of Mr Polly* (1910).

The third and last group is made of the novels of ideas, which showed the didactic tendency in Wells: *Tono-Bungay* (1909), *The New Machiavelli* (1911), *Mrs Britling Sees It Through* (1916), *The World of William Clissold* (1926) and many others.

Without doubt the best of Wells can be found in his scientific romances and comic novels, while his novels of ideas are today dated and generally neglected³.

Towards the end of his life his contemporary political impact was limited. His efforts regarding the League of Nations became a disappointment⁴ as the organization turned out to be weak, unable to prevent World War II. The war itself increased the pessimistic side of his nature. In his last book, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945), he considered favourably the possibility that humanity would be replaced by another species. He also called the era "the age of frustration".

Wells died on 13th August, 1946, while working on a project that dealt with the dangers of nuclear war. A commemorative plaque in his honour was erected at his home in Regent's Park, London.

3. *neglected*: forgotten, not receiving attention.

4. *disappointment*: cause for sadness because something has not happened.

