

Science Fiction by Isaac Asimov

PEBBLE IN THE SKY
I, ROBOT
THE STARS, LIKE DUST—
FOUNDATION
FOUNDATION AND EMPIRE
THE CURRENTS OF SPACE
SECOND FOUNDATION
THE CAVES OF STEEL
THE MARTIAN WAY AND OTHER STORIES
THE END OF ETERNITY
THE NAKED SUN
EARTH IS ROOM ENOUGH
NINE TOMORROWS
FANTASTIC VOYAGE
ASIMOV'S MYSTERIES
NIGHTFALL AND OTHER STORIES
THE GODS THEMSELVES
THE EARLY ASIMOV
THE BEST OF ISAAC ASIMOV
BUY JUPITER AND OTHER STORIES
THE BICENTENNIAL MAN AND OTHER STORIES

ASIMOV

on Science Fiction

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of the present and possible future, to carry his heroes farther and farther afield in other "voyages *extraordinaire*"—to the polar regions, to the sea bottom, to the Earth's center, to the Moon.

The Moon had been a staple of the tellers of travel tales ever since Lucian of Samosata in the first century AD. It was thought of as just another distant land, but what made it different in Verne's case was that he made the effort to get his heroes there by scientific principles that had not yet been applied in real life (though his method was unworkable as described).

After him, other writers took men on longer voyages to Mars and to other planets and finally, in 1928, E. E. Smith, in his *The Skylark of Space*, broke all bonds with his "inertialess drive" and carried humanity out to the distant stars.

So science fiction began as an outgrowth of the travel tale, differing chiefly in that the conveyances used do not yet exist but might exist if the level of science and technology is extrapolated to greater heights in the future.

But surely not all science fiction can be viewed as travel tales. What of stories that remain right here on Earth but deal with robots, or with nuclear or ecological disaster, or with new interpretations of the distant past, for that matter?

None of that, however, is "right here" on Earth. Following Verne's lead, whatever happens on Earth is made possible by continuing changes (usually advances) in the level of science and technology so that the story must take place "right there" on future Earth.

What, then, do you think of this definition: "Science fiction stories are extraordinary voyages into any of the infinite supply of conceivable futures"?

(*The Name of Our Field*)

Almost everything about science fiction is a matter of controversy. This, perhaps, is not really strange. It may be because the writers, the fans, and even the casual readers happen one and all to be afflicted with eloquence, articulateness, and firm opinions. They will argue endlessly on any aspect of their beloved field and, in all probability, like each other all the better for the chance they had of expressing themselves vigorously.

Even the phrase "science fiction" itself manages to evoke dreadful nose-to-nose confrontations and I am not in the least backward about my opinion, either, as witness the following essay.

3. THE NAME OF OUR FIELD*

In the preceding essay, I talked of Jules Verne's "extraordinary voyages" and that brings up the point of how difficult it was to find a name for the kind of items that are published in the magazines of our field.

Such magazines contain "stories," and "story" is simply a shortened form of "history," a recounting of events in orderly detail. The recounting could, in either case, be of real incidents or of made-up ones, but we have become used to thinking of a "history" as real and of a "story" as made-up.

A "tale" is something that is "told" (from the Anglo-Saxon) and a "narrative" is something that is "narrated" (from the Latin). Either "tale" or "narrative" can be used for either a real or a made-up account. "Narrative" is the less common of the two

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simply because it is the longer word and therefore has an air of pretentiousness about it.

A word which is used exclusively for made-up items and never for real ones is "fiction," from a Latin word meaning "to invent."

What such magazines contain, then, are stories—or tales—or, most precisely, fiction.

Naturally, fiction can be of different varieties, depending on the nature of the content. If the events recounted deal mainly with love, we have "love stories" or "love tales" or "love fiction." Similarly, we can have "detective stories" or "terror tales" or "mystery fiction" or "confession stories" or "Western tales" or "jungle fiction."

The items that appear in the magazines of our own field deal, in one fashion or another, with future changes in the level of science or of science-derived technology. Doesn't it make sense, then, to consider the items to be "science stories," or "science tales," or, most precisely, "science fiction"?

And yet "science fiction," which is so obvious a name when you come to think of it, is a late development.

Jules Verne's extraordinary voyages were called "scientific fantasies" in Great Britain and the term "science fantasy" is still sometimes used today. "Fantasy" is from a Greek word meaning "imagination," so it isn't completely inappropriate, but it implies the minimal existence of constraints. When we speak of "fantasy" nowadays, we generally refer to stories that are not bound by the laws of science, whereas science fiction stories *are* so bound.

Another term used in the 1920s was "scientific romance." Romance was originally used for anything published in the "Romance languages," that is, in the popular tongues of western Europe, so that it was applied to material meant to be read for amusement. More serious works were written in Latin, of course. The trouble is that "romance" has come to be applied to love stories in particular so that "science romance" has a wrong feel to it.

"Pseudoscience stories" was sometimes used, but that is insulting. "Pseudo" is from a Greek word meaning "false" and while the kind of extrapolations of science used in science fiction are not true science, they are not false science either. They are "might be true" science.

"Superscience stories," still another name, is childish.

In 1926, when Hugo Gernsback published the first magazine ever to be devoted exclusively to science fiction, he called it *Amazing Stories*.

This caught on. When other magazines appeared, synonyms for "amazing" were frequently used. We had *Astounding Stories*, *Astonishing Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, *Marvel Stories*, and *Startling Stories* all on the stands, when the world and I were young.

Such names, however, do not describe the nature of the stories, but their effect on the reader, and that is insufficient. A story can amaze, astound, astonish, and startle you; it can cause you to marvel and wonder; and yet it need not be science fiction. It need not even be fiction. Something better was needed.

Gernsback knew that. He had originally thought of calling his magazine *Scientific Fiction*. That is hard to pronounce quickly, though, chiefly because of the repetition of the syllable "fic." Why not combine the words and eliminate one of those syllables? We then have "scientifiction."

"Scientifiction," though, is an ugly word, hard to understand and, if understood, likely to scare off those potential readers who equate the "scientific" with the "difficult." Gernsback therefore used the word only in a subtitle: *Amazing Stories: the Magazine of Scientifiction*. He introduced "stf" as the abbreviation of "scientifiction" and both abbreviation and word are still used sometimes.

When Gernsback was forced to give up *Amazing Stories*, he published a competing magazine *Science Wonder Stories*. In its first issue (June 1929) he used the term "science fiction," and the abbreviation "s.f."—or "sf" without periods—became popular. Occasionally, the word has been hyphenated as "science-fiction," but that is only done rarely.

The story, however, doesn't end there.

Since 1960, in particular, science fiction has tended to shift at least some of its emphasis from science to society, from gadgets to people. It still deals with changes in the level of science and technology, but those changes move farther into the background.

I believe it was Robert Heinlein who first suggested that we

ought to speak of "speculative fiction" instead, and some, like Harlan Ellison, strongly support that move now.

To me, though, "speculative" seems a weak word. It is four syllables long and is not too easy to pronounce quickly. Besides, almost anything can be speculative fiction. A historical romance can be speculative; a true crime story can be speculative. "Speculative fiction" is not a precise description of our field and I don't think it will work. In fact, I think "speculative fiction" has been introduced only to get rid of "science" but to keep "s.f."

This brings us to Forrest J Ackerman, a wonderful guy whom I love dearly. He is a devotee of puns and wordplay and so am I, but Forry has never learned that some things are sacred. He couldn't resist coining "sci-fi" as an analog, in appearance and pronunciation, to "hi-fi," the well-known abbreviation for "high fidelity."

"Sci-fi" is now widely used by people who don't read science fiction. It is used particularly by people who work in movies and television. This makes it, perhaps, a useful term.

We can define "sci-fi" as trashy material sometimes confused, by ignorant people, with s.f. Thus, *Star Trek* is s.f. while *Godzilla Meets Mothra* is sci-fi.

AFTERWORD 3

(The Name of Our Field)

After the original appearance of the preceding essay, Forrest J Ackerman was slightly chafed by the last few paragraphs and wrote to me, defending the "sci-fi" abomination.

Relax, Forry, you've won.

There are millions of people who talk about "sci-fi." The newspapers, TV, radio, the nonscience fiction magazines, the general public, all speak of it exclusively as "sci-fi." Even the subscription department of my very own magazine can't seem to use anything but "sci-fi."

The only people who say "s.f." are those few (not more than 100,000 in all, perhaps) who combine incredible intelligence with a deep and thoroughgoing knowledge of science fiction.

Surely, Forry, you can't begrudge the fact that we few, we happy few, we band of brothers, should cling firmly to the right.