

A Guide to Science Fiction Subgenres

The world of science fiction is literally epic and incredibly complex. The genre can be divided into dozens of subgenres, each with their own unique themes and attributes. Any one science fiction story can cross the boundaries of several of these subgenres, or even break off into its own cult category. Charting the entire universe of sci-fi subgenres would therefore be impossible, but here are some of its most common worlds.

Hard Science Fiction

Science fiction in which science and technology take center-stage, or in which scientific concepts are explained in detail. Hard SF is typically concept heavy, and attempts to provide scientific realism, often at the expense of character development and plot.

Soft Science Fiction

Science fiction in which science and technology take a back-seat to character-driven plots. In soft SF, the *how* is much less important than the *why*.

Military Science Fiction

Science fiction with a distinctly military theme. Characters are usually members of a military organization, and the plot will generally revolve around a war and/or military conflict. Duty, honor, heroism and other military clichés are par for the course.

Robot Fiction

Fiction in which the science of robotics is a central theme, typically relating to work of Isaac Asimov and the ideas advanced in his Robot series.

Social Science Fiction

Fiction in which future societies are extrapolated, explained and often criticised, usually for the purpose of social satire. The social sciences are the over-riding theme in this type of fiction; however, science and technology will usually play a central role in the structure of the extrapolated society.

Space Opera

Space opera is one of the more confusing and ill-defined terms that the genre has to offer. It typically refers to long-running science fiction series with continuing story arcs. These are usually set in space (or involve travel between two or more planets), have a large number of recurring characters and focus on large-scale (or “epic”) fictional events, such as galactic wars. Recurring themes in space opera include politics, imperialism, colonialism, war, space exploration, heroism and rebellion.

Steampunk

Steampunk merges the science fiction genre with alternate history and the design aesthetic of the 19th and early 20th Centuries. It is a literary genre, a style of dress and an artistic movement all rolled into one.

The basic idea behind steampunk is the introduction of modern (or futuristic) concepts and technologies into an earlier setting, or vice versa. It focuses largely on 'the age of steam' and the perceived inventiveness of industrial engineers. In a steampunk timeline, for example, computers may have been invented several centuries earlier and used alongside, or even powered by, steam engines.

Since the 1980's steampunk has grown beyond a simple literary genre and expanded into a large-scale artistic and cultural movement. Central to this movement is the belief that 19th Century literature (the works of Jules Verne and H.G Wells in particular), technology and fashion was more aesthetically appealing, and ultimately more durable than those produced by today's 'throw-away' culture.

Cyberpunk

Fiction relating to the science of cybernetics, which views nature as a series of interconnecting mechanical systems. Specifically, cyberpunk deals with the link between biology and computer technology, and explores humanity's changing relationship with computer systems. Virtual reality, prosthetics, cyborgs and internet fraud are all part of the cyberpunk niche, and usually go hand-in-hand with social decline.

Biopunk

Biopunk is similar to cyberpunk, except that it focuses on the use of bio-technology and genetic engineering rather than computer technology. Genetic manipulation, body modification and eugenics are all common themes in biopunk literature, as are social decline and political repression.

Nanopunk

Nanopunk is closely related to cyberpunk and biopunk, but focuses mainly on the use of microscopic machinery (or nanotechnology).

Superhero Fiction

Opinion varies on whether or not stories about superheroes belong to the science fiction or fantasy genres. Personally, I've always felt that this type of literature (and media) belongs in a genre of its own, having its own set of rules, themes and characteristics. The level of scientific realism employed by such a work can affect the degree to which it is 'accepted' into the genre. Generally speaking, however, superhero fiction is thought to be a scifi subgenre, whether we like it or not.

Voyages Extrordinaires

Jules Verne used this term to categorize his works, long before the term 'science fiction' was coined. It means "extraordinary voyages" and says as much about the exploratory format of his stories as it does about the fantastical ideas they contained. Today, the term may be attached to works that are directly inspired by Verne, or which follow the same format and imbue the same spirit of adventure.

Scientific Romance

This label was widely used before the term 'science fiction' was coined. It generally refers to the works of early British scifi writers, such as H.G Wells.

Gothic Science Fiction

A blurring of the line between science fiction and gothic fiction. Gothic science fiction often takes conventional gothic concepts (mythology, magic, monsters etc.) and attempts to explain them scientifically. A good example of this would be vampirism explained as a rare blood disease.

Mundane Science Fiction

Science fiction using only currently available or 'achievable' technology. This usually discounts faster-than-light travel. The aim is to create realism and explore science fiction ideas that are a little closer to home, such as the colonization of worlds in our own solar system.

Mundane science fiction is as much a movement as it is a genre, and recognises the huge impact that science fiction has on our society. It aims to promote a more realistic view of our universe so as to avoid future disillusionment. It is hoped that this will lead to a greater appreciation of the natural wonders and abundant resources that exist on our own world, and those close by.

SciFi/Horror

Works that bridge the boundaries of both the science fiction and horror genres.

SciFi/Comedy

Science fiction that is humorous in nature.

SciFi/Fantasy (or 'Science Fantasy')

Works that bridge the boundaries of both the science fiction and fantasy genres. Concepts traditionally belonging to science fiction (space travel, robots etc) appear alongside those usually associated with fantasy (magic, mythology etc.)

Apocalyptic Science Fiction

Fiction concerning a cataclysmic event, typically ending in the decline of the human race, human extinction, societal upheaval or the total destruction of the Earth itself.

Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

Fiction set in the aftermath of a cataclysmic event, in which the world, and human civilization, has been radically altered. Post-apocalyptic landscapes are typically grim, with survivors facing multiple dangers, such as violence, starvation, radiation, extreme weather and even mutants.

Zombie Fiction

While zombie fiction is also claimed by the horror and fantasy genres, it is sometimes considered to be science fiction at its core. An individual zombie story may fall into any one or more of these categories, depending on its content and theme. However, most zombie fiction falls under the 'post-apocalyptic' heading

(taking place during or after a 'zombie apocalypse'), and can therefore be categorised as scifi (if not scifi-horror).

Alien Invasion

Fiction in which aliens attempt to invade the Earth, either through military conquest, political subversion or a campaign of mass extermination.

Alien Conspiracy

Fiction in which the existence of alien life, or a government's interaction with alien intelligences, has been hidden from public knowledge.

Time Travel

Science fiction in which the character/characters travel into the past or future. This often merges with the 'alternate history' and 'parallel worlds' subgenres.

Alternate History

Although not strictly scifi, this is a branch of the speculative fiction tree that frequently converges with the 'social science fiction', 'time travel' and 'parallel worlds' subgenres of science fiction. Alternate history stories are set in a world in which history has taken a different course. Often, a single event is identified as the beginning of this change; the assassination of Hitler, for example.

Parallel Worlds

Fiction concerning travel to parallel universes, in which the world is slightly different from our own. The theory of parallel universes states that there are an infinite number of these alternate worlds. The traditional way to visit them is via a wormhole (or 'Einstein-Rosen bridge').

Lost Worlds

Essentially a continuation of Jules Verne's 'voyage extraordinaires', this is more a story-telling format than it is a genre. It concerns voyages to forgotten lands (islands, lost continents, isolated jungles etc.) and the discovery therein of scientific wonders (living dinosaurs, ancient technology, the secret of Atlantis etc.).

Dystopian Fiction

Dystopian fiction deals with political repression and police states. A dystopian society is one in which freedoms are limited and conventional morality has been in some way perverted. This is the opposite of a utopian society. The flagship work in this subgenre is undoubtedly George Orwell's 1984.

Space Western

Science fiction in which a future space-borne society portrayed as being like that of the American West. The comparison may be literal, with astronauts wearing cowboy hats and sporting Colt revolvers; or figurative, depicting a lawless society of traders and pioneers.

Retro Futurism

Retro futurism does for 1950s American pulp science fiction what Steampunk does for the works of Verne and Wells. It is an attempt to recapture the spirit of (or parody) 'the golden age of science fiction'.

Recursive Science Fiction

In the words of author Mike Resnick, this is "science fiction *about* science fiction". More precisely, it is science fiction in which there are multiple references to other scifi works, or which attempts to examine, parody or pay homage to existing science fiction works (or the genre itself).

Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction is an umbrella term, encompassing the larger genres of science fiction, fantasy, supernatural fiction, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, alternate history and horror. Writers of social science fiction often refer to their work as speculative fiction, perhaps to avoid the stigma attached to science fiction.

Slipstream

A post-modern crossover, where elements of science fiction, speculative fiction and/or fantasy merge with contemporary and mainstream literature. This is a highly dubious genre, which may or may not fall under the greater science fiction umbrella. Sometimes defined as the indefinable it may or may not exist, according to some critics, who see it as a kind of homeless shelter for those works that cannot be easily classified. Slipstream's tendency toward the absurd is sometimes seen to be at odds with mainstream science fiction.

Pulp Science Fiction

The term 'pulp' refers to the cheaply produced paper on which many of the science fiction magazines of the 1950s were printed. This is not a true genre of science fiction but indicates a specific era of publishing.

SciFi Fanfiction (or 'Fanfic')

Stories written by fans of an existing science fiction franchise, using previously established characters and concepts.

Erotic Science Fiction

Sexually explicit science fiction designed to titillate readers/viewers. Most erotic science fiction is written by hormonally challenged fans.

Source: <http://www.scifiideas.com/writing-2/writing-advice/a-guide-to-science-fiction-subgenres/>