On Science Fiction

Science fiction is something of a misnomer. Yes, it's about science. And true, it's fiction. However, neither of these is sufficient to define it.

As with any fiction, it's important for the reader to be able to connect with something in the story. The easiest—and by far the most common—way to accomplish this is, of course, to have human or human-like characters. If the characters' reactions and motivations are comprehensible, then a writer can invent just about any fantastic situation that he or she desires.

For example, in the June 2009 issue of *Analog*, James Van Pelt's story “Solace” concerns a four-thousand-year-long space flight, in which the crew spends great swaths of time asleep, awakening once every century for two weeks of routine maintenance. This is not something that we could possibly think of as normal.

The story's protagonist, Meghan, is a nature lover whose job is to make sure that various plants and seeds make it to their destination alive and able to reproduce. She grows profoundly depressed throughout the story as the realization sinks in that she will never be able to see an aspen forest again. She will never be able to lounge in the shade of a tree. In four thousand years, she will plant the seeds, but she will be an old woman before they can grow tall. The reader feels for her. It's a very human reaction to a fantastical plight.

When she finds a way to grow a small stand of aspen trees on their ship—it's a pretty big ship—we rejoice. She has managed to use their long journey to her advantage. She sets up the growing apparatus, goes to sleep, and when she wakes up a century later, the aspen stand is ancient.

The reader can sympathize with Meghan not because we have experienced the exact same problem, but instead, because she is human, and we can understand, in other ways, what she's going through. She reacts in human ways. She relates to her problem the same way we would, and, most importantly, we can, through reading the story, put *ourselves* in her position.

But any fiction can be—and, indeed, most fiction is—about humans with problems. So what is it that sets science fiction apart from other genres?

In the short story, “Rautavaara's Case,” Phillip K. Dick explores savior myths. Explorers in a spaceship are killed when it is struck by a tiny meteorite and depressurizes. A scouting team from a race of beings made of energy locates that ship and discovers that one of the ship's crew still shows some faint life signs. These beings decide to conduct an experiment in which they superimpose their savior myth over the humans'. The barely living human in the ship re-experiences the final moments of her life in which Jesus Christ himself visits her and the crew of the ship. They are terrified at first, but even moreso when Jesus proceeds to eat one of the crew alive.

It's a disturbing image—and it’s meant to be—but it highlights an interesting feature of science fiction. While interstellar space flight is relatively easy to suspend disbelief for, a race of beings made of energy strains credulity.

But this story isn't meant to be plausible. Dick is asking what would happen *if there were* a race of beings made of energy. He speculates that they might conceivably view an afterlife in which they are consumed by greater energy source—their concept of God. They might even be offended by the idea that mere mortals might conceivably consume their savior—as is the case with the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist.

The energy beings are surprised when the humans investigating the deaths of the crew became aware of the experiment and are appalled and demand an apology. They thought the humans would be fascinated by the experiment.

“Rautavaara’s Case” is not about science or technology, though elements of both are in the story. We can't even reasonably assume that beings made of energy exist. However, the story remains compelling because it's not about energy beings and it's not about space travel. It's actually about humans and how we relate to our mythologies. It is, again, about humans relating to human problems, but with the *twist* of a fantastical technology- or science-related idea in the mix.

Science fiction is *about* many things. Biology, chemistry, cybertechnology, sociology, ecology, genetic engineering, time travel, philosophy, theology, space flight, extraterrestrials, politics, and war. It can be about any of these things and more, but it's *always* about humans and ideas.

It doesn't need to be realistic to tell us something interesting. Frank Herbert's *Dune* is about fantastical concepts like prophesy, and bizarre technologies like force fields and a drug that extends life. But the characters and the byzantine ways in which they interact are what make the story.

Kurt Vonnegut complained in an editorial he wrote for the *New York Times* in 1965 that he was “a sore-headed occupant of a file-drawer labeled 'science- fiction' and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.” He lamented that most critics didn't take the genre seriously. Granted, things have changed since 1965, and science fiction has received much in the way of critical attention since but consider that Vonnegut's comments came in response to the perception that his novel *Player Piano* was science fiction, something that he claims not to have considered when he wrote the novel. He said, “The feeling persists that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works.”

Vonnegut himself is guilty of perpetuating the sentiment that writing science fiction is somehow not respectable.

And now consider that Phillip K. Dick once stated that “The best SF novel I have read is Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, because it actually deals with men-women relationships,” citing *Brave New World* as almost as good and *1984* as terrible in this regard. Perhaps it's not for Vonnegut to decide if his work is science fiction or not.

Science fiction defies definition. This is because it's something different to most people who read it. Vonnegut's primary complaint about science fiction is that so much of it is bad—which is true. A lot of science fiction is merely formulaic genre fiction. But this complaint seems to be misguided when one considers that most mainstream fiction is bad, formulaic genre fiction. Period. Most books that normal people read will go out of print and be lost to the passage of time. It's hard to imagine a scenario in which the works of Danielle Steele will be taught in a university setting.

The worst of science fiction from 1965 is, more or less, dead. Nobody reads it. But the good didn't go away. Some of it lived on. Writers like Harlan Ellison, Kurt Vonnegut, Phillip K. Dick, Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, wrote their most famous works in the mid-20th century and they are the pioneering authors that are inspiring today's writers of science fiction. Perhaps it is these writers who are responsible for the fact that a large quantity of the science fiction available today *is* good.

The most concise description of science fiction that I've ever come across is from Stanley Schmidt's submission guidelines for *Analog Magazine*. Since *Analog* is perhaps the most successful and respected of all science fiction publications, they can be considered something of an authority on the matter.

We publish science fiction stories. That is, stories in which some aspect of future science or technology is so integral to the plot that, if that aspect were removed, the story would collapse. Try to picture Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*without the science and you'll see what I mean. No story!

The science can be physical, sociological, psychological. The technology can be anything from electronic engineering to biogenetic engineering. But the stories must be strong and realistic, with believable people (who needn't be human) doing believable things–no matter how fantastic the background might be.”

Vonnegut is not alone in being perceived as a science fiction writer and not wishing to be. In 1980, Harlan Ellison, whose most famous works include *A Boy and his Dog* and *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, walked out before an interview had even begun when he was introduced as a science fiction writer. To be fair he had established beforehand with the show's producers that the interviewer was not to call him a science fiction writer.

And this brings us to an interesting point. Ellison, among others, distinguished himself from the science fiction community—though he was at one point the vice president of the Science Fiction Writers of America—by referring to his work as *speculative* fiction.

The term speculative fiction has meant many things. Robert Heinlein, whose most famous works include *Starship Troopers* and *Stranger in a Strange Land,* is often attributed as having coined the term in the late forties, though he used the term synonymously with science fiction.

The term didn't catch on until the 1960s when Harlan Ellison and others picked it up as a way of distinguishing *themselves* from Heinlein and Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke. This period was called the New Wave of science fiction and throughout the sixties, writers like Dick, Ellison, Urusula K. LeGuin, and Octavia Butler, broke an astonishing amount of new ground in science fiction, crushing pre-conceived notions of what it could be about. Hard science plausibility was no longer the important thing as far as these writers were concerned. Partially inspired by the work of the beats, like William S. Burroughs, these works were often surreal, and focused far more on the human factor than the science factor.

Like all popular dissenting groups, these outliers were absorbed into the mainstream science fiction community in the seventies and the “speculative” nomenclature fell into disuse. It wasn't until recently (the early 2000s) that speculative fiction was redefined to be an inclusive term that in today's critical discourse is used inclusively to describe all sorts of genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, supernatural fiction, utopian and dystopian fiction, apocalyptic fiction and alternate histories.

Speculative fiction is probably just as ambiguous a term as science fiction because it highlights the inadequacy of genre labels. By labeling something as speculative fiction, you're basically just saying that it isn't “normal.” The problem with that is when one considers that all great literature is, by dint of being great, not normal.

Science fiction is about people and it's about ideas and it's about the sorts of things that happen when these two things encounter each other. It's exhaustless to meditation. Its possibilities are limitless.

William Faulkner said that “the human heart in conflict with itself” was the only thing worth writing about. I must respectfully disagree. Science fiction is about the human mind in conflict with itself and with the things that it creates. A whole lot of it manages to fit the human heart in there, too. In this way, it is everything that any great literature aspires to be.