

# On Science Fiction

by Kurt Vonnegut

Years ago I was working in Schenectady for General Electric, completely surrounded by machines and ideas for machines, so I wrote a novel about people and machines, and machines frequently got the best of it, as machines will. (It was called *Player Piano*, and it's coming out in hard covers again next spring.) And I learned from the reviewers that I was a science-fiction writer.

I didn't know that. I supposed that I was writing a novel about life, about things I could not avoid seeing and hearing in Schenectady, a very real town, awkwardly set in the gruesome now. I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file-drawer labeled "science-fiction" ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a tall white fixture in a comfort station.

The way a person gets into this drawer, apparently, is to notice technology. The feeling persists that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works, just as no gentleman wears a brown suit in the city. Colleges may be to blame. English majors are encouraged, I know, to hate chemistry and physics, and to be proud because they are not dull and creepy and humorless and war-oriented like the engineers across the quad. And, because English majors can scarcely sign their own names at the end of a course of English instruction, many become serious critics. I have already said what they then do to the drawer I'm in.

But there are those who love life in this fulsome drawer, who are alarmed by the thought that they might some day be evicted, might some day be known for what they really are: plain, old, short-story writers and novelists who mention the fruits of engineering and research. They are happy in the drawer because most of the people in it love each other as members of old-fashioned families are supposed to do. They meet often, comfort and praise one another, exchange single-spaced letters of 20 pages and more, booze it up affectionately and one way or another have a million heart-throbs and laughs.

I have run with them some, and they are generous and amusing souls, but I must now make a true statement that will put them through the roof: They are joiners. They are a lodge. If they didn't enjoy having a gang of their own so much, there would be no such category as science-fiction. They love to stay up all night, arguing the question, "What is science-fiction?" One might as usefully inquire, "What are the Elks? And what is the Order of the Eastern Star?"

Well--it would be a drab world without meaningless social aggregations. There would be a lot fewer smiles, and about one-hundredth as many publications. And there is this to be said for the science-fiction publications: If somebody can write just a little bit, they will probably publish him. In the Golden Age of Magazines, which wasn't so long ago, inexcusable trash was in such great demand that it led to the invention of the electric typewriter, and incidentally financed my escape from Schenectady. Happy days! But there is now only one sort of magazine to which a maundering sophomore may apply for instant recognition as a writer. Guess what sort.

Which is not to say that the editors of science-fiction magazines and anthologies and novels are tasteless. They are not tasteless, and I will get to them by and by. The people in the field who can be charged fairly with tastelessness are 75 per cent of the writers and 95 per cent of the readers--or not so much tastelessness, really, as childishness. Mature relationships, even with machines, do not titillate the unwashed majority. Whatever it knows about science was fully revealed in *Popular Mechanics* by 1933. Whatever it knows about politics and economics and history can be found in the Information Please Almanac

for 1941. Whatever it knows about the relationship between men and women derives mainly from the clean and the pornographic versions of "Maggie and Jiggs."

I taught for a while in a mildly unusual school for mildly unusual high-school children, and current science fiction was catnip to the boys, any science fiction at all. They couldn't tell one story from another, thought they were all neat, keen. What appealed to them so, I think, aside from the novelty of comic books without pictures, was the steady promise of futures which they, *just as they were*, could handle. In such futures they would be high-ranking non-coms at the very least, *just as they were*, pimples, virginity and everything.

Curiously, the American space program did not excite them. This was not because the program was too mature for them. On the contrary, they were charmingly aware that it was manned and financed by tone-deaf adolescents like themselves. They were simply being realistic: they doubted that they would ever graduate from high school, and they knew that any creep hoping to enter the program would have to have a B.S. degree at a minimum, and that the really good jobs went to creeps with Ph.D.'s.

Most of them *did* graduate from high school, by the way. And many of them now cheerfully read about futures and presents and even pasts which nobody can handle-- 1984, *Invisible Man*, *Madame Bovary*. They are particularly hot for Kafka. Boomers of science fiction might reply, "Ha! Orwell and Ellison and Flaubert and Kafka are science fiction writers, too!" They often say things like that. Some are crazy enough to try to capture even Tolstoy. It is as though I were to claim that everybody of note belonged fundamentally to Delta Upsilon, my own lodge, incidentally, whether he knew it or not. Kafka would have been desperately unhappy D.U.

But listen--about the editors and anthologists and publishers who keep the science-fiction field separate and alive: they are uniformly brilliant and sensitive and well-informed. They are among the precious few Americans in whose minds C.P. Snow's two cultures sweetly intertwine. They publish so much bad stuff because good stuff is hard to find, and because they feel it is their duty to encourage any writer, no matter how frightful, who has guts enough to include technology in the human equation. Good for them. They want buxom images of the new reality.

And they get them from time to time, too. Along with the worst writing in America, outside of the education journals, they publish some of the best. They are able to get a few really excellent stories, despite low budgets and an immature readership, because to a few good writers the artificial category, the file-drawer labeled "science-fiction," will always be home. These writers are rapidly becoming old men, and deserve to be called grand. They are not without honors. The lodge gives them honors all the time. And love.

The lodge will dissolve. All lodges do, sooner or later. And more and more writers in "the mainstream," as science-fiction people call the world outside the file-drawer, will include technology in their tales, will give it at least the respect due in a narrative to a wicked stepmother. Meanwhile, if you write stories that are weak on dialogue and motivation and characterization and common sense, you could do worse than throw in a little chemistry or physics, or, even witchcraft, and mail them off to the science-fiction magazines. A marketing tip: the science-fiction magazine that pays the most and seems to have the poorest judgment is *Playboy*. Try *Playboy* first.