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Top 10 science fiction novelists of the '00s -- so far

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We are blessed so far this decade with an amazing crop of new science fiction novelists.

Writing in a variety of styles, this crew is arguably more insightful, more interesting, higher intensity, and bolder than many (but not all!) of their predecessors -- and in my view revitalizing the genre at a time when more new technologies that will radically reshape all our lives are incubating and percolating than ever before.

So, taking nothing away from authors like David Brin who have long been established and continue to produce top-notch work, here are my nominations for the top 10 new science fiction novelists of -- more or less -- the decade, plus one bonus.

And, they're not *all* British.

Charles Stross

Stross, in my opinion, is first among equals -- the single best emerging talent with several outstanding novels in various styles under his belt and hopefully many more to come.

"One of us" in the sense that his career includes a stint as -- not kidding -- Linux columnist for *Computer Shopper* magazine, Stross is equally adept at both near-future and radically-extrapolated timeframes, and both hyper-serious and humorous moods.

Glasshouse is Stross's latest book and perhaps the best introduction to his work. A paranoid journey into a world of intergalactic teleportation and arbitrary physical body reshaping will have you thinking twice about who you are, and how you know who you are.

Singularity Sky and Iron Sunrise are top-notch post-Singularity space opera featuring perhaps the most inventive alien opponent ever created for science fiction -- "the Festival". You'll never look at telephones that drop out of the sky the same way again.

Accelerando is the best envisioning of the Singularity committed to paper so far. This book is really cool, both in the sense of how the kids mean it, and also in tone -- the plot, which spans about 100 years, is emotionally cold but amazingly inventive and highly likely to keep you up nights thinking hard about where we're all headed in the long run.

The Atrocity Archives and The Jennifer Morgue, in contrast, are highly entertaining shaggy dog stories about an IT guy named Bob who gets drafted into mankind's fight against forces of evil from another dimension -- James Bond meets Call of Cthulhu meets The Office.

Finally, Stross is also an active blogger with, let's say, strong points of view.

Richard Morgan

Morgan writes outstanding, page-turning, highly inventive military- and detective-flavored hard science fiction set in turbulent worlds where hard men are faced with hard challenges.

Altered Carbon is definitely the place to start, Morgan's first and perhaps most inventive novel, Robert Heinlein meets Raymond Chandler -- and first of a trio.

Broken Angels is a strong followup that tilts more towards military fiction while still occupying the same universe.

Woken Furies completes the trilogy with more hard-boiled action featuring a protagonist who has to fight a younger, and really mean, version of himself, which he does not enjoy.

Thirteen is undoubtedly Morgan's best-written novel so far -- this is an author whose skills are growing rapidly, and this book shows it. Not officially released in the US yet (I just read the British version, *Black Man*, renamed for US consumption), *Thirteen* is a near-future story of genetic engineering gone badly wrong -- a future version of all those classic paranoid political thrillers of the 70's but with a much harder edge. Highly recommended. Also very helpful re advising on things to think about before booking your next trip back from Mars.

Alastair Reynolds

Reynolds is the real deal -- doctorate in astrophysics and former staff scientist at the European Space Agency -- and writes as if Robert Heinlein knew a thousand times more about science and completely lost his ability to write for warm characters. While Reynolds' work is cold and dark -- almost sterile -- in human terms, he operates on a scale and scope seldom seen, and everything he writes is grounded in real advanced theoretical physics. Highly recommended for anyone who likes large-scale space opera and big ideas.

Revelation Space, Redemption Ark, and Absolution Gap -- together, Reynolds' flagship trilogy -- are three of the darkest, largest-scale, and most scientifically complex hard science fiction novels ever written. Highly recommended to anyone who thinks that sounds like a good idea (I did!).

Century Rain is Reynolds' most approachable novel so far -- a trippy far-future expedition to an apparently inexplicable complete clone of Earth and all its inhabitants from our year 1959. Like Morgan's work, strong overtones here of Raymond Chandler -- in a good way (in a *great* way).

Chasm City has more overshades of Richard Morgan -- lots of combat, science, and intrigue. Are you sure you know who you are?

The Prefect is just out and I haven't read it yet, but it's next on the stack.

Ken MacLeod

MacLeod is incredibly creative -- his imagination is second to none -- and he's a superb writer. Many of his books have political overtones that may or may not interfere with your ability to enjoy them. Sometimes MacLeod seems to think that socialism is going to work a lot better in the future than it did in the past. But if you can get through that, his novels certainly qualify as dizzyingly inventive and frequently rewarding.

The Star Fraction, The Stone Canal, The Cassini Division, and The Sky Road form the Fall Revolution sequence, MacLeod's first major body of work. Cyberpunk, political revolution, high-tech combat, love-slave androids, cloning, wormholes, artificial intelligence, and nuclear deterrence for hire -- oh my! Join the Felix Dzerzhinsky Workers' Defense Collective today.

The Execution Channel, MacLeod's latest, takes a left turn into a paranoid post-9/11 near future featuring war with Iran, flu pandemics, nuclear terrorist attacks, government conspiracies, and the Execution Channel, broadcasting actual footage of murders and executions around the clock. Haven't read it yet, but sounds like fun.

Peter Hamilton

Hamilton is the clear heir to Heinlein in my view. Large-scale space opera told through a shifting and interlinked cast of people from various walks of life, and amazing storytelling -- or, as (accurately) blurbed by Richard Morgan, "flat-out huge widescreen all-engines-at-full I-dare-you-not-to-believe-it space opera".

It's taken Hamilton a little while to find his talent, but he's definitely found it. His two latest novels are superb: Pandora's Star and its sequel Judas Unchained. Plain on staying up late, you'll roll straight from the first into the second -- and they are not short (in the best way!).

John Scalzi

Another post-cyberpunk Heinlein heir, Scalzi writes strong, highly characterized, inventive novels that have been racking up tremendous review after tremendous review for the past few years.

Start with Old Man's War (don't worry, they put the old dude in a young body, so you don't need to find out what it's like to fight aliens after hip replacement surgery). Progress directly to sequel The Ghost Brigades (Sci Fi Essential Books) and triquel The Last Colony.

Scalzi is also an active blogger, turns out!

Neal Asher

This way lie dragons... literally, and not like you've ever met before. Asher is an incredibly strong author of science fiction with a distinctive horror overlay. Not for the squeamish, but highly inventive.

Asher's primary work is the Polity series -- Gridlinked, The Line of Polity, Brass Man, and Polity Agent. The extended story of an enigmatic agent for the all-powerful artificial intelligences who rule the whole of human space, the Polity, these novels blend Ian Fleming with large-scale military combat, advanced theoretical xenobiology, nanotechnology gone badly wrong, and war drones with bad attitudes. Most definitely entertaining.

Follow those up with The Skinner and The Voyage of the Sable Keech, and then the delectable standalone novella Prador Moon. One of the most distinctively imagined "bad bug" alien races, one of the most creative and lethal new worlds, and a historical scandal of horrific proportions combine in a whirlwind of violence and battle.

Asher is blogging as well!

Chris Moriarty

Gibson meets Heinlein (can you tell I was a Heinlein fan growing up?) in a melange of science fiction themes, most particularly artificial intelligence, filtered through a distinctly female point of view. A rapidly developing talent worth reading, and watching for future advances.

Read Spin State and then read Spin Control.

Peter Watts

Watts' fifth novel, Blindsight, has put him on the map -- a new tale of alien contact, as conducted by a team of entitites from a future Earth that will send a chill down your spine without even getting to the alien part.

David Marusek

My last and final entry of the top 10 is the one I am least certain about. Marusek is off the charts in terms of creativity and inventiveness -- in his debut novel, Counting Heads, he extrapolates with incredible verve and detail an Earth circa 2134 that is a near-utopia. I frankly need to read it again. I think it may be a failure as a novel, but if so, it's an amazing failure. Well worth keeping an eye on at the very least -- has to win the award for highest potential.

Bonus: Vernor Vinge

Vinge, a retired San Diego State Univeristy professor of mathematics and computer science, is one of the most important science fiction authors ever -- with Arthur C. Clarke one of the best forecasters in the world.

First, if you haven't had the pleasure, be sure to read True Names, Vinge's 1981 novella that forecast the modern Internet with shocking clarity. (Ignore the essays, just read the story.) Fans of Gibson and Stephenson will be amazed to see how much more accurately Vinge called it, and before *Neuromancer*'s first page cleared Gibson's manual typewriter. Quoting a reviewer on Amazon:

> When I was starting out as a PhD student in Artificial Intelligence at Carnegie Mellon, it was made known to us first-year students that an unofficial but necessary part of our education was to locate and read a copy of an obscure science-fiction novella called *True Names*. Since you couldn't find it in bookstores, older grad students and professors would directly mail order sets of ten and set up informal lending libraries -- you would go, for example, to Hans Moravec's office, and sign one out from a little cardboard box over in the corner of his office. This was 1983 -- the Internet was a toy reserved for American academics, "virtual reality" was not a popular topic, and the term "cyberpunk" had not been coined. One by one, we all tracked down copies, and all had the tops of our heads blown off by Vinge's incredible book.

True Names remains to this day one of the four or five most seminal science-fiction novels ever written, just in terms of the ideas it presents, and the world it paints. It laid out the ideas that have been subsequently worked over so successfully by William Gibson and Neal Stephenson. *And* it's well written. *And* it's fun.

So what? Well, he's done it again. Vinge's new novel, Rainbows End (yes, the apostrophe is deliberately absent), is the clearest and most plausible extrapolation of modern technology trends forward to the year 2025 that you can imagine.

Stop reading this blog right now. Go get it. Read it, and then come back.

I'll wait.

It's that good.

We'll see how things turn out, but I would not be the least bit surprised if we look back from 2025 and say, "I'll be damned, Vinge called it", just like we look back today on 1981's *True Names* and say the same thing.

He better write a sequel.