

# **Genre Fiction: A Primer**

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## **Understanding What Sci-Fi Readers Want**

Taking the readers through futuristic worlds, navigating the yet known aspects of science and above all raising deep and insightful questions that tickle, very silently, the nerves of people on countless matters concerning human emotions, psychology, cultures and societies, politics and even science itself - the science fiction genre is probably the most imaginative and intricate of the lot. With its popularity soaring to new heights, the genre itself has come a long way from the time of H.G.Wells, Jules Verne, Philip.K.Dick and Ray Bradbury to more recent works. For any writer to set foot in this world, it is vital to understand that sci-fi is not necessarily about little green men and robots. Of course, any writer attempting this genre would have gobbled up enough novels to know this fact.

To come up with deep questions and to create an acceptable work, it is necessary to read the readers. Here are a few pointers to gauge a sci-fi driven mind.

## **It's all in the details**

The science part of it can be made-up but that does not give a writer any leeway to throw situations and points that negate previously proven scientific facts. A misstep in this regard could prove to be a costly dampener. Sci-fi readers, as accepted by many writers, do not appreciate loosely built up scientific premises. It is important to get fundamental facts of science right before embarking on the imaginative quest.

## **Consistency and congruency**

The greatest 'put-off' point for any reader of this genre is inconsistency. There is a thin line between science fiction and fantasy that writers should be wary of. While the word 'fiction' here gives writers the freedom to fashion different worlds, the word 'science' makes it imperative to create rules in that world. Sticking to these rules will help any writer maintain the consistency and congruency the sci-fi reader so craves. This essentially means that an enormous amount of thought and

research is needed even before a writer sets out on this quest to capture sci-fi readers' minds.

### **Driving questions**

Creating a fictional scientific idea that forms the basis of the story aside, every sci-fi novel generally raises deep and thoughtful queries about varied subjects. It is this query or series of queries that give life to a sci-fi novel. While earlier works have touched upon topics like human emotions, politics and ethics, many modern works have picked on questions that relate to human-environment conflicts. In other words, a sci-fi novel is a microscope that helps readers delve into otherwise ignored or unperceivable ideas and happenings.

### **Value of characters**

The questions may be the driving points of any sci-fi novel, but it is crucial to remember that it is ultimately the characters that directly or indirectly pose those questions. In the quest for creating a perfect scientific premise and a valuable core question, the

significance of characters, human or otherwise, should not be lost. Readers are still living breathing organisms that connect to other living breathing organisms.

### **Finding novelty in the old**

Sci-fi readers are quite a dedicated and smart bunch and to garner their attention; it becomes essential to seek an answer to the question of “what new idea is being presented in the novel?” Maybe an idea in itself is not new but it is pertinent to at least come up with ways to project the said idea in a novel and previously untried way.

A rightly paced work sprinkled with thoughtful questions, and relevant science can probably be considered a recipe for a good sci-fi novel. Imagination might have no boundaries but sticking to rules in sci-fi will help avoid audience wrath.

## **Understanding What Thriller Readers Want**

It can be argued, with the news of so many crimes and macabre events we encounter every day that reality has probably trumped thriller novels. That would not be too far from the truth. If one were to scan any 'top sellers' list at any point in time, it is possible to find at least a couple of thrillers and suspense novels and novellas. It is certainly intriguing to know as to what makes people invest their time and money in reading the very things they fear. It is a well-known fact that the human mind craves for the occasional thrills, horrors and adrenalin rushes. Yet that is not why a suspense thriller finds an audience, it is the belief that the chaos, the imaginary world and its characters encounter, will die down at the end and all will indeed be well again. Ultimately, it is the idea of 'justice will prevail' at some point that drives readers of this genre or at least that is the case with most thriller novels.

As always, the fact that 'everything has been written once' cannot be escaped. The differences in characterization and

premises and the world or location that those crimes and characters are set in will still make thriller readers pick up a novel from the shelf. From psychological and crime to supernatural, what do thriller readers expect in a novel?

### **A taut story**

A thriller is, well, supposed to thrill. What is needed is a taut and transfixing storyline that plays on the fears of the audience without overdoing the terrors and horrors. Out-of-place situations are not something that a thriller novel reader would appreciate. Every event is supposed to lead the reader towards another that ultimately has some relevance to the entire plot and the climax. Any knot formulated at any point should eventually be unraveled by the end. Multiple storylines and complex layers are classy but might end up confusing the reader if not handled with care. Commonalities should be identified and laid bare sooner rather than later.

Violence and body counts work but only in ways and numbers that the story demands. Thrillers might not be morality

plays or knowledge enhancing encyclopedias, but readers will always love to learn something new from everything they read.

### **Living and Non-human characters**

Thrillers do not just revolve around the central characters, the antagonist and protagonist. There are numerous non-human elements that can make for great characters themselves. For instance, a particular piece of art, a specific home or an entire city, elements like these can be given life to enhance the 'heart-thumping' and 'adrenaline-pumping' factor.

As for the living characters, there is certainly a need to provide some shades of grey. The good can be flawed, and the flawed can be good. The back stories and events that lay bare the doubts, fears and insecurities of central characters will help build the tension.

### **Crafting twists and holding suspense**



There practically can be no thriller novel without an incredible plot twist. Regardless of the placement of the twist, it is necessary to create situations and events that deny the reader from anticipating that twist. A well-thought out cliff-hanger is necessary to hold the suspense till the end. The human mind is a very curious one, and it loves to guess, so the writer's job is to blacken the list or lay out as many choices as possible.

### **Steering clear of reality**

Thriller readers, in most cases, want to be transported to a fictional world, and they want to clearly segregate their reality from fiction. Too much emphasis on real life incidents will blur the line they do not want to cross, and this does not augur well for the novel. It is not in the best interest of the writer to create fear. The writer's job is to play on it. The writer's job is only to thrill.

The success of thriller and suspense novels lie in blinding the reader from the truth and by only revealing so much for them to get intrigued. It means that the first half is the trailer and the second, the movie.

## **Understanding What Fantasy Readers Want**

Dreams are gateways for humans to journey through unknown lands, experience countless implausible situations, meet incredible characters and live a life that is exceptionally different from that of reality. Such dreams, which the human mind coughs up from time to time, do not have to worry much to find a target audience. Whereas, the dream worlds that fantasy writers create on paper should be engaging enough to capture the attention of an equally imaginative fantasy reader. Fantasy, sci-fi and suspense thrillers have a lot in common. All deal with make-believe worlds, made-up creatures and unreal situations but fantasy novels differ mostly in the avoidance of core scientific facts and grotesque premises.

From J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis to J.K. Rowling, Peter Jackson and George R.R. Martin, fantasies have not only succeeded as paperbacks but also as big screen adaptations. Writing and publishing fantasy novels have their set of challenges.

Unlike sci-fi genre, fantasy novels have the freedom of breaking many rules as the characters or the premises are not confined by scientific boundaries. A certain amount of leeway in this regard is possible. For a writer to go about creating such a world, it is essential to understand as to what will make a reader invest himself or herself in the world that the writer has created.

### **Escaping reality**

Fantasy genre readers look to purchase tickets to alternate realities, a world far removed from their own, yet engaging enough for them to want to experience the trials and tribulations of the characters there. To ensure this, the writer has to create ways for the reader to become more invested in that world. It is essential for a writer to pull the reader into the world by giving as many details about the world as possible, be it the physical attributes and landscapes, the rules of that world, etc. If the world involves a race other than human, which is the case with most fantasy novels, it is necessary to vividly describe those creatures, even if some of the elements are left to the imagination of the reader.

## **Chronicling the past**

It is of course necessary to give a glimpse of some of the 'whys' and 'hows' but narrating the past of the fantasized world in extreme detail will serve no purpose other than diverting the readers mind from the core story. Bringing back the reader to the central plot will later become an epic challenge as the writer would have to start from scratch to ensure the reader's investment in the main characters. Unloading kilos of information all at once will end up numbing rather than enlivening readers.

## **On characters and expressions**

There is a certain love-hate relationship between quirky character names and fantasy novels. Some unusual attempts at strange names work, some don't. For the names to settle in the minds of the readers though, it is vital that they are not randomly arrived at but have relevance to the settings. Fantasy readers take immense pleasure in old world phrases and ancient expressions. They certainly do not mind hitting dictionaries; internet or even the libraries to comprehend the meanings of such phrases. If the

settings demand usage of antiquated vocabulary, nothing should stop the writer from going for it.

### **What is the USP?**

Not everything supernatural is enchanting and captivating. For instance, readers have had enough of mythical creatures, hobbits, leprechauns and the lot. It does not mean that readers don't appreciate the occasional element of magic and mythical creatures but it is necessary for writers to steer clear of 'road-most-traveled' elements and look to present some originality in this respect, a USP that will work to pique audiences' interest.

The core of a fantasy novel is imagination and leaving some of it to the audience is the best way to go.

## **Understanding What Horror Readers Want**

Inspiring awe is never an easy thing for a writer, especially considering that the readers of today are drenched in and bombarded with an unbelievable number of horror stories through television and cinema. The grotesque nature of many crimes today has also been instrumental in upping the expectations of this genre of readers. Writing and publishing horror stories have certainly lost a bit of sheen today.

The times of Lovecraft and Stephen King have certainly changed and what worked then, will most certainly not work with today's readers. The scare quotient just needs to be higher. It can also be successfully argued that there is an amazing gap between what seems to work with the audience and the kind of works that are lapped up by critics. This means that many of the works that critics have said an 'aye' to have not exactly made the publisher's or the writer's pockets heavier. A tricky time this, for an equally

tricky genre. So, what sends chills down today's audience's spines and what hits their snooze button?

### **To scare and not to disgust**

The problem with this genre is that, there are numerous elements that when not handled subtly can end up grossing or repelling the reader rather than scaring or shocking them from within. Readers want the plot and events to emotionally disturb and bother them. This emotional investment in the characters and events will keep the story ticking. This is not to say that events should not be explained to up the scare quotient but the elucidation should stay within the boundaries of subtlety unless and until it makes a great difference to the story or has some significance to the development of characters. As many readers agree, sometimes what is left untold is the scariest part of a horror story.

## **Well-etched out characters**

Readers might not care about horrific things happening to equally horrific characters. The genre is built on the foundation of the archaic 'good vs. evil'. Characters can and should have shades of grey but ultimately their development should warrant the care of readers. The fact that readers realize that such characters are going to suffer terrible things as the story moves along and the anxiety that it creates in the mind of readers is what drives them to turn the pages.

## **Reasons matter**

Readers do not want horror and terror to be shoved down the central characters' throat. Plausible reasons, preferably those that are direct results of an unwise choice or an unanticipated result of a seemingly clever decision or even those that arise from choices connected to the safety and security of loved ones, are a lot more acceptable.



## **Drawing up walls**

The space and the amount of freedom that is given to the central characters are extremely crucial. What readers want are constraints and impediments at every go. Confining characters physically or mentally is the recipe for a good horror story.

## **Clichés and twists**

This is a no-brainer. Enough has been written about vampires, ghosts, ghouls, lycanthropes and the occasional scary dolls but it is impossible to stay clear of everything. Urban legends and supernatural elements fuel this genre but what readers do want are twists to these clichés.

Readers span many generations, and the present lot has already been fed an indigestible amount of vampires and ghosts. Sustaining suspense and making the story concise and taut will help writers reach a wider audience.

## **Understanding What YA Readers Want**

There is mystery, there is fantasy, there is sci-fi, there is horror, there is thriller, there is romance and then there is YA. Unfortunately, completely detaching YA novels from the rest and giving the title of 'genre' to the same would not do it any justice. Young Adult novels span a wide range of genres themselves, but the difference lies in who they cater to. The age range and the gender make all the difference here. Again, this too cannot be written in stone.

As recent reports indicate, YA novels have found an audience in not just 'teenagers' who were the original targets, but also in adults, mostly the parents and other older family members of such teenagers. More writers and publishers have become aware of this fact and certain modifications, small ones if not enormous, are made to accommodate that range. Considering this eclectic range, what should the writers be wary of when penning YA novels and what do readers want from writers today?

## **Knowing what genre works**

On accepting the fact that YA in itself is not a genre, it becomes easy to traverse through many others to cater to the specific teenaged audience and preferably a portion of adults too. Fantasies, Sci-fi and Thrillers seem to rule the roost among readers. Marginally dystopian plot lines delving deeply into the contemporary familial and societal issues are also a big draw among young adults. This is in sharp contrast to the held belief that only romantic vampires and high-school romances drive teenagers to the bookshelf.

## **Variety in characters and characterizations**

It is an increasingly connected world and an even more diverse environment. This transformation is reflected in the taste of YA readers too. What readers want are varied characters from different walks of life and from various ethnicities battling through numerous everyday problems or even those that occur in imaginary worlds. Reading about characters that overcome such hurdles including physical ailments, complicated diseases and

social stigma against sexual preferences and the like seem to liberate such young minds.

### **Of family ties and bonds**

Contemporary parents, relationships between family members and sibling rivalries and bonds can make for great underlying stories, if not the main. Families and relationships have a great influence in a teenager's life and a reasonably well-adjusted family leaping over hurdles thrown at them will certainly click with the audience.

### **Creating a voice that resonates**

Essentially a writer needs to connect with the audience, in this case mostly teenagers. A story told from the point of view of the protagonist is a much-preferred approach. Readers want the plot or its characters to directly or indirectly speak to their minds and resonate with their sensibilities while staying away from being preachy. Any current problem including abuses, rapes, drug issues, etc., can be dealt with. Addressing present day

problems that plague teenagers in imaginary settings and fantastical ways is what will get the cash registers ringing.

### **Less bulk and more pace**

Though readers do not necessarily dismiss bulkier novels, it is in the interest of the writer to make the story concise and within general teenager-attention-span limits. Instead writers can concentrate on the pace of the novel and the conversational approach. This certainly does not mean that vocabulary needs to be simple and unintelligent. The YA audience is a very smart and witty bunch and is well capable of imbibing shaper dialogues and plots.

This cannot be all that a teenager wants, true. YA readers are more accepting than they are given credit for. It is a time of revelation and exploration for the lot and a great story; no matter the genre, with a strong voice will certainly do the trick.

## **Understanding What Mystery Readers Want**

The urge to don a deer-stalker hat and solve the mysteries of everyday life is present in almost every individual. Such is the allure of mystery novels. Spanning a wide range of audience across age, gender and societal background, mystery as a genre has continued to intrigue and charm readers till today. Unlike fantasies, where rules and conventions tend to blur most of the time, mystery novels follow a certain set pattern. The reader preferences have a lot to do with the creation and sustenance of this boundary. Most readers prefer a novel to challenge them on an intellectual level by giving too many choices or too little. They want to run a parallel investigation by simultaneously imbibing the characters, situations and the clues that these stories throw at them.

The strength of 'whos', 'whys', 'whats' and 'hows' of a mystery novel are what keep the readers hooked. Mysteries might resemble thrillers in certain ways, but the approaches differ with

respect to the kind of suspense. While in thrillers that involve crimes, the 'who' part is mostly established early on and the suspense is with respect to how the antagonist will be brought to justice or how further crimes and sins will be prevented, mysteries keep the 'who' under wraps till the end in most cases. So what do readers want from a mystery novel these days?

### **Convolutd yet believable characters**

Readers prefer characters that they can relate to but with certain twists. Coloring the characters, especially the protagonist in unique shades by giving an ailment, physical or mental handicap will help readers get more invested in the story. Still, readers would not want to spend hours on the back stories. A minimalistic approach will work best.

### **Murders sell**

Mystery novels can revolve around any crime but as many studies indicate, murders are more intriguing and tend to find more readership than other crimes. Scouring through hundreds of

pages for a stolen piece of necklace might not what a mystery reader wants. A violent crime, though rapes and crimes involving children are still forbidden, that will certainly challenge the protagonist and the reader in every way possible is much more preferable than an art crime and that crime should be done with great élan. Readers won't exactly be that excited about a dreary and done-to-death shot-and-killed murder.

### **Believable crimes and methods**

Readers look forward to doing their own investigation which means that the crime in itself should be believable enough. The place of occurrence and reasons behind the crime can be manipulated, but the crime should be given ample shades of reality.

The investigator or protagonist need not necessarily be a professionally qualified PI, cop or an FBI agent, but readers do look for a strong motivation behind bringing the doer of injustice to light. While the perpetrator of violence should also be well capable of that act, the readers would want the protagonist to



employ acceptable and believable methods in arriving at clues and ultimately solving the crime.

## **Suspects and suspense**

Maximizing both suspects and suspense does work but only if handled extremely well. Groups who have a score to settle and those caught in circumstantial issues form a great pool. The success of a mystery novel lies in holding the suspense till the end. The ending though should be believable and exciting with every clue relating to the finale and motivation leading to the crime revealed clearly. Even if the antagonist is revealed well before the ending, the whys and hows should be made intriguing enough to hold the readers' attention for the rest of the pages.

Mysteries also traverse different sub-genres like noir, traditional, period and cozy and each works in different ways. The best way to succeed is to know what is trending. A good look at bestsellers of today will help identify the best way forward.

## **Understanding What Romance Readers Want**

It is virtually impossible for all writers or aspiring writers to be psychology majors. Identifying a specific set of audience and writing to cater to their sensibilities and interests seems like a humongous task, and it is. The challenge lies in the fact that perceptions, tastes, wants and desires differ with every single soul that it renders all attempts at generalization pointless. Yet there are certain, even if only few, commonalities among the various genres of readers across the globe, irrespective of cultural and societal differences, that can be successfully employed to arrive at a work which at least endeavors to cater to that specific audience. If, smitten by the countless stories of love, hate and romance that have made a grand impact over the last few centuries, a writer decides to carry the baton forward, it becomes imperative to first have an understanding of those commonalities.

This is not to say that unique attempts and genre-mash ups or path breaking ideas should be shunned. Guidelines can hardly be

termed as rules but to create a work that is sellable and that which speaks to the target audience in question in a language they understand, these guidelines can be considered as frameworks or templates on which settings, characters and the various significant events in the lives of those characters can be built.

## **The H and H**

There seems to be a consensus on the fact that any romance novel should revolve around the lives of two main characters, the hero and the heroine whose ultimate romance forms the basis of the main plot. There can be multiple romantic couples and stories within stories, but too much convolution in this regard might put off readers. Subplots should not turn the focus away from the main characters for long. Novels of the Mills and Boon type totally negate the presence of such subplots. It is important to understand 'how much deep is too deep'. The story or its dialogues should not be a bottomless pit from which the reader is unable to rise.

## **Conflicts, obstacles and HEA**

One might be tempted to draw on the fact that life is not a fairy tale and attempt to fashion a 'reality' based ending to a story but as many bestselling novels indicate, it is probably the 'Happily Ever After' ending that is more preferred among the audience. The characters might be hit by numerous obstacles and undergo countless internal conflicts, but the idea is to create marginally flawed characters, realistic events and a fairy tale ending.

## **Character development**

Readers would want to invest themselves in the lives of the characters that are central to the story. This means that it is vital to create prior events, heartbreaks and their positives and negatives in great detail. The flaws of the characters make them down to earth and believable. There have been countless debates on the amount and kind of flaws the central characters in romance novels are 'allowed' to have. For instance, adultery and infidelity, in accordance with numerous studies, seems to be a definite no. Though there are those who have been successful in bending this rule, it is still a very hard rule to bend.

## **Genre-mash ups**

This idea has become more prevalent now than ever before. From vampires and ghosts to period, thriller and sci-fi, romantic novels can take a detour to traverse other realms of fantasy while keeping the core idea of romance intact. The key here though is to arrive at either an imaginary setting that sounds believable or a realistic one that blends seamlessly with the characters. It is also vital to come up with complicated and interesting situations and characters while also unraveling every knot that is created before the HEA.

Understanding what readers want is the first step in the creation of a novel but this should never deter a writer from picking quirky hues for his or her palette. After all, even within the boundaries of the canvas, it is possible to create a masterpiece.