SCIENCE FICTION

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Adam Roberts

the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

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larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media, in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

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DEFINING SCIENCE FICTION

ONE DEFINITION

The term ‘science fiction’ resists easy definition. This is curious, because most people have a sense of what science fiction is. Any bookstore will have a section devoted to SF: shelves of mostly brightly-coloured paperback volumes, illustrated on their covers with photorealist paintings of intricate spaceships perhaps, or of men and women in futuristic cities or bizarre alien landscapes. Most of these novels are narratives that elaborate some imaginative or fantastic premise, perhaps involving a postulated future society, encounters with creatures from another world, travel between planets or in time. In other words, science fiction as a genre or division of literature distinguishes its fictional worlds to one degree or another from the world in which we actually live: a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality, a fantastic literature.

But when it comes down to specifying in what way SF is distinctive, and in what ways it is different from other imaginative and fantastic literatures, there is disagreement. All of the many definitions offered by critics have been contradicted or modified by other critics, and it is always possible to point to texts

consensually called SF that fall outside the usual definitions. It is, perhaps, for this reason that some critics try to content themselves with definitions of the mode that are mere tautologies, as if 'we' all know what it is and elaboration is superfluous. Edward James suggests that 'SF is what is marketed as SF' (although he concedes that, as a definition, this is 'a beginning, nothing more') (James 1994:3). Damon Knight says that 'science fiction is what we point to when we say it'; and Norman Spinraid argues that 'science fiction is anything published as science fiction' (quoted in Clute and Nicholls 1993:314). There is a kind of weariness in this sort of circular reasoning, underlain by a sense that the whole business of definition is nothing more than a marketing exercise. Lance Parkin suggests that 'SF is a notoriously difficult term to define, but when it comes down to it, a book appears on the SF shelves if the publisher thinks they will maximize their sales by labelling it as such' (Parkin 1999:4). This mistrust of definition has interesting implications for the self-image of SF as a genre, although it doesn't get us very far as a starting point.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines science fiction as 'imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes, frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel', adding that the term did not come into common usage until the 1920s. The terms of this basic dictionary definition are instructive: 'imaginative fiction' differentiates SF from 'realist' fiction, in which there is some attempt at a literary verisimilitude that reproduces the experience of living in the world we recognise as ours. Where the realist writer needs to focus on accuracy, the SF author can use her imagination to invent things not found in our world. These points of difference, the 'scientific discoveries' or 'environmental changes' of the dictionary definition, may be such things as 'space or time travel' but they could be many other premises not listed by the OED, to do with robots, computers, alternative histories and the like. This makes SF a literature of ideas predicated on some