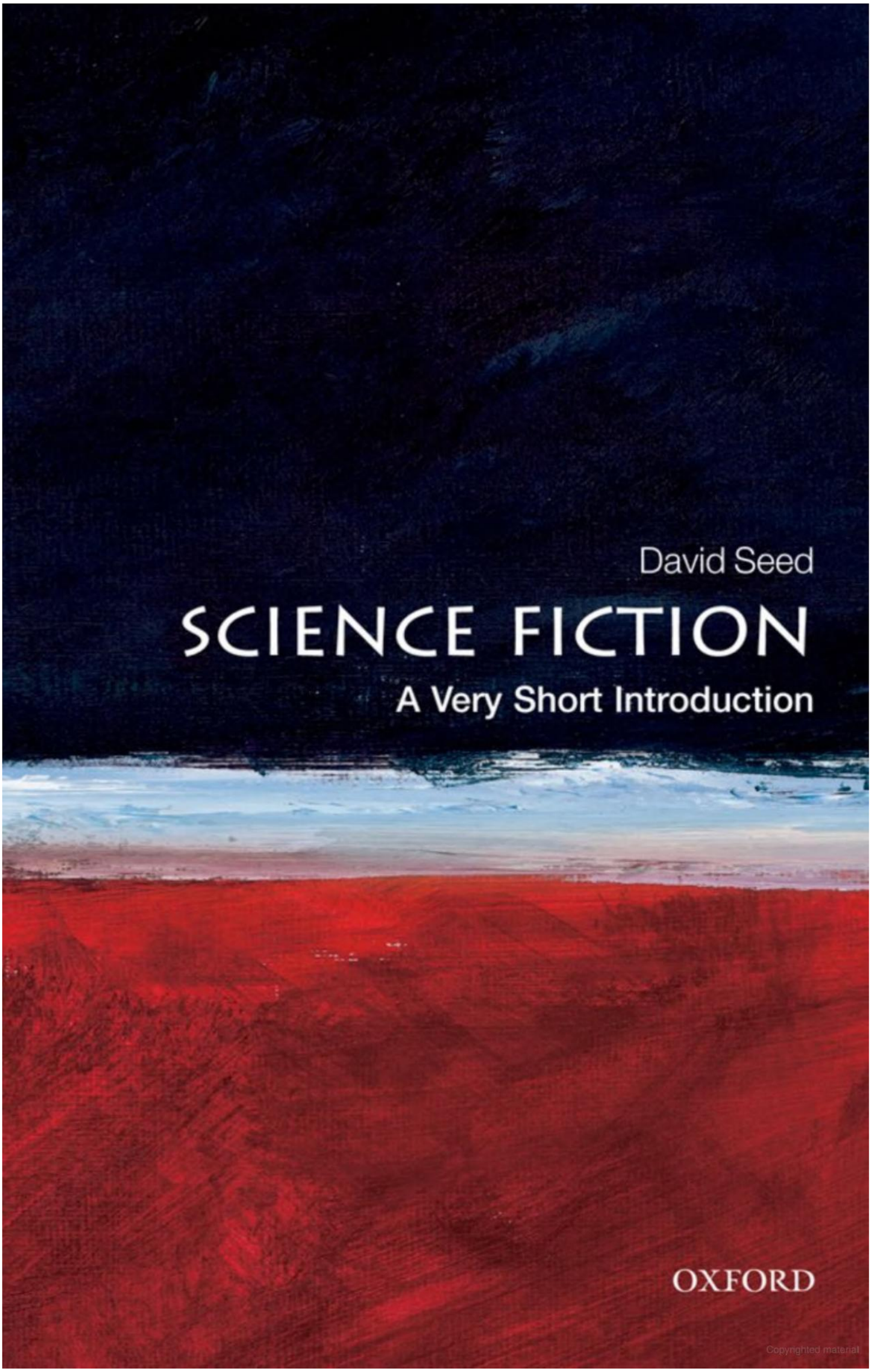

David Seed

SCIENCE FICTION

A Very Short Introduction

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The publisher and the author apologise for any errors or omissions in the above list. If contacted they will be happy to rectify these at the earliest opportunity.

Introduction

Science fiction has proved notoriously difficult to define. It has variously been explained as a combination of romance, science, and prophecy (Hugo Gernsback), 'realistic speculation about future events' (Robert Heinlein), and a genre based on an imagined alternative to the reader's environment (Darko Suvin). It has been called a form of fantastic fiction and an historical literature. This volume will not attempt to reduce these explanations to a single, comprehensive definition. That way madness lies. Instead, I shall outline here some of the guiding presumptions which will be used throughout this introduction. Firstly, to call science fiction (SF) a genre causes problems because it does not recognize the hybrid nature of many SF works. It is more helpful to think of it as a mode or field where different genres and subgenres intersect. And then there is the issue of science. In the early decades of the 20th century, a number of writers attempted to tie this fiction to science and even to use it as a means of promoting scientific knowledge, a position which continues into what has become known as 'hard SF'. Applied science – technology – has been much more widely discussed in SF because every technological innovation affects the structure of our society and the nature of our behaviour. Technology has repeatedly been associated with the future by SF, but it does not follow that the fiction is therefore *about* the future. The crudest reading of an SF novel is to ask 'did Arthur C. Clarke get it wrong?' Science fiction is about the

writer's present in the sense that any historical moment will include its own set of expectations and perceived tendencies. The futures represented in SF embody its speculative dimension. In that sense, as Joanna Russ has explained, it is a '*What If* Literature'. The writer and critic Samuel Delany has applied the term 'subjunctivity' to SF in a similar spirit to explain how these narratives position themselves between possibility and impossibility. It is helpful to think of an SF narrative as an embodied thought experiment whereby aspects of our familiar reality are transformed or suspended.

The heated debates about the nature of SF are usually conducted by its practitioners, and this can even be seen as one of the defining characteristics of the field. These exchanges often revolve around the status of SF, whether it consists of 'popular' or 'mainstream' fiction, despite the fact that such terms have increasingly lost their meaning in the sheer variety of contemporary published SF. Or the debates might centre on the history and scope of SF. The wave of feminist science fiction from the 1970s onwards also saw the retrospective construction of a tradition which rehabilitated writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It has been a recurring claim among SF writers that they are more and more occupying the position previously occupied by realist fiction and that their narratives are the most engaged, socially relevant, and responsive to the modern technological environment. In a title that plays on Ariel's famous speech in *The Tempest*, Thomas M. Disch's *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* (1998) has argued that SF permeates every level of society, especially of the entertainment industry.

A *Very Short Introduction* cannot offer a history of SF, nor does it need to, since a number of excellent histories are currently in print. Instead, it will attempt to tie the selected examples to their different historical moments to demonstrate how science fiction has always been an evolving mode. There is extensive debate over when SF began. Some histories have extended their reach back as far as Lucian of Samosata's *A True Story* from the 2nd century

AD, which describes a voyage into space and a form of inter-planetary war. Other historians take their starting points in the Renaissance with works like Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638), or in the Industrial Revolution with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Two other starting points have been mooted: the late 19th century from around 1870, and the early 20th century when labels like 'science fiction' were first used. The latter position confuses descriptive labelling with the set of narrative practices which would necessitate such descriptions. Origination in antiquity raises different problems of cultural practice, and such examples could best be thought of as 'ur-SF'. Works from the Renaissance or early 19th century are clearly much closer to the methods we now identify with SF and could be described as 'proto-SF'. This is not to deny their self-evident importance to the evolution of SF, but it is common practice for literary historians and novelists themselves to seek precursors in their efforts to substantiate generic practice.

This volume will work on the premise that what we now know as science fiction began to emerge in the late 19th century with a great upsurge in utopias, future-war narratives, and representatives of other genres that can be grouped under the SF umbrella. Apart from the expansion in education which established a commercial base for a number of science fiction writers in Britain, the period from around 1870 through to the First World War was one of extraordinarily rapid technological change, with widespread use of electricity for the first time, the coming of aeroplanes, the development of the radio and cinema, and the proliferation of the popular press. It was also a period that saw the emergence of the USA as an imperial player on the world scene, with all the rivalry that carried with the older empires of Europe and Asia. During these years, we see the emergence of a body of writing with distinct preoccupations and characteristics that remains a recognizable, commercially viable, and sometimes very lucrative, feature of the culture industry. This body of work became known as science fiction.