

# The History of Science Fiction

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Entertainment

## Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

### Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

If you listened to the science fiction After Midnight episode you got a little taste of this fact, but we are sci fi geeks. I was that kid who was always reading books that were WAY too mature for me. Science fiction warped my fragile little mind. We're eventually going to do an After Midnight episode on sci fi literature and that'll be a blood bath because we're both invested.

Science fiction is a relatively modern genre of entertainment because, first of all, it requires that there be, you know, science. Before the advent of reason and the scientific method, science fiction was sketchy at best, because writers can only predict the future of technology based on the technology of the era in which they live. And if the pinnacle of your era's technology consists of fire,

the scope of your science fiction is going to be modest. I'm sure some monk or scribe in the 1200s wrote futuristic stories but when your contemporary science is based on alchemy and bloodletting, your science fiction is really just...fiction. Stories with titles like "50 years from now all of our lead will be gold and yellow bile will cure the Bubonic Plague" aren't going to hold up. Plus it's tough to cast your imagination very far in the future when your life expectancy is like 17 years. It's hard to imagine the technology of next year when every day is a fight to make it until tomorrow. Science fiction of year 1 was like, "someday, people will live to be 22."

You could make a case that there was science fiction before the industrial revolution, and many idiots have; historians who are clearly delusional have claimed that the history of science fiction goes all the way back to the epic of Gilgamesh, but the case for ancient sci fi is a weak one. It would not be a winning case in a court of law. It wouldn't be a winning case in front of judge Reinhold. For instance the supposed "science fiction" epic of Gilgamesh primarily concerns monsters and gods and sorcery... you know, sciency stuff. There are other ancient tales that anticipate time travel and aliens and quite a

few that involve robots (usually a steampunk-version powered by clockwork referred to as "automata" *ahtamatuh*) but none of them have a foundation in anything other than whimsy. Which brings us to the enduring debate within science-fiction fan circles, and we touched on this in our After Midnight bonus episode about the top five science-fiction films of all times, available for free in our discord. How much hard science does there have to be for a story or book or movie to qualify as science fiction? Star Wars is considered science fiction, but it's based on an ancient template, the hero's journey or the Monomyth, just like lord of the rings, it's sword and sorcery in space. What are Jedi if not space wizards? "The force" is magic, plain and simple.

But Star Wars does include common science fiction tropes like space ships and robots and faster-than-light travel, so it's controversial.

Regardless, as determined by Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan, the first true work of science fiction is Johannes Kepler's 1634 "Somnium," aka the dream. German astronomer Johannes Kepler wrote about a journey to the moon via a sort of wormhole and he included realistic depictions of how the earth would look from space plus eclipses etc.

The book also includes demons and giants and moon snakes so again, the scientific cred is iffy. But the attempt to genuinely portray elements of scientific reality in the context of a fictional narrative seems to make it a good candidate for sci fi ground zero.

But I personally am choosing a different genesis point. Mary Shelly published Frankenstein in 1818. While it can definitely be characterized as gothic horror, it also established the "mad scientist" trope, and at least attempted to credibly explain the reanimating of a corpse by identifying electricity as a necessary component of life. And Frankenstein wouldn't be a one-off. Mary Shelley in my estimation is the first real science fiction author, her novel "last man" predicted an apocalyptic scenario involving a pandemic in England—prescient—while her short story "Roger Dodsworth: the reanimated Englishman" concerns a man who was frozen in ice and brought back to life, credibly depicting that staple of science fiction known as cryonics or suspended animation.

There were a few other notable science fiction works in the 1800s. Do you have any favorite science fiction from the 1800s?

For instance, the French prose poem "The last man" by **Jean-Baptiste François Xavier Cousin**

**De Grainville** (that's his full name, and don't you dare just call him Xavier or Jean or Francy McFancypants. Momma didn't give me six names so you peasants could start improvising with nicknames). Anyway the last man is quite possibly the first apocalyptic tale, in which the human race loses the ability to reproduce, it was like children of men but with a bunch of religious mumbo jumbo that probably still would have made a better movie than Children of Men. Didn't enjoy that one.

Another commonly cited science fiction work of the late 1800s: "The Steam Man of the prairies": "The... novel starts when Ethan Hopkins and Mickey McSquizzle—a "Yankee" and an "Irishman"—encounter a colossal, steam-powered man in the American prairies. This steam-man was constructed by Johnny Brainerd, a teenaged boy, who uses the steam-man to carry him in a carriage on various adventures." It was the iron giant, but with Brainerd and McSquizzel.

But of course the seminal works of 19th century science fiction were by the first two authors who are undeniably, inarguably sci fi badasses, two of the most kickass influential authors in the history of authoring: Jules Verne and my personal favorite, HG Wells.

Let's start with Verne. French novelist **Jules Gabriel Verne** wrote a series of 54 sci fi adventure classics known as his Extraordinary Voyages, like *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *A Floating City*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and of course *The Fur Country*. Remember that classic? It had nothing to do with animals or furrries, but instead is a fantastical account of a polar exploration. No ponies involved, thankfully. No ponies were injured in the making of this episode, I promise. Some insomniacs had a visceral reaction to the infamous pony scene, they let me know about it, and hey, so did I to be honest. We laugh at things that traumatize us, it's a defense mechanism.

Verne in fact wrote a *bunch* of books about the polar regions, which makes sense, he lived in the golden age of polar exploration, which we recently covered in episode 95. He was a man of themes and categories, often writing multiple novels with similar titles and subjects...for instance, in addition to *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* he also wrote a novel called *Eight Hundred Leagues on the Amazon*. I'm assuming it was shorter. By like 12,000 leagues. Also he of course wrote the famous novel "*Dick Sand, A Captain at Fifteen*" the story of a 15 year old

who becomes a ship captain. Dick sand is a wonderful phrase. Avoid that beach. Dick eventually ends up in Africa, and from there the novel is concerned mostly with the issue of slavery, and handles it very tactfully I'm sure. To be fair Verne has never been canceled, so it couldn't have been that bad. A little late for a cancellation, but cancelations can be retroactive. Columbus was very popular and revered until people actually paid attention to the specifics. "Discovered America? Awesome. What did he do when he got there? Ooh..."

Regardless, Verne had a massive influence on literature and sci fi, Ray Bradbury would eventually quip "We are all, in one way or another, the children of Jules Verne." I'm assuming he's talking metaphorically or maybe Verne was very potent. He was banging all of those 19th century literary groupies.

Finally we get to my guy. Herbert George Wells. Along with Verne, HG Wells is considered one of the fathers of science fiction. I like that science fiction has two fathers. Very progressive. I used to read the Time Machine every couple years, it's that good. It holds up. Do you have a favorite HG Wells novel? Wells was prolific; he wrote War of the Worlds, The Invisible Man, The Island of Dr Moreau, the time

machine, and the first men in the moon in one six-year stretch between 1895 and 1901. I have read many of his books but not the first men in the moon...weird that it's not ON the moon. Seems potentially tragic. And short. I'm assuming the protagonists didn't know that you have to slow down when you approach the moon, so that you land on the moon rather than...in it. I have also not read the War in the Air, a novel about Bert Smallways who resides in the fictional town of Bun Hill, and becomes a central figure in airship battles between Germany and the United States. Wells published this in 1908, 31 years before World War 2, in which airships would indeed be employed as weapons by Germany. Impressive prognosticating.

Wells is considered more of a moralist than Verne, his novels intended to convey a message, there's typically an identifiable moral or ethical or political point of view. In that way they are considered to be didactic, and... yeah, that's true, but they're also fun as hell and in my opinion not super heavy handed. Wells was however very committed to a variety of causes, he was a socialist, an atheist, and a pacifist. In 1943 he would write "An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church." He was nominated for the

Nobel prize in literature 4 times. He never won, but Impact craters on Mars and the Moon are named after him, so hey, that's basically the same thing. I'm sure he was totally fine with being snubbed by his peers and broader academia as long as he could have his name affixed to a couple of giant holes. We have done you the great honor of using your name to adorn various empty spaces on desolate surface of the Moon." Not even a feature of the Moon, like a hill or a valley; just an empty space. This place where something used to be but now nothing is, we've given it your name. That's *your* empty space in the middle of empty space.

So Wells and Verne were the innovators who kicked the sci fi genre into high gear, but the two fathers of science fiction had competition. There were uncles and cousins of sci fi as well. The first novel exploring the idea of artificial intelligence and rogue machines taking over the world, "Erewhon"—the word nowhere backwards, slightly misspelled—was published in 1872 by a former New Zealand sheep farmer named Samuel Butler. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling would also dabble in sci fi. Conan Doyle wrote the Lost World

in 1912 and we've debated whether throwing random dinosaurs into a novel qualifies as science fiction, but it's Arthur Conan Freakin' Doyle so I'm not going to engage in haterism here. He created Sherlock, he can be an honorary sci fi author if he wants to.

Even Edgar Allen Poe was a science fiction pioneer, he wrote stories describing a trip to the moon, while mark Twain explored time travel in "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court." Everyone was getting in on the sci fi action. Lots of dabblers. And of course an author near and dear to your heart, in 1912 Edgar Rice Burroughs kicked off the Barsoom series of ridiculous high-leaping Mars novels that would eventually lead to the cinematic travesty that was John Carter.

The early-to-mid 1900s would also introduce the hugely influential—for better or worse—pulp magazines. Publications like 1926's Amazing Stories—the first publication solely devoted to science fiction—and later, the likes of Astounding Science Fiction would nurture some of the giants of the genre, including the big three: Robert A Heinlein, Arthur C Clark, and Isaac no-middle-initial Asimov. He did have a middle name, it was Yudovick, he was born in Russia and his parents

emigrated when he was a toddler and he would never publicize his middle name because it wasn't great, and also he wasn't a diva. I can see why Arthur C Clarke did it, there are a lot of Arthur Clarks in the world, but it's not like you're competing with a bunch of American Asimovs. For me Asimov's seminal work would be one of the few bright spots of 1970s sci fi literature, Rendezvous with Rama. Which somehow hasn't received the movie treatment. My only wish is that before I die Rendezvous with Rama makes it to the big screen. And also a million dollars. I should revise my wishes. I hope I never find a genie in a bottle, I'd be that guy whose first wish is a sandwich because he happens to be hungry. But look, we could make Rendezvous with Rama into a movie...we have the technology. Someone get on that. Midnight Masses?

Moving to Robert Anson Heinlein, an author who would become famous for his libertarian views, his nudism, and his novels exploring both, novels like Stranger in a Strange land, a book that would espouses public nakedness and free love and rampant sexism and also contributed the word Grok to the lexicon. And let's not forget Starship troopers which would become a ridiculous movie that

would have almost no relation to the hard science book yet which we both love despite its silliness. I didn't read much Henlein, I'll be honest. Not my guy.

Speaking of authors I didn't read much, Isaac Y. Asimov was a Bostonian writer, professor, and intellectual who would become famous for a bunch of overrated books that I could never get into, I read the first half of the first foundation novel and meh. Ditto the I, robot series. I think I read a few of those but they didn't make a huge impression. However Asimov did write one of those "aaaa" short stories, possibly one of the best I've ever read, nightfall. And I'm going to summarize it because it's that good. Nightfall is set on a planet called Lagash, a world bathed in perpetual daylight as a result of six bright suns, at least one of which is always visible in the Lagashian sky. The inhabitants of Lagash have never experienced prolonged darkness, and as a result they harbor an instinctive fear of any cave or shadow or dark area, and being deprived of light for even a few minutes is torture, and is in fact used as a punishment. When the story begins, scientists on Lagash have recently uncovered evidence that every 2000 years Lagashian civilization experiences a complete reset, a cyclical meltdown, and they

determine that the culprit is a recurring total solar eclipse. Every 2,000 years there is a stretch of time during which five suns have set and a large moon blots out the final sun for half a day. They theorize that when darkness falls, members of the humanoid species living on the planet lose their fricken minds and burn every structure to ash in a desperate attempt to drive away the darkness, and the entire civilization is forced to start over from scratch.

Confident that they can save civilization from being completely obliterated by the impending apocalypse, Lagashian scientists begin to prepare for the ordeal of night. But their preparations will prove to be woefully inadequate, because there is a key factor of which they are unaware: Lagashians have always assumed that their suns are the only stars in the sky and that they themselves are the center of their own small universe, but as it turns out, Lagash is located at the center of a "giant cluster," an unimaginably dense and vibrant mass of stars. When night finally falls, and the obscuring veil of daylight is yanked away, a vast tapestry of blinding suns reveals itself, and the inconceivable scope of the universe becomes horrifyingly clear. At which point, even the scientists themselves begin to descend into madness.

The story ends as "On the horizon outside the window, in the direction of Saro City, a crimson glow began growing, strengthening in brightness, that was not the glow of a sun. The long night had come again."

Some listeners may be wondering why I haven't mentioned Ray Bradbury, and it's because by his own account Bradbury wasn't a science fiction author. "First of all, I don't write science fiction. I've only done one science fiction book and that's Fahrenheit 451, based on reality. Science fiction is a depiction of the real. Fantasy is a depiction of the unreal. So the Martian Chronicles is not science-fiction, it's fantasy. It couldn't happen, You see? That's the reason it's going to be around a long time -- because it's a Greek myth and myths have staying power." And this really gets to the heart of the conundrum that we've already described. By Bradbury's definition, Star Wars would not qualify as science fiction. It's a myth, and maybe that's why it's so enduring. This is one of the challenges and inherent weaknesses of the genre: Works of science fiction are always in danger of being rendered irrelevant when their specific scientific predictions don't come to pass. Many science

fiction books seem quaint and silly today if the authors didn't include some version of the Internet. But if, on the other hand, you're depicting a future that involves wizards and light swords and "the force," which is magic, then you don't have to worry about realism. I don't think we'll ever resolve this debate about what actually qualifies as science fiction, but I'm going to honor Ray Bradbury's own wishes and leave him off the list of sci-fi authors.

Now obviously the history of science-fiction isn't confined to literature. the early 20th century introduced cinema and the first primitive special effects, allowing directors and cinematographers to visually depict some of the fanciful and futuristic stories that had previously been confined to the written word.

A year after the debut of the Amazing Stories pulp magazine, in 1927, German director Fritz Lange released the dystopian sci fi film Metropolis with its iconic female robot, its HG Wells-inspired themes of extreme class warfare, and the Art Deco aesthetic that would dominate pop-culture depictions of the future for years to come. You might recognize this as the Googie aesthetic. It is most associated with Southern California in the 50s, but you can find examples all across the

country and if you saw one you would know exactly what I mean. I'll post some pictures in the discord. It's what the 1950s thought the 2000s would look like. flying cars with gleaming fins, buildings with swooping cantilevered roofs featuring unnecessary adornments: tall thin spikes with radiator flanges and neon boomerangs. Every piece of Googie looks like it was developed in a malfunctioning wind tunnel. If you're still having trouble picturing it, just think of the Jetsons.

This was a period of real divergence in the various pop-culture concepts of science fiction. The visual depiction of science fiction in movies of the 50s and 60s was often art deco and Googie, while the literary version of this so-called golden age of sci-fi was much more grounded and nuanced. Many science fiction movies took their cues from the cover art on those sensationalist pulp magazines, sporting titles like "the thing from outer space" and "invasion of the body snatchers." Meanwhile, the pulps actually published some excellent hard sci fi but their cover art had an arguably bigger impact than the contents, and contributed to the juvenile reputation of the science fiction genre.

Also in the 1950s sci fi once again

broke new ground, leading to a revolutionary new medium, as shows like Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers became hits on television.

Perhaps the biggest influence on science fiction in the 1900s would be the development and devastating implementation of the atom bomb. The splitting of the atom would lead to the shocking devastation in Heroshima, and a world collectively horrified at the potential of the first truly species-ending weapon; this was the first time in history that humans had the capability of ending their own reign via an extinction-level event. The atom bomb was the first true doomsday weapon, and it led to an explosion—so to speak—of post apocalyptic fiction. And this is another area we debated in our After Midnight episode, because post apocalyptic fiction isn't necessarily science fiction. Often it could more accurately be considered alternate history. A nuclear war doesn't require any technology that isn't already available...any of the nine nuclear-armed countries in the world could exterminate human life and make the world uninhabitable tomorrow if they woke up in a bad mood. If the US or North Korea or Russia had a little too much to drink last night and decided "you know what, let's just start over. A world that created

Jägermeister is not a world that deserves to continue. Let's try again." So in the recent episode of After Midnight ranking sci fi movies, we arbitrarily decided that apocalyptic fiction only counts as sci fi if it includes some type of futuristic technology, like AI etc. For instance I would say the novel "On the beach"--one of the first hugely popular depictions of nuclear holocaust that was adapted twice to film--was alternate history, whereas the original Charlton Heston Planet of the damn dirty apes was sci fi. Both involve the fallout of nuclear war but the latter includes space travel and time travel and speculative evolution and is generally way less depressing... there are talking apes! Plus that last shot of the statue of liberty jutting out of the sand is incredibly campy and amazing. "You blew it up! Damn you...Damn you all to hell." Spoiler alert. The planet of the apes is earth. Anyway, regardless of whether you want to categorize post-apocalyptic fiction as sci fi, the genre influenced molded future works science fiction by introducing themes of devastation and the specter of ever-present existential threats, and a grim hopelessness which has infused much of today's media depictions of the future. And of course the apocalyptic end-times event doesn't have to be nuclear, as 2020 made us all too aware. In the

wake of Heroshima there were also authors who began to straddle the genres of horror and science fiction and post-apocalypse without the nuclear component, like Richard Matheson, whose vampire-pandemic novel "I am legend" would be adapted numerous times to film and also inspire a whole subgenre of trapped-in-a-location-surrounded-by-the-undead tales, unintentionally contributing to that other incredibly popular kind of apocalypse, the zombie version. Tangent: one thing I've learned from this podcast is that even the most dystopian versions of science fiction, if you really think about it, are inherently optimistic. Even an apocalyptic tale about a ragtag tribe of irradiated nomads wandering the barren nuclear wastelands is based on the assumption that at least a few humans still exist in the future. Which defies the odds. Check out episode 69: "how it ends" to learn about all of the literal and metaphorical boomsplodes that can and eventually will take us out. The human species surviving even this long was spectacularly unlikely; we're all living on borrowed time.

Moving away from horror and dystopias, in 1965, Frank Herbert published Dune, a pioneering mystical and philosophical sci fi

novel of that would become a popular centuries-spanning saga. Also, the 60s produced one of my favorite authors of all time. The salty, grumpy, famously bitchy and hyper talented Harlan Ellison began churning out edgy, often transgressive and extremely problematic stories like A boy and his dog, plus instant classics like "I have no mouth and I must scream," and "repent Harlequin said the tik tok man." That one is better than it sounds. Another author custom built for the 1960s was renowned mystic, psychoactive drug-enthusiast and serial-nuptialist Philip k dick. (He was married five times...also a serial domestic-abuser btw. He reportedly tried to push his third wife off a cliff). He also attempted to commit suicide after his third divorce by driving off a cliff with his new gf in the car. Is it suicide if you take someone with you? That's like a suicide *bomber*... that's terrorism. Either way, clearly the man should be kept away from cliffs. And women. If you are female in the 1960s, if you're a science fiction fan time traveler, don't go hiking with Phillip k Dick near any type of escarpment. Avoid all slopes or edges. The man really lived up to his name, by the way. Get it? Phillip K DICK? Anyway, serial attempted-cliff-jumper PKD has become a science fiction hero to a legion of devoted fans. After laboring for

much of his youth in obscurity Dick rose to prominence in the late sixties with the alternate history novel *Man in the High Castle*, which imagined a world in which the Nazis won WWII; it was recently adapted for television by Amazon prime. Dick published *do androids dream of electric sheep* in 1968, and a very loose interpretation of that novel would eventually be brought to screen as the seminal sci fi film *Blade Runner* starring Harrison Ford. Dick died in 1983 but would posthumously become a cult figure and immensely influential to Hollywood sci fi, his stories and novels have been transformed into various films of varying quality like *Minority Report*, *total recall*, *a scanner darkly*, *the Adjustment Burea*, *Paycheck*, *screamers*, *imposter*, and *Next*. They weren't all classics. Plus there was the recent anthology series *electric Dreams* on Amazon Prime, which was inspired by the success of *black mirror* but... yeeeeeah. It's no *black mirror*. I've seen *black mirror* senator, and let me tell you senator, you are no *black mirror*. You don't get the reference? Dan quail? Ok. Many of these adaptations as I mentioned were very loose...Dick's stories and novels were often surreal and offbeat and barely comprehensible so most of these movies simply claim to be "inspired by" a phillip k dick novel. I don't know if you've

read much Dick, but faithful reproductions of some of his more outlandish stories would be jarring or outright silly.

Up until now you'll notice that we've only mentioned one solitary female author, although she was quite possibly the most influential of all time—Mary Shelley—but while science fiction has traditionally been a boy's club, Ursula K. Le Guin became a household name in 1969 with publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, pioneering so-called soft science fiction, which is supposedly more character and emotion driven. Seems like a slightly sexist term and concept but hey, I didn't make it up, so don't kill the messenger.

In the visual realm, the late 60s introduced an iconic TV series that boldly went where quite a few authors had already gone before... Star Trek wasn't breaking any ground, and the original series would only last three seasons, but its impact would be huge and the spin-offs would become classics in their own right and help shape sci-fi fan culture, contributing to the rise of cosplay and conventions and the cult of sci-fi fandom.

Literary Science fiction began to lose its luster in the 1970s; the quality of writing slumped along with the quality of music and

fashion and art, it was a bad time for everything except chest hair. Chest hair really flourished. Science fiction movies in the 70s were a mixed but mostly unappealing bag. A couple dubious theatrical highlights: *Soylent green* (which is people, spoiler alert) the creepy and didactic *Stepford Wives* with its heavy-handed commentary on the patriarchy, and the dystopian *Logan's Run*, in which a seeming utopia is revealed to be a dystopia when the titular Logan learns that the giant computer at the heart of civilization is murdering every human on their 30th birthday in the name of population control. Logan is in his mid 20s...thus the run. The original *West World* also debuted as a film in 1973, written and directed by Michael Crichton, and it would later be rebooted as a popular HBO show. Crichton of course would make his own modest contributions to science fiction with iconic *Jurassic Park* plus a few mediocre novels like *The Andromeda Strain* and *Congo*. *Jurassic Park* was pretty great, though it's a bit light on science (remember the whole "shoehorning dinosaurs into the narrative" debate?) but otherwise Crichton is kind of a hack, imo. When it comes to sci fi authors, the only literary bright spot of the mid to late seventies would be a devout Mormon named Orson Scott Card. *Ender's Game* was originally a short

story that appeared in Ben Bova's clumsily titled "Analog Science Fiction and Fact." Card would later expand the story into one of the most influential novels and series of all time. Basing a series around a short story would turn out to be a theme for Card...a short story called "The Tinker" would become the novel *Hot Sleep*, which would be expanded into the expansive and breathtaking *Worthing Saga*. A planet called *Treason* would be revised and expanded into the masterful *Treason*, and the short story *Mikal's Songbird* would be stretched into the unfortunately B-movie-named *Songmaster*. All of those works were written in the late 1970s while every other author sci fi author was apparently too busy doing coke and wearing chains or whatever to write a decent novel. Thank God for straight-edge OSC. Uncool people are very productive. They don't have distractions like social engagements and fun. Trust me, I'd know. When I say thank God, of course I'm thanking the Mormon version of God, which is the same as the Christian one except that the God of the Mormons was once a humanoid mortal who lived on another planet. That is true, according to the LDS church, God was an alien dude before he was exalted. The Church of Latter Day Saints has a lot in common with Scientology. I wonder if the Mormon

god was hanging with Xenu. We'll have to do a scientology episode soon.

Obviously the 800 pound sci fi behemoth in the late 70s wasn't in the realm of literature, it was a film. Star Wars...and we're skipping it. We're not going to reopen the "is it science fiction" can of sarlacc worms, and there's nothing we could tell you about Star Wars that 90% of you don't already know. So, Star Wars may or may not be science fiction but it's a beloved sprawling swashbuckling space mythology and I both love it and hate it...and now back to books.

The 1980s would witness the resurrection of kickass literary science fiction, starting for me with 1983's mind-blowing nanotechnology nightmare *Blood Music* by Greg Bear, but the real savior of 1980s sci fi would be the subgenre of cyberpunk. William Gibson was one of the defining authors of my adolescence. Published in 1984, his debut novel *Neuromancer* was hard-edged, razor-fingered, high-tech, evil-corporate-dystopian neo-noir awesomeness. And his *Burning Chrome* is one of the great story collections of all time, including the dazzlingly short and brutal *Johnny Mnemonic*, which became a far less dazzling and unfortunately far less

short film of the same name.

Authors like Bruce Sterling and Neal Stephenson are often lumped into the cyberpunk category, though I feel like they're only cyberpunk the way every band from Seattle was suddenly grunge in the 90s. It became a catch-all. I was more a fan of the ruthless foot-on-the gas cyberpunk of Gibson and also Richard Calder, whose novel *Dead Girls* and follow-ups *Dead Boys* and *Dead Things* are challenging to read but worthwhile mindfucks. If you are intrigued by the idea of a teenager wandering around futuristic Bangkok and getting high by chewing on the preserved sexual organs of his deceased techno-vampire ex gf, this is the series for you. I mentioned I don't consider Bruce Sterling a great example of cyberpunk, but I do have to give it up to him for editing the excellent "mirror shades" anthology of cyberpunk stories, a great starting point if you can't handle pure unfiltered William Gibson right off the bat. In fact it's a good starting point because there is a very cool but also very unique William Gibson story in that anthology, it's nothing like his normal writing, but still great. The Gernsback continuum. Highly recommended. Cyberpunk would directly influence Japanese anime and manga, think *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*, while films like *The Matrix* and *Robocop* owe their

chrome-and-visors aesthetic directly to William Gibson. Sci fi *films* in the 80s were likewise a major improvement over the 70s, starting with *Alien*, which technically came out in 1979 but for our purposes I'm going to consider it the first major sci fi film of the 1980s, because it busted open the floodgates for the succeeding decade. *Alien* would be followed by the likes of *Blade runner* in 1982, *Terminator* in 1984, *Predator* in 1987, and of course *Total Recall*... this era also commonly known as the golden age of Schwarzenegger, by me, and again I'm fudging the dates, because *total recall* came out in 1990. Shh.

Speaking of the 1990s, the literary portion of the decade opened with the publication of Dan Simmons *Hyperion*, possibly my favorite novel of all time and easily in the top ten list of almost any serious sci fi fan. Kim Stanley Robinson also produced his excellent *Mars* series throughout the nineties—*Red*, *Green* and *Blue Mars*—the first popular and science-accurate depictions of terraforming, tracing the evolution of Mars from the Red planet to an earthlike world over the course of generations. Notable science fiction movies of the 90s included many of the ones we discussed in *After Midnight*--*Dark City* and *event horizon* and

Stargate, Independence Day (of which I am not a fan, but it was a massive hit), Gattaca (of which I am a huge fan and ended up on our Top Five list), and of course the masterful cyberpunk kung-fu mashup the Matrix. Ditto.

So now we're closing in on the present day. The 21st century has been hit and miss for science fiction, and I would love for some Insomniacs to send me a list of books I should check out. We're now in what I would consider the literary equivalent of a science fiction wasteland. This is the science fiction apocalypse. That may be a bit dramatic. It's not all bad. Young adult novels dominate the landscape and they're...fine. Hunger games, maze runner, Divergent, and of course Ready Player One, etc I've read them all and enjoyed many parts of those books.

In addition, there HAVE been a few highlights for me: Altered carbon is a solid recommend, a darkling sea was truly innovative, under the skin is so damn good, waking gods, Dark Matter. Great, great novels. Wool was ok, I've tried to get into Perdido Street station and old man's war and the three body problem, and I just can't. So leave those off the list of recommendations.

I have however enjoyed *cinematic*

sci fi in the 2000s much more than the novels. Men in Black, District 9, Vanilla Sky, which everyone hates but me, the reboot of the planet of the apes after the disaster that was the Tim Burton version (they finally got it right), The Island, which is not a good movie but I enjoy (mostly because of Scarlet Johanssen...I've never really understood all the hype about her until she was wearing that white jumpsuit). And in the 2010s the hits just kept coming with Snowpiercer, the Martian, Elysium, Ex Machina, and some controversial choices that I enjoy like Passengers. There have also been some comical misfires like Valerian and Jupiter Ascending that provided a good laugh, but on the whole cinematic Sci Fi is super fun right now; it's just the literature that sucks balls. That is my critical analysis of the current state of science fiction...like the meme says, change my mind.

READ A REVIEW

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