From the Director

Greetings,

As each semester brings in record numbers of students, I think it’s important to recognize the ever changing culture that this influx brings with it. As in everyday life, we here at the MMCC Library understand the need to adapt accordingly to the needs of our ever changing student population. With that being said, we will continue to focus our investments in resources that go in line with the 21st Century model of learning.

Just as students have changed the way they seek and retrieve information, libraries must effectively adapt to stay relevant. As learning devices become more technical, and less traditional, we here at the MMCC Library are committed to creating and maintaining services that will keep us relevant in this ever changing world of academia.

Although change can be scary for some, I personally see it as an exciting opportunity to have a positive impact on how our students learn and interpret the world around them.

Thanks

Bill Reader

Before exploring this intriguing notion, I should mention that my interest in and study of SF has only recently been rekindled. Here’s what happened: I noticed a pattern emerging after having watched a few recent movies, including Minority Report, Paycheck, and Next.

What I noticed was that all of these movies were based on short stories by a writer named Philip K. Dick. Intrigued, I began reading as much Philip K. Dick as I could find. I craved more, and began reading as much SF as I could, finding writers such as Ursula K. LeGuin, Octavia Butler, Joanna Russ, and lesser known SF writers such as Cordwainer Smith. In spite of being set on far away planets and sometimes populated with aliens that resembled large centipedes, I continued...

Transformers and Transformations: Science Fiction as Serious Literature

Guest Writer: Bill Reader

A number of memorable moments in my life have a common link. A few moments that immediately come to mind are:

- Carving a Viper fighter from Battlestar Galactica into my block of linoleum for a third grade art class project while many of the other kids were carving flowers, snowmobiles, and animals into theirs...

- Having to settle for a plain old Imperial Stormtrooper as a pilot for the TIE fighter I got for Christmas because my older brother wouldn’t let me even look at his Darth Vader action figure...

- Being honored for an essay I wrote in ninth grade English class on H.G. Wells’ The War of the Worlds...

- Watching Close Encounters of the Third Kind under the stars with my future wife as part of a free film series shown in Ann Arbor.

Take a moment to travel back in time, to revisit your past. It’s likely that you will find some moments in your life when you have had close encounters with science fiction (or sci fi, or speculative fiction, or just plain SF. “Science fiction” is a very broad category; I am going to use the term very loosely).

SF has played a significant role in our popular culture for decades, and, as a result, is likely to intertwine with our lives and memories. We currently regard SF very highly indeed, if Avatar’s phenomenal box office performance is any indicator, not to mention the Oscar nominations for best picture for both Avatar and District 9. Some critics claim that SF is the most important form of literature ever produced, and that it will become the most predominant form of literature in the 21st century. However, SF has not always been held in such high esteem in our culture. A genre that was once widely considered the junk food for the mind (and I’m sure some folks might still feel this way) seems now positioned to nourish the intellect of this century.
this was some serious literature I was reading, dealing with some serious themes: the nature of human relationships, reality/simulation, and social structures, among others. Why had I been ignoring SF for so long?

I'm pretty sure it's because I majored in English in college. The impression I got as an English major was that only "serious literature" was worthy of scholarly attention. William Bradford and Anne Bradstreet were more important than Ray Bradbury; it was clear that we should read and explicate Emily Dickinson instead of experiencing Philip K. Dick. There was, however, a class called Science Fiction and Fantasy, but in my mind at the time any kind of "popular" writing was not important, so I did not take the class.

SF is "popular," and often we academics like to seek out, study, and talk to each other about "unpopular" things, which are usually quite obscure things in which only academics are usually interested; the work of academics seems to attach a kind of "seriousness" to the obscure thing that is studied. The public, then, is led to believe that only "serious" subjects outside the popular realm are worthy of academic study.

This stigma is not just confined to the halls of academe. SF has suffered from some seriously bad PR over the years. For example, many of the movies from the 50s and 60s, riding the wave of the emerging youth culture in the US, were geared toward the fantasies and preoccupations of adolescent male consumers. Writers would crank out story after story, usually following predictable formulas, for publication in pulp magazines aimed toward the same male audience. When we "grow up," we're predisposed to dismiss SF as something we enjoyed in childhood, or that we read in high school, but have since outgrown. SF's tendency to be "campy" has also fed into the perception that the genre lacks seriousness. It's no wonder, then, that there is the tendency to think of SF as junk food for the mind.

I agree with the general assessment that some works of science fiction can be called intellectual junk food for many of the reasons I've outlined above. However, I am much more inclined to agree with the claim of some critics that SF is important and will likely emerge as the predominant literature of the 21st century.

An obvious, but no less significant, reason for this claim is that SF can be understood as a response to and critique of modern science and its prominence as the dominant way of arriving at knowledge about our world.

Part of the reason is because of SF's popularity. It is easily accessible through film and published texts, it is entertaining, and many of us enjoy the experience of it. Critics like bell hooks feel that popular culture is the place for academic work because of its ability to reach wide audiences with the serious themes and issues addressed in many popular texts.

Furthermore, change is an essential element of the genre. Change is also a key element of our lives today. Octavia Butler's book, Parable of the Sower, which is set fourteen years from now, tells the story of a girl who initiates the rise of a new faith. The god of this new faith? Change. SF is a place where changes that we are currently experiencing (or will possibly experience in the future) -- environmental, social, scientific, political -- can be explored in imaginative ways. Butler herself represents an important change in how SF has been received -- the contribution of women to a genre traditionally dominated by men. Ursula K. LeGuin, Joanna Russ, and Marge Piercy have used the genre to explore themes of gender and sexual identity, family, the body, and social structure.

SF also holds a mirror up to ourselves. It insists on a connection with the world we know. Darko Suvin, an important academic critic, claims that there is at once something familiar to us in SF, something we recognize about the world we inhabit, something rationed plausible, yet something unfamiliar. Such "cognitive estrangement," as Suvin calls it, leads us to reflect on the world we inhabit. We are confronted with the familiar system of apartheid and the townships in District 9. At the same time, we encounter the unfamiliar, the aliens who have been forced into a desperate existence in the townships of Johannesburg. We realize that we have witnessed a very familiar story and reflect not on the ugliness of the aliens, but on the ugliness of how those in power oppress others because of difference.

A SF story can lead us to reflect on ourselves and the world we inhabit. Through the transformative potential of SF, we can seek to change our world. This transformative power, combined with how SF has permeated our popular culture, might very well be why science fiction will become the most important form of serious literature in the 21st century.