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SCIENCE FICTION: THE FUTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

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Science fiction is a literary genre that has gained more respectability in the past few years than it had experienced previously. One can remember trying to find examples of this genre to read. Jules Verne and H. G. Wells could be found if one were educated enough in the genre to seek out these authors. When pressed, a librarian might try to foist Plato's *Republic* or More's *Utopia* off on the neophyte science fiction seeker. For the most part, those interested in this genre had to seek outside the confines of the public library to find examples of science fiction to consume. Science fiction for young readers in this period could become expensive. Magazines and short story collections existed, but one was apt to acquire a potpourri of good and bad fiction. Comic books abounded during this pre-television era and Buck Rogers was in great demand. Time marched on and the future became the present and atom bombs were detonated and the nuclear era became a reality. Aircraft were constantly redesigned, rockets had been invented, John Glenn went into orbit and on an historic day men actually walked on the moon. The world of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon was reality and science fiction reached out to explore new ideas.

What exactly is science fiction? Generally it is presently considered to be a literary genre consisting mainly of short fiction and novels. There have been some examples of poetry and one play which has been published in so many anthologies that it has become very well known; this is Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* In order to give serious consideration to the special genre of science fiction, one must accept certain precepts. The first and most important one was stated by Janet Kafka in a recent article, "Consider it as a literary sub-genre rather than a sub-literary genre" (7). It is important to science fiction that one assume Ms. Kafka's premise as a basic tenet. This becomes important to the student of science fiction because of the poor repute the genre held in the minds of many teachers and librarians. As important writers discovered the genre, or as young writers evolved into experienced authors of craftsmanlike talents, the genre took on new respectability. During the sputnik era Americans turned in increasing numbers to things scientific and in the process science fiction burgeoned and grew into maturity.

Television came forth with series such as "Star Trek" which was dropped over five years ago and still claims the imagination of fans who have formed clubs, pay five dollars a seat to see reruns in McNichols arena and other places and clamor for a movie that is being made currently based on the series. A trip to any local bookstore gives evidence of its continued popularity in books based on the scripts, log books, plans of the space ship

Enterprise and all manner of poster, puzzles, coloring books, etc. Other series such as “Space 1999,” and “Lost in Space” had a great deal of exposure and gained many fans. Movies such as Clarke’s “Space Odyssey-2001,” “Logan’s Run,” the “Planet of the Apes,” the animated film, “Wizards,” and two that are on the screen, “Star Wars” and “Close Encounters” help to keep science fiction in everyone’s conscious mind.

If one accepts science fiction as a true literary form, one becomes confused when consulting a variety of authors as to definitions. Robert Heinlein, a noted science fiction author, defines it as follows:

. . . science fiction is speculative fiction in which the author takes as his first postulate the real world as we know it, including all established facts and natural laws. The result can be extremely fantastic in content but it is not fantasy; it is legitimate—and often tightly reasoned—speculation about the possibilities of the real world (11, p. 369).

Honor A. Webb defines science fiction as . . . “(a) prophetic, (b) descriptive of the social impact of science, (c) set in a novel, imaginative, possible fantastic situation” (11, p. 366). Another writer, Janet Kafka, defines it as a . . . “commentary on people and societies as we find them today, as well as extrapolating from this to give us a view of some possible alternative futures” (7). The final definition comes from Sylvia Engdahl; science fiction serves to . . . “shape attitudes toward the future, and toward some of the possibilities the future may hold, as well as toward the universe that waits to be explored” (6, p. 252). For the purposes of this discussion the following definition of science fiction will be used: speculative fiction which takes into account life as it presently exists and provides the reader with possible alternatives which might exist at some future time based on ideas generated by contemporary problems or concerns.

In considering the use of science fiction as classroom reading material there are several concerns which must be dealt with. One concern deals with the language that the characters use and another deals with the role that sexual activity plays in the story itself. Janet Kafka refers to science fiction as “action oriented, sexless and simplistic” (7, p. 47). It is true that some four letter words do tend to creep into the most recent paperback stories and novels, any concerned teacher should preview books before assigning them. Sex, as Kafka indicates, is not a major concern in most science fiction and is not alluded to in many stories and novels. An important concern of many teachers is: will the students be able to read the work or will it be too difficult. Basic vocabulary is an important consideration. Quina and Greenlaw suggest that much of science fiction is appropriate for middle and secondary school students. This includes such prominent works as *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Heinlein and *Dune* by Herbert. Elementary students, they suggest, would be able to read Suzanne Martel’s *The City Under Ground* or Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* as would older students reading at this level (12, p. 105). Science fiction can have several important

functions as a teaching tool. It can teach content learning in science, give students a feel for the way science operates, teach attitude and values, and educate students for the future (8).

One advantage that science fiction has over other literary genres is that “Since material is concerned with the student’s future, relevance is built-in and motivation is high” (10). Students tend to see science fiction as extremely relevant to life today. The students in the classrooms of the seventies have seen Future Shock come into reality in their own short lifetimes. The present energy crisis is real science fiction now and for the future. The problems of water conservation brought forth in *Dune* are becoming a reality in those parts of the country with severe water shortages. The fragility of the environment, the problems with smog and pollution, over-population and a myriad of other present problems dealt with by science fiction writers in the future societies which they propose are problems pondered by today’s youth beginning in elementary schools. Today’s youngsters are aware and concerned. The problems of the world are brought daily into their homes through the science fiction of one era’s dream, the television set. Children must learn to consider alternatives, there are no set solutions to today’s problems that face all of mankind and that will ultimately have to be dealt with in some future time.

Science fiction has as one of its goals the preparation of individual minds to accept the variety of solutions that their works propose. Unless society is prepared to deal with novel solutions to new problems that arise, it may not be able to cope with them at all.

No science fiction writer expects to live to see the day when his ideas will be accepted by society. He hopes . . . that the seedlings he plants in society’s ground will be nurtured by the next generation of writers and readers and, if his ideas grow and have vigor, by generation after generation until they bear fruit (11, p. 366).

Today’s children are more aware, more concerned, and more informed than any preceding generation of youth. This is an exciting genre for them. It meets their needs to verbalize societal concerns. “Science fiction for children reflects the implications of technology and the possibilities for the future. Through it can be provided a method of developing an awareness of some of the alternatives of the world’s future” (5, p. 201). Bearing in mind the scientific savvy of today’s youth, authors of science fiction utilize themes in their works that . . . “reflect the concerns . . . for the continuation of man and the life he has known within this century” (5, p. 197).

The final indication that science fiction has come into its own in children’s literature is the fact that several juvenile science fiction works have received prestigious awards. Juvenile science fiction has come a long way since the first American juvenile science fiction work by Robert A. Heinlein was published in 1947. The book is titled, *Robert Ship Galileo*. Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* is cited in almost every article on

juvenile science fiction as an outstanding example of the genre. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* by Robert O'Brien won the Newberry Medal in 1972. This book deals with animal experimentation and the creation, by the super intelligent rats experimented on by National Institute of Mental Health, of a utopian society. There is much food for thought, for the concerned youthful reader, in this juvenile novel. A third novel of proven literary merit is Ursula le Guin's *The Farthest Shore* a fantasy which won the National Book Award for children's literature in 1972.

The genre has travelled far from Plato's *Atlantis* to Well's *War of the Worlds* from Tom Swift and Buck Rogers to *Rendezvous with Rama* and *Dune Children* from the Frank Reade, Jr. series to picture books like *The Humans of Ziax II*. The realities of the world are part of every person's life if there is a library nearby and an index to find the science fiction that can open the vistas of ideas that need to be considered, mulled over and at some future time acted upon.

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