

A Writer's Guide to
**SPECULATIVE
FICTION**
Science Fiction and Fantasy

Crawford Kilian and
Silvia Moreno-García

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Preface

Storytelling basics don't change much, but writing speculative fiction and fantasy has changed enormously in recent years.

Writers now enjoy resources and markets scarcely imagined even by the most prophetic of mid-20th century SF authors: the web, social media, online book sales, audiobooks at the push of a button, self-publishing, crowdfunding.

Equally important, writers themselves have changed. More of us are women, LGBTQ2S, persons of color, and Indigenous writers. Such writers' knowledge and experience are invaluable resources in themselves, including their own story traditions.

But whatever writers bring to SF and fantasy, they can always learn from established techniques and styles — if only to overturn them.

As writers of speculative fiction and fantasy, we've learned a lot the hard way, making painful mistakes, wasting time in blind alleys, when all we wanted to do was tell a story quickly and effectively so we could get on to the next story. So, we've organized this book to help you decide what kind of stories you want to tell, how to tell them

better, and how to get them to readers with a minimum of anguish. While no single book can make you a writer — if only! — we hope this one helps you get started on the right foot. (There are also resources on the downloadable forms kit for you to use; see the instructions for downloading at the back of this book.)

Writing any novel is a process of self-education, and for SF and fantasy writers that means joining an endless conversation of authors, living and dead. Your own stories are your contribution to that conversation, and it helps if you know what a lot of other authors have said. We've cited a wide range of writers, both current and classic, whom you could read with benefit to your own writing. And we've shared a lot of anecdotal evidence from our own lives as writers; you'll likely find you've had similar experiences.

Similar, but far from identical. The writers of the mid-20th century never imagined SF and fantasy as rich and diverse and surprising as what its current authors are writing. What you write will, we hope, be equally surprising and unpredictable.

We wish you every success as you begin your writing journey.

Silvia Moreno-García

Crawford Kilian



The Past, Present, and Future of Speculative Fiction and Fantasy

Even if the “backstory” doesn’t appear in your story, you should have a good idea of what’s happened before Chapter 1 starts. For the same reason, you will write more effectively if you know something about the history of the genres of speculative fiction and fantasy, and if you think about how they may change in the foreseeable future. Before we get into technical details, let’s survey where these genres have come from, and where they’re likely to go.

Speculative fiction, like speculation itself goes back a long way; the first story about a journey to the moon appeared in the second century CE. In fact, speculation was what set the story apart; we now call this the “what if” element. What would we find if we could fly to the moon? What if sorcery worked? What if 20 billion people were living on this planet? In this kind of story, ideas are vitally important; character is less so. The stock figure is the obsessed philosopher or mad

scientist who is more concerned with the ideas under discussion than with the “real” world around him. So even as SF emerged as a literature of ideas, it couldn’t resist poking fun at those ideas through satire.

1. Conventions in Speculative Fiction and Fantasy

A genre is defined by its conventions: characters, settings, or events that readers expect to find in it. An attractive, difficult, unmarried man is a convention of romance. A ranch in danger is a convention of the western. An interstellar political system is a convention of SF. By the 16th or 17th century, early speculative fiction had developed a number of conventions, most of which are still visible in modern SF.

1.1 An isolated society

An isolated society could be on an island or remote mountain region that is very difficult to reach. It is often portrayed as the geographical equivalent of a womb, which may or may not be an agreeable place. Utopia, St. Thomas More tells us, resulted from the cutting of a canal across a phallic peninsula, creating an island that looks like a uterus: All the major cities are on the shores of an inland sea, which travelers enter through a narrow and dangerous strait.

Nineteenth-century novelist Samuel Butler makes entry to his *Utopia*, Erewhon, similarly difficult, as does Aldous Huxley in *Island*. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell puts the secrets of Oceania in Room 101, 101 being a number that Orwell consciously intended as a female genital image.

In modern SF the isolated society may be on a colony planet, a parallel world, or a generation ship creeping between the stars. In a fantasy story the society may be isolated in time, like Middle Earth or Conan’s Hyborian Age. Or it may be somehow cut off from the world around it, such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s Oregon town that skips around the state, thereby avoiding the blight of strip malls and fast-food joints. But in SF and fantasy we still find something uterine and comfortable about such settings. Hobbit holes are highly womblike, and Le Guin’s town sounds like a great place to settle down — if that’s the right term for such a highly mobile community.

In your writing, the isolated society doesn’t have to be a lost colony. It could be a minority group, for example, that supports its members

and defends them against outside threats. Or it could be a family — traditional or unusual — living physically or culturally apart from other people.

1.2 A morally significant language

More's Utopians speak a combination of Greek and Latin, suggesting they have gone as far as non-Christian society can hope. Orwell's Oceanians are gradually learning to speak Newspeak, designed to suppress conscious thought. In the remarkable 19th-century Canadian novel *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*, James De Mille presents an Antarctic dystopia whose inhabitants speak Hebrew. They are descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and their society is a grotesque perversion of Judeo-Christian values. And in *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut gives the island of San Lorenzo a degraded dialect of English.

Tolkien, of course, is the master here. His training and scholarship in languages enabled him to create languages whose moral significance lies in their esthetic qualities: Elvish Quenya, an ancient tongue of elves in *The Lord of the Rings*, is like music, while the language of the Orcs is as harsh and ugly as the Orcs themselves.

You don't have to invent your own languages, but your use of language should be very conscious. If your story portrays an oppressive bureaucracy, let us hear the bureaucrats mumbling in euphemisms and bafflegab while your hero speaks plain, blunt English.

1.3 The importance of documents

SF writers will shut down their plots at a moment's notice if they can introduce a long extract from some important written work or other. The long epigraphs in Frank Herbert's *Dune* are an example. *The Book of Bokonon*, in *Cat's Cradle*, is another. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston Smith spends considerable time reading *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, a subversive book that explains (to us more than to Winston) how Oceania has become what it is. Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* is an anthology of such documents, almost entirely concealing the plot.

Lacking such a document, SF characters will talk endlessly about their society and technology; sometimes the book itself, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a document under discussion by academics in the future.

This doesn't mean you have to drag in some mythical document whether the story needs it or not. Early satirical science fiction came out of a print-based medium; its chief target is the scholar who understands (and misunderstands) the world through reading books. Your high-tech future may have abandoned print on paper altogether, and your critical document could be, for example, a new computer protocol that gives users instant access to any data bank in the world.

1.4 A rationalist/ideological attitude toward sex

Brave New World, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and many other novels express and explore a rationalist or ideological attitude toward sex. Some approve; some don't. In Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We*, which inspired both Huxley and Orwell, any citizen can demand sexual services from any other citizen. Huxley's young women wear their Malthusian belts, while Orwell's belong to the Anti-Sex League.

As sexual roles and expectations have changed, this aspect of SF and fantasy has changed with it. We have female soldiers in Joe Halderman's *The Forever War* and so many female warriors in fantasy that at least one anthology parodied the practice with *Chicks in Chainmail*. In *The Power*, Naomi Alderman shows us a world in which women gain political and sexual power by acquiring the ability to inflict serious electrical shocks to men.

How does this affect your writing? Well, you could portray a society with what you consider ideal sexual relationships. Or you could show us relationships that are far from ideal but imposed on the characters by the kind of world you've put them in. (In Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*, many women have to be kept in labyrinths to protect them from teleporting rapists.) The distorted relationship itself becomes a criticism of your world's social order. Changing that social order will mean not only justice and freedom but also improved relations between men and women.

1.5 An inquisitive outsider

Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Gulliver in his travels, and countless others serve as lenses through which we observe "what if" societies. Their own cultural biases may influence their perceptions, but they often see that the culture they are studying is in some way only their own with some aspect exaggerated or diminished. (In some cases, as with Gulliver or Winston Smith, we may understand this better than the narrator. When that happens, we are dealing with irony.)

In your writing, the inquisitive outsider may be your central character, but he or she doesn't have to come from somewhere else. Your hero may be a teenage girl who's trying to understand why her lunar-colony society has a taboo against going out on the surface, or a young soldier trying to pull back from the gritty details of combat training to learn the real causes of the war she's supposed to fight.

2. The Fusion of Satire and Romance

Renaissance SF, as a literature of ideas, was never a popular genre. More's *Utopia* circulated among a small circle of intellectuals. But other writers soon found they could use elements from SF in popular fiction, which had always been fond of monsters, strange kingdoms, and exotic locales. This kind of romance gave us a brave hero (often aristocratic but reared in obscurity), wise old men, evil usurpers, perilous quests, and an essentially conservative political agenda: The hero's job is usually to preserve or restore an idealized society.

Interest in romance grew throughout the age of European exploration, discovery, and conquest. Adventurers encountered lands and societies that seemed like something out of popular fiction; when the conquistadors first saw Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs' imperial capital, one of them said that it was like something out of *Amadis of Gaul*, a medieval thriller.

While the typical European response to these new societies was to try to destroy them, they nevertheless posed a challenge that many thinkers and writers were glad to meet. Europeans saw that different peoples had found different solutions to the problems of organizing themselves; society was therefore not so much God-ordained as humanly designed. The dangerous implication here was that we might actually implement ideas to change our own society, rather than imposing change only by force of arms.

The debate raged on for centuries: What is the real nature of the human being — fallen angel, noble savage, decayed child of great ancestors, or ancestor of wiser, greater descendants? In the light of foreign societies, Europeans criticized their own, and some critics paid a high price. It became safer to write satire, poking fun at the follies of mythical societies, than to poke fun at the follies of one's own society.

In hindsight, the European encounter with the rest of the world was enormously stimulating to the Europeans — and often fatal to everyone else. As the age of exploration and conquest ended, literature

kept on offering fictional versions of what had been factual accounts. Ever since Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro, some novels showed Europeans discovering new worlds and lost civilizations. By the mid-19th century, however, authors had few blank spots left on the map, while readers continued to demand at least fictional discoveries.

It's not surprising, then, that authors took readers deep into the jungles of Africa and South America, or into the mountain valleys of Tibet, to find new societies, strange creatures, and magical lore. Others began to look to other worlds, or to the future, simply because the 19th century had run out of the right kind of real estate.

What we often consider the dawn of SF — the age of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells — was really the high noon of a long-established genre. The contribution of Verne and Wells was to define the major subgenres.

3. The Evolution of Fantasy

Meanwhile, fantasy was beginning to evolve into a genre of its own, after centuries of being just another kind of story about remote and wonderful places. In many ways, it was an understandable reaction against the changes that science in the service of industrialism was making to traditional society. William Blake's "dark Satanic mills" had cut people off from their roots; the old stories let them tap into a lost past.

Folktales and fairytales blithely portrayed a world of witches and spells even while it was thought that science was driving superstition from the public mind; by the 19th century these tales had become common childhood reading thanks to Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm brothers. Authors brought up on such stories began to experiment with them, creating genuine literary works out of the imagery and motifs of fairytale. Writers such as William Morris, consciously rejecting industrial society, created quasi-medieval worlds in which magic worked, and readers responded very happily to these worlds.

In the early 20th century, a number of writers such as Lord Dunsany, "Saki" (the pen name of H. H. Munro), and E. R. Eddison enriched the genre. Sometimes, like Eddison, they set their fantasy worlds in real places, like the planet Mercury, but with no effort to make these settings resemble those worlds as astronomers knew them.

So, when J. R. R. Tolkien published *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s, he was working in a familiar genre — but on a scale never before seen. Readers came to him after reading H. P. Lovecraft, Saki, C. S. Lewis, and

other fantasy writers, but Tolkien's scope and vision changed the genre forever — not always for the better.

Those of us writing SF and fantasy now face a serious problem: We find it hard to say anything new in genres that rely for their impact on the novelty of their ideas. Moreover, SF and fantasy are so market-driven that genuine originality is likely to languish in the slush pile.

At the same time, we realize that both genres are really about the here and now, not some magical realm or the far future: Isaac Asimov's Foundation series, for example, is really about the uncertainties of the post-World War II international order. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is largely about the changing sexual mores of the 1960s. Tolkien was attacking totalitarianism and the more brutal aspects of the industrial era.

Given the current pace of events, however, it's hard to find a "present" that isn't ancient history by the time we've dealt with it in print. (Think of all those versions of World War III fought against the Soviet Union.)

We writers therefore face an awkward choice: Accept the conventions of this or that subgenre (military SF, time-traveling police, space opera, cyberpunk, sword and sorcery) and write more or less academic exercises on their themes; or, we can try to turn our chosen genres on their heads.

Imagine, for example, a future in which you can step through a doorway onto a planet 10,000 light years away. Imagine trillions of people living in a galaxy full of such doorways. Now imagine someone who actually wonders what's out there in interstellar space, and builds the first spaceship in millennia; like rowing across the Atlantic instead of flying. What is this person likely to find?

Or you can have fun at the expense of the classics in your genre. Satirizing SF and fantasy can work up to a point (after all, they themselves are forms of satire), but it's also a sign that the original genre has run out of energy. Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* tales are a hoot at first, but after a dozen titles even loyal readers may find the gags a bit stale. And part of the appeal of both genres is that old reliable — the sense of wonder. We want the elation and excitement of romance, the sense of awe in encountering the mysterious, as well as the intellectual amusement of satire.



Where Do We Go from Here?

I suspect that future SF and fantasy will find most scope in two divergent directions.

The first of these will be superrealism, or “bottom line” stories. In science fiction, bottom-line writers will explore economically viable societies and the uses they make of science and technology. No more interstellar-war stories unless the authors show how you can pay for such warfare, and what its benefits are. No more societies ruled by arbitrarily evil megacorporations unless you can show how such groups develop a genuine advantage over public institutions. By showing how economic or political principles rule future societies, we can examine how those principles rule our own.

In fantasy, the bottom-line approach will encourage writers who want to drag the genre out of the Middle Ages. Walter Jon Williams’s *Metropolitan* novels, set in an urban world running on “plasm,” are a step in this direction. Charles Stross’s *Laundry* novels give us a world of magicians whose bureaucratic masters want a strict accounting of the expenses incurred in fighting invaders from the dungeon dimensions.

The second direction might be called antirealism or (to coin a pompous literary criticism term) “mythotropic” literature — stories that move toward myth. Sir Arthur C. Clarke argued that technology, if advanced enough, is indistinguishable from magic. In mythotropic SF we assume a Clarkean level of technology that, by becoming magic, enables its users to act out whatever their inmost desires might be — to behave, in effect, like gods or demons. Just as myth enables us to humanize the world we encounter, mythotropic SF would enable us to explore our own psyches on a grand scale.

Mythotropic fantasy, by contrast, would use the common images (dragons, swords, caves, forests) as conscious metaphors for aspects of the human mind and experience; it would also explore other cultural traditions with unfamiliar myths and images, seeking both novelty and whatever is common to all cultures in their response to the human condition.

Both kinds of literature would still, of course, be about ourselves at the turn of the millennium.

But if we can see the essential pattern in technological change, and the psychological constants in our images of fantasy, our fiction will have a better chance of lasting, of appealing to readers growing up in a very real 21st century.

— C.K.

4. Related Reading

In addition to the novels and authors mentioned in this chapter, we strongly recommend that you explore ancient literature: the Bible, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Greek drama, Roman verse, and nonfiction. Do not limit yourself to European literature. Look at the *Ramayana* of India, Chinese novels such as *The Journey to the West*, or medieval Japanese classics like *The Tale of Genji*. You will be pleasantly surprised to see how similar they are to SF and fantasy.

The literary studies of the late Canadian scholar Northrop Frye, especially his *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Secular Scripture*, provide a useful context for science fiction and fantasy; our genres deal in myth and archetype, and no one understands them better than Frye. Studies in comparative mythology, like Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, can also offer guidance.