

Amazing World of Science Fiction

by Gonit Sora - Saturday, January 05, 2013

<http://gonitsora.com/amazing-world-of-science-fiction/>

Imagination is more important than knowledge said **Albert Einstein**. Most of us are perhaps not aware of many worlds totally different from our own which exist in sub conscious minds of many imaginative people with prophetic vision whom we recognize as science fiction writers. Science fiction writers' possess the predictive talent to foresee the future. **Jules Verne** (February 8, 1828 – March 24, 1905), the celebrated **French** novelist had such a prophetic vision and predicted well in advance the man's victory over moon. Science fiction (*sf*) writers often describe worlds which are quite different from our own though retaining some elements of the one in which we live in. But there remain a strong possibility that the imagined world of the story might some day come into existence. The pace at which technology is altering our ways of life it is very much possible that we are going to have a world quite different from the one inhabited by us today.

Issac Asimov

Isaac Asimov (January 2, 1920 – April 6, 1992), *sf* writer of world renown characterizes the genre in these words –“**science fiction story must be set against a society significantly different from our own -- usually, but not necessarily, because of some change in the level of science and technology -- or it is not a science fiction story.**” He has also this crisp and concise definition of science fiction - ‘**Science fiction is that branch of literature which deals with human responses to changes in the level of science and technology.**’ In addition to this there are as many definitions of *sf* as there are *sf* writers and critics but this definition is easily comprehensible even by a new *sf* buff.

According to **Robert A. Heinlein** (July 7, 1907 – May 8, 1988), another celebrated *sf* writer of his time *sf* is “*realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method.*” Any story which defies the methodology of science is not *sf* story. Methodology of science as we know involves steps like sprouting of new curiosities in mind, formulation of a hypothesis and then various tests to verify its validity and to reach to the conclusion accordingly. *Sf* must respect the methodology of science and should not be illogical and irrational insofar as the contents and themes of stories are concerned.

First Science fiction Novel

There seems to be an agreement in majority of *sf* critics that the first true science fiction novel was **Frankenstein** by **Mary Shelley** (30 August 1797 – 1 February 1851). She employed a scientific methodology /rationale to persuade the audience that her story took place in the realm of the possible. This magnum opus novel of the author dealt with the possibility that science could even create a monster that can destroy its progenitor i.e. science itself and possibly mankind. There is a striking resemblance of

the ghost **Frankenstein**, with our own mythical character **Bhasmasur** who tries to kill Lord Shiva even after obtaining the boon from Him. But **Marry Shelley** did not wish her story to be a myth only and made the main character of the novel a scientist and his scientific efforts a focal point of the reader's attention.

Science Fiction versus Fantasy

Fantasy is usually defined as a work which takes place in a non-existent and unreal world, such as fairyland, or concerns incredible and unreal characters while science fiction employs physical and scientific principles not yet discovered and are not contrary to present knowledge. Works of fantasy to which we are very familiar are **Alice's adventures in wonderland**, **Lord of the rings** and **Harry Potter series**. Here authors may enjoy all the liberty to use even far-fetched assumptions like unicorns, multi legged creatures, talking animals and many forms of monsters and ghosts (like Frankenstein!) in their themes of choice. But in science fantasy /fiction there must be some possibility that the described characters or events could possibly happen. **Miriam Allen de Ford** (August 21, 1888 – February 22, 1975) perhaps explains the difference more lucidly: "*Science fiction deals with improbable possibilities, fantasy with plausible impossibilities.*" It is a common practice amongst *sf* writers to not contradict known scientific facts while the authors of fantasy are not bound by such restraints.

Science fiction and science fantasy

Is there any difference between the terms '*science fiction*' and '*science fantasy*'? Fiction is a Latin word which means '*to invent*' while fantasy is a Greek word meaning '*to imagine*'. Both are in fact lumped together in general understanding of *sf* and have often been addressed as '*surrealistic fiction*' which is simply put as *super realistic fiction*. In science fiction, science and technology is depicted without any distortion of facts while in science fantasy even wild imaginations are acceptable like time travel, anti gravity, faster than light (FTL) travels etc.. According to **Jayant Narlikar** (July 19, 1938-), noted Indian *sf* writer many fantasy elements like journey faster than light could make the *science story a bad one despite its good style and form*.

Prophetic Vision

Arthur C. Clarke

Science fiction is known for the ability of its proponents i.e *sf* writers to predict the future. **Jules Verne** envisioned a submarine run on electric batteries and a rocket to the moon launched from **Cape Canaveral** more than a century ago which in turn inspired making of the first nuclear submarine, the **Nautilus**, and the Apollo space programmes. Novels of **H.G. Wells** (21 September 1866 – 13 August 1946) paved the advent of battle tanks, air forces and atomic bombs. Likewise **Arthur C .Clarke's** (16 December 1917 – 19 March 2008) fictional idea made the geosynchronous satellites a reality which further initiated possibilities of today's satellite television. Owing to this capacity of visualizing the future in advance, *sf* writers have been world-famous throughout the ages.

A Brief History

Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe (January 19, 1809 – October 7, 1849) is often credited along with **Jules Verne** and **H.G. Wells** as the founders of modern science fiction. **Poe's** story 'The Balloon Hoax' was an instant hit and perhaps inspired many later stories written on man's victory over moon. But majority opinion supports **Frankenstein** (1818) by **Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly** to be the first modern work of science fiction. However, the author who started writing *sf* the way we know it today is undoubtedly **Jules Verne**. His most famous novels are "**From the Earth to the Moon**" (1873) and "**Journey to the Centre of the Earth**" (1864), Later **Well's**, "**The war of worlds**" (1898) and "**The Time Machine: an invention**" (1895) attracted wide readership.

In 1926, *sf* magazine "**Amazing Stories**" appeared and the editor was the journalist and publisher **Hugo Gernsback** (August 16, 1884 – August 19, 1967). The year 1937 witnessed another great editor of *sf*, **John W. Campbell Jr.** (June 8, 1910-July 11, 1971) who started the publication of "**Astounding Science Fiction**" and published stories of writers such as **Isaac Asimov**, **Arthur C. Clarke**, and **Robert A. Heinlein**. Now *sf* began to gain status as serious fiction. Campbell encouraged his authors to write in a realistic way about the possible effects of technology on people and society. He wanted them to be critical about science and write about what could happen if something went wrong. Now the quality of the stories improved and "Astounding Stories" became more realistic rather than imaginative. In between the period 1926-1950 *sf* was published mostly in American and British magazines.

In the years that followed, *sf* became a subculture with authors, editors, and fans. Some more magazines were started notably: "**Galaxy**" (1950) and "**The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction**" (1949). When nuclear bombs were dropped in Nagasaki and Hiroshima exactly in a manner that *sf* writes had predicted, the genre got more promotion and found many new readers. Now *sf* was recognized as serious literature as readers were convinced that this new branch of literature could really predict the future.

The Golden Age

The enormous growth of the genre led to the so-called "**The Golden Age**" when many notable authors and novels appeared on the scene - **A.E. Van Vogt** (April 26, 1912 – January 26, 2000) with "Slan" (1940), **Isaac Asimov** with "Foundation" (1951), **Robert A. Heinlein** with "[Starship troopers](#)" (1959), and "Stranger in a Strange Land" (1961), and **Theodore Sturgeon** (26 February 1918 — 8 May 1985) with "More than Human" (1953). **Philip K. Dick's** (December 16, 1928 – March 2, 1982) most famous title "Do Android Dream of Electric Sheep" (1968) on which a movie was made in 1982 named "Blade Runner" also appeared. In the 50's of the last century, **Arthur C. Clarke's** "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1968), **Fredric Pohl** (November 26, 1919-) and **Kurt Vonnegut's** (November 11, 1922 – April 11, 2007) "The Sirens of Titan" (1959) appeared and were considered to be the part of the same "**The Golden Age**".

New Wave !

A 'new wave' in *sf* writing appeared on the horizon afterwards and focused on the psychological aspects rather than technology oriented "hard *sf*". Important ingredients of the new wave were drugs, overpopulation, disasters, and sex. This new trend was represented by famous *sf* authors like **Brian Aldiss** (18 August 1925-) and **J.G. Ballard** (15 November 1930 – 19 April 2009). With the advent of computers there were new themes in science fiction resulting into a hitherto unfamiliar way of literary writing termed '**Cyberpunk**' and was acknowledged very soon as a subgenre of *sf* writing. The

representative work of Cyberpunk was **Neuromancer** a debut novel by **William Gibson** (March 17, 1948-). In cyberpunk, stories usually take place in the fantastic virtual worlds created through internet which are still not affected by air pollution and decay. Popular movies in the subgenre of cyberpunk were "Blade Runner" (1982), "Videodrome" (1983) etc.

Popular Major Themes

Major themes of *sf* which remain prime attention for the audience include space travels (viz., Star Wars and Star Trek), time travel (viz., Back to the Future), psychological or biological changes in man (viz., The Incredible Hulk) ,supernatural characters (Viz., Superman, Spiderman, Batman) ,alternate universe(viz., Star Wars) etc. Apocalyptic *sf* which incorporates end of world stories, alien invasions, utopias and dystopias, alternate history /universe, are some other popular themes.

The terms like Robots, Androids, Cyborgs, Clones, Cyberpunk/Virtual Reality, Pantropy, Genetic engineering, and nanotechnology etc. are very familiar to these themes. Cyberpunk is the fairly recent genre of dystopic (opposite, utopian) near-future world where there is global connectivity and communication through the web, bio/techno enhancements, and a mood of alienation, resistance, often sex and graphic violence. Virtual reality, holographic simulations, artificial intelligence also make frequent appearances in these themes.

Popular *sf* themes in India include space travels, environmental imbalance, population explosion, material transfer, clones, memory transfer, planetary travels, innovations in medicine etc. Since *sf* is an imaginatively fertile field, *sf* writers are trying on many themes of their choice.

Indian Mythology and Science Fiction

Ursula le Guin (*October 21, 1929*), American *sf* writer, once said that '*sf* is a modern-day mythology'. In the context of Indian mythology the statement appears to be curiously true. Science fiction's strange new ideas and imagery characterize mythological stories too. It's for this reason that *sf/f* buffs are usually tempted to draw analogies between science fiction and mythology. It is in the very nature of *sf* that it usually deals with the non-existent social set ups, technology and gadgetry, etc. of an imaginary future making the genre quite analogous to myths since the latter is also known for its depictions/descriptions of imaginary things and people. **Carl Sagan** (November 9, 1934 – December 20, 1996) was very impressed and inspired by sources of ancient knowledge. He once appealed *sf* writers to delve deep into Indian mythology to get original *sf* theme ideas.

Greg Bear while arguing on the issue said "*I don't know of any Western sf writers who haven't been inspired by one or more traditions of mythology.*" **Roger Zelazny** (May 13, 1937 – June 14, 1995), decades ago, wrote the much-admired **Lord of Light** based on Indian stories and myth. **Sir Arthur's Fountains of Paradise** takes place on both ancient and future Serendip, today known as Sri Lanka... I'm sure there are many more examples! Perhaps the greatest analogs to stories like Mahabharata are found in comic books--tales of superheroes--and in movies and television shows like *X-Men* and *Heroes*.

Is Dr. Who a wandering god with a propensity for young human females? Perhaps we should colour him blue like Krishna!

<http://www.gregbear.com/blog/display.cfm?id=768>.

Incidentally the colour of main protagonist of recent sci-fi movie Avatar is also blue and he has many other similarities with lord Krishna.

The legend in the Indian mythology that Trisanku is hanging in the sky between the heaven and the earth, though regarded as incredible, has fascinated one and all since time immemorial. Now we all know about the **Lagrange points** which are the five positions in an orbital configuration where a small object affected only by gravity can theoretically be stationary relative to two larger objects (such as a satellite with respect to the Earth and Moon). In 1945, Arthur Clarke also wrote in an article published in *Wireless World* that placing three geostationary satellites (Compare Trisanku!) above the equator would revolutionize global telecommunication. A mythological idea that objects can be made to appear stationary above the Earth found a place in science fiction. In 1964 the first Trisanku (!), Syncom, a geostationary /geosynchronous satellite was placed above a fixed longitude on the equator, and thereby a myth became a reality.

Our ancestors imagined all such seemingly bizarre and interesting things but because the appropriate technology was not available at contemporary times the dreams were not realized in their own times. We are still waiting to see many of the predictions made by our scripture writers to see the light of the day. We must salute the wisdom of our ancestors that mythology still holds water to show us our future and Indian science fiction owe a lot to this treasure trove of endless imaginative ideas. A lively debate on Indian mythology and science fiction and other pertinent issues in Indian *sf* have been a prime attraction amongst not only Hindi *sf* lovers but *sf* fraternity all over the world and could be accessed at:

<http://in.groups.yahoo.com/group/indiansciencefiction/>

Hard vs. Soft Science Fiction

Science fiction (*sf*) is often categorized under hard and soft forms of *sf* writing. The term hard *sf* is reserved for the stories that are built on science without any deviation from known facts and where explanations are given in a reliable way rather than in imaginative manner. Here technology plays a major part. In soft *sf*, the stories are built on human psychology and emotions. New wave of *sf* writing is usually soft *sf*, while **cyberpunk**, that was evolved out of New Wave, is in something of a shadow land between hard and soft *sf*. Some critics say that most of the stories written by Arthur C. Clarke are hard *sf* while those by Issac Asimov are soft *sf* involving social angles and human values.

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Those First Indian SF Stories...

Many *sf* critics tend to agree that the first true Hindi *sf* was a serial written during 1884-88 by **Ambika Dutt Vyas** and was entitled 'The Strange Tale-[Aaschary Vrittant]' and was published in '-Peeyush Pravah' a magazine published from Madhya Pradesh. Influenced perhaps by the adventure stories of Jules Verne, 'Aaschary Vrittant' presented a very interesting, captivating saga of one Mr. Gopinath, the protagonist who took the breathtaking adventurous journey underneath the earth. Though influenced by a western stuff the story was an original effort of *sf* writing in Hindi.

A notable Bengali science fiction was **Jagadananda Roy's *Shukra Bhraman* (Travels to Venus)**, published in 1879. Another story which caught attention of Indian *sf* fans was written by an icon in Indian scientific world - **J.C Bose** (30 November 1858 – 23 November 1937)-a Bengali gentleman and scientist of international repute who wrote '**Absconded Tempest**' [**Palatak toofan**]-1896] which narrates a thrilling story how a turbulent sea was calmed with even a minuscule thing- as ordinary as a drop of oil. The story bears a strange semblance with the '**chaos theory**' propounded much later.

In Marathi *sf* writing started late around 1910 with the publication of a translation of Verne's 'Men in the Moon' serialized in a magazine named 'Kerala Kokil' printed and published in Cochin. In yet another prominent Indian Language ,Tamil the history of *sf* writing could be traced back to 1959,of course a very late beginning, in writings of a great poet[Mahakavi], C.Subramania Bhartiya whose story entitled ,'Kakkai Parliament[Parliament of the crows] is said to have some *sf* elements.

Sf writing in many other Indian languages seems to have been initiated much later. In Malayalam,for instance, *sf* writing appears to have been initiated in 1950, with the initiative taken by **Keral Sastra Sahity Parishad**-a most respected autonomous body of science popularization in India. Similarly, Assamese language with its very laudable role and history in science fiction writings, stepped into the arena of *sf* writing in the late 1930's. In Kannada *sf* writing began in 1940's with the advent of **Dr.Sadanand Nayak** with his famous *sf* love story employing a plot on heart transplant.

Who Propounded Chaos Theory?

Edward Lorenz or J. C. Bose ?

Many of us now know that '**chaos theory**' was propounded by **Professor Edward Lorenz** who died at the age of 90 on April 16th 2008. Born on May 23rd 1917 in West Hartford, Connecticut and educated at Dartmouth College and Harvard University he still enjoys the status of being father of modern chaos theory. He became a mid night celebrity with his talk entitled, "**Predictability: Does the Flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?**" But interestingly enough much before to it **Jagdish Chandra Bose**, Indian scientist wrote a story on a similar theme entitled, "Palatak Toofan"(1896) [absconded tempest] -the story described how a severe surge of the sea could be appeased by even a drop of oil and could save a ship.

In this backdrop if we look for Lorenz's thesis on how small actions could lead to major changes, what is now usually referred to as the "**butterfly effect**" it sounds almost similar to what was already proposed by J.C.Bose. Much later, in the 1960s Lorenz mathematically derived the conclusion that small differences in a dynamic system such as the atmosphere could set off enormous changes.

If you are aware of J.C.Bose's contributions to the world of knowledge you could easily spot one sad aspect that he discovered wireless communication first but for the reasons not clear to many **Marconi** was credited for the epoch-making invention.

Now it is the 'chaos theory' for which this Indian Scientist is not credited as the world knows today that it was propounded by Lorenz .Did Lorenz get clues from the work of J.C Bose ?Or might be that they both got inspiration from some other source not known to us till date. A deeper quest is still required to finally reach to any conclusion .This is just to attract the attention of world intelligentsia to thrash out the matter to do justice albeit posthumously to a Great Indian scientist.

How to Write Science Fiction

There are no fixed rules to write science fiction. One has to read science fiction stories first and only then think of writing a story. Without a reading habit one can not write a good science fiction. And then gradual improvement could be made with practice in due course of time. **Though talent for writing is also certainly required but this could often be obtained through the sheer practice of writing.** It is said that writing itself makes a man perfect. There are many sites now days which assist the beginner authors like –

<http://www.writesf.com/>

The site has enlisted many tips and ways which could be beneficial.

Asimov the maestro says that it is only and only persistent writing which teaches a budding writer to improve his /her work further. Those early rotten stories written usually by the beginners may eventually turn into good stories later. He emphasizes that writing is a skill and it should be learned. So try to write –best of luck!

Further Reading:

1. Asimov on Science Fiction
2. Science Fiction: What it's all about? By Sam J Lundwall.
3. <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-Science-Fiction>
4. <http://www.mariannedyson.com/sfspin.html>
5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science_fiction

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