

Science Fiction: Why So Many Intellectuals Despise It


Do you want to rule a world? Blow apart a sun? Test a theory of community? Explore the very depths of depravity? End slavery and misery? Destroy all empires?

It is possible. . . At least in the imagination.

“The proper study of man is everything. The proper study of man as artist is everything which gives a foothold to the imagination and the passions,” C.S. Lewis once said.

As it surrounds us now and resides, specifically, in no medium, we take science fiction for granted. Though we have lost the “new frontier” aspect of science fiction as exploration of other worlds, we have certainly thrown ourselves into exploring the limits—at least technologically and scientifically—of this one. I am typing this very essay on a gadget that Steve Jobs imagined even better than did Star Trek and its “futurism.”

During the first half of the twentieth century, however, what came to be known as science fiction was nothing short of disreputable to almost all literati and to the American public at large. It was considered low-class, childish, and quasi-pornographic. Associated with pulp, science-fiction books usually appeared on drugstore shelves next to ribald sex stories, romances, and comic books. Aside from a few prominent novels—such as [*Brave New World*](#)—science fiction remained suspect to most, and only highly regarded by a few. Those few could be truly fanatic and evangelical, meeting at various times of the year at what would become known as conventions, writing and mailing newsletters, and trading books and novels whenever possible. The detective/mystery author, Sharon McCrumb, has written two mysteries set at early science-

fiction conventions, and, at least to this author, described the culture perfectly. 


All this shunning and disrepute, however, served the new genre well as it grew mightily and without the restrictions that mainstream publishing placed on so much of the fiction of the time, especially in New York, where neither Jews nor Catholics were much welcomed in respectable publishing. Decentralized and unconnected to any single urban center, science fiction writers could be anti-ideological, anti-conformist, and subversive of WASPish norms. They could explore any thing, any setting, and any personality or community in any situation. Truly, the possibilities were endless. Geniuses such as C.S. Lewis, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Alfred Bester, and Robert Heinlein found themselves at the center of a new movement, one that allowed for the flourishing of imagination. Through their own speculations about what could be, science fiction also witnessed a grand critiquing of what was—especially in response to the rise of totalitarian and terrorist ideologies.

Before the term “science fiction” became the go-to-term for the genre, those in favor and those against employed other names and terms such as fabulist, speculative fiction, pseudoscience fiction, and scientifiction. Frankly, these terms serve just as well as the one that became the norm, and each reveals the expansiveness and possibilities of such literature. During the 1950s, though, Lewis, Bradbury, and Sam Moskowitz promoted the concept of science fiction. As the term only slowly became acceptable (mostly as it became profitable), the literati trashed science fiction for its supposedly childish desire to escape. As Lewis so cuttingly responded:

That perhaps is why people are so ready with the charge of ‘escape.’ I never fully understood it till my friend Professor Tolkien asked me the very simple question, ‘What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?’ and gave the

obvious answer: jailers. The charge of Fascism is, to be sure, mere mud-flinging. Fascists, as well as Communists, are jailers; both would assure us that the proper study of prisoners is prison. But there is perhaps this truth behind it: that those who brood much on the remote past or future, or stare long at the night sky, are less likely than others to be ardent or orthodox partisans. [Lewis, "On Science Fiction"]

In the post-modern world of inhumane horrors—all quite real—what sane person would not want to escape?

As Lewis understood it, the literati only wanted to comment on life's banality and dreariness, while those who love science fiction want to dream dreams. For every realist in New York City, perhaps, two romantics lurked in the fields of Illinois or in the pubs of Oxford. 

Never shy about promoting what matters most in the world, the University of Chicago—arguably the most daring and interesting institution of higher learning in the western world of the 1950s—sponsored a major academic symposium on the meanings of science fiction on February 8, 1957. Unfortunately, few details about the logistics or the origins of the conference remain in the public record, but a student of the profound British, Roman-Catholic theologian, Ronald Knox, edited four of the conference papers and published them two years later as a small book, *The Science Fiction Novel* (edited by Basil Davenport, 1959). Revealing the sheer diversity in thought and makeup of science fiction, the conference featured Robert Heinlein, Robert Bloch, C.M. Kornbluth, and Alfred Bester. Each spoke lovingly but critically of the rising genre, noting where it had succeeded, where it had failed, and, perhaps most importantly, where it had failed to recognize its failure.

It is fascinating to read through the arguments made in 1957, as science-fiction fans (the hardcore kind) in 2015 make the

same arguments, noting the same successes, failures, and failures to recognize failures. Last year, as some readers of *The Imaginative Conservative* probably know, the [Hugo](#) nominations imploded over the behavior of certain fans claiming to act (rather rudely and inappropriately, at least to my mind) for ideological reasons. At *The Imaginative Conservative*, some of the very artists we have studied and promoted were caught in the middle of this. Winning a Hugo after that horrible fiasco might prove itself, today and tomorrow, more a badge of dishonor than honor. Only time will decide such things.

Hopefully, the science-fiction community can move beyond this and quickly.

Though the divide—especially as understood today and over the past several decades—is often couched in left-right terms, it really reflects a division over those who want to continue science fiction as an open-ended genre and those who believe a certain pattern and tradition set by those pioneers of the 1930s-1950s should still be followed. Is it new and improved or merely new? I was recently quite taken with a young writer, [David Forbes](#). Though openly leftist, Mr. Forbes writes well and thinks even better. If nothing else, Mr. Forbes's recent essays should serve as a warning. We fall into the old habits of unthinking tradition only at the peril of our imaginations and our art.

There is no doubt that the very genre of science fiction allowed genius—such as that of Lewis and Bradbury—to thrive, so did the very ostracism of the WASPs of New York City. Science fiction not only allowed the genius to be genius, it also encouraged the very individual excellence of each writer to flourish against the deadening conformity of its day.

Armed with imagination against the dread conformity of the market, science fiction can do the same for us today.

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Books by Bradley Birzer may be found in [The Imaginative Conservative Bookstore](#).

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