



A COMPANION TO  
*SCIENCE*  
*FICTION*

EDITED BY **DAVID SEED**



**Blackwell**  
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A COMPANION TO

# SCIENCE *F*ICTION

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# Introduction: Approaching Science Fiction

This companion is intended to serve as an introduction and guide to one of the most extensive and varied kinds of modern literature. It does not pretend to exhaustive coverage. For that, the reader should consult reference works such as John Clute and Peter Nicholls' *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1999), which remains the leading work of its kind for its combination of author and topic entries, or the *St. James Guide to Science Fiction Writers* (4<sup>th</sup> edn, Pederson 1996). It reflects a broad cultural shift towards science fiction that published writing on SF subjects (the term "science fiction" and its acronym SF will be used interchangeably throughout this volume) has become so extensive that a full bibliography would need to be as long as this volume. Here each essay concludes with a "references and further reading" section which not only give details of works cited within the essays, but also includes other relevant works and bibliographies. One of the most popular narrative subjects in SF is exploration and it is the hope that this companion will help readers in their discovery of the field by setting up a number of sign-posts and recommending some of the routes to take.

The very fact that this companion is being published suggests that SF at long last is being viewed as central to the culture. In the 1950s, cover statement for Penguin editions of John Wyndham's novels declared that he was writing a "modified form of what is unhappily known as 'science fiction,'" whereas in 2000 Wyndham's works started appearing in the Penguin Modern Classics. Apart from shifting Wyndham from the margins to the heart of an evolving modern canon, this change shows a reassessment of the idea of science fiction. Its centrality has been asserted by the US novelist Thomas M. Disch, who declared in 1998: "science fiction has come to permeate our culture in ways both trivial and/or profound, obvious and/or insidious" (Disch 1998: 11). The alternatives are strategic here because Disch is hedging his bets on the nature of SF's impact on culture, while the fact of its presence is indisputable. Whatever we think of SF, we live science fiction in our daily lives. From at least the 1950s onwards, writers such as Ray Bradbury have insisted that we live within the



very technological environment of robotics and cybernetic devices that many SF writers describe.

This is not to argue that SF is the new version of social realism though this argument would not be absurd. Indeed, SF writers of the 1950s and 1960s quite often put forward such a view. Horrified equally by the US government restrictions on scientific knowledge in the Cold War and by the irresponsible myths promoted by SF writers at this time, Philip Wylie insisted in 1953: "The proper function of the science fiction author – the myth-maker of the twentieth century – would be to learn the science of the mind's workings and therewith to plan his work . . . so it will represent in *meaning* the known significance of man" (Wylie 1953: 239). Wylie was writing in the shadow of the Bomb and he was only too well aware of the weaknesses of SF at that time. Nevertheless, his insistence on SF's centrality was echoed by Robert Heinlein a few years later, when he declared: "It is the only fictional medium capable of interpreting the changing, head-long rush of modern life. Speculative fiction is the main stream of fiction" (Heinlein 1964: 53).

This raises a question which will recur throughout this companion: how do we read SF? Joanna Russ opened her 1975 "Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction" with the following questions:

Is science fiction literature?

Yes.

Can it be judged by the usual literary criteria?

No. (Russ 1995: 3)

There are two issues being raised here: the value of SF and the reading protocols we should apply to SF novels. If we approach *Dune* with the same expectations we would bring to *Middlemarch*, the result will probably be disappointment, not only because, as Joanna Russ has pointed out, SF tends to down-play character in favor of "phenomena." An even bigger reason lies in the way SF plays with our notion of the real. So, for Darko Suvin, a pioneer of SF criticism, science fiction estranges the reader from the familiar world and produces striking new perspectives as a result (Suvin 1979). Suvin set a high standard of analytical rigor for SF criticism and at the same time suggested ways in which we could think of SF as engaging with forms of otherness (see Parrinder 2000). The narratives in fiction and film of alien encounters are only one – sometimes sensational – form which this confrontation with otherness might take.

The problem of where to situate SF on a critical map has resulted in a number of different explanations of its development. Arguments continue about its origin, some critics even dating SF back into classical antiquity. The productive side to this archaeological line of enquiry is the recovery of lost works; I.F. Clarke's labors on future wars narratives are a shining example. The more essays and editions are produced on the science fiction of figures like Twain, Trollope, or Kipling, the more it is revealed that realism is not the uniform or "mainstream" some literary historians would have us