

GREAT SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 1

BY PATRICK SMITH

In our recent survey of *Bookmarks* readers, respondents rated their interest in the SF genre as remarkably low; only sports and poetry suffered worse ratings. SF has come to mean “speculative fiction”—a catchall category for science fiction, fantasy, horror, most alternative histories, superhero fiction, and even magical realism. So as we take a deeper look at one of SF’s primary subgenres, science fiction, we do so with some trepidation—and with the hope of changing a few minds.

It seems that science fiction has never really broken away from its clichéd reputation: only young men consigned to their parents’ basements read the stuff. That’s a shame, because the genre has unrivaled power. It’s not bound by the semirigid structures of good-guy-versus-bad-guy crime fiction. It’s not even curtailed by reality: science fiction novels are some of the most flexible and adroit in addressing ideas, philosophy, culture, emotions, and people. The best books are strong on plot and character development, as in the best literary fiction. They are strong on action and adventure, too—and packaged with pop-culture savvy and an ear for the good hook. If you don’t think science fiction has enough reality for you—if you don’t think it’s applicable to your life—try out a few books on this list.

Our Approach

First, we list only the best, period. There’s a lot of science fiction out there, but like any other genre, not all of it is worth your time. Some authors crank out series after series in a manner similar to the Harlequin Romance factory, and this formulaic refuse can overwhelm the quality work in the genre. Science fiction author Robert J. Sawyer described this phenomenon in his essay “The Death of Science Fiction”:

A person who has become interested in SF through the media, or because of vague childhood memories, will pick up a book from the vast SF rack and be turned off. You could read a good SF novel a week each week of the year, no doubt. But if you read an SF novel a week picked at random from the rack, you’d never come back for a second year of such torture.

We’ll help you do much better than picking up a random book from a random rack.

What counts as science fiction? As with any other hobby with obsessive fans, there are plenty of subgenres to discuss: Hard SF, Social SF, Cyberpunk, Space Opera ... the list goes on. That must say something about the richness of the genre. (Some deemed Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* a science fiction dystopian novel; others wouldn’t hear of it.) The boundaries of science fiction are murky at best. The three categories that we’ve chosen for our first installment of *Bookmarks*’s science fiction survey are just a start.

Cyberpunk

First coined by Bruce Bethke in the early 1980s and meant to convey the movement's cutting-edge science and its underground roots—from the hallucinogenic, grubby Beat prose of William S. Burroughs to the subversive lyrics of the Sex Pistols—"cyberpunk" now encompasses a broad range of settings, characters, and plots—and a handful of subgenre spinoffs, including "steampunk" and "biopunk." Cyberpunk's characters are alienated loners living on the fringes of chaotic societies. The settings are dark, the outcomes gloomy, and the boundaries between reality and illusion often indistinguishable.

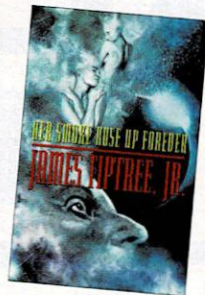
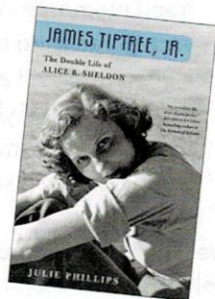
Cyberpunk translates well to the big screen—*Blade Runner* and the *Matrix* trilogy are two of the most prominent examples—though the literature stands on its own. William Gibson made the biggest splash with *Neuromancer* (1984); other prophets of speculative near-future offer work that similarly mirrors our realities.

Some Classics of Cyberpunk

James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Bradley Sheldon)

James Tiptree, Jr., the pseudonym of Alice Bradley Sheldon, was at the vanguard of writers who introduced strong characters, examined gender roles unblinkingly, and folded astute social commentary—particularly the power of technology to transform individuals and societies—into fiction that might otherwise be considered science-heavy "hard SF." (See Julie Phillips's biography of the author, *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice Sheldon*, ★★★★★ Nov/Dec 2006).

Sheldon's ruthless anonymity in the then male-dominated field endured until the mid-1970s, after which she wrote little. In a scene that seems almost fitting given her dark edge and a fascination with the biological basis for human action, Sheldon in 1987 as-



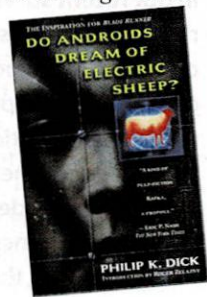
sisted in the suicide of her gravely ill husband before ending her own life.

Known primarily for her short fiction, Sheldon's best work remains in print in *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever* (1990), which contains 18 of her best-known stories, including the "The Screwfly Solution," with its upside-down sexuality and misogyny, and the novella "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?"—a story of three astronauts returning to Earth to find that they have arrived several hundred years in the future and that a plague has eradicated most of the planet's men. When the astronauts are rescued by the predominantly female crew of the *Gloria*, they discover just how much the world has changed. A second collection, *Meet Me At Infinity* (2000), gives insight into Sheldon's career and her unique life on the fringes of the male-dominated world of science fiction.

Philip K. Dick

A demigod in cyberpunk circles, the mercurial and troubled Dick lighted the way for a later generation of writers with novels that explored shifting identity and the darker implications of technology in corporate and political settings. Film adaptations of Dick's work include *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *The Minority Report*, and *Imposter*, among others.

The Hugo Award-winning *The Man in the High Castle* (1963), an alternate history that posits the assassination of FDR in 1933, the rise of the Axis in World War II, and Germany's unchecked imperialism, was a critical success. Dick nonetheless struggled to gain mainstream recognition during his lifetime, despite publishing several other novels closely associated with the later cyberpunk movement, including *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (first published in 1968, the book inspired *Blade Runner*), *Ubik* (1969), and *A Scanner Darkly* (1977). Dick's short stories, found in collections such as *Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick*, remain popular for their snapshot acuity and quirky permutations on dystopian



Cyberpunk for Beginners

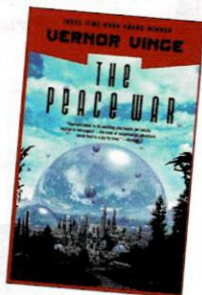
Although William Gibson set the gold standard for cyberpunk with *Neuromancer*, Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2003), the first in his well-received Takeshi Kovacs series, is a good place to start. Or, try Elizabeth Bear's (no relation to SF legend Greg Bear) *Hammered*, which introduces transplanted Canadian Special Forces casualty Jenny Casey as she negotiates gang warfare on the streets of Hartford, Connecticut, in a grimy near future.

societies. Check out "The Minority Report" and "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," both of which have been adapted to the big screen (the latter inspired *Total Recall*).

Vernor Vinge

Prolific and inventive, Vernor Vinge crafted the novella *True Names* (1981) (reprinted in *True Names and the Opening of the Cyberspace Frontier*, a collection of early essays that speculate on the future of cyberspace). *True Names* was an early exploration of sabotage on the “datanet” and one of the first stories to fuel interest in cyberspace and the cyberpunk movement.

Vinge has a reputation for his prescient speculations on the future of the Internet. His speculative work, though dated in some ways, still stands the test of time. Two follow-up novels, *The Peace War* (1984) and its sequel, *Marooned in Realtime* (1986), explore oppression and the political implications of technology’s rush toward perfection. In *The Peace War*, the Peace Authority has developed the ultimate technology, the Bobbler, an impenetrable force field, and has gained absolute control. The Authority comes under attack, however, when a rebel group that has co-opted the services of an Authority scientist discovers a flaw in the Bobbler. Bobbler technology is reprised in *Marooned in Realtime*, a murder mystery featuring the unredeemed cop Wil Brierson, for whom a single murder is the least of his worries.



Contemporary Cyberpunk

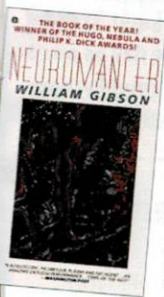
William Gibson

It is hard to overestimate the influence of cyberpunk on a generation of sci-fi writers, and it is even more difficult to discuss the genre without giving William Gibson top billing. To readers coming to the genre for the first time, he is the godfather of the movement.

Neuromancer (1984) features the damaged but talented hacker Henry Dorsett Case, driven to destitution and crime by his inability to access cyberspace. Desperate to reverse the neurological impairment that keeps him in

check, Case, with the help of “street samurai” Molly Millions, takes on a mysterious job from an ex-military agent called Armitage. The novel swept the major sci-fi awards. *Neuromancer*, along with *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), forms the *Sprawl* trilogy. The short story collection *Burning Chrome* (1986) contains some excellent examples of the genre, including “Johnny Mnemonic,” a story adapted to the big screen and starring Keanu Reeves.

Gibson’s latest novel, *Spook Country* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2007), draws on elements of cyberpunk as it follows a paranoid magazine writer through an assignment into the limits of virtual reality and art. Much of the grittiness and the

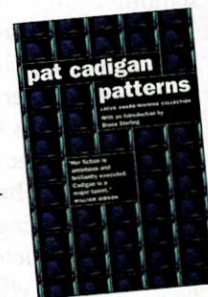


pervasive darkness of the early cyberpunk fiction have been replaced by a more sanitized—though no less engaging—sense of place and purpose.

Pat Cadigan

Pat Cadigan has written some of the most inventive cyberpunk fiction out there. Although she knows the science, Cadigan’s jumping-off point is the vastness of the human mind, and her fiction erases the boundaries between perception and reality. At the same time, she develops characters that are real, despite the dehumanizing effects of the technology that surrounds them. Think James Tiptree, Jr., version 2.0.

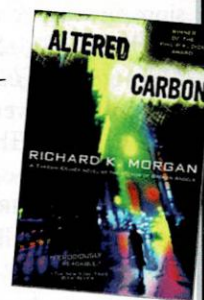
A must-read is the award-winning *Patterns* (1989), a collection of 14 stories that serve as cautionary tales on the fragility of identity and on people’s incessant search for fulfillment. In the title story, Cadigan explores the insidious effects of television on its watchers; the cyberpunk anthem “Pretty Boy Crossover” features rebellious teens expressing themselves by going digital. Other worthies: *Tea From an Empty Cup* (1998), a virtual-reality detective novel; and *Synners* (1991), a novel expanded from her short story “Rock On” (in *Patterns*). *Fools* (1992) and *Dervish Is Digital* (2001) round out the work of the one of the finest—and outside the fairly insular world of sci-fi, relatively unknown—writers today.



Richard K. Morgan

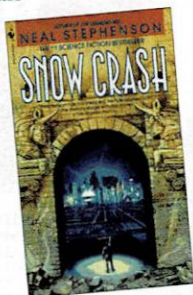
Richard K. Morgan is one of a host of Scottish writers (Ken McLeod, Charles Stross, and Iain Banks, among others) who have taken the genre by storm in the last decade. Morgan’s series, featuring the volatile, highly trained Takeshi Kovacs, is a fun combination of noir detective fiction, psychologically exhaustive plots reminiscent of those of Philip K. Dick, and a study of identity on the cusp of a postcyberpunk revolution.

In *Altered Carbon* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2003), Kovacs is hired by the “Methuselah” Laurens Bancroft, a man wealthy enough to ensure his virtual immortality through the use of regular computer backups of his memories, to investigate a recent attempt on Bancroft’s life. The opening installment is followed by *Broken Angels* (★★★★ July/Aug 2004) and *Woken Furies* (2005). *Market Forces* (★★★★ May/June 2005) and *Thirteen* (★★★★ July/Aug 2007) are worthy stand-alone novels portraying Morgan’s violent, dystopian worlds.



Neal Stephenson

After *The Big U*, a satirical look at the American university system, and *Zodiac*, an eco-thriller, Neal Stephenson made his mark as a cyberpunk writer. *Snow Crash* (1992) is a complex, shifting novel of a virtual reality, and *The Diamond Age or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (1995) is an intricate, highly stylized novel set in various locations in the South China Sea and featuring Nell, an outcast who uses the Primer to rise above her station.



Never one to think small, Stephenson embarked several years ago on his largest project to date, the Baroque Cycle. This ambitious series—*Quicksilver* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2003), *The Confusion* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2004), *The System of the World* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2004)—runs to more than 2,500 pages total and covers half a century, beginning in 1660 with the Restoration in England. The trilogy follows Stephenson's popular *Cryptonomicon* (1999), which fleshes out two parallel projects: the efforts of Bletchley Park cryptographers to crack Axis codes during World War II and the contemporary development of a government-proof "data haven" in Kinaktua, a fictional island off the coast of Malaysia. The novels of the Baroque cycle are all intricately connected and replete with both historical characters and fictional figures whose ancestors later appear in subsequent volumes.

Also consider ...

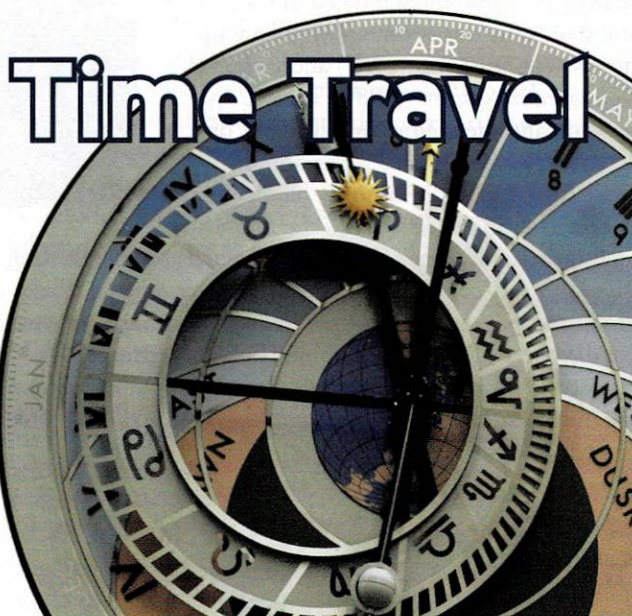
J. G. BALLARD: The Brit Ballard's apocalyptic, outré fiction plumbs the depths of human depravity in novels and stories that resemble the early Gibson—without the neat toys. Check out *Crash* (1973), which transforms the violence and suddenness of automobile accidents into a sexual compulsion, *Concrete Island* (1974), *High Rise* (1975), and *Hello America* (1981). Start with the short fiction in *The Best Short Stories of J. G. Ballard* (2001), which includes the technology-driven pieces "The Concentration City," "Chronopolis," and "The Voices of Time."

ALFRED BESTER: A comic book writer before he became a sci-fi novelist, Bester is known for the cult classics *The Demolished Man*, which won the first Hugo ever given in 1953. In this future world, ESP is commonplace and crime unknown—until the desperate Ben Reich plots to murder his business rival. In *The Stars My Destination* (1956), an improbable hero, the feckless Gully Foyle, transforms himself in the name of revenge.

BRUCE BETHKE: His short story "Cyberpunk" is more famous for its title than its content, but still worth reading.

RUDY RUCKER: Rucker, a computer scientist, was present at the birth of the movement. The prolific and eclectic author's most recognizable work comes in *The Wetware*

Tetralogy, including *Software* (1982), in which computer scientist Cobb Anderson develops a series of robots called "boppers"—advanced machines that operate with free will—and must hide for his crime. Given the opportunity to join the boppers' colony on the Moon, Anderson discovers that immortality has its drawbacks. The book influenced later work that explored the boundary between the biological and the digital. *Wetware* (1988; Philip K. Dick Award winner), *Freeware* (1997), and *Realware* (2000) followed.



Although a little-known writer named Samuel Madden envisioned a trip to the late 20th century in his *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1733), H. G. Wells put time travel on the map with *The Time Machine* (1895). Generations of writers have followed his lead ever since.

Stephen Hawking surmised that one day we will be able to travel time through wormholes. In *Time: A Traveler's Guide* (1998), a collection of essays that walks the boundary between science fact and science fiction, Clifford Pickover writes: "Our heirs, whatever or whoever they may be, will explore space and time to degrees we cannot currently fathom. They will create new melodies in the music of time. There are infinite harmonies to be explored." Of course, one is left wondering: if time travel will one day be possible, why has no one appeared from the future in our time? Perhaps the only way we will ever explore time travel is through fiction.

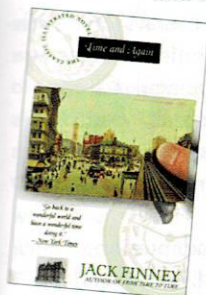
Some Classics of Time Travel

Jack Finney

Jack Finney sets many of his stories in the Galesburg, Illinois, of his alma mater, Knox College. Although Finney tried his hand at thrillers and penned *The Body Snatchers*

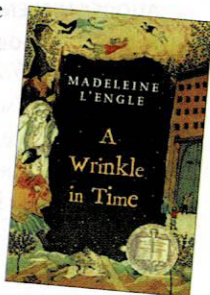
(1955), which has seen several incarnations on the big screen, Finney's time-travel stories are his legacy.

Check out *The Third Level* (1950) and *I Love Galesburg in the Springtime* (1963), both short story collections. *Time and Again* (1970) and its sequel, *From Time to Time* (1995), feature Simon Morley, an ad illustrator chosen to join a government plan to travel into the past through the use of elaborately drawn sets and self-hypnosis. In *Time and Again*, that past world is 1880s New York City; the sequel finds Morley in the city in the years before World War I, and his adventures aboard the *Titanic* figure prominently in the novel's outcome.



Madeline L'Engle

Thanks to L'Engle, a generation of readers can use the term *tesseract* (a means of moving freely in space and time) in polite conversation. With *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), the recently deceased L'Engle wrote one of the most beloved time-travel novels of the last half century. The young-adult classic and Newbery Award winner remains as relevant for adults as ever, with its delightful combination of science and engaging characters, including the Murry clan and, of course, Mrs. Whatsit. When their physicist father disappears, Meg Murry and her brother Charles Wallace, along with their friend Calvin O'Keefe, track him across space and time to the planet Camazotz. In the process, they run afoul of IT, a malevolent force set on taking over the universe.

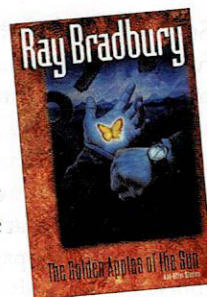


L'Engle published three sequels to her most famous work, *A Wind in the Door* (1973), *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1978), and *Many Waters* (1986), as well as more than three dozen other novels and collections. See our profile of L'Engle in Issue No. 17, July/Aug 2005.

Ray Bradbury

Although Ray Bradbury has been one of the most beloved science fiction writers over a career spanning more than half a century, perhaps his greatest gift to the genre was a short

story titled "A Sound of Thunder," first published in *Collier's* in 1952. The plot is familiar because it comes down to generations of readers as the archetype of the "Butterfly Effect": When hunters return to the past to hunt *Tyrannosaurus rex*, one of the hunters deviates from the designated path, crushing a butterfly—and changing the world forever. The story can be found in the collection *The Golden Apples of the Sun* (1953).



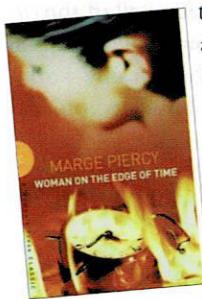
Also check out *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), a near-future tale of first efforts to colonize Mars during chaotic times on Earth and of the consequences of profound culture clash. *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), though not a time-travel classic, is a dystopian "soft science fiction" classic.

Contemporary Time Travel

Marge Piercy

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is an important novel even without the element of time travel. Her handling of Connie Ramos's two distinct worlds and her blunt examination of mental illness, however, make this a classic in the genre. Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, Connie enters Bellevue Hospital in 1970s New York City. Almost immediately, she starts communicating with Luciente, a woman from a small village in the 22nd century. The utopian vision that greets Connie—most of society's ills have long since been remedied—compels her to address her own shabby reality.

Piercy, who has published nearly 20 novels and collections of poetry and essays, often writes across genres. For instance, the World War II epic *Gone to Soldiers* (1987); *City of Darkness, City of Light* (1996), the author's take on the French Revolution; and the dystopian *He, She, and It* (1991; winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award) stand with *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a testament to Piercy's fertile imagination.

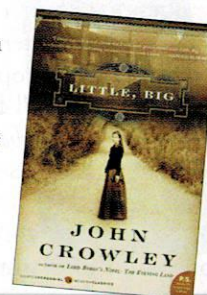


Time Travel for Beginners

Jasper Fforde's novels are wildly popular and, as with the work of Terry Pratchett (see below), compulsively readable. John Crowley's novella *Great Work of Time* (first collected in *Novelties* in 1989) and Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* (1992) are both smart, engaging books that handle the time-travel element in very different ways.

John Crowley

The lyrical John Crowley has always been a bit of a literary chameleon. He inspires reader loyalty with the captivating *Great Work of Time* (1989; also packaged as the 2004 volume *Novelties and Souvenirs: Collected Short Fiction*). His crowning achievement, *Little, Big* (winner of the 1982 World Fantasy Award), features



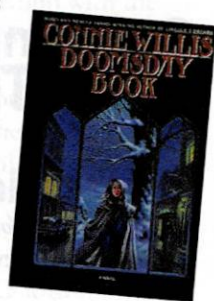
Smoky Barnable, who travels from the City to Edgewood to fulfill a prophecy and marry Daily Alice Drinkwater. Crowley tells this story over four generations of the extraordinary, fairy tale-ridden Drinkwater family, and it is truly a beautifully crafted novel.

Check out the author's other novels and short stories, all of which similarly defy classification—including the ambitious and expansive tetralogy *The Aegypt Cycle*, which follows historian Pierce Moffett, who studies an imaginary country, and which was named by Harold Bloom as part of his 1993 Western canon, or *Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land* (2005), a literary mystery.

Connie Willis

Connie Willis has become the de facto dean of the contemporary time-travel story. The much-decorated Willis (nine Hugos and six Nebulas to date) combines solid stories with engaging characters, particularly in her witty and sometimes scathing portrayals of academics, as in *Doomsday Book* (1992). In this tour de force, Kivrin Engle, a history student in 2048, travels back in time to an English village in the 14th century, at the onset of the Black Death. Willis masterfully juxtaposes a 21st-century epidemic with Kivrin's realization that her small English village will soon be wiped out. Willis's talent also shines in *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (1997), a comedy of manners that takes place in 2057 but whisks its characters back to the 1940s and to Queen Victoria's England to reconstruct a cathedral—and save the universe.

Willis's humor is never too far from her fiction, and Willis, who shows a great deal of invention within a standard time-travel scenario, always seems to be having as much fun writing as we do reading. "I'm not interested at all in the mechanics of time travel," Willis says. "How would you put together this time machine? How would it physically work? I'm interested in the theory of time travel. How do you deal with the paradoxes?" (www.scifi.com).



Also consider ...

ARTHUR C. CLARKE: His short story "Time's Arrow" (1952) explores the unintended consequences of time travel.

KAGE BAKER: Her *Company* novels, set in the 24th century, send characters from the destruction of Carthage to 16th-century Europe to the San Francisco earthquake. It's a neat premise full of action and clever plotting over eight books—from *In the Garden of Eden* (1997) to *The Sons of Heaven* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007).

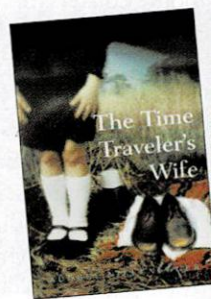
OCTAVIA BUTLER: Butler's untimely death in 2006 silenced one of the most distinctive voices in science fiction (she

was the only SF writer to receive the MacArthur "Genius Grant"). Her *Kindred* (1976) powerfully examines slavery and race relations in early 19th-century America.

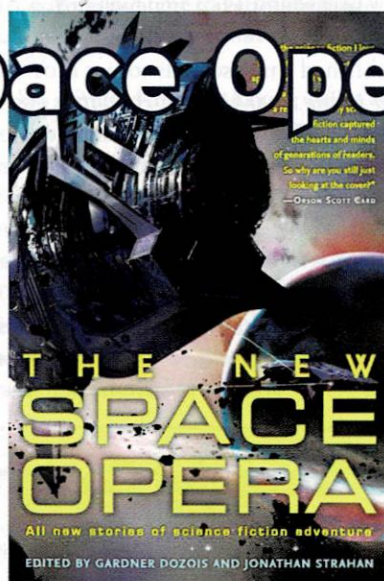
TIM POWERS: Tim Powers's *The Anubis Gates* (1983) is a cult classic, a surrealistic riff on time travel set in early 19th-century London. Any book whose protagonist matches wits with an insane clown on stilts must be read. Check out Powers's other novels, including the recent *Three Days to Never* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2006), which invokes a magical family related to Albert Einstein.

JOHN VARLEY: Best known for the film adaptation of the short story "Air Raid" (1977), which was later expanded into the novel *Millennium* (1983), the award-winning John Varley has written at a high level for more than three decades. *Mammoth* (★★★★ **SELECTION** Nov/Dec 2005) is a weird, little gem of a book that features a cloned, frozen woolly mammoth and uses time travel in the way Michael Crichton used recombinant DNA.

AUDREY NIFFENEGER: We can't discuss time travel without including a book group favorite, *The Time Traveler's Wife*. In this work of "soft science fiction," Henry DeTamble suffers from a time-travel disease: when he is under stress, he is unavoidably snatched back and forth in time. This makes for a highly unusual romance between Henry and his wife Claire: while Henry's age is in constant flux, Claire ages on a steady course. They have to make the most of their awkward snatches of time together.



Space Opera



Big ideas, big egos, big ships, big problems. Space opera means interplanetary travel and sexy technology, unsolvable philosophical conundrums, war on a galactic scale. Its characters are larger-than-

life figures carried through from book to book in doorstep tomes whose worlds are as intricate and real as any we inhabit.

Things haven't always been so rosy. E. E. Smith, one of the avant-garde of the space opera, penned *The Skylark of Space* (1928), *Galactic Patrol* (1937), and a number of other volumes in the *Lensman* series before falling into relative obscurity. Although "space opera" was originally a derogatory term meant to evoke the melodrama of radio soap operas in the 1930s and 1940s, space opera's rise paralleled that of the golden age of science fiction, when legends such as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, L. Sprague de Camp, and Arthur C. Clarke brought their groundbreaking work to the page. Smith's work, even if it hasn't worn well over more than 80 years, was the jumping-off point for film characters as popular as Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, and Barbarella—and for a generation of writers who would shape the future of science fiction.

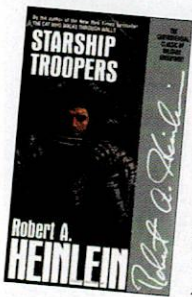
Asimov's *Foundation* series, which featured people living throughout the galaxy in a far distant future, upped the ante in the middle of 20th century, and Gene Roddenberry took the reins with the *Star Trek* franchise. The space opera now offers aficionados and neophytes alike the chance to experience new worlds writ large on the night sky.

Some Classics of Space Opera

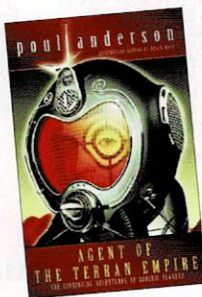
Robert A. Heinlein

Film director Paul Verhoeven popularized Heinlein's work in 1997 when he refashioned the author's cult classic *Starship Troopers* (Hugo Award winner, 1960) into a movie. Heinlein, with this not-so-subtle commentary on patriotism and civic duty taken to the extreme, was accused of promoting militarism and even fascism. (Verhoeven's film version furthered this sentiment.) *Starship Troopers* features Juan "Johnny" Rico, a recruit from the future who volunteers for military service in order to win citizenship. Johnny learns why he is a soldier when he enters the Terran Mobile Infantry and finds an interstellar battle being waged between humankind and "the Bugs," an arachnoid species. The book is so different philosophically from Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, a challenge to social mores such as monogamy and religion and forerunner to the countercultural revolution, that it is remarkable. Both books reveal the author's oscillating worldview over a long, varied, and sometimes controversial career.

Many of Heinlein's novels ride the edge of military science fiction (the author graduated from the Naval Academy in 1928). Along with Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Ray Bradbury, Heinlein is the writer most recognized by non-science fiction readers, having broken through in the 1940s with stories in mainstream magazines.



Poul Anderson

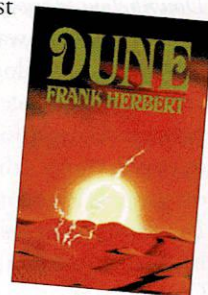


Poul Anderson's *Ensign Flandry* series was a legitimate and welcome response to the stunning popularity of Asimov's *Foundation* books, which rocked the science-fiction world in the decade after World War II. The title novel, published in 1966, features the young Dominic Flandry, an ensign in the Imperial Naval Flight Corps, as the Earth and the Merseians, two galactic powers with the wherewithal for interstellar expansion, test each other. The series mirrors America's distrust of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Anderson's sense of the grandeur of space opera shines in every book, including *The Rebel Worlds* (1969), *A Circus of Hells* (1970), *A Knight of Ghost and Shadows* (1974), and several other novels and short story collections centering on Flandry and the Terran Empire.

Frank Herbert

The lord of *Dune* remains one of the most beloved writers in the genre. The *Dune* series is also a continuous best seller, despite having been rejected by more than 20 publishers when Herbert first shopped the book in the mid-1960s. The story of Paul Atreides and his quest to Arrakis (Dune)—the sole source of melange, the most valuable substance known and a powerful and versatile drug—examines environmental concerns, politics, and mysticism and religion. It also explores the complex interpersonal relationships that keep the five sequels intact.

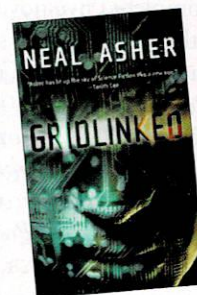


When Herbert died in 1986, the author's son Brian and writer Kevin J. Anderson picked up the franchise. Since then, they have collaborated on at least eight *Dune*-related novels; however, fans disagree as to whether these novels should be included in Herbert's original *Dune* world.

Contemporary Space Opera

Neal Asher

Neal Asher's *Polity* series borders on cyberpunk. It mixes intelligent, dystopian settings with far-flung excursions involving Ian Cormac, an Earth Central Security agent, who in *Gridlinked* (2001) uncovers a plot to destroy a Runcible on the uninhabitable planet Samarkand. Cormac hasn't endeared himself to the book's archvillain, Arian



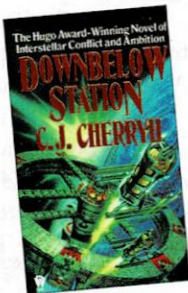
Pelter, and his humanity has been stripped by a too-long exposure to the grid—hence the book's title.

Asher followed the first novel with *The Line of Polity* (2003), *Brass Man* (2005), *Polity Agent* (2006), and *Line War* (2008). The series is a smart blend of genres that gives a hip, sharp edge to space opera. In the opening salvo, check out Arian Pelter and Mr. Crane, two truly psychotic characters with work to do.

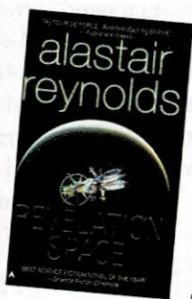
C. J. Cherryh

The grand dame of contemporary space opera, C. J. Cherryh has written more than 60 books in the last three decades. Although an eclectic voice across the SF spectrum, Cherryh's best-known work comes in the *Alliance-Union* novels. Vast in space and time, they comprise 24 volumes in half a dozen threads. The epic Alliance-Union universe extends far past the 21st century

Among the most popular in the *Alliance-Union* series are *Downbelow Station* (1981), *Cyteen* (1988) (both of which won the Hugo Award for Best Novel), *Tripoint* (1994), and the *Faded Sun* trilogy. A good novel to start with is *Downbelow Station*, a space opera that describes the ongoing battle between an isolationist Earth (ruled by The Company, but in conflict with others) and its distant colonies; it touches on geopolitics, economics, ethics, and love. Starting with *Downbelow Station* is also a good direction for readers interested in a military bent to their science fiction, though Cherryh is nearly as prolific in fantasy as in science fiction.



Alastair Reynolds



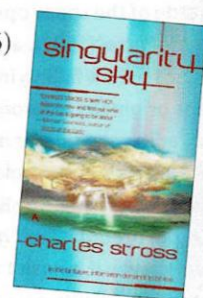
Alastair Reynolds exploded onto the scene in 2000 with *Revelation Space*, the first volume in the eponymous series. Dan Sylveste is an archaeologist whose study of the appearance and mysterious disappearance of alien life forms might ultimately answer some age-old questions—and eventually get him killed. The series is incredibly detailed—and hard

science fiction at its best.

To date, Reynolds has completed five novels and other related short stories, including *Chasm City* (2001), *Redemption Ark* (2002), *Diamond Dogs*, *Turquoise Days* (2003), *Absolution Gap* (2003), *Galactic North* (2006), and *The Prefect* (2007).

Charles Stross

Charles Stross's latest novel, *Halting State* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2008), is a change of pace for one of the groundbreaking writers of the last decade, though much of his work, including *Accelerando* (2005) and *Glasshouse* (2006), is a bridge between hard science fiction and elements of the space opera.

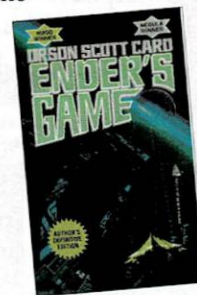


As another new space opera writer, Stross combines hard science fiction, including some deft work on nanotechnology, with his exploration of far-flung worlds. Technology stands front and center with a certain inevitability, though the author tempers his passion for the new by questioning the direction that our fascination with bigger, better, and more will take us. Check out *Singularity Sky* (★★★ Jan/Feb 2004) and *Iron Sunrise* (2004), the sequel. Here, set in the 24th century, an interstellar colony called Moscow launches a Slower-Than-Light strike (a ship that travels 80 percent of the speed of light) after being supposedly attacked by rival New Dresden. But if this rival wasn't responsible for Moscow's annihilation, who was?

Also consider ...

IAIN BANKS: One of the talented Scots, Iain Banks has written nearly two dozen novels and collections in various genres. His six-book *Culture* series, written over 20 years, features a Utopian society built in a world where few problems exist—except those brought on by the inhabitants themselves.

ORSON SCOTT CARD: The much-feted and occasionally controversial Card needs little introduction, having won both the Hugo and the Nebula for successive novels in his popular *Ender* series—*Ender's Game* (1985), *Speaker for the Dead* (1987), and *Xenocide* (1992).



Space Opera for Beginners

Because of the scope and heft that characterize space opera—these are series that routinely span galaxies and millennia—*The New Space Opera* (2007), a collection edited by SF stalwarts Gardner Dozois (*The Year's Best Science Fiction* and *Asimov's*, among many others) and Jonathan Strahan (Dozois's Australian counterpart) is a relatively concise introduction to some of the best talent working in the long form today. The collection includes pieces by Ian McDonald, Peter F. Hamilton, Nancy Kress, Paul J. McAuley, Mary Rosenblum, Stephen Baxter, and others.

THE NEW SPACE OPERA (2007): Edited by sci-fi stalwarts Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan, the collection contains 18 stories from established writers—Dan Simmons, Nancy Kress, Gregory Benford, Ken McLeod, Kage Baker, and others—and relative newcomers. It's worth a look for readers short on time or for those considering a new direction. ■