

# Introduction to Science Fiction

Prof. Andrew Goldstone

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Office hours: Wednesdays, 12–1 p.m. or by appointment

December 11, 2023. Course conclusion.

- 1967 Ted Chiang b. NY
- 1968 Jeff VanderMeer b. PA, raised Fiji
- 1988? VanderMeer attends U of FL (no degree?)
- 1989 Chiang receives BS in CS, Brown  
Chiang attends Clarion Workshop  
VanderMeer, *The Book of Frog* (self-pub)
- 1990 Chiang, "Tower of Babylon," *Omni*, November (Nebula)
- 1992 VanderMeer attends Clarion Workshop
- 2002 Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others* (New York: Tor)
- 2007 J. and Ann VanderMeer, *Best American Fantasy* (Canton, OH: Prime)
- 2008 J. and A. VanderMeer, *The New Weird* (San Francisco: Tachyon)  
Chiang, "Exhalation," in *Eclipse Two*, ed. Jonathan Strahan (Hoboken: Night Shade)
- 2014 VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (New York: FSG)  
*Authority* (New York: FSG)  
*Acceptance* (New York: FSG)
- 2016 J. and A. VanderMeer, *The Big Book of SF* (New York: Vintage)  
*Arrival*, dir. Denis Villeneuve (Chiang, "The Story of Your Life")
- 2018 *Annihilation*, dir. Alex Garland
- 2019 Chiang, *Exhalation: Stories* (New York: Knopf)
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## exam deets

- ▶ Thursday, December 21, 8:00–11:00, FH-A1
- ▶ closed book; bring writing utensils
- ▶ no make-ups except for documented medical emergency
- ▶ short answer (some choice), one essay (some choice)

## exam practice

The king was pregnant.

- ▶ Identify the author, source text, and approximate date. Discuss the significance of the passage in relation to the text.

## SF syntheses: periodization

1. Arrange the texts chronologically. Try to do it without looking at the dates.
2. Discuss dividing lines, and try to justify them based on features of the writers.
3. Periods are never perfectly clear: identify a few problem cases, and say what about them is problematic.

## same diff

SF has no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin.... SF is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them.

Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass-Cultural Genre System*, 16.

Detective fiction and science fiction display a textual coherence...and they sustain it over very long periods (160 or perhaps 200 years).... A lexical model [i.e., a logistic regression model trained on word frequencies to distinguish science fiction and “random” fiction] is able to recognize science fiction across a long timeline with an accuracy of 90% of greater.

Ted Underwood, *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 40, 44.

## SF syntheses: problems

1. Brainstorm shared *problems* (social, cultural, philosophical) we've encountered in multiple texts.
2. Group the texts. Notice boundary cases.
3. Who's left out, and why? Try another grouping.

easy-peasy

- ▶ TRUE or FALSE? Science fiction is a boy genre. Discuss with examples.



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- ▶ TRUE or FALSE? “Extravagant Fiction Today—Cold Fact Tomorrow.” Discuss with examples.

## for SCIENCE

Such typical [“cognitive”] methodology of SF...is a critical one, often satirical, combining a belief in the potentialities of reason with methodical doubt in the most significant cases. The kinship of this cognitive critique with the philosophical basis of modern science is evident.

- ▶ TRUE or FALSE? Discuss with examples.
- ▶ BONUS: who wrote it?

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- ▶ TRUE or FALSE? Discuss with examples.
- ▶ BONUS: who wrote it?

Suvin, 377.

There's simultaneously something rigorous and something playful in genre ["sf and fantasy and horror"]. It's about the positing of something impossible—whether not-yet-possible or never-possible—and then taking that impossibility and granting it its own terms and systematicity. It's carnivalesque in its impossibility and overturning of reality, but it's rationalist in that it pretends it is real. And it's that second element which I think those who dip their toes in the sf pond so often forget. They think sf is “about” analogies, and metaphors, and so on. I refute that—I think that those are inevitable components, but it's the surrendering to the impossible, the weird, that characterizes genre.

China Miéville interviewed by Joan Gordon, *Science Fiction Studies* 30, no. 3 (November 2003): 366, [JSTOR](#).

## what good?

What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction?

Butler, "Positive Obsession," 134–35.

next

- ▶ exam
- ▶ keep in touch
- ▶ read on