

Science Fiction

Extremely prevalent in film and literature today, science fiction has only established itself as a genre in the last 150 years. Despite its recent rise to fame, it has very old roots in mythical and philosophical literature. Epic poems like *The Odyssey* (Homer), or books like *The Republic* (Plato) and *Utopia* (Thomas More) have elements of the fantastic anticipating the popularity of science fiction writing in the 20th century.

Nineteenth-century writers such as Edgar Allan Poe (*The Raven*) and Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*) pioneered the genre of fantasy literature in the emerging industrial world. But it was not until late in the 19th century that H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Rice Burroughs began penning scientific romances that envisioned interplanetary travel and alien invasions. These writers had an extraordinary influence on the coming golden age of science fiction.

Inspired by Hugo Gernsback's pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*, founded in 1926, science fiction spread throughout the United States and England. It moved from cheap magazines devoted to futuristic stories to a legitimate branch of literature with the plot, characters, and themes of major novels. In so doing, a whole generation of visionaries—among them Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury—were introduced to a world increasingly fascinated by the technology of the new atomic age.

Future visions of technology and science are essential to these stories. Common subjects have come to include robotics, aliens, time travel, biological experiments, and apocalyptic disaster. Although a branch of fantasy, science fiction often makes philosophical statements about our current existence.

Over time, science fiction has presented not only some of the greatest stories in modern literature, but has foreseen many developments that define the contemporary world. Writers such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Michael Crichton have, like Bradbury, practiced social criticism and sometimes prophecy that has made them favorites around the world.

Science fiction has come to embrace a wide diversity of writers and approaches. C.S. Lewis has used the genre as a medium for religious allegory. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood imagines a dangerous future world from a feminist point of view. And writers like Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler have created African American characters within a genre that has come a long way since *Frankenstein*.