

Science and Fiction

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Russell Blackford

Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination

Visions, Minds, Ethics

 Springer

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For Peter Nicholls

A Note to Readers

In what follows I sometimes use the letters “SF” for “science fiction” or “science fictional.” This is mainly based on considerations of flow or euphony: on occasion, writing “SF” sounds less repetitive or awkward. If inconsistency about something like this bothers you, you have been warned.

I have avoided the abbreviation “sci-fi” even though this increasingly predominates, especially in mass media discourse. Many older aficionados of the science fiction genre still find something offensive about it. More important, perhaps, is my residual sense that “sci-fi” refers mainly to space opera, or at least to action-adventure stories with a science fictional twist of some kind. Thus, it works to refer to a movie like *Rogue One: A Stars Wars Story* as an example of sci-fi. The same might even apply to Ann Leckie’s ambitious Imperial Radch series. But consider Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. These all possess the formal characteristics that define the mode or genre of science fiction. I have no compunction, therefore, about calling them SF novels, but to my ear there would be something very strange in referring to any of them as “sci-fi.”

In the past, Atwood has been resistant to being considered a science fiction writer. The problem is that her work often does take the form of science fiction, even though it is not the sort of thing typically evoked when people talk about or use the expression “sci-fi.” It has no extraterrestrial aliens or battles in outer space. But science fiction is a far broader phenomenon than space opera.

Each chapter of what follows provides a reference list of literary critical works (and similar) that I have cited. However, most of the creative works that I discuss are novels and movies, so I have not usually provided citation details beyond the name of the author, or director, and the date of first publication or cinematic release. This is usually sufficient for the reader to locate a copy. In some cases, I've thought it helpful to provide a bit more information in the text.

In most cases, I provide citation information, such as date of publication, only the first time a work is mentioned. As an appendix, however, I have included a list of works referred to more than in passing. This could also serve as a recommended reading/viewing list for somebody looking to develop an overall perspective on the science fiction genre. It is a slightly idiosyncratic list, not so much because I have odd personal tastes (as these things go) as because I'm approaching science fiction from a particular perspective. Still, it's no more idiosyncratic than other such lists.

Another warning—this book contains spoilers, lots of them. On one hand, I have not gone out of my way to reveal endings pointlessly. On the other hand, the interpretation of a novel, movie, or other work often depends on what happens at the end. In many cases, there was nothing for it but to describe endings and comment on what they imply.

Finally, *Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination* is intended to be accessible to almost anyone who is likely to pick it up (or to find it while browsing online). I assume some prior interest in the science fiction genre and some general interest in literature, but I don't assume deep knowledge of either. Nor do I use a lot of critical, philosophical, or scientific jargon. Despite its particular concern—the intersection of science fiction and moral philosophy—*Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination* could function reasonably as an introduction to SF for someone with only limited knowledge.

But if all has gone well, it also offers enough depth to enrich the understanding even of deeply read students of the genre. That, dear readers, is for you to judge.

Acknowledgments

I have dedicated this book to Peter Nicholls, the great encyclopedist of science fiction. For four decades, no one has engaged meaningfully with the genre without benefiting from his scholarly work.

Damien Broderick has been a mentor, colleague, and friend for over thirty years now. During that time, I've learned an enormous amount from him—about science fiction and about the difficult crafts of creative writing and literary criticism. I hope he will find some merit in this modest volume.

Another mentor was the late Norman Talbot, the supervisor of my first doctoral dissertation (the one in English literature), which I completed in the early 1980s. Justin Oakley supervised my second doctoral dissertation (this time in philosophy) more than two decades later. I learned much from both of them, and I've kept in mind their high scholarly standards.

Van Ikin and Sean McMullen were my coauthors of a previous book, *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction* (Greenwood Press, 1999). Both are fine scholars, and I benefited from working with them. The experience of researching and writing *Strange Constellations* hardened me for the rigors of another scholarly monograph relating to the SF genre. In addition, Van Ikin published much of my early criticism and scholarship—back in the 1980s and 1990s. He gave me the confidence that I can do this job. As editor of the journal *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*, and in many other ways, he has made a crucial contribution to historical and critical understanding of the genre.

Thanks, too, to Gregory Benford, who has been kind to me in many ways and was instrumental in the publication of this book. And thanks to Angela Lahee, my supportive and patient commissioning editor at Springer.

My wife, Jenny Blackford, is a poet, author, scholar, IT expert, and extraordinarily sharp-eyed reader. She has added value to this project at many stages and in countless ways (the same applies to all my books). My heartfelt thanks to her, as ever.

Thanks to many other friends with whom I've discussed and debated science fiction and/or moral philosophy over very many years. I'll forget someone important if I try to name you all individually.

Finally, the title of this book is partly inspired by that of *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* by Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin (Oxford University Press, 1977), a work that has influenced my general thinking about the SF genre since I first read it many years ago.

A book such as this discusses a large number of novels, short stories, plays, movies, and other cultural products. I've taken all possible care, including rereading many novels and stories that I'd last broached years, or even decades, ago. Still, there are bound to be some errors and misunderstandings. I'm entirely to blame for those—I hereby absolve everybody else mentioned in the paragraphs above.

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