



How Great Science Fiction Works

Gary K. Wolfe

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Robots, spaceships, futuristic megacities, planets orbiting distant stars. These icons of science fiction are now in our daily news. Science fiction, once maligned as mere pulp, has motivated cutting-edge scientific research, inspired new technologies, and changed how we view everyday life - and its themes and questions permeate popular culture. Take an unparalleled look at the influence, history, and greatest works of science fiction with illuminating insights and fascinating facts about this wide-ranging genre. If you think science fiction doesn't have anything to do with you, this course deserves your attention. And if you love science fiction, you can't miss this opportunity to trace the arc of science fiction's evolution, understand the hallmarks of great science fiction, and delve deeply into classics while finding some new favorites.

These 24 captivating lectures reveal the qualities that make science fiction an enduring phenomenon that has been steadily gaining popularity. You'll grasp the context and achievements of authors like Arthur C. Clarke, H.G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, Ursula K. LeGuin, and many more. You'll experience the wonder, horror, and incredible imagination of works like Frankenstein, the Foundation series, Stranger in a Strange Land, and dozens of more recent stories as well. You'll also see this genre's influence in movies like Star Wars and TV shows like The Twilight Zone.

Science fiction can take us places in time and space where no other form of fiction can - outer space, the far future, alternate universes, unfathomable civilizations. The best science fiction expands our imaginations and makes its mark on our reality. And while few writers would ever claim to predict the future, sometimes authors get it almost eerily right: Gernsback describing radar in 1911, Bradbury describing giant flatscreen TVs in 1951, Gibson inventing "cyberspace" in 1984, and so on.

How Great Science Fiction Works Details

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From Reader Review How Great Science Fiction Works for online ebook

Miquel Codony says

Es excelente. Como repaso a los recursos, la historia y los temas de la ciencia ficción, difícilmente se puede hacer mejor.

Si alguien duda, en alguna ocasión, por qué la ciencia ficción es importante y qué aporta a la literatura, este es el curso al que hay que recurrir.

Angie Boyter says

Rather disappointing---not as advertised. This is a Great Courses COURSE, and from the title I was expecting something more analytical, giving more insights into what makes a good work of science fiction and perhaps why the genre is popular. This is more of a straightforward history of science fiction, with lectures on the various topics like war in SF, robots, space opera (which he never really defines), etc. Many of the lectures become simply a litany of works or authors under that topic. Some are simply named, which is not very helpful, or the instructor gives a summary of the plot, which usually spoils the story for someone who has not read it but does not analyze why this is a good example. There is also more emphasis than I would prefer on very early SF or precursors of SF from centuries past. In addition, the author says SF is not fantasy but then proceeds to include some works that are clearly fantasy, especially in the last lecture.

????? ?????????? says

I had a dream a few months ago, the kind of dream you replay again and again after you wake up... the kind that sticks. Although it was only one scene, whenever I replay it, I can feel my heart-pounding and find myself reliving the sense of awe that overcame me during the dream.

So, naturally, I went and wrote it down. After 20 pages, I realized that I was writing the opening chapter of my new novel...my third novel to be exact. I also realized that I'm writing science fiction, which I've never done before. Does watching Star wars and the Hunger Games count? After a very short consideration the answer was a clear "no".

That's how I ended up listening to this Audible course.

After the first three or four lectures, I couldn't make up my mind whether I liked it or hated it. I expected to get structured tips, tricks and -dare I say - "*Strategies*" on how to write science fiction. **I did not. That was very disappointing.** However, now that I "wasted" my 15 dollars Audible credit (and as the stingy person I am), I decided to see this through and milk whatever I can get in return for the money spent.

The course took main themes and components of science fiction novels (e.g. spaceships, planets, time travel, utopias, distopias) then provide a detailed commentary them. Then he uses plot summaries of best selling novels to describe how they are differently used in the genre.

As the course progressed, I started researching these books he discusses and ultimately ended up adding them to my "want-to-read" shelf on Goodreads. By the end of the course I stacked up 10-15 science fiction novels out of almost a 100 mentioned in the lectures. These 10-15 books were very, **very**, relevant to what I want to write. Not only did I have this list, I also had a pretty good understanding of plots of 10s of best selling novels.

My list included:

- The Time Machine
- Neuromancer
- We
- Uglies
- Stranger in a Strange Land
- Childhood's End
- Orphans of the Sky
- Parable of the Sower
- Gun, With Occasional Music
- The World Inside
- Brave New World
- The Space Merchants

The upside:

(+) Having this "menu" of plots summarized and thematically categorized was useful. It will help me brainstorm about my novel as I progress.

(+) As a novice to the genre, I don't think I would've ever been able to get to this level of understanding if it weren't for this course.

The downside

(-) as I said earlier in the review, there is no guidance on what a good science fiction novel is , but more of a discussion of themes

(-) I felt that Gary K Wolfe (The lecturer) had a political message that he constantly tried to weave into the course (with or without context). He frequently (and) 'conveniently' found a way to state his support of feminism or denounce traditional gender roles. I completely understand if it were mentioned a couple of times. But after the 20th time, it was a bit too much. The course is about science fiction not about gender roles and feminism.

For that, he loses 2 stars.

Einar Nielsen says

I really liked this. I had listened to Wolfe on the Coode Street Podcast and therefore got these lectures and boy am I glad I did. There are 24 lectures that talk about different aspects of science fiction and delve deep into the subject. I wish that I had sat down with pen and paper to take notes. My only objection is that I would have liked to hear a little bit more about Samuel R Delany (but I have heard a lot previously). Otherwise, I learned so many new things and I have taken a class on science fiction and listened to another Great Courses lecture previously.

So if you are a bit of a sci-fi nerd like myself and enjoy learning about its history then this is a definite recommend.

Brad says

An excellent overview of Science Fiction from an academic perspective, Gary K. Wolfe offers some pretty compelling insights along the way and offers one of the finest distinctions between Sci-Fi and Fantasy that I have come across -- without diminishing either genre. A must for anyone just starting their journey in Sci-Fi, and a high recommendation for any old Sci-Fi vets who need a refresher of the roots.

EruDani says

Si les gusta el sci-fi no se pierdan esta serie de clases sobre el tema, es un resumen excelente de las obras desde sus inicios con Mary Shelly hasta cerca de 2017, divididos en temas como: ciencia ficción y religión, ciencia ficción y feminismo, ciencia ficción y el medio ambiente, distopias y cyber punk, entre otros. Sin desperdicio y les va a llenar la lista de 'libros que quiero leer' en apenas una hora... :P

Rick Howard says

I very much enjoyed Dr. Wolfe's Great Courses lecture. I have always considered myself to be a science fiction fan, but after listening to these lectures, I learned that there are numerous holes in my science fiction education that I will have to get busy filling.

To my great surprise, I learned that the mother of science fiction is Mary Shelly, the author of 'Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus,' published in 1818. She was the first author to tell a fictional tale where the catalyst of the entire story arc was a bit of science that was tantalizingly just out of modern reach. Electricity might be able to reanimate dead tissue. What a great idea. The fact that a woman created an entire genre of writing is fascinating by itself but when you consider that she did it when, at the time, respectable women didn't write novels and especially didn't write horror/gothic novels, Shelly's accomplishment is extraordinary. And she wasn't done there. Some scholars say she is the first author to create a post-apocalyptic novel too when she published, "The Last Man" in 1826.

On the other end of the spectrum, I was saddened to discover that men treated women and minorities just as badly in the science fiction family as they did everywhere else. Although Shelly's Frankenstein was fabulous start, science fiction has largely been, until recently, an American and British tradition and mostly written by white people. That is slowly changing now, but since Shelly's beginning to Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Left Hand of Darkness" in 1969, the story authors and pulp magazine editors that published these stories were not diverse. There were exceptions of course, but the bulk of the writers were white and American or British.

What I found the most interesting about Dr. Wolfe's explanation of science fiction though was my realization that there isn't much difference between science fiction and other genres. They all tell fictional stories. Literature scholars rate good literature higher than the other forms because authors tell good stories that are realistic but also illuminate some piece of the human condition: love, sadness, life, death, etc. Authors who can write at multiple levels like that are very good at their craft.

Other genres are normally frowned on by literature scholars because the authors usually tell fantastical stories; stories that would never happen in the real world. Science Fiction authors use not-yet-existing-but plausible science to explain visionary possibilities. Fantasy authors uses magic and/or the supernatural to explain their whimsical, imaginary, and even grotesque tales. Horror writers uses the supernatural to explain their stories of the macabre. But even these lesser forms of story telling, as judged by the literature scholars, could be literature too if they illuminated the human condition somehow as many of the great science fiction books do. The difference between literature fans and science fiction fans though is that, sometimes, science fiction fans just want a rip-roaring story that doesn't make us think too much; stories like space operas and space westerns where there are lots of space ships and robots and flying cities and the heroes save the day and they don't give a hoot about the human condition. Science fiction fans will take some illumination of the human condition but it is not a prerequisite.

I recommend Dr. Wolfe's Great Course. I learned a lot and because of it, I have a deep stack of great science fiction to discover.

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Lori S. says

An excellent overview of the history and different aspects of the genre.

G33z3r says

Interesting survey of science fiction, both its historical trends and its favorite themes (spaceships, time travel, disasters, cyberpunk, steampunk,...) And its recent enough (as of today in 2016) to be aware of contemporary works as well.

David says

Well, as a long-time SF fan, this Great Course (one of Audible's Daily Deals) was bound to appeal to me. I was not sure if it would contain anything I didn't know, but of course Professor Wolfe, as a PhD expert in the subject, has read even more science fiction than me. Still, I was gratified to recognize most of the names and titles he mentioned (even if I hadn't read them all).

This is really a history of science fiction, rather than a course in that elusive quality of "greatness." Defining "great" SF is necessarily going to be subjective, so Wolfe attempts to be broad and expansive. He starts with the early origins of science fiction - the pulps, and good old Hugo Gernsback (of course he covers earlier material and gives proper homage to Mary Shelley and other sci-fi forebearers), talks about the Grand Old Masters you'd expect (Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke, E.E. Doc Smith, etc.) and moves all the way up through the modern day, ending in about 2014 as he mentions such recent names as Li Xixin, Nnedi Okorafor, and Lavie Tidhar, thus addressing SF's changing demographics and broader audience.

The chapters generally cover a particular "generation" of sci-fi (e.g., the pulp era, or the New Wave of the 60s and 70s, or space opera, or cyberpunk), or else a particular trope (rocket ships, alien invasions, dystopias, etc.) In each chapter he describes some of the notable authors and books in some detail, and with a persuasive degree of knowledge of a subject he clearly loves.

For the most part, Wolfe tries to avoid being too opinionated, so if his own tastes prejudice his judgment, it's not obvious. The series was slightly dry and academic, and probably won't appeal to anyone who isn't a SF fan already (this is not an "Introduction to Science Fiction" course), and if you are an aspiring writer, don't be misled by the title into thinking it will give you any writing tips (though it will probably give you a list of books you should add to your reading list). But for any serious science fiction aficionado, this will be an enjoyable listen, talking about old favorites and probably some titles you hadn't heard of before and will want to check out.

11811 (Eleven) says

Covers Frankenstein through modern day. So many books I want check out beyond the usual Bradbury/Heinlein/Wells/Aasimov stuff that I wouldn't be aware of if I hadn't listened to this.

Short lectures but still a great series.

Phillip says

The Title Is misleading. This is primarily a history of science fiction. I was expecting something more theoretical. But, it is a fine history of the science fiction genre.

Veronique says

3.75*

I'm pretty much omnivorous when it comes to reading, but Science Fiction has always fascinated me. This is probably due to growing up reading Jules Verne and Yoko Tsuno (Belgian scifi comic - <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>).

On the whole, I found this 'course' interesting. Wolfe gives a very good overview of the genre, from the early 19th century with Mary Shelley's Frankenstein to nowadays. He mentions many authors and works, as well as the important role of editors, while reviewing themes and the evolution of the genre. However, I felt that most of these lectures were superficial and never really went deeper in the subject.

Kat Hooper says

Review coming soon at www.fantasyliterature.com.

Robert says

More of a history of the genre than a deconstruction of the genre itself. Still, Wolfe does a good job of covering the definition of science fiction over the years. He articulates three points that resonated with me about the draw of science fiction:

1. Provides a sense of wonder
2. Provides a means of exploring what it means to be human
3. Provides a screen on which to project fears and anxieties
