

Definition of Terms

Speculative fiction is a convenient umbrella term for fiction that deals with alternative worlds, whether past, present or future. It takes aspects of reality and “speculates” on what would happen if one thing were changed. The genre encompasses science fiction, fantasy, futuristic, and supernatural storytelling, as well as other commonly linked forms like alternative history, horror, comics

Science fiction: Takes place in our universe (even if in a different galaxy) following our physical laws of gravity, chemistry, physics, etc. Special powers are explained by natural phenomena, machines, or inventions such as:

- First Science fiction novel: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, 1818 and 1831
- Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (volcanic wells)
- H. G. Wells’ *Time Machine* (a mechanical invention)
- *Andromeda Strain* and *Jurassic Park* by Michael Crichton; Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* series (genetic manipulation)
- Other examples: Star Trek, Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Heinlein, Ursula LeGuin, James Tiptree Jr. (aka Alice Bradley Sheldon)

But also...

- W.E.B. Dubois “The Comet” (1920, end of world scenario), “Princess Steel” (1908, allegorical critique of capitalism and industrialization)
- *Black No More* by George S. Schuyler 1931
- Ray Bradbury, “Way in the Middle of the Air” 1950, in original *Martian Chronicles*, removed in 1997; and “The Other Foot” in *Illustrated Man* 1950
- Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler vampires (*Kindred*) but also postapocalyptic (*Parable Series*) and *Lilith’s Brood* (Xenogenesis)
- Nalo Hopkinson: Queer black Caribbean and Canadian (*Skin Folk*)
- See Lyndsie Manusos’ excellent primer at <https://bookriot.com/science-fiction-subgenre-primer/>

Fantasy: often takes place in a different or parallel universe, thus doesn’t have to follow the natural laws of our world. There can be dragons, elves, werewolves, vampires, and other mythological creatures; people can have magic and supernatural powers.

- Game of Thrones
- Lord of the Rings
- Harry Potter
- urban fantasy (werewolves, vampires, etc.)

But also...

- N.K. Jemisin (3-time Hugo winner—both sci-fi and fantasy), and
- Nnedi Okorafor (*Who Fears Death*, *Binti* series)
- Nisi Shawl (*Everfair* and editor of the amazing *New Suns* spec fic anthology)
- See Lyndsie Manusos’ excellent primer at <https://bookriot.com/fantasy-sub-genre-primer/>

Space Opera: some forms are in between sci-fi and fantasy, like Star Wars—yes, space travel, but the Force. This is a category of its own, with pangalactic quests that are a variation of the ancient Hero's Journey archetype.

Steampunk: Sci-fi/fantasy with a 19th-century aesthetic and an emphasis on retro-futuristic gadgets—"steam" meaning the time when steam engines ruled the world, and "punk" alluding to a free-for-all mash-up of eras. Don your top hats and goggles, because anachronisms are allowed in this cauldron of adventure.

Solarpunk: as with Steampunk, there is an emphasis on technology, but here, the focus is on solving the world's problems with scientific inventions and ingenuity. The feeling is more optimistic than....

Dystopia: We all know 'em: Hunger Games, Station 11, The Road, 1984, The Handmaid's Tale—doom and gloom and more doom ahead, but sometimes an element of hope as well.

Supernatural: Featuring ghosts/otherworldly creatures/mysterious powers. Marked by fear of, or fascination with, the unknown. Often linked to other genres (i.e. supernatural horror, urban fantasy, Gothic lit, etc.)

Other adjacent forms--aka things that show up at the same cons (conventions):

Magical Realism/Fabulism: set in a world resembling our own, but with folkloric or magical elements

Slipstream: blends speculative and literary fiction, and often has a darker feel to it. The point is not so much a sense of wonder as a sense of weirdness or cognitive dissonance, to replicate the weirdness of modern times. Think Helen Oyeyemi, Aimee Bender, Mariana Enriquez, etc.

Alternate History: The "what would have happened if" genre, like Man in the High Castle or Everfair.

Horror: levels of horror vary, and can feature physical or psychological danger (or both)

Comics/Graphic Novels

RESOURCES for Writers

- Clarion West: Based in Seattle, focus on speculative fiction, workshops and events throughout the year, in person and online, in addition to the 6-week summer program <https://www.clarionwest.org/>
- CODEX: Online forum for speculative fiction writers, lots of information about the field, connections with other writers, specific markets, competitions, etc; competitions to build community and keep you writing <https://www.codexwriters.com/>
- SFWA: you don't have to be a member to get a mentor for 3 months <https://www.sfwaweb.org/other-resources/for-authors/mentoring-initiative/>
- Two-hour transport: monthly SFF open mic and reading, critique group, <https://twohourtransport.wordpress.com/>
- Futurescape: <https://futurescapes.ink/>
- Odyssey Workshop: <https://www.odysseyworkshop.org/>
- Speculative Literature Foundation: <https://speculativeliterature.org/>
- NYC Midnight: writing competitions to help find community and possibly critique group members <https://www.nycmidnight.com/>
- Meetup: Search under "writing" or "science fiction" or whatever topic you want to focus on, plus location, and filter by results
- Local bookstore SFF reading groups (varies by location)