

The Science Fiction of the Metric System

I admit it proudly; I'm an ignorant, stupid American who resists change. I'm a purist. I'm an artist. I'm a troglodyte science fiction writer who still clings to his God, guns and the U.S. Standard System of Measurement.

"Seriously?" you ask?

"Yes, seriously," I reply.

Consider this...how would the repeating refrain from the classic Who song, "I Can See For Miles," sound if Roger Daltrey pulled out his handy Metric converter and changed it to "I can see for kilometers and kilometers and kilometers...?" It might just be me, but I don't think it has the same memorable or syntactic ring as "Miles." Or let's change the title of Ray Bradbury's 1953 masterwork, "Fahrenheit 451" to "Celsius 232.7778." Which one do you prefer? Be honest now.

Being a science fiction writer, I obviously read a lot of science fiction novels and stories which means I have to suffer through this manic, obsessive, compulsive, metric sickness constantly. This is mainly because many of the science fiction writers of today and the recent past are physicists whom, for whatever reasons, have converted over to the author lifestyle and feel this innate need to sound smarter than the rest of us supposedly uneducated jacklegs. Honestly, I physically cringe when I come across a Metric reference in a story because the pretentiousness is so glaringly obvious.

Arthur C. Clarke, graduated with a First-Class Degree in Mathematics and Physics from King's College in 1946, and he sure made this fact known in a book he wrote titled, "Hammer of the God," which is about a giant asteroid heading for Earth. There's a chapter in the book where he gives the reader, in goobly-gook metric-speak, pages and pages of description about how many spins the asteroid is making, how fast it's traveling, the preposterous weight of the object, details on its orbital path around the sun and even the projected width and depth of the crater it would make in the Earth's surface. By the end of the chapter my eyes were bleeding, my ears were melting and I didn't know what planet I was on. For the record, Arthur C. Clarke is one of my favorite authors of all time but I would have been happy just to know that a giant rock is headed for earth and it's traveling really, really fast – now get on with the story!

The argument these physicist/science fiction writers counter with is that the details of the Laws of Physics have to be explained carefully and correctly or the fiction just isn't believable. Bullhockey! Bradbury never dealt with the complexities of metricism (Hey - I just made that word up!), no, he was more concerned with the quality of the actual words he was writing and the metaphorical implications of his story. You see, Bradbury wrote for the regular person, the common man, the reader who enjoys the process of reading, not the elitist scientists or scientist-wannabees who still haven't figured out what ignited the Big Bang or what resides in the singularity of a black hole (I have a feeling the two are related but that's fodder for another blog). That sums my own literary philosophy up perfectly.

In a scientific manual, article, report, essay or journal, sure, go for it – use all the metricism you want, that's where it belongs. It doesn't belong in fiction unless you want to turn people into blocks of unconscious stone.

Anton Chekhov, one of Russia's greatest writers, once said that "Clarity of expression is of utmost importance." He was absolutely correct. Here's one of the problems a writer has to deal with when someone reads his story; he/she has to put pictures in the reader's mind clearly and simply or the meaning of what the reader is reading is not comprehended by them. I ask any of you out there, can you picture in your mind how long a kilometer is? How about a mile? Again, be honest. Of course, picturing a mile is much easier than picturing a kilometer, which is 1.609 of a mile. How do you picture 1.609 of a mile in your head? You can't, but it sure sounds smart and important, doesn't it?

I've talked to some of the finest products our U.S. university system is squeezing out through the grinder and when I have this conversation with them they look at me as if I'm The Who's "Deaf, Dumb and Blind Kid." The Metric system is easy! they protest in their snobby, stuffy, professor-like voices. Does this seem easy to you...

- 1 inch is about 25 millimeters or 2.54 centimeters
- 1 pound is about 454 grams or 0.436 kilograms
- 10 degrees Fahrenheit is minus 12.22 degrees Celsius
- 1 cup is 0.2365 liters
- 1 square mile is 2.590 km²
- And one stat I read about the other day is that converting to the Metric system will somehow magically increase the total surface area of the solar system by 42%. WHAT???

Yeah, I thought so. No wonder the United States is one of only three countries left in the world still using the Standard system (Myanmar and Liberia are the other two)! The fact of the matter is that the Metric system is only different from the Standard system because it's the Metric system. Both are accurate forms of measurement, both can be broken down into smaller and

smaller parts for even more accuracy. And not many people realize that we landed on the Moon in 1969 using mainly the Standard system. Seems to me that if we could do it then, we could do it today, why make things more complicated?

In the interest of truth and justice, I must confess to you that I have used a Metric reference in one or two of my stories, but that's because the editor forced me to do it. And that's the only reason I will use it in the future.

Thank you for your time,
GC Rosenquist