

Science Fiction vs. Fantasy

The other day I was eating a bowl of cereal for breakfast at the kitchen table and as often is the case while doing anything mundane, I became really bored. Luckily, my wife had recently purchased a book of word seek puzzles for a plane trip she was going to take and had conveniently left it on the table. I found a pen, grabbed the book, opened it up and searched for a subject I was sure my wife wouldn't be interested in. Way, way in the back, past subjects such as "Cooking Utensils" and "Wallpaper Patterns," I finally found "Science Fiction."

Oh! This will be perfect! I thought. Searching for names like "Asimov," "Clarke" and "Bradbury" or the titles of famous sci-fi books like "Dune," "Ender's Game" or "Ringworld" will be fun! Yay!

I read the list at the bottom of the page to familiarize myself with what I was supposed to find in the mish-mash of letters above and that's when I nearly thrust the pen into my ear - repeatedly. Included in the list were characters from *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and Michael Moorcock's famous *Elric* series. What the hell? How could any of these offerings be considered science fiction in any way, shape or form? I mean, where's the science in casting a spell in some exotic garbly-gook language? Where's the science in waving a magic wand while you're flitting thru the sky on a broomstick, or using a demonic sword to suck out the souls of your enemies? The answer: There is none. The proper genre these books should be found in is FANTASY.

And what's worse, every bookstore I've ever been in makes the same mistake, mixing fantasy in with real science fiction. It's quite maddening to a sci-fi purist.

And before any of you start protesting to me that magic and sorcery is a science – BULL-HOCKEY! You see, in science fiction, the writer deals with futuristic technologies or situations that could possibly, one day, happen, because it's based on actual SCIENCE. In many cases this has already happened, sci-fi writers have actually predicted the future (Arthur C. Clarke's prediction of the orbiting communications satellite is one example. Orwell's frightening 1949 novel, "1984," is coming true as you read this!).

But, there will never be a time where a person chants a line of incomprehensible mumble-bumble and a Big Mac suddenly appears in front of you out of thin air. No one will ever be riding on broomsticks and there will never be swords that suck the souls out of people like a soda straw – unless a science-based technology is behind it.

That Dear Reader, is the difference between science fiction and fantasy.

There are, however, a few rare examples that blur the line between the two genres and combine them quite elegantly. Edgar Rice Burroughs' "John Carter of Mars" stories can't be strictly called sci-fi stories even though some element of technology is used in them throughout (the grand flying solar-powered vehicles and the massive oxygen machines are two examples). And then there's "Star Wars," with its mixture of laser technology, space ships that travel faster than light and that mystical, mysterious religion called "The Force" (the Jedi Knights, on many levels, always remind me of the Crusader Knights – but that's a subject for another future WebEssay).

By the way, I never started the puzzle. I just ate my cereal real fast then went to my office to write a sci-fi story.

Thanks for your time,
GC Rosenquist