



JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE  
OF

Science Fiction

# Discuss these questions

- How would you define "science fiction"?
- Do you enjoy reading science fiction?
- Who are your favourite science fiction authors?
- What sort of people do you think science fiction mostly interests?
- Do you think you can learn much about science by reading science fiction?
- Can you think of any ideas which were "science fiction" in the past but which are common technologies today?
- Can you think of any ideas which are science fiction today but which will be common technologies in the next 50 years?

# What is Sci-Fi?

- Science fiction, often called “sci-fi,” is a genre of fiction literature whose content is imaginative, but based in science. It relies heavily on scientific facts, theories, and principles as support for its settings, characters, themes, and plot-lines, which is what makes it different from fantasy.
- So, while the storylines and elements of science fiction stories are imaginary, they are usually possible according to science—or at least plausible.
- Although examples of science fiction can be found as far back as the Middle Ages, its presence in literature was not particularly significant until the late 1800s. Its true popularity for both writers and audiences came with the rise of technology over the past 150 years, with developments such as electricity, space exploration, medical advances, industrial growth, and so on. As science and technology progress, so does the genre of science fiction

# Read the following short passage:

As the young girl opened her window, she could see the moons Europa and Callipso rising in the distance. A comet flashed by, followed by a trail of stardust, illuminating the dark, endless space that surrounded the spacecraft; the only place she had ever known as home. As she gazed at Jupiter, she dreamed of a life where she wasn't stuck orbiting a planet, but living on one. She envisioned stepping onto land, real land, like in the stories of Earth her father had told her about. She tried to imagine the taste of fresh air, the feel of a cool, salty ocean, and the sound of wind rustling through a tree's green leaves. But these were only fantasies, not memories. She had been born on the ship, and if they didn't find a new inhabitable planet soon, she would surely die there too.

# What typical characteristics are in the passage?

The example above has several prime characteristics that are common in science fiction. First, **it is set in the future**, when humans no longer live on Earth. Second, **it takes place on a spacecraft that is orbiting Jupiter**. Third, **it features real scientific information**—Europa and Callisto are two of Jupiter's moons, and as Jupiter is a planet made of gas, it would not be possible for humans to live there, explaining why the ship is currently orbiting the planet rather than landing on it.

# Hard science fiction

Hard science fiction strictly follows scientific facts and principles. It is strongly focused on natural sciences like physics, astronomy, chemistry, astrophysics, etc. Interestingly, hard science fiction is often written by real scientists, and has been known for making both accurate and inaccurate predictions of future events. For example, the recent film *Gravity*, the story of an astronaut whose spacecraft is damaged while she repairs a satellite, was renowned for its scientific accuracy in terms of what would actually happen in space.

# Soft science fiction

- Soft science fiction is characterized by a focus on social sciences, like anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics—in other words, sciences involving human behavior. So, soft sci-fi stories mainly address the possible scientific consequences of human behavior. For example, the Disney animated film *Wall-E* is an apocalyptic science fiction story about the end of life on Earth as a result of man's disregard for nature.
- In truth, most works use a combination of both hard and soft science fiction. Soft sci-fi allows audiences to connect on an emotional level, and hard sci-fi adds real scientific evidence so that they can imagine the action actually happening. So, combining the two is a better storytelling technique, because it lets audiences connect with the story on two levels.

# What is the difference between science fiction and fantasy?

- Fantasy a genre of fiction that concentrates on imaginary elements (the fantastic). This can mean magic, the supernatural, alternate worlds, superheroes, monsters, aliens, and so on. Many science fiction works involve elements of fantasy, like imagined worlds, made-up beings from other galaxies, paranormal powers etc; so the two genres tend to overlap. However, the primary distinction is that that elements of fantasy in science fiction always have a basis in science, whereas fantasy is strictly imaginative.



A genre-defining piece of science fiction literature is H.G. Wells' 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds*, which tells the story of an alien invasion in the United Kingdom that threatens to destroy mankind. The following is a selection from the novel's introduction:



*No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter...No one gave a thought to the older worlds of space as sources of human danger.*

# Conclusion

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In conclusion, science fiction is a genre of possibility, imagination, and innovation whose popularity rises in relation to advances in science and technology. Its authors use real science to create fictional stories that explore the possible future of mankind and the universe in a way that is both imaginative and realistic.