

Introduction

Science fiction as a whole has one basic theme. Stories in this field ask and then offer speculative answers to the question "What if—?"

In return such fiction demands from its reader an intelligent and imaginative response. It stretches the horizon, opens doors for those who do so respond. From its speculations there literally have been born inventions and discoveries that are now a part of our daily life.

For these inventions, science fiction created names and descriptions before they actually appeared. Radar, laser, radio, television, submarines, atom research, space ships were all minutely described in science fiction and were considered as only fantastic dreams, dismissed by most as completely impossible.

We have now almost come to believe that the gifted writer in this field may envision today something that will be concrete truth tomorrow. This has been proven many times.

Originally, science fiction, in the hands of such writers as Jules Verne, was concerned with what we now term the "gadget" story—that is, one in which the main theme-action exists only to introduce some unusual invention or discovery. There is little attempt at characterization in such fiction. The characters exist merely as the necessary human instigators of the discovery or to operate some machine.

But in later years, writers are inclined to follow the lead of the other great pioneer in the field—H. G. Wells. Inventions and discoveries in this type of fiction are only incidental. What matters is mankind's reaction to them, his possible subjection or victory over future circumstances and problems.

There are a number of well recognized themes for the writer to draw upon, to use in his own question game with the future—too many to include examples in any one volume. But it is the purpose of this book to offer a selection of some of the better known themes as presented by authors who are masters of their craft.

Here is the robot, the mutant, the off-world pioneer, the space ship in distress, an alien invasion of this world, future medical discoveries, world catastrophe, telepathy, galactic diplomacy, the far future, the difficulty of communicating with aliens, and (what is rare in this field) an example of humor.

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This book is only a general sampling, an introduction to what may be found in those tales that answer the question "What if—?" It is meant to open not only the possible gates to tomorrow, but also the door of the reader's own imagination.