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Anything Could Happen (And We Would Believe It)

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Science fiction defies definition, resists origins, refuses boundaries. If it's the genre that considers the impact of "science" on human life—a reasonable first attempt to describe what it might mean to slap "science" and "fiction" next to each other as a single term—you immediately run into the problem that modern life is so totally suffused with "science" (and has been for so long) that it would be hard to name any work of contemporary literature that isn't also science fiction. If it's the genre that names what *isn't* real, but *might* be, you ultimately run into the same problem: where's the bright line that divides that kind of "speculation" from the telling of any other story you know isn't actually true? All fiction, by its nature, posits some alternative but plausible world; the worlds of science fiction may be *more* alternative than the worlds of mimetic fiction, but they're somewhere in the same ballpark. We all know perfectly well there was never any such person as Leopold Bloom, but, for the duration of *Ulysses*, we're willing to suspend our disbelief.

If science fiction is framed as an oxymoron—if the genre is actually essentially about the things we know *aren't* true, like ray guns and hyperdrives and time travel and superpowers—the problem still doesn't go away. If I tell you a story about a flood that destroys civilization, is it only a science fiction when I say it is going to

happen tomorrow, but not yesterday or 4000 B.C.? (What if I say the flood is happening right now, as we speak, just so incredibly slowly that only scientific instruments can see it happening?) If I tell you a story about people who defy the laws of nature in the pursuit of forbidden knowledge, and are punished for their transgressions, does it *really* matter whether we're talking about a magic apple from the Tree of Knowledge or a ghastly reanimated corpse or the Manhattan Project or climate change or the illegal invention of bleepblorp on the planet Myxplex?

Even given all these caveats, I do think there is something distinct about science fiction, despite the inability to name that distinction with much certainty or specificity. I wouldn't call it an aesthetics; I don't think it's a politics, exactly; it's really something more like an ethos, or a mood. The singular proposition that undergirds all science fiction, from the Book of Genesis to *The Book of the New Sun*, is that things could be different than the way they are. Science fiction is what you get when you turn the world into a philosophical thought experiment: both the person who writes science fiction and the person who reads it fiddle with the knobs of reality, turning this part up and that part down, adding in this, taking out that, to see what you get when you make some changes. Sometimes the focus of the experiment is what change does to just one person, or to families, or to friendships; sometimes it's on what happens to an entire society when it changes too fast, or too slow,

or too much, or too little, or even (we might dare to hope) changes just the right amount, and in plenty of time, without anyone having to suffer.

“I love you sons of bitches,” exults one of Kurt Vonnegut’s characters to a convention filled with science fiction writers. “You’re all I read any more. You’re the only ones who’ll talk all about the really terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either, but one that’ll last for billions of years. You’re the only ones with guts enough to really care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstanding, mistakes, accidents, catastrophes do to us. You’re the only ones zany enough to agonize over time and distance without limit, over mysteries that will never die, over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be Heaven or Hell.”

What makes science fiction so vital, I think, in our moment—what makes it more than just abstruse or borderline psychotic ramblings about triangle people from the purple dimension—is the way our world has become so supersaturated with change that the stuff now oozes out of every new breakthrough, gadget, or once-in-a-century environmental catastrophe (which seem to be occurring at least two or three times a year). Our society is totally unrecognizable not just from the perspective of the 1890s but from the perspective of the

1990s (which themselves would have looked completely mad to the person from 1940). And the pace is accelerating: the world of ten or five or three years hence will be just as bizarre and inscrutable, from the perspective of 2015. Most of us will still be there, hopefully, but we'll be different too; we'll have to be. Today anything could happen—immortality is invented, the aliens finally show up, the comet is spotted that will kill us all—and we would believe it. We are bathing in change, marinating in it, maybe drowning in it. And science fiction is the primary way we talk about the strange world of difference that is all around us, the imminent, radical historical changes that will free us, or transform us, or eat us. The joy and terror and power and urgency of science fiction comes, for me, in the fact that everything really is science fiction, now. Science fiction is the air we breathe. We're all halfway up the roller coaster, click-clacking higher and higher up the ramp, about to peak over the crest and finally see what's on the other side—and our science fiction writers are in the very first car, seeing everything that's coming that tiny bit sooner, shouting back their prophecies: "Everybody hold on tight. We're really close. It won't be long now."