

For a partial list of videos to use in conjunction with the study of world literature see "Navajo Students and 'Postcolonial' Literature" by Kurt Lucas in *English Journal* 79:8 (1990): 54-58.

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Teaching Valuable Lessons with Science Fiction

Chris Radke

In some schools, at any mention of a reading assignment, students begin to cringe. One way to get students hooked on reading is through science fiction.

What Constitutes Science Fiction?

Professor Tom Bacig, who teaches Science Fiction at the University of Minnesota—Duluth, arranges this genre along a continuum. At one end resides fantasy, which includes dragons, knights with swords, imprisoned heroines, and adventuresome tales situated in foreign worlds. These stories would include *The Hobbit* or the *Star Wars* trilogy. At the other end of the continuum lies realism with a basis in factual human knowledge and experience. These works examine issues of history, sociology, psychology, scientific advancement, and, in general, the human condition. Examples include *Fahrenheit 451* and *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

The teaching of science fiction could be placed at either end of this spectrum, or among any of a multitude of ways to categorize this genre. Duluth librarian Judy Sheriff wishes she had multiple copies of some science fiction books so that she "could put one in each category which the book could be classified in."

Thinking about Science Fiction

"Myth teaches meaning . . . by imagination and metaphor, entering the back door of the mind through the imagination" (Prothero 33). The myths within science fiction tales are exactly what can turn students on to reading this genre. These stories are not just fanciful tales to be read by students as bedtime stories. Or . . . maybe that is exactly how we should regard them! As children we read or were read tales like *The Three Little Pigs* or *Hansel and Gretel* which taught life lessons about the value of hard work and not trusting strangers.

A Canticle for Liebowitz by Walter Miller, Jr. warns of lessons not learned by the human race in the aftermath of a nuclear war. The unforeseen dangers of acquiring genetic engineering knowledge are foretold by Michael Crichton in *Jurassic Park*. Science fiction empowers students to think critically about the issues of technological advancement with respect to human nature's inclinations. If we engaged in a nuclear encounter, would we learn from its consequences after the first time, the second, or even the third, as Miller supposes? Has our knowledge and capability of human genetics increased at the same rate as our maturity and respect for such power within the human race? These are just a

few of the questions readers of science fiction begin to grapple with when they read these "fairy tales." Students who read science fiction can get the best of both worlds—reading stories that spark and provoke the creative imagination while simultaneously coming to understand the circumstances and possibilities of the world around them.

What's the Difference?

Myths within science fiction ultimately "function to teach cultural values, defining and reaffirming the beliefs and conventions of a particular society" (Beach 411). Thus, science fiction can also be used to teach values of multicultural literacy. For example, students could read *The Eye, the Ear, and the Arm*. The author, Nancy Farmer, depicts familial love in Zimbabwe, Africa, when parents and children are separated by outside forces in the year 2194. *The Man in the High Castle*, by Philip K. Dick, tells the story of how Americans must learn to adapt to the customs of their new conquerors, the Japanese. Meanwhile, Nazi armies advance across the eastern United States enacting their policies of genocide along the way.

Another novel by Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, deals with the enslavement of sentient life forms called "replicants." Though created by humans, the replicants were given the ability for independent thinking, emotional responses, and dreaming. They act and appear just like humans, but are sent off to an uninhabitable "off world" colony as slave laborers. Each of these stories is ideal for teaching about people with differences and the issues facing a diverse society.

Science fiction can also be used to acknowledge feminine perspectives. *The Man in the High Castle* depicts one of the main characters, Julianna, as an important, independent woman whose demeanor 'lends to the ending's unpredictable ending. Both Robert O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah* and Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* portray women in positive, assertive positions of control. In addition to portraying female characters in positions of power, stories like these present role models for young, female readers as well as "a mode of arousing interest in science, through literature, that is traditionally more congenial to female students" (Donawerth 40).

Weaving the Disciplines

Teaching science fiction can be taken one step further within an educational setting. Not only does this genre stimulate students to think critically, but also it can be used "to make connections across the disciplines" (Cox 35). Our educational system has perpetuated the idea that each subject is a separate and independent identity. How many times has a science teacher heard "This isn't math class." Or when the social studies teacher assigns an essay, the student response is "This ain't no English class." Students need to understand that the world is not so neatly segregated into academic departments. Mathematicians need to know how to write articulately, just as English teachers need to understand the implications when a new "genetic breakthrough" is headlined in the newspapers. Science fiction literature can help overcome these barriers.

It seems the strongest barrier is between the sciences and the humanities. "A large part of the tension between the

humanities and the sciences is due to the elusiveness of achieving a clear, comprehensive, and mutual understanding of what each *is*" (Goldbert 71). When teachers from both areas make the effort to explore and understand each other's classrooms and subjects, students can realize a connection between the two and, hopefully, spark an interest in learning about both of them.

As English teachers, it is not too difficult to incorporate these books into the curriculum. For example, Stranger in a Strange Land could be read in conjunction with Shakespeare's Henry V. Mike and Hal both must mature and assume roles in the adult world, and while the two characters reside in two different environments and settings, both face the same overall maturation dilemma. After reading the two works, students could discuss how both genres present the situation, and how each character deals with the challenges of maturation.

Reading Dandelion Wine by Ray Bradbury could be the impetus for a creative writing assignment. This book assembles the many short stories found in each chapter into a coherent picture of one twelve-year-old boy's magical summer in a small, rural Illinois town. Students could read the entire book or a few chapters and then descriptively write about a time or experience they recall from their childhood.

Likewise, it is not difficult for a science or history teacher to include science fiction into one or more units. One method to diminish the boundaries would be to use Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep in conjunction with a physics unit covering robotics, or as an offshoot to a biology unit on genetics.

Despite their physical and mental advantages over humans, Dick's replicants soon realize that they are just as fallible as humans because of their built-in three-year life span.

There are many other books that could be used in the these courses and others. It is important to start considering options for integrating science fiction works into and across the curriculum. Supplementing textbooks with an occasional "extra-ordinary" tale will enliven the teaching and learning experience. The possibilities are only limited by our creativity.

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