
The Science Fiction Handbook

M. Keith Booker
and
Anne-Marie Thomas

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

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*For our students
And for Amy, Adam, Skylor, and Benjamin Booker*

Contents

Part 1 Introduction	1
Science Fiction in Western Culture	3
Part 2 Brief Historical Surveys of Science Fiction Subgenres	13
The Time-Travel Narrative	15
The Alien Invasion Narrative	28
The Space Opera	40
Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction	53
Dystopian Science Fiction	65
Utopian Fiction	75
Feminism, Science Fiction, and Gender	86
Science Fiction and Satire	98
Cyberpunk and Posthuman Science Fiction	110
Multicultural Science Fiction	124
Part 3 Representative Science Fiction Authors	137
Isaac Asimov (1920–1992)	139
Margaret Atwood (1939–)	141
Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006)	143
Samuel R. Delany (1942–)	145
Philip K. Dick (1928–1982)	147
William Gibson (1948–)	149
Nicola Griffith (1960–)	151
Joe Haldeman (1943–)	153
Robert A. Heinlein (1907–1988)	155
Nalo Hopkinson (1960–)	157
Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–)	159
Ian McDonald (1960–)	161
China Miéville (1972–)	163

George Orwell (1903–1950)	165
Marge Piercy (1936–)	167
Frederik Pohl (1919–)	169
Kim Stanley Robinson (1952–)	171
Neal Stephenson (1959–)	173
H. G. Wells (1866–1946)	175
Part 4 Discussions of Individual Texts	177
H. G. Wells, <i>The Time Machine</i> (1895)	179
H. G. Wells, <i>The War of the Worlds</i> (1898)	185
George Orwell, <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> (1949)	193
Isaac Asimov, <i>I, Robot</i> (1950)	200
Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kormbluth, <i>The Space Merchants</i> (1952)	207
Robert A. Heinlein, <i>Starship Troopers</i> (1959)	214
Philip K. Dick, <i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</i> (1968)	222
Ursula K. Le Guin, <i>The Dispossessed</i> (1974)	229
Joe Haldeman, <i>The Forever War</i> (1974)	236
Marge Piercy, <i>Woman on the Edge of Time</i> (1976)	243
Samuel R. Delany, <i>Trouble on Triton</i> (1976)	250
William Gibson, <i>Neuromancer</i> (1984)	257
Margaret Atwood, <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (1985)	264
Octavia Butler, “Xenogenesis” Trilogy (1987–1989)	271
Neal Stephenson, <i>Snow Crash</i> (1992)	278
Nicola Griffith, <i>Ammonite</i> (1994)	285
Kim Stanley Robinson, “Mars” Trilogy (1993–1996)	292
Nalo Hopkinson, <i>Midnight Robber</i> (2000)	299
China Miéville, <i>Perdido Street Station</i> (2000)	306
Ian McDonald, <i>River of Gods</i> (2005)	314
Glossary	321
Selected Bibliography	333
Index	341

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Part 1

Introduction

Science Fiction in Western Culture

Most readers of science fiction spend little time or energy worrying about a definition of the genre or attempting to determine whether any given text is science fiction or not. They tend to know what sorts of stories and books they regard as science fiction and have little trouble locating works in the category to read. Scholars and critics tend, however, to be more cautious (and finicky) about categorization, so that many studies of science fiction as a genre begin with lengthy meditations on the definition of science fiction, often in order to distinguish it from other forms of “speculative” fiction, such as fantasy and horror. Such efforts tend to reveal that science fiction might not be so simple to define as first meets the eye. For example, most of the essays in James Gunn’s collection, *Speculations on Speculation*, attempt in one way or another to define the characteristics of the genre and to “address the difficulties in delimiting the field of science fiction,” as Gunn puts it in his own introductory remarks (*Speculations*, 1). Indeed, the first essay in this collection is Gunn’s own “Toward a Definition of Science Fiction,” the very title of which suggests that even Gunn (who has spent decades as a science fiction scholar and novelist) is unable to complete the task of defining science fiction, or “sf” as we will frequently call it in this book.

Gunn begins his essay by avowedly declaring that “the most important, and most divisive, issue in science fiction is definition” (*Speculations*, 5). He then goes on, not really to define science fiction, but to characterize it. Primarily, for Gunn, science fiction is a literature set in worlds different from our own – and different in ways that invite the reader to interrogate these differences, to ask “hard questions” about them in terms of what they can tell us about our own world. Though Gunn oddly fails to mention Darko Suvin in this brief essay, his vision of science fiction is very much congruent with Suvin’s now classic argument that science fiction is a

literature of “cognitive estrangement,” a literature that places readers in a world different from our own in ways that stimulate thought about the nature of those differences, causing us to view our own world from a fresh perspective. Suvin’s discussion of cognitive estrangement (which has played a founding role in the history of serious academic criticism of science fiction) is included in his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). It is also included as the third chapter in Gunn’s collection, which includes a second essay by Suvin as well.

In this volume we will work primarily from Suvin’s definition of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement, while remaining aware that this definition is a bit incomplete. After all, cognitive estrangement is very similar to the phenomenon of defamiliarization that the Russian formalists saw as the central strategy of all literature. Indeed, it could be argued that all literature produces cognitive estrangement to some extent, an observation that leads Carl Freedman to declare that, in this sense, all fiction could be considered science fiction and that the latter may actually be a broader category than the former (*Critical*, 21). On the other hand, Freedman (citing Suvin) goes on to argue that the designation “science fiction” is best “reserved for those texts in which cognitive estrangement is not only present but dominant” (*Critical*, 22). In other words, while all fiction produces cognitive estrangement, it is only in science fiction that such estrangement is the principle goal and project of the text.

Still, even with this basic notion in place, Freedman spends an introductory chapter of over twenty pages attempting to define science fiction and distinguish it from other genres. Ultimately, he arrives at his final focus on cognitive estrangement via a dialectical negotiation between what he sees as the two basic tendencies in attempts to construct definitions of science fiction: the narrow tendency to view science fiction only as that fiction which derives directly out of the American pulp tradition that began with the founding of *Amazing Stories* by Hugo Gernsback in 1926, and the broad tendency to consider virtually all “arealistic” literature, from Lucian and other early satirists to Pynchon and other postmodernists, as science fiction (*Critical*, 14–15).

For our purposes, science fiction might be defined as fiction set in an imagined world that is different from our own in ways that are rationally explicable (often because of scientific advances) and that tend to produce cognitive estrangement in the reader. But, in employing this definition, we follow Freedman in attempting to negotiate between “narrow” and “broad” conceptions of science fiction as we discuss the genre in this book. It is, for example, important to note that sf has many important predecessors in the Western literary tradition. Thus, in his history of science fiction, Adam

Roberts locates the origins of sf in the ancient Greek novel, devoting separate chapters to “ancient” sf and to sf in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, respectively.¹ The arealistic satire of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) is quite frequently discussed in relation to science fiction, and it is significant that Swift’s book appeared as a sort of countercurrent in British literature just as Daniel Defoe and others were helping to launch the realist novel as a major literary force. The barbs of *Gulliver’s Travels* are aimed at what Swift saw as the dehumanizing aspects of scientific modernity and thus in many ways run counter to the celebration of scientific and technological progress that informs so much science fiction, but Swift’s satire (designed to reveal the follies of his contemporary society by displacing them onto unfamiliar turf) definitely relies on cognitive estrangement for its effects. In any case, critiques of the possible negative consequences of unrestrained scientific and technological advancement are an important strain within modern science fiction. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), often identified as the first genuine work of science fiction and at the very least an important literary predecessor of science fiction in its modern form, is similarly concerned with science overstepping its bounds, even as it draws upon earlier models such as the various literary incarnations of the Faust story.

Such predecessors clearly indicate that science fiction has strong historical connections within mainstream literary connections. Indeed, it has affinities with numerous established genres. Among other things, the emphasis in science fiction on change (and the often-noted ability of the genre itself to change dramatically over time in conjunction with technological and other changes in the world at large) would link science fiction to the genre of the novel in general. Mikhail Bakhtin has famously characterized the novel an ever-evolving genre that changes continually over time, largely because of its ability to maintain close contact with developments in the world outside the novel, leading to an intense contemporaneity that is also reflected in the novel’s ability to maintain contact with “extraliterary genres, with the genres of everyday life and with ideological genres” (*Dialogic*, 33). Science fiction might, of course, be considered one of these “extraliterary” genres, but it is also the case that most of Bakhtin’s descriptions of the novel as a complex, dialogic genre that absorbs the characteristics of all other genres with which it comes into contact also apply to science fiction.

Science fiction bears special similarities to certain specific novelistic sub-genres. For example, the tendency of science fiction to be set in historical periods different from those in which it is written suggests parallels with the subgenre of the historical novel, identified by important critics such as Georg Lukács as perhaps the quintessential form of the realist novel.

In his highly influential *The Historical Novel* (first published in 1937, though not translated into English until 1962), Lukács argues that the great historical novels of the early nineteenth century are the quintessential literary expressions of the ideology of the European bourgeoisie in their period of ascent to power. In particular, Lukács argues that these novels uniquely captured the dynamic energies of this revolutionary historical change, though they declined in power as the bourgeoisie became conservative and decadent after establishing their dominance. This ability to reflect historical change is one that is often associated with science fiction. Indeed, the historical novel and science fiction as a whole have more in common than might first be obvious. As Edward James notes, “Of all the non-sf genres, only historical fiction presents readers, and authors, with problems that resemble those of sf” (*Science*, 112).

In the same vein, Freedman, building upon the work of the important Marxist critic and theorist Fredric Jameson, presents an extensive elaboration of the parallels between science fiction and the historical novel (*Critical*, 50–62). Jameson, in fact, has pointed out on several occasions a connection between science fiction and the historical novel, as when he describes science fiction as “a historically new and original form which offers analogies with the emergence of the historical novel in the early nineteenth century” (*Postmodernism*, 283). Jameson presses this point further in *Archaeologies of the Future*, where he argues that Lukács’s historical model of the decline of the historical novel can be completed by extending it one step further, to include the emergence of science fiction, “which now registers some nascent sense of the future, and does so in the space on which a sense of the past had once been inscribed” (*Archaeologies*, 286). Science fiction, in short, inherits the mantle once worn by the historical novel as the utopian literary genre par excellence and as the genre most capable of capturing the energies of the historical process.

From this point of view, it may be significant that science fiction as we know it began to take form as a genre in the nineteenth century, just when, according to Lukács, the historical novel was in a state of decline. In any case, it was with the “scientific romances” of H. G. Wells at the end of the nineteenth century that modern science fiction began to emerge in an identifiable form – though we should also note that sf, as a publishing category, did not then exist and that Wells’s romances were not, at the time, easily distinguishable from other contemporary forms (the utopian fictions of Edward Bellamy and William Morris, the imperial romances of H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling). Wells, who would go on to even greater success in the early years of the twentieth century as an author of realist satires such as *The History of Mr Polly* (1910), in many ways

towered over the genre of science fiction for the next several decades, adding a modicum of literary respectability to a form that really became visible as a separate entity only with the success, beginning in the 1920s, of American pulp magazines devoted to science fiction.

Science fiction as a selfconscious publishing category is generally considered to have begun in 1926, when editor Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of *Amazing Stories*, the first magazine devoted exclusively to science fiction. *Amazing Stories* was marked by an extremely optimistic vision of a technology-driven future, foreshadowing such later visions as the future technological utopia of *Star Trek*. However, pulp science fiction quickly began to gain complexity and sophistication, especially with the work of John W. Campbell, who assumed the editorship of the pulp magazine *Astounding Stories* beginning in 1937. Campbell's quest for stories with greater complexity and literary merit led to the discovery of such writers as Isaac Asimov, Lester Del Rey, Robert Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, and A. E. Van Vogt. Retitled *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1938, Campbell's magazine dominated the genre through the World War II years and beyond, helping to make the period from the end of the 1930s to the end of the 1950s what has come to be known as the Golden Age of Science Fiction.

The 1950s saw the proliferation of other important magazines, including *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Galaxy Science Fiction*, as the short story continued to be a vital form for the exploration of new sf ideas. Meanwhile, the genre was changed forever with the rise, during that decade, of the science fiction novel as a specific publishing category, in the midst of an explosion in paperback publishing in general, especially in the US. However, the science fiction "novel" was initially dominated by the conversion of previously-published magazine fiction (such as Isaac Asimov's "Robot" and "Foundation" stories) into book form. The rise of the science fiction novel (with Wells still looming as an important precedent) provided room for Golden Age writers such as Heinlein and Asimov to exercise their imaginations in more expansive ways – and in ways that often differed dramatically from the innocent optimism of the Gernsback era. The opportunities offered by the expanding sf publishing industry of the 1950s also helped to launch the careers of younger writers with genuine literary talents, such as Alfred Bester and Philip K. Dick, who began to take science fiction in new and more literary directions.

One could argue, though, that it is a mistake to try to "justify" science fiction by pointing out what it has in common with the more mainstream tradition of Western canonical literature. Indeed, much of what makes science fiction important (and gives it a special ability to produce cognitive estrangement) is the way in which it departs from canonical literary

traditions. For example, while the realist novel is a strongly individualist genre focusing on the attempts of strong individual protagonists to surmount personal difficulties, the science fiction novel often deals with the life-or-death fates of entire cultures or planets. As a result, science fiction tends to be weak on characterization in relation to the literary novel, but strong in its exploration of important social and political issues. In addition, pulp sf magazines have remained crucial to a fan culture that has helped sf readers to establish communities of a kind unknown among devotees of “high” literature, including an array of popular sf conventions in which fans can meet each other as well as well-known authors.

The existence of a vibrant fan culture helped to drive the rise of the science fiction film in the 1950s. American films fueled by Cold War anxieties – especially alien invasion films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) – were particularly important here, though the horror movies of Hammer Films in England (as well as apocalyptic Japanese monster movies) were part of the same phenomenon. Such films demonstrated that even the “lowest” of cultural forms could respond to important social and political issues, and perhaps in ways that engaged with contemporary concerns far more directly than loftier cultural forms.

Among other things, the pulp aspects of science fiction at least potentially endow the genre with certain folk energies, while allowing the “lowly” genre to explore certain themes in ways that would never be possible in more “respectable” venues. Alan Wald, for example, has noted how left-leaning American writers during the repressive years of the McCarthyite 1950s often diverted their critique of American capitalism into popular genres such as science fiction in order to avoid censorship. Or, as sf master Frederik Pohl has put it, science fiction writers can “say things in hint and metaphor that the writer dares not say in the clear” (*Politics*, 10). As a result, Pohl notes, 1950s science fiction might well have been able to get away with political statements that other forms could not and may therefore have represented “the only truly free speech left in America” at the time (*Politics*, 12). The diversion of leftist energies into popular genres in the 1950s produced a few interesting works by genuinely leftist writers – such as Ben Barzman’s *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* (1960) – and there are certainly a number of works of 1950s’ sf – such as Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth’s classic *The Space Merchants* (1952) – that include strong liberal (if not radical) political commentary.

This tradition of political commentary may explain why science fiction was able to respond to the changing political climate of the 1960s with a so-called New Wave (a term borrowed from the French *nouvelle vague* movement in film) that emphasized social and political relevance as well

as greater literary complexity. Thus, if the Golden Age was dominated by “hard” science fiction (in which the emphasis is on particular technologies and on scientific accuracy), the New Wave signaled a turn toward “soft” science fiction, which is more character driven and more concerned with the social and political ramifications of technological developments than with the technologies themselves.

The New Wave was spearheaded by editors such as Britain’s Michael Moorcock (*New Worlds* magazine) and America’s Judith Merril (in the anthology *England Swings*). Such editors attempted to make sf more sophisticated in terms of literary style as well as content, responding especially to trends of the 1960s to include franker treatment of issues such as sexuality. In addition to Moorcock himself, leading New Wave writers include Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, M. John Harrison, John Brunner, Samuel Delany, Thomas Disch, Harlan Ellison, Ursula K. Le Guin, Robert Silverberg, and Norman Spinrad. The New Wave was dominated to some extent by short stories, but New Wave writers also produced important novels, including Spinrad’s *Bug Jack Barron* (1969) and Delany’s *Triton* (1976). Television’s *Star Trek*, which enjoyed only moderate success in its original broadcast run (1966–1969), also echoed many of the concerns of the New Wave – and would go on to become arguably the most important single phenomenon in the history of science fiction, spurring a particularly enthusiastic fan culture and eventually triggering an extensive sequence of film adaptations and spin-off television series.

The quest for social and political relevance that fueled the New Wave also helped to drive related phenomena, such as an important resurgence in utopian fiction (especially that by women writers such as Le Guin and Joanna Russ) in the 1970s, though Brunner’s dystopian fictions of the late 1960s and early 1970s provided an important counter-trend. By the early 1980s, however, the science fiction novel seemed to have reached a certain stagnation, partly because the New Wave had narrowed the gap between science fiction and mainstream fiction, depriving sf of some of what made it special and important in the first place. It was also the case that phenomena such as the end of the space race and increasing concerns about technology-induced environmental decay (the near-disaster at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in 1979 can be taken as a key marker) had, by the 1980s, seriously muted public excitement about the potential of technology to change the world in positive ways.

On the other hand, written science fiction also suffered in the late 1970s and early 1980s because science fiction film, from the release of *Star Wars* in 1977 to the release of *The Terminator* in 1984, was experiencing an unprecedented period of critical and commercial success, even if the films of

the period often showed more nostalgia than optimism, more anxiety over the threat of technology than excitement over its possibilities. This brief period saw the release of such important films as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), *Alien* (1979), *E.T. the Extraterrestrial* (1982), and *Blade Runner* (1982), as well as the first two *Star Wars* sequels: *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *The Return of the Jedi* (1983). In subsequent years, advances in the technology of computer-generated imagery would continue to make science fiction film a hugely popular phenomenon, though the increasing emphasis on displays of dazzling special effects sometimes made sf film more spectacular at the expense of being less thoughtful.

The success of the *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Alien*, and *Terminator* sequences of films brought sf to wider audiences than ever before and helped to fuel a Golden Age in sf television in the 1990s.² Meanwhile, written science fiction proved more resilient than it might have first appeared as the skepticism of the early 1980s helped to fuel the rise of “cyberpunk” science fiction, a movement that revitalized science fiction and drove it in important new (postmodern) directions. With writers such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling leading the way, the cyberpunks combined an individualist punk sensibility with a keen awareness of the implications of the emergent computer technologies of the era. They also employed an array of styles derived from other genres (hardboiled detective fiction provided a particularly important stylistic model), indicating a tendency toward postmodern pastiche that allowed the cyberpunks to produce something genuinely inventive by reassembling bits and pieces of the works of the past, drawing upon important sf predecessors such as Bester and Dick, in addition to more mainstream authors such as Thomas Pynchon. The result was a hipper and edgier form of science fiction that was well in tune with the popular imagination of the cynical 1980s.

This cynicism is often reflected in cyberpunk fiction itself, which tends to be set in near future worlds in which technology (especially computer-based virtual reality technology) has advanced significantly, but in which these advances have done little to solve the sorts of social, political, and economic problems that were already prevalent in the 1980s. Partly because of this inability (or unwillingness) to imagine a better future, the original wave of cyberpunk science fiction was relatively short-lived, and some observers have seen Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992), with its lighter satirical tone, as announcing the end of the original movement and the beginnings of what would come to be called “postcyberpunk.”

In the years since the publication of *Snow Crash*, postcyberpunk fiction has continued to evolve, often blending with a new tendency toward

“posthuman” science fiction, which imagines a future in which technological changes have brought about dramatic physical and intellectual changes in the human species itself – or even rendered that species irrelevant through the rise of superior artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. Meanwhile, the release of *The Matrix* in 1999 signaled the first truly successful cyberpunk film, while cyberpunk has exercised a major influence in the realm of comic books and graphic novels; Japanese comics (*manga*) and animated films (*animé*) have shown a strong cyberpunk influence as well. Other trends in science fiction have also remained vital and Kim Stanley Robinson’s “Mars” trilogy (1993–1996), which has little in common with cyberpunk, may be the most significant work of both hard and soft science fiction to have been produced in the 1990s, thus illustrating that the “hard” and “soft” designations are not mutually exclusive.

In the realm of posthuman science fiction, the work of the Australian writer Greg Egan is worthy of special mention, though developments in postcyberpunk and posthumanist science fiction have been largely dominated by a group of writers who have collectively constituted a “Boom” in British sf from the mid-1990s to the present. British Boom science fiction is often highly literary and fiercely political; it might be noted that Roger Luckhurst interestingly echoes Wald on the American 1950s when he suggests that the Boom has been made possible partly because the low value accorded science fiction, fantasy, and the Gothic has allowed these genres to “flourish largely below the radar” of the British cultural establishment (“Cultural,” 423). Luckhurst further notes that this situation in contemporary British science fiction has parallels with that of American science fiction in the repressive days of the 1950s. He suggests, however, that the situation in Britain is much less repressive than that which prevailed in the United States in the McCarthy era, providing an atmosphere conducive to a genuine Boom in political science fiction, as opposed to the scattered works of politically-engaged sf in the US in the 1950s.

The British Boom writers represent a sort of culmination of the history of science fiction to this point. Their work is marked by high literary merit, yet often draws in important ways on pulp traditions. The British Boom writers also draw on virtually every previous science fiction subgenre, in addition to related genres such as fantasy and horror, particularly re-energizing such genres as the space opera and cyberpunk, previously thought to have seen their best days. The genre-bending fiction of China Miéville, combining a basic fantasy matrix with images from horror and the cognitive power of science fiction, may be the single most important example of British Boom sf. Meanwhile, writers such as Ken MacLeod, Charles Stross, Iain M. Banks,

Justina Robson, and Richard K, Morgan have helped to reinvigorate both the space opera and cyberpunk, partly through multigeneric combinations of the two in single works.

The quality and quantity of the work produced by the British Boom writers – along with the rise of Australian writers such as Egan and the continued productivity of American sf writers such as Robinson – suggests that science fiction as a whole is currently in a particularly rich period that shows no sign of ending soon. The complex, multi-generic nature of British Boom fiction also helps to call attention to the variety of subgenres that has informed the historical development of science fiction. As a result, we attempt no comprehensive overall history of science fiction in this volume.³ Instead, we present, via the individual chapters in Part 2 of this book, overviews of the development of a number of important subgenres, always taking account that there is considerable crossover among subgenres and that an individual work might participate in several subgenres at once. These overviews also include extensive lists of recommended reading within these subgenres, as well as lists of related works of science fiction film.

Part 3 of this volume includes brief biographies of a number of important science fiction writers, adding a further historical dimension by tracing the careers of these individual writers. Part 4 includes extensive critical analyses of some of the most important works of science fiction, chosen both for their merit and for their ability collectively to represent as many different science fictional phenomena as possible. Part 5 then closes the volume with a brief, selected glossary of terms relevant to the study of science fiction.

Notes

- 1 Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 2005.
- 2 See the discussion of this phenomenon in Booker, *Science Fiction Television*, 111–47.
- 3 Such attempts do, however, abound. Roberts's volume is particularly far-ranging in its historical coverage, while James's *Science Fiction in the 20th Century* (1994) is particularly good on science fiction from Wells forward. Luckhurst's *Science Fiction* (2005) is also especially good for its emphasis on the evolution of science fiction within larger cultural contexts. For an overview of the history of sf film, especially in the US, see Booker, *Alternate Americas*, (1–25).



Part 2

**Brief Historical
Surveys of Science
Fiction Subgenres**

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