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the future of scifi never looked so good...

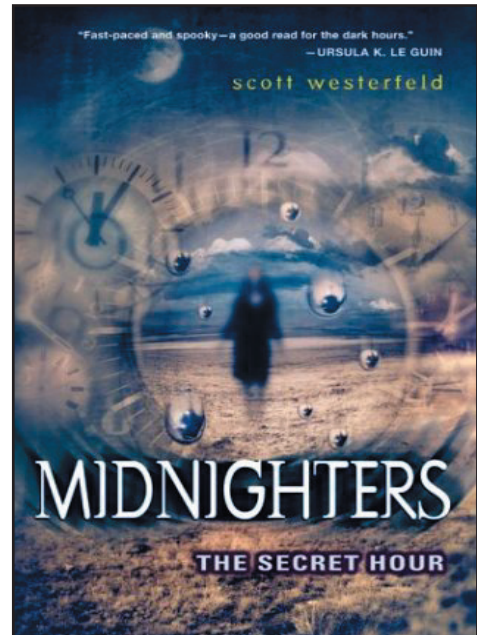
Some things change, and some things seem never to change. The future is always before us, and our dreams shape the way we enter and manage our plans for the future. Perhaps this is why the genre of Science Fiction (SF) developed and boomed in the twentieth century, fuelled by the spiralling growth in technologies and scientific discoveries in our world. Though some place the origin of SF with the gothic novel, particularly Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, I favour 'the future' as the catalyst that has inspired SF culture, books and media.

Fortunately, it was not my ideas, but the ideas of four prominent authors that figured in the in-store debate 'Science Fiction – the New Black?', hosted by Kinokuniya Books in Sydney in January 2007. The promotion flyer for the event quoted a Rod Serling (Serling created the ground-breaking Science Fiction series *The Twilight Zone*. CBS aired 156 episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, an astonishing 92 of which were written by Serling) – and then posed the idea that whilst SF has been considered cult and underground (geeky) in the past, in recent years it has been accepted more readily into the mainstream. As fantasy reaches saturation point with the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, SF is emerging as a more dominant and dynamic genre – the new black!

Any teacher librarian worth their salt is aware of the vast range of book titles available in the science fiction or fantasy genre. Have you read *Playing Beatie Bow*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Harry Potter*, *Space Demons* or *1984*? I assume so! But does your library stock Nebula Award winners, or any of the classic or emerging Science Fiction and Fantasy authors? How about Claire Carmichael, Anne McCaffrey, Sharon Shinn, Nancy Farmer, Isaac Asimov, or Robert Silverberg (to just pluck a few names out of the hat). Are you aware of the impact of science fiction in crafting our futures? You may have seen the movie *I Robot* – but did you know that scientist and SF writer Isaac Asimov developed 'The Three Laws of Robotics', critical to this book and movie, and that these laws will continue to shape robotics developments in the context of our society for a long time to come?

Of course, the list of potential titles for a school library is extensive. I also think that there are a number of school libraries that do not support science fiction and fantasy genres as well as they should, thereby missing an important opportunity to engage our young readers in what might be the very 'hook to reading' that they need.

Justine L'arbalestier recognises the personal impact of the technological world. She suggests that while many may think of SF as being about rockets, space exploration and vast empires, the most interesting aspect of SF is more personal and about our daily lives. The reality of



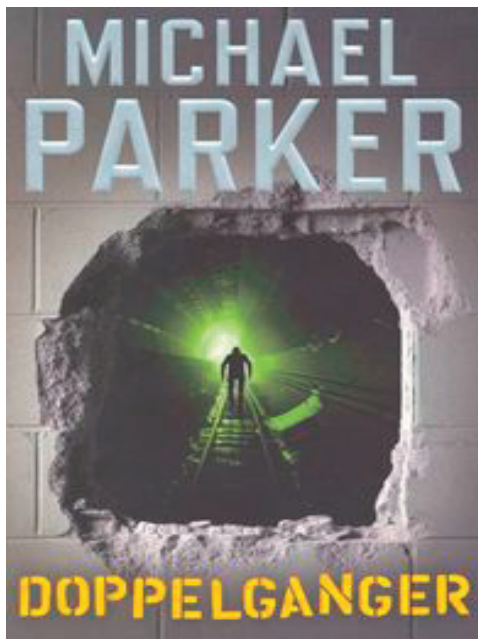
such scientific and technological changes can be seen in the social networking tools of our world with mobiles, SMS, email and MySpace.

For Justine the strength and fascination of SF is its ability to engage in the personal – to take issues and ideas and transform them within the context of the story, to present new perspectives, raise new concerns or simply challenge our cultural and social thinking. (I'm reminded of George Orwell's *1984* as an example of this for strong political and technological commentary.) Justine is a passionate reader of manga and anime, and believes that these 'genres' make a significant contribution to SF. When they were questioned, we discovered that all the young readers at the debate were also fans! (Do you stock graphic novels in your library?)

Justine's husband, Scott Westerfeld, took the discussion further with a tantalising view of Fantasy and magic – with or without SF. Scott describes himself as an 'organic' SF fan – every day, everywhere – even when watching TV. His perception of SF, an embodiment of the 'personal' as explained by Justine, has allowed him to create books that are very popular, particularly with girls. The appeal of personal transformation – ways of changing yourself, your mind and your relationship with others – coupled with the use of geeky fun technology such as 'hoverboards' makes his various series a real hit with young readers. Scott describes his *Uglies* series as his most SF books while *Midnighters* are at the other end of the range, being more about magic. This explains the interesting juxtaposition that Scott offered between SF and fantasy – a hoverboard is just a broomstick!

He sees a crucial difference between magic and technology. 'A light switch doesn't care if you are the "seventh daughter of the seventh daughter". Anyone can turn on a light switch. Technology doesn't have "chosen ones". Even though there are people who are better at it, it works for anybody and can be used for the defined purpose'.

So that's why Scott likes SF – just because it doesn't have 'chosen' people. It is also why he believes that fantasy is so popular, as it catches the notion of 'being special', whereas in SF, once you manufacture the hoverboard,



everyone can have one. Scott provided his own quotable quote: 'The rule in fantasy is that the world doesn't change. The rule in SF is that the world does change'.

Michael Parker took the debate beyond books, to the world of movies (*Eragon* and *Harry Potter*) which is helping to bring SF and Fantasy into the mainstream. Michael is passionate about SF because the genre can be the vehicle to work through present and future moral and social issues by allowing us to dream and imagine what we can be, to engage with our future without our political blinkers, and so to be able think differently. A scientific concept about extra-terrestrial civilisations, the Drake equation, which was developed by Frank Drake in 1961 as a way to focus on the factors which determine how many intelligent, communicating civilisations there are in our galaxy, has inspired Michael's life. Michael is convinced that SF nourishes a sense of curiosity about the world beyond the covers of the book being read. We now also have a visual culture that is overwhelmingly about SF zones, such as manga, anime, movies, and television. Manga and anime are an important part of the SF genre exhibiting both technology and personal themes. So the media are helping to bring SF into the mainstream.

However, for Michael, SF needs to be promoted differently to be 'the new black'. Many thrillers take in elements of SF, such as books by Matthew Reilly and Michael Crichton, and 'tomorrow' is a regular theme. Michael's book *Doppelganger*, has been promoted as a mainstream thriller without genre identification on the cover. Yet the action takes place in a SF parallel world with a gritty urban feel set at nearby Town Hall station in Sydney. The website for the book provides outstanding information about the book – and its personal, societal and SF themes. Looking at this explains Michael's suggestion that 'speculative fiction' as a title would allow a genre to encompass future, past or just tomorrow!

Finally, Deborah Abela confirmed the futuristic technology twist inherent in the SF that makes her books so popular. Her *Max Remy*, *Super Spy* series captures the personalisation of our world, and the predictive possibilities inherent in SF settings. She creates lots of things driven by technology, and suggests that all her

gadgets are scientifically based though invented in her imagination.

The 'New Black' or not?

By whatever name, or whatever the range that science fiction encompasses, there is no doubt that SF is popular, and may well be increasing in popularity. Our author debaters have given us some clues about the SF genre today.

Discussion amongst teacher librarians on OZTL Net, in the lead-up to the debate, also saw some interesting comments about the genre – both from convinced SF fans to those unfamiliar with the genre (who have been persuaded to SF by Scott Westerfeld's books and the enthusiastic following he has amongst adolescent readers).

There is plenty of science in Science Fiction. Does it matter where SF ends and where fantasy begins? Not at all, that is, unless you make the mistake of categorising a book and therefore dismissing it from your reading choices or reading promotions. Teacher librarians on OZTLNet enthusiastically agreed that SF is popular. They offered the following thoughts: 'It is the engagement with the characters, the sense of place, the issues that are tackled, and the author's voice that makes or breaks the book'. 'Girls will read SF, particularly if it contains challenging relationships, love interest and issues'. 'The secrets are the characters and stories, with the personalities and relationships – more than the science and the technology'.

Anime, manga, movies, TV shows (from *Dr Who* to *Heroes*), online games (*World of Warcraft*) and 3D virtual worlds (*Second Life*) are emerging as pervasive influences for a technological orientation in our world. The global classroom is an easy reality when communication is synchronous and multi-threaded. How much easier is it, then, for our students to engage in ideas via a SF (personal or magical) framework than it might have been ten, twenty or fifty years ago? You no longer have to be a geek to watch a SFTV show or read a SF book.

If you have not yet dipped into SF, there are many excellent www sites available for information. Start with <http://www.scifi.com/> and just keep going! Then jump across to SciFan at <http://www.scifan.com/> for books and links of interest.

Because we are in a Web 2.0 world of social networking spaces and online communication, I have a sense that there is a growing ease with the science fiction genre in all media forms. Our students have an easy familiarity with it all, and enjoy it! They are ready to question and explore the personal side of these imaginary places and spaces, to better understand their own futures.

Combine this with the enthusiasm for reading SF and fantasy by both boys and girls in our schools (for reasons which fit perfectly with the ideas raised by our four authors during the debate) I am lead to conclude that maybe – just maybe – science fiction is the new black!