

## A Note on the Genre of “Futuristic Fiction”

by  
William Leiss (2006)

Utopian stories are part of a very old literary and philosophical genre that imagines human society sometime in the future, often using a dialogue format to convey a picture of the future society’s features. The most famous early modern work in this genre is Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516); this book, as well as Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1602) and Johann Andreae’s *Christianopolis* (1610), were strongly influenced by the first work of its kind in European civilization, Plato’s *Republic*. But it is only in Francis Bacon’s short work, *The New Atlantis* (1627), that the authentically modern form emerges, because it was Bacon who introduced the commitment to science and material progress into the utopian vision of the future.

The first stage of industrialism in the early nineteenth century breathed new life into this genre; many authors responded to it by combining utopianism, industry, and socialism. The most important early writers and crusaders for this vision were Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Charles Fourier (1772-1837), and Robert Owen (1771-1858). Owen was also an industrialist who tried to put his ideas of a “new moral order” into practice in the cotton mills at New Lanark. (Throughout the nineteenth century various types of experimental “socialist” communities sprang up, especially in the United States.) The three notable fictional works on the English side of this tradition appeared towards the end of the century: Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872), Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), and William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890).

Morris is important because he is one of the first writers in this genre to turn away from the belief that industrialism is an appropriate economic basis for a harmonious society of the future. However, what emerged as the dominant tradition in this imaginative fiction thereafter placed a strong emphasis on new gadgetry made possible by modern technology. The fifty-four novels by Jules Verne (1828-1905) provided enormously popular stories along these lines, as did many of the fifty novels written by H. G. Wells (1866-1946). Wells is sometimes called the “father” of science fiction, although this can be misleading, since many of his novels, especially the later ones, emphasized social rather than technological themes. However, perhaps the most profound imaginative work of fiction about science and ethical responsibility ever written was Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (first published in 1818) – a book that is all the more remarkable in that the author was nineteen years old when she wrote it!

In the twentieth century this tradition split into two streams. First, there is the literary stream which may be called “futuristic fiction.” Here important novelists turned utopia into “dystopia,” a bleak vision of possible futures. Its first great expression occurs in *We*, written in Russian by the naval engineer Yevgeny Zamyatin in 1920, but published first in English translation in 1924. The better-known works that followed were Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1948). There is also the trilogy by C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945). Many women writers, notably Doris Lessing and Ursula LeGuin, have entered this field, and of course there is Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). In this stream the story line does not depend primarily or even importantly on machines or gadgets, especially those which supposedly appear in the future. Rather, the focus is on forms of social organization that are presented as being a possible outcome of present-day trends. “Futuristic fiction” attracts two different types of authors. One is the writer of “serious” prose about social trends, who chooses the novelistic form as a way of dramatizing the account and, possibly, appealing to a wider audience. Such authors commonly produce no other kinds of fiction. The other type is the accomplished literary figure, such as Huxley or Atwood, who writes novels, short stories, and poetry, and who occasionally chooses the “futurist” setting.

Second, there is the “science fiction” stream, dominated by the mass-market paperbacks and Hollywood horror films that emphasize futuristic gadgetry. Yet there are important works in this sub-genre which rival those in the literary stream in terms of imaginative power and which focus more on social as opposed to technological issues. Notable here are the remarkable series of books by Philip K. Dick (1928-1982), including the three stories that have become major movies (*Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, and *Minority Report*); by the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem (1921- ), author of *Solaris*, *Mortal Engines*, and many others; and by Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), especially *I, Robot* and the three novels of his *Foundation* series. And there are many other writers, such as John Brunner (1934-1995, especially *The Sheep Look Up*, 1972), who have produced interesting novels of this type.

*Note: For a discussion on the origins of futuristic fiction, see pages 61-71 in chapter 3 of The Domination of Nature, by William Leiss (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994).*