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The Underappreciated Intersection of Science Fiction and Satire

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Introduction

“The purpose of satire is, through laughter and invective, to cure folly and to punish evil; but if it does not achieve this purpose, it is content to jeer at folly and to expose evil to bitter contempt.”

– Gilbert Highet

My History with Science Fiction

I fit the stereotype of an adolescent social outcast gravitating toward science fiction as an escape. Though my parents tried to find help for me, our rural county in northern New York had very few mental health resources available for children, and I was a preteen before anyone (ironically, just my regular pediatrician) even suggested that I might have Asperger’s (as it was then called). In the meantime, from first grade to fifth grade I was bullied daily, including being called “faggot” about five times a day on the school bus.

I had one friend on the bus with whom I got into Star Wars, and after he moved away in third grade I remained into Star Wars. It may come as a shock that this was not considered cool at that time and place. My classmates in fourth and fifth grade teased me for liking a franchise they considered vastly inferior to the Lord of the Rings movies. This only drove me further into it as an escape. I liked the movies, of course, but after I discovered in a local library that books chronicled many further adventures in a galaxy far, far away, I tried to collect and read all of them. (Given the sheer number, this was an impossible goal, and Disney would later declare almost all of them non-canon anyway.)

Star Wars was one of my first ventures into what I called science fiction. (Some will argue that it isn’t science fiction at all – it’s known as “space opera,” which some consider a subgenre of science fiction while others consider it a separate genre – but such distinctions were lost on me at

that age.) I always had a vivid imagination, and science fiction expanded its scope a thousandfold by opening up the potential of worlds, creatures, and events beyond anything available on my native planet. Because I wasn't thrilled about my native planet, it also provided escape. I even daydreamed that when I grew up I would live in a space station above the Earth with my wife, a lightsaber, and a bunch of robots.

Yet some science fiction didn't just seek to provide escapism, but to be "serious," to remain rooted in Earth's problems. The most memorable example was Bruce Coville's *My Teacher is an Alien* series. My mother gave me her worn copy of the first book, and I discovered the fourth one by chance at the library before realizing there were two more in between. The general premise of the series, which starts a total mystery and becomes fully clear in the last book, is that Earth is the only planet in the galaxy where people haven't figured out how to live in peace and harmony with each other and share their resources equitably. The galactic government is so terrified of what could happen when humans develop interstellar travel, it debates whether to destroy Earth entirely before that happens. A few individuals have been sent to Earth disguised as elementary school teachers to make observations and decide whether the human race has any redeeming qualities and deserves to be spared.

I am still fond of Bruce Coville, but after I grew up I realized how heavy-handed this series' message was. Making Earth the *only* planet in the galaxy with significant social or environmental problems, a creative choice that makes us humans look even worse, seems a bit gratuitous and implausible. The author also doesn't get into any of the underlying causes of those problems. The message seems to be that we just need to stop being stupid and mean to each other. Granted, these are young adult books and it's understandable that they wouldn't get into a lot of political complexity, but I'm not sure the oversimplified message is actually useful to anyone. Most of the

target demographic probably already believes in being good to the environment and the people around them. What are the factors that prevent this belief from playing out on a global scale?

This is a recurring theme in science fiction, a paradoxical contrast to escapism. Many other writers have also used it to critique the follies of humankind, albeit usually with a bit more subtlety. Sometimes this rubs me the wrong way. I love critiquing the follies of humankind, but it often comes across to me as holier-than-thou if not handled with the greatest of care. It comes across to me as the author saying, “Look at me, I am so wise and enlightened, and I have a very profound message to share with all you simpletons.” It just isn’t attractive. It’s by no means limited to science fiction, but most noticeable to me in this genre – science fiction makes me think about space, which makes me think about how tiny and insignificant each of us are, which makes me very cynical when a tiny and insignificant science fiction author wants me to think their message is the most important thing ever put in print.

Another series I devoured at a young age was *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. Because I was so young and lived in a different culture and decade, much of it went over my head, but I understood enough to find it hilarious. Pure entertainment, pure escapism. In middle and high school, I made some embarrassing attempts to copy Adams’ one-of-a-kind writing voice (British slang and all) that, while since abandoned, I hope have left a lasting and noticeable impact on my own writing voice.

My mother once said something to the effect that this series wasn’t really science fiction, it was comedy. I didn’t know what she meant. Now I can think of a couple things she may have been referring to. First, Adams always prioritizes humor over plausibility. Most science fiction aims to create the illusion that it could really happen somewhere, sometime – or, if that’s impossible, to dazzle the reader/viewer so much that they don’t notice or care about such

considerations. (Even Star Wars, which routinely flouts the laws of physics, has countless tie-in materials to patch up every plot hole and explain the galaxy's history, politics, ecology, etc. in mind-numbing detail.) Adams makes no attempt to convince us that his Infinite Improbability Drive is a viable future technology or that the ridiculous *deus ex machinas* which often save his characters' lives are anything but ridiculous *deus ex machinas*. These and many more aspects of his stories justify themselves by being funny. Because he doesn't take himself too seriously, readers will let him get away with anything.

Second, no matter how far the series ranges across time and space, it never gets far from Earth or Earth's problems – but again, these are treated through a lens of humor. The first book opens as the local town council is attempting to demolish series protagonist Arthur Dent's house to build a bypass. Arthur is very annoyed about this, and particularly about not having been warned in advance, and then the bureaucracy, incompetence, and apathy of town councils and government in general are satirized in this exaggerated exchange:

“But Mr. Dent, the plans have been available in the local planning office for the last nine months.”

“Oh yes, well, as soon as I heard I went straight round to see them, yesterday afternoon. You hadn't exactly gone out of your way to call attention to them, had you? I mean, like actually telling anybody or anything.”

“But the plans were on display...”

“On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them.”

“That's the display department.”

“With a flashlight.”¹

¹ “Torch” in the original British edition.

“Ah, well, the lights had probably gone.”

“So had the stairs.”

“But look, you found the notice, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Arthur, “yes I did. It was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying ‘Beware of the Leopard.’”

(Adams, *More Than Complete Hitchhiker’s Guide*, 9-10)

Not much later, the issue becomes moot when a fleet of Vogon spaceships arrives to demolish the Earth to build a hyperspace bypass, whatever that is. The Vogon captain responds to protesting humans with, *“What do you mean you’ve never been to Alpha Centauri? For heaven’s sake, mankind, it’s only four light-years away, you know. I’m sorry, but if you can’t be bothered to take an interest in local affairs that’s your own lookout.”* (Adams, *More Than Complete Hitchhiker’s Guide*, 26) The parallel is obvious enough that even I got it as a kid, but it’s not heavy-handed because it’s funny. The subversion of expectations in having the alien invaders just doing a mundane construction job is also funny. When my mother said that the series is comedy, not science fiction, perhaps she was thinking of how the Vogons aren’t really an alien race, they’re every mindless bureaucrat and insufferable government office on Earth. And yet the story never comes off as a screed against them. It remains a fun story.

Anecdotally, from my college experience, I believe writers are conditioned to frown upon escapism and humor as less sophisticated and less desirable, and to feel they must strive to write “serious” things with “deep” messages. I don’t say this to criticize my classmates, many of whom have been very talented, and of course everyone doesn’t need to conform to my personal tastes. For that matter, the fewer people who write like me, the more I can fill a unique niche and stand out in the crowd of literary offerings. But in one creative non-fiction workshop, classmates

couldn't even consider that I might try to be funny, and gave useless feedback like "I don't think a video rental store is really 'a modern, permanent sort of business.'" (I don't claim that it was the funniest joke ever, but it should at least have been recognizable as a joke.) In my last fiction workshop, for the first time I had one classmate who also wrote something intentionally funny, and she expressed hesitation as to whether that kind of writing was okay. Another classmate responded that her having to ask such a question proved that academia had gone wrong somewhere.

Science fiction and humor are both apt tools for commentary. Combining the two is, I think, an apt and very underrated solution to the pitfall of the former coming across as preachy on its own. I want to emulate Douglas Adams in that respect even though I'm no longer copying his voice. I want to write funny science fiction adventures that function on one level as pure entertainment, while still carrying some of those "deep" messages for readers to pick up on and think about without having their intelligence insulted. I want to explore that potential in my thesis. I also want to stretch myself and improve at writing satire. While I'm reasonably skilled at writing funny things, satire per se is a challenge because metaphor, allegory and the like are a language in which I'm not entirely fluent. In my last fiction writing workshop I wrote a satire of police brutality set in a medieval fantasy world, and it was about as subtle as getting pepper-sprayed in the face.

Preparatory Reading

To explore these ideas, I read from three main categories: critical books, craft books, and actual examples of science fiction or fantasy (some satirical, some "normal"). I wasn't aware of much science fiction satire aside from Douglas Adams – science fiction *comedy* abounds, but if it isn't commenting on real-world issues, it's not quite what I'm going for. Nonetheless, I think these

genres (on top of my existing familiarity with science fiction, of course) gave me enough principles to take away for my own work.

Racial Formation in the United States by Michael Omi and Howard Winant covers one of the first topics I also hoped to cover. A lot of the book frankly went over my head, but I got the gist that racial categorizations are more complex and fluid than just skin color or ethnic origin, and that getting rid of them altogether and just looking at everyone “the same” as many would like to do is not a sufficient way to address structural racism. Looking at how these categorizations have changed gave me room to ponder how they might change again in the hypothetical future world of a science fiction story.

The Science Fiction Novel: Imagination and Social Criticism has four authors arguing about whether social criticism in science fiction actually accomplishes anything, and (as you might expect) don’t come to a definitive answer. But Robert A. Heinlein comments in his chapter,

By means of science fiction one can (as one does in mathematics) examine the extremes of a social problem, search it for inflexures, feel out its changing slopes. Nearly all stories in the ‘main-stream’, by their very frameworks, are forever self-excluded from this important form of analysis.... Science fiction joyously tackles the real and pressing problems of our race, wrestles with them, never ignores them – problems which other forms of fiction cannot challenge. For this reason I assert that science fiction is the most realistic, the most serious, the most significant, the most sane and healthy and human fiction being published today. (Davenport 59)

Though the book is older than my parents, it gave me food for thought about whether I expect to accomplish anything besides the personal satisfaction of making fun of things and people. I still don’t have a definitive answer, but I’ll see how people respond to my stories.

I became aware of Lisa Yaszek's essay "The Women History Doesn't See: Recovering Midcentury WOMEN'S SF as a Literature of Social Critique" because it was included in a book called *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings* that I considered as a craft book. I didn't end up getting the book, but this essay seemed applicable. It documents how female authors between the end of World War II and the 1960s feminist movement used science fiction to critique nuclear warfare and racial injustice. Yaszek attempts to "recover" this history that's little known, perhaps because feminist historians don't take science fiction seriously, perhaps because science fiction historians don't take women seriously, or perhaps both.

As the title implies, *The Craft of Science Fiction: A Symposium on Writing Science Fiction and Science Fantasy* carries advice on various aspects of science fiction writing from fifteen published authors. These authors would not all agree with each other about what exactly defines the genre, and they might occasionally critique each other's work, but taken together they offer up a lot of solid recommendations on how to write something both entertaining and plausible even if you're not a science expert. Luckily for me, too, Jack Williamson notes in the conclusion to his remarks, "Its readers are a bright and open-minded lot, with few sacred cows. Its traditions encourage exploration of every sort of problem and satiric attacks on every kind of target." (Bretnor 213) This brief statement reinforced my belief that the potential here has been woefully underused.

Gilbert Highet's *The Anatomy of Satire* looked so boring that I was tempted to skip it, but turned out to be a great read. Other than a mention of *1984*, it says nothing about science fiction, but instead traces the origin and development of satire from the ancient world to the early 1960s (when it was published), using dozens of illustrative examples. It did make me second-guess a little whether I'm just mocking for the sake of mocking, and whether that makes me an ugly person.

Hight notes that while satire pretends to present a reality, it always is and should be based on distortion. It “usually does this in one of two ways: either by showing an apparently factual but really ludicrous and debased picture of this world; or by showing a picture of another world, with which our world is contrasted.” (Hight 159) This sounds like a perfect match for science fiction, with its potential for depicting alien worlds or hypothetical future versions of this one. As he notes, satire has often employed fantasy for a similar reason.

Of course *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series (or trilogy in five parts, as Adams called it) was a no-brainer when I got to actual examples. I hadn’t read it in over a decade, yet almost every word of *The More Than Complete Hitchhiker’s Guide* compilation was like an old friend (I say “almost” because this edition was a little more Americanized than the one my parents had before I loaned it to someone who lost it). This time around, I read it in conjunction with *The “Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” Revisited: Motifs of Science Fiction and Social Criticism*, a thesis by Christian Erkenbrecher that unpacked the first book’s social criticism in more ways than I would have appreciated on my own even as an adult. Douglas Adams was even more of a genius than I realized. In addition to the satire, it was instructive to see how he subverted usual science fiction tropes in ways more subtle than a straight-up parody that nonetheless enriched the stories. Erkenbrecher also finds himself asking “Does Social Criticism in a Comic SF Novel Work?” and decides that “many questions remain unanswered and leave the reader contemplating what he had just read, which is exactly the way Douglas Adams would have wanted it.” (Erkenbrecher 80)

I also revisited Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*, another of my favorite books, and his posthumously published short story collection *Look at the Birdie*. This gave me a feel for his style and for the difference in structure between a novel and a short story. I noticed a striking difference, too, between how obvious the messages or themes were in the short stories compared to the novel.

It was almost difficult to believe that they came from the same author, but I presume he didn't have as much room to experiment in the same form. *Cat's Cradle* is obviously an anti-war and anti-arms-race book, but so many of the details just seem weird and random and not necessarily symbolic of anything. This is the kind of subtle satire I need to get better at. Reading his work so close to that of Douglas Adams, I also noticed an obvious influence of his voice on the latter's. This presumably means it's had an influence on me too. The circle of life continues.

Even though it's fantasy, I read *Equal Rites* by Terry Pratchett expecting a satire of sexism, as it tells the story of a baby girl who accidentally receives a dying wizard's staff even though only boys can be wizards in this world. Though it is comedic, and though it does have a theme of the protagonist overcoming her society's rigid gender roles, it was for the most part just a fantasy adventure and didn't teach me as much in that regard as I had hoped. Still, it was a good story and got me outside of the sci-fi echo chamber a little.

My main takeaway from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* was that it's funny when people repeat each other or contradict themselves. It's especially funny if the people contradicting themselves are authority figures. If all instances of those two things were removed from the novel, it would be a pamphlet. It's not very sophisticated humor, but it becomes funnier by virtue of being repeated over and over, as if the repetition itself is the joke. I tried to emulate it. This novel also clued me in to the fact that sometimes satire is done through exaggeration, the opposite of the subtlety I had in mind, so then I had to wrestle with that and decide which approach is better for which situations.

My original plan was to write a novella, so to get a feel for the structure of a satirical novella, I reread *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin A. Abbott. I wasn't aware of any satirical science fiction novellas. This one is more fantasy, but close enough. Abbott does at least three things simultaneously – tells an entertaining story in a creative world, teaches

mathematics, and satirizes the sexism and classism of Victorian England. He performs the latter by unironically attributing prejudiced views against women and lower classes to the character narrating the story, but since this is in a fantasy world where everyone is a geometric shape, the wrongness of such prejudice is a little more obvious even to readers who might have held similar views against other humans in real life. It seems Abbott, who presented himself as merely passing along the narrative given to him by this character, did receive some pushback from readers, as he wrote in the Preface to the Second Edition:

It has been objected that he is a woman-hater.... I gather that in the course of an imprisonment of seven years he has himself modified his own personal views, both as regards Women and as regards the Isosceles or Lower Classes. Personally, he now inclines to the opinion of the Sphere that the Straight Lines [women] are in many important respects superior to the Circles [aristocrats]. But, writing as a Historian, he has identified himself (perhaps too closely) with the views generally adopted by Flatland, and (as he has been informed) even Spaceland, Historians; in whose pages (until very recent times) the destinies of Women and of the masses of mankind have seldom been deemed worthy of mention and never of careful consideration. (Abbott iii)

Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* provided two examples of straight science fiction without the satirical elements. These both deal with hypothetical futures, the former on another planet and the latter on this one. They're both rather cynical about humans' ability to create a prosperous future, and both result in disaster. That's right up my alley. They both incorporate the known scientific knowledge of the time and extrapolate from it to create something plausible. *Oryx and Crake*, ironically, feels more outlandish than the one set on another planet, but in my judgment there's nothing in it that couldn't happen given

advances in gene modification technology and the nature of greedy corporations. I like the approach of throwing the reader into this bizarre version of the world and then backing up and explaining how it came to be the way it is. It's also more in line with the style I tried to follow in my own writing, to include plausible scientific details but not in as much technical depth as *Red Mars*, which I feel would make it less accessible to some readers.

Additional works that weren't on my list, but which I had time for, included *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* and its sequel *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* by Douglas Adams, *Blade Runner* (originally titled *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) by Philip K. Dick, *The Merlin Effect* by T.A. Barron, the Incredible Hulk novel *Stalker from the Stars* by Len Wein et al, a compilation of short stories from the 1930s-50s entitled *More Adventures on Other Planets*, and various more recent short stories in the online magazine *Lightspeed*, such as "The Revolution Will Not be Served with Fries" by Meg Ellison, "Memoranda from the End of the World" by Gene Doucette, and "Anything Short of Death is Survivable" by David Anaxagoras. These all gave me a little more well-rounded idea of what science fiction looks like in practice. An exact definition is difficult to settle on, but most would agree that a sci-fi plot is dependent in some way on an advance in science and/or technology, which is speculative in nature but grounded in reality to some extent. If it just uses magic, it's fantasy. If it has outlandish elements like people breathing in space with no explanation, or if the plot is generic enough to take place in any genre, the average reader would still consider it science fiction but most authors would not. Space travel is a common feature (and is of most interest to me) but is not necessary. *Blade Runner* and *The Merlin Effect* both take place entirely on Earth (though the latter also incorporates fantasy elements, as you could probably guess).

I noticed that the short stories began *in media res* and then went into a lot of exposition to catch the reader up, which novels also do, but not to such an extent. They each focused entirely on one setting and one main character, not having room to spare on a lot of travel or subplots or fleshing out multiple characters. The older ones were also a sobering reminder that my stories will someday be contradicted by the advance of science no matter how much I strive to be realistic and extrapolate from the science of today. (Especially when, like these authors, I remain in our own solar system.) Still, they have a great charm, a feeling of boundless adventure that stands the test of time. The newer stories tend to have a more cynical tone, as one would probably expect even if they hadn't been published in the second year of a global pandemic. It also seems to me that the authors must try harder to come up with something original that leaves an impression on the reader. Some of them are humorous. I hope my contributions will be in good company with them.

About My Stories

With this background, I wrote three short stories to illustrate the potential for satirical science fiction to comment on real-world social or political problems in ways that don't come across as preachy or detract from the excitement of a narrative. I aim to strike a balance in my writing between realism and humor. Rather than being totally goofy and implausible like the *Hitchhiker's Guide* stories or ignoring the laws of physics like Star Wars – as much as I enjoy both of those franchises – I want to create worlds and plots that I think could actually exist. So I tried to think logically about how our current society might evolve in terms of culture and technology from where it is now. I tried to be scientifically accurate insofar as possible, though like almost all science fiction authors I had to cheat sometimes, e.g., with faster-than-light travel. Most of my humor derives from character dialogue or narration as opposed to absurd events. I tried to make

my characters realistic, but they tend to be funnier in their day-to-day conversations than the average person (if I do say so myself).

Short Story 1: In a future era when Earthlings have regular contact with aliens, the concept of race has evolved to include them. Everyone is considered “human”, and each species from each planet is considered a “race”. Racial prejudice between humans has been all but eradicated because differences in skin color or ethnic origin no longer seem significant. Humans are more unified by default because aliens are the new “other”. I do think it would take something of this magnitude to effect such a change in real life. (Omi and Winant argue that race will never go away, and I think they’re right, but they didn’t take aliens into account.) It also helps that globalization has led to peoples and cultures mixing all over the planet. Having learned from the past, most Earthlings know better than to be racist against aliens either, but many are prejudiced against the Florgs because of a recent war between their respective planets. It’s similar to how many Americans today turn a blind eye to their prejudice against Middle Easterners in the name of national security.

My challenge here was to come up with more thoughtful and useful commentary than just “racism is bad.” I wanted to satirize people’s denial of it, and even the construct of race itself – that is, while it may forever be necessary to divide humans up into these categories, I think that necessity is unfortunate and doesn’t reflect well on us as a species. It shouldn’t matter but I know it does and always will. To my great regret, I didn’t get invested in the movement for racial justice and police reform until it exploded after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, but my motivation dates to January 14 of that year, when a grossly incompetent officer of the Logan City Police Department abused me for breaking no laws at all while his partner silently watched. I recognize that if I had been any race other than white, Hayden Nelson well might have “feared for his life” and done worse than swagger, yell, and threaten me until I became suicidal. Since then,

I've tried to channel my contempt for law enforcement into activism so that my trauma won't have been in vain.

Short Story 2: War between Earth and other planets is conducted in virtual reality simulations to save the expense of transporting personnel and equipment across several light-years, but (spoiler alert) those who die in VR get euthanized in real life. People accept this because it doubles as a solution to overpopulation, and soldiers sign up for it voluntarily to get their schooling paid for. I was inspired by *Catch-22*, the recent snafu in Afghanistan, and my recurring thoughts on the injustice that so many good young people have had to die because their nations' leaders couldn't get along. War satire is nothing new, but unfortunately it remains as timely as ever, and I hope my take on it is unique.

Short Story 3: In the distant future, humans are extinct, but a network of robots keep each other and the Earth's high-tech infrastructure in pristine condition. They typically communicate by interfacing digitally with each other, becoming part of a hive mind that shares thoughts instantaneously. However, a computer virus emerges that destroys some robots and damages others beyond repair, and interfacing this way becomes too much of a risk. (Conspiracy theorists believe it evolved naturally, but it was really created in a lab somewhere by a deranged robot.) The robots must rediscover verbal language and communicate face-to-face. Being cut off from the hive mind makes the protagonist robot feel isolated and depressed. As it comes to understand itself as an individual rather than just part of the whole, it also experiences an existential crisis over the futility of maintaining a dead world.