CONTEMPLATING THE DIVERSE BEAST: ANALYZING SCIENCE FICTION'S MARGINALIZATION

A Thesis

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Jeffrey Vincent Yule, B. A.

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The Ohio State University

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Master’s Examination Committee:

Debra A. Moddelmog

Christian K. Zacher

Approved by

[Signature]

Adviser

Department of English
For My Mother
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VITA

January 13, 1965 ........................................... Born—Herkimer, New York

1987 ......................................................... B. A., Colgate University,
                      Hamilton, New York

1987-1989 .................................................. Learning Center Specialist
                      (English), Herkimer County
                      Community College,
                      Herkimer, New York

1990-Present ............................................ Graduate Teaching Associate,
                      The Ohio State University,
                      Columbus, Ohio

FIELD OF STUDY

Major Field: English
# Table of Contents

**DEDICATION** ................................................................. ii  
**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ..................................................... iii  
**VITA** ........................................................................ iv  
**INTRODUCTION** ............................................................ 1  

## Chapter  

| I. SCIENCE FICTION IN THE ACADEMIC-CRITICAL COMMUNITY | 20 |
| II. CHARACTERIZATION AND SCIENCE FICTION—CANON AND STATUS | 49 |
| III. RESPONDING TO THE LEM CRITIQUE | 74 |
| IV. THE MISREAD SHORT STORIES OF WILLIAM GIBSON: “HINTERLANDS” AND “THE WINTER MARKET” | 93 |

**CONCLUSION** ................................................................. 111  
**WORKS CITED** ............................................................... 120
INTRODUCTION: STARTING POINTS

There is perhaps more nonsense spoken about science fiction than any other variety of narrative. (58)

—David Hartwell, Age of Wonder

There is an old Indian folk tale about four blind men who encounter an elephant and try to identify it. Since each man’s vantage point is different, they all describe the elephant differently. One fellow finds the animal’s tail and assumes it is a rope; another believes a leg is a log; the third man thinks an ear is a fan. The fourth man is sure that whatever he and his companions have found is infinite, because he cannot find an end to the massive animal’s body. The “point” of this story is that our understanding of things depends on how completely we perceive them and how well we, as a group, synthesize the information we obtain. Science fiction’s current situation on the margin of academia and criticism has many parallels with the situation of the elephant, with academics and critics most often filling roles analogous to those of the blind men. Everyone is quite sure of what it is they have found, but they cannot agree because
everyone is too busy defining the whole based on its parts instead of synthesizing their findings to produce a more satisfactory answer.

The use of the word “beast” in my title is not meant to suggest that I consider science fiction a genre of beastly fiction. In fact, although much of the writing is clumsy, I consider the genre no more beastly than any other sort of fiction. (What fictional form, after all, doesn’t have more than its share of clumsy writers and flawed texts?) Instead, I chose the term “beast” to suggest the great size and diversity of the science fiction corpus. Simply put, as the fourth blind man recognizes, the elephant is a very large animal. “Beast,” for me, captures something of that magnitude which “animal,” with its neutrality regarding matters of size, does not. My title is simply meant to suggest that the large, diverse genre of science fiction is often categorized by critics who are relying on insufficient information (critics, as it were, feeling the texture of only a tail or a leg) or who are drawing imprecise conclusions (assuming too quickly that the tail or leg beneath their hands reveals not only the texture of the entire object under study but its “true nature” as well), or both. In order to analyze science fiction’s current situation in the academy and literary criticism, I will begin by setting my hands on the beast.

A Historical Overview

Hugo Gernsback coined the term “science fiction” in 1929, referring to the type of fiction he began publishing in the magazine Amazing Stories in 1926. “Science fiction” supplanted the earlier term “scientifiction,”
while still carrying the same meaning: “the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision” (Gernsback in Fiedler, *Dreams* 11). Gernsback’s definition is serviceable although not particularly comprehensive, but it recognizes that science fiction predates *Amazing Stories*. Thus, although Gernsback mentions only Verne, Wells, and Poe specifically, he could easily have added Mary Shelley for *Frankenstein* (1818), Herman Melville for “The Tartarus of Maids,” Samuel Clemens for the posthumously published “Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes,” Nathaniel Hawthorne for, among other stories, “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” George Chesney for *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) or Robert Louis Stevenson for *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).1 Certainly not all these works are charming in the modern sense of the term, but they fulfill the spirit of Gernsback’s definition at least as well as Poe’s fiction. Later in this introduction I shall return to the issues involved with defining science fiction; to prepare for that venture, though, I will first review some of the fundamentals relating to Gernsback’s science fiction publications and their effect on the genre’s literary status.

Before the 1920s, there was no stigma attached to science fiction, nor was it differentiated from other fiction as it is today (Blish 23; Fiedler, *Dreams* 11; Lem 49). H. G. Wells, for instance, was a central literary figure of his day and carried on literary correspondences and friendships with, among others, Joseph Conrad and Henry James. Although he eventually fell out with both men, in the years before those breaks they saw him as a talented peer.2 Thus, although James disagreed with Wells on
numerous matters of style, he also praised some of his works, especially *The Time Machine*. Indeed, it is some measure of the Wellsian influence that after James’s death, a substantial but unfinished story of time travel entitled *The Sense of the Past* (1917) was found among his papers (Franklin x), while parallels between Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907) and Wells’s *The Invisible Man* (1897) suggest a similar Wellsian influence (McConnell 48, 116).

During the last decades of the nineteenth-century and the first decades of the twentieth, nothing resembling today’s well-established academic and critical circles existed. New novels were reviewed in a variety of newspapers and magazines, but fiction as a whole was not subjected to the sort of scrutiny characteristic of contemporary academic criticism. Nonetheless, as literature was gauged during this period, Wells was well-respected, both as a popular writer in the sense that his books sold very well and as a technician in that the authors of the period who aspired to art rather than simple craft took his work, including the scientific romances, seriously.

By the late 1920s and ’30s, however, science fiction had fallen into disrepute due to a process which is commonly referred to today as “ghettoization.” Traditionally, critics explain this phenomenon as the result of the inferior writing in Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories* and its imitators (Aldiss; Blish 21-28; Hartwell; et al). Gernsback’s editorial standards placed great emphasis on ideas but not on style, originality, or even what might best be described as simple linguistic fluency. As a result, works by authors like Wells and Poe were presented alongside distinctly derivative
stories by writers whose fiction was limited by a lack of creativity or a lack of concern with the fundamentals of good writing—or both. The situation was exacerbated by commercial considerations. So many science fiction periodicals demanded material during the pulp boom that editors were forced to print inferior material if they were unable to locate anything better, and the dynamics on the demand side of the economic equation were equally problematic. Since pulp writers were poorly paid, they were forced to write quickly to make even subsistence salaries. As a result, productivity rather than carefully edited prose or stylistic innovation was their paramount concern. This insular, popular fiction environment is the ghetto where modern science fiction began. One can hardly be surprised that these manifestations of science fiction were not well-accepted by selective readers, despite their popularity with pulp audiences. But we ought to remember that science fiction was very popular.

Indeed, there was an explosion of science fiction during the '20s and '30s, in fiction as well as in comic books, films, and radio. Not surprisingly, however, science fiction’s very popularity was a major contributing factor to its commercial, academic, and literary ghettoization, just as its popularity continues to contribute to its general marginalization. After all, to appeal to a broad, popular audience, any artistic form must cater to the lowest common denominators of taste. It must be simple so that as many people as possible can understand it. The result in science fiction is sci-fi—all the inferior manifestations of science fiction.

So it was that science fiction gained popularity and notoriety but not respectability. Later, a variety of editors would supplant Gernsback’s
authority and, working at other publications, dictate which sorts of science fiction would be published. John Campbell’s *Astounding*, Horace Gold’s *Galaxy*, and Michael Moorcock’s *New Worlds* began to recognize science fiction’s sociological and thematic possibilities, developed an interest with basic stylistic and grammatical competence, and established a hospitable environment for innovative science fiction. Since Gernsback, a host of authors, including but not limited to Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, Ursula Le Guin, and Kurt Vonnegut, has written science fiction that bears little resemblance to the clumsy, ungrammatical fiction many readers associate with the pulps.

Many mainstream authors and academics have also experimented with and/or commented on one or more forms of science fiction, including Kingsley Amis, Margaret Atwood, Anthony Burgess, William Burroughs, Leslie Fiedler, Aldous Huxley, Doris Lessing, C. S. Lewis, and Robert Scholes. Samuel Moskowitz taught the first college class on science fiction at the College of the City of New York in 1953 (Delany, *Starboard* 166). In 1959, the Modern Language Association inaugurated the continuing seminar on science fiction (Delany, *Starboard* 166), and now there are hundreds of science fiction classes at high schools, colleges, and universities all over the nation. Currently, numerous academic conferences, scholarly books, and journals are devoted to the form. Yet despite all these considerations and the fact that science fiction is now both widely published and available, the academic-critical community’s acceptance of science fiction is at best qualified.
Many university English departments, for instance, still offer no courses in science fiction, while others offer them more as a concession to student interest than out of a sincere belief that science fiction is as worthy of study as Victorian novels, Renaissance drama, or twentieth-century poetry. The courses do exist, but they are taught by whichever faculty members or graduate students can be found to handle them, often regardless of their experience or familiarity with the genre. As Leslie Fiedler phrases it, the genre has been claimed by academics “who need it to bring life into dying classes in traditional literature” (Dreams 22). That core reading lists for masters and doctoral exams rarely include works of science fiction only further suggests that the universities’ embrace of science fiction is halfhearted, especially in light of the fact that the genre has been one of the most prevalent twentieth-century fictional forms. Old prejudices die hard. And so it is that I come to this study.

Defenses generally counter specific charges. Such is the case, for instance, with Sidney’s An Apologie for Poetrie (1580-83) or John Dennis’s The Usefulness of the Stage (1698), both of which replied to Puritan attacks—one on poetry and the other on theater. A defense of science fiction, or at least this particular defense of science fiction, takes a slightly different approach. I am interested in coming to a more complete understanding of science fiction’s current marginalization. A blow-by-blow refutation of the attacks made against science fiction would be both simplistic and tedious. Thus, by the same principle that encourages reviewers and critics to expend as much time as possible paying attention to the best work available, I will focus primarily on the criticisms, both
explicit and implicit, which are the most significant either because their incorrect assumptions have influenced the way science fiction is perceived or because those critiques accurately locate weaknesses in science fiction and suggest avenues for real improvement.

I shall begin by defining science fiction as I and others have used the term. This should avoid many of the problems which arise when critics use the same term to refer not only to different texts but also to different social or cultural phenomena. My first chapter locates science fiction on the contemporary academic-critical landscape and more clearly defines the nature of its current marginalization. Chapters two and three address the most significant criticisms of the genre, explaining how, despite their flaws, these critiques offer valuable insights into the genre. In my second chapter, I focus on the issue of characterization, both to address the matter on its own terms and to set the stage for the following chapters, where the matter of characterization remains a central thread of my discussion.

Chapter three responds to the broad critique of science fiction offered by Stanislaw Lem's pivotal essays: "Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case—with Exceptions" (1973), "Cosmology and Science Fiction" (1977), and "Metafantasia: The Possibilities of Science Fiction" (1981). In my final chapter, I move beyond an analysis of science fiction's current situation to attempt some corrective criticism by examining two overlooked examples of characterization. By offering a case study of William Gibson's short stories "Hinterlands" (1983) and "The Winter Market" (1986), I seek to show how criticism, even by well-intentioned commentators familiar with science fiction, can fail, while suggesting the manner in which both those
inside and outside of the science fiction community can address the work of an author who is seen by both groups as a significant writer.

Definitions and Terminology

Although genres resist definition (Delany, “Reflections” 236; Rose 1-4), and, indeed, the term “genre” is itself problematic (Frye 246-248; Roberts 199-204, 217, 225), critics traditionally open discussions of science fiction with definitions anyway. For the purposes of this study, I will outline the generally accepted boundaries which previous criticism has established for science fiction before explaining the specific terms I will use. The necessary starting point for both of these tasks is an overview of the difficulties in formulating specific, generally applicable definitions of science fiction. Existing genre definitions admit a wide range of works which quite clearly are not science fiction—including Sinclair Lewis’s Arrowsmith, Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead, and Bram Stoker’s Dracula—while excluding such central science fiction texts as John Campbell’s “Night,” Hal Clement’s Mission of Gravity, and Walter M. Miller’s A Canticle for Leibowitz (Knight, “What Is” 62-63). John Campbell even states that since science fiction encompasses all fictional possibilities, all other fictional forms represent special cases of science fiction (Spinrad 35).

The overarching absurdity of attempts to define science fiction is perhaps best reflected by Roger Zelazny, who comments that whenever he hears a reasonable definition of the genre, he writes a science fiction story which violates that definition (Alterman 25). But this effort provokes
more than authorial playfulness; it leads to the critical fatigue captured in observations that even a "generally acceptable literary definition" of science fiction is impossible (Spinrad 34). Briefly put, seeking a comprehensive definition of science fiction is something of a Grail quest, and past attempts suggest that the most critics can hope to do is describe the genre's overall tendencies (Delany, "Reflections" 236), defining science fiction as a historical phenomenon, "a developing complex of themes, attitudes, and formal strategies that, taken together, constitute a general set of expectations" (Roberts 200; Rose 4; Suvin in Stableford 68). Fortunately, although I, like my predecessors, cannot formulate a comprehensive definition of science fiction, an overview of the genre's tendencies and the wide range of expectations readers bring to science fiction texts will adequately serve my purposes. Still, within the confines of that framework, a variety of distinctions will be both necessary and useful.

Most broadly, science fiction is a subcategory of fantasy whose events represent extrapolations of current scientific facts, hypotheses, or methods. Often, science fiction writers construct worlds and societies by positing fundamental differences between the technology, biology, sociology, and/or scientific advancement of our world and their fictional worlds. These differences are used as points of departure. Some obvious examples include dystopias such as Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and George Orwell's 1984, as well as such diverse works as Samuel Delany's Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand, William Gibson's Neuromancer, Robert Heinlein's Starship Troopers, Ursula Le Guin's The
*Left Hand of Darkness,* and Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris.* We cannot, however, readily distinguish between fantasy in general and science fiction in particular, because many science fiction stories, including most of H. G. Wells’s scientific romances, straddle the boundary. The notable exception is *The Island of Dr. Moreau,* where the fantastic events—the creation of beast people from animals—represent straightforward possibility, as Wells himself realized.³

The beast people created by Moreau’s procedures are the stuff of “hard” science fiction; that is they adhere to the realities of scientific possibility. Current technology may not yet allow for such procedures, but they are certainly within human reach. In *First Men in the Moon,* however, Wells imagines a substance which directly contradicts accepted physical laws. The substance, Cavorite, resists the effects of gravity and allows Wells’s protagonists to propel their ship to the moon. If we were to consider only Cavorite in making a genre evaluation of *First Men,* Wells’s novel could hardly be looked upon as science fiction. There is nothing remotely “scientific” about Cavorite—it is a purely fantastic creation. Still, in a broader manner, *First Men in the Moon* exhibits the general tendencies I have outlined, because, like *The Time Machine,* *The Island of Dr. Moreau,* and *The War of the Worlds,* it extrapolates carefully and systematically using evolutionary theory as a point of departure. The creatures inhabiting the moon in *First Men,* the Selenites, represent one potential outcome of evolution, just as do the Martians in *The War of the Worlds,* the devolving beast people of *The Island of Dr. Moreau,* and the Eloi and the Morlocks of *The Time Machine.*
In fact, science fiction, even the hard-core variety, almost always embraces at least some decidedly unscientific elements, including "impossibilities" such as anti-gravity, faster-than-light space crafts, and time machines, as well as occasional instances of sloppy science, such as a recurrent blunder in some science fiction works where Jupiter's gravity is erroneously described as "crushing" when it is approximately four earth gravities—significant by terrestrial standards but far from lethal (Blish 37). Of course the difficulty is that while we can identify sloppy science, we cannot be as certain about supposed impossibilities. There always exist a chance that some "impossible" science fiction creations might become possible as a result of future discoveries. Opinions vary among scientists—particularly physicists, whose field is most generally at issue—on the distinction between possible and impossible (Geffe et al), but one need only examine the theories of some physicists—Stephen Hawking, for instance—to see a wide range of remarkable possibilities that are being set forth as viable. Indeed, in light of theoretical work and recent discoveries made accessible to nonscientists by such scientist-authors as Stephen J. Gould, Carl Sagan, and Lewis Thomas, it has become something of a cliché to note that contemporary science is far stranger than contemporary science fiction.

To a large extent, the ambiguous boundary between what is possible and what is impossible prevents critics (and scientists) from formulating a comprehensive, generally acceptable definition of science fiction based on distinctions between scientific possibilities and impossibilities. The boundary between the two is simply too hazy, and even when it is not, the
works under discussion, like Wells’s scientific romances, contain a combination of hard scientific possibilities and apparent impossibilities. As a result, each reader must decide for her- or himself which works do or do not constitute science fiction. Consequently, definitions of science fiction remain remarkably subjective with individual sensibilities rather than standardized, quantifiable criteria determining what amounts of hard science, questionable science, and outright fantasy allow a work to be categorized as science fiction, as straightforward fantasy, or as a category which straddles the boundary, science fantasy. This subjectivity also characterizes efforts to define science fiction, since critics invariably define science fiction to match their own idea of the genre’s “true” nature (Knight, “What Is” 62), particularly in their tendency to avoid describing the genre as it exists in favor of making prescriptions for its “proper” composition (Stableford 68). Still, as Delany observes, “Words mean what people use them to mean” (Jewel 9), so although definitions describing science fiction as those works we point to when we use the term (Knight in Gunn 71) may seem flippant, they actually recognize the broad definitional difficulties involved with science fiction.

With the wide range of these difficulties in mind, I offer what seems to me the best list of science fiction’s tendencies and characteristics. The list—taken from Damon Knight’s “What Is Science Fiction?”—concludes “that a story containing three or more of the [listed] elements . . . is usually perceived as science fiction; with two, it is perceived as borderline; with one or none, it is non-science fiction” (63). Knight’s list includes the following elements:
2. Technology and invention.
3. The future and the remote past, including all time travel stories.
4. Extrapolation.
5. Scientific method.
6. Other places—planets, dimensions, etc., including visitors from the above.
7. Catastrophes, natural or manmade. (64)

Knight’s elements provide a critical field test which helps determine a fiction’s proximity to the science fiction genre. The test is not foolproof, however, since problematic works such as Pamela Zoline’s “The Heat Death of the Universe” can and do appear in science fiction publications where, regardless of their lack of extrapolative “what if” elements, they ask to be read according to science fiction expectations (Rose 4), despite the fact that those expectations will certainly vary from reader to reader. Fortunately, although we cannot adequately and comprehensively define science fiction (and, indeed, such a definition would likely prove constrictive rather than liberating), we can depend on Knight’s field test as a general indicator of the what the broad category of science fiction entails while identifying some its various modes and setting forth some exact distinctions, as between such terms as “genre science fiction,” “in-genre,” “mainstream science fiction,” “sci-fi,” “science fiction,” and “SF.”

“Genre science fiction” refers to those works written by experienced science fiction authors for experienced science fiction readers, including such works as William Gibson’s “The Gernsback Continuum” (1981) or Neuromancer (1984) and Larry Niven’s Ringworld (1970). The term is
used in contrast to "mainstream science fiction," which refers to works written for a mainstream reading audience. Due to what Charles Nicol calls its more straightforward, precise style (150), readers generally find mainstream science fiction more accessible, while genre science fiction is usually less so, appearing to mainstream readers as narrative masses of jumbled science fiction images, scientific explanations and partial explanations, and complex composition (Nicol 154). We might conveniently think of the accessibility of mainstream science fiction as resulting from its similarities to mainstream realism, since it generally avoids referring to or drawing from genre conventions unfamiliar to mainstream readers. The phrase "mainstream science fiction" is essentially interchangeable with "literary science fiction" or Robert Scholes's term "minimal SF," in that works in these categories treat "contemporary life with only a single slight distortion of normal expectations" (Scholes 61). Some examples are Daniel Keyes's Flowers for Algernon (1967), Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five (1968), and Jack McDevitt's The Hercules Text (1986). In this study, I will use the term "in-genre" to refer to critics or authors familiar with the science fiction tradition, as opposed to mainstream authors or critics who experiment with or discuss science fictional forms, often without developing a sufficient expertise either to meaningfully discuss the genre or to write fictions that draw from its traditions.

In general, the term "sci-fi" (pronounced skih fee) refers to popular, commercial, and/or artless manifestations of science fiction, including not only fiction but also comic books, films, television programs, and toys.
Sci-fi is the average person's conception of the genre: narratives filled with rockets ships, ray guns, and bug-eyed alien monsters. In older commentary, the term is used as fashionable shorthand for science fiction, as in Francis Abernathy's 1960 "The Case for and Against Sci-Fi." (In this context, it is likely to be pronounced [sigh fie], however.) It is still used in this sense by critics unfamiliar with science fiction criticism, as, for instance, in Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep*, where Booth refers to all genre science fiction as "sci-fi" (60-61). Thus, sci-fi is often simply "Science fiction as it is referred to by those who do not know better" (Friend 48).

"Science fiction" remains the overarching term which refers to all fiction in the genre, regardless of any evaluations of its merit, just as the term "novel" refers equally to a Harlequin romance or *Moby Dick*. The abbreviation "SF" presents a slight problem for this study as well as for science fiction criticism in general, however. It often refers to a broad marketing category of English-language, commercial fantastic literature which would include the works of J. R. R. Tolkien as well as Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov; this is how Hartwell and Spinrad generally use the term. In many cases, however, it is contemporary critical shorthand for "science fiction"; this is, for instance, the case in much of Samuel Delany's criticism as well as the criticism published in the journal *Science-Fiction Studies*. In this study, I use science fiction instead of "SF" to avoid confusion, but if a critic I quote should use the abbreviation as anything other than critical shorthand, I will make that distinction clear in context. Also when I write about science fiction, I do not mean the broad marketing
category generally referred to by the shorthand "SF" as some use the abbreviation. I shall neither defend nor substantially discuss works which are generally categorized as fantasies or magical realism, whether by Tolkien, Borges, or Marquez. No value judgment of those works is implied by this exclusion, nor should one be inferred: my focus is strictly a matter of necessity.

The distinctions between these terms often determines whether a critic's meaning is understood or misinterpreted. To clarify matters, when I express an interest in better understanding the critical issues surrounding science fiction, I use the term "science fiction" broadly, but when I speak of defending science fiction, I am not referring to all science fiction. I favor positive selection. Just as the specialist in Victorian literature would find the serializations of *Varney the Vampire* an inferior fictional analogue to serializations of Charles Dickens's work, I, too, make distinctions between the various works I encounter. Consequently, many broad critiques of science fiction (Abernathy; Koestler; Staggers; and others) are of peripheral interest to this study, since, whether their authors realize it or not, their critiques maintain credibility only if they are read as being directed at the lowest common denominator of science fiction, sci-fi.
Notes: Introduction

1 See H. Bruce Franklin’s *Future Perfect* or Samuel Moskowitz’s *Science Fiction by Gaslight* for examples and discussion of such early American and British science fiction.

2 Wells and Conrad remained friends for approximately twelve years, Wells and James for about fifteen. These and other literary friendships are detailed in numerous works on Conrad, James, and Wells, but the chapter “Of Art, Of Literature, Of Mr. Henry James” in David Smith’s biography *H.G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (151-176) provides a useful, succinct overview of Wells’s many “close friendships in the literary world of his time” (151).

3 In a note which follows the story, he rightly states that Moreau’s experimental creations were “within the possibility of vivisection.”

4 Peter Nichols’s *The Science in Science Fiction* offers a good general overview of unscientific science in science fiction, with the chapters “The Limits of the Possible” (66-87) and “Where Science Fiction Gets it Wrong” (190-201) providing a discussion particularly pertinent to hard science fiction. John Huntington’s “Hard-Core Science Fiction and the Illusion of Science” offers a cogent, brief overview of the dynamic that allows for the
mixing of science and fantasy in works which still fall under the science fiction rubric.

5 It is worth noting, however, that even the terminology of science fiction's subcategories has various meanings. For instance, Norman Spinrad defines sci-fi as science fiction that depends on the generalized plot skeleton common to pulp-fiction. In this case, the particularized image system of the story is irrelevant, so in the Spinradian sense of the term, science fiction could include such genre stereotypes as bug-eyed monsters or ray guns without falling into the sci-fi category (Spinrad 21).
CHAPTER I: SCIENCE FICTION IN THE ACADEMIC-CRITICAL COMMUNITY

We come to every book trailing clouds of expectations; some part of our mind has already stamped a label on any new book before we have started reading the first page. (69)

—Thomas J. Roberts, An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction

From the late 1920s through the early 1960s, science fiction was overtly labeled extraliterary, both by those inside and outside the literary establishment. Now it is at least located somewhere on the literary landscape, although in qualified terms. When critics or scholars discuss science fiction, they are prone to statements about their interest in “good,” “serious,” or “literate” science fiction. Similar qualifications about an interest in novels, short stories, or drama would appear not only self-conscious but defensive. Obviously, some nerves remain exposed despite the fact that attitudes towards the genre have changed and are continuing to do so. Still, a careful analysis of the academic-critical community reveals that some longstanding critiques of and stereotypes about the genre remain firmly entrenched, for reasons which I will shortly address. What partially masks science fiction’s marginalized status is the tendency of contemporary
criticism to avoid longer, overt critiques of science fiction in favor of brief, offhand dismissals.

Two such dismissals are found in works by critic Wayne Booth and author Michelle Herman. In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Booth writes: "How do I weigh the lively adventure offered by many a piece of sci-fi against the thin characters and frequently incoherent moral worlds too often found there?" (60-61). Two distinct charges against science fiction are implicit in Booth's question: one directed towards its characterization and another, on ethical grounds, at its "frequently incoherent moral worlds." Michelle Herman's short story "Auslander" contains a more general and equally quick jab at the genre. The title character, a translator, thinks about the down side of her career:

She was being fanciful; she had proofread too many romance novels lately. With this thought she felt a pang of self-pity. She had lied when she'd said she was busy. She had not had any real work since early fall; she had been getting by with freelance proofreading—drudgery, fools' work: romance and science fiction, houseplant care and rock star biographies. (207)

Science fiction is "fools' work," rather than serious or challenging or, as with novels in general, even potentially challenging or interesting. Unlike Booth's passing comment, this is a blanket indictment. In both cases, the authors' conclusions are presented as givens requiring neither explanations nor elaboration. The audiences of both works are expected not only to understand these sudden critiques of science fiction but to agree with them. This is one sort of overt attack on science fiction, but the genre's
marginalized standing is also perpetuated more subtly by both the attention and lack of attention mainstream literary critics pay to it.

In *The American Novel in the Twentieth Century* (1978), for instance, Miles Donald describes science fiction as one of "the two categories [of popular fiction] which seem most currently worthy of intelligent interest" (177), but his discussion of the genre is neither well-informed, current, nor, finally, intelligent. Donald uses dated novels as his central examples, calling, for instance, Frederick Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* one of the "most reputable of recent science fiction works" (178) despite the fact that the book was published in 1953 and Donald is writing over twenty years later. Instead of buttressing his discussion with a more extensive survey of genre literature, Donald allows his opening paragraph to showcase his ignorance. After a first sentence which describes *Amazing Stories* as having begun publication during World War II—instead of in 1926 when its first issue actually appeared—Donald names as two of science fiction's "best exponents" Robert Speckley and A. P. Lovecraft (instead of Robert Sheckley and H. P. Lovecraft), and then provides an overview of science fiction fundamentally identical to stereotyped accounts of the genre from the early 1960s. One might excuse Donald if these oversights were simple proofreading mistakes, but a close reading of the chapter in the context of the book doesn't support that conclusion.

Donald sprinkles the names of well-known science fiction authors like Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein into his discussion along with the mainstream science fiction author Kurt Vonnegut and the borderline
science fiction/supernatural horror writer H. P. Lovecraft. What the reader
notices, however, is that Donald’s generally competent approach to the
twentieth-century novel is curiously muddled here, as if he had not really
read the works he was discussing but was basing his conclusions on the
work of others. It is too much, of course, to expect that a broad survey of
twentieth-century American fiction could achieve anything nearing
comprehensiveness. Still, after Donald successfully discusses details
including the variance between John Dos Passos’s merits and his critical
reputation and competently manages such tasks as analytical overviews of
Faulkner and Updike, his critical surface-skimming of science fiction is
striking. Samuel R. Delany (listed in the index as “Delaney, S. R.”) merits
half a sentence—sharing that space with Ursula Le Guin. The thematic and
stylistic richness of Delany’s work—even what he had written through
1978—argues for more than a cursory comment that his novels Babel 17
and The Einstein Intersection might represent an “elaborate allegory of the
problems of being black in America” (190). The same could be said of
Donald’s anemic treatment of Le Guin or of a variety of authors about
whom Donald shows no awareness, including Philip K. Dick. Donald,
however, seems almost completely unaware that any worthwhile science
fiction has been written since 1965, ignoring the work of the American
writers who were influenced by or a part of the New Wave movement of
the 1960s and ’70s. Such an oversight is roughly equivalent to discussing
Joyce’s importance to the novel without mentioning anything he wrote after
his 1916 A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.
Donald's attempt is a not atypical of mainstream critical efforts addressing science fiction. Discussions of the genre are frequently either bungled badly or the works are seen as so unimportant that both critics and editors allow treatments of science fiction to go to press in the sort of poorly proofread condition Donald's study exhibits. Alternately, such studies simply ignore science fiction. Thomas Daniel Young, for instance, found no essays on science fiction worthy of inclusion in his *Modern American Fiction: Form and Function* (1989)—I was, in fact, unable to find any mention of the genre whatever within its pages. Bradbury and Ro's *Contemporary American Fiction* (1987) mentions only the film *E. T.: The Extra Terrestrial*. Otherwise, these studies lead their readers to conclude that science fiction has nothing whatever to do with contemporary American fiction. Bradbury's *The Modern American Novel* (1983) at least mentions that the fiction of both William Burroughs and Kurt Vonnegut draws on "popular science fiction" (152, 157). Moreover, Bradbury's phrasing hints that some form of science fiction, set in opposition to the popular type he mentions, might exist. The reader is left to her own devices to determine what that category, which Bradbury would probably term "literary" or "truly worthwhile" science fiction, might include, although he reveals that Burroughs isn't a part of it, although Vonnegut may or may not be.¹

Although these various statements about and failed treatments of the genre may appear to be unrelated incidents, they are not. The utterance of Herman's character in "Auslander" has its source in the same set of assumptions as Booth's nutshell criticism of science fiction, Donald's
inadequate treatment of the form, and Bradbury’s, Ro’s, and Young’s inattention to it. Broadly speaking, the academic-critical community is either ill-prepared to discuss science fiction or simply uninterested in it. Delany’s term for this radical unfamiliarity is “rupture” (Starboard 83), and he discusses some significant examples of his own, as does Norman Spinrad (34-56). What strikes me as a centrally important question is, “Why has science fiction continued to remain either unfamiliar or uninteresting to mainstream academicians and critics?” or, in terms of what John Updike calls “the crucial question,” “What keeps science fiction a minor genre, for all the brilliance of its authors and apparent pertinence of its concerns?” (126). The answer I propose is that the genre continues to be marginalized because of its variance from accepted norms in three distinct but related areas: its apparent lack of mimesis, the reading protocols associated with the genre, and, finally, its unique sociological dimensions.

Realism and Mimesis: The Strange Subjects of Science Fiction

Robert Heinlein rightly observes that “Even fiction of the most sordid and detailed ashcan realism is imaginary—or it cannot be termed fiction” (6), a fact which Brian McHale observes in more scholarly terms when he, like Robert Scholes, notes that “Any fiction of any genre involves at least one novum—a character who did not exist in the empirical world, an event that did not really occur” (McHale 59; Scholes 61). Thus, the difficulty mainstream readers and critics have with science fiction must not
be that it concerns imaginary places or events, since imaginary events are
the necessary province of all fiction, but rather that the imaginary places
and events that are its subject matter are too distant from everyday reality.
More briefly, the genre is not sufficiently mimetic. To be reputable,
contemporary fiction must be, as Damon Knight suggests, “laid against
familiar backgrounds (familiar, at least, to readers of reputable fiction—as
far as the reader’s personal experience goes, a Dakota wheat farm may be
as exotic as the moons of Mars)” (Wonder 3). In contemporary fiction,
the issue is not one of relevance necessarily, but of familiarity. In fact,
science fiction is more often concerned with the present and the world we
inhabit rather than with abstract futures or other worlds. As Delany
observes and many other critics recognize, science fiction “uses the future
as a narrative convention to present significant distortions of the present”
(Delany, Starboard 47; Jordin 60; McHale 59-60; Roberts 13; Scholes 29,
61-62; et al). But those distortions are very unfamiliar indeed, since the
type of novum we most often find in science fiction is not “at the level of
the story or actors but in the represented world itself” (McHale 59).

Consider a work which does comparatively little to dislocate the
reader from everyday experience: Jack McDevitt’s The Hercules Text
(1986). Early in the novel, a physicist tries to persuade a NASA
administrator that aliens are using a pulsar as a transmitter. The
administrator, Quint Rosenbloom, doesn’t doubt that extraterrestrial
intelligence is possible but remains unconvinced by the evidence because
such discoveries are not made by “well-run government agencies” (20).
Simply stated, his philosophy follows a rationale that the remarkable is not
meant to and does not, by nature, intersect the mundane. There are too many pressing concerns, and the bottom line, he says, is that “The President is not going to want to hear about Martians” (21).

As educated people, many scholars and readers are, like Quint Rosenbloom, willing to accept the possibility that life might exist elsewhere in the universe or, to locate other centrally science fictional events, that people will make amazing discoveries and develop remarkable technologies. But although most people can admit to such possibilities, they do not expect to see them suddenly become proven facts. For most people “real life” is an aggressively normal, stable place that parallels Rosenbloom’s view of government agencies and reality. Strange or wondrous things might happen, but they don’t happen here. As a result of this mentality, John Updike’s comment that “Science fiction . . . rarely persuades us and involves us in the way the quietest realistic fiction can” (128) makes perfect sense. Thus, while McDevitt’s physicist sees his data as evidence of an intentionally created message beacon, Rosenbloom, a practical man, sees the data as “a goddam series of beeps” (22).

It is a matter of perspective. In McDevitt’s novel the exponentially-timed pulse sequences are, of course, the creation of an alien species. For my purposes, the question they raise is what place do the marvels of science fiction or the remarkable revolutions of science and technology that often fuel science fiction have in the life of a well-read but otherwise normal individual, whether an academic or critic?

Certainly the majority of revolutionary scientific theories are beside the point of most readers’ lives, or are at least perceived as such. Darwin’s
theory of evolution created a major controversy and still occasionally raises tempers and generates news, but the theories which predominate in the twentieth century relate not to biology but to physics, a field far more difficult for laypeople to understand and, consequently, far more difficult to popularize. The vast majority of people simply leave physics to the physicists, even more than they leave the general field of science to the general category of scientists. In a specialized world, most of us naturally accept that there is no need for everyone to be conversant in every discipline. The inventions that result from scientific advancement will enter into widespread production and use whether we, as individuals, understand the specifics of their workings or not. The dynamic may be unfortunate, but it is understandable. How many of us, after all, despite having a general awareness of their importance, truly understand Einstein’s theories, let alone the work of the physicists who followed him? Moreover, how often do we feel obligated to understand how a device works just so long as we are capable of operating it?

The numerous technological marvels of contemporary life are a bit more comprehensible than theories and, as such, are perfectly acceptable. Compact disc players, video cassette recorders and personal computers, for instance, are ubiquitous now, although they were nowhere near so common as recently as ten years ago. Many such devices are, of course, left to specialists, whether trained (as with the technicians who operate hospital Catscans or Magnetic Resonance Imagers) or informally self-educated (as with the family member who can actually program the video cassette recorder or use the household computer). Such everyday items as these, or
pocket calculators, microwave ovens, and cordless phones, would have been interesting elements of a science fiction story written during the 1930s, '40s, or '50s. Now they are too ordinary. It would appear, then, that the distinction between what we consider normal and what we term "unusual" in life or "unacceptable" or "unrealistic" in fiction is partly a matter of pacing—it takes time for unfamiliar things to become ordinary.

The problem with science fiction seems, then, to be the suddenness with which it presents the unusual. Technologies spring into existence, history is rewritten, worlds are colonized, World War III is fought, and aliens met—often before the end of the first chapter. In everyday experience, new technologies or scientific revolutions gradually ease their way into people's lives, becoming, by degrees, normal. In science fiction, the considerable amendments of everyday experience—scientific, technological, social, and/or historical—are jarringly sudden. And it is very easy for a reader to observe that the events being described are, first, not true, and, by everyday standards of realism, so unusual that they seem unlikely ever to be true. To many, of course, science fiction's lack of directly mimetic content argues against its literary value. Thus, even though science fiction utilizes significant narrative distortions of the present to address itself to contemporary issues rather than to some vague future, that fact is often lost in the confusion caused by the significant distortions of the present required to create a science fictional world. As a result, the relevance of events in science fiction appears marginal, because, unlike the events of a Dakota wheat farm, their distance from everyday reality is too great. Like so much science and technology, a great deal of
science fiction’s subject matter is not the province of the mainstream reader.

The average academic or critic, then, like the president McDevitt’s administrator refers to, does not to want to hear about Martians. She or he has been taught to appreciate mainstream literature, what Delany calls “mundane fiction” and Heinlein “non-science fiction.” And these works reflect the same sort of attitude toward the remarkable. Heinlein captures the nature of this dynamic in a passage which anticipates Robert Scholes’s discussion of “empirically based Anglo-Saxon criticism” (28):

In contrast to science fiction . . . non-science fiction . . . at most shows awareness of the byproducts of scientific method already in existence. Non-science fiction admits the existence of the automobile, radar, polio vaccine, H-bombs, etc., but refuses to countenance starships and other such frivolities. That is to say, non-science fiction will concede that water is running downhill but refuses to admit that it might ever reach the bottom . . . or could ever be pumped up again. It is a static attitude, an assumption that what is now forever shall be. (5)

The static attitude mainstream fiction embodies is in direct variance with science fiction’s inherently speculative dynamic. Surely, this is a significant factor in the genre’s marginalization, since the genre’s fundamental lack of mimesis ties it to, although often wrongly, the image of undisciplined romance.

Consider, for example, the overview I have provided of McDevitt’s *The Hercules Text*. As a rule, most plot summaries strike me as ludicrous and unpromising—whether I enjoy the work the summary is derived from
or not. Science fiction, it seems, is hindered by the fact that plot summaries make it sound even more ludicrous because of the manner in which summary heightens the gulf between science fiction’s events and the sort of “reasonable” events associated with the realistic tradition. As a result, even an entirely self-consistent work such as McDevitt’s is likely to suffer summary dismissal. Thomas Roberts inadvertently recognizes this in a different context when he discusses the strangeness of such science fictional creations as the personal force field. “The body shield is absurd, of course, but not because it is scientifically impossible,” he writes. “It is scientifically impossible for Glendower to call spirits from the vastly deep in Henry IV, Part One, but he does so and we do not object” (179). But science fiction’s unusual mimesis is merely a starting point. The nature of the genre’s departure from so-called realistic literary norms is also complicated by and closely tied to a variety of fundamental differences between the reading and writing conventions associated with mainstream and science fiction.

Reading Science Fiction: A Strange Process

As I have noted, one problem science fiction poses for mainstream readers is the suddenness with which it presents the unusual. But there is a more complicating dimension to the genre’s strangeness than the sudden appearance of technologies, alternative historical events, World War IIIs, or alien encounters. The text itself is often daunting. Consider, for example, these passages by a pair of contemporary science fiction authors:
The police probe was ten kilometers from Tango Charlie’s Wheel when it made rendezvous with the unusual corpse. (80)

I stood there a long time before I took that first step back. Because she was dead, and I’d let her go. Because, now, she was immortal, and I’d helped her get that way. And because I knew she’d phone me, in the morning. (126)

The ghost was her father’s parting gift, presented by a black-clad secretary in a department lounge at Narita. For the first two hours of the flight to London it lay forgotten in her purse, a smooth dark oblong, one side impressed with the ubiquitous Maas-Neotek logo, the other gently curved to fit the user’s palm. (1)

The first passage is the opening sentence of John Varley’s short story “Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo” (1985); the second and third are both by William Gibson, from the opening sections, respectively, of “The Winter Market” (1986) and Mona Lisa Overdrive (1988). The reader has very little chance of meaningfully interpreting the first two passages as they are presented; in the last, though, Gibson’s context allows a tentative conclusion: “the ghost” is some sort of small, handheld device, although we cannot yet be sure what functions it serves. No matter how carefully we examine the first two passages, however, Tango Charlie’s Wheel, the unusual corpse, and the woman who is simultaneously dead, immortal, and
ready to use a phone remain inexplicable. We can guess (rightly) that the contexts of all these stories will reveal whatever answers we require, but until we have read on, we are left with a radically underdetermined text. These passages are characteristic of what Joanna Russ calls in media res beginnings, which contribute to the science fiction phenomenon of The Dislocated Reader, where the reader is “plunged instantly into a strange world” although “to the characters in the story . . . it’s not a strange world at all” (55).

In such essays as “About 5,750 Words,” “Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction,” “Science Fiction and ‘Literature’—or, the Conscience of the King,” and the book-length study The American Shore, Samuel Delany discusses this very phenomenon, attempting to explain mainstream readers’ lack of interest in science fiction by addressing the different reading protocols associated with mainstream and science fiction (“Reflections” 235). Many critics implicitly or explicitly recognize the variances in these reading strategies (Hartwell 5; Nicol 157; Stableford 68), and one of the main concepts upon which much of Delany’s work rests appears at least as early as Heinlein’s 1959 essay “Science Fiction: Its Nature, Faults and Virtues.” Here, Heinlein identifies science fiction’s use of secondary worlds in preference to realistic models as one of the main differences between the two fictional forms. But Delany’s discussion represents both a more comprehensive and a more refined attempt to understand the ramifications of the rhetorical variances of the two forms.

Closely analyzing science fiction texts and the way in which we read them, Delany explains that:
The play of meanings, contradictory or otherwise, that makes up the SF text is organized in a way radically different from that of the mundane text. . . . When we read science fiction carefully, we can see that practically any rhetorical figure operates differently in a SF text from the way the same, or similar, figure would operate in a text of mundane fiction. (Starboard 49)

Certainly, from the examples I have provided we can see that the manner by which a reader builds meaning from a science fiction text is different from the way the same reader would build meaning from a mainstream text. Words and phrases are combined in novel constructions and even familiar terms can take on meanings which must be ascertained through a story’s context. It is not surprising, then, that as Delany and others have noted, many people—even some sophisticated readers of mainstream literature—have difficulty with science fiction because they cannot connect unfamiliar textual elements and use authorial cues to construct the alternate worlds the texts describe (Starboard 50; Nicol 157). The ability to read such material is certainly not the exclusive province of the hyperliterate, however; nor does all science fiction require it. But the reading protocols required by some science fiction works are sufficiently distinct from their mainstream counterparts that science fiction might be perceived as poorly written by readers approaching it with mainstream expectations. Thus, genre science fiction is generally inaccessible to the mainstream readers, often appearing as daunting narrative masses of jumbled science fiction images, scientific explanations, and partial explanations (Nicol 154).
The processes involved in reading the two types of fiction are different enough to at least modify the view that reading choices are simply a matter of taste; instead, the tendency to read science fiction reflects a reader’s aptitude for and previous experience with that fictional form and its requirements. This is certainly an area that requires further investigation, but Delany’s conclusions have even broader ramifications for a contextualization of science fiction and literature. He sees them as distinct forms of discourse (Starboard 87-88) and goes so far as to state that “reading science fiction as if it were literature is a waste of time” (Starboard 100). By this Delany does not mean that science fiction should not be read carefully and thoughtfully; instead, he suggests simply that the criteria we use to evaluate science fiction’s merits and faults should be sensitive to science fiction’s anomalous structure and protocols.

There are some basic problems in Delany’s discussion of science fiction’s reading protocols, however. First, the protocols Delany describes are not necessary for mainstream science fiction texts such as Keyes’s Flowers for Algernon or McDevitt’s The Hercules Text. Similarly, not all non-mainstream science fiction is as daunting as the examples I provide. We should also note that the textual demands of science fiction are not entirely different from the demands of such modernist and postmodernist texts as Joyce’s Ulysses or Finnegans Wake, Borges’ Ficciones, or Barth’s Lost in the Funhouse. In these works, the texts require a range of activities that are not commonly required by realistic fiction: the playing of word games, the construction of secondary worlds, and the suspension of belief, among them. Yet critics have not backed away from them, defeated. But
although Delany may overstate the difficulties inherent to science fiction's reading protocols, he raises a significant point about the genre. As a single facet, the anomalous reading requirements of the genre would contribute no more to science fiction's marginalization than would the analogous requirements of a great many modernist and postmodernist texts. But these protocols, when viewed as one element contributing to the genre's marginalization, become more understandable.

The Sociological Dimension of Science Fiction: Strange Customs

Even in works written to introduce science fiction to unfamiliar audiences, such as Hartwell's *Age of Wonders* (1984) or Fiedler's *In Dreams Awake* (1975), the genre is negatively characterized. Science fiction is often called a drug, and the reading of science fiction is described as a drug habit (Hartwell 7-8), merely extending a longstanding metaphor equating science fiction readers with addicts (Amis 16; Fiedler, *Dreams* 18; et al). An extreme taste for anything might be called an addiction, of course, but one finds it difficult to imagine readers with a pronounced taste for Shakespeare or Henry James describing themselves as addicts.\(^3\) The distinction is significant. If an individual has a taste for something with which society does not approve, he is, quite literally, an addict, a pervert, or a misfit; if the same individual has a taste for something he ought to, he is a normal enthusiast, an aficionado, or an expert. A taste for science fiction is still linked with the former category rather than the latter, and
although the joking self-deprecation that equates some readers with addicts is rooted in the pulp era, its ramifications remain evident.

While children and adults might have hidden their taste for science fiction in the 1930s and '40s by tearing off the covers of their pulp magazines, an ongoing explosion of science fiction in books as well as comics, films, and radio had already begun. Science fiction as well as science fiction images became remarkably popular in the 1930s and '40s, especially among the young, and they remain so today (Hartwell 8). Numerous critics have observed that it is nearly impossible to live in our culture and remain ignorant of science fiction since the media landscape is so permeated with its imagery (Aldiss 276; Hartwell 65). The popularity and ubiquity of its images aside, however, the academic-critical community rarely embraces media-packaged science fiction. Still, the popular image most people have of science fiction derives from science fiction's mass culture manifestations, an error Roberts calls a "confusion of genres within a kind" (7). In this situation, an observer evaluates an entire genre on the basis of a few of its manifestations; thus, based on science fiction movies, television shows, advertising images, and toys, individuals form their opinion of the entire genre. As a result, science fiction is looked upon as belonging to the realm of children, associated with cartoons, toys, and comic books and is consequently viewed as something people ought to outgrow. If readers don't outgrow it, conventional wisdom suggests, there is probably something wrong with them. This generalization is sometimes supported by science fiction fans themselves.
Their interest in the genre leads them to become part of a subculture of like-minded people—many of them the very "addicts" I referred to earlier. These fans organize and attend clubs and science fiction conventions, produce amateur publications called fanzines devoted to their hobby, and correspond both by letter and computer mail. The stereotypical image of both the fan and the casual reader of science fiction is that of a physically unattractive, maladjusted adult or near adult with both underdeveloped social skills and literary tastes. The observations of in-genre authors and critics perpetuate this image. Thomas Disch, for instance, notes that both the science fiction subcategory cyberpunk and "traditional rocket-and-blaster science fiction . . . caters to the wish fulfillment requirements of male teenagers." Gary Wolfe confirms that science fiction "addresses the needs of adolescents and even adults who, at some stage in their lives, felt themselves to be unattractive or ill at ease in their own bodies" (66). Similarly, throughout his study of science fiction Hartwell characterizes the typical science fiction reader as maladjusted, although he reserves the phrase "fat and pimply population" (9) for describing fans. In much the same vein, Spinrad speaks of the "extravagantly costumed horde" (xv) to which general print and media critics refer in their dismissals of science fiction and presents the "psychic profile of the typical sci-fi fan" (25) in terms which suggest that such individuals are maladjusted.

Significantly, the social dynamic of fans is generally viewed by genre insiders as a phenomenon largely separate from "serious" science fiction criticism. Indeed, fans are commonly characterized as devoted, uncritical
readers who will gladly work through huge quantities of poorly written fiction (Amis 48; Donald 177; Hartwell 12-13; et al.), while selective, critical standards are implicit in the work of “serious” commentators. Contemporary science fiction criticism functions on the principle that just as there has been improvement in the quality of the fiction being written, there are also more qualified in-genre critics ready to discuss it. Few historical overviews of science fiction (including my own) fail to mention the improvement of genre fiction since its early pulp days. Moreover, the most well-respected science fiction critics—among them Samuel Delany, Darko Suvin, and Robert Scholes—are both sufficiently perceptive and well-trained to discuss that fiction. In fact, though, evidence suggests that the examples of Delany, Scholes, and Suvin are not broadly representative of science fiction criticism. Again, the work of in-genre critics suggests as much.

Norman Spinrad credibly explains the science fiction community’s broad acceptance of Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*, which won both the Hugo and the Nebula Awards, as the result of reader identification with the main characters. Spinrad describes how the protagonist, a “sexually arrested adolescent who becomes the savior of the human race through his prowess at war sports and video games” and his siblings, “two other sexually arrested adolescents who take over the world as electronic fanzine letterhacks” embody the self-image of many science fiction readers (25). Thus *Ender’s Game* “plays the plot game to perfection, warping the reader to total identification with a hero who is [the reader/fan] himself, who wins
battle game after battle game, slays the villains, becomes the savior of the human race, and gets the girl” (Spinrad 27).

Perhaps, then, that *Ender's Game* received recognition from readers in the form of a Hugo Award is understandable; after all, despite the critical estimation of the academic-literary community, the most popular contemporary English-language author is probably Stephen King. From the King example we can clearly see that the tastes of “uninformed” readers can no more be held against science fiction critics than they can be held against their mainstream counterparts. The Nebula Award *Ender's Game* received, however, was bestowed by the active science fiction writers and critics who comprise the Science Fiction Writers of America, a consideration which suggests that in-house standards are not all they might be. A possibility, which I present only tentatively, is that the social stereotypes regarding fans might be equally applicable to its more “serious” readers and critics—at least more than they would like to believe or, at least, admit to in print. After all, although the maladjusted hordes of fans may not be members of the Science Fiction Writers of America, it appears that some of their attitudes are represented among its membership. Indeed, the fans of one generation often provide many of the authors, editors, and critics of the next (Fleming 264; Friend 135; Moskowitz, “Fanzines”).

Certainly, as Spinrad observes, whatever associations mainstream readers or literary critics make between the eccentric or socially maladjusted behavior of science fiction fans and science fiction itself cannot have strengthened the genre’s reputation in the academic-critical community. It is, after all, easy for a majority to dismiss those things a
minority holds dear if the minority itself can be dismissed as a group of eccentrics. And the behavior of many science fiction fans provides ample grounds for dismissal, either on the grounds of trivial in-group politicking, the more overarching and silly self-importance captured in such insider views of fandom as Sam Moskowitz’s The Immortal Storm (1954), or the outrageous and unusual antics of fans celebrating at any one of the numerous conventions that take place all over the United States each year. For better or worse, their behavior is only normal in the context of celebrations like Mardi Gras.

But the importance of science fiction’s sociological dimension to the genre’s marginalization is more far reaching than the behavior of its antic fans. The exclusion of science fiction from literary status originally brought fans together with writers into a close-knit community that allowed for a degree of direct feedback between readers, authors, and editors that is without peer in contemporary literature (Fleming 265; Friend 83-89; Hartwell 158). This exchange has also had a significant influence on the form that in-genre criticism has taken. Not surprisingly, that tone tends towards one of three categories: blustery defiance, humbleness, or fear of outside influence.

Defiance is a form of self-affirmation in the face of external disdain. This response is represented by in-genre critics who name science fiction as the most viable literary form in a world of exhausted literary possibilities (Hartwell 197), describe it being more demanding than realistic fiction (Benford 95), call it “the most difficult of prose forms” (Heinlein 19-20), or even define other forms of literature as special forms of science fiction
(Bretnor in Amis 61; Campbell in Spinrad 35). Although the defiant critical tone is more characteristic of early in-genre criticism, the attitude which produced it is still implicit in the work of some recent commentators. It is not accidental, for instance, that one of the terms Samuel Delany uses for mainstream literature is "mundane fiction"; he intentionally and ironically reverses the relative status of the two genres through the use of this term, a good-natured jest, to be sure, but one whose very existence reveals a great deal.

The humble response operates from a different stance altogether. By gratefully acknowledging the attentions of "significant" critics, this type of criticism seems designed to lead science fiction gradually toward respectability. Writing of Robert Scholes's study *Structural Fabulation*, one critic flatly states "that all those who take science fiction seriously owe him much gratitude for placing his considerable prestige on that side of the literary lists" (Remington 48). This type of criticism is currently most evident in discussions of H. P. Lovecraft's fiction (Cannon 41-43), but it is present elsewhere as well, although often more subtly, as when science fiction critics refer to notices given to science fiction by such "well-known" mainstream critics as Leslie Fiedler (Hartwell 129-130).

Those who fear outside influence acknowledge that the end of science fiction's ghettoization in the pulps means it will be exposed to different influences, critics, and standards. Hartwell writes that science fiction is endangered by writers who adhere to mainstream literary standards and produce science fiction without adding anything to the genre (188) and also that science fiction is in "a period of transition between attack and
attempted absorption" (195) by mainstream literature. Other authors, critics, and editors feel much the same (del Rey and White in Fleming 269), while even critics who welcome outside attention and criticism feel a need to address the situation, one of them, for example, observing that the only way science fiction can be taken over by mainstream literature is for "very bad academic criticism to . . . swamp . . . a responsible academic approach" (Delany, *Starboard* 94).

All these cases, however diverse, provide evidence that the science fiction community itself may not be ready for widespread acceptance. As Fiedler observes, the genre may have been confined to a ghetto once upon a time, but it was at least a cozy ghetto (*Dreams* 22). Science fiction's new status is sometimes as confusing for its in-genre authors and critics as it is for those in the mainstream of literature. Not surprisingly, then, to some extent the actions of fans and in-genre critics and authors have mitigated against broader acceptance, either by defensively attacking mainstream literature, appearing too eager for and, as a result, undeserving of, mainstream praise, or by simply suffering, in print, from a sort of literary xenophobia. Indeed, we can still see evidence of in-genre authorial and critical sensitivity to criticism that seems antiquated. In 1977-78, in an incident *Science-Fiction Studies* dubbed the "Lem Affair," Polish author and critic Stanislaw Lem's honorary membership in the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) was revoked after the appearance of a brief essay he had written which was highly critical of science fiction.4 Only after Lem's ouster was the situation carefully examined by in-genre critics, with Darko Suvin concluding that the text the SFWA found offensive was a
very free translation of a German version which was itself a translation of a Polish original, a fact Suvin discovered after noting the essay’s unusual and “humiliatingly rude” (85) tone. Suvin closes by noting:

Finally, it strikes me as odd in this comedy of errors that nobody in the SFWA has in the two years between the Atlas article and now ever thought of checking out the German (semi-) original, or even—with supreme audacity of imagination—of writing Lem for the Polish original and perhaps some explanation.... This is all rather sad. And as I wrote in SFS #11, doesn’t such disinterest in the actual evidence tend to substantiate those views of Lem’s which many of us would still like to think of as exaggerated? (85)

Lem, as usual, was guilty of nothing more than an honest, critical attitude about science fiction. But in-genre critics and authors still have a great deal of difficulty differentiating informed criticism of the genre from the haphazard attacks on science fiction that were once so common.

The insecurity which led to Lem’s ouster from the SFWA is the same one which elicits sarcastic or indignant responses from authors when they feel they have been unfairly attacked (Anthony; Asimov, 1990). In one instance, Isaac Asimov responded to an editorial critical of sequels, assuming that even though the work in question mentioned only Piers Anthony’s novels, it was also directed at his sequels to Foundation (Asimov, 1984). But all these incidents, as well as the three frequent tendencies of science fiction criticism I discussed earlier, are meant only secondarily as critiques of in-genre standards. What strikes me as most significant about all these considerations is the way in which they—whether
intentionally or unintentionally—perpetuate science fiction’s marginalization. Unlike the negative associations mainstream readers and critics might develop towards the genre as a result of fan activities, however, science fiction’s social insularity and its resulting critical tendencies are obvious to anyone who reads genre publications, and they help shape many people’s opinions of science fiction while perpetuating established, simplistic evaluations of the genre.

Science fiction’s lack of mimesis, its unusual reading protocols, and its uniquely insular and often unflattering social dimension do not appear to represent anything resembling a killing blow to science fiction’s chances of moving away from literary marginality. In fact, any of these considerations, if taken alone, would probably not be a decisive factor in the genre’s marginalization, but together they perpetuate an environment in which science fiction is seen as so distinctly other that it remains broadly unacceptable. Science fiction, it seems, remains almost as strange now as it was fifteen, twenty five, and thirty-five years ago, at least to the majority of mainstream academics and critics.

Literary canons, of course, have been under attack for some time from a variety of quarters. Still, although they are not universal monoliths, canons remain stable, conservative structures that change slowly rather than quickly. But even now, when canon literature is such a problematic term and a problematic issue, there seems to be little room for a revision of science fiction’s overall status.

Nonetheless, some manifestations of literary status have coalesced around science fiction. Three academic journals pay very close attention to
science fiction as well as the more general category of fantastic fiction: *Extrapolation, Foundation*, and *Science-Fiction Studies*. Book-length studies of science fiction are now fairly common, and, of course, there are also numerous university and college courses devoted to the genre, some of which are taught by scholars possessing considerable familiarity with and expertise in both science fiction and the broader category of literature. Opinions about the genre will certainly continue to shift as the study of science fiction outlives the people who harbor misconceptions about the genre.

Yet to a remarkable extent, opinions about science fiction that are one, two or even three decades old still circulate today—although those opinions are either more subtly expressed or are simply repackaged to appear new and improved. Science fiction has been condemned on charges of escapism, pessimism, materialism, optimism, for being anti-religious and pro-science, because of sociological simplicity, stylistic and linguistic ineptitude, and lack of imagination. These charges have been so frequently repeated and so inadequately substantiated that they long ago ceased functioning as meaningful criticisms of science fiction. Instead, they are now more useful as stereotypes that give insight into science fiction criticism, particularly its inadequacies. And the primary inadequacy is simply that science fiction exists in a blind spot of the academic-critical community, and, as a result, the general literary community is ill-equipped to discuss, let alone evaluate, the genre. And so science fiction's marginalization continues.
Chapter One: Notes

1 Bradbury is vague on this point, calling Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan* “a more elaborate science fiction” than *Player Piano* (167), without directly categorizing either work as literary or popular. Indeed, the only distinction he makes is that *Slaughterhouse Five* is Vonnegut’s “most ‘postmodern’ novel” (169), which might be complimentary. Still, one wonders how Bradbury would have contextualized Philip K. Dick’s “most postmodern” fictions—*Ubik* or *The Man in the High Castle*—in a broad discussion of postmodern authors if his intent is to equate postmodern tendencies with significant fiction.

2 This is not to deny that some early fictions, such as Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) are reputable, since they clearly are. I mean to point out only that the sort of respect given to exceptional early non-mimetic works is not offered to their contemporary non-mimetic fictive counterparts. The one notable set of exceptions are dystopias, such as Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Orwell’s *1984*. The response to these works is an anomaly which probably results from the ongoing American critical appetite for jeremiads.

3 Notably, though, in his *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, Thomas Roberts uses the term “addict” without distinguishing between addicts’ reading material, pointing out that whether a reader’s focus is on paperback
romances, the Bible, Marx, or Shakespeare, he or she is still an addict. This objective stance is very uncommon.


5 To begin examining some of these charges—and to see how little changed they are in their more recent manifestations—one might start with the following works: Francis E. Abernathy’s “The Case for and Against Sci-Fi” (1960), Arthur Koestler’s “The Boredom of Fantasy” (1953), Joseph Kostolefsky’s “Science, Yes—Fiction, Maybe” (1953), L. W. Michaelson’s “Social Criticism in Science Fiction” (1954), and Anthony Staggers’s “Now Read On” (1956).
CHAPTER II: CHARACTERIZATION AND SCIENCE FICTION—
CANON AND STATUS

The novelist shows his exuberance either by an exhaustive analysis of
human relationships, as in Henry James, or of social phenomena, as in
Tolstoy. (311)

—Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism

Characterization is a primary concern of twentieth-century fiction,
and science fiction’s perceived lack of developed characterization is one of
the most recurrent critiques of the genre (Barthell; Burgess; Updike; et al)
and one which is particularly significant to science fiction’s
marginalization. As with most critiques of the form, though, charges of
inferior characterization are not universally applicable. As we shall see,
science fiction is varied; some of it contains poor characterization, some of
it does not. Moreover, in some instances, characterization is simply
beside the point of science fiction. But before discussing those matters, I
will examine the specific terms of the characterization critique of science
fiction. Because instances of this criticism are numerous but essentially
similar, I will focus on one representative example: John Updike’s 1990 review essay of David Hartwell’s *The World Treasury of Science Fiction* (1989).

Here, Updike notes that “each science-fiction story is so busy inventing its environment that little energy is left to be invested in the human subtleties. Ordinary ‘mainstream’ fiction snatches what it needs from the contemporary environment and concentrates on surprising us with details of behavior; science fiction tends to reverse its priorities” (126). As a result of the genre’s reversed priorities “many of the characters in science fiction might as well be robots” (127). Updike’s main point is clear enough, but the backdrop he is writing against is not. A clear hint of that backdrop is provided by a parallel example—incidentally, also a review—where Anthony Burgess observes that “fiction is not about what happens to the world but what happens to a select group of human souls, with crisis or catastrophe as the mere pretext for an exquisitely painful probing, as in [Henry] James, of personal agonies and elations” (256). Although only Burgess’s comment mentions James, both Burgess and Updike draw on the criticism of James and his younger contemporary, Virginia Woolf.

In an ongoing correspondence, James expressed his opinions about the importance of characterization to H. G. Wells in the context of their debate on the proper nature of the novel, taking essentially the same view on the matter as Woolf would later.² In her essays “Modern Fiction” (1919) and “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” (1924), Woolf criticizes Wells for his failure to create more fully realized characters, placing him firmly
in the tradition of Victorian novelists, where characters may be realistically true in the outward sense of action, but where they remain profoundly deficient, lacking psychological complexity, what E. M. Forster calls "roundness," although Forster sees neither "flat" nor "round" characters as being of inherently greater literary value. Woolf writes: "I believe that all novels . . . deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel . . . has been evolved" ("Bennet" 199). She goes on to say that she wonders whether books of the sort that Wells writes ought even to be called books because "they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction" (201).³

Considering the literary environment in which Wells wrote, he must have known that his decision to forego characterization would invite the very criticisms James and Woolf offered. Wells's decision to continue writing as he did suggests that he was very stubborn, very untalented (and therefore incapable of writing any differently), or was actually writing with a plan, producing fiction that might even contain some genuine substance. Experimental examinations of the inner self such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* are not to be found among Wells's novels. For Wells, such works were, because of their relative inaccessibility, unacceptable. At the same time, however, Wells was very much an author aware of his time, and his work contains and is shaped by many of the same concerns as the modernist writings of such figures as Eliot, Joyce, and Woolf. The relevant issue, then, must be Wells's creative
intent, particularly the manner in which that intent so frequently led him to dispense with Jamesian characterization.

James notes that “The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting” (170). Based on the evidence of their own experimental work and their own words, one would expect that both James and Woolf would have, if not broad tastes in literature, at least an inclination to view variances in approach as desirable. Woolf, of course, notes that Wells’s books are “of great value, and indeed of great necessity” (“Bennet” 201). Nonetheless, her dismissive commentary on Wells’s fiction makes it clear that his books were not of interest to her. As I have already noted, James contemplated the matter of the novel’s requirements and settled on only one—that novels should be interesting. Apparently, however, even when Wells’s novels, including the scientific romances, interested him, they left him unsatisfied.

Fortunately for purposes of comparison, we have some general indications of Wells’s point of view on the writing of fiction and some particular insights into his use of characterization. In *Experiment in Autobiography*, he writes:

[James’s] main indictment is sound, that I sketch out scenes and individuals, often quite crudely, and resort even to conventional types and symbols, in order to get to a discussion of relationships. The important point which I tried to argue with Henry James was that the novel of completely consistent characterization, arranged beautifully in a story and painted deep and round and solid, no more exhausts
the possibilities of the novel than the art of Velasquez exhausts the possibilities of the painted picture. (414)

Wells goes on to say, “I had a great feeling that we were both incompatibly right” (414). These statements are pivotally important to one’s conception of the proper relationship—if any—between characterization and fiction. If a reader can accept that only fictions with complex characters in the style of James or Woolf are significant, then that individual will have difficulty not only with Wells’s work but with a great deal of science fiction as well. At the heart of the matter rests a significant issue. Does fiction without Forster’s round characterization have the potential for literary significance, perhaps even the chance to gain entry into the canon, or by its failure to adhere to formalized expectations does it forfeit any such right? Updike, following in the footsteps of James and Woolf, expresses his position clearly when he states that “science fiction makes us stop and reflect and identify theoretical issues, but it rarely persuades and involves us in the way the quietest realistic fiction can” (128), predicking his observation on the notion that science fiction lacks round characterization. He, too, in a sense, has said, “I do not find this fiction interesting.” Before presenting my very different position on this matter, I will briefly return to the example of Wells’s fiction to understand not only why his work but also much of science fiction remains interesting and to explore the manner in which characterization functions within the science fiction tradition.

In his essay “The First Wells,” Jorge Luis Borges suggests that Wells “enlarged the possibilities of the novel” (58). Certainly, Wells used themes in his scientific romances that extended the traditionally defined range of
the novel's subject matter. His fiction, for instance, is arguably the first to reflect a complete understanding of Darwinian theory and its ramifications. At the same time, however, some of the most powerful of these scientific romances, such as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, utilize character types: The Scientist, The Scholar, or The Ineffectual Clergyman. Mark Rose's observation about Wells's short story "The Star" applies to much of Wells's fiction and has a particular bearing on the broader subject of characterization in science fiction:

We should . . . note that Wells's characters are not characters at all in the novelistic sense, but merely such representative figures as the mourning woman who is unconcerned about the planet's approach or the professor of mathematics who calculates that the planet's course will intersect the earth's. Wells's protagonist is mankind as a collective entity; his antagonist, similarly abstract, might be described as the physical circumstances of the cosmos in which mankind attempts to survive. The narrative, then, can be interpreted as a model of the relationship between man and nature. (29)

Rose's statement that Wells's characters are not really characters in the "novelistic sense" suggests that they derive from another tradition—the allegorical.

But one must ask whether the absence of Jamesian characterization in Wells's fiction, or in some science fiction, is necessarily a defect. Wells comments not on individuals but on humanity's relationship to the world and the universe; his theme is the survival of the human race. He repeatedly examines the chances of human survival—testing the adaptive ability of characters in different circumstances and allowing these
characters to stand for humanity as a whole. Authors could place individuated, fully-realized characters in such novels, and these complete, characters—which Forster would call "round"—could illustrate the impact of evolution and catastrophes on their individual psychologies, but the impact of remarkable events on individual, round psychologies was not Wells’s primary interest. Vincent Brome, although favoring Wells’s position in this matter, captures the underlying dynamic of Wells’s and James’s variant approaches when he explains that James’s goal was to “come to the core of life through individual self-revelation brought to a pitch of artistic perfection. To Wells this was nonsense. He knew himself to be the victim of forces outside his control, and it was the final vanity to look inside himself for the key to it all” (96).

More specifically, we might observe that for Wells, it was the final vanity to look inside any character’s mind for “the key to it all.” Wells found the answers to questions at “the core of life” by looking at the universe through the lens of science because his central concern was with humanity’s place in the universe, not with the psychological and necessarily inwardly directed questions that interested James. But Wells’s approach to characterization was not necessarily rooted solely in his scientific perspective. In some situations, purposeful inattention to characterization also offers narrative advantages. In The Invisible Man, for instance, Wells’s careful delineation of Griffin, the titular invisible man, accentuates his invisibility. As Frank McConnell notes: “The ‘Invisible Man’ is also invisible in terms of the narrative technique itself: for while we are privileged to see Kemp, Marvel, and even minor characters in moments of
reflection or private action such as are usually granted us by the third-
person omniscient narrator, Griffin, the central and crucial character of
the tale, appears only in his effect upon others, only in those moments
when he chooses to violate his invisibility in one way or another” (123).
If, as McConnell suggests, we read The Invisible Man as an exploration of
whether a person can exist as a human being outside of society’s
boundaries, then Wells’s rendering of Griffin’s character has obvious
advantages. Once again, McConnell makes an essential point:

[I]f the monster [Griffin] poses the question, How
much can you take away from a man and still call
him a man? he also poses the question in its
sociological key: How much of what we call
“human” can exist outside the elaborate system of
checks and balances which is human society? “In
all my great moments I have been alone,” cries
Griffin to Kemp as he narrates his discovery of
invisibility. And Kemp later reinforces that
observation as he is organizing a party of villagers
to track Griffin down: “The man’s become
inhuman, I tell you. . . . He has cut himself off
from his kind. His blood be upon his own head.”
(117)

By keeping Griffin invisible in the narrative itself, Wells emphasizes his
separateness. Griffin’s status as a sort of non-character sets him off not
only from the story’s other characters but from the reader as well. As a
figure who is as invisible as Wells could make him, then, he is frightening
not only because he is dangerous but also because he is enigmatic.

Wells did not use the particular approach to characterization of The
Invisible Man in his other scientific romances, but his interest in forces
outside his control allowed him to offer clear visions of the effects of
time—and evolution—on humanity. The impact of these scientific
romances is of the sort we associate with allegories such as *Everyman* or
Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. As with these works and such works as J. G.
Ballard’s “The Drowned Giant” (1965), Wells’s characters in the scientific
romances function on a symbolic level and are not carefully realized as
individuals because, by existing either as types or, more rarely, as flat
characters, they are broadly representative. Thus, the reader does not
know what is at the heart of Prendick’s personal philosophy in *The Island
of Dr. Moreau*, nor what Bedford’s or Cavor’s deepest feelings are on a
variety of issues in *The First Men in the Moon*.

It is important to realize, however, that the reader need not know
these things to appreciate the stories. This is the point brought out by C. S.
Lewis:

How anyone can think this form [science fiction]
illegitimate or contemptible passes my
understanding. It may very well be convenient not
to call such things novels. If you prefer, call them
a very special form of novel. Either way, the
conclusion will be much the same: they are to be
tried by their own rules. It is absurd to condemn
them because they do not often display any deep or
sensitive characterization. They oughtn’t to. It is a
fault if they do. Wells’s Cavor and Bedford have
rather too much than too little character. Every
good writer knows that the more unusual the scenes
and events of his story are, the slighter, the more
ordinary, the more typical his persons should be.
Hence Gulliver is a commonplace little man and
Alice a commonplace little girl. If they were more
remarkable they would have wrecked their books.
(108)
Lewis’s straightforward defense can be bolstered by noting another brief but useful discussion of character in science fiction, which approaches the issue from a slightly different vantage point. In Intersections: The Elements of Fiction in Science Fiction (1978), Thomas L. Wymer and his collaborators note that there are considerable fictive possibilities inherent in character types since authors can play on readers’ expectations to create more surprising flat characters as well as novel situations, as in Joanna Russ’s “When It Changed,” Robert Sheckley’s “Specialist,” and Clifford Simak’s “A Death in the House” (33-43). By playing on the reader’s expectations about various character types, an author can actually enhance his or her characterization, a fact which is no more alien to science fiction authors than it was to Chaucer. The Wife of Bath is a well-realized flat character in a field of flat characters defined primarily through her associations with the earthly and the sensual, just as is another successful flat character Forster discusses by name—Shakespeare’s Falstaff. Neither of these characters possesses the psychological depth, the roundness, which James and Woolf advocated, yet few critics would argue that these vital figures are instances of unsuccessful characterization. Science fiction offers similar examples.

All of William Gibson’s characters in Neuromancer (1984), for instance, are flat, yet many of them are also memorable and vital. Molly, for instance, is defined just as exclusively by her predatory attitudes and aggressiveness as Falstaff and the Wife are by their earthiness, and, like
them, she has a similar degree of solidity as a character. The same is true of the recurring dealer in stolen and rare computer hard- and software, the Finn, despite the fact that all his appearances are brief. Bruce Sterling’s “somewhat picaresque” (Spinrad 118) novel *Schismatrix* (1985) offers another noteworthy flat character: the protagonist Abelard Lindsay, who is defined primarily by his desire to live, to continue on to another episode in his long life. He reacts to situations in ways that are psychologically convincing although Sterling does not use the novel as a means of psychological exploration. Perhaps the best example of successful flat characterization, though, is offered by a novel that also embraces round characters, Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965). Many of Herbert’s characters are defined primarily through one characteristic: the veteran soldiers Duncan Idaho and Gurney Halleck by their loyalty to the Atreides family, the Harkonnens by their lust for power, and the Atreides’s physician Yueh by a love for his wife. Yet all these characters project a sense of completeness which equals that of the Wife or Falstaff. Throughout the novel, all their presences are strong, yet Herbert never explores their innermost complexities. Each of these characters remain the same people they are when Herbert first presents him; the story merely fills in the details of those initial pictures.

The comments of Wells, Rose, Lewis, Wymer and others I have reviewed here, taken as a whole, present the alternative to the James-Woolf point of view. But having noted what we might refer to by the shorthand “the pro-Wells case,” I want to avoid the pitfall of simply duplicating, although inverting, what seems to me James’s and Woolf’s primary error:
privileging one approach to fiction, under all circumstances, over another. I certainly do not mean to suggest that science fiction should avoid characterization or that novels which concern themselves with subtleties of character are somehow inferior to those that don’t. I simply wish to observe that neither the presence nor the absence of either flat or round characterization in fiction necessarily represents a superior creative decision. As Wells himself notes, both he and James were accurate in their thinking about characterization; it is only that, as exclusive alternatives, their forms of correctness were incompatible. The sort of exploration that we might expect from Jamesian characterization in science fiction is the province of New Wave and post-New Wave writers, among the works of such authors as J. G. Ballard, Samuel Delany, and Roger Zelazny, who focus on the ramifications of unusual events on individuals—exploring, instead of outer space, the inner space of the human mind.5

At the same time, however, we should remember that the vast majority of pre-New Wave science fiction was the sort that Lewis discusses, and the increased interest in characterization among science fiction writers was the cause of considerable in-genre debate. For many editors, fans, and critics, the move towards characterization and the stylistic innovation that accompanied it was a movement towards fiction but away from science and, to a large extent, away from science fiction as well. Characterization has been as central an issue for in-genre criticism—as it has been for mainstream critiques of the genre—since then. The New Wave movement was a phenomenon primarily of the 1960s but also of the early '70s, yet even after its impact had already been keenly felt, some
science fiction critics still believed that the proper interest of science fiction was, or at least should be, science and technology. In 1971, for instance, Robert Barthell argued:

The condition of the science fiction hero will remain that of a poorly drawn character within a weak literary style. His condition is the result of the technical and scientific nature of this literature; a literature concerned with technical problems for technical people who find intellectual stimulation in science and technology itself. This fascination with the interplay of rationalistic, intellectualized concepts turns away from the humanistic goals which were originally thought to be the end of scientific knowledge and application: goals still embodied in our mainstream literature. It forces us to an assessment of this literature by something other than traditional critical tools now available. (63)

Like Lewis, Barthell would like to try science fiction by its own rules, but he unnecessarily seeks to alienate the genre from other fictional forms. In line with that reasoning, we can contemplate the nature of Barthell’s argument to understand its equally revealing strengths and weaknesses.

From our admittedly privileged position, we can see that Barthell is first incorrect when he states that “the science fiction hero will remain . . . a poorly drawn character within a weak literary style.” Certainly if an author’s style is weak then Barthell is correct. But the issue Barthell raises is not the stylistic incompetence of science fiction authors; instead, he takes a fundamentally narrow view of the genre. Certainly, a great deal of science fiction is stylistically weak and presents poorly drawn characters. The style and characterization of many hard science fiction
authors, for example, never advances beyond the level of what Richard Davis terms “utilitarian prose” for the very reasons Barthell suggests—because of the technical and scientific, rather than literary, interests of their readers. By 1971, Barthell could have formulated his theory based on the then-existing body of hard science fiction. Had he been interested in doing so, he could easily have found further corroborating evidence right up through the 1980s by examining that same subcategory—a point I shall discuss shortly. But what if Barthell were to look elsewhere?

As we have seen, it can be to a science fiction author’s advantage to use character types or flat characters, but characters in science fiction are not always poorly drawn, as they are in much hard science fiction, or absent, as they are in some of Wells’s scientific romances, or even flat, as they are in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* or Sterling’s *Schismatrix*. In *Dune*, for example, Frank Herbert uses the omniscient viewpoint to create a range of carefully developed characters, some of whom, as we have seen, are flat, but some of whom are round, like Paul Atreides. Throughout the novel, the reader is allowed to see into the character’s mind and to understand the variety of his motivations: his desire for vengeance against the Harkonnens, what he repeatedly refers to as a sense of his “terrible purpose,” and his love for his wife and her native culture. The same sense of roundness is evident, though less fully realized, in the assassin Count Fenring, whose motivations in refusing to kill Atreides reflect a considerable degree of psychological complexity.

Similar complexities are evident in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1968), where Ursula Le Guin defines her two protagonists primarily on
the basis of their radically different biologies, while exploring the psychological ramifications of both their biological differences and the variations such differences engender in a society. Science fiction novels occasionally utilize round characterization with an even tighter focus, as in the novels of J. G. Ballard, where generally only one character is psychologically complex. He, like Wells, has a clear opinion about characterization. “To be honest,” he says, “the relationship between my characters do[es]n’t interest me very much. There is only one character I am interested in by and large. All my fiction is in a sense about isolation and how to cope with isolation. I’m talking about man’s biological isolation in relation [to] the universe . . .” (Ballard in Greenland 99). Not surprisingly, Ballard develops only the inward-looking, alienated central character in each of his novels, such as Dr. Robert Laing in *High Rise* (1975). Such selective characterization allows Ballard to fruitfully invert Wells’s approach in *The Invisible Man*. Instead of creating significantly enigmatic central characters, he makes all non-central characters partially invisible. The result accentuates the central figures’ alienation by making them the only “whole” people in worlds of ghosts (Greenland, *Entropy* 98-99).

A variety of other works that preceded and followed Barthell’s essay also successfully present strong characterization in similar manners, including Daniel Keyes’s *Flowers for Algernon* (1967), Philip Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), William Gibson’s “The Winter Market” (1986), and Jack McDevitt’s *The Hercules Text* (1986). Moreover, such works as Roger Zelazny’s “For a Breath I Tarry” (1966) and “Home Is the
Hangman” (1975) explore the very constituents of human character. Clearly, science fiction writers can create characters adhere to James’s requirements. Whether or not they choose to, however, is often a matter of creative preference rather than the result of any authorial shortcomings. Still, a great deal of contemporary science fiction tends towards either undeveloped characters or character types. Critics advocating the psychologically realistic tradition of the novel—like Updike—will be sure to fault science fiction for this reason.

Yet as we have seen, there is no hard and fast rule of literature that requires round characterization. We should understand from the outset, then, that Wells’s approach to characterization is not without precedent. If Wells enlarged the possibilities of the novel, as Borges suggests, he did so partly by continuing a literary tradition in which round characters were not a necessity. Later authors have modified or abandoned characterization using more radical techniques. For instance, in works like Manhattan Transfer (1925) and the trilogy U. S. A. (1938), John Dos Passos leaves the reader with a range of figures, none of whom is individually critical to the story nor fully realized as an individual, in a sense, decentralizing his characterization. Borges almost completely dispenses with characterization in the stories collected in Ficciones (1944; tr Ficciones, 1962) and El Aleph (1949; tr The Aleph and Other Stories, 1970). Evaluations of these works require no new literary standards; all that is necessary is some flexibility of opinion. If applicable, a scholar should surely note whether a work utilizes character types, but to ignore the fiction’s potential merits, as
Woolf, James, Updike, and others seem to suggest we should, is extreme, and, I would suggest, limiting.

Barthell and, to a lesser extent, Burgess and Updike would have the reader accept that science fiction is radically different from mainstream literature: that it is a pure intellectual exercise rather than fiction interested in human issues or psychology. Yet Barthell's observation is only partially correct. Certainly some science fiction follows in the tradition of Jules Verne and Hugo Gernsback in its particular interest in technology. Such hardware stories are entertainments that can be admired for their inventiveness, imagination, and readability. Their existence, however, offers us no reason to suppose that science fiction, as a genre, has estranged itself from an interest in humanity. Despite Barthell's assertion to the contrary, in the essay "Some Science Fiction Parameters: A Biased View" (1975) Roger Zelazny expresses not only his own opinion but also the opinion of many of his peers when he writes that "science fiction is concerned with the human condition and with man's fate" (247-248).

Barthells' argument and Updike's and Burgess's critiques appear so convincing—and are so recurrent—for the simple reason that it is easy to note instances of unconvincing or clumsy characterization in science fiction. What is far less commonly noted, however, is that the most obvious examples of ineffective characterization are found in science fiction that is clumsy and unconvincing. As an example, let us consider Larry Niven's "Neutron Star" (1966). The questions we must ask of Niven's story—or any story like it—do not concern only its scientific content or characterization. The issue at hand is the overall effect of
whatever techniques an author uses; that is, why might some works offering characterization function very well as fiction while others do not?

In the case of Niven’s short story, it is apparent that the author has written a scientific puzzle and couched it in fictional form; although it is technically fiction—embracing, however uneasily, both characters and a plot of sorts—it need not have been cast in a fictional form at all. Instead, the entire story could easily have been offered as a question (“What overlooked physical law caused the grisly death of the ship’s previous pilot and how can the current pilot avoid the same fate?”) and then followed by an answer (“The peculiarities of a neutron star’s gravity are the cause, and, through foresight, the pilot can avoid the same fate”). Thomas Chastain provides a format for such a puzzle fiction in the science magazine Discover. Six times each year Chastain frames a murder mystery in a fictional format which presents all the possible suspects and necessary evidence. Following the “mystery” is a solution and an explanation of its derivation from the evidence. What Chastain writes has a great deal in common with a short story, but even in the unlikely event we were to categorize it as fiction, we aren’t likely to describe it as particularly good fiction.

The question these works lead us to is a broad one: what makes a work of fiction significant or good? If a work such as Niven’s is a puzzle, should we dismiss it, and if we do, should we necessarily treat other works with similar qualities in the same manner? Some might be tempted to dismiss mysteries or detective fiction as they are puzzles rather than fictions, but certainly very few among the academic-critical community
would claim that the puzzling word games of, say, James Joyce make his fiction unworthy of study. Similarly, the “playfulness” of much postmodern fiction is not generally held against it either. As a result, our question can be refined with a corollary question: why do we accept one sort of “puzzle fiction” as significant but not others?

Let us return to Niven’s story and some other examples provided by hard science fiction, a subcategory of the genre that is particularly interested in scientific veracity and theoretical explorations. Science fiction’s proponents frequently mention the “sense of wonder” the genre evokes. Yet is a “sense of wonder” enough to prompt us to accept such fiction? I suggest that, in general, it is not. We are not sufficiently captivated by the scenario and situations of works like Niven’s to ask for nothing more than the presence of an exotic setting and a puzzle as a precondition for appreciating the work as fiction, although we might appreciate it for other reasons. Those with the proper temperament, an interest in physics, math, or, puzzles, might appreciate what Niven offers, and, as a result, might express their pleasure with the “story.” But, considered as a story, “Neutron Star” remains a largely unintegrated combination of physics textbook and fiction, lacking the linguistic fluency that allows us to appreciate Niven’s skills as an author rather than as a scientist or a writer of puzzles. The prose is never more than stiffly adequate to its task. Just as one might sleep on a pallet while wishing for a comfortable bed, Niven’s work can be read as fiction. Still, most readers, like our pallet-bound sleeper, prefer something more sensitive to their needs. Science fiction, particularly hard science fiction, offers many
examples which parallel Niven’s “Neutron Star.” Yet although in this story the weak characterization appears as an obvious flaw, the actual shortcoming of the story is not so much that it lacks effective characterization but, rather, that it lacks a story.

As we can see, then, allowing Barthell’s viewpoint a fair hearing reveals the narrowness of its terms. We can easily point out the flaws of, say, Hal Clement’s clever but stiffly written *Mission of Gravity* (1954) or later works with similar flaws that would support Barthell’s theory: Niven’s *Ringworld* (1970) and *Ringworld Engineers* (1980) or Robert Forward’s *Dragon’s Egg* (1980), for instance. But having pointed out these examples (and there are, of course, many more), we have proven nothing. Attempting to establish that the quality of characterization of a diverse genre is inferior by noting the existence of *some* weak characterization is a spurious method that judges science fiction not only by its worst examples, but by the worst examples of *one subtype* of the genre. A broader sampling of science fiction reveals the shortcomings of such an approach. William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* concerns itself not with its characters’ psychologies but with the manner in which these characters function in an imagined society. Like Bruce Sterling’s *Schismatrix*, a work which is as much hard science fiction as any story by Forward or Niven (Spinrad 120), *Neuromancer* invests its energy in exhaustively analyzing social phenomena, taking the second approach Northrop Frye notes by which a novelist can show his or her “exuberance” for the fictional form (311). As with many of Wells’s scientific romances, all these stories are about the one thing Burgess says fiction cannot concern
itself with: "what happens to the world" (256). Although the focus of authors from Wells to Sterling is certainly broader than that of Northrop Frye's other mode of exuberant, fictive display—"the exhaustive analysis of human relationships, as in Henry James" (311)—it seems wrongheaded for critics to dismiss the former approach without considering its merits.

What remains, then, to the charge of inferior characterization? As with most generalities, it contains a grain of truth, but the scope of its claim makes it inaccurate. Some science fiction authors, such as Niven or Forward, are clumsy writers and are consequently unskilled at characterization. Moreover, they are not primarily interested in characters; instead they use characters to act almost as the reporters who describe the hard science marvels they imagine and the situations they conceive. Others, like Wells, usually saw both flat and round characterization as unnecessary to his science fiction or, like Ballard, thought it necessary only in certain circumstances, directing efforts at round characterization towards only a central figure while purposefully leaving other characters undeveloped. Finally, of course, science fiction authors draw characters with considerable skill, as with Le Guin and Zelazny. In short, Barthell, or any critic with sufficient patience, can cite numerous examples in the context of an argument which "proves" that characterization and fiction's other elements are either absent from science fiction or inferior to that which is offered by the best mainstream fiction. Conversely, however, any number of other critics could examine a different set of works from the same period and, using an equal number of examples, "prove" exactly the opposite. Regrettably, as these groups of
critics exchange salvoes, none of them will have made much headway in coming to better understand science fiction.
Brief appreciative and derogatory terms are problematic but necessary. When I speak of characterization that is "poor," "clumsy," or "weak," I refer to characterization which offers less than what the context both calls for and at least partially attempts. (Thus, Swift's Gulliver is not a failed character because the work he inhabits requires a character type, a figure with an allegorical rather than psychological dimension.) Possible reasons for faulty characterization are numerous, but I will present one example from science fiction and, after some elaboration, allow the reader to apply his or her own logic to the problem. In Larry Niven's "Neutron Star," Beowulf Shaeffer, a spaceship pilot, is developed in brief passages that are interspersed throughout the story. One of those passages concerns Shaeffer's decision to travel in a spaceship with a transparent hull. "You should not make such a trip with the walls transparent. You would go insane" (17), his employers tell him. Shaeffer replies: "I'm no flatlander. The mind-wrenching sight of naked space fills me with mild but waning interest. I want to know nothing's sneaking up behind me" (17). The flaw here is authorial clumsiness; Niven's dialogue presents Shaeffer as a caricature not a character. In a later instance, the breakdown in characterization results from a different sort of oversight. When Shaeffer is in a situation he recognizes as life-threatening, there is no evidence of fear on his part, no reasonable human reaction to his circumstances.

Woolf's criticisms are not directed specifically at Wells's scientific romances. In fact, her observation that such books as Wells wrote leave her with the feeling that "In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque" ("Bennet" 201) suggests that her primary focus is on Wells's later novels. Still, the point of view she expresses applies equally to Wells's scientific romances, and, I suggest, this perspective was long ago appropriated by mainstream critics who have used it as a basis for their discussions of both Wells's work and science fiction in general.

Frank McConnell, for instance, notes: "For all the flurry of Darwinian elements or evolutionary speculation in the late-nineteenth-century utopias, not until *The Time Machine* did the real power, and the real terror, of evolutionary theory find adequate expression in fiction. I have said that one of the most important shockwaves cast by *The Origin of Species* was not simply the idea of man's heritage from lower animals, but rather the disorienting discovery of the immense vistas of time upon which any definition of 'man'—or of man's success—has to be imagined" (80).

Colin Greenland's study of the New Wave, *The Entropy Exhibition* (1983), discusses science fiction from just this perspective, particularly in
the chapters “Pulling Out of the Space Race: Anti-Space Fiction” (44-51) and “Footholds in the Head: Inner Space Fiction” (51-69).

6 Barthell does not explain his use of the term “weak,” but, given the context, a definition along the lines of what I have already offered for poor characterization should suffice, since, for both our purposes, “style” refers to the method by which an author integrates the various elements of his or her fiction.
CHAPTER III: RESPONDING TO THE LEM CRITIQUE

As a rule I do not review science fiction books, for they are as a rule bad.

—Stanislaw Lem, from his review of Ian Watson’s *The Martian Inca*

[T]he word novel, which up to about 1900 was still the name of a more or less recognizable form, has since expanded into a catchall term which can be applied to practically any prose book that is not “on” something. Clearly, this novel-centered view of prose fiction is a Ptolemaic perspective which is now too complicated to be any longer workable, and some more relative and Copernican view must take its place. (304)

—Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

Considered as a group, Stanislaw Lem’s essays on science fiction offer what is very likely the strongest and most thoughtful critique of the genre. By following Lem’s work from his initial observations to the conclusions he reaches in his later criticism, we can observe a thoughtful, well-formulated analysis of science fiction. But Lem’s criticism is of particular interest to this study because by responding to it, I am also provided with an opportunity to build on the discussion I offered in my previous chapter, exploring such conventional aspects of fiction as
characterization and plot in order to understand the way these elements function in science fiction. Three essays comprise the core of Lem's critique and outline the evolution of his thoughts on the relationship between science fiction and traditional narrative structures, although many of the sentiments expressed in these essays appear elsewhere as well.

"Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case—with Exceptions" (1973) provides a straightforward, general critique, "Cosmology and Science Fiction" (1977) a significant particular critique, and "Metafantasia: The Possibilities of Science Fiction" (1981), what Lem calls his important critique of science fiction (199).

A precondition to good criticism is that a critic addressing any genre have a reasonable amount of both familiarity and sympathy with it. As I discussed in the first chapter, many mainstream attempts to address science fiction fail due to their authors' unfamiliarity with not only genre traditions but genre fiction as well. The need for a reasonable amount of sympathy is equally important. Criticism does not require reflexive crusades, either attacking or defending a particular work or set of works. Yet a flaw of criticism focusing on science fiction is just this sort of fanaticism, with critics or readers either defending all science fiction out of a strange but loyal love for the genre or attacking it out of an equally unusual and excessive hatred.

Lem's position in relation to both these extremes is almost ideal. He is familiar with English-language science fiction, and his perspective is enhanced by his familiarity with mainstream and world literature. Moreover, he appreciates the possibilities of science fiction while
recognizing the genre's shortcomings. Lem's criticisms tend towards bluntness, but it is probably a measure of his accuracy rather than his lack of cordiality that he has offended as many in-genre authors and critics as he has. Lem may not avoid all the problems which affect science fiction criticism, but his work certainly stands above the majority of his peers'.

"Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case—with Exceptions"

In "Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case—with Exceptions," Lem defines science fiction as a sociocultural "collective phenomenon" consisting of readers and reader/fans as well as the authors and publishers who are the science fiction producers (47). His examination focuses on texts in general rather than on specifically named works, and he views these generalized texts through the lens of essentially commercial-economic considerations, using economic and consumerist—particularly prostitution—metaphors. Lem describes science fiction as a special literary case because it belongs to two distinct cultural spheres—the "Lower Realm" or the "Realm of Trivial Literature" and the "Upper Realm" or the "Realm of Mainstream Literature" (47)—yet it remains distinct from the rest of trivial literature because of one fundamental difference between it and its neighboring genres: "It is a whore, but a quite bashful one at that; moreover, a whore with an angel face. It prostitutes itself, but, like Dostoevsky's Sonya Marmeladova, with discomfort, disgust, and contrary to its dreams and hopes" (57). More succinctly, "[Science fiction] comes from a whorehouse but it wants to break into the palace where the most
sublime thoughts of human history are stored” (59). Lem cannot escape what is for him the damning conclusion, that “in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred . . . [science fiction] fulfills its task with stupidity. It always promises too much, and it almost never keeps its word” (59).

That the vast majority of books in any genre are “trash” (65) is not lost on Lem, but the “Lower Realm” economic and academic attributes of science fiction present the genre with particular problems. In “the Upper Realm of culture there are forces that never cease furthering positive selection. In the Lower Realm, the best books are placed beside the worst and most stupid, and submerged by them” (65). Criticism and recognitions of achievement within the science fiction community, such as the Nebula and Hugo Awards, lack the impact of their mainstream counterparts, and much of the behavior surrounding these mainstream analogues “merely apes grown-up literature” (66). Lem notes that the desire for equal status that led to the creation of in-genre awards prompts science fiction editors and critics to try to gain mainstream respect for their genre by associating science fiction with works by such respected authors as Borges, Calvino, Grass, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe—either by including works by these authors in science fiction anthologies or by comparing their works to science fiction. In Lem’s opinion these attempts are failures since the courtesies offered by those in the Lower Realm are not reciprocated by their Upper Realm counterparts; science fiction works are never discussed in Upper Realm circles or included in Upper Realm anthologies (67).

Lem states that the substance of science fiction is “kitsch,” the “last, degenerate form of myths” (67). Gifted writers can transcend that
substance’s limitations, although the vast majority of science fiction does no more than trashily approximate what its publisher’s book jacket blurbs promise. The one exception Lem names is Philip K. Dick, whose work revitalizes kitsch, enervating such science fiction clichés as alternate universes and precognitive humans.² Despite Dicks failings, the significance of his best works is greater than that of most science fiction. Lem calls these Upper Realm works part of the Literature of Ideas or the Literature of Possibilities (83), admiring in his uniquely harsh manner the merits of their ontological substance. Lem’s thorough and provocative point-by-point discussion of science fiction and of Dick, though, boils down to two basic points: first, economic conditions keep science fiction from becoming a more artistically vital form, and, second, there are and have been no truly great science fiction writers—that is to say, no writers whose accomplishments rival those of a Shakespeare or a Joyce—because even the writings of Lem’s one exception, Philip Dick, are flawed.

Since the economic critique is Lem’s starting point, it shall also be mine. Certainly, Lem raises a variety of significant points. In science fiction marketing, the best fiction is essentially indistinguishable from the worst, because the same publishers package all works similarly and market them beside one another on bookstore shelves. While examples from various categories of fiction might be situated on the “literature” shelves, all science fiction titles are placed together regardless of whether or not they are “merely popular” or “literary.” This situation perpetuates science fiction’s image as a purely popular form, since there is no easy, reliable way for a reader to differentiate between those stories generally accepted
as superior stories and those considered mediocre or worse—a situation which often carries over to the shelving of science fiction in libraries. Critics other than Lem have noted related problems resulting from the economics of science fiction. In many instances, science fiction has become sufficiently profitable to make it a desirable stopping off point for authors on their way to more profitable markets (Hartwell 183). Commercial considerations prompt even some accomplished science fiction writers to compose long strings of profitable sequels or to intentionally construct works in the mold of the “fat best-seller novel” (Disch; Hartwell 183). But such efforts, although lucrative, are usually indistinguishable from the vast majority of best-sellers. They are read and then forgotten.

Still, Lem is inaccurate when he makes such strong statements as:

> From reading “inner circle” critiques [of science fiction] and considering what science-fiction prospectuses offer, you would hardly believe that the authors who are reviewed display an abundant ignorance of the grammar, syntax, and style of their mother tongue; it is as if one suddenly hears that a team of athletes preparing for the Olympic Games cannot yet get up and stand. (68-69)

Essentially, Lem has returned to the notion that most material in any genre is substandard, even though he earlier dismissed that argument as an untenable basis for an overall critique of science fiction (65). Clearly, everyone who writes science fiction cannot be exceptionally talented, and book jacket texts are advertisements, not honest criticism. Economic realities do have a strong impact on publishing, whether of science fiction, poetry, or mainstream literature, and, like other forms, science fiction has
suffered from commercial realities. Yet when Lem strikes out at science fiction, what he finally strikes out at is the commercialism that makes kitsch possible. Lem writes:

Knowing no discretion and no reverence for things inconceivable to the human mind, piling universes upon universes without batting an eyelash, mixing up physics with metaphysics, and trite trash from misinterpreted philosophical systems without end, science fiction is the true embodiment of kitsch, because of the cheekiness of its total ignorance, which even denies the existence of a higher knowledge, toward which it finds no path, and denies it triumphantly and obstinately. (69)

Discretion and reverence, as Lem uses the terms, have little place in the publishing business. It is a commercial environment, not one generally concerned with high art. Books are often written by authors who need to sell them to make money.³

Science fiction’s popularity insures that many authors will work within the genre, either exclusively or occasionally, and reader demands for new fiction requires the piling of universes upon universes, since the creation of new worlds and new universes is central to science fiction. The current situation has some similarities to pulp era publishing, when the need for new fiction was so great that quality was of secondary importance to editors so long as they obtained enough material to fill each issue. Still, the authors’ profits from science fiction are better now than they once were, which, if nothing else, allows authors to write at a less furious pace if they wish. Many, of course, do not. Piers Anthony, for instance, writes at a prodigious pace in an admitted effort to make money. His work is
neither particularly original nor effective in integrating its various
elements into what I would call a well-written whole, but it sells very well.
Although we might blame him for making the extra thousands of dollars he
makes each year by spending his time writing new material rather than
revising, it would be decidedly unfair to blame science fiction as a genre
for Anthony's decision or the decisions of others like him.

In light of all these drawbacks, it is easy to overlook the fact that
commercial considerations have also undoubtedly benefited science fiction,
as David Hartwell recognizes:

Science fiction was invariably written to sell—there
was never any sympathy or pretension to writing
without achieving publication—if your work didn't
sell and get printed, you were just a fan, not a
writer. . . . This situation was probably the
healthiest thing that could have happened to science
fiction, a crucial factor in preserving the vital field
while other commercial genres were losing their
audiences and writers; while poetry, for instance,
became arcane, specialized, unintelligible to the
uninitiated and without a general audience to
support its publication. (135)

We might also note that even commercially driven fields can attract gifted
artists. Shakespeare, for instance, was very attentive to economic realities,
as were a variety of other authors who have since become important to
English department canons, including Dickens, Twain, Fitzgerald,
Hemingway, and Faulkner. In an ideal world, writers would all be able to
compose under ideal conditions, and they would, doubtless, produce ideal
literature. In our less-than-perfect earthly reality, though, authors must do
the best they can, as authors have always done. Still, given the increase
amounts of time usually allocated to both education and leisure activities in industrial societies, we can recognize that those who wish to write now have an easier time of doing so than those of any other time. After a forty-hour work week at some necessary occupations, they still have ample opportunity to write due to such time-saving writers' tools as typewriters and word processors.

What we should note about Lem's critique in "A Hopeless Case" is that, despite its bluster, much of it is directed less towards science fiction itself than toward the circumstances in which it is placed. Lem's critique thus helps us better understand the genre's circumstances. Finally, though, what Lem faults science fiction for is the fact that the form has so far failed to foster a Shakespeare. Obviously, there are basic problems with such an objection. Limited as we are by our vantage point, it is impossible for us to know whether a great artist is among us. Future generations decide for themselves what literature to prize, and the records of the rises and falls of various literary fortunes only makes more plain that those things one generation values may be of no interest whatever to those who follow them. Rather than hunting for potentially great works, then, it would seem a more reasonable course simply to find those that strike us as good (however we define that term individually or as a group) and leave final judgements to future generations. Yet Lem's frustration with the state of science fiction in the early 1970s led him in an interesting direction, a direction he articulated in his next important essay.
“Cosmology and Science Fiction”

“Cosmology and Science Fiction” builds on the points Lem raises in “A Hopeless Case” and anticipates much of his “Metafantasia.” In “Cosmology,” Lem objects to science fiction’s ignorance of contemporary cosmological theory. As he says: “science fiction has encapsulated itself so much against . . . [contemporary] cosmology that it is unwilling to receive any signals; that is to say, any news from the field of science, with the exception of what manages to make the front pages of the newspapers (such as . . . black holes)” (203).

This objection is a variant form of the proscriptive definitions of science fiction I discussed in my introduction. Essentially, Lem calls for a more purely scientific science fiction, but his rigorous approach in “Cosmology” offers a thoroughness lacking in most proscriptive definitions. He notes that science fiction is supposed to evoke a sense of wonder in its readers, “but upon close examination that ‘wonder’ divulges its close relationship to the tricks of a stage magician. As popular fiction, science fiction must pose artificial problems and offer their easy solution” (204-205). As a result of the genre’s need for simplicity, the cosmos is domesticated because the reality of space is inappropriate for the needs of science fiction writers. As an example of this simplification, Lem identifies one of the central subjects of cosmology—singularities—and asks, “What heroic characters, what plot can there be where no body, however strong or hard, could exist longer than a few fractions of a second? The space surrounding a neutron star cannot be passed closely in a
spaceship even at parabolic velocity, because the gravity gradients in the human body increase without a chance that they might be stopped or screened, and human beings explode until only a red puddle is left” (207-208).

We should note that there is at least one revealing flaw in Lem’s argument, which, although it might at first appear trivial, is actually very instructive. He observes that no hero or object can survive for more than a few fractions of a second in close proximity to a neutron star. In simple terms, Lem is correct. Robert Forward has calculated the strength of gravitational tides at 400 kilometers from a neutron star as 200 gravities per meter and notes that such intense gravitation would literally tear a person apart (“When Science” 5). At first glance, it would appear that such a setting would be utterly inhospitable to characters and, as a result, plots and fiction as well. Forward, however, has pondered the problem and come to the conclusion that “Six ultradense masses placed in a ring about [a] human spaceship would make a counter tide that would cancel the [gravitational] tide of the neutron star” (“When Science” 5). By incorporating these ultradense masses into his spaceship’s design, Forward was able to allow his human characters to make a close approach to a neutron star in the novel Dragon’s Egg (1980).

Thus, given ingenuity and scientific knowledge, authors can accomplish fictional feats that adhere to science while still seeming to domesticate space. However, Forward, as a senior research scientist, has more scientific expertise than most science fiction authors but, regrettably, nowhere near the linguistic gifts of a Delany or Le Guin. In the revealing
dedication to *Dragon’s Egg*, Forward writes, “My special thanks to Lester del Rey, who took what was practically a pedantic scientific paper and helped me turn it into something interesting to read.” In fact, even if the current state of *Dragon’s Egg* represents an improvement over earlier versions, it still has too much in common with Niven’s “Neutron Star” for it to represent much of a fictional achievement. But the shortcomings of Forward’s fiction result from his shortcomings as a writer of fiction rather than from the inadequacies of the fictional form itself.

In other cases of this sort, however, there appear to be more basic difficulties involved—difficulties of the very sort Lem points out. Scientist and hard science fiction author Gregory Benford, for instance, observes that the very alienness of science fiction’s topics presents particular problems for science fiction authors. Benford notes that simply utilizing “some of the techniques of modernism” is not enough to convincingly “depict characters or aliens outside our culture” or to make technically-oriented hard science fiction function as both good science and strong fiction (96). As a result, he concludes, “Different, perhaps totally new literary techniques must be developed” (96). Benford does not speculate what those techniques might be or offer possible avenues for stylistic exploration. Lem, however, addresses that very issue in his “Metafantasia.”
"Metafantasia: The Possibilities of Science Fiction"

Lem considers the "primary unsolved problem of science fiction to be the lack of a theoretical typology of its paradigmatic structures. Since writers of science fiction do not even recognize the existence of this problem, the structures they use most frequently are neither aesthetically nor epistemologically adequate for their chosen themes. An example of aesthetic inadequacy is the practice of authors who attempt to write mimetic (pseudorealistic) works, and yet model such phenomena as 'contact with another civilization' or an invasion from outer space after the relationship between detective and criminal," as in Hal Clement's Needle (193). Lem's observation of science fiction's reliance on established narrative forms supports his call for "an entirely new narrative structure, one that might be modeled on the historiography, the biographies of scientists, or perhaps a collage of excerpts from scientific texts, press clippings, the addresses of Nobel laureates, or other facsimiles" (170). As he says, the "potential treasury of narrative structures of science fiction has not yet been satisfactorily exploited" (170).

As an example of a so-far untried narrative form Lem imagines "an entirely different order" of science fiction text, written in the form of a mid-twenty-first century popular scientific book "detailing the history of cosmological views, including the most recent theories" (164). Lem observes that conventional narrative techniques do not lend themselves to a text of this sort since "The intellectual adventures of the new cosmogony's creators will not be contained by traditional naturalistic or realistic
narrative structures. We need not know about these scientists’ wives, children, and acquaintances, any more than about Newton’s or Planck’s social and marital lives. . . . [T]he concept requires the chronicle of an idea, not of the vicissitudes of a few individuals” (170). To support his point, Lem observes that, from an empirical-scientific perspective, novels such as Clement’s Needle and Daniel Keyes’s Flowers for Algernon are inadequate. Still, Lem admits that Flowers for Algernon “is interesting psychologically” (194). It is perhaps in this observation that we can find the seam in Lem’s argument that will allow us to better understand both its strengths and its weaknesses.

Lem’s central example in “Metafantasie” is not Clement’s novel; it is Keyes’s. Yet Flowers for Algernon is mainstream science fiction which is not primarily concerned with the widespread impact of scientific advancements. The novel focuses on the artificial intellectual rise and fall of its retarded protagonist because it is meant to be psychologically interesting rather than empirically rigorous or theoretically thorough. Its focus, in the tradition of Henry James and Virginia Woolf, is on character rather than on society or technology. Not surprisingly, then, like James’s and Woolf’s criticism of H. G. Wells for his failure to create complex characters, Lem’s argument raises a valid general point which fails in some instances because it does not apply and should not be applied to all fiction. Nonetheless, although Lem chooses his central example imprecisely, the same cannot be said for the formulation of his argument.

Science fiction is consistently held up by its proponents as one of the most viable of contemporary forms because it is particularly well-suited to
address contemporary concerns with the scientific, theoretical, and technological aspects of our culture (Hartwell; Heinlein; et al). If some science fiction authors opt to set aside characterization in favor of empirical-scientific subject matter, as do such authors as Hal Clement, Robert Forward, and Larry Niven, then we might logically expect them to pay more attention to their scientific and empirical content rather than debasing it with an unnecessary fictional frame. What Lem asks for is merely that science fiction use the proper tool for the proper job—if the fiction is not concerned with subjects that can best be treated using traditional forms, then those forms should be discarded or at least altered. That is, if works like Forward’s Dragon’s Egg or Niven’s “Neutron Star” are purely theoretical explorations, if they, like Dragon’s Egg, began as a pedantic, scientific papers, then rather than giving these works a thin varnish of fictional elements, make them into science fictional, non-pedantic scientific papers. Lem even offers a viable model—the above-mentioned mid-twenty-first century popular scientific book (164).

Lem has also written some stories that dispense with the unnecessary veneer of traditional fiction, although not using the particular model he presents in “Metafantasia.” His Imaginary Magnitude (1985) consists of prefaces to books of the future, while One Human Minute (1986) “reviews” three twenty-first century books. Certainly, these works dispense with any unnecessary fictional veneer. Some science fiction has integrated a similar approach, but these works make a compromise between standard fictional forms and the radical departure from those forms Lem suggests. William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s The Difference Engine (1991), for instance,
presents a range of fictive documents, including a court deposition, letters, poems, a London playbill, a column from *The Tatler*, and transcripts of a Parliamentary address, an interview, and a sound recording (408-420). Sterling calls the presentation of material from such documents “sampling” and describes *The Difference Engine* as a “heavily sampled text” (Sterling, Panel). In the same work, however, Gibson and Sterling invest considerable effort developing characters that effectively delimit the social, scientific, and technological realities of the alternate nineteenth-century world they inhabit. In *The Hercules Text*, Jack McDevitt uses a similar “sampling” device—recurring, brief sections headed by the word “monitor” that present a scattering of headlines and transcripts from a computer information network. McDevitt’s extensive textual samplings—he draws from, among other things, transcripts from television addresses, interviews, and news reports—delimit his near future setting very effectively; yet he, even more than Gibson and Sterling, is interested in characters, particularly in the impact of alien contact on his main character’s life.

The insertion of sampled passages in fiction, of course, is not new. John Dos Passos does essentially the same thing in such works as *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and his collected trilogy *U. S. A.* (1938). Dos Passos also presents multiple characters without a true protagonist in *Manhattan Transfer*, just as Gibson and Sterling do in *The Difference Engine*. But although we can see that the Dos Passos-like sampling of some science fiction—either used in tandem with decentralized characterization or not—shows a sympathy with Lem’s perspective, the sort of radical departure he
suggests has not been embraced by science fiction writers. Still, that Lem has legitimately observed another potential approach for science fiction does not preclude other approaches. Science fiction can retain an interest in characters to good effect, either to help provide details and deepen the reader's picture of a story's world or to provide insights into characters, a point I will return to in my final chapter.

Lem often raises the ire of in-genre science fiction commentators because he honestly assesses and becomes irritated by science fiction's flaws, then makes a serious effort to surmount them. As a result, his fiction tends towards the experimental, as in *Imaginary Magnitude* and *One Human Minute*. To conservative in-genre authors and critics, Lem's work is disturbing for the same reason the art displayed at the Armory Show was disturbing to so many critics in 1913. There is an unusual irony in the fact that science fiction is marginalized partly because the alterations it posits on contemporary society are too radical and sudden for many readers to accept. Lem is marginalized within the genre for similar reasons: his work embraces a radically different approach unacceptable even to the supposedly broad-minded members of the science fiction community. The fiction and criticism that came out of the New Wave movement were too radical for many, although to a large extent they merely drew from the modernist literary tradition, particularly the work of Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence (Fiedler, "Criticism" 6; Greenland, *Entropy* 160-161, 180). Lem, however, is often more daunting because his influences are usually more contemporary and experimental, what we might call postmodern. Recognizing the possibilities of science fiction and recalling the bold claims
of in-genre writers and critics, Lem seeks to realize the genre's potential through experiment and innovation. As with any avant-garde effort, of course, broad acceptance lags behind the actual achievement. But just as the rise of any new approach to or form of literature doesn't obliterate that which precedes it, Lem's work doesn't make all that came before it or those current works which draw on older traditions obsolete, as I hope to show in my final chapter.
Notes: Chapter Three

1 Lem’s use of prostitution metaphors strikes me as sexist and offensive, but since the comparisons they offer are clear enough, I shall set aside a feminist critique so as not to move too far afield from my central topic.

2 Although not named by Lem, William Burroughs is another revitalizer of kitsch, since, although often discussed as a postmodernist rather than science fiction writer, he too “unabashedly seizes on the lowest common denominator of science-fiction conventions” (McHale 66) and, like Dick, his work is strongly grounded in ontology.

3 As a revealing example, we might examine the early work of Lem’s exception to science fiction’s hopelessness: Philip K. Dick. Much of Dick’s early work was written very quickly as a result of tremendous financial pressures. If any science fiction writer ever piled universe on top of universe, it was Dick, and much of his early fiction, especially the short fiction, reflects the haste of its composition.

4 This passage is probably a veiled reference to Larry Niven’s “Neutron Star,” which ignores the fact that the close approach to a neutron star would have been fatal under the circumstances the story describes. Even Niven, a writer of hard science fiction, fails to attend to scientific detail as he domesticates space.
CHAPTER IV: THE MISREAD SHORT STORIES OF WILLIAM GIBSON: “HINTERLANDS” AND “THE WINTER MARKET”

The work of a variety of critics (Bradbury 152, 157; Ebert; Greenland 195, 203; Jameson 38; McHale 59-72; and others) suggests that the most likely direction from which mainstream criticism will begin to more fully address science fiction is by exploring parallels between postmodern fiction and science fiction. Science fiction, of course, is not discussed only in the context of postmodernism. The genre’s current marginalization—unlike its earlier ghettoization—allows for specific authors if not the entire genre to attract the attention of mainstream literary publications as well as the attention of their in-genre counterparts. One recent author, William Gibson, however, has been discussed in all three contexts, and the example provided by that discussion offers insights into both Gibson’s work and science fiction criticism in general.

Reviews and essays in such mainstream publications as Book World—The Washington Post (Platt), The Nation (Erik Davis), The New York Times Book Review (Disch; Jonas), The Times Literary Supplement (Greenland; Kincaid), and The Village Voice (Cohen) have praised Gibson’s fiction both as science fiction and, more generally, as fiction. In Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991), Frederick Jameson notes that “William Gibson’s representational innovations . . . mark his work as an exceptional literary realization within
a predominately visual or aural postmodern production” (38). Eric Davis observes that “Gibson’s prose can generate what Jameson call[s] the postmodern sublime, a rush born of the attempt to represent the impossible totality of the decentralized global network of multinational capital” (639). Certainly, then, from a variety of perspectives, Gibson’s work has been deemed worthy of attention. We should note, however, that simply because Gibson’s fiction has been seen as worthy of study, it does not necessarily follow that it has been carefully studied—even by those inside the science fiction community. As Gibson’s example reveals, science fiction sometimes exists in the blind spot of in-genre as well as mainstream commentators. In-genre critics have had noticeable difficulties addressing Gibson’s short fiction, in particular often overlooking its complexities as a result of oversights that those in the science fiction community have come to expect of mainstream commentators. By carefully examining two important stories, I hope to show that Gibson’s short fiction is neither stereotypical nor immature and, by doing so, to give some indication of the shortcomings of science fiction criticism and also suggest that part of the cause of the genre’s marginalization is, ironically, science fiction criticism.

Critics discussing William Gibson’s fiction generally focus on his novels—Neuromancer (1984), Count Zero (1986), and Mona Lisa Overdrive (1987)—and devote only brief mentions or book reviews to the material in his 1986 collection Burning Chrome. When the short stories are discussed, they are treated either as insignificant exercises that led up to the novels or as works that have no existence independent of them.¹ Even Gregory Feeley—the author of one of the collection’s more substantial
reviews—gives little attention to the legitimate literary substance of the collection. Instead, he focuses on "the immaturity of the attitudes" (97) that lies beneath all of Gibson's fiction. But in fact, despite the marked similarities between several of his short stories and novels, Gibson's short fiction clearly indicates his authorial range and depth.

Some broad critiques of Gibson's work apply to his short stories, while other charges directed specifically at his short fiction are neither accurate nor pertinent. In order to reevaluate these stories, we must differentiate between the accurate, useful critiques and those that are either inaccurate or misleading. For instance, charges of occasional stylistic excess (Feeley 98; Rirdan 44) are accurate. Gibson does tend, as Feeley phrases it, to "strain for effect with technicolor dramatics" (98). On the other hand, the observation that commercial considerations adversely affected Burning Chrome (Feeley 97)—although factually accurate—tends to obscure rather than illuminate more substantial issues relevant to the short stories. The collection includes all the short fiction Gibson had written or collaborated on up until the time of its publication for economic reasons—interesting, perhaps, but not a factor of great importance to the evaluation of the stories. The publishers noted a demand for Gibson's work and provided a collection as quickly as they could.

Because Burning Chrome collects the work of a relatively new author, it is necessarily brief and, as we would expect, contains some tentative, early efforts. The tendency among Gibson commentators to treat the novels and short stories as a unified whole, however, presents more overarching problems. In light of the parallels in style, setting, and
characters between the novels and short stories, one can understand the
general inclination of critics to group Gibson’s works together and treat
them as a unified whole. But the existence of such parallels does not
automatically require that we treat all of Gibson’s short stories as being cut
from the same cloth as his novels. Critics have dwelled on Gibson’s
tendencies for so long that the importance—and even the existence—of his
fictive variations has been largely overlooked.

Gibson puts his characteristic style and approach to considerably
different use in two stories—“Hinterlands” and “The Winter Market.” Yet
unlike “The Gernsback Continuum,” which is so markedly different from
Gibson’s other work that generalizations cannot meaningfully apply to it,
these stories are discussed in broad sweeps because they outwardly
resemble the Gibson norm. In these works, though, Gibson undertakes
literary experiments very different from his overtly adventure-oriented
stories while still using many elements both of the hard-boiled thriller and
what has been termed cyberpunk. By noting the ways these works deviate
from what critics have posited as Gibson’s norm, we can determine the
nature of Gibson’s literary talent, better understand his work, and observe
the manner by which critics’ oversights and generalizations allow science
fiction to be misunderstood and, as a result, marginalized.

Gibson’s stories generally open in the midst of situations that the
reader cannot help but find disorienting. Only after a gradual
accumulation of details do the initially confusing and apparently unrelated
elements of the story coalesce into an identifiable pattern. The other
recurring feature of Gibson’s fiction, as both Orson Scott Card and Tom
Maddox observe, is a reliance on the traditions of hard-boiled fiction: his
dialogue and writing style are often terse; violence is presented at close
range; the settings are gritty; and the protagonist is usually a cynical figure
in a necessarily cynical world. The briefest and most representative
example of Gibson’s brand of hard-boiled science fiction is “Johnny
Mnemonic,” which includes all the standard elements of the hard-boiled
tradition in a context quite different from anything Dashiell Hammett or
Raymond Chandler were likely to have imagined.

But while Gibson constantly relies on the disconcerting opening in
his fiction, he both modifies and puts the hard-boiled tradition to
considerably different use in “Hinterlands” and “The Winter Market.”
Here, Gibson sets aside high-technology action-adventure in favor of
character study. In both cases, the tone is contemplative, and Gibson
moves much closer to the literary roots of hard-boiled fiction, aligning his
work with the fiction of Hemingway and Dos Passos rather than with the
sensational stories of Mickey Spillane. Once the reader has moved past the
initially confusing openings of “Hinterlands” and “The Winter Market” and
begun synthesizing complete pictures of the stories, he or she will find that
they unfold in a multiplicity of directions, and details that at first appear
irrelevant or confusing take on new significance. The avenue of
exploration I will pursue is one that is central to Gibson’s fiction—his
treatment of technology’s effects on human psychology.

“Hinterlands” chronicles a day in the life of Toby Halpert, a
“surrogate.” With the help of a “handler,” he tries to prevent the
psychologically destroyed space travellers returning from the area known
as the Tovyebskr Anomaly—and generally referred to as “the Highway”—from killing themselves. At the same time, the handler-surrogate teams try to learn as much as possible from these travellers—called hitchhikers—about what happens between the time they disappear into the Highway and return bearing artifacts from alien cultures. The suicide rate among surviving hitchhikers is one hundred percent, and the surrogates’s work is demanding, stressful, and disillusioning, but it benefits society by maximizing the amount of useful information obtained from each hitchhiker. Given its subject matter, one may at first be tempted to categorize “Hinterlands” as another story that turns, as Feeley puts it, on the trite, overused literary device of “monstrous truths that drive their discoverers mad” (98); however, such a categorization overlooks Gibson’s careful creation of a psychologically complex character, Halpert, who is neither a type nor simply another of Gibson’s characters whose catharsis is “largely banal” (Feeley 97).

Considering Halpert’s decision to remain in such a stressful environment, his psychology is, if nothing else, intriguing. Similarly, his suffering, his sacrifice of individual identity in the course of his work, and his radical discontent and disconnectedness from society are, even if sometimes overstated, far from banal. The intensity of his experiences and his desire to be a hitchhiker—even though he has full knowledge of the job’s dangers—are extreme, and the reader might question his sanity, but his profession, his feelings, and his conjectures combine to form a picture of a character who is far from stereotypical. The story provides more than
the circumstances of an alien and unfamiliar situation; it provides a picture of the Tovyevski Anomaly and a life lived in that phenomenon’s shadow.

If the plot device of truths that drive their discoverers mad were at the root of the story, Feeley would be on firmer ground in his criticism of “Hinterlands.” But it is not. The plot element Feeley finds objectionable is not a firmly, objectively established “fact” of the story; Halpert simply speculates that Olga Tovyevski’s, Leni Hofmannstahl’s, and every other hitchhiker’s insanity results from the transactions they undertake to gain alien technologies and artifacts. Yet Halpert has no more idea than the reader what actually happens to the hitchhikers or why they invariably go insane. As he states about Hofmannstahl: “We’ll probably never know what she met out there” (85).

A specific cause for the hitchhikers’ insanity is neither provided by the story, nor, finally, important to the way it functions. The reader is necessarily left without any way of knowing whether Halpert’s hypothesis is correct because his uncertainty provides the tension that shapes his character and drives the story. Gibson presents Halpert as unstable, as a character who has attempted suicide, still wants to try his luck at the highway, and abuses drugs. Consequently, his more subjective leaps of imagination—such as his theory about the cause of hitchhiker suicides—need to be taken as such. After all, despite speculating that “Olga must have known, must have seen it all, somehow; she was trying to keep us from finding our way out there” (86), she might just as easily have been “clawing at her radio gear, blooding her hands” (82) in a frantic attempt to call for help or alert earth of some discovery. In the end, Toby’s
supposition about Olga and her radio gear works more as a projection of his own feelings about the Highway than as a literal account of what happened on Olga’s ship. Whether she was attempting to destroy the radio equipment, engaging in some insane struggle to make it work, or doing something entirely different, from Halpert’s point of view, what Olga ought to have been doing was trying to destroy it. As a result, all the possibilities condense into one, and Olga’s actions are viewed through the lens of Halpert’s own desperation and anxiety about the Highway. Clearly, Gibson does not reuse a tired literary device in “Hinterlands”; he examines a complex character under exceptional pressure.

A similar misdirection of interest undermines commentary on “The Winter Market.” Critics focus on the fact that one of its characters creates art from junk (Feeley 98; Maddox 47) not because that creation is the story’s major concern, but, rather, because this aspect of the story allows them either to draw parallels between “The Winter Market” and Gibson’s novels, as both Maddox and Feeley do, or to criticize Gibson on the grounds of unoriginality and banality, as Feeley does. In either case, this aspect of the story—although significant—is subsidiary to the story’s rendering of the relationship between Casey, an engineer, and Lise, a woman who, although dying and confined to life in an exoskeleton, is “born to” (139) the popular artistic form of her day. Her goal, though, is not to become famous or wealthy, but to free herself of a congenitally diseased body by having her personality encoded as a computer program and stored in a mainframe. Thus, even after Lise’s death, her program is still capable of phoning Casey. Casey’s anxiety about hearing her voice
again and his difficulty in reconciling the reality of her physical death with her continued existence in a computer’s memory drive the story and form a constant narrative refrain, represented by Casey’s and Rubin’s repeated remarks that Lise might call or by Casey’s questions about whether the computer program is actually the same Lise he knew. Both the story’s bleak tone and its complex ambiguities are captured effectively in the first of these refrains when Casey stands on a wall above False Creek, apparently toying with the idea of jumping. He says: “I stood there a long time before I took that first step back. Because she was dead, and I’d let her go. Because, now, she was immortal, and I’d helped her get that way. And because I knew she’d phone me, in the morning (126).

This complex web of considerations and reflections and their effect on Casey are central to “The Winter Market.” Again, this is a story about characters, not about character types. The focus, of course, is on Casey, especially on Lise’s effect—both as a person and as a technological construct which inspires curiosity and horror—on him. The other significant character, Casey’s friend, the artist Rubin Stark, complicates and enriches Casey’s—and the reader’s—knowledge of Lise, even though Stark is finally revealed to know less about her than Casey does. The characters Gibson creates here are anything but types. Each of them is unique: quirky, human, and prone towards the very sorts of untypical behavior that prompts Casey to take Lise home, to “do one of those things you do and never find out why, even though something in you knows you could never have done anything else” (129).
These two apparently dissimilar stories stand apart from the Gibson norm because, due to an almost complete absence of violence, neither is in the characteristic mold of the hard-boiled thriller. This significant aspect of Gibson's approach hints that he is not writing thrillers, but, rather, is focusing on human psychology. Brief details of hitchhiker suicides are included in "Hinterlands," but unpleasant details are kept to a minimum. The only notable exception is Hofmannstahl's grisly suicide, which is described in some detail. But even here, the actual suicide takes place off-stage, and only the literally bloodless results are included in the story. In "The Winter Market," there is no physical violence of any sort. The distinctly subdued tone of these stories and the marked shift they represent from the violence of Gibson's "Sprawl" emphasize that in these works Gibson is not providing thrillers of the sort represented by "Johnny Mnemonic," Neuromancer, or Count Zero. Further, the characters are not marked by a tendency towards action. Instead, disoriented, and grimly patient, they struggle with their situations, sometimes cringing in the face of phenomena they cannot understand, whether these phenomena result from alien influences, as in "Hinterlands," or from human advancements, as in "The Winter Market." The only character to throw off this lethargy is Halpert, but when he does so, entering the "handler-surrogate gestalt" (80) before going into Leni Hofmannstahl's ship, he is not—strictly speaking—even entirely himself anymore. Instead, he is a computer-spliced amalgamation of two people.

What becomes apparent about these stories is that the technologies they contain are significant without being the foci that technologies often
become in science fiction. Instead, the technologies, the marvels, and the extrapolated trends—all the elements that mark the stories as science fiction—allow Gibson to create unique characters and examine their psychologies and lives. Without the Toyevski Anomaly, the Toby Halpert we know could not exist. Lacking the environmental and technological conditions of the Sprawl, Gibson’s Lise would be a radically different individual. At their very cores, then, these stories explore characters in situations we understand because the technological pressures they contain are akin to even if more severe than those in our own lives. Their situations mirror our own. That is one achievement of the best science fiction, and it is certainly an achievement of Gibson’s best work. He does not simply create fascinating situations and then construct convenient characters to play show and tell with them. His settings leave indelible impressions on the characters who inhabit them, and the believable correspondence between the characters and their environments represents one means by which Gibson integrates the various elements of his story to produce a cohesive, effective whole.

In light of Gibson’s sensitivity to the necessary interconnectedness of character and setting, at least one of his authorial strengths is what Bruce Sterling terms his ability to “pinpoint social nerves” (Introduction 2). Moreover, Gibson not only pinpoints those nerves, he exhibits a considerable sensitivity to them—particularly in “The Winter Market,” where Lise embodies the ways that the technological, industrial, and cultural realities of modern life alter humanity. Casey notes that the illness which confines Lise to an exoskeleton might be the result of one of the new
environmental diseases “that they’ve barely even named yet” (130). Realistically, Casey’s initial reaction to her is to look, recognize her strangeness, then look away—like most people, to ignore and escape her. The radical isolation Lise feels as a result of this treatment is emphasized and deepened later, after she asks Casey, with hate and “some terrible parody of lust” in her eyes (122), if he wants to go to bed with her. She reveals that although her damaged nervous system prevents her from experiencing sexual sensation, she sometimes likes to watch her lovers feel what she cannot. In general, then, Lise is ignored, and even when she gets close enough to someone to make him a lover, she does not so much participate as watch. Her only recourse—the only meaningful direction in which to direct her survival instinct—is towards a continued life beyond flesh, an existence that will free her from her body. But as Casey’s final view of her reveals, even after she has given up on life, she would still like to watch one more time, “to kiss herself goodbye” even though for her that means she has “[t]o find someone drunk enough to do it for her” (148).

Finally, Lise’s continued existence and much of her pain result from the next century’s most advanced medical and technological measures. Her body cannot feel, but her exoskeleton allows her to go through the motions of love-making, so that she can watch and be repeatedly reminded of the differences which set her apart from others. When machines and technology can no longer keep her alive, they distill her mind’s essence into a program and place that distillation into the receptacle of a computer mainframe, enclosing her and narrowing her range of experience still
more than her exoskeleton and damaged nervous system did when she was alive.

Lise’s resonance as a character results partly from the reader’s ability to identify with her. All her characteristics which elicit reader sympathy have analogs in contemporary society. Her congenital condition is not so very different from illnesses resulting from environmental factors today. Her exoskeleton, at first strange, simply combines computer-brain interface technology with a logical extrapolation of the technologies that today provide increasingly complex artificial limbs. And her addiction to wizz is no more unusual than the contemporary appetite for illegal drugs. Finally, it is Lise’s very familiarity to us that makes her such a resonant figure—she represents our own twentieth-century society grown older but not wiser. She is not a character of a utopia nor of a dystopia—she occupies the middle ground and shows that things will remain pretty much the same, that society will develop new problems and new partial solutions, and that some will always be left outside looking in—that they, like Lise, have to be content just to watch.

Clearly, then, Gibson does more than provide interesting phenomena and characters, but thought-provoking subject matter does not guarantee superior fiction. What still remains to be examined is the manner in which Gibson presents his material, and, in a case of considerable unanimity, critics have not found his talents wanting. As Feeley, Maddox, and nearly every critic to discuss Gibson’s work have noted, his style is engaging. A stylistic analysis could, of course, explore a wide range of strengths, but, for the sake of brevity, I will address only one—Gibson’s attention to
detail. In “Hinterlands,” for instance, Halpert appears to digress in a full paragraph discussion of a particular species of vine in Heaven’s pseudo-jungle. The paragraph concludes: “But I like those vines: The leaves are heart-shaped, and if you rub one between your hands, it smells like cinnamon” (74). These concrete, familiar details contrast strongly with the context—where many aspects of the setting are necessarily unfamiliar. Significantly, though, the details of the paragraph’s final sentence do more than simply add depth to the setting; they also tell the reader something about Halpert’s sensitivity to his environment and the simple pleasure he derives from smelling cinnamon and touching a plant. These considerations echo his discussion of the “special kind of darkness” (84) brought on by the drug Charmian provides. Halpert tells us that:

It was nothing like the darkness of Big Night, that sentient, hunting dark that waits to drag the hitchhikers down to Wards, that dark that incubates the Fear. It was a darkness like the shadows moving in the back seat of your parents’ car, on a rainy night when you’re five years old, warm and secure. (84)

In both cases the sensory details harken back to familiar, earthly things, highlighting Halpert’s vulnerability in the face of the Highway, the damage that it does to the hitchhikers, and the damage that it does to him as a result of his continued but frustrated desire to go there. Because of Gibson’s careful use of detail, Halpert becomes more fully realized and less a type, just as the story does.

Gibson uses detail to equally effective ends in “The Winter Market.” As Casey chronicles his involvement with Lise, the gradual accumulation of
details fleshes out the setting and characters. In the course of this process, 
Gibson pays particular attention to mechanical devices and sounds they 
produce. When Casey and Lise are in his apartment, he comments that he 
hears her exoskeleton “click softly as it move[s] her” (130). Throughout 
the story, Rubin’s home “clicks and stirs . . . with the furtive activities of 
his smaller creations” (148). This attention to small sounds, to subtle clicks 
and stirs, culminates in the story’s final sentence, when Casey hears a “clear 
and tiny sound,” yet another click, at the same time it “clicks” for him that 
Rubin is right, that he will eventually have to work with Lise again (149). 
The sounds of Rubin’s creations are presented dispassionately, clinically, 
while only the sound of an antique coffee machine possesses any particular 
character; the “roar of Rubin’s antique espresso machine” (128) comforts 
Casey. This is a sound from the past, produced by a machine built in a 
time before exoskeletons and new environmental diseases. This detail 
suggests and heightens the effect of the impending arrival of an antithetical, 
artificially generated sound Casey dreads: Lise’s voice on the telephone. 
Again, the subtle details Gibson provides both contribute to the setting’s 
verisimilitude and reinforce the story’s concern with characters’ lives.

Feeley states that the catharses of Gibson’s characters are banal. In 
fact, the careful presentation of these stories insures that they are anything 
but banal. Consistently, Gibson’s characters walk the fine line between 
strangeness and familiarity. Halpert, Casey, and Lise all confront situations 
the reader has never faced but which have identifiable roots that challenge 
the reader’s imagination while capturing his or her sympathy. So although 
Gibson’s fiction is couched in the traditions of the hard-boiled detective
thriller, his alterations to that tradition allow him to undertake psychological explorations of resonant characters.

Clearly, then, the weaknesses attributed to Gibson’s short fiction are not so much in the works themselves as they are in the critical community’s failure to focus coherently on those stories that depart from the perceived norm of Gibson’s fiction. Some of his short fiction is readily distinguishable from his novels, but if we remain content to read these stories unimaginatively, their underlying substance will remain either unnoticed or largely misunderstood. Granted, not every work in *Burning Chrome* is a literary gem, but by taking a fresh and more careful look at Gibson’s fiction we can recognize those works which will reward further consideration. The alternative is that the considerable substance of Gibson’s short fiction will remain virtually untouched. What is particularly unusual about this situation is the fact that the errors which have been made in respect to Gibson’s fiction have been made by in-genre critics whose mistakes are those frequently attributed to their mainstream counterparts.

Strangely, in-genre critics seem to have begun accepting some of the things that “everyone knows” about science fiction and applied those generalizations to Gibson’s fiction. First and foremost, they have accepted the notion that generalizations are reliable, which, in this particular instance, amounts to validating commentators’ unfamiliarity with their material. More specifically, of course, critics expect that Gibson can be best understood as a microcosm of the “general category” of science fiction, accepting that his work reflects immature attitudes, relies on
character types rather than individuals, and is flawed because of commercial considerations. As we have already seen, of course, the accuracy of any of these charges depends on what a critic means by "science fiction," just as we would expect, the accuracy of any charges leveled at Gibson's work depends on the referent of the phrase "William Gibson's fiction."
Notes: Chapter Four

1 A focus on the novels does, of course, often make sense—for instance in necessarily directed discussions such as Glenn Grant’s “Transcendence Through Detournment in William Gibson’s Neuromancer.” Peculiarly, though, even supposedly broad discussions of Gibson’s work marginalize the short fiction. In addition to Gregory Feeley’s review of Burning Chrome, see Danny Rirdan’s “The Works of William Gibson” and Tom Maddox’s “Cobra, She Said: An Interim Report on the Fiction of William Gibson.”

2 The term “cyberpunk” has been used in reference to such a range of stories and novels that it has become nearly meaningless. Still, although I agree with the assertion that cyberpunk is more a marketing concept than a distinct trend in science fiction (Delany “Is Cyberpunk” 35), I will use the term loosely here to refer to works of science fiction—particularly Gibson’s—in which computer-brain interfaces are recurring elements in a world where illegal drugs, radical cosmetic surgery, and powerful multinational corporations are commonplaces.
CONCLUSION: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON A DIVERSE GENRE

Readers often undergo an ossification of taste. If we are “raised” reading one form of literature rather than another, we might well find it at the center of a narrow range of literary interests. Such a situation would, of course, have a drastic effect on the way we respond to genre fiction, assuming, of course, that genre fiction is not what we’ve been raised on. Thomas J. Roberts notes that

The pages of any journal in mathematics are unintelligible to most of us, of course, but those journals are excusably unintelligible. It is the inexcusably unintelligible that interferes with our minds in our forays into strange genres of fiction. Sometimes we impatiently lump unintelligible stories in with the unreadably subliterate, say, when it is merely that they are so deeply embedded in their tradition or in a specialized subculture that they temporarily baffle us. (58)

When Roberts speaks of the genre and subculture traditions of science fiction, he refers to far more than the reading protocols Samuel Delany has identified as being specific to the form. There are a variety of genre conventions (faster-than-light starships, for example), character types (the bold space captain), ongoing debates (what sort of starship really offers the most reasonable design?). Also, as with any genre, new fiction responds to or critiques previous genre works. Often-mentioned examples of this phenomenon are the critique-responses to Robert Heinlein’s militaristic
society in *Starship Troopers* (1959): Harry Harrison’s parody of Heinlein, *Bill, The Galactic Hero* (1965) and Joe Haldeman’s *The Forever War* (1975), which emphasizes war’s “meaningless stupidity and brutality” (Aldiss 370; Roberts 160-161). Although these responses to Heinlein make some degree of sense outside of their particular context, there are science fiction stories that are far more problematic when viewed independently of their genre. Richard Davis’s “Hackers in the Dewey,” for instance, appears amateurish to readers who are unaware that the story parodies science fiction’s postapocalyptic clichés and sometimes too-serious tone. Similarly, if the reader is unaware that William Gibson’s “The Gernsback Continuum” parodies “1930s technophiliac visions of the future” (Maddox 46), the story seems little more than a puzzling exercise in surrealism.

When readers stumble upon science fiction, their reactions range from appreciation to loathing, but, of course, these are often uninformed opinions. As we can see using the examples I have provided above, some stories, like Davis’s, would appear amateurish, what Thomas Roberts calls “clownish” (64-70), even though the work is strongly embedded in genre tradition and offers a critique from within that tradition. A work like Gibson’s “The Gernsbeck Continuum” would be utterly baffling. But science fiction might elicit very different reactions. Imagine, for example, that a reader encounters Harrison’s *Bill, The Galactic Hero* without having any larger context for the novel. If the reader is amused, he or she might characterize science fiction as an entertaining, lighthearted genre. Should another reader find the work frivolous, however, he or she might conceive
of science fiction as childishly frivolous. Alternately, a similar reader might encounter Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*. “Here,” such a reader might say, “is an example of the fascist tendencies that make science fiction an ethically dangerous genre.” (I rather imagine Wayne Booth pronouncing these fateful words.) Once again, all these readers might be quite sure that they have a valid and useful insight into what science fiction really is, but, of course, they, like the four blind men examining the elephant, are drawing conclusions based on limited data.

In fact, authorial borrowings and responding in science fiction, as with the genre’s fan-author-editor interaction, results in the very diversity I have been discussing since the beginning of this study. But for the casual critic or academic who decides to “add” science fiction to his or her repertoire, that diversity often goes unnoticed. I chose to discuss characterization as one example of this overlooked diversity, but I hope I have made it abundantly clear that there are others—diversity of theme, stylistic orientation, and ideology among them. One of the greatest problems with science fiction criticism is that critics and academics, who are often very well read in some areas of literature, assume that their expertise elsewhere translates into an automatic expertise with any merely popular genre they happen to read, however unexperienced they may be with it (Roberts 80-81). But the fact remains that “the degree to which any particular reading strategy makes sense of a text . . . is no guarantee that one has joined the authorial audience” (Rabinowitz 190). Thus, critics
often “make sense” of science fiction, but the manner in which they do so often lacks sensitivity to the subject.

It is no wonder that Delany is in no hurry for science fiction to gain literary status (“Gestation” 71-73). The consequences for misunderstanding the genre would be remarkable. Science fiction will not fit comfortably into a broader literary context if critics simply conceive of it as another set of texts that can be treated just like those currently in the canon. Delany’s reservations, then, mirror Rabinowitz’s observation. Fortunately, Delany probably doesn’t have much need to worry. English departments have not been and are not now madly rushing to embrace science fiction.

The fault with science fiction’s current status, however, belongs not only to some nebulously defined group of ignorant outsiders. As we saw in the example of William Gibson’s fiction, in-genre critics also treat their subject with less sensitivity than it deserves. Moreover, as Lem’s ouster from the Science Fiction Writers of America illustrates, sometimes the unprofessional behavior of in-genre writers and critics is less than admirable. Or, as Spinrad’s observations about Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* reveal, the critical acuity of the science fiction community is certainly not above question. And that this might be the case has had a considerable effect on in-genre critics and authors. Traditionally, science fiction was a closed, separate environment, but as it has been subjected to increasing scrutiny from outsiders, that has changed.
Most science fiction falls into the category of what Stanislaw Lem has astutely termed “trivial literature.” It is intended to sell, to measure up to nothing more than the most minimal literary standards. This consideration, however, neither necessarily argues against the merit of science fiction as a genre nor forms a base upon which any significant, well-reasoned critical attack on science fiction can be mounted. Yet in 1985, Luc Sante attempted to do just that in *Harper’s Magazine* essay entitled “The Temple of Boredom.” It is some measure of how untenable such critiques are that after readers disagreed with Sante, noting that his essay ignored science fiction’s “best” authors, Sante agreed that there are a few good science fiction writers but that the majority of science fiction books are mediocre (“Science Fiction Strikes Back”). Science fiction commentators, of course, have known that for years, and, indeed, in-genre writers recognize that fact under the heading of a principle known as Sturgeon’s Law, which states that ninety-nine percent of science fiction is trash, but ninety-nine percent of the work in any genre or fictional category is too. Sante’s essay is simply another example of the recurrent nature of science fiction critiques. At best, the same inaccuracies are simply rediscovered every decade or so; at worst, they are merely repackaged.

That Sante’s article was the last general, high-visibility attack on science fiction indicates that such critiques are less in evidence now than they once were. Over time and due to the work of a variety of talented authors, science fiction has become more acceptable. At the same time,
new generations of literary critics and scholars have come to their material without ever having lived through a time when science fiction was the overtly lowbrow form it was during the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s. The operative term when discussing science fiction now is no longer “ghettoized.” Now, the issue is marginalization. Thinking of science fiction as being located somewhere on the literary landscape, then, what observations seem relevant to a consideration of the genre?

Like Delany, I recommend no rush to “literary” status for science fiction. Nothing would make me more uncomfortable than for mainstream critics to suddenly integrate science fiction into their discussions, their canons, and their classes without having some broad experience with the genre they are discussing. What would be more productive is a shift in attitude, a recognition that science fiction merits serious discussion. As I noted in my first chapter, there are significant differences between mainstream fiction and science fiction, but none of these necessarily prevents the gradual formulation of broader canon which embraces science fiction. It remains true, as Delany suggests, that there are significant differences between the way we read many science fiction texts and their mainstream counterparts. But these differences do not argue for the inability of mainstream academics and critics to read science fiction. They present difficulties which are surely much more easily surmounted than those posed by Joyce’s most demanding works, and mainstream criticism has shown that it can rise to the demands of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*. Science fiction, by contrast, is neither so strange nor so difficult as so many
have been led to believe. It simply requires the same close attention as other forms of fiction.

The fact remains, however, that as Lem notes, most science fiction remains undeserving of close attention, that it fails to meet the stated goals of in-genre supporters. But, as Sturgeon’s Law suggests, the same is surely true of most fiction produced in this or any other genre at this or any other time. Lem accurately points to some of the inherent weaknesses of the genre and formulates his own viable approach, but he too often mourns the absence of a Shakespeare rather than admiring the works of a Marlowe. We are perhaps on firmer ground if we approach contemporary offerings looking for those works which strike us, for whatever reason, as good and praiseworthy rather than trying to extrapolate which authors will or will not gain the admiration of future generations. We simply do not and cannot know such things. So although Lem and many others are right to point out the many failings of science fiction, they are perhaps too quick to ignore its successes.

In any event, matters seem to be improving for science fiction’s reception. The canon is opening up to literatures that have been as marginalized as science fiction ever was. Perhaps as part of that reevaluation process, science fiction will move from the margins towards the center. There are some promising signs. After all, when Sante’s readers pointed out that his essay had ignored science fiction’s best writers, even he admitted they had a point. Still, as we note that canons are opening up to works by ethnic and racial minorities, we must also be aware that
science fiction can still be fashionably dismissed in print in ways that would be unthinkable if critics were referring to, say, women writers or Hispanic poets. Imagine the reaction to any critic who seriously suggested that contemporary women writers are not worthy of serious consideration since so few of them write fiction which measures up to the best fiction that has ever been written. Here we see the problem phrased in a manner we can readily understand: overgeneralization ignores both the diversity and those exceptional works that are always of central interest to literary scholars.

Science fiction is diverse. Trying to squeeze the genre into one narrow niche or another to make it match one conception of what the form should be will badly mangle both our treatments of science fiction and our organizational niches. As with most things, once we study science fiction carefully, we see that generalities are no more useful than they usually are. Science fiction is not many of the things we might have heard, not what many of the generalities posit. It neither loves, fears, nor despises characterization. It is no more a realm of unrelieved literary incompetence than any other genre, nor is it a necessarily juvenile form. But the same is true of the generalities posited by those within the science fiction community. Science fiction is not the only viable contemporary form. Nor, if we consider some forms of fantasy, magical realism, or experimental postmodern fiction, is science fiction necessarily the most demanding fictional form for an author to write, although authors can undertake rigorous experiments within the genre just as other authors do using postmodern forms. Nor is the genre necessarily a desirable place to
spend all one’s time reading and studying. To better understand science fiction, academics and critics need to read more science fiction, but many times those who study science fiction need to read outside of the genre as well. Science fiction has a great deal in common with mainstream fiction, and it is a viable genre worthy of study. But if we approach it with the expectations we have for mainstream literature, we will often be frustrated and disappointed. All of us have to read with care, to contextualize, to ask not just how a text fits into our conception of what fiction is, but also the ways in which the works we read don’t fit those frameworks, how the frameworks that support one set of fiction differ from those of another, and how we might create a broader framework that will allow us to discuss a variety of fictions.
WORKS CITED


