

# University of Warwick Science Fiction and Fantasy Society

## Recommended books

Welcome to the University of Warwick Science Fiction and Fantasy Society.

If your idea of fantasy is David Eddings, Tolkien and Harry Potter, and you think SF stopped when Isaac Asimov died (not that I have anything at all against Eddings, Tolkien or Asimov) then you're missing out on a tremendous wealth of really interesting writing. There now follows a necessarily subjective and highly incomplete list of recommended authors and books.

If your favourite author is missing (and there *are* several obvious candidates who were intentionally omitted because, well, everybody's already heard about them) then please come to the Tuesday evening social and tell us.

## Books

Iain Banks is one of the best known contemporary British SF writers, and one of the few that has also attained mainstream literary success. His SF fiction is written under the cunning pseudonym of Iain M Banks, and include a series of novels (*The Player of Games* and *Use of Weapons* are particularly recommended) set on the edges of a utopian galactic society called the Culture, as well as a few other SF novels (for example *Against a Dark Background* and *The Algebraist*). His 'mainstream' fiction is also recommended, especially the family mystery story *The Crow Road* (almost worth reading just for its opening line of "It was the day my grandmother exploded") and the supremely twisted *The Wasp Factory*.

Jorge Luis Borges An unrivalled master of magic realism, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) is best known for his essays and short stories. A good place to start is the anthology *Labyrinths* which contains many of his best-known stories: *The Library of Babel* (which illustrates concepts of infinity by means of a library containing a copy of every possible book), *Funes the Memorious* (a meditation on memory and knowledge) and *The House of Asterion* (in which a well-known legend is told from an unexpectedly different perspective).

Susanna Clarke's award-winning fantasy novel *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, is set against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars in an alternate England where practical magic has historically existed. The title characters, the dour and miserly Norrell and his more able student Strange, seek to return England to a golden age of magic. This book was accurately described by Neil Gaiman as "unquestionably the best English novel of the fantastic written in the last seventy years", and if you haven't already done so you should go and read it *right now*. An anthology of short stories, *The Ladies of Grace Adieu* (with beautiful illustrations by Charles Vess), is also a must.

Greg Egan, a software engineer and mathematician, writes imaginative hard SF exploring ideas from theoretical physics. Particularly recommended are *Permutation City* and *Schild's Ladder* together with the short story collection *Axiomatic*.

Jasper Fforde has written two series of highly entertaining fiction-inspired novels, one (*The Eyre Affair*, *First Among Sequels* etc) featuring the government agent Thursday Next, and the other (*The Big Over Easy* and *The Fourth Bear*) featuring Inspector Jack Spratt of the Reading Police Department (Nursery Crimes division).

Neil Gaiman is perhaps best known for his *Sandman* series of graphic novels (see later), whose morose title character is the Lord of Dreams. His other work includes the contemporary fantasy *American Gods* and its comic sequel (of sorts) *Anansi Boys*, as well as the modern fantasy *Neverwhere* and the faerie story *Stardust* (the film adaptation of which was released last October).

William Gibson has been hailed, along with Bruce Sterling, as the godfather of the Cyberpunk genre. If you haven't read *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* then you've missed out on some of the most influential SF literature of the last thirty years.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood Perhaps best described as 'alternate future', Grimwood's novels include the *Arabesque* trilogy (*Pashazadeh*, *E endi* and *Felaheen*) set in an alternate near-future Egypt where the Ottoman empire never fell, and four novels (*neoAddix*, *Lucifer's Dragon*, *reMix* and *redRobe*) set in the twenty-first century of a world where France won the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

Laurell K Hamilton is one of the leading lights of the 'urban fantasy' genre. Her best-known work is the *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series, which starts out with the entertaining supernatural murder-mystery *Guilty Pleasures* (but takes a disconcertingly and progressively sado-masochistic turn from about the sixth or seventh book onwards).

Tom Holt is best known for his contemporary comic fantasy novels. Particularly recommended are *Expecting Someone Taller?* and *Flying Dutch*, the latter based on the premise that shortly before being cursed with immortality, a certain legendary Dutch sea captain took out a life insurance policy, the terms of which now threaten total worldwide economic collapse in the event of the policy maturing. Also worth reading are the four books set in the firm of JW Wells and

Company, 70 St Mary Axe (*The Portable Door*; *In Your Dreams*; *Earth, Air, Fire and Custard* and *You Don't Have To Be Evil To Work Here But It Helps*).

Diana Wynne Jones has been writing imaginative fantasy stories for children and young adults for at least three decades before JK Rowling wandered into that Edinburgh café. Her work includes the Chrestomanci series (*Charmed Life*, *The Magicians of Caprona*, etc) and the standalone novels *Eight Days of Luke*, *Fire and Hemlock* and *Howl's Moving Castle* (the latter made into an animated film by the Japanese master animator Hayao Miyazaki).

Ursula K Le Guin is best known for her *Earthsea* series of fantasy novels, although the award-winning *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* are also very highly regarded.

Ken MacLeod's novels typically include elements of anarchist, socialist or libertarian politics set in the near future. His *Fall Revolution* series (*The Star Fraction*, *The Stone Canal*, *The Cassini Division* and *The Sky Road*), *Engines of Light* trilogy were well-received; his latest novel *The Night Sessions* was published earlier this year.

China Meville was recently appointed to a lectureship in creative writing here at the University of Warwick, and came to prominence with his novel *Perdido Street Station*, a supremely imaginative story set in the dark industrial city of New Crobuzon, and which won the Arthur C Clarke Award in the significant and auspicious year of 2001. He has since written two further books (*The Scar* and *Iron Council*) set in the same world, as well as the novel *Un Lun Dun*, set in a dark, mirrored version of London.

Je Noon came to prominence in 1993 with the publication of his first novel *Vurt* (followed over the next four years by *Pollen*, *Automated Alice* and *Nymphomation*), all of which are recommended. His collection *Pixel Juice* is almost worth reading just for the poem *Metaphorazine*.

Mervyn Peake (1911-1968) is best known for his gothic fantasy trilogy *Gormenghast* (comprising the novels *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast* and *Titus Alone*) which describe the fortunes of Titus, son and heir of Sepulchgrave, 77th Earl of Groan and ruler of the unchanging, oppressive, ramshackle Castle Gormenghast, and the chaos and change wreaked upon this dusty, ritual-bound world by the Machiavellian outsider Steerpike. This is one of the great classics of 20th century fantasy literature.

Christopher Priest's best known novel is perhaps *The Prestige*, a complex tale of feuding Edwardian magicians, which was recently made into an excellent film starring Hugh Jackman, Christian Bale and Michael Caine (and featuring David Bowie as Nikola Tesla). Also well worth reading are *The Separation* (winner of the 2002 BSFA and Arthur C Clarke Awards) and *The Armation*.

Robert Rankin writes highly entertaining comic fantasy, including the *Brentford Trilogy* (currently standing at eight books, including *The Brentford Triangle*, *East of Ealing* and *The Brightonomicon*; an adaptation of the latter is currently being broadcast on BBC 7) and various standalone novels,

many of which (for example, *The Hollow Chocolate Bunnies of the Apocalypse* and *The Witches of Chiswick*) are almost worth reading just for the titles.

Alastair Reynolds was for several years a research astrophysicist working for the European Space Agency, before taking up writing full-time in 2004. He first found critical acclaim with his hard SF space opera *Revelation Space* (since followed by four other novels and two novellas set in the same universe). His 2004 novel *Century Rain*, much of which is set in an alternate 1950s Paris, is also highly recommended.

Justina Robson's first few novels *Silver Screen*, *Mappa Mundi*, *Natural History* and *Living Next Door to the God of Love* partly centre around philosophical questions about consciousness and identity, involving concepts such as artificial intelligence and nanotechnology. She is currently in the process of writing the tremendously fun *Quantum Gravity* series of near-future cyberpunk fantasy novels (the first two, *Keeping it Real* and *Selling Out* are now in print) featuring elven rock stars and cyborg secret agents.

Neal Stephenson's first major success was the cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*; he followed this up with *The Diamond Age* and the codebreaking thriller *Cryptonomicon*. His latest work, the *Baroque Cycle* trilogy (*Quicksilver*, *The Confusion* and *The System of the World*) is in some sense a historical prequel to *Cryptonomicon*.

Charles Stross The Edinburgh-based writer Charles Stross previously worked as a pharmacist, software engineer and a technology journalist. His near-future novel *Accelerando* follows three generations of a family living through a technological singularity, and was nominated for a Hugo award in 2006. The parallel-worlds fantasy series *The Merchant Princes* is worth reading (the third book, *The Clan Corporate*, was recently published in paperback), as are his two Lovecraftian technothriller *Laundry* novels (*The Atrocity Archives* and *The Jennifer Morgue*) and the two 'post-singularity space opera' *Eschaton* novels (*Singularity Sky* and *Iron Sunrise*).

Sheri S Tepper Particularly recommended are the *True Game* trilogy of fantasy novels (*The True Game*, *The Chronicles of Mavin Manyshaped* and *The End of the Game*) and the *Arbai* trilogy (*Grass*, *Raising the Stones* and *Sideshow*).

Connie Willis Best known for her entertaining Victorian time-travelling comedy romance *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (featuring a brief cameo appearance from Jerome K Jerome), Willis' other work includes *Passage* (which concerns a small group of medical researchers investigating near-death experiences) and *Bellwether* (which explores the nature of fads, serendipity and research funding).

Carrie Vaughn is another rising star of the urban fantasy genre (and, as it happens, an old friend of mine). She is the writer of an ongoing series of novels about a late-night talk radio presenter named Kitty who happens to be a werewolf. The series starts with *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*; the fourth (*Kitty and the Silver Bullet*, published earlier this year) got into the New York Times best-seller chart. She's currently contracted to write three more; the next two (*Kitty*

and *the Dead Man's Hand* and *Kitty Raises Hell*) are due out in early 2009.

Roger Zelazny (1937{1995) is perhaps best known for his two series of fantasy novels set in the mythical, archetypal city of Amber and following the machinations of its royal family (*Nine Princes in Amber*, *The Guns of Avalon*, etc) but his classic SF novel *Lord of Light* is also well worth reading, as are the short stories *A Rose for Ecclesiastes* and *The Doors Of His Face, The Lamps Of His Mouth*.

## Graphic novels and comics

This is an unconscionably incomplete list. Please feel free to get in touch and tell me what I've missed.

*The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* is Bryan Talbot's splendidly inventive apocalyptic story of a war spanning parallel universes. The title character, an agent of Parallel 00{00, has the ability to shift between worlds; much of the story takes place in a neo-Cromwellian England where the Civil War never ended. A sequel, *Heart of Empire*, is set some years after the climactic Battle of London, and concerns Princess Victoria Arkwright-Stuart's search for her long-vanished father.

*Blade of the Immortal* A complex and well-written *manga* set in feudal Japan, following the fortunes of Asano Rin, orphaned daughter of the head of a sword-throwing school, and her travelling companion Manji, an immortal samurai. Written and illustrated by Hiraoki Samura.

*The Book of Ballads and Sagas* A collection of British folktales retold by various writers (Neil Gaiman's retelling of 'The False Knight on the Road' and Sharyn McCrumb's version of 'Thomas the Rhymer' are particular highlights) edited and beautifully illustrated by Charles Vess.

*Bone* Written and illustrated by Je Smith, *Bone* ran for 55 issues between 1991 and 2004 and tells the story of the three Bone brothers who stumble into a lost valley kingdom and into the middle of a brewing war between the humans and the rat creatures. A splendid balance between lighthearted comedy and epic dark fantasy.

*Cerebus* A stunning achievement, written entirely by the Canadian writer and artist Dave Sim (assisted by fellow Canadian artist Gerhard) this began in 1977 with the eponymous bipedal misanthropic aardvark storming into an inn, and ended three hundred issues (and approximately 6000 pages) later in 2004 with the title character's death from old age. In between, it ranges through sword and sorcery, politics, religion, and literary satire.

*Gemma Bovary* Posy Simmonds' tale of tragedy and adultery in modern-day France, based on Flaubert's classic novel *Madame Bovary*. Originally serialised in the *Guardian* and republished in a single volume.

*Hellblazer* Made into the decidedly underwhelming *Im Constantine* in 2005 (James 'Spike' Marsters would have been much more suitable for the rôle than Keanu Reeves), this highly entertaining and sometimes gory series has been running continuously since 1988. The central character, John

Constantine, is a fast-talking trenchcoated magician with highly questionable ethics.

*The Invisibles* Grant Morrison's comic series (1994{2000) concerning the five members of a cell of the Invisibles, a secret occult organisation battling against the forces of oppression. Splendidly and entertainingly bizarre.

*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* Made into a rather poor *film* in 2003, this series of (at present, two) graphic novels features the adventures of a small group of adventurers from popular fiction (including Allan Quatermain, Mina Murray, Captain Nemo and others) recruited by British military intelligence to further the interests of the Empire. Written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Kevin O'Neill.

*Sandman* Neil Gaiman's ongoing comic series (1989{1996) concerning Dream of the Endless, the (somewhat morose) anthropomorphic personification of sentient beings' ability to dream and tell stories (his six siblings also put in occasional appearances, most notably his more cheerful elder sister Death). Full of clever references to mythology and folklore, this was the first graphic novel I read, and makes Neil Gaiman one of a very small number of people who have completely changed the way I think about an entire art form.

*Serenity Rose* I really like this one. It's about a young, introverted American art student and witch (one of roughly fifty known people worldwide with inherent magical ability) named Serenity 'Sera' Rose. All the goths want to be her friend, but she'd really just like them all to leave her alone, please.

*Strangers in Paradise* Terry Moore's witty and poignant story of the complex relationships of three friends, played against a backdrop of a mafia-style organisation with influence at the highest political levels.

*The Tale of One Bad Rat* Bryan Talbot's award-winning story of a young woman seeing abusive parents, and her search for peace in the Lake District of Beatrix Potter.

*Usagi Yojimbo* translates roughly as 'rabbit bodyguard' and follows the fortunes of Miyamoto Usagi, a wandering ronin who happens to be a rabbit. Formerly retainer to Lord Mifune (a tiger) he occasionally fights in the service of Lord Noriyuki (a panda) of Clan Geishu, and alongside Tomoe (a cat) and Gen (a rhinoceros).

*V for Vendetta* "People should not be afraid of their governments, governments should be afraid of their people". Another genre-changing work from Alan Moore, this was made into a *film* starring Hugo Weaving and Natalie Portman.

*Watchmen* Alan Moore's reinvention of the entire superhero subgenre, taking as its premise the idea that someone who regularly dresses up in a garish costume to fight crime is, at best, somewhat disturbed.

*Why I Hate Saturn* Anne is a brilliant but neurotic writer whose life takes a turn for the surreal when her mildly deranged sister Laura (who proclaims herself to be the Queen of the Leather Astro-Girls of Saturn) turns up out of the blue on the run from her dangerous and well-connected ex-boyfriend. Written by Kyle Baker.

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