

- 1 -
TEACHING THE FUTURE
Science Fiction in Education
By Ian Nichols

The one constant feature of our society, of our history, is change. Sometimes change is brought about by natural events, sometimes by inevitable social forces. For the last two hundred years, at least, the majority of social changes have come about through changes in science and technology. Whatever the reason, whatever the nature of the change, the fact remains that the world which is to come will differ from the world which is. Perhaps one of the essential needs of students in our schools is to be equipped to handle change. Not change of a specific type, but change itself, whatever form it may take.

Many of the texts we use in high school, in both upper and lower school, focus on the world as it is now. This is not a criticism of such texts, except in that any text which attempts to examine the present will be, by the time it has gone through the process of writing, publication and evaluation to reach the desks of our students will be a historical document, not something which truly looks at the present. A year is a long time in literature. Those issues which are burningly relevant today will hardly be remembered in five years, and we are then teaching texts because of their literary qualities, not because of their relevance. As such, they may be fine exemplars of all that is good in literature but they are not exemplars of change.

Science fiction is the literature of change. It is essential to its nature that it must portray a world which is different from the world we know. The differences shown in science fiction stories reflect those things which have already caused changes in society. We know, for instance, that the Black Death made a vast difference to the development of European society. A story written about the plague would be a historic novel, but science fiction can go beyond a simple reiteration of events. What if the Black Death had killed every person in Western Europe? What would be the consequences of that? The consequences of the actual Black Death are known, but the consequences of the death of entire cultures, of entire societies, are speculative. Or are they? The Aztec culture was nearly wiped out by diseases brought by the conquistadores, yet I know of no stories, no novels, which have been written about that event.

In Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *The Years of Rice and Salt*, the whole of Western Europe dies in the plague. Indeed, its point of departure is the discovery that all are dead by two outriders from a Mongol army. The novel focuses on what happens to people, and the world, after that. This is what the best science fiction does; it looks at the effects of change on individuals and societies.

Robinson's novel poses the question of what the world would be like if a culture which was based on an entirely different set of principles from those of Western Europe rose to world dominance. How is this relevant to coping with and understanding change? The major changes in Australian society, in my lifetime, were those which came about through the influx of people from other cultures, and it is likely that, in the future, these changes will increase. At the school where I work, half the students are from a non-Western European culture, and there are changes in the school as a consequence of this. Perhaps a study of Robinson's novel could aid students in understanding the differences between cultures, as our society changes in response to the effects of these same cultures. Perhaps it could aid them in understanding similar future changes in world society, as well. Read another way, it might aid them to understand the changes experienced by Native Australians as a result of another culture, with a totally different ideology, largely supplanting theirs.

The change does not have to be a vast one, however. In Mark Clifton's story *The Conqueror*, a small genetic change in a plant A causes it to have the power to make people peaceful and co-operative. Eventually, world peace breaks out. How would individuals respond to the development of peace and co-operation? In the story, there are those who resist it, simply

- 2 -
TEACHING THE FUTURE
Science Fiction in Education
By Ian Nichols

because it is a change. It raises the question of whether we truly want peace, or whether what we want is just for things to stay the same as they always have been. It examines the nature of people in the face of change. Surely this is something it is worthwhile to study in a time of change?

This is not to say that the value of science fiction lies in its predictive ability. Science fiction's record of specific prediction is not a terribly good one, and sometimes rests on some very poor science. Oft-used texts, such as *Children of the Dust* and *Z for Zachariah*, which seemed important in the time of the Cold War, now seem dated and irrelevant, part of a sub-genre of apocalyptic novels about a future which never came to pass. In the same way, novels which have us colonising the Moon and Mars before the end of the twentieth century were wrong. Some works of science fiction from the forties and fifties have spaceships which were still navigated using slide rules as calculators, or mechanical computers.

In terms of the general effects of specific changes, though, science fiction's record is quite good. John Wyndham's *The Trouble with Lichen* examines what the social reaction might be to enormously extended life-span, an issue which gene technology makes more important every day. Larry Niven's stories of Gil Hamilton, a detective with a future world police organisation, collected in *The Long Arm of Gil Hamilton*, are concerned with the effects of organ transplants. One of his predictions was that the organs of condemned prisoners might be used as transplants, something which is being considered by several legislations in the USA at this minute. What is the morality of these issues? This is exactly what these stories focus on.

Some of the most overwhelming changes to our world have been brought about by computer technology. In Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, computers and the internet are an integral part of the society portrayed in the novel. The changes this has wrought on society are foregrounded, and questions are raised, again, which concern the adaptation to these changes. The changes of the near future, due to technology, are even more prominent in William Gibson's novels, or those of Neil Stephenson. Gibson's *Neuromancer*, in particular, is a fascinating study of the possible effects of more intensive use of technology.

It would be possible to go on at length describing the various works of science fiction which, in their various ways, provide a vision of the future, past or present which allows us to discuss the results of change with our students. There is, however, another quality which I believe is essential in order to cope with the changes the future will, inevitably, bring. That quality is imagination. An imagination which is based on fact, rather than pure fancy, as is the case with fantasy. Science fiction provides, I believe, more scope for the development of imagination than the more mundane fiction which is the common fare of students.

It is not necessary to exercise a great deal of imagination to imagine the setting of *Cloud Street*, or of Elizabeth Jolly's short stories, or of Robin Klein's *I Came Back to Show You I Could Fly*, or of Glynn Parry's *Postcards from LA*. Again, this is not a criticism, because one of the primary qualities of these works is their verisimilitude and their easy visualisation. They possess, even though some of our senior students may not believe this of *Cloud Street*, in particular, accessibility. However, this vaunted accessibility may not be worth as much as is touted for it, since it does not, really, challenge the reader, does not engage the reader's imagination. Moreover, many of the standard works we offer our students, which we deem to be accessible, are, in fact, accessible to us, and somewhat tedious for our students. We clutch at this assumed accessibility as a drowning person clutches at a lifebelt, offering it to our students as a substitute for more imaginative texts, and suggest, by this, that the world is limited to suicidal teenagers, who happen to be pregnant, or pony clubs, or families which appear to be okay, but in fact the father is a drunk, the mother is having an affair with the

TEACHING THE FUTURE
Science Fiction in Education
By Ian Nichols

postman, and the children are asthmatic adhd sufferers with a drug habit. I would humbly submit that such visions of the present are not only mind-numbingly dreary, but positive disincentives to even consider a future which may be only a continuation of such dreariness.

How much more does it engage the imagination, then, it to consider a world where there are problems, yes, but where there are solutions to these problems? A world such as that of Rod McBann, in Cordwainer Smith's *The World Buyer*, where, in order to avoid being kindly killed after failing a fitness test, the protagonist must buy a world. The Earth, as so happens. Where, after he succeeds on this, he is used by the government, and certain agents within it, to free an entire race of people who have been enslaved for thousands of years. Rod McBann is a hero, and can it be bad to offer heroes to our students? Can it be bad to offer them a future where a person can make a difference?

One of the strengths of science fiction is that it can take things which are current and extrapolate. It can even take past events and project them into the future, altering them to make points which are much more difficult to make while maintaining a contact with the world as we have known it. Joe Haldeman, for instance, in *The Forever War*, takes the concept of a war in the future and develops within his novel a bitter irony which reflects on the wars of our own recent history. Much of his vision of this future war is based on his own experiences in the Vietnam War, and the final irony of the war is that it is based on a simple lack of communication. The combatants simply did not speak each other's language. I think there is a lesson there that is valuable for anyone, not just our students.

Of course, there is bad science fiction. A science fiction writer, Theodore Sturgeon, formulated this as Sturgeon's Law: 90% of everything is crap. Certainly, some of the novels which have been used with, and recommended to, students are far from being hallmarks of excellence in the field of science fiction. It would be more truthful to say that some of them are *only* known within schools, and hardly sell outside of them. *Galaxarena*, *Space Demons*, *Futuretrack 5* are all examples of this, marketed to schools by booksellers who rarely have any real understanding of the field, nor of the excellence to be found there. Few of them have heard of the major international awards for science fiction, such as the Hugo and Nebula awards, and even fewer are aware of our own national awards for science fiction, the Ditmars. These awards are guidelines, at least, to what is considered excellent in science fiction by those who know the field intimately. With apologies to the authors, none of the texts I have just mentioned have so much as gained nominations for those awards, let alone won them.

And then there are the classics. *Brave New World*, *1984*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Frankenstein*, for instance. All are, or have been, recommended texts for study in upper school, in either English or Literature. Their literary qualities seem to suggest them, but, as literature, one can only wonder at their real worth. *Brave New World*, in retrospect, is well written, but the cautionary future it predicts is ridiculously flawed if one takes even a few moments to examine the logic of it. The same could be said of the much better written *1984*. As a work of literature it is excellent but as a vision of the future it had little validity even when it was written. *Frankenstein* is a well-crafted piece of gothic horror, but its relevance depends on its placement in the evolution of the novel, not its vision of science. Of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it could be best said that it is unlikely that Ms Atwood was aware of how well-ploughed was the field in which she inserted a new and minor furrow.

Of course, it is easy to criticise without offering alternatives, or any basis for the choice of those alternatives. Equally, it would be verging on arrogance to imply that a single person could suggest texts which had not already been considered by one's peers and the assembled wisdom of the Curriculum Council. Then again, it might be fun. But sticking one's own neck out to make a list of what is good, bad or ugly is not only an invitation to lively debate (read

TEACHING THE FUTURE
Science Fiction in Education

By Ian Nichols

“raging argument”), but exposes one’s own limitations. Rather than expose myself, I would rather offer to the assembled educators the listings of the various award winners. One could do worse than start off with our own local Ditmar and Aurealis awards, which can be found at www.natcon.org.au/2007/Ditmars.htm and www.aurealisawards.com/ respectively. Internationally, there are the Hugo, Nebula and British Science Fiction Awards (www.thehugoawards.org/hugo-history, www.nebulaawards.com/ and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BSFA_Awards). *Locus*, the most important review and news magazine of the genre, maintains a website that lists a host of awards at www.locusmag.com/SFAwards/, including those mentioned above. It also gives its own awards out every year.

Given the depth of information about what is out there to be used in schools, if they so choose, it is hoped that a little more variety, a little more depth, could be the result of a closer examination of the field of science fiction and fantasy.