

Talking Book Voices Podcast
Season 3, Episode 9
Science Fiction

September 3, 2026
Podcast Transcript
Laura Jean and Becky

SUMMARY: In this episode, Laura Jean and Becky explore the wide-ranging world of science fiction. They discuss popular subgenres, from time travel and dystopias to cyberpunk and space opera, as well as current trends like AI ethics and Afrofuturism. They also share tips for finding the right science fiction book based on your interests, whether you're a longtime fan or new to the genre.

NARRATOR INTRO: Welcome to Talking Book Voices, the podcast. Get ready to embark on an adventure with us as we dive into and celebrate the magic of the Texas Talking Book Program. Let's raise our voices together and make the world of literature accessible for all. The Texas Talking Book Program is a division of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission and serves as a regional library for the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled, a division of the Library of Congress. The Talking Book Program provides specialized library services to individuals who have a qualifying visual, physical, or reading disability, such as dyslexia.

In each episode of Talking Book Voices, we will delve into the heart of the program, uncovering its history, sharing inspiring stories, and exploring the vast collection of materials it has to offer. We will bring you the latest updates, interviews with program experts and patrons, and useful tips to make the most of this invaluable program for Texans and beyond.

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LAURA JEAN: Hi podcast listeners! My name is Laura Jean and I've been a Reader's Advisory Librarian here at the Talking Book Program for over a decade. Before that I have worked as a library assistant at various different academic and public libraries for 12 years.

BECKY: My name is Becky, and I've been a Reader Consultant for 26 years.

LAURA JEAN: Wow!

BECKY: So what IS Reader's advisory? One of our major responsibilities as Reader's Advisory Librarians is to know about the different types of books that are available to our patrons. One way to categorize books is by genre. What exactly IS genre fiction? For our purposes, a genre is a group of books that have a similar subject matter, like romance or science fiction.

So, tell me a little bit more about what defines the science fiction genre?

LAURA JEAN: Well, science fiction is a version of speculative fiction focusing on the impact of hypothetical science and technology on people and places. Or you can think of it this way: speculative fiction answers the question; "What if." So, fantasy asks: what if magic was real? Horror asks, what if our deepest darkest fears were real? And science fiction asks, what if futuristic technology was real? Science fiction typically deals with imaginative and futuristic concepts within the scope of current science as we know it.

BECKY: Ok, so why do people want to read science fiction? What attracts them to it?

LAURA JEAN: Well, the main draw is generally the setting. Readers want to be taken out of the real world and become completely immersed in worlds and spaces different than the one we inhabit.

BECKY: Ok, so then why not fantasy?

LAURA JEAN: Well that's a good question! Sometimes there's overlap, but you can't assume that a science fiction fan will like fantasy or historical fiction...or other genres with a strong sense of setting or worldbuilding. The accompanying attraction for science fiction fans tends to be futuristic technology or concepts. The main question then becomes do they prefer hard or soft science fiction?

BECKY: What do you mean by hard and soft science fiction?

LAURA JEAN: Well "hard" refers to the books that strictly adhere to known physical laws or scientific theories. And some recent examples are Andy Weir's books. They tend to stress IDEAS as well as ACTION.

And "soft" science fiction refers to more character based and philosophical based science fiction. They tend to lean more on the "soft" sciences like psychology, sociology, philosophy... They can be religious or culturally based. Like the "force" in *Star Wars* or the Bene Gesserit in Herbert's *Dune* series. These books tend to use futuristic technologies or alien societies to imagine how they might affect human behavior, culture, and emotion.

BECKY: Okay, so besides the worldbuilding aspect, what else draws readers into the realm of science fiction?

LAURA JEAN: Well, because the setting is the main attraction I'll go into it a bit more and then describe some other appeal factors.

The setting: so, like fantasy, science fiction is ALL ABOUT the world-building. In the case of science fiction, the story takes place in outer space, another world, in the future, or in the past. And readers are lured in by the action set in richly detailed worlds. Which sometimes leads to them being massive tomes or even really LONG series. Again, think of *Dune* or *Star Wars*.

Characterization: so, the characters can include beings such as aliens, mutants and robots or even humans who possess futuristic tech or paranormal abilities.

The storyline or the plots: are often action-packed and generally plot driven. And they're generally fast-paced.

And the writing style: can be all different types of writing styles from the more prosaic to the more lyrical and sometimes literary or experimental in nature.

And then finally, the tone or the mood: in science fiction, again, it can run the gamut from playful and humorous like Robert Asprin or thought provoking and analytical like the works by Stanislaw Lem.

BECKY: Playful and humorous? I thought science fiction was always dystopian...like depressing worlds where rebel teens try to challenge the status quo?

LAURA JEAN: Well, there are a lot of those, but it's not the only type! There are so many subcategories of science fiction.

So, one really big one is the time travel or time slip. Now, these are fictional versions of time-travel and the rules must be laid out in each individual book for how the time travel works, just like in fantasy, the rules must be set in place for any magic that takes place.

There are several different types of Time Travel or Time Slip. The first kind is a Single Fixed History: where everything takes place in the same time.

And then the second type is where History is Flexible: characters can travel through time. It can be caused by either futuristic technology or some sort of unknown force. It can be accidental or on purpose and there are three main types: Time Slips, Time Loops, and Time Paradoxes.

Now, a Time Slip is a storytelling device where a character accidentally travels to another time, another era, without the use of technology, usually without even understanding the mechanism that caused it.

BECKY: Like the *Outlander* series!

LAURA JEAN: Yes! And good for you for jumping to romance and not blinking an eye. Yes. This would be a genreblend of historical fiction and romance with a Time Slip technique. A storytelling strategy more commonly found in science fiction.

And then you've got Time Loops: this is where characters are trapped in a continuously repeating span of time. The cycle resets when a specific trigger occurs, such as a character's death or the end of the day, and that forces the protagonist to retain their memories and find a way to break the cycle.

And then you've got a Time Paradox or a Temporal Paradox: and this happens when a character travels backward in time. Because the timeline creates a loop, the event that triggered the time-travel is ultimately undone by the act itself, breaking the rules of basic causality. And there are different types of these, but let's not deep dive into this. Suffice it to say, a character goes back in time and by doing so causes problems they need to deal with.

And finally, in addition to Fixed and Flexible History, there are Alternate Histories. And an alternate timeline is when something in our past changed and these changes are brought about by outside forces? Like, how would that affect our society? Harry Turtledove is known for his Alternate History series set later in the 19th century United States.

And kind of like a subset of those are Parallel Realities: in which characters explore alternate realities but can travel back between our world and that alternative world.

And that's just one subcategory of science fiction. There are also:

Utopias, Dystopias, and Armageddon:

Utopia: Now that is a future that is perfect... Well, at least it LOOKS perfect, but is it REALLY perfect if you look underneath the surface?

And Dystopia, which you mentioned before: this is fiction about a society that does awful things to the people living in it, and a good example is Suzanne Collins' Hunger Games Series.

And then you've got Armageddon or Apocalypse: and that just deals with how humanity copes with a world ending event and/or its immediate aftermath.

Another subgenre are the Punk Subgenres: which is an anti-establishment, books with a strong, often anachronistic, aesthetic. These categories merge distinct technological eras or concepts with futuristic societal struggles.

So, an example is Cyberpunk: also known as Techno science fiction. It explores the effects of technology on society. It often highlights the dark side of tech. And a key component is computer expertise. The setting is online, in virtual reality, or cyberspace. It is noir inspired, usually set in a gritty, urban corporate dominated society, and it often uses heavily stylized, invented jargon and slang to help immerse the reader. And William Gibson is known as the father of Cyberpunk.

And then you've got Steampunk, which is a blend of retro-futuristic technology set in the past. It is usually technology focused, typically set in Victorian Times but it can also be set in the American West or a post-apocalyptic future. It can feature fantastic monsters and outrageous inventions.

And then there's Atomicpunk: set in the mid-20th century during the atomic age. There are retro-futuristic ray guns, sleek chrome against the backdrop of the Cold War. Like that show *Fallout* that was based on the game.

And then another subgenre are the Military Science Fiction. In these novels the setting is a large-scale space war, characters are often members of the military and the setting is a future time or location, outer space or other planets. The war may be against aliens, computers, or other humans and it can cover a variety of military themes. Good usually prevails and there is often a crossover with the Space Opera genre. An example is Texas author Elizabeth Moon.

And then, Space Opera is adventures in space on a gigantic scale, it includes vast empires, massive space battles, LOTS of action and intrigue, good overcomes evil.... eventually. Unlikely friendships can arise, and there is sometimes a dash of love interest.

And then, Psychic Abilities: this is where either protagonists or antagonists have some sort of paranormal abilities like: ESP, psionics, telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, precognition, clairvoyance...

And there are Robots, Androids, Cyborgs, and Killer Computers: and Robots are mechanical beings that can carry out complex tasks. Androids are made to act and look like humans. And Cyborgs are humans that have body parts replaced with some type of mechanical components. And in these kinds of books, when you have Computers, they are generally not human-shaped, and not mobile, and often they have a habit of trying to take over the world. Think of Arthur C. Clarke's character, HAL 5000.

BECKY: Wow, that's a lot of different subgenres! What are some current trends?

LAURA JEAN: Well, right now, AI ethics is really popular, as you can imagine. But there also seems to be a trend towards African-Futurism: this is a trend that recenters the narrative by placing focus on Africans and African experience. And these books do not feature Western culture. They feature black protagonists. And a great example is the author Nnedi Okorafor.

A trend right now is Classics in Space: and that's the retelling of classic myths set in against a science fiction background. Like a reinterpretation of classical heroes, and that's a facet of this trend.

BECKY: So, like the Iliad, but in outer space?

LAURA JEAN: EXACTLY. Actually, you just described the *Ilium* series by Dan Simmons.

BECKY: That was just a lucky guess. So how can I help a reader who is interested in finding science fiction that they enjoy?

LAURA JEAN: I generally start by asking them how much science do they want and how authentic does that science need to be?

And what kind of pace is the reader looking for? Do they want it action packed? How much thought-provoking content does the reader want?

These are two questions that help me determine if a reader prefers hard or soft science fiction.

BECKY: What about someone who is interested in trying science fiction, but might need a gentle nudge or an easy entry point?

LAURA JEAN: Well, I start with superheroes, because they kind of fall into science fiction and/or books that have generated a good bit of buzz. If they've heard about them from someone else, that's usually a good in. Also, there've been some great young adult science fiction novels written lately, and they can be a nice way to ease into a new genre.

Genre crossing: so, you can ask them if there's another genre that they usually read, and finding a genreblend with science fiction, it might make it more palatable. You mentioned *Outlander* previously, and this is a great example. A reader might not think they like science fiction at all but enjoy some of the mechanics used traditionally in this genre. But you need to be careful. Just because somebody's ok with a little time travel in their romance doesn't always mean they're ready for a time paradox or a hard science fiction novel.

And anthologies and short stories are always a great place to start with a genre because they're short, so less time is invested if it's not your thing. But they're also great for science fiction fans because anthologies are a great way to learn about new authors.

You should also consider other media besides books: a lot of readers come to science fiction books through other forms of media. Is there a science fiction TV show, movie, or podcast they are interested in? Maybe they've seen a recent television or film adaptation of a science fiction novel or series and that sparked their interest.

BECKY: Well, Laura Jean's given us some insight into the science fiction genre. Perhaps you're already a fan. So, here's a question for you: what is it about science fiction that you like? Do you prefer books with scientifically sound

futuristic technology? Or are you more interested in how human society might be affected by an alien invasion...or the addition of cyborgs into the mix? Whatever warps your drive, we can help you find books that incorporate those features.

Thinking about what specifically you enjoy about a book or a genre helps us make the best book recommendations. And it helps us think outside the box to help you find books in similar genres or from similar authors that you might enjoy.

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