

Issues in Earth Science

“Topics for Debate”

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This is part of a series of essays from writers and scientists on the topic “At What Point Does Science Fiction Turn Into Fantasy?”

At What Point Does Science Fiction Turn into Fantasy?

by

S. L. Card



At what point does science fiction turn into fantasy? Or, one might argue, when does fantasy become science fiction? Many opinions persist on both sides of the science

fiction/fantasy divide, and middle-of-the-spectrum, popular works, such as *Star Wars*, tend to elicit strong reactions.

On the surface, I'd have to say I agree with Dr. C. When I look at the Oxford definitions of fantasy vs. science fiction, the words that really separate them, for me, are "magic" and "science". Magic requires acceptance, while science is the pursuit of understanding. There the two genres begin to divide, but I feel there's more to it. What about that pesky *Star Wars* that seems to merge science and magic?

It might help to trace the origins of the genres, but even there it gets complicated. Fantasy as a genre is fairly new, evolving with the European romances of Medieval times as literary fiction joined myths and legends. Science fiction, on the other hand, is argued by some to be as old as the Sumerian poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh* with its Mesopotamian technology and post-apocalyptic flood scenes, among additional elements, while others suggest science fiction developed through the 17th to 19th centuries following the scientific revolution. The term "fantasy" is only noted to have surfaced around the time of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, published in 1937. The term "science fiction" became popular in the 1920s after it was used by Hugo Gernsback in reference to the adventure-oriented stories he published in his science magazines,

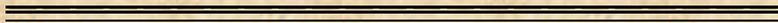
but H. Bruce Franklin at Rutgers University has dated the first use of the term to 1851 with, "Science-Fiction, in which the revealed truths of Science may be given interwoven with a pleasing story which may itself be poetical and true." found in chapter 10 of *A Little Earnest Book Upon A Great Old Subject* by William Wilson.

So what came first? Where's the divide? Is there a divide beyond magic and science; beyond acceptance and the pursuit of understanding within the story?

For me, it begins with mythology as the precursor to science in our effort to understand our world. Humans have been telling stories for a long, long time in an effort to pass along information. Before written words we were sharing stories orally. Even today we spend much of our lives telling stories in the form of gossip. Stories shape us, they inform our lives, they help us interpret our world and society and what it means to be human. Stories give us a way to feel we have control over the world, letting us see patterns in chaos and meaning in randomness; they tell us why things are the way they are. Yet so does science. But where myth, according to psychiatrist Carl Jung, gives us understanding via an unconscious

recognition of archetypes, such as Luke Skywalker as the Orphan/Regular Guy or Han Solo as the Rebel in *Star Wars*, science gives us understanding via conscious observation and experimentation. And here is where I really see the two genres diverging: fantasy, so closely linked to the archetypes of myth, speaks to the unconscious of the reader, while science fiction speaks more to our conscious desire to understand.

Yet a story can do both, and because fantasy, as a genre, tends to stay much closer to the original archetype roots of myth, in my mind, science fiction emerges from fantasy. The transition begins simply if a story has some element within it that anchors it to the possibilities afforded to us through science, be that a piece of technology or systemic study and investigation by a character. *Star Wars*, then, while filled with archetypes that ground it as a fantasy, transitions to science fiction because it also plays with ideas and technology we recognize through our scientific understanding, such as faster-than-light travel, universal translators or even lightsabers.



After a brief career as a field biologist, **S.L. Card** began doing interpretive work with children's groups, sort of a Bill Nye meets the Kratt Brothers. Now, when she's not reading or writing, you can usually find her outdoors with her family, often with spiders in her hair (for some reason spiders always find her hair). She lives on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, Canada, in a crooked old farmhouse where she writes about young heroes.



Image Credit: Russ Colson

This is part of a series of essays from writers and scientists on the topic "At What Point Does Science Fiction Turn Into Fantasy?" You can link to the other essays at [Issue 7 essays](#),

or link directly below.

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- [Fantasy versus Science Fiction: A Curious Divergence](#)—By Alex Stargazer
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