

Issues in Earth Science

“Topics for Debate”

Issue 7, July 2017

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

Seed Thesis for 'At What Point Does Science Fiction Turn Into Fantasy?'

by

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In *Issues in Earth Science*, we have tried to publish stories that invoke real earth science ideas for use in the classroom. Our story from previous issue 6, [In the Rough](#), is a

fantasy, yet there are glimpses of real science in it. What is the difference between science fiction and fantasy?

This is a favorite debate among writers of science fiction

and fantasy, and everyone has their own viewpoint, so I hope we can get some interesting submissions addressing this question.

Teaching science at the college level has forced me to realize that most people believe that knowing science is about knowing facts or theories, and that science is manifest in the form of technology.

But that is not so. Despite the word's origin in meaning "knowledge", science is about how we figure things out, not what we know. All national science standards in the USA over the past 20 years have tried vainly to move the public needle in that direction.

Thus for me, a story becomes science fiction when there is an effort either by the characters, or by the underlying background society of the world, to understand how things work and why they work that way. Something becomes magic, and part of a fantasy, when powers and processes simply exist, and there is no curiosity, explanation, or pursuit of discovery related to them. A magic wand is simply a magic wand, and it has powers because it is a magic wand. On the other hand, if seemingly magical powers are underpinned by ancient

technologies buried in the planet, or by unknown natural laws whose discovery plays a part in the story, then that becomes science fiction.

The presence of technology is not different from the presence of a magic wand. If it's used without any background understanding, simply as a tool or backdrop for the story, then it's not science fiction. On the other hand, if there is an effort in the story (or implicit in the society behind the story) to understand how things work, or how they got to be the way they are, then that is SF, even if it involves what appears to be magic, or magical SF elements like time travel or FTL travel.

Some time back, I shared some of these ideas with an online writers group on a thread about science fiction and fantasy. If you want to check it out, you can find the discussion at

<http://absolutewrite.com/forums/showthread.php?300599-Sci-fi-vs-Fantasy>

You might also check my blog on a similar vein, [Putting Science back in Science Fiction](#), at The Writer's Corner

What do you think? What's the difference between science fiction and fantasy?

Dr. C.



Image Credit: Russ Colson

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[Issue 7 essays](#),

or link directly below.

- [At What Point Does Science Fiction Turn into Fantasy?](#)--by S. L. Card
- [Spaceships and the Force – How Exactly are Science Fiction and Fantasy Different?](#)--By S E Jones
- [Fantasy versus Science Fiction: A Curious Divergence](#)—By Alex Stargazer
- [Science Needs Fantasy](#)—by Tabb C. Prissel

Find more essays and stories at [Issues in Earth Science](#).

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