

Familiar Aliens:

Science Fiction as Social Commentary

While literature teachers have a reputation for reading everything from *War and Peace* to the backs of cereal boxes, the reality is that they sometimes fall into the common trap of many readers, which is to find a genre that gratifies and stick with it. Consequently, genres like science fiction may get little attention in the classroom beyond the classic Ray Bradbury or Jules Verne. Teachers unfamiliar with science fiction cannot offer their students its wealth of texts that deal seriously with a variety of complex, contemporary social issues, some of which have obvious tie-ins to technology. Not only does science fiction offer wonderful opportunities for the English classroom, but the possibilities across the curriculum also are immense. Science, math, computer technology, psychology, and even economics are possible discussion topics, and these subjects comment on how humankind's imagination can lead to the best and worst in its creations. Aliens are no longer unrecognizable monsters; they have become the scientific and technological avatars of a modern world.

Throughout history, the human race has developed ways to make lives longer, richer, and more convenient. Our expanding knowledge of the world is continually applied to advancements and devices that "improve" lives. Each generation sees new inventions and discoveries that previous generations could only imagine, or may never have imagined. Some inventions, like bombs and weapons, have nega-

tive consequences for the world, proving that humans have the capacity to unleash the powers of destruction in the name of progress; others, like vaccines and pacemakers, show our ability to imagine and create ways to preserve and improve human life. In other words, science and technology comprise a double-edged sword of destruction and preservation; as the two evolve, there will be questions of ethics and morality.

Teaching students to challenge and question the world around them should be one of the major goals of the literature classroom. If the intent is to encourage students to create meaning, then English curricula hold a wealth of opportunities for teaching such skills. To this end, teachers traditionally teach classic texts such as *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818), *The Invisible Man* and *War of the Worlds* (H. G. Wells, 1897, 1898), *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1931), and *I, Robot* (Asimov, 1950). These texts, and others like them, posed important questions about the nature and the future of science, society, and commerce for

many generations of students. From genetic manipulation to artificial intelligence, books that reveal the power of the human mind to imagine unlikely events and situations capture readers' attention. The interest in science fiction hasn't waned, and judging by the current number of texts that address these issues, interest may, in fact, be increasing.

The wonders of the field now

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called “techno-science” have become an integral part of daily life in contemporary society. A generation of teens lives in a world in which knowledge is literally at their fingertips. Even the word “impossible” may be outdated. Through television, radio, movies, the World Wide Web, cell phones, iPods, digital downloads, GPS systems, global gaming, instant messaging,

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and online social networking, students commonly spend the majority of their day exposed to technology. Similarly, medical advances such as genetic testing, cloning, stem cell research, DNA identification, and the manipulation of human cells have become topics of daily discussions. No longer are such subject matters left only to the experts to debate; ethical

and moral challenges to progress become the province of everyone.

While classic texts remain powerful tools of discussion and historical relevance, Marc Aronson (2003) reminds us that “if adults want books to be part of teenagers’ lives, they must provide books that are equally attuned to the present” (p. 42). Young people need books that inspire them to question and challenge *their* world, much as the classic texts challenged former generations. Contemporary young adult science fiction approaches issues of techno-science to specifically appeal to adolescents and deal with problems they know are real. Many of these texts play off of the current technologies in which students participate and the public dilemmas of ethics that they hear about in the news, from family and friends, or experience for themselves. The genre is a natural for thinking about how closely good and evil are related.

Considering the Realities of *The House of Scorpion*

The House of the Scorpion (Farmer, 2002) is an excellent example of young adult science fiction that deserves to be in the classroom. Farmer addresses the issue of gene manipulation by creating a society in which drones or “eejits”—whose intelligence and

individuality is removed—perform all menial labor. In this society, the wealthy can extend their lives by harvesting the organs of their own living clones. When we consider who has access to the best health care in America, this concept is not farfetched.

The drug empire of Opium, set up between the United States and Mexico, is a solution to the immigration crisis, and the “eejits” who work there are the poor souls who have unsuccessfully tried to sneak across the border. They are turned into robot-like beings who do only what they are programmed to do—eating, drinking, and resting only when commanded to do so—and who are forced to live in the most inhuman of conditions. While not specifically a science or technology issue, immigration, as imagined by Farmer, simply becomes a potential spoke in the wheel of a genetic conspiracy. The seemingly ridiculous scenario highlights the current lack of a solution to the American immigration problem, and the menial labor the eejits must perform has a hauntingly familiar resemblance to the current lot of many immigrants who work long, hard hours for little pay. Students will no doubt see immediately the connection to two contemporary social problems—wealth distribution and immigration—and will most likely have strong reactions to and important questions about the long-term social consequences of each, as presented in Farmer’s story.

Like the eejits, the minds of the clones are also systematically destroyed, turning them into nonsensical beasts. Clones have no traditional mother and father; they are taken from an existing person’s genes and allowed to develop inside of a cow until they are harvested as infants. Locked up and isolated, they are generally detested as creatures less respectable than animals. Readers learn quickly that Matt, the main character of this book, is the one clone who is spared the “intelligence removal” treatment. That is because he is the clone of the lord of Opium, El Patron, who wants his clone to have a “normal” childhood until he needs to harvest his organs. Matt is an intriguing main character because, while he feels himself to be a human being as much as anybody else, he is treated like “a bad animal,” an “it” (p. 27). The reader cannot help but identify with Matt as he tries to define himself in the face of a society that tells him over and over again that he is less than human. Although he is a genetic copy of El Patron, he is still obviously living

his own life, has his own thoughts and desires, and develops his own personality, much to the chagrin of El Patron, who would have him be nothing more than a shadow in the world. Again, the parallel thinking by some about those who live in society's borderlands is frightening.

In the real world, human cloning is not something we have yet accomplished, although we are surprisingly close. Last year, there were reports in the news of the cloning of rhesus monkey embryos to produce stem cells, and, in fact, it has already been ten years since Dolly the sheep was cloned. Scientists are still a long way from actually being able to grow a human clone inside the womb to produce a baby, but they are certainly closer to it than ever. In fact, 15 American states already have laws pertaining to human cloning. It is not inconceivable that human cloning will be possible in our lifetime, and it is easily imaginable during the lifetime of our students. This and other medical possibilities have created a world in which the bioethics of medical advancement raises serious issues.

The House of the Scorpion takes these issues to extreme, but not in a way that completely surpasses possibility. Like all good science fiction, it raises important questions about humanity and what makes a human "human" after all? It also provides ample room for discussion about the best ways to handle our growing capacity to change, control, and create life. Students *will* face these challenging questions in their lifetimes; thinking and talking about them now can only be helpful for them later. Who will have access to the scientific wonder of cloning? Who will suffer because of it? Is it okay to create clones of ourselves in lieu of having children naturally? What makes medical science ethical or not ethical? These are not far-fetched questions.

Farmer's book forces readers to look at genuine problems requiring genuine solutions. Her text takes a strong stance against using fully developed human clones to meet the medical needs of others, but it raises important questions about embryos. By allowing students to research and see primary documents on the scientific issues in this book, huge connections can be drawn between English class and science class, as well as any class that studies social issues. Depending on the school and the level of science students are engaged in, what they learn or have learned about genetics could make the book even more critically

valuable. This book easily becomes a vehicle for interdisciplinary study. At the same time, reading *The House of the Scorpion* could add a level of interest to what students learn in science. Students who "hate" English but are interested in science will be drawn in by this book. Likewise, students who love literature but feel that science is not a subject to enjoy will find important connections between the story line and the world of science they inhabit every day.

Other texts that deal with scientific questions and issues include *The Angel Experiment: Maximum Ride* by James Patterson (2005), *Mergers* by Steven Layne (2006), and *Transplant* by Malcolm Rose (2003). Patterson's book raises interesting questions about the potential use of DNA; Layne's talks about a society of assimilated races; and Rose tackles another issue that has already been in the headlines—face transplants. One more text that forces relevant concerns about the possibilities of medical advances is Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005), which is the first in a popular trilogy. Again, the topic is one that has already found its way not only into the news, but into the everyday lives of teens: cosmetic surgery and its implications for the search for identity and articulated cultural notions of what it means to be pretty. Westerfeld's book offers a disturbing critique on some very real social conditions and opens a whole new conversation on unnecessary medical and "social" technologies. It is not to be missed.

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The Eerie Intimacy of *Feed*

M. T. Anderson's *Feed* shifts the focus from science to technology and may best fit into a category of science fiction known as *cyberpunk*. Movies like *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) give a good visual of what the world of *cyberpunk* looks like. William Gibson and his famous *Sprawl* trilogy, of which *Neuromancer* (1984)

is the first novel, is probably the best-known writer in this subgenre. The category continues to evolve, and there are now *postcyberpunk* stories as well as stories that fall into the category called *cyberprep*. What all of these stories have in common is a combination of technological advancements that include some form of body modification (cybernetics would be an early runner) and computer intrigue. *Cyberpunk* is also popular in several anime and manga graphic novel series.

In *Feed*, everything is owned and controlled by large corporations (school is School™, fact is fact™,

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and speech tattoos™—which cause the bearer of the tattoo to automatically say “Nike” in every sentence—are corporate examples), and most people have a computer “feed” from the Internet and television directly wired into their brains. People can instantly access any information they want, shop, chat with their friends, send memories and physical sensations

to one another, watch shows, and listen to music, all while the feed bombards them with advertisements personally catered to their buyer profiles. Television shows, music, and other forms of entertainment have been reduced to mere sensationalism (as illustrated by the popular television show “Oh? Wow! Thing!”), and fashion and hairstyles change by the hour.

The current fad for the main character, Titus, and his friends is to have “skin lesions.” Even though the lesions are the unsightly and dangerous result of the feed, consumers have been manipulated into believing that the lesions are the cool, must-have tattoos of their generation. It does not take long for readers to understand that while poverty and starvation continue for the less fortunate, the populations of highly developed countries are falling deeper and deeper into self-absorbed consumerism promoted by the feed. Upon reflection, readers will easily concede that the role huge corporations play in the characters’ daily lives is not nearly as removed from their own as they may have initially thought.

In this wicked satire, Anderson is able to tease out

the senselessness and destructiveness of a commercially driven society and does so in a number of ways, not the least of which is through language. Language and how it is used in *Feed* raises any number of interesting questions. The story is told through the voice of Titus, who speaks just as he thinks, using less than proper English and peppering his conversation with heavy doses of interjections (e.g., “like” and “um”), a good amount of slang, and a variety of obscenities. (The choice to allow characters to speak as authentically as they think exemplifies one of the components of “radical change” found in contemporary books for youth, as discussed by Eliza Dresang in her book *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age* [1999]). Language that at first glance might be considered offensive and too vernacular is actually used to show how society has changed and what it values. “Curse” words are no longer considered inappropriate, and even adult characters speak quite informally. For example, Titus’s dad says of his wife “She’s like, whoa, she’s like so stressed out. This is . . . Dude . . . Dude, this is some way bad shit” (Anderson, p. 46). The sales representative from FeedTech™ who tells a character that her feed cannot be fixed says: “We have to inform you that our corporate investors were like, “What’s doing with this?” (p. 195). Clearly, it is not just the teenage characters whose language is in question.

Interesting discussion could arise in the classroom around how students respond to the language in this book. How do they feel when they hear adults speak so carelessly? Should there be a division between formal and informal language? Why and when? What are some similarities and differences between language now and language in this book? When does language cross borders and become unacceptable and/or offensive? Is language a reflection of something larger in a culture? If so, what?

Another important theme in *Feed* is the potential problems associated with the development of technology and the instant gratification it seems to bring. Just as *The House of the Scorpion* entertains the important question of science’s increasing power to “play God,” *Feed* illuminates the potential danger of excessive dependence on technology. Anderson depicts a society so dependent on technology that one of the characters dies when her feed stops functioning—with the feed wired directly into the brain, a malfunctioning feed

means a malfunctioning person. Indeed, the most disturbing aspect of this book may be the characters' apathy for their own well being. Ironically, Violet, the character whose feed finally kills her, is the only person readers meet who has the courage to think for herself and challenge what she sees happening around her. Near the end of the novel, she explodes at Titus, saying:

Do you know why the Global Alliance is pointing all the weaponry at their disposal at us? No. Hardly anyone does. Do you know why our skin is falling off? Have you heard that some suburbs have been lost, just; no one knows where they are anymore? . . . Do you know the earth is dead? Almost nothing lives here anymore, except where we plant it? No. No, no, no. We don't know any of that. We have tea parties with our teddies. We go sledding. We enjoy being young. We take what's coming to us. That's our way. (p. 214)

Throughout the novel, Anderson takes subtle and not so subtle stabs at the nature of American contemporary society—our unrelenting need to consume, our complicit relationship with corporate advertising (including Channel One), our growing dependence on technology, and our unthinking development of what constitutes “new” and “better.” He reveals society's widespread oblivion to the most pressing problems of the world, our unthinking approaches to everyday life, and the focus on immediate gratification without concern for the long-term effects of our actions.

Feed is futuristic enough for the reader to see the absurdities of the world Anderson creates, but it hits close enough to home to cause readers to take a second look at our world and the direction we are headed. While the novel warns readers about technological developments that go unchecked, it also challenges them to consider the role they play in how society ultimately embraces and uses those technologies. Students who read this book will certainly engage in enlightening discussions about the important questions it raises. It might be especially significant to study in relation to older books on this topic, such as *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949). What has changed since these books were written? What has come true? Is one of the futuristic societies better or worse than the other? Why? Are we living already in an irreversible dystopia?

Texts, Movies, and the Classroom

We have here explored just two books of science fiction that could be used in the classroom to touch on issues of science, technology, and the future of the human race, but there are many more available. Authors like Sonia Levitin, William Sleator, Terry Prachett, and Jeanne DuPrau, to name just a few, have written challenging and revealing stories that students will find interesting and relevant. From the *Double Helix* (Werlin, 2005) to *Z Is for Zachariah* (O'Brien, 1974), there is no shortage of applicable science fiction that calls on the critical thinking skills students will need as they navigate a future we probably cannot even imagine.

Indeed, students already do this through the many science fiction movies they watch and enjoy. Mention *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) or *Idiocracy* (Judge, 2007) to them, and they will quickly note these are stories of social commentary and political statement. Though they may initially joke and say *Wall-E* (Stanton & Docter, 2008) is nothing more than an animated romance, it will not take them long to offer that it is also a dark story of the fate of mankind, as is the disturbing film *Children of Men* (Cuarón & Sexton, 2006). The desire to rid ourselves of anything we deem different or inexplicable cannot be avoided when discussing *District 9* (Blomkamp & Tatchell, 2009), and the cloning that occurs in *Moon* (Jones, 2009) is no harder to imagine than that which takes place in *House of Scorpions*. Students already think about issues of social consequence; all teachers need to do is pull such ideas into the classroom.

In an ever-changing world, it is crucially important to make school a place where everyone learns to look beyond the “now” into the world being created for the future. English classrooms can be places where students examine complex questions that, *in their lifetime*, will require thoughtful answers. If the

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societies found in *The House of the Scorpion* and *Feed* are unacceptable, for instance, then students should be encouraged to think through what they can do to make science and technology work in more meaningful ways. By providing books from a wide range of science fiction that connect with students because of characters, age, and contemporary issues, you will help students engage more deeply with the world in which they live and are about to inherit.

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