

# Why We Need a New Genre Label -- Oh, and What Do You Write?

A Rambling Essay From the Sleepless Desert of Dreamless Waiting

*Gene Stewart*

***Science fiction*** just sounds wrong nowa days. It's got the pejorative "science" in it and it emphasizes "fiction" as if we need to be told the difference.

This implies there *is* a difference and that's what makes it so very wrong, not to mention dangerous.

After all, in today's irreality, to use Philip K. Dick's coinage, belief counts much more than any fact, and assertions are true to the degree they are repeated, not confirmed. Further, in the prevailing mindset one contradicts the consensual delusion at great risk to personal safety. People die these days from saying what's true. "Speak the truth and dig your grave," Sinead O'Connor said, after running afoul of Big Ideology by tearing up a picture of the Pope on Saturday Nite Live to protest Vatican policies against abortion. And this was long before USA went fascist.

Years later, she hasn't lived it down. They still hound her for it, and hate her. Forgiveness isn't something offended religionists bother much with, it seems.

Best to stick with what's *popular*. And sure, popularity is fickle. It shifts every moment. Stay tuned and keep up or you chance an onslaught of hate to wither a sculpted rose.

Some of what's happening today is reminiscent of the Dark Days before the Renaissance, before the Enlightenment, when the church last held sway and persecuted the likes of Galileo, Copernicus, and Giordano Bruno. Survival depended on subterfuge, on plot and counter-plot. Giving lip-service was a necessity back then.

On bended knee was a posture taken not only by ardent suitors and penitents, knights being dubbed and priests looking for dropped pennies, but clever or desperate rationalists trying hard just to stay alive in a world gone insane. Bended knee was a pose all aped in order not to stand out.

When it came to thought, it was kept to one's self. Sharing thoughts got people turned in, tortured, and killed. Rationalists lived the dangerous and short life of the spy.

And this was long before a Nazi Pope, remember.

Who do you think reads science fiction? Those selfsame rationalists, who else? The same folks who would have been burned at the stake or hanged from the windows in a Medici square, bodies broken on the rack or pierced in Iron Maidens, bones crushed by thumb- and ankle-screws and presses. Getting Medieval on one's ass isn't just a phrase, it's rooted in uncounted deaths and undeniable sufferings refined brilliantly during the Dark Ages.

They sharpened their use of fear and hatred as control devices during the burning times of the witch hunts. If accused, one was guilty until proven innocent.

Imagine being charged with the crime of writing science fiction.

Bully tactics would crush you. Toe the line or else. Kowtow. Obey. Bow, kneel, and prostrate one's self or else. Recant this speculative drivel and confess its base unworthiness.

If you think I'm joking, remember that IMAX theaters had to stop showing *Volcanoes of the Deep* because it discussed unusual life forms and suggested that the majority of the biomass on Earth can be

found at 12,500 feet or deeper, under the oceans, in thermal vents. Further, it mentioned geology and we all know where *that* leads. No kidding, the theaters, and in fact IMAX film-makers, have felt the chilling effect of bullying to this extent.

Aligning one's self with science these days is akin to wearing a sign reading Heretic. And science fiction? Lies told about science? Madness. Or at least political insanity.

Science fiction in the pulp era was looked upon as one step sideways from pornography and considered just as corruptive, corrosive, and confounding to the moral and mental upbringing of children. Get caught reading *Astounding* and one could receive a caning or worse, even as the offensive tract was burned because fire purifies.

Do things change? Or do they circle back like panthers hungry again as night begins to fall?

Some of us learned recently about a North Korean literary genre depicting the glorious leader passing among the plebes in common garb, unrecognized and observant. (Oddly, it's not called the Mark Twain's Prince and the Pauper Stuff.) These mincing, sycophantic stories invariably show the leader in a roseate, near holy glow and always end with his beneficence. '

The writers in North Korea are forbidden to mention anything from outside the Perfect Paradise that is North Korea, under penalty of death and, worse, of having one's family expunged.

Kind of like Ann Coulter only mandatory.

We're not quite to that point stateside but something as restrictive, Soviet, and mindless could well be imposed here. It fits the pattern we've seen developing since the electoral coup. The first one, I mean.

Reigning in imagination and stopping people from thinking about science and what it could possibly do is policy these days. Trees cause pollution, clear cutting prevents forest fires, and global warming is a myth because science doesn't convince people who hear a god talking to them. The True Believers in control are censorious and contemptuous, dismissive and draconian. They impose their subjective sub-reality on us, using belief and noble platitudes, fear tactics and empty promises. Same as it ever was.

When W gave a speech the other evening he addressed our dependence on foreign oil -- literally hours after romancing a Saudi prince at the Ranch in Crawford, TX, remember -- by saying we must free ourselves from such dependency. He went further, saying we must free ourselves from non-renewable energy sources and fossil fuels. Lest anyone mistake this for good sense or even honesty, he then said that, to this end, he'd asked Congress to approve a 2.8 billion dollar research initiative into...coal. Apparently in Bush World coal isn't a fossil fuel but is renewable.

He believes this, it seems, despite pesky facts.

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Believe = pretend.

Fact = real, provable, and confirmed by repeated testing and long term experience.

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Heretical, such assertions. They fly in the face of the Official Version. Winston Smith rewrote history in 1984 so it always reflected the changing perfections of Big Brother's viewpoint. The past was malleable and facts tolerated only for political reasons, and never unbent or unaltered.

Science fiction written under Stalin's Soviet Russian cultural oppression tended to critique the regime in veiled or symbolic terms. It remained the only almost-deniable way to dissent. Blunter writers like Aleksandr Solszhenitsyn were tortured and sent to the camps comprising the Gulag Archipelago. Most sf writers, such as Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, ducked under the blade and managed to stay at home among loved ones. Imaginative literature indeed.

Of course stateside sf remained the world's standard. USA's "anything goes" attitude kept its sf fresh and innovative, at least in New Wave theory. Unrestricted, sf flourished.

Those days are gone.

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We must recognize that science fiction needs a new genre label. Without a new name it is doomed to be expunged, forbidden or, far worse, co-opted and controlled, as Soviet Korea does. Why? Because it has those two hated words in it, "science" and "fiction". Ideologues such as those in the NeoCon Death Cult don't tolerate such terms.

Speculative fiction, proposed decades ago as an alternative term for this odd genre when the New Wave splashed over the Old Guard, is one way to go. Speculating is more accurately what sf stories do, after all, be they science fiction, fantasy, or horror.

This still leaves us with that "fiction" thing. Why do we insist on this? Does Robert B. Parker call his Spenser novels Mystery Fiction? Don't we all understand that the novels are fictional by definition?

What do you write?

Oh, I write speculations.

Syllabic, but it works.

William S. Burroughs, Beat Queen, used to say, "I write reports." That was accurate, too. Stories are reports, whether factual or fictional. And most if not all fiction includes facts for verisimilitude anyway.

Reports is shorter than Speculations and it's admirably vague. Nothing much there to upset the Vagon ideologues.

Then there's Shakespeare's answer: Words.

That's shorter yet, and gives away nothing. But it doesn't distinguish the genre much at all, does it? How would critics know when to sneer? How would publishers know from which books to withhold advertising? How would readers know where to find the next length of yard-goods to match the others they've consumed?

Isaac Asimov, the Good Doctor himself – and who is or was the Bad Doctor? Harlan? -- answered: Lies. He argued that fiction is professional lying. This point was made tongue-in-cheek, though. Lies seek to deceive. Fiction seeks to reveal. They are opposites and so Lies is not a good answer unless one is a lawyer and/or politician. (Present company always excepted.)

What do you write? Oh, I write words.

What kind of words? Words I hope you want to read.

Of course most writers don't write for an audience, and constant reader is but a silhouette of the writer's excuses. We write because we must, and mostly for the story's sake. What we're capturing and trying to preserve is voice.

What voice? Ours, if we're lucky. Echoes of others' if we're most.

What do you write? Oh, I write stories. A good story well-told remains the baseline of good fiction.

Told – there's a hint.

We're writing down what we sound like when we tell a story.

What do you write?

Oh, I write me.

And to Omicron-Perseid VIII with genre labels.

*Post script:*

from Wm. Gibson's blog, 18 Oct 04: posted 9:54 AM

"In the summer of 2002, after I had written an article in *Esquire* that the White House didn't like about Bush's former communications director, Karen Hughes, I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend – but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

"The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create

our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

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Gene Stewart again: In other words, the Bush League's disconnect from reality is planned, a conscious decision to turn their backs on the Enlightenment and Empiricism and go back to the Dark Ages where belief trumps fact and ideology counts more than truth.

Be it noted that Gibson's latest superb novel, *Pattern Recognition*, is set in the present; it's not science fiction, although it sure seems like it. I wrote the first draft of this article on 15 Oct 04, then had this brought to my attention, from William Gibson's blog, found at his official website:

**<http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com/index.asp>**

It underscores what I was saying half in jest and sent me into rewrite mode, but now the laughter dies and we face a genuine threat to rationality, a declared enemy of reason. Think about this.

Bill Frist is on the record as saying the gloves are off. They're coming for us. The religionists intend to expunge the rationalists – those Reality-Based among us.

If you can't, won't, or don't think, it's already too late for you and you needn't wait in line to be processed for the camps – you're already smoke.

Enjoy the fool's paradise of freedom you have found in particulate form.

– Gene Stewart *Bunkered in the Nebraska Wilderness*