



About the Author



Full text biography:

John Scalzi

Birth Date : 1969

Known As : Scalzi, John Michael; Scalzi, John Michael, II

Place of Birth : United States, California, Fairfield

Nationality: American

Occupation : Writer

Table of Contents:

[Awards](#)

[Personal Information](#)

[Career](#)

[Writings](#)

[Sidelights](#)

[Related Information](#)

Awards:

Joseph W. Campbell Award for best new science fiction author, 2006, for *Old Man's War*; Sci Fi Essential Book, from *SciFi.com*, 2006, for *The Ghost Brigades*; Hugo Award for best related book, 2009, for *Your Hate Mail Will Be Graded: A Decade of Whatever, 1998-2009*; Seiun Award, 2010, for *The Last Colony*; Kurd-Lasswitz-Preis, 2010, for *The Android's Dream*; Locus Awards science fiction novel prize, Hugo Award for best novel, both 2013, and Best Translated Science Fiction Book Prize, Geffen Awards, 2016, all for *Redshirts*.

Personal Information:

Born May 10, 1969, in Fairfield, CA; married Kristine Ann Blauser, 1995; children: Athena. **Education:** University of Chicago, A.B., 1991. **Religion:** Agnostic. **Memberships:** Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (president, 2010). **Addresses:** Home: Bradford, OH. **E-mail:** john@scalzi.com.

Career Information:

Writer and video game developer. *Fresno Bee*, began as film critic, became humor columnist, c. 1991-96; *America Online*, in-house writer and editor, 1996-98; *Official U.S. Playstation* magazine, chief entertainment media critic, 2000-06; *AMCTV.com*, weekly columnist, beginning 2008. Creative consultant, *Stargate Universe* TV series.

Writings:

FICTION

- *Agent to the Stars*, Subterranean Press (Burton, MI), 2005.
- *Questions for a Soldier*, Subterranean Press (Burton, MI), 2005.
- *The Android's Dream*, Tor (New York, NY), 2006.
- (Editor) *God Engines*, Subterranean Press (New York, NY), 2009.
- (Editor) *METAtropolis*, Tor (New York, NY), 2010.
- *Fuzzy Nation*, Tor (New York, NY), 2011.
- *Redshirts*, Tor (New York, NY), 2012.
- *Lock In*, Tor (New York, NY), 2014.

"OLD MAN'S WAR" SERIES

- *Old Man's War*, Tom Doherty Associates (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Ghost Brigades*, Tor (New York, NY), 2006.
- *The Last Colony*, Tor (New York, NY), 2007.
- *The Sagan Diary*, illustrated by Bob Eggleton, Subterranean Press (Burton, MI), 2007.
- *Zoe's Tale*, Tor (New York, NY), 2008.
- *The Human Division*, Tor (New York, NY), 2013.
- *The End of All Things*, Tor (New York, NY), 2015.

NONFICTION

- *The Rough Guide to Money Online*, Rough Guides (New York, NY), 2000.
- *The Rough Guide to the Universe*, Rough Guides (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Uncle John's Presents Book of the Dumb*, Portable Press (San Diego, CA), 2003.
- *Uncle John's Presents Book of the Dumb 2*, Portable Press (San Diego, CA), 2004.
- *The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies*, Rough Guides (New York, NY), 2005.
- *You're Not Fooling Anyone When You Take Your Laptop to a Coffee Shop: Scalzi on Writing*, Subterranean Press (Burton, MI), 2007.
- *The Rough Guide to the Universe II*, Rough Guides (New York, NY), 2008.
- *Your Hate Mail Will Be Graded: A Decade of Whatever, 1998-2008*, Subterranean Press (New York, NY), 2009.

Contributor to the "Uncle John's Bathroom Reader" series, Portable Press (San Diego, CA). Regular contributor to *Dayton Daily News*. Author of the blogs *Whatever* and *By the Way*.

Sidelights:

A prolific nonfiction author, John Scalzi has published magazine articles, newspaper columns, blogs, corporate brochures, and books. He began his writing career as a film critic for the *Fresno Bee* in his native California. In the late 1990s, Scalzi transitioned to full-time freelance writing and started a daily blog titled *Whatever* that gained a wide readership. He also began work on his first novel, *Agent to the Stars*, with no real intention of ever professionally publishing it. Instead he posted the story on his Web site and welcomed readers to send him a dollar if they enjoyed it.

Scalzi subsequently debuted a second novel online with an unexpected result: He was contacted by an editor who wished to see the military science fiction story published. *Old Man's War* earned Scalzi a 2006 Hugo Award nomination, critical acclaim, and a solid fan base. In a review for the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Michelle West shared her opinion of the novel: "There's definitely Scalzi humor laced throughout it, which is to be expected; less expected, a genuine sense of regret, loss, and almost veneration for things that are taken for granted in our daily lives." Another *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* reviewer, Robert K.J. Killheffer, remarked: "Scalzi's straightforward, muscular prose and tightly focused pacing yield an undeniable page-turner." Noting similarities in prose to the works of science fiction great Robert A. Heinlein, a *Publishers Weekly* contributor described *Old Man's War* as a "virtuoso debut [that] pays tribute to SF's past while showing that well-worn tropes still can have real zip when they're approached with ingenuity."

The sequel to *Old Man's War*, titled *The Ghost Brigades*, is set in the same universe but picks up the story of a secondary character. The novel was selected by *SciFi.com* as a Sci Fi Essential book for 2006. "Scalzi skillfully weaves together action, memorable characterizations, and a touch of philosophy," remarked Carl Hays in a *Booklist* review. Online *Bookslut* reviewer Stephen Granade noted that the book "delivers on its promise of solid science fiction entertainment with a leavening of serious issues."

With *The Last Colony*, Scalzi offers his readers a third book that follows now-retired, planet-hopping soldier John Perry, following *Old Man's War* and *The Ghost Brigades*. Perry has settled down on a distant world, part of the

Colonial Union, where he is content living with his wife and their adopted daughter. But when a former commander of Perry's comes to visit, he tells Perry that they are organizing to colonize a new planet, combining individuals from ten existing worlds in order to guarantee a diverse population. According to the commander, Perry and his wife would make perfect candidates for the new program. However, once the Colonial Union has relocated them to the new planet, it becomes obvious that they have an entirely different motivation than the one originally claimed. A coalition of aliens is determined to cease the human colonization process across the universe, and they have been blocking attempts in any way they can.

Hays, writing in *Booklist*, remarked: "Scalzi's captivating blend of off-world adventure and political intrigue remains consistently engaging." In a contribution to *Publishers Weekly*, a reviewer opined that the book "lacks the galactic intensity of its two related predecessors, but makes up for it with entertaining storytelling on a very human scale."

Scalzi's 2008 book, *Zoe's Tale*, is another installment in the "Old Man's War" series. In this work he retells the events of the previous book in the series, *The Last Colony*, from the perspective of Zoe, the teenage daughter of Jane Sagan and John Perry. Many reviewers commented that Zoe is such an interesting character that the fact that most of the plot of the novel is a retelling is irrelevant.

Reviewing the work on the *SF Reviews* Web site, a contributor assessed: "Scalzi deftly spins a touching coming-of-age story within an overall plot framework that he's already established. He wastes little time retelling scenes from *Colony*. When the plot of *Zoe's Tale* reaches its inevitable points of overlap (most notably the arrival of a Conclave fleet above Roanoke), Scalzi breezes over the details, perhaps a little too confident of readers' familiarity with the earlier book." *Booklist* contributor Hays opined: "Scalzi takes a calculated risk in adopting Zoe's adolescent viewpoint, but it pays off," and a *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted: "Scalzi's sharp ear for dialogue will draw in new readers, particularly young adults."

The Human Division, published in 2013, was initially released online as a serial novel comprised of thirteen installments. The book, while part of the "Old Man's War" world, is not a linear follow-up to its predecessor. Earth has severed its alliance to the Colonial Union because they've been secretly using mankind to harvest soldiers. The Conclave, a cooperative of several different alien races, has stepped forward to vie for the union's former role. This main plot plays out over the course of thirteen separate tales, and each serves to advance the disparate causes of the union and the Conclave.

While some critics decried the disjointed story structure, most lauded the overall effect. *Booklist* correspondent David Pitt was skeptical about the book's "experimental feel and shifting narrative," but he nevertheless concluded that it "is one more proof that [Scalzi is] an unqualified A-lister in the genre." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic offered a similar opinion, remarking: "Laced with oddball humor, the plot is not so esoteric that a newbie to sci-fi's outlier world cannot follow." Furthermore, according to a *Publishers Weekly* contributor, the "deeply realized characters and stinging webs of political and social deceit lend mystery and emotionally harsh realism."

The Android's Dream is Scalzi's third novel of military science fiction that also incorporates political suspense and social commentary. *Bookslut* contributor Granade also reviewed the book and called it "a galloping caper that is very funny and very satisfying." He further commented: "By combining a tight ending with sympathetic characters and sharp, funny writing, *The Android's Dream* delivers top-notch entertainment."

Agent to the Stars, the first title that Scalzi posted online asking for donations from satisfied readers, ultimately made him a solid return before it, too, was requested by an editor. Scalzi subsequently took the novel off of his Web site, and it became a published novel. The book kicks off as a typical Hollywood novel, following agent Thomas Stein as he attempts to build his career and find work for his star clients until he finds himself saddled with a new client, one he anticipates having trouble with no matter how good his acting is. Joshua is a Yjerajk, hailing from another planet, and his lack of basic humanity has Thomas despairing of ever finding his new client any work. However, slowly but surely he begins to warm to Joshua and his persistent efforts, and as a result finds himself more successful in his efforts to avoid having Joshua typecast as an alien from outer space.

Regina Schroeder, reviewing for *Booklist*, opined: "A remarkably intelligent first-contact yarn, this book is absurd, funny, and satirically perceptive." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* commented that "several entertaining trips to the aliens' spaceship enliven the predictable plot."

Scalzi's next book, *Fuzzy Nation*, is a modern interpretation of H. Beam Piper's classic 1962 science fiction novel *Little Fuzzy*. In an interview with Josh Hadro, a contributor to *Library Journal*, Scalzi stated: "I was reading *Little Fuzzy* again not so long ago, and, on one hand, it's incredibly enjoyable--H. Beam Piper's craft in terms of the language still speaks to us. But at the same time, for example, the opening scene has Jack Holloway there stroking his mustache, smoking a pipe, basically the very model of an anachronism. I was thinking of it as a fun intellectual exercise: writing this today for audiences today--what would you change, what would you make different?"

A contributor to the *SF Signal* Web site noted: "*Fuzzy Nation* is a fun ride, one that will be familiar to readers of Scalzi's other books or his Web site." *Library Journal* contributor Jackie Cassada predicted: "Scalzi readers as well as Piper fans should enjoy this modern throwback."

With *Lock In*, Scalzi offers a science fiction mystery filled with humans who live their lives almost entirely in the digital realm. Twenty-five years ago, the Haden's syndrome virus rendered a small but sizable chunk of the population entirely paralyzed. Survivors communicate with others via a threep, which plugs them into a neural network not unlike the Internet. Some of the able bodied act as Integrators, allowing the paralyzed to upload their consciousness and move about in the world. When someone hijacks an Integrator and uses them to commit a murder, Leslie Vann (an Integrator turned FBI agent) teams with her partner (Haden's patient Chris Shane) to solve the unusual crime.

While *A.V. Club* Web site correspondent Tasha Robinson felt that the novel is not without flaws, she nevertheless asserted that "*Lock In*'s saving grace is that it's such fascinating information. The murder mystery is a particularly odd one." Robinson went on to note that Scalzi "uses an immediate mystery as an access point to a hugely complicated, creative new world, then uses that world to flesh out the mystery--and in the way it pays close attention to its science-fiction details, without making them into the plot. It feels like he's created a mighty big world for this comparatively small story, but better too many ideas than too few." As *NPR Online* reviewer Jason Sheehan put it, "once he's gotten past the tricky part of building a near-future world and putting a dead body in it without getting bogged down in the details of either, the rest is all cake and hand grenades. ... Which is, of course, where Scalzi plays his second neat trick: Pulling off a half-twist ending that couldn't work anywhere but in this world and yet, at the same time, is so perfectly cop-story-esque that it could've been ripped right from a 1940s pulp novel." Commending the novel's world building in his *USA Today* assessment, Brian Truitt remarked: "The social commentary is readily apparent, with Scalzi touching on the treatment of those with disabilities, civil unrest, oppression of minorities and the danger of greedy folks in big business. What's more impressive, though, is the entire tech-born culture he invents."

Anastasia Klimchynskaya, writing on the *Seattle PI* Web site, proffered a similar sentiment, advising: "This fictional reality is complex, with the world having gone through many iterations of changes to accommodate these new types of human beings--and it is the existence of that very world in which the story takes place that makes the novel true science fiction. It's this futuristic fictional reality, different from our own in many ways, that through its very existence allows Scalzi to pose these questions and ponder the way we live now." Lauding *Lock In* on the *Boing Boing* Web site, Cory Doctorow called it "a book with everything Scalzi's fans have come to love and expect from his books, and more." Furthermore, Doctorow declared, "it's never preachy, but if *Lock In* doesn't make you think, you weren't paying attention. You could hardly ask for more: a book that grabs you by the lapels and won't let go, a book full of wit and humor, a book that makes you reconsider our world and where we sit in it. This is Scalzi's best book to date, and that's saying rather a lot." Indeed, online *io9* columnist Andrew Liptak wrote: "*Lock In* is a fun read ... and certainly one of Scalzi's best novels to date. Long-time fans of his works will be entertained by its snappy dialogue, interesting plot and excellent world, and newcomers will find that it's an accessible science fiction novel, one that'll undoubtedly be a gateway drug into science fiction ... and to a screen near you. *Lock In* is slick, fast and exciting throughout, one that we'll hopefully see again."

Scalzi has written or contributed to a number of nonfiction books, including several in the "Rough Guide" and "Uncle John's Bathroom Reader" series. In 2007, selections from his popular blog were compiled into *You're Not Fooling Anyone When You Take Your Laptop to a Coffee Shop: Scalzi on Writing*. In this title, Scalzi takes a different approach to the writing guide. Whereas most books about writing focus on craft or on the writing life itself, Scalzi takes a hard look at writing as a career. He does not address it as a hobby or something one does simply to feel artistically fulfilled while all the time forced to work another job. Instead he looks at writers who get paid for their work and at all of the different types of writing jobs that are available to someone willing to work to improve their skills and to spend some time tracking down the opportunities. He splits the book into several sections, the first of which addresses the craft of writing, stressing the need to acquire all the tools of the trade, a skill set that includes a solid knowledge of grammar and spelling. The second section of the book addresses writing as a business. From there he addresses the subject of writers in general, and then science fiction or speculative fiction, given that this is the genre in which he primarily writes and where he has begun to receive a measure of success and acclaim.

Robert M. Tilendis, in a contribution for the *Green Man Review* Web site, remarked: "If you can get past Scalzi's fairly confrontational style (which can sometimes be annoying simply because he's playing at being a smart-ass--or maybe he really is a smart-ass), there is a lot of good information in here, particularly on working as a freelancer."

Scalzi also edited the collection *METAtropolis*, a book in which he and other contributors provide tales that depict different urban environments in the future. Though each author's story is unique, the tales are all strongly interrelated with regards to theme and subject matter.

Reviewing the work in *Voice of Youth Advocates*, contributor Teri S. Lesesne recommended: "The real audience for this book is teens who are already fans [and] are well-read in the adult section of science fiction." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor said of the work: "Each story shines on its own; as a group they reinforce one another." Regina Schroeder, a contributor to *Booklist*, lauded: "This stellar collection is a fascinating example of shared world building."

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 15, 2005, Regina Schroeder, review of *Agent to the Stars*, p. 1644; March 1, 2006, Carl Hays, review of *The Ghost Brigades*, p. 77; May 1, 2007, Carl Hays, review of *The Last Colony*, p. 78; August 1, 2008, Carl Hays, review of *Zoe's Tale*, p. 54; June 1, 2009, Regina Schroeder, review of *METAtropolis*, p. 46; November 1, 2009, Carl Hays, review of *God Engines*, p. 28; May 15, 2012, David Pitt, review of *Redshirts*, p. 31; May 15, 2013, David Pitt, review of *The Human Division*, p. 26; August 1, 2014, David Pitt, review of *Lock In*, p. 47.
- *BookPage*, September, 2014, Michael Burgin, review of *Lock In*, p. 20.
- *Bookwatch*, December, 2015, review of *The End of All Things*.
- *Christian Century*, December 12, 2012, James F. McGrath, review of *Redshirts*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, May 1, 2011, review of *Fuzzy Nation*; May 15, 2012, review of *Redshirts*; April 1, 2013, review of *The Human Division*; August 1, 2014, review of *Lock In*; June 1, 2015, review of *The End of All Things*.
- *Library Journal*, April 15, 2011, Jackie Cassada, review of *Fuzzy Nation*, p. 87; May 1, 2011, Josh Hadro, author interview.
- *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, June, 2005, Michelle West, review of *Old Man's War*, p. 33; September, 2005, Robert K.J. Killheffer, review of *Old Man's War*, p. 25.
- *Publishers Weekly*, December 6, 2004, review of *Old Man's War*, p. 47; June 20, 2005, review of *Agent to the Stars*, p. 63; March 19, 2007, review of *The Last Colony*, p. 48; June 23, 2008, review of *Zoe's Tale*, p. 42; June 8, 2009, review of *METAtropolis*, p. 31; September 14, 2009, review of *God Engines*, p. 32; May 1, 2011, review of *Fuzzy Nation*, p. 59; April 2, 2012, review of *Redshirts*, p. 40; March 11, 2013, review of *The Human Division*, p. 44; June 16, 2014, review of *Lock In*, p. 62; July 6, 2015, review of *The End of All Things*, p. 50.
- *USA Today*, August 30, 2014, Brian Truitt, review of *Lock In*.

- *Voice of Youth Advocates*, August, 2010, Teri S. Lesesne, review of *METAtropolis*, p. 272; June, 2011, KaaVonnia Hinton, review of *Fuzzy Nation*, p. 192.

ONLINE

- *A.V. Club*, <http://www.avclub.com/> (August 25, 2014), Tasha Robinson, review of *Lock In*.
- *Boing Boing*, <http://boingboing.net/> (April 10, 2016), Cory Doctorow, review of *Lock In*.
- *Bookslut*, <http://www.bookslut.com/> (January 18, 2007), Stephen Granade, reviews of *The Ghost Brigades* and *The Android's Dream*.
- *Green Man Review*, <http://www.greenmanreview.com/> (June 15, 2008), Robert M. Tilendis, review of *You're Not Fooling Anyone When You Take Your Laptop to a Coffee Shop: Scalzi on Writing*.
- *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/> (January 21, 2012), author profile.
- *io9*, <http://io9.gizmodo.com/> (August 25, 2014), Andrew Liptak, review of *Lock In*.
- *John Scalzi Home Page*, <http://www.johnscalzi.com> (December 27, 2013).
- *NPR Online*, <http://www.npr.org/> (August 27, 2014), Jason Sheehan, review of *Lock In*.
- *Seattle PI*, <http://www.seattlepi.com/> (September 21, 2014), Anastasia Klimchynskaya, review of *Lock In*.
- *SF Reviews*, <http://www.sfreviews.net/> (January 21, 2012), author profile.
- *SF Signal*, <http://www.sfsignal.com/> (May 1, 2011), review of *Fuzzy Nation*.*

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, 2016

Gale Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Gale Document Number: GALE|H19948431

Source Citation: "John Scalzi." 2016. *Books & Authors*. Gale. Farmington Community Library. 20 Mar 2017 <http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/start.do?p=BNA&u=lom_metronetmncf>

© 2017 Cengage Learning

Redshirts discussion questions:

1. This book was routinely criticized for being two-dimensional and shallow. There were also many comments noting that his other books are not like this and have considerably more “weight” to them. Why do you think Scalzi chose to write in such a simple way?
2. Do the jokes work for you? Specifically, the sexual references? Compare the humor of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* to *Redshirts*.
3. One of the central themes is the inability of the ensigns to control their own destiny? Do they ever achieve this? Or do they always remain under the control of the Narrative?
4. Jenkins – discuss the ethics of what he did by allowing some ensigns to live while others, who are unaware of his role and the need to hide, end up dying.
5. Kerensky – how does he differ from the rest of the bridge crew? Why is he the only officer who gets hurt (and then recovers miraculously)?
6. Who do you consider to be the main character? Kerensky, Nick Weinstein, Dahl?
7. Do you need to be a hard-cord SF fan to enjoy this book? Is this true of all SF?
8. Can you prove you’re not fictional, or not in a parallel universe?
9. Who would you cast in a movie/TV show adaptation of this book?

How to read Science Fiction

A talk given at Greenbelt 2006 by Simon Morden

What is SF?

Science fiction has a many definitions as there are people who want to define it.

Wikipedia says that "Science fiction is a genre of fiction in which the story depends (at least in part) upon some change in the world as we know it that is explained by science or technology (as opposed to magic)."

Robert Heinlein said that SF was "Realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method."

My working definition of SF is closer to Theodore Sturgeon's: "A good science fiction story is a story about human beings, with a human problem, and a human solution, that would not have happened at all without its science content."

But best of all is Damon Knight's: "Science Fiction is what I say it is when I point to something and say that's science fiction."

What science fiction isn't

It isn't about squids in space, or rather, it isn't *all* about squids in space. Despite my fondness for all things tentacly, SF isn't all aliens and spaceships. A large proportion of SF never leaves the planet or encounter aliens. Perhaps fully half of the Clarke award books didn't either. Out of the six shortlisted books, two had no alien/space content whatsoever.

It's not only for scientists. Sometimes I still don't understand what's going on, and I have two degrees. But when I was eight I didn't have any degrees. Some SF is written by and for genre fans who know what a Singularity is, how big a Dyson sphere is, and the problems inherent with grey goo. Most is not – and any good author will take their reader along for the ride, whether it's the first SF book they've picked up or the fiftieth.

It won't turn you into a glasses-wearing übergeek or a conspiracy nut. That is, unless you want it to. Most readers of SF are perfectly normal, and completely harmless.

What science fiction can't do

It can't predict the future. Just from the law of averages, some SF predictions have come true, but the vast majority don't. This is because SF authors don't use SF to predict the future – they use it to explore it. For the very great part, they don't like what they find. Ray Bradbury once said "People ask me to predict the future, when all I want to do is

prevent it." SF has sought to warn people about current social trends by extrapolating them into a plausible future. SF is very much a literature of the present.

It can't make up for the fact you dropped science at GCSE. Or, "Everything I know about science I learnt from SF books". Whilst you will undoubtedly learn new stuff about science from SF books, you'll undoubtedly learn new stuff about law from John Grisham books. But the chief part of Science Fiction is that it's fiction. Writers make up stuff all the time. In fact, it's the writer's job to make you believe the untrue stuff as much as the true. In fact, we delight in making the junction between true/untrue as seamless as possible.

It won't win the admiration of your friends, family and work colleagues: authors very rarely have any input as to what goes on the cover of their book – and book publishers seem to go in for a lurid 'squids in space' style of cover art that doesn't often have anything to do with what goes on in the text.

There's also a lot of snobbery involved – so much so that when an SF book crosses over to the mainstream, there's a flurry of reviews saying to the effect 'this is too good to be SF'. Even some authors are involved in this: Margaret Atwood being an easy target here. If *The Handmaid's Tale* isn't SF, we'll have our Arthur C Clarke award back, thank you.

What science fiction can do

It can entertain you. SF is one big playground. If we can think of a decent reason to do something outrageous, we'll do it. We blow up planets and stars, mass thousands of spaceships, change both the past and the future, and even cheat the end of the universe.

It can make you think. One of the biggest unanswered questions is "what if?" Science Fiction is all about "what if?", and SF stories are deliberately told to explore the possibility of time travel, genetic engineering, computers in people's heads, teleportation, what happens when the oil runs out, what to do if we're contacted by aliens. If more politicians read SF, we wouldn't be in half the messes we're in now.

It can give you a whole new set of stuff to worry about. From nanotechnology turning the planet into grey goo, through giant asteroids delivering a civilisation-killing blow to the Earth, to a genetically engineered plague wiping out all life, we have it all. Highly advanced aliens coming to destroy us all. Global climate change. World-spanning repressive dictatorships. Wars without end. Clones. Cybernetics. Intelligent machines. It beats lions and tigers and bears, oh my, into a cocked hat.

We also get to pity those poor souls who don't know what they're missing. It's good to feel superior. Science fiction is often smart fiction – sassy, intelligent, forward-looking. And so will you be when you read it.

Yes, there are different types of science fiction

Alternate history – Change on point of history. PK Dick, *Man in the High Castle*. Almost anything by Harry Turtledove. Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt*.

Cyberpunk – high-tech low-life. Neal Stephenson, Charlie Stross, William Gibson, Pat Cadigan

Military – soldiers in space. Robert Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*. Joe Haldeman, *Forever War*, Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*.

Post-apocalypse – Nevil Shute, *On the Beach*. Philip Reeve, *Mortal Engines*. John Wyndham, *Day of the Triffids*, *The Chrysalids*.

If you like...

Family sagas, try Julian May's *Pleistocene Saga*. May's work is fantastically detailed and follows one family through a magnificently epic story.

Detective stories – Hardly anyone does SF/detective stories like Jon Courtney Grimwood.

Technothrillers. Is Clancy your man? Then get a load of Alastair Reynolds' *Revelation Space* and *Pushing Ice*. More tech that you can shake a stick at.

'Literature'. The winner of the 2005 Arthur C Clarke Award, *Air*, by Geoff Ryman, is everything a lit book needs to be.

Gothic novels your thing? China Mieville is the writer of choice. Look no further than *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar*.

Politics, anyone? MacLeod, writes mean SF often with a political riff. Try *The Cassini Division*, or *Learning the World*.

Comedy: Douglas Adams, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

SF books you ought to read

HG Wells – The War of the Worlds

Wells' classic novel of alien invasion, published in 1898, has three-legged Martian war-machines crushing the most technologically advanced culture on Earth – the British – with the survivors hiding from a fate worse than death in the rubble of London.

George Orwell – 1984

Orwell's political masterpiece is set in a dystopian future of Big Brother, Newspeak and thought police.

Frederick Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth – The Space Merchants

Pohl and Kornbluth's razor-sharp filleting of global capitalism in general and the advertising industry in particular dates from 1953, and shows a future dominated by overpopulation,

resource shortages, and an imminent land grab for Venus.

Ray Bradbury – Fahrenheit 451

1953 turned out to be a golden year for sci-fi: Bradbury's writing illuminates this tale of Montag the fireman, paid to burn books. Almost everything by Bradbury is brilliant – but this is the only book he would ever admit to being science fiction.

Frank Herbert – Dune

Forget the slightly dodgy film, Dune is a complex, multi-layered story revolving around a chemical called 'spice', which makes space travel possible, and whoever controls the spice, controls the Imperial throne.

William Gibson – Neuromancer

Gibson crafts a startling and disturbing future where cyberspace (a term he coined, along with 'The Matrix') is more real than reality. All the more amazing for having been written on a manual typewriter in 1984.

Orson Scott Card – Ender's Game

This controversial book, first published in 1985, centers on children who are taken by the military and trained to fight the enemy. The psychological depth and sharp social insight make this book a genre classic.

Greg Bear – The Forge of God

It's the end of the world as we know it – aliens have done something to the planet and it's counting down to disaster. This is wide-screen, effects-laden fiction, and it gave me memorable and terrifying nightmares. Well worth it, I say! (1987)

Mary Doria Russell – The Sparrow

The Sparrow was the winner of the 1996 Arthur C Clarke Award, involving a complex alien culture and the Jesuit mission which makes contact with them. It is a deeply affecting story of faith and humanity which produces as many questions as it does answers.

Michael Marshall Smith – Spares

An veteran of one of the most bizarre wars ever fought falls foul of a rich and powerful gangster – and hides out working as a guard on a farm where clones are kept for organ replacement for the rich. Savage, funny, passionately angry, this is a sharp, gritty book full of surprises. (1996)

Simon Morden is the author of "Heart", "Another War" and the forthcoming "The Lost Art", as well as the short story collections "Thy Kingdom Come" and "Brilliant Things". He is editor of the British Science Fiction Association's writers' magazine, "Focus", and was a judge for the 2006 Arthur C Clarke Awards.

Published under a Creative Commons license – Simon Morden 2006

Redshirts quotes:

From NPR:

John Scalzi, trope-poking author and blogger, has engaged one of sci-fi's most famous canons with *Redshirts*, tackling both the sublime and the absurd of classic *Star Trek*. The book's title is itself a joking Trek reference; the show killed off so many red-clad security crewmen so quickly that the phenomenon developed a name: "redshirting."

Reddit post:

"This was the first John Scalzi book I've read, and while I enjoyed it, I was rather annoyed with the writing style. "Minimalist" would be an understatement. Virtually none of the characters are described in any detail. For example, the book is meant to be a parody of *Star Trek*, including an "alien" First Officer. But what makes him an "alien" is never described! Does he have pointed ears? Blue skin? A tail?

So my question is, is this deliberate on Scalzi's part as a way to trade off of our mental images of *Star Trek* or is this how Scalzi normally writes? Because if all of his work is this "vanilla" I'm not sure I could stand it."

From Wired:

"It took me eight books to finally be at a point in my career where I could come out with a book and say, 'This is meant to be a funny book,' and we didn't have to make any bones about it," says Scalzi.

Wired Interview:

Q: Is SF too inaccessible for people new to SF? (Because today's writers are so much more literary)

JS: "... when I write, the person that I keep in mind is my mother-in-law. And my mother-in-law reads Nora Roberts and she reads Julie Garwood, and she's going to read my stuff because I'm her son-in-law and she loves me. So what I do when I'm writing this stuff is I think, "How am I going to communicate all the ideas that I want to communicate, and at the same time make it something that Dora — my mother-in-law — will be able to follow?" If I can make something that she's going to be able to follow and be interested in, and have a good time reading, it seems likely to me that I should be able to get just about anybody to follow it.



