

Come in, Flash! Sci-fi's arrived

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

A whoosh, a roar and a burst of dazzling lights.

They used to be the staple of science-fiction novels. But things are changing. The action and excitement are still there, but pyrotechnics have been upstaged by serious social commentary. And drugstore pulp has entered the halls of academe.

"Sci-fi" has arrived as a literary form. High schools throughout the Detroit metropolitan area offer at least one science fiction elective. School officials in Birmingham and Livonia say science fiction is their most popular course.

One Detroit public high school offers 26 sections in science fiction—all are filled. Wayne State University and the University of Detroit offer high-level courses in the subject.

BUT WHY the new-found popularity?

According to Marshall Tymn, professor of English literature at Eastern Michigan University, the answer is simple: Science fiction is exciting, entertaining and relevant to young minds.

Tymn should know. He is a coordinator of the nation's largest annual gathering of teachers of science fiction. More than 200 teachers are expected on the EMU campus this spring for the conference's third meeting.

"Mainstream literature just is not furnishing any answers to younger readers about where we're heading," said Tymn.

"Science fiction literature is attractive. It's alive with mind-boggling concepts."

"It's probably more entertaining than mainstream literature. And younger readers are turned off by literature that doesn't entertain."

TYMN SAID today's science fiction readers, far from being lost in daydreams, want to know what their alternatives are for the future.

"Science fiction deals with those alternative futures. Science fiction is giving the broad picture of the direction in which we may be heading. It deals with corruption, ecology, mismanagement, in government. The emphasis is away from hard science."

The sci-fi of the 1970s, Tymn said, has come a long way from Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers and the monster invasions of the grade B Japanese movies.

Instead, science fiction has gone "serious."

"Today's writers are not concerned with gadgets, monsters and computers coming to life," he said.

"Logan's Run" and "Soylent Green" were two recent science fiction films Tymn pointed to as examples of the new emphasis on contemporary and future social problems.

"Logan's Run wasn't a bad movie. It tried to portray what the future might be like," he said. That movie depicted a society in which no one was allowed



Tracking screens and UFO sightings have captured the imagination of the public once again thanks to "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." According to school officials, the slick new movies may have

helped make science fiction more popular with high school and college students, but there are other reasons for its growing popularity.

to live past the age of 30—a "youth culture" gone berserk.

"Soylent Green" tried to portray a vastly over-populated world suffering from other ecological problems," he said.

However, "Star Wars," the biggest box office hit ever, wins no interstellar points from Tymn. "It was a highly entertaining movie, but it stressed special effects. It created a negative effect. It reinforces all the stereotypes. All it did was set science fiction back," he said.

NEVERTHELESS, Tymn acknowledges the media-hype surrounding "Star Wars" and "Close Encounters" has helped to extend the popularity of literature which had for a long time only a cult following.

"It's no longer a stigma to write science fiction. And the market is a lot easier to break into for a writer," Tymn said.

"And our writers are accessible. That's not always the case with mainstream writers," said Tymn. "We can see the Isaac Asimovs, Peter B. Clarkes and Ray Bradburys."

"There are scores of conventions, and the writers never fail to make the rounds."

CHARLES BUELL, an English teacher at Birmingham's Seaholm High School, agreed with Tymn.

"The real value of science fiction is that it points to the changing role of the individual in the future," he said. After some consideration, he corrected himself. "It deals with the changing role of the future."



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Thinking about adding a solar heating unit to your home?

Based on today's comparative costs and benefits of solar and conventional heating, it would be uneconomical to try to heat a typical upper Midwestern home totally by solar energy, claims "solar economist" David Pogany of the Illinois Department of Business and Economic Development. Pogany was one of a number of professionals who addressed a solar energy conference March 2 at the University of Michigan.

He says that, for the optimum "payback" on your investment, solar heating should be used in conjunction with conventional heating. The amount of reliance of solar heating, he said,

could range anywhere from 30 to 75 per cent, depending on home insulation and a variety of other factors.

Ted Kurkowski of the U.S. Department of Energy office in Chicago advised that some \$9 million in federal solar "demonstration" grants are available nationally this year for solar energy projects involving residential and commercial buildings.

But he said government agencies, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Energy, are extremely selective and are most likely to favor projects with the greatest "public visibility."

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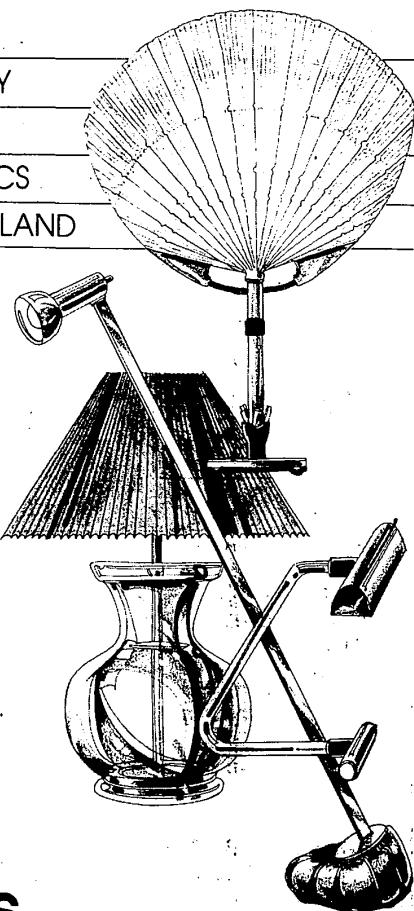
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