

SCIENCE FICTION

A REVIEW OF SPECULATIVE LITERATURE

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SCIENCE FICTION

A REVIEW OF SPECULATIVE LITERATURE

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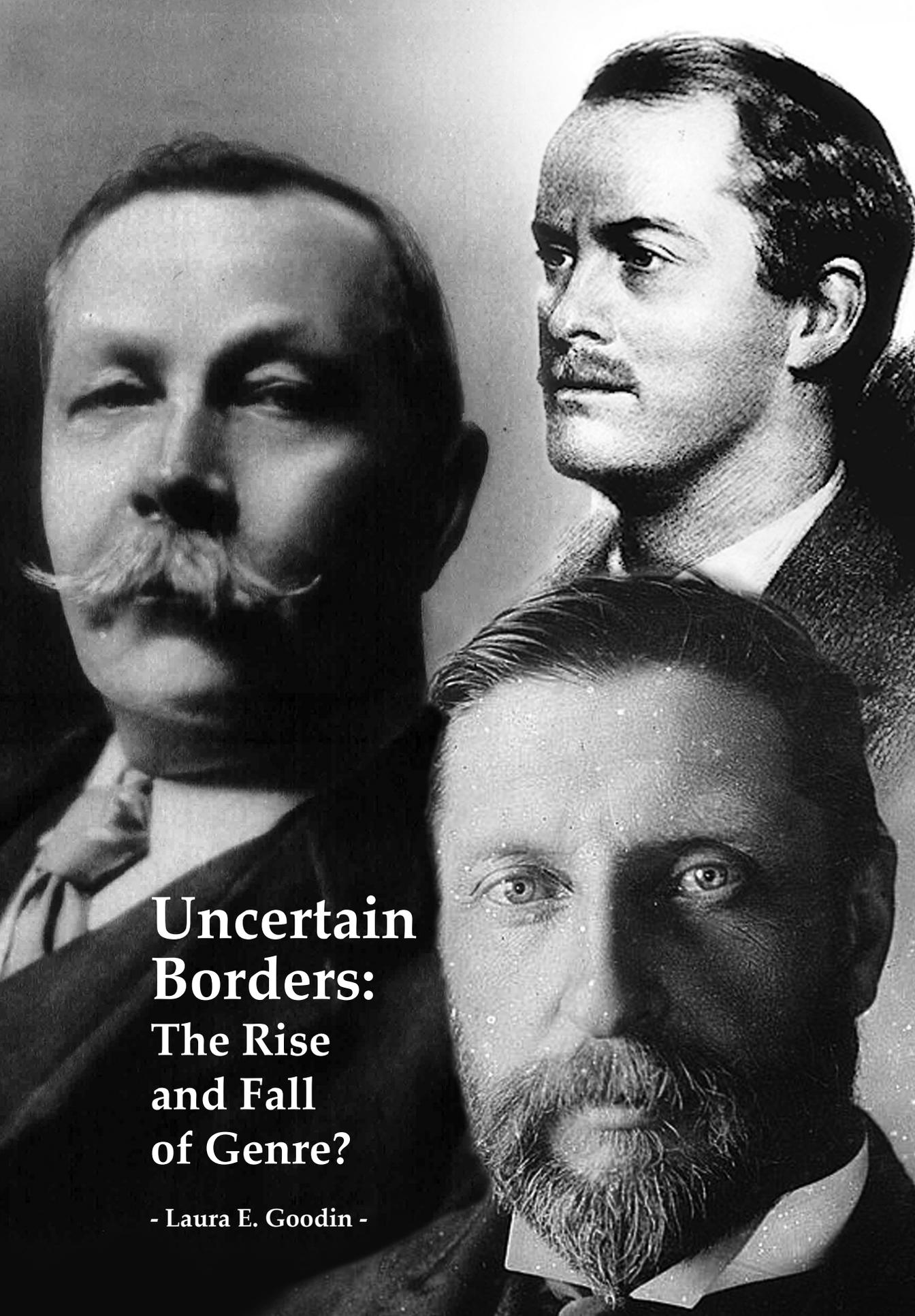
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**Uncertain
Borders:
The Rise
and Fall
of Genre?**

- Laura E. Goodin -

Here we may weave our humble tale, and point our harmless moral without being mercilessly bound down to the prose of a somewhat dreary age. Here we may even – if we feel that our wings are strong enough to bear us in that thin air – cross the bounds of the known, and, hanging between earth and heaven, gaze with curious eyes into the great profound beyond. There are still subjects that may be handled there if the man can be found bold enough to handle them. And, although some there be who consider this a lower walk in the realms of fiction, and would probably scorn to become a “mere writer of romances,” it may be urged in defence of the school that many of the most lasting triumphs of literary art belong to the producers of purely romantic fiction, witness the “Arabian Nights,” “Gulliver’s Travels,” “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” “Robinson Crusoe,” and other immortal works. If the present writer may be allowed to hazard an opinion, it is that, when Naturalism has had its day, when Mr. Howells ceases to charm, and the Society novel is utterly played out, the kindly race of men in their latter as in their earlier developments will still take pleasure in those works of fancy which appeal, not to a class, or a nation, or even to an age, but to all time and humanity at large.

– H. Rider Haggard (1887)

Genres and What They’re For

One of the tools writers can use for making artistic and commercial choices is the idea of genre: the placing of artistic work into categories that, to a degree, determine the boundaries within which writers will exercise their invention (Chandler, 2000, p.3). Readers have become accustomed to the relatively rigid division of fiction – particularly popular fiction – into categories that explicitly offer known and accepted conventions (Holquist, 1983, pp.157-158; Cawelti, 1976, p.8). Someone who wants to read a western will not go to the fantasy section of a bookstore or search a bookseller’s website for “science fiction” or “horror”.

Writers, readers, publishers, and booksellers operate within the constraints of traditional genre conventions. Expectations are explicit – not just about story content, but about form as well (Jones, 2009, p.8). A story must do more than incorporate a few tropes to be considered to belong to a specific genre: it must also conform to traditional plots, character types, and themes (Seitel, 2003, pp.290-291).

Genre distinctions are, fundamentally, not just descriptive but prescriptive: they set out what “ought” to happen. Derrida (1980) writes:

As soon as the word “genre” is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: “Do,” “Do not” says “genre,” the word “genre,” the figure, the voice, or the law of genre.... Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity (pp. 56-7).

Moreover, generic distinctions are inherently negative: whether a text is considered to be within a given genre is more a function of what it *isn't* than what it *is*. A story is an adventure until the jungle foliage parts to reveal a space ship; a western until the horse starts talking; no genre at all until the appearance of a specific trope that shuts it out of all generic categories except one – which instantly becomes inescapable. Gelder (2004) writes, “This is an important point to note: that genres are internally antagonistic, their subgenres needing to carve out differences in kind for themselves – which may mean knocking other subgenres out of the way in the process” (p.59).

Yet the distinctions among genres are not simply a checklist of tropes. Each genre fosters (indeed, requires) an internal cohesiveness: things must work, both thematically and technically, as part of a relatively consistent system of expectations. As Gelder (2004) puts it, “A genre requires something quite fundamental to be installed at its core: an ‘attitude’, a sensibility, a paradigm. The experiences of its characters are then traced in relation to that paradigm, often to the exclusion of pretty much everything else” (p.64). In other words, adherence to the conventions of the genre (which are, in effect, an external milieu for a story) ensures that it is consistent not only with other stories in that genre, but within itself: the characters’ actions and the themes that guide the story make *sense* for someone experienced in reading within the genre.

Such consistency can be deeply satisfying in itself (Prince, 2003, p.456). Cawelti (1976, p.8) and Chandler (2000, p.9) assert that familiarity offers readers a satisfying and pleasant emotional security, and aids in understanding details and following plots. This provides a clue as to what makes the drive for classification so pervasive. The continuing existence of genre distinctions throughout literary history (whether they divide prose from poetry, literature from popular writing, or fantasy from science fiction) suggests that these distinctions fulfil a basic human need for integration into one’s culture and shared experience with one’s fellows. Seitel (2003) begins by saying that genres integrate the reader not only with the text, but with the culture within which the text is created:

As a rule of thumb, speech genres – a panoply of forms that includes proverbs, parking tickets, Ph.D. dissertations, jump-rope rhymes, international legal conventions, epics, detective novels, television news, and Hollywood westerns – define, refer to, or contain in some way a particular social *world*, or a particular sector of a larger social world.... Genres are storehouses of cultural knowledge and possibility. They support the creation of works and guide the way an audience envisions and interprets them (pp. 277-9).

Warshow (2001, pp.99-100) also stresses genre boundaries as the nexus of individuals’ experience of the text and their acceptance of the traditions and norms that structure the society as a whole. He asserts that types perpetuate themselves and create “their own field of reference” (p.100) as individuals return to them again and again, and as these individuals value originality only to the extent that it highlights and intensifies the feeling of familiarity without disrupting it. More specifically, Gelder (2004, p.55) asserts that an understanding of how stories have been categorised, and according to what criteria, is essential in individuals’

process of engaging with these texts in the fullest way: participation in this agreed system of categorisation, and familiarity with how it has been applied in the past, is what makes both reading and writing genre fiction possible. Along these lines, Bourdieu (1993) speaks of “competent beholders”, who demonstrate their cultural competence and integration when they “unconsciously obey the rules governing a particular representation” (p.216).

Researchers have clearly emphasised the role of genre conventions as a sort of artistic and societal glue, often presenting them as self-evidently desirable, or at least inevitable. However, these conventions have by no means been a necessary characteristic of popular fiction in every case. Examples abound of works that have either disregarded or consciously subverted strict genre boundaries, and of authors who wrote in and combined what are now considered numerous genres, particularly from the earliest days of fiction intended for a mass audience. For example, the short stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (which I will discuss later) offer numerous instances of stories that combine elements of what would later be separated into fantasy, adventure, science fiction, humour, and horror, and Edward Abbott’s *Flatland* is both fantasy and social satire (Gilbert, 1991, p.395).

Many researchers, in fact, regard the mutation, subversion, and outright rejection of genre conventions as being at least as inevitable as their existence in the first place. For example, Dimock (2006) writes:

I invoke genre less as a law, a rigid taxonomic landscape, and more as a self-obsolete system, a provisional set that will always be bent a pulled and stretched by its many subsets. Such bending and pulling and stretching are unavoidable, for what genre is dealing with is a volatile body of material, still developing, still in transit, and always on the verge of taking flight, in some unknown and unpredictable direction (p. 86).

Farrell (2003, p.391) suggests, specifically in relation to the case of Greek tragedy (that exemplar of rigid generic criteria), that imposing standards of “purity” on genre conventions is both fruitless and overly fastidious: eventually, “the clear system of well-defined genres collapses on itself, producing decadence, hybridism, miscegenation, and murk”.

Pavel (2003) points out that normative systems of genre conventions are not obligatory; instead, “they are good artistic habits, practices of the trade, rather than imperatives” (p.209). He adds that as they are progressively found to be inadequate for answering new artistic problems, they “divide into subgenres, rivalries and struggles ensure, and attempts are made to achieve new syntheses” (p.210). Chandler (2000), Gelder (2004, pp.59, 74), and Brooke-Rose (1981) similarly observe that genres are fluid, adversarial, impure, and dialectic, with both practitioners and consumers struggling to simultaneously maintain generic consistency and customise it to their own vision: “a finite list of genres will incite rebellion and hence and alteration of genres or the creation of new ones. It is thus a self-destructive prognostication, and the author of such a list can be (unconsciously perhaps) a co-author of creative mutations” (Brooke-Rose, 1981, p.61).

Interestingly, in pointing out the taxonomic peril inherent in imposing the characteristics of an “accident” – one occurrence – on all the occupants of its

designated genre, Kermode (1983) also implies that breaking free of the constraints of genre is not, perhaps, as easy as some might hope:

The difficulty is made worse by the desire of those who understand this to disassociate themselves vigorously from the old novels that exhibit such restrictions; not only do they wish, understandably, to write novels which are free of those local and provincial restrictions so long mistaken for essential elements of the kind; not only do they sensibly want to enquire into what sort of thing a novel really is, what goes on in the mind that reads it; they also, and less happily, assert that the newness of what they are doing distinguishes it decisively from anything that has been done before (p.176).

And yet it seems that increasing numbers of authors are bent on finding exactly that newness, on distinguishing themselves from what has gone before. Indeed,

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Derrida (1980, p.59) asserts that the way genre operates “is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (p.59). He goes on to say that the very act of drawing a genre boundary creates that which violates it: “as soon as there is this blinking of an eye, this cause or this floodgate of genre, at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins” (p.65).

Could it be, then, that the disruption of genre conventions might not merely be inevitable, but actually offer outright artistic advantages for both the writer and

the reader? Seitel (2003), for one, writes that generic conventions are as important in the breach as in the observance:

the generic expectations that shape a particular work may never be fully revealed. Or an utterance may jostle audience expectations through irony, ellipsis, or another trope and still entertain within the generic framework. And conversely, an utterance that completely fulfils all generic expectations probably affords little aesthetic pleasure (pp. 290-1).

These researchers’ slightly different takes on genre theory reinforce each other to build an understanding of genre as social construct that both comes from and contributes to the society within which it functions. The concept of genre is neither assumed *a priori* nor imposed from outside society; it is neither all-powerful nor immutable. Rather, it has emerged, waxed, and – for some writers and readers at least – waned over time. This process may not be a new one: for example, as White (2003) theorises, at the beginnings of Western literature at least, “the theory of genre as essence...may have served as a goad, rather than a hindrance to creative variation in poetic practice, in much the same way that Bann suggests the art

police did in Restoration French painting” (p.601). And indeed, as novelist John Gardner (1991) points out,

genre-crossing of one sort or another is behind most of the great literary art in the English tradition.... Like genre-crossing the elevation of popular or trash materials is an old and familiar form of innovation. It was a favorite method of late Greek poets..., Roman comic poets, many of the great medieval poets..., and poets of the Renaissance (pp.20-21).

However, the proliferation during the mid- to late 19th century of what would today be considered popular genres (including science fiction, mystery, the western, and a new, highly characteristic approach to the ancient genre of the adventure story) suggests that an inventiveness that would later become constrained by genre conventions was, at least for the moment, thriving.

An investigation of some of the popular fiction of the era can yield some insights into the nature of genre and its uses as both a form within which creativity can work and a catalyst for rebellion and artistic innovation. This is what I aim to accomplish in this article.

A Time Before Genres

During the Victorian era in particular, the categories that might now be identified as science fiction, fantasy, horror, and adventure were essentially inextricably blended, with stories routinely combining elements of what would later be considered separate genres (Gelder, 2004; McDonald, 2004; Wilson, 1993; Fraser, 1998; Stableford, 1985). Such tales, which depicted the characters’ external lives (for example, their adventures in exotic settings), were generally grouped under the heading of “romance”, to distinguish them from works that focused on characters’ introspection and emotional lives (Lang, 1887a, p.684).

Many researchers consider this not as disregard for the unique characteristics of each type of story, but as an artistic choice of varied tools, all seen as part of a coherent approach to producing specific effects in the reader. Fraser (1998), for example, writes, “a natural elision occurred at the fin de siècle between quest romance and science fiction. To some degree this development had been anticipated by Jules Verne: to which genre does *Twenty Thousand Leagues Beneath the Sea* (1869) belong? *The Lost World*, and Conan Doyle’s other Challenger stories, also fit both descriptions” (p.78). Taves (1997) comments, “While characterization was seldom Verne’s strength as a writer, usually the fault was obscured by the context of the story, with an adventurous, scientific, fantastic, or comedic setting” (p.135). Evans (1988, pp.74-75) points out that the romance protagonist is designed to evoke readers’ emotions: he (and they were almost universally male) “is a great deal more than a simple paragon of Positivist rationalism. He also possesses all the qualities of the archetypical Romantic hero: courage, aesthetic sensitivity, idealism, devotion to justice, humor, thirst for glory, compassion, love of freedom, and ‘grandeur’ in general” (pp.74-5). Similarly, McDonald (2004) asserts that for Victorian readers the appeal of romance lay in “the way in which it forges its meanings out of the clash between the marvellous and the mundane” (p.15).

Margaret Atwood (2011) speaks of this process as less a clash than a merging, but concurs that its effect is to unnerve the reader: "In the sinister portions of a romance, the protagonist is often imprisoned or trapped, or lost in a labyrinth or maze, or in a forest that serves the same purpose. Boundaries between the normal levels of life dissolve: vegetable becomes animal, animal becomes quasi-human, human descends to animal" (p.157). Writers of romances consciously strove for this clash as the means to produce an awareness of wonder, which some modern researchers refer to as a sense of the sublime: "a response to a shock of imaginative expansion, a complex recoil and recuperation of self-consciousness coping with phenomena suddenly perceived to be too great to be comprehended" (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008, p.146).

The classical Greek writer Longinus, whose *On the Sublime* was familiar to Victorian writers such as Andrew Lang (who wrote a foreword to Havell's 1890 translation of the work), wrote that sublimity was an overarching quality to art – indeed, to human existence as a whole:

it was not in nature's plan for us her chosen children to be creatures base and ignoble, —no, she brought us into life, and into the whole universe, as into some great field of contest, that we should be at once spectators and ambitious rivals of her mighty deeds, and from the first implanted in our souls an invincible yearning for all that is great, all that is diviner than ourselves. Therefore even the whole world is not wide enough for the soaring range of human thought, but man's mind often overleaps the very bounds of space. When we survey the whole circle of life, and see it abounding everywhere in what is elegant, grand, and beautiful, we learn at once what is the true end of man's being.... To sum the whole: whatever is useful or needful lies easily within man's reach; but he keeps his homage for what is astounding (Longinus, 1890, p.55).

In such a definition, there was no provision for distinction among what would much later come to be the genre categories of fantasy, science fiction, horror, or adventure: if the work produced astonishment and yearning in the reader, it was sublime. The 18th-century politician and philosopher Edmund Burke ([1756] 2012, Part II, Section 1) similarly characterised sublimity as a powerful universal force, found in nature as well as in humanity's works, and similarly declined to confine it to one or another specific type of work.

A century later, Todorov (1973) described a similar feeling, which he termed "the fantastic": "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event (p.25)." He stipulated that a text's evocation of "the fantastic" was based on its fulfilling three conditions:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the

themes of the work – in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations (p.41).

Todorov’s definition of “the fantastic” shares with Csicsery-Ronay’s and Burke’s definition of “the sublime” a sense of shock, of sudden realisation that one is confronted with something that may – or may not – be transcendent or ineffable. Csicsery-Ronay (2002, pp.79-80) asserts that the reader’s awe in the face of the fantastic can take either of two forms: the sublime or the grotesque. The former induces awe “by the experience of the uncontainable, illimitable extension of nature and technology’s second nature beyond human powers of comprehension” (p.79). The latter’s awe “comes from experiencing combinations of elements that cannot occur, or should not occur, according to the established categories of scientific reason or customary observation” (p.79).

While Csicsery-Ronay is writing specifically of science fiction, his conditions for constructing both the “disturbing anomalies” (p.80) that evoke the grotesque and the “experience of the uncontainable” (p.79) that evokes the sublime can apply equally to the magical-realistic hybrid of fantasy and adventure written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), H. Rider Haggard (1856-1925), and Talbot Mundy (1879-1940). A number of researchers have considered that these three authors consciously strove to evoke a sense of the sublime in their readers, whether or not the authors themselves would have used the term as Burke did.

The genre-transcending nature of sublimity was not the only factor contributing to the lack of clear genre demarcations.

For example, Emandi (2013) lists a number of specific phrases that Conan Doyle used to create an atmosphere of “otherness” in “The Hound of the Baskervilles” and “The Sussex Vampire”, commenting that “such surroundings contain something ominous in them, foretelling terrible experiences. An oxymoronic presence, the moor is gloomy and extraordinary at the same time. One could say it has mesmeric forces...” (p.319). Similarly, Nelson (2006) goes through Haggard’s *She* (1887) finding examples of Burke’s list of things conducive to a sense of the sublime (cries of animals, the idea of extreme pain, excessive loudness, silence, solitude, vastness, hugeness, grandeur, difficulty, power, width, height, depth, darkness, night, gloom, obscurity, and stenches; Nelson adds “great stretches of time” to the list [p.115]). He concludes that “Haggard’s romance is swathed in ‘sublime’ images and events that contribute a great deal to the imaginative appeal of this perennially popular book” (p.116); Gilbert and Gubar (1989) suggest of Haggard’s fascination with the occult that “such destabilizations of orthodox Christianity, originating with the disruptions of reality enacted at séances...must have dramatized yet again the fragility of the control the rational western mind had supposedly achieved over a world which might at any moment uncannily assert itself” (p.29). Mundy’s efforts to evoke the sublime stemmed from both a

sense of artistry and an eagerness to present theosophical and occult philosophies to his readers (Taves, 2006; Ellis, 1984; Mundy, 1925), and he was as ready to do this through science-fictionesque technologies such as nuclear fusion and space ships (Mundy, 1924b; 1931) as through less-plausible, more-fantastic elements such as mind control (Mundy, 2012a) and descriptions of intimidating natural wonders that livened his more or less “straight” adventure (Mundy, [1916] 1985).

The genre-transcending nature of sublimity was not the only factor contributing to the lack of clear genre demarcations. A number of researchers have contended that the question of where lay any explicit boundaries between science, pseudo-science, and flights of imagination was far from settled. As Richards (1997) asserts, “The essential point...is that religious and scientific knowing were neither separate nor separable categories. It was not clear whether there were boundaries between them or, if there were, where they should be drawn” (p.52). Similarly, Atwood (2011) writes,

Adventure romance had taken off with Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* in 1882, and later coupled straight adventure – shipwreck, tramps through dangerous swamps and nasty shrubbery, encounters with bloody-minded savages, fun in steep ravines and dim grottos – with a big dollop of weirdness carried over from earlier Gothic traditions, done up this time in a package labelled “Not Supernatural.” The excessive powers of She are ascribed not to a close encounter with a vampire or god but to a dip in a revolving pillar of fire, no more supernatural than lightning. She gets her powers from Nature. It’s from this blend – the grotesque and the “nature” – that Wells took his cue. An adventure story that would once have featured battles with fantastic monsters – dragons, gorgons, hydras – keeps the exotic scenery, but the monsters have been produced by the very agency that was seen by many in late Victorian England as the bright, new, shiny salvation of humankind: science (pp. 144-5).

Winter (1997, pp.24-5) also points out the degree to which science and mere speculation were commingled, writing that “early Victorian science was volatile and underdetermined” (p.24). He uses the examples of phrenology and mesmerism to assert that what was and wasn’t orthodox science was far from clear at the time.

Winter (1997) follows Jacyna (1983) in drawing attention to an antagonism in early-Victorian science between an emphasis on “imminence” – the idea that life and activity were an essential part of the organic world – and on “transcendence”, the idea that life was breathed into nature by God. This antagonism suggests that the same tension between the linkage of empirical discovery with rational thought, and understanding gained through intuition, were also likely in other areas of intellectual life: how wild could speculation become before it crossed the line from scientific enquiry to purely imaginative flights? Along these lines, Brantlinger (1988) points out that “the search for new sources of faith led many late Victorians to telepathy, séances, and psychic research” (p.228), saying that it reflected “the desire for alternatives to both religious orthodoxy and scientific skepticism” (p.228). Fraser (1998) applies this ambiguity specifically to romance:

In [British Victorian-era novelist Sir Walter] Besant's...eyes...the marvellous and exceptional were not only feasible, but potentially as true as the everyday. We may add that a convincing adventure romance explores this paradox, and persuades us of its cogency. The strength of the romance, by this token, has to do with its treatment of the ambiguous versatile relationship between believability and fact.... For the advocates of romance, the esoteric and outlandish were newly worthy of attention, not simply because they permitted an escape from commonplace tedium, but because they opened onto the wilder excesses of fact (pp.13-14).

This is not to say that readers and critics were entirely unaware of any distinction between realistic and speculative fiction. Victorian writer and critic Andrew Lang, for example, was clearly aware that they were different, but asserted that a writer could make an artistic choice to mingle them, with results he found very satisfying (Lang, 1887a, p.685; 1887b, p.36). However, he still drew no boundaries between what are now considered adventure, fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Vaninskaya (2008) asks: "Can one even speak of the mixing or hybridization of genres in a particular work if the genres themselves had not yet been conclusively defined?" (p.60). The lack of any firm distinction between the various types of romance offered artistic freedom: because readers did not expect such delineation – which did not yet exist clearly in the cultural discourse in any case, as demonstrated by Lang's grouping them together under the common heading – writers were free to confound any and all types of romantic elements, whether plausible in the "real world" or not. By the same token, it did not occur to publishers to demand that their writers do otherwise.

A look at the broad category of adventure stories provides additional insight. Adventure has always been one of the most amorphous of the popular genres (Gelder, 2004, p.66). In critiquing the tales of H. Rider Haggard, who has been considered by some to constitute the genre's apotheosis (Murray, 1996), Lang referred to adventure tales variously as adventure, fantasy, legend, allegory, and romance, even within one review (Lang, 1887b); while this suggests an awareness that one could, perhaps, stress different aspects of a given romance, and thus apply a taxonomy of sorts, it does not yet constitute an insistence on clear and imperative genre boundaries. In another telling example, while Jules Verne's publisher would eventually pressure him to focus more on what readers expected (Taves, 1997, p.135), initially he was actually importuned by his publisher to combine what would later be considered science fiction "with the plot formula of an adventure story" (Taves, 1997, p.135). While readers of the time expected adventure stories to involve elements such as capable (and almost invariably male) heroes, physical danger, and exotic locations (D'Amassa, 2009; Csicsery-Ronay, 2008; Gelder, 2004; Fraser, 1998), they seem also to have positively relished the introduction into the mix of what are now regarded as speculative elements. Doyle, Haggard, and Mundy, popular authors working in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, provide examples of writers' willingness not only to write in what would now be considered science fiction, fantasy, and horror, but even to combine elements of each in the same work, in a desire to trigger in their readers a sense of the sublime.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930)

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fiction ranged widely, and he used, ignored, or subverted the common features of adventure fiction as it suited him. While Jules Verne and H.G. Wells are perhaps more widely known for their tales of "scientist-adventurers" (Suvin, 1979, pp.64-66; Evans, 1988, pp.74-75) than Conan Doyle for his, they were by no means the only authors to mix elements of adventure, science fiction, and fantasy. Conan Doyle wrote stories in several of what are considered today to be distinct genres. For example, many of his short stories might today be described as horror, others as fantasy, and still others as science fiction, mystery, or straight adventure, and his novels ranged from mystery to science fiction to historical fiction¹. Moreover, he wrote more than a few works that incorporated what would become characteristic features of two or more genres at once. Perhaps the most famous of these is *The Lost World* (1912), which combines the science-fiction tropes of scientific discovery, a skeptical public, and the curmudgeonly "mad scientist" with those of the stereotypical jungle trek that virtually defines Victorian and Edwardian adventure. In an even more self-aware example, in "The Leather Funnel" (1902), a character remarks, "The charlatan is always the pioneer. From the astrologer came the astronomer, from the alchemist the chemist, from the mesmerist the experimental psychologist. The quack of yesterday is the professor of tomorrow" (p.468); clearly, at least the character sees no sharp distinction between fantasy and science fiction.

These are not, however, the only examples of transgressions in Conan Doyle's oeuvre of what would later be considered genre boundaries. Although the use of humour was not common in Victorian adventure fiction (Vaninskaya, 2008, p.58), Conan Doyle did not hesitate to incorporate it into his writing. The short story "The Great Keinplatz Experiment" (1919) uses a putative scientific investigation into the transmigration of personalities (which, in itself, puts the story in a grey area between science fiction and fantasy) as a frame for a farce involving slapstick, mistaken identities, drunken antics, and thwarted romance. "Lot No. 249" (1892), in which an irascible researcher deposes an animated mummy on errands of vengeance against those who slight him, could today be categorised as either horror or fantasy (depending, perhaps, on the reader's own fondness for one or the other).

In another example of Conan Doyle's use of humour, his creation Brigadier Gerard is a model of complete and comic lack of self-awareness. For example, in the story "How the Brigadier Slew the Brothers of Ajaccio" when he is summoned into the presence of his emperor to be deputed on a mission, he undergoes Napoleon's careful scrutiny. "'I believe that you are the very man I want,' said [Napoleon]. 'Brave and clever men surround me upon every side. But a brave man who –' He

1 For example, the stories "The Brazilian Cat" and "The Leather Funnel" might today be classified as horror; "The Ring of Toth" as fantasy; "The Los Amigos Fiasco" and the Professor Challenger novels as science fiction, "The Blighting of Sharkey" and the Brigadier Gerard novels as adventure; *The White Company* and *Sir Nigel* as historical fiction; and, of course, the Sherlock Holmes stories and novels as mystery.

did not finish his sentence, and for my own part I could not understand what he was driving at (Conan Doyle, [1896] 1977, p. 45).” In adventure after adventure, Gerard catches on far later than does the reader – and always too late – that the kindly priest is a villain in disguise; that he has been given disinformation, not precious despatches as he believes, so that he can be captured and his documents mislead the enemy; that the shouts of approval he hears as he pushes his way uninvited to the front of the hunt and slays the fox with his sword are really bellows of rage at his clueless vulgarity (Conan Doyle, [1903] 1977; 2013).

Like the undeniably dashing, yet vain and clueless Gerard, Conan Doyle’s other protagonists often fail to conform to the common stereotype of the heroic and competent young man. For example, Professor Challenger, while brilliant and capable, is highly unsympathetic in his braggadocio and irascibility (“Did you think you could match cunning with me – you with your walnut of a brain?”, [1912] 2004 pp. 20-21); he’s also more than a little off-putting in his oddly animalistic appearance (Conan Doyle, [1912-1929] 2004). Conan Doyle gives a nod to the stereotype in the person of the point-of-view character, a brash young journalist who begins his association with Challenger in a bid to prove his worth to the young woman he loves, but it is Challenger who directs the adventure. And, of course, Sherlock Holmes himself – antisocial, graceless, drug-addicted, and emotionally distant – is hardly a manly and honourable hero.²

And, of course, Sherlock Holmes himself – antisocial, graceless, drug-addicted, and emotionally distant – is hardly a manly and honourable hero.

While over the next few decades publishers (at least) would come to regard such seeming unawareness of readers’ expectations with deep suspicion, the readers themselves still made Conan Doyle a famous and wealthy man. Either they did not expect their favourite author to write within rigid conventions, or he succeeded commercially and artistically by ensuring that his work incorporated a wide and less-than-predictable range of approaches and techniques.

H. Rider Haggard (1856-1925)

H. Rider Haggard stands as one of the towering figures of Victorian adventure fiction. His influence over the genre is profound, and his own works have lost little of their fascination over the past century: many have been adapted into films and graphic novels, and his characters have been co-opted by later writers (with varying degrees of irony) into pastiches and mashups such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Moore et al., 2002). Although fantasy and adventure are today considered quite distinct, fantastic elements are integral to the plots of

² While this research acknowledges that Holmes’s character became increasingly complex in the later stories, readers’ perceptions of his personality were originally – and, as later pastiches suggest, lastingly – formed based on the early stories and novels.

many of Haggard's works. One of the most popular of these, *She* (1887), uses them liberally.

A tale of two Englishmen's encounter with a hidden society ruled by the charismatic and despotic Ayesha, *She* starts out straightforwardly enough, with an ancient relic and a journey to Africa; however, before the book is over, the characters have been confronted with mindreading, clairvoyance, reincarnation, sorcery, and immortality. "But the more impossible it gets," wrote Haggard's friend, fellow-writer, and reviewer Andrew Lang (1887b), "the better (to my taste) Mr. Haggard does it" (p.36).

In *She*, Haggard departs from other adventure tropes as well. For example, the point-of-view character, Ludwig Horace Holly, is far from the typical adventure hero. He is middle-aged, scholarly, agonisingly shy, and – much like Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger – remarkably unattractive. Moreover, he is very conscious of his own unsuitability as a hero, particularly compared to his ward, Leo Vincey, who is both active and handsome (although certainly no match for Holly in intellect). Additionally, Haggard is at pains to portray non-white characters as individuals, who may be noble or wicked, weak or strong, intelligent or stupid (although the race-based master-servant roles common to Victorian fiction persist). Ayesha – *She* herself – is no mere plot device: rather, she is a figure of immense, cynical wisdom and tyrannical power, as well as an initiate into the mysteries of immortality.

Ayesha, the Return of She (1905) continues their story, with the same conspicuous absence of today's genre "rules". The characters' decision to resume their adventures is based not on the more commonly employed artifact or cryptic distress message, but on a miraculous vision. They seek what they know is implausible, if not insane: a resurrected (or at least reincarnated) Ayesha, and in Central Asia, not in Africa, where they had seen her perish. While the story includes life-threatening treks across the Himalayas, avalanches, wise monks, evil barbarian leaders, packs of savage dogs, and other standard adventure tropes, it also includes unearthly mummy guides to mysterious mountaintops, prophecies, love affairs that span millennia, visions discerned within towering sheets of flame, and, indeed, the uncanny appearance of Ayesha half a world away from where they'd seen her last. Interestingly, narrator Holly finds none of this particularly supernatural ("Nay, none of these things were true miracles, since all, however strange, might be capable of explanation"; p. 171), further suggesting that the boundary between realistic and fantastic fiction was far less an issue for Haggard than it would become for later writers, readers, and publishers. No, Holly saves his incredulity for Ayesha's rejuvenation, the result of Leo's faithfulness. And even there, the putative editor of this, Holly's memoir, speculates in a footnote that the "Fire of Life", the agent by which the rejuvenation occurs, could owe its origin to

the emanations from radium or some kindred substance. Although in the year 1885 [20 years before the novel's publication], Mr. Holly would have known nothing of the properties of these marvellous rays or emanations, doubtless Ayesha was familiar with them and their enormous possibilities, of which our chemists and scientific

men have, at present, but explored the fringe (p. 221).

In *Ayesha*, in short, Haggard blends without compunction many tropes and approaches now segregated into fantasy, science fiction, and adventure.

When the World Shook (1919) is, like *She* and *Ayesha*, composed of realistic and fantastic elements. It, too, has as its central plot device the fantastical connection of lovers across time and incarnation; it, too, laces its adventure with paranormal and pseudoscientific phenomena; in this case, they include, for example, astral projection, telepathy, and the concept of suspended animation as a means of living through vast stretches of time (a device that has since made an appearance in so many science-fiction stories). Moreover, in detailing his own backstory, the main character tellingly muses:

It is this boggling over exteriors, this peering into pitfalls, this desire to prove that what such senses as we have tell us is impossible, is in fact possible, which causes the overthrow of many an earnest, seeking heart and renders its work, conducted on false lines, quite nugatory. These *will* trust themselves and their own intelligence and not be content to spring from the cliffs of human experience into the everlasting arms of that Infinite which are stretched out to receive them and to give them rest and the keys of knowledge (pp. 3-4).

In other words, the selfless search for the sublime is the way to genuine wisdom. The novel itself constitutes a fable illustrating this moral. Its three main characters assume the roles of the unassailable skeptic (Bickley), the person of adamant faith (Bastin), and the agnostic who attempts to mediate between their positions (the narrator Arbuthnot); the plot throws at them one unbelievable event after another, testing their approaches to reality. While Bastin's single-minded Christianity comes out of these ordeals better than Bickley's relentless and scornful positivism, only

Arbuthnot's willingness to consider supernatural as well as natural causes for the bizarre phenomena he sees is portrayed as wholly sensible. Is this a work of fantasy? A love story? A philosophical allegory? A cracking yarn? Haggard clearly has no problem combining aspects of each into the one novel.

In contrast to these works, the iconic *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) begins firmly in familiar territory: the characters are on a quest for a long-lost relative and hidden treasure. Narrator Allan Quatermain is the ideal figure of a protagonist, being a highly skilled hunter, fit and capable, with an easy and extensive knowledge of many of Africa's cultures. Nor is there any overt speculative element in the story; the character Gagool's skill as a "witch-smeller" seems more a gift for callous political manipulation than a truly supernatural talent. But even here, Haggard refuses to be entirely bound by the tropes already developing in the adventure fiction contemporary with his own. The prince in disguise, noble and brave, is black, and successfully enlists the assistance of his white companions – rather than the other way around – when his identity is revealed and he makes a bid to recover

Is this a work of fantasy? A love story? A philosophical allegory? A cracking yarn?

his throne. The white characters return to civilisation with merely a handful of diamonds, rather than the pocketsful they could have grabbed (although, to be sure, this is enough to ensure them comfortable lives). And there is an interracial love affair of genuine tenderness and poignancy.

Haggard's less-well-known work *Nada the Lily* (1892) also departs from what have since come to be a number of expected adventure tropes. First, the only white character is a faceless, nameless narrator who merely introduces the actual story: the traditional European hero is entirely absent. Second, the story's antagonist is loosely based on the historical Zulu figure Shaka; does this make the novel an adventure, or historical fiction? Third, the story relies heavily on magical plot devices, such as clairvoyance, the intervention of spirits into daily life, weapons of magical potency, and the aid of ghost-wolves who used to be human.

Haggard's commercial success (Rieder, 2008, p.38) suggests that many of his readers agreed with his friend Lang: "Romance tells Mr. Haggard her dreams beside the camp-fire in the Transvaal, among the hunters on the hills of prey and he repeats them in a straightforward hunter's manner, and you believe in the impossible and credit adventures that never could be achieved" (Lang, 1887a, p.691). The admixture of fantasy and adventure was seen as a positive and commendable artistic choice, not, as Suvin (1979) would later have it, as an immature crafting of speculative fiction.

Talbot Mundy (1879-1940)

Even as late as the 1920s, the lines between the genres remained far less firmly fixed than they later became. A number of writers could, and did, write across a broad range of genres and use a broad range of tropes, and their readers followed them eagerly wherever they led. One such writer was the Anglo-American Talbot Mundy, whose stories were a consistent favourite with the readers of *Adventure*, the pulp magazine that was his most consistent market (Taves, 2006).

While Mundy is less well-known today than either Conan Doyle or Haggard (Taves, 2006), his writing was immensely popular during his lifetime. He published 45 novels and over 150 short stories, among which were works of historical as well as adventure fiction, and he was one of the flagship writers for *Adventure* (Taves, 2006). Many of his works – for example, his novel *Rung-Ho!* (1914) – are entirely stereotypical Victorian adventure, depicting manly heroes on a search for an artifact or a missing person in a suitably exotic – but not esoteric – locale. However, he had a lifelong interest in metaphysics and mysticism (Taves, 2006; Ellis, 1984; Mundy, 1924a), which increasingly affected the themes and devices in his fiction (Taves, 2006). For example, in *Caves of Terror* (1924), one character holds forth:

Once in every hundred years men have been sent forth to prove by public demonstration that there is a greater science than all that are called sciences. None knew when the end of the *Kali-Yug* [age of darkness] might be, and it was thought that if men saw things they could not explain, perhaps they would turn and seek the true mastery of the universe. But what happened? You, who are from

America; is there one village in all America where men do not speak of Indians as fakirs and mock-magicians? For that there are two reasons. One is that there are multitudes of Indians who are thieves and liars, who know nothing and seek to conceal their ignorance beneath a cloak of deceit and trickery. The other is, that men are so deep in delusion, that when they do see the unexplainable they seek to explain it away. Whereas the truth is that there are natural laws which, if understood by all, would at once make all men masters of the universe (p.13).

The protagonists survive the stereotypical crocodile pits, 70-foot leaps into raging rivers, elephant rampages, and escapes from locked rooms using only a safety pin and a cotton rope. However, they must also contend with assaults by mystical vibrations that nearly drive them mad, narrow escapes from incineration by unseen forces, and malevolent scrutiny from miles away. The character of a holy man repeatedly asserting that these phenomena are not magic, but science, does not save them from being fantastical; nor does Mundy seem overly concerned with keeping the two separate.

The Nine Unknown (1924) offers a subtle mixture of fantasy – a hidden cadre of preternaturally wise people who secretly and profoundly influence the events of the world – and science fiction. Like writers of a few decades earlier, Mundy evokes readers' awe by imbuing what were then the relatively new, nearly science-fictional ideas of nuclear fission with mystical and transcendent significance. One of the cadre speaks:

Did it never strike you there is more energy contained in a ton of gold than in a million tons of coal? Does that open any vistas? Do you see that to squander gold as money would be only to debauch the world, which is already too debauched, whereas gold's energy released in proper ways might change the very face of Nature? I am telling you no secrets. All the chemists know what I am hinting at. They don't know how to release the energy from gold or uranium or thorium, that's all (pp.232-3).

Jimgrim (1931), like Haggard's *When the World Shook*, portrays paranormal and pseudoscientific phenomena as "scientific". For example, the protagonist, Grim, attempts to explain telepathy to his bemused and skeptical comrades (while eerily prefiguring the rise of demagogues within a few years of the book's publication – adding an element of political commentary, along with the speculative, into what appears at first to be a fairly conventional adventure story):

Ten minutes trailed into an hour while he explained, as far as can be done when scientific words have not yet been invented for the purpose. I did not believe him.... My mind, while I try to keep it tolerant of other men's opinions, refuses to take seriously explanations that are not demonstrable by scientific method. For him to say, as he did say, that the eastern trick consists in emptying the brain of thought in order that it may pick up other thought deliberately broadcast or else latent in the layers of the mass-mind, left too much still to be explained. His argument that orators, with

nothing in the world to say, can stir men's minds by stilling thought with trickery of voice and gesture, and then fill them with emotion that induces them to go away and vote in opposition to their better judgment, seemed to me unconvincing (p. 238).

A few pages later, Grim makes another attempt to explain telepathy in scientific terms: "Thought-wave-lengths are like radio wave-lengths, only different in degree and impulse. This wave-length reaches one kind of person – that, another. Very few guess what is happening to them" (p. 251). Mundy does not stop there, eventually introducing an unmistakable space ship into the narrative:

The thing – it resembled nothing we had ever seen – arose, not more than fifty yards away from us, from beyond a clump of ornamental trees that shaded a fountain in Vasantasena's garden. It reflected the flames. It was long, cylindrical, and no propeller – no wings. It arose quite leisurely. It appeared to me to be made of metal and had fluted sides, like corrugated iron. I guessed its length at fifty feet, its diameter at fifteen. It shone like silver, blood-red where its corrugations caught the firelight. It went straight up until it was almost lost to sight, then shot away toward the northeast. It appeared to me to go as fast as sometimes the moon appears to move between the rifts of storm-blown clouds (pp. 301-2).

Thus, in *Jimgrim*, Mundy doesn't just incorporate science fiction alongside fantasy, he ties them together in a way that suggests he sees no real difference between them. It is very possible that Mundy, who was keenly interested in theosophy and the occult (Taves, 2006; Ellis, 1984; Mundy, 1924a), genuinely saw no difference between the more and less plausible phenomena he described; however, it is more likely that he was aware of the distinction – already being made in pulp publications such as *Amazing Stories*, which published only "scientific fiction" (Bleiler, 1998) – and chose to ignore it.

In Mundy's novel *Om, The Secret of Ahbor Valley* (1924), another hero, Cotswold Ommony, travels to Tibet to search for his long-lost sister. Like many adventure heroes, he is an outsider and a loner, kept separate from colonial society by both his unusually keen perceptiveness and his unpopular (progressive) political views. However, he is far from the automatically successful "Mary Sue": his career has been lacklustre, and he is embittered and at loose ends. The journey to Tibet is revealed to be the path to his spiritual rejuvenation, and Mundy consciously uses it as a vehicle to impart the eastern philosophies that he himself finds deeply attractive. Moreover, Mundy adds fantastic elements; for example, supernatural objects, reincarnation, and mystical, unseen sages who direct from afar the lives of the people they single out for special attention. One of his biographers notes, "Writing such a book as *Om* was a risky venture for Mundy; he chose to diverge from the conventional commercial formulas. In a letter to his publisher, he described it as 'soaked with sound philosophy and stirring mystery, plus dangerous adventure'" (Taves, 2006, p.124). And indeed, the publisher was wary of alienating Mundy's readers, although the book sold well and continued for decades to be highly regarded (Ellis, 1984, p.153).

Mundy's most famous work, *King – of the Khyber Rifles* (1916), can be grouped

among his more stereotypical adventure novels, containing little in the way of either speculative elements or eastern philosophies. Even so, it offers readers one of Burke's avenues to the sublime through its melodramatic descriptions of terrifyingly high mountains and deep chasms ("It was the river, million-colored in the torch-light, pouring from a half-mile-long slash in the cliff above them and plunging past them through the gloom toward the very middle of the world", p.199), its graphic descriptions of disease and other horrors ("They seized a man, laid him on the bed, tore off his disgusting bandages and held their breath until the awful resulting stench had more or less dispersed", p.185), its occasional incidents of gruesome cruelty (such as the death of King's younger brother, and King's learning of it only when handed his brother's severed head), and its half-hints of greater and more unnatural forces at work throughout the story ("Her own eyes were grown big and round, and she gazed at the crystal ball as she had looked into King's eyes that night, with the very hunger of her soul", p. 306).

By the outbreak of World War II, however, reviewers' tolerance for "the mystical tosh" (W. C. Weber, cited in Ellis, 1984, p. 222) had begun to wane markedly. Only 15 years earlier, one reviewer had gushed:

Again Talbot Mundy! We feel like stopping here, for certainly Mundy has that rare instinct which gives us just what we want, mystery, danger, unknown lands, occult realism of Eastern thought. There is information within the pages. A Lama is the Central figure, a character unique and [an] impressive, winning, compassionate heroic gentleman. From this story will come an understanding which no work of fiction, to our knowledge, has given previously (Lee, 1925, p. 306).

However, by 1940, J. S. Southron (1940) of the *New York Times* was less enthusiastic:

The writer of "Old Ugly-Face" [i.e., Mundy] might, justifiably, point to factual writers as supporting a use of hypnotism, mass and individual, and, possibly, telepathy in a story more than 99 per cent of whose action takes place in Tibet; but where their allusions are sparse, tentative or hypothetical his are wholesale and positive. Add to this the assumption of unusual – and highly debatable – physical phenomena, such as "flying" lamas (that is Tibetan priests "who can walk through the air"), and the continual employment of "visions" and miraculous interventions and you get a story that cannot be put across convincingly without a very special persuasiveness; in other words, literary atmosphere.

It does not get this.... As a mystery adventure it is manifestly

In this Mundy may have been a bellwether for those writers who today use the internet to find and reach their readers with an immediacy that he perhaps would have embraced ardently.

unfair. Clues are supplied, villainy circumvented and difficulties overcome with the help of clairvoyance, clairaudience and miracle. If you like that sort of thing this is decidedly your book. This reviewer, emphatically not one of the highly evolved elect, prefers a good brainy detective (p. 20).

Mundy provides a fascinating example of a writer who, even in the early days of the pulp era, was entirely aware of the ever-more-rigid constraints imposed on his work, and who consciously strove to circumvent the publishers to speak directly to his readers. In this he may have been a bellwether for those writers who today use the internet to find and reach their readers with an immediacy that Mundy perhaps would have embraced ardently.

These examples support the suggestion that genre boundaries are not inherent in the subject matter and tropes of a work of fiction; rather, they are a function of readers' own agreed perceptions of what tropes belong together, and of the degree to which writers agree to be guided by these perceptions. As long as readers accepted the admixture of adventure, fantasy, and science fiction, writers were free – indeed, encouraged – to produce it. However, their acceptance was already starting to give way to strict genre expectations: as mentioned above, editors at Mundy's publisher, Bobbs-Merrill, were deeply wary of *Om*, fearing that its unusually esoteric and philosophic content would deter readers looking for straightforward adventure. Nevertheless, it became one of his best-selling works (Taves, 2006, p.123), and this raises the question: was it readers' demands that drove the development of genre boundaries, or publishers' *assumptions* about readers' demands?

Lines Are Drawn

Over the first decades of the 20th century, the chaotic blend that was romance sorted itself – or was sorted – into increasingly strict categories (Fraser, 2004). However, this process did not begin spontaneously. Some of the root causes for the development of genre boundaries were already in place even as Conan Doyle, Haggard, and Mundy were writing. In his 1927 memoir, Conan Doyle, bitter about the lack of commercial success that his 1906 historical novel *Sir Nigel* had found, complained by analogy about the increasing rigidity of expectations from both the public and publishers: "In England, versatility is looked upon with distrust. You may write ballad tunes or you may write grand opera, but it cannot be admitted that the same man may be master of the whole musical range and do either with equal success" (Conan Doyle, [1927] 2007, p.188).

One factor in this process may have been that, as the practice of science advanced, the distinction between realistic and fantastic was beginning to sharpen. Alkon (1994) writes:

A looming problem for writers in the nineteenth century was how to achieve sublimity without recourse to the supernatural. In 1819 John Keats famously complained in *Lamia* that science was emptying the haunted air. The supernatural marvels that had been a staple of epic and lesser forms from Homeric times would no longer do as

the best sources of sublimity (p.2).

The accelerating advance of science and changes in public taste thus introduced a tension between a desire for strangeness and an increasing rejection of the supernatural (Caillois, 1983, p.6). Near the end of the century, contemporaries of Conan Doyle were actually losing patience with the conflation of science and fantasy in popular fiction: "But it is one of the ignominies of this hybrid species of invention – jolting you at every step from the naturalistic to the fantastic and back again – that its practitioner is perpetually reduced to the humiliating necessity of seeking at least some show of support for his imagination in physical fact or hypothesis" (Watson, 1888, p.332). At the same time, "the creation of a commercial audience for science fiction [in the 1890s] encouraged an explosion of subgenres that popularized, exploited, and even forecast the latest scientific theories and technological marvels" (Fayter, 1997, p.259). In other words, increasing numbers of people were developing a taste for science fiction, as distinct from fantasy and horror, and publishers were responding. Wolfe (2011, p.10) relates the emergence of increasingly genre-specific pulp magazines: *Weird Tales*, founded in 1923 and specialising in sword-and-sorcery stories such as Robert E. Howard's "Conan the Barbarian" tales; *Amazing Stories*, founded in 1926 and including a broader range of fantasy stories; and *Astounding*, John W. Campbell Jr's successful science-fiction pulp.

This process of developing identifiable genres to appeal to specialised readerships was to continue for several more decades (Wolfe, 2011), during which time these readerships grew into "fiercely loyal" fan bases (Wolfe, 2011, p.19).

A number of factors came together to facilitate the development of readerships that could act in concert to identify, access, and share information about specific genres of popular fiction – groups that would identify with particular works of literature, film, and television; consume media and licensed products linked to these works; and interact through conventions and, eventually, nascent online communities. One of these factors was the burgeoning of what might be termed the first mass media: inexpensive and widely distributed printed matter. Fayter (1997) writes, "Why did mass science fiction not 'take off' until the 1890s? Part of the answer lies in the story of Victorian publishing. After such developments as the invention of the steam press, cheap wood-pulp paper, and the stereotyping process, it became both possible and profitable to publish a variety of...newspapers and periodicals..." (pp.259-69). Moreover, the rapid increase in individuals' power to communicate with each other (Reid, 2012, pp.4-5; Merrick, 2004, n.p.) further enlarged the potential for groups of enthusiasts, which would come in time to refer to themselves as "fandoms" (Wolfe, 2011), to gather momentum. For example, in the United States, the percentage of non-rural households with telephones rose from less than 15% in 1902 to about 45% in 1940 (Fischer, 1992, p.93), and the percentage with automobiles from about 23% in 1920 to more than 60% just 10 years later (Fischer, 1992, p.102). As Devitt (2004) points out,

Genres usually develop through the actions of many people, in groups. A genre operates within a group of language users, but the nature of that group and hence of its genres varies, from communities (people who share substantial amounts of time together in common

endeavors) to collectives (people who gather around a single repeated interest, without the frequency or intensity of contact of a community) to social networks (people who are connected once – or more – removed, through having common contact with another person or organization (p.46).

The flourishing of communications technology, increased ease of transportation, and availability of texts all helped create “groups of language users” who could share and encourage each others’ interest in their genre of choice: in other words, fandoms.

This trend did not gather momentum in isolation. Every enthusiast of a genre must have a way to procure the texts they crave; for every outlet (bookseller, newsagent, movie theatre, library), there is an infrastructure of creators and producers. Frow (2006) writes:

This is to say that genre is not just a matter of codes and conventions, but that it also calls into play systems of use, durable social institutions, and the organisation of physical space. At another level, classification is an industrial matter. It is enacted in publishers’ catalogues and booksellers’ classifications, in the allocation of time-slots for television shows and in television guides, in the guidelines and deliberations of arts organisations, and in the discourses of marketing and publicity, together with the whole apparatus of reviewing and listing and recommending, that drive so much of film production. The consumers of books, recorded music, television and film are ongoingly schooled, and actively school themselves, in the fine-grained details of genre (pp.12-13).

Thus there emerged an environment in which the various groups – publishers, booksellers, writers, and readers – could begin to assert their own preferences, and shape those of the others. Three forces appear to have been reinforcing each other: publishers’ desire to identify and sell to specific, reliable markets of repeat customers; readers’ willingness to consume, again and again, stories of specific types; and writers’ willingness to meet readers’ and publishers’ expectations. Chandler (2000) specifically mentions “a triangular relationship between the text, its interpreters, and its producers” (p.5). Similarly, Frow writes,

In thinking about genre as a process it becomes important to think about the conditions that sustain it: the institutional forces that govern the determination and distribution of classification and value. Genres emerge and survive because they meet a demand, because they can be materially supported, because there are readers and appropriate conditions of reading (literacy, affordable texts), writers or producers with the means to generate those texts, and institutions to circulate and channel them (p.137).

In examining the development of rigid genre boundaries, then, one must ask: what benefits did they have for each of these key groups, and what drawbacks? How did the groups interact to intensify this process? Was it inevitable and ineluctable, or has it carried with it over the years the potential for its own disintegration?

Readers

Cawelti (1976) suggests that the relationship among readers, writers, publishers, and booksellers, while essentially circular, is driven in the first instance by readers:

I think we can assume that formulas become collective cultural products because they successfully articulate a pattern of fantasy that is at least acceptable to if not preferred by the cultural groups who enjoy them. Formulas enable the members of a group to share the same fantasies. Literary patterns that do not perform this function do not become formulas. When a group's attitudes undergo some change, new formulas arise and existing formulas develop new themes and symbols, because formula stories are created and distributed almost entirely in terms of commercial exploitation. Therefore, allowing for a certain degree of inertia in the process, the production of formulas is largely dependent on audience response. Existing formulas commonly evolve in response to new audience interests (p.34).

Thus, although readers' interests may be sparked by what booksellers and publishers initially offer them, their purchasing power – and their choices of where to allocate it – are the impetus for the commercial system that is the production and consumption of genre fiction. It can be worthwhile, then, to examine some of the reasons readers might be drawn to genre fiction.

In the most general sense, readers may find satisfaction in the mere act of categorisation: the resolution of “an inevitable tension between particularity and generality, the contingencies of undifferentiated experience and the organism's need to categorize” (Prince, 2003, p.456). They may also enjoy the “nostalgia” triggered by the repetitive experience of reading text after text within the same genre: “it is art whose content is not direct experience, but already formed ideological artifacts.... [Nostalgia] is partly a fascination with dating, aging the passage of time for its own sake: like looking at photographs of ourselves in old-fashioned clothing in order to have a direct intuition of change, of historicity” (Jameson, 1983, pp. 134-6).

This familiarity is, certainly, a major draw card for many readers. “One pleasure may simply be the recognition of the features of a particular genre

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because of our familiarity with it. Recognition of what is likely to be important (and what is not), derived from our knowledge of the genre, is necessary in order to follow a plot" (Chandler, 2000, p.8). Cawelti (1976) writes, "Much of the artistry of formulaic literature involves the creator's ability to plunge us into a believable kind of excitement while, at the same time, confirming our confidence that in the formulaic world things always work out as we want them to" (p.16). Readers not only grow familiar with the tropes and devices of their favourite genres, but come to rely on them to cue them into the plot and themes of each text. Devitt (2004) stresses readers' craving for knowing what's going on: "a writer who mixes or shifts *genre* in the middle of a text causes confusion for the reader, not because the reader cannot label the genre but because the reader cannot be sure of the writer's purpose or the reader's role – cannot be sure of the *situation*" (p.22).

Thus, much of readers' satisfaction with genre fiction comes of their feeling knowledgeable (Warshow, 2001, pp.99-100), of being Bourdieu's (1996) "competent beholders" (p.216). Chandler (2000) similarly refers to "competent readers", who are not generally confused when some of their initial expectations are not met – the framework of the genre can be seen as offering "default" expectations which act as a starting point for interpretation rather than a straitjacket. However, challenging too many conventional expectations for the genre could threaten the integrity of the text. Familiarity with a genre enables readers to generate feasible predictions about events in a narrative. Drawing on their knowledge of other texts within the same genre helps readers to sort salient from non-salient narrative information in an individual text (p.8).

Lacoss (2002) gives the specific example of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels: "The wizarding world can be likened to a club or folk group. Readers want to join. By learning 'folk' ways (that is, the ways to be a wizard), readers perceive themselves as in the club. Recognizing other members as having the same secret knowledge is a treat" (p. 72). Jones (2009) notes the development of "folk ways" (although he doesn't use that specific term) within science fiction in general:

Increasingly, SF writers assumed that their audience understood the core conventions of the genre: faster than light travel through 'hyperspace', time travel, the many-worlds interpretation of quantum theory which allows for the possibility of multiple, simultaneous, slightly different universes. If you were an SF reader, you didn't need these things explained to you; if you weren't normally an SF reader, you quickly became baffled (p.8).

This feeling of being "in the know" can extend to the pleasure of figuring out the puzzles of the plot based on one's own expertise within the genre: "'Cognitive' satisfactions may be derived from problem-solving, testing hypotheses, making inferences (e.g. about the motivations and goals of characters) and making predictions about events" (Chandler, 2000, p.8). Readers of genre fiction thus take genuine pleasure in wandering through familiar territory, enjoying surprises here and there, but relaxing in the knowledge that in their favourite authors they have found trusted allies in a collaborative process of creating shared meaning.

Curiously, the same readers who enjoy and actively choose works that demonstrate genre conventions can also seek out works that test, or even break, those conventions – and this tension can, itself, be a source of satisfaction. Cawelti (1976, pp.12-16), for example, traces its development and resolution from the introduction of a new element into a conventional genre structure through its increasing popularity, imitation, metamorphosis into a stereotype, and, finally, a component itself in the conventions of its genre. The driver of this process, he asserts, is conflicting needs for order and security, on one hand, and change and novelty, on the other. The former, when too strictly adhered to, produce boredom; the latter, when too heedlessly pursued, danger and uncertainty. The tension, however, is maintained and mediated by readers' awareness that the experiences engendered by reading are not only imaginary, but controlled – and thus made safe – “by the familiar world of the formulaic structure” (p.16).

Devitt (2004) points out that the balance between genre conventions and their subversion is vitally important to readers' enjoyment of genre-fiction texts:

Genres...permit a great deal of individual choice, for not every aspect of every text is specified by any genre.... Without variation, it would not be possible to perceive standardization; without generic choice, it would not be possible to enact generic constraint.... Were there just variation and no standardization, meaning would also be impossible. Too much choice is as debilitating of meaning as is too little choice.... It is with some reason that many students panic when the assignment “allows” them to “write on any topic” (pp.149-150).

In short, whether genre conventions serve as a comfort zone, or as a firm foundation for leaps into new creative territory (or both), they have proven to be deeply and consistently attractive to readers for more than a century.

Another source of pleasure for readers of genre fiction can be the degree to which they identify with the texts' main characters. Cawelti (1976) writes:

While the specific characterization of the hero depends on the cultural motifs and themes that are embodied in any specific adventure formula, there are in general two primary ways in which the hero can be characterized: as a superhero with exceptional strength or ability or as “one of us,” a figure marked, at least at the beginning of the story, by flawed abilities and attitudes presumably shared by the audience. Both these methods of characterization foster strong, but slightly different, ties of identification between hero and audience (p.40).

Cawelti (1976) also notes, “Because of its escapist thrust, formulaic literature creates a very different sort of identification between audience and protagonists. Its purpose is not to make me confront motives and experiences in myself that I might prefer to ignore but to take me out of myself by confirming an idealized self-image” (p.18). While it may be somewhat dismissive to limit readers' enjoyment of the characterisation in the texts they read, several authors have noted the draw of the idealised protagonist. As an example, adventure novels in particular tend to feature protagonists who are attractive for “all the qualities of the archetypical Romantic hero: courage, aesthetic sensitivity, idealism, devotion to justice, humor,

thirst for glory, compassion, love of freedom, and ‘grandeur’” (Evans, 1988, pp.74-5). Other researchers, such as Fraser (1998, pp.22-23) and Cohen (2003, pp.486-487), mention in particular their competence: they are what Csicsery-Ronay (2008) terms “the Handy Man”, who “is generally induced or forced out of a culturally comfortable, predictable home environment, to exotic and undeveloped regions. There he either solves a fundamental problem that permits him to function as an entrepreneurial culture hero for his original culture..., or he establishes the bases for a cultural transformation on his own terms...” (p.227).

A number of successful writers of genre fiction have stressed the importance of protagonists with whom readers can identify. “Sympathy, identification, and empathy all help to create an emotional bond between the reader and the characters. At this point you are on the brink of transporting your reader.... This is the aim of the fiction writer: to bring the reader to the point of complete absorption with the characters and the world” (Frey, 1994, p.16). Connelly (2002) calls the moment where the reader creates a bond with a well-written character “the empathetic strike” (p.58); Gardner (1991), one of whose most popular novels (*Grendel* [1971]) is written from the point of view of Beowulf’s (literally) monstrous eponymous adversary, writes, “We act out, vicariously, the trials of the characters and learn from the failures and successes of particular modes of action, particular attitudes, opinions, assertions, and beliefs exactly as we learn from life” (p.31). He goes on to add, “However odd, however wildly unfamiliar the fictional world – odd as hog-farming to a fourth-generation Parisian designer, or Wall Street to an unemployed tuba player – we must be drawn into the characters’ world as if we were born to it” (p.43). Moreover, Dijkstra (1994, pp.155-156) reports that the degree to which readers experience the emotions depicted for a text’s characters is crucial to their involvement with and enjoyment of the text. The protagonists of genre fiction – capable, active, and engaged within their own stories – provide effective templates for readers’ engagement.

The area in which reader involvement in the tropes and conventions of the genres they love comes into its full flower is fandom: the communities that have more or less spontaneously formed, and continue to form, around particular works and types of works.

By the late stages of the pulp era (a decade or so later in terms of fantasy), the writers and readers of these genres had developed easily recognizable protocols and even consensus literary histories, all based in a kind of populist canon developed through common reading and in some cases through that proto-internet of conventions, hectographed or mimeographed fanzines, and magazine letter columns collectively known as fandom (Wolfe, 2011, p. 24).

As discussed above, genre can provide a sense of community, of “belonging”, of having experiences and “folk ways” in common, and of having a bond not only with a favourite author but with other fans within the genre (Lacoss, 2002, p.72; Letson, 1994, p.229). Gelder (2004) writes:

Each genre of popular fiction is able to generate its own cultural logic, its “homology”: a set of attitudes and practices that seem to fit the kinds of things the genre stands for (and even, some that

apparently don't). There are now a number of readership sites online which coalesce around particular genres and build a cultural logic around them.... At these sites, and others like them, readers can move outside their novels and into the kinds of cultural "worlds" those novels inhabit. Of course, there are readerships which do indeed actively participate in those worlds, those cultures, and even help to create them. Popular fiction often enjoys a particular kind of reader loyalty, one that can build itself around not just a writer and his or her body of work (which certainly happens) but the entire genre and the culture that imbues it. In other words, popular fiction has fans – readerships which live through their genres, inhabiting them and claiming them – we might even say, territorializing them (pp. 80-81).

Thus genre gives rise to groups, which in turn perpetuate and solidify genre conventions. Wolfe (2011) (perhaps somewhat over-vividly) refers to the "balkanization" of readerships (and, in the case of film and television, viewerships) (p.22).

This group identity often takes on multiple functions, becoming far more important to fans than the texts themselves in isolation. Letson (1994) writes, "The main function of a subculture is to provide a focus for specialized interests and in-group activities and validation of common values. Since fandom is a self-conscious subculture, in-group feelings run high, and the supporting apparatus of rituals, in-jokes, passwords, and so on is elaborate and multi-leveled" (p. 229). Devitt (2004), Cawelti (1976), and Frow (2006) all stress that genre cannot be considered apart from the social context with which it has a mutually reinforcing relationship. Specifically, Devitt (2004) writes, "It is...the nature of genre both to be created by people and to influence people's actions to help people achieve their goals and to encourage people to act in certain ways, to be both-and. Genres never operate independently of the actions of people, but the actions of some people influence the actions of other people through genres" (pp.48-9). She notes that such groups even develop their own "generic etiquette", which "constrains people if they want to belong to a group" (p.148). Frow (2006) similarly takes notice of the ability of fandoms to develop (and enforce) social norms: "Genre is neither a property of (and located 'in') texts, nor a projection of (and located 'in') readers; it exists as a part of the relationship between texts and readers, and it has a systemic existence. It is a shared convention with a social force" (p.102). As Devitt (2004) writes,

The heart of genre's social nature is its embeddedness in groups and hence social structures.... It is...groups of people who are in a position to pass genres on to new participants, who form the groups with which new members interact. The genres that develop from a group's interactions, then, reciprocally reinforce the group's identity and nature by operating collectively rather than individually (p.36).

Thus, through a sort of communal inertia, reinforced by group norms, fandoms may by their nature tend to solidify genre boundaries.

While readers are perhaps the factor with the most power in determining and insisting upon genre conventions, the role of publishers and booksellers in

this process can't be overlooked. As Cawelti (1976, p.8) points out, publishers, in particular, have been well-served by the development of strict genre boundaries. Books that adhere to conventions appeal to an already-coherent market, saving both time and money in marketing efforts. Writers can often produce books more quickly within these conventions, allowing publishers to offer a steady stream of products to receptive, even eager, consumers. While writers as early as Verne, and Mundy only a few decades later, were already experiencing pressure from their publishers to rein in their broad-ranging stories (Taves, 1997; 2006), the development of mass publication intensified this pressure on many writers (Fayter, 1997, pp.259-260).

Publishers and booksellers

Although readers have tended to be the initial drivers for the development and solidification of genre conventions, they must still negotiate with publishers and booksellers, through the mechanism of their purchasing decisions, about which texts will be offered to them. Devitt (2004) notes that "different reading publics have developed at different historical periods, with different literary 'tastes' and

Writers' own relationships with genre conventions can be extraordinarily complex: are they tools, fetters, or both?

different commercial forces at work to encourage reading some works and even whole genres over others" (p.180). Each party in this relationship has a degree of sway, and this requires publishers and booksellers to know what their customers like – and, more to the point, what they *will* like. As Gelder (2004) writes, "To sell a genre means that one must be actively involved with it, participating in its logics and practices as much as the most knowledgeable fan. A good genre bookseller in effect must be an aficionado, out-reading or at least out-knowing the readers to whom he or she sells" (p.80). Similarly, Chandler (2000) writes, "From the point of view of the producers of texts within a genre, an advantage of genres is that they can rely on readers already having knowledge and expectations about works

within a genre.... Genres can thus be seen as a kind of shorthand serving to increase the 'efficiency' of communication" (p.6). This shared knowledge base facilitates the negotiation process whereby readers get texts that meet both their expectations and their needs, and publishers and booksellers profit financially thereby. However, the motivation of those producing and selling genre texts is not solely short-term profit from quick and healthy sales, although that is without doubt a strong determinant of marketing decisions (Sedgewick, 1991, p.18). A more comprehensive and longer-term motivation is the need to create a customer base of loyal readers who grow to rely on particular publishers for particular, expected types of texts.

At the same time, genre conventions can backfire, causing otherwise eager and receptive readers to reject texts outside their usual range of choices, or

introducing ambiguity into exactly the situations they were intended to clarify. Margaret Atwood (2011), discussing her early reading life and perceptions of genre conventions, writes:

Is this term [science fiction] a corral with real fences that separate what is clearly “science fiction” from what is not, or is it merely a shelving aid, there to help workers in bookstores place the book in a semi-accurate or at least lucrative way? If you put skin-tight black or silver clothing on a book cover along with some jetlike flames and/or colourful planets, does that make the work “science fiction”? What about dragons and manticores, or backgrounds that contain volcanoes or atomic clouds, or plants with tentacles, or landscapes reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch? Does there have to be any actual science in such a book, or is the skin-tight clothing enough? These seemed to me to be open questions (p.2).

Moreover, readers who are told by publishers and booksellers that one book is “real” science fiction or fantasy and another is not (through cues such as which of the publisher’s imprints produces it, its cover design, or where it’s shelved in the shop) may discover that such advice is faulty, or may simply disregard it. This is all the more probable if publishers’ actions indicate, as Sedgewick (1991) asserts, that “the reading desires and commercial demands of SF readers are irrelevant” (p.19). Sedgewick goes on to contend that publishing has mutated to the point that “[a] given book’s publication and distribution depend upon corporate decisions that are unlikely to be based solely upon the book’s merit – or upon its potential appeal to SF readers” (p.19).

The benefits of genre conventions for publishers and booksellers, then, depend greatly on the degree to which they maintain ongoing dialogue with readers. Their relationship with writers, however, is far more heavily weighted: they are in a position to exert great pressure on them to produce the texts that are eventually offered to readers. Writers’ own relationships with genre conventions can be extraordinarily complex: are they tools, fetters, or both?

Writers

It is tempting to simplify writers’ relationships with genre conventions to the solely economical: writers need to sell stories; therefore, they need to conform to publishers’ expectations, who in turn require stories that meet readers’ demands. And, indeed, that is a significant factor in determining the degree to which writers pay attention to genre conventions. Gelder (2004) writes, “A writer produces popular fiction because he or she intends (or, would prefer) to reach a large number of readers. Whether that intention is realized depends upon the case – since not every work of popular fiction is a bestseller – but even so, a choice has been made and a particular kind of career subsequently grinds into motion” (p.22). Wolfe (2011) traces this back to the first decades of the 20th century:

Science fiction, despite its healthy legacy throughout the nineteenth century, was essentially a *designed* genre after 1926, the year in which Hugo Gernsback launched *Amazing Stories*. It consisted of a

set of available markets to which writers ostensibly would conform, rather than a tradition of narrative that eventually would find its markets. This inevitably placed serious constraints upon the ability of writers to expand the boundaries of the genre.... (p.34).

More starkly, he writes that beginning in the 1930s, authors sometimes were reduced to writing stories on demand to satisfy an idea of the editors, or in more demeaning cases to writing stories that would exactly fill a hole in the next month's issue or that would somehow make sense of a prepurchased cover illustration. This is a tradition that would continue for years after the pulps had been replaced by the only slightly less garish digest-sized magazines of the 1950s (p.11).

Sedgewick (1991, p.29) views the dependence of writers upon publishers more pessimistically still, stating that the concerns of mass-market-driven publishers about "publishability...manacles both the 'pro' and 'non-pro' SF writer to the fears, whims, and prejudices of the publishing establishment" – which are becoming increasingly harder for writers to gauge. This, in turn, makes writers who want to earn a living increasingly cautious. However, it would be shortsighted to consider economic factors alone when analysing writers' motivations for working within genre conventions. While they certainly play a role, writers work to reconcile complicated and shifting demands in their artistic practice.

Many, if not most, writers of genre fiction have a genuine desire to entertain readers – and often to participate in creative dialogue with fan communities. Gelder (2004) notes, "This sentiment – 'I love my readers' – is common to popular fiction writers, who often work hard to maintain a sense of 'intimacy' between their readers and themselves..." (p.23). Tierny and Lazansky (1980) assert that writers and readers form an agreement, or contract, about what a text is for; the unspoken specifics of this agreement are used to determine how successful the text is from both perspectives:

The text, therefore, rather than bearing meaning explicitly, represents meaning or cues to meaning. The author, in producing a text, rather than merely transmitting thoughts in words to a page, makes assumptions about what the reader will generate and can be expected to generate. And the reader, constructing an interpretation which is plausible and complete, selectively uses the author's cues; indeed, we posit that the nature of a reader's interpretation reflects the extent to which the author has lived up to his/her part of the contractual agreement and/or the extent to which the reader made appropriate use of the author's cues (p.609).

Similarly, Wolfe (2011) points out that there is often a "compact between author and reader" (p.70), where all agree that the author will offer readers a particular type of experience (he specifically applies this to fantasy, where there is "an agreement that whatever impossibilities we encounter will be made significant to us, but will retain enough of their idiosyncratic nature that we still recognize them to be impossible" (p.70), but the concept is applicable in principle to other genres).

One example of writers adamantly adhering to these negotiated (or evolved)

expectations is the oath of the Detection Club, a group of English writers of mysteries, who together vowed that their detectives would “well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God” (Haycraft, 1947, p.198). This was the better to adhere to the contract with their readers: if readers wanted a straight-up, no-pixie-dust, “fair play” mystery, then that’s what these writers would pledge to give them. In response, Holquist (1983) comments:

The vow not to use ghosts and death rays may seem amusing – certainly, in their elephantine way the founders of the club intended it to be so; but it contains great wisdom, too. For these elements are foreign to the world of the detective story – they belong to other worlds of sheer convention, pure fiction, the ghost story and science fiction. There is an important point to be learned about conventions here. They do not exist in isolation; to do their work they must determine whole landscapes, conjur up specific plots which are peculiar to them alone. Conventions must be familiar. Each fictive world has its own magic, its own form of reassuring omnipotence. In the fairy tale, a good heart and patience in the face of misfortune will always avail; so, in cowboy stories will a good heart and a quick gun. In spy stories a peculiar kind of committed amorality coupled with an ability to survive unusual amounts (and kinds) of physical punishment overcome atomic destruction again and again. In the Tarzan novels great physical strength and intimacy with nature conquers all (pp.157-8).

Along the same lines, author Jack Dann (discussion, 9 July, 2013) comments, A genre by definition is very restrictive because once you pose a set of rules for the world, universe, state, whatever it is you’ve created, everything has to work rationally from there, even if it’s a fantasy. If any *deus ex machina* can happen at any time, the story is boring. So you’re working very rigorously, and I think what the rules are, are conventions that have worked, and that people understand. So it’s a convention, especially in a field where you have to explain everything. You don’t want to have to explain, as writers did in the early Gernsback days, “Hello, I’m holding a telephone, as you well know!” And this is also somewhat of a problem, or has been. As any genre evolves, there are books that will welcome a non-familiar reader, and then there are other ones that won’t.

From this point of view, genre conventions are a positive thing, enhancing the relationship between writers and their readers – which, after all, is the reason most writers seek publication to begin with, rather than keep their texts unshared.

Moreover, many researchers have noted the creative benefits writers can derive from genre conventions: they characterise them not as a cage, but as a scaffold to which writers can cling – or from which, perhaps, they can dangle more freely. Devitt (2004) writes,

For creativity to be generated, then, the creative mind must both discover patterns and follow patterns; both diverge from the already existing and converge into the now existing.... To produce an interpretable text, every writer must rely on the community's genres; to produce a unique text, every writer must exploit some of the possibilities for divergence within those genres (pp.152-4).

Genre conventions provide a "set" upon which the author can display virtuosity while still maintaining a connection with the reader (Bourdieu, 1993, p.128); and they can be used to introduce characters and plot devices that push ironically against genre constraints, introducing what Porter (1990) calls "an ambiance of play" (p.86). Similarly, Csicsery-Ronay (2008) writes,

SF is the main artistic means for introducing technoscientific ideas and events among the value-bearing stories and metaphors of social life. And yet, precisely because a gap exists between the fundamentally rationalistic, logocentric universe of scientific discourse and the diffuse culture of social myths and alternative rationalities, sf texts are expected to involve playful deviations from known scientific thought... (p.6)

Bourdieu (1993, p.128) applies this idea specifically to the genre of the Western, noting that the "very strict conventions of a heavily stereotyped genre" drove writers to exercise virtuosity in how they played with the tension between writing within conventions and parodying them by too-strict adherence to what has gone before.

Seitel (2003, pp.290-1) adds that these expectations may not be explicit, or even conscious, but are still essential in the breach as well as the observance as part of the shared process of giving meaning to a text: "Generic expectations attune the audience's imagination and prepare its response. Generic patterns [such as narrative formulas and clichés] reside in knowledge shared by artist and audience" (p.290); at the same time, "an utterance that completely fulfills all generic expectations probably affords little aesthetic pleasure" (p.291).

Thus, even though Cawelti (1976) somewhat ungraciously suggests that one of the reasons writers agree to work within genre conventions is that they "provide a means for the rapid and efficient production of new works" and spare the writer from "hav[ing] to make as many difficult artistic decisions as a novelist working without a formula" (p.8), genre conventions are more often characterised as both a useful artistic tool and a deeply satisfying channel of communication between writers and their readers.

However, although genre conventions provide advantages and benefits for all parties in the societal enterprise of creating, distributing, and consuming texts, they can also contribute to the stultification, and ultimate implosion, of genres. Wolfe (2011) writes, "Genre implosion does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of a given genre, or even to a weakening of its market viability, but it can lead to atrophy and to a limited, self-contained readership..." (p.52). While there have always been writers as well as readers who have rebelled against this process (as seen above, Talbot Mundy provides an example), there are signs that this rebellion is accelerating, and that the century-long heyday of genre conventions

may be nearing its end. The next section will examine some of the ways in which both writers and readers are increasingly subverting, transcending, or outright defying genre conventions, and the ramifications of this for traditional means of publishing and distributing these new styles of text.

The Beginning of the End?

Despite the usefulness of genre conventions (as things to be both honoured and flouted), a number of researchers and prominent writers and editors of speculative fiction have contended that these conventions are becoming largely insubstantial. Genre boundaries have always been porous ones: writers as well as readers have enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with them as both a scaffold for artistry and a shackle chaining them to expectations and conventions. McDonald (2004) contends that much of readers' pleasure in a narrative results from just this tension between genre fiction's conventions – "the use of stock characters, formulaic language... [and] the social and cultural norms that are omnipresent" (p.16) – and an author's deliberate transgressions against them. Similarly, Chandler (2000) points out that readers derive pleasure not only from the familiar, but from its manipulation, and from "the consequent shifting of our expectations" (p.9). McDonald (2004) asserts that, in fact, breaking the rules can be highly desirable, greatly enhancing not only the writer's artistic achievement but the reader's enjoyment:

Narrative pleasure is produced by, and in, the gap that exists between the conventions that structure romance (the use of stock characters, formulaic language as well, of course, as the social and cultural norms that are omnipresent) and the transgressions that its narrative produces. The prevalence of convention in romance is integral to the kind of pleasure it achieves; without convention (without a system of norms and expectations that can be transgressed), the effect of transgression is lost. And it is in this *effect* that pleasure is located (p.16).

Despite their creative benefits (de Geest & Goris, 2010, p.82), many authors do not consider them to be anything other than highly changeable conveniences, with little or nothing of "purity" about them (Dimock, 2006, p.86; Gelder, 2004, p.74). Vaninskaya (2008) comments: "Those unwilling to create categories so capacious as to be impracticable give in to the opposite compulsion to generate ever-new configurations, to keep multiplying and subdividing classes and types, heaping qualifier upon qualifier, until they arrive at the conclusion that every text is *sui generis* and genre theory is bunk" (p.61). Pavel (2003) describes this process another way:

To see genre as a set of good recipes, or good habits of the trade, oriented towards the achievement of definite artistic goals makes the instability of generic categories less puzzling and less threatening. Genres other than strictly formal ones are unstable and flexible because the goals pursued by writers with their help vary, as do the ways of achieving these goals. The good habits the writers form in the process (the recipes they discover, or, if you want, the norms

they create) are therefore subject to change. In some cases these good habits are unduly codified, with the result that innovation, or, rather, adaptation to slightly different goals, is made more difficult. This was the case with neoclassical tragedy in France. But such cases are far from typical. Most often, genres end up by pursuing a variety of representational goals. They divide into subgenres, rivalries and struggles ensue, and attempts are made to achieve new syntheses (p.210).

Atwood (2011) writes, "Bendiness of terminology, literary gene-swapping, and inter-genre visiting has been going on in the SF world – loosely defined – for some time" (p.7). Fox (2012) notes,

When a critic with a literary background says that a speculative work "transcends the genre," it's both a cliché and a sly insult, implying that moving away from genre and into some sort of supergeneric space can only be a positive thing. By contrast, writers with genre backgrounds who are looking to do something new tend to incorporate multiple genres rather than trying to do away the genre altogether. The result is not an empty plate but a feast with a wide variety of flavors in unusual and sometimes startling combinations (p.26).

Moreover, the societies themselves within which such distinctions are embedded have contributed to their evolution and divergence. As Dr. Allan Weiss, of York University (personal correspondence, 5 February, 2013), comments, "The number of essential features of a genre is...actually quite small compared to the number of expected or typical features. What is generically essential to one generation or society may be very different from what is considered essential by another." Chandler (2000) similarly writes,

Each new work within a genre has the potential to influence changes within the genre or perhaps the emergence of new sub-genres (which may later blossom into fully-fledged genres). However, such a perspective tends to highlight the role of authorial experimentation in changing genres and their conventions, whereas it is important to recognize not only the social nature of text production but especially the role of economic and technological factors as well as changing audience preferences (p.3).

Thus the nature of genres allows for their deterioration, as well as their accretion. Author Daryl Gregory (discussion, 17 September, 2012) points out that "there has always been cross-genre [work] happening. But there does seem to be more of it going on from the writer's point of view. We've all read so much of this, we've all grown up with it, that it feels natural to do it." But are currently practising speculative-fiction writers conscious of any such deterioration in genre conventions? Indeed, might they be actively working to *induce* it?

A number of writers have asserted that, far from deliberately flouting genre conventions, they merely ignore them. For example, author Nalo Hopkinson (discussion, 18 May, 2013) says, "if I try to do something that's a little bit different – sometimes I'm not even aware that it's a little bit different, it's just how I see

that book that I'm writing – to have people get all kerfuffled because I don't have a conventional hero or something, I find really bemusing. I don't know what's going to happen – I'm along for the ride." Author Jack Dann (discussion, 9 July, 2013) similarly says,

I write across genres.... For me, it's basically what I'm interested in.... I write what I want, and then try to find an outlet. However, there are commercial ramifications, which is why I don't really write mainstream short stories. They may appear in a prestigious journal somewhere, but I've been a working writer most of my life. For 99 percent of the time I've written what I've wanted to and I've written it the way I wanted. And it may have cost me audience, but I've been lucky in that publishers have allowed me to do it.

Writer and editor Dr Janeen Webb (discussion, 9 July, 2013) says, "You write what the story is, then you try to figure out where it fits, I think.... I think [genre expectations] subvert themselves. I put characters in a room and I see what they'll do. They often surprise me." Author Tim Jones (2009) similarly asserts,

For me, interstitial fiction is more of an impulse or a mood than a genre, and I'm therefore cautious about the prospect of its becoming overly codified. I've only once set out with the intention of writing an interstitial fiction story, and I found it hard to do deliberately – "have I got the proportions right? Are the fantastic elements too prominent, or not prominent enough? Does this story really count as being interstitial fiction?" These are hard traps to avoid. Spontaneity, and a willingness to let the story have its head, are better guides (p.10).

Author Richard Harland (discussion, 20 July, 2013) says, "Genre is something that gets assigned after the fact. The really original, innovative works happen because someone writes what they're drawn to, what fascinates them. Later, readers say, 'I'd like more of this,' and only then does a genre start to evolve." Gregory (discussion, 17 September, 2012) has also commented,

"If I were smarter I wouldn't switch genres every novel I write, or every story. I write across the board, and that's what I really enjoy; that's my natural tendency, to write that way. But it causes problems. If you want to have a successful career, the idea is to write something that catches on and to write it over and over again." Thus, at least some authors, while aware that their work does not always conform to genre conventions, deny that this is a deliberate attempt to flout them.

A number of researchers have examined the question of whether writers consciously intend to subvert genre conventions, or whether it happens organically

But are currently practising speculative-fiction writers conscious of any such deterioration in genre conventions? Indeed, might they be actively working to induce it?

in the course of their creative work. Lewis (2007) writes,

New literacies tend to allow writers (users; players) a good deal of leeway to be creative, perform identities, and choose affiliations within a set of parameters that can change through negotiation, play, and collaboration.... True agency is arrived at through a mixture of process and product, learner control and imposed limits. The most important ingredient, however, is a meta-awareness of how the domain works and how one might work the domain (p.231).

More succinctly, Wolfe (2011) notes, "A good deal of cavalier wire-cutting is going on these days among writers using the resources of what were once fairly clearly delineated genres, and for the most part this is a salutary and exhilarating development, bringing with it a sense of breached ramparts and undiscovered terrain" (p.3). Wolfe goes on to describe "the emergence of a generation of writers" whose stories "effectively deconstruct and reconstitute genre materials and techniques together with materials and techniques from an eclectic variety of literary traditions" (p.13). He says that these writers are faced with the choice between "expansion of discourse to the edges of genre and beyond, or collapsing of the discourse into an increasingly crabbed and narrow set of self-referential texts" (p.25), and are responding by

developing strategies for writing science fiction without writing in the genre of science fiction.... One strategy is essentially to colonize another genre, using the tropes of science fiction as instrumentalities for moving the narrative into a different mode altogether. The time travel theme, for example, often has served as a convenient mechanism for constructing science fiction narratives that at the same time appropriate the protocols of historical fiction (p.35).

Wolfe views this process favourably:

The writers who contribute to the evaporation of genre, who destabilize it by undermining our expectations and appropriating materials at will, with fiction shaped by individual vision rather than traditions or formulas, are the same writers who continually revitalize genre: A healthy genre, a healthy literature, is one at risk, one whose boundaries grow uncertain and whose foundations get wobbly (p.51).

"These are authors," he adds, " for whom genre is not a space to inhabit, but a collection of tools and resources to be drawn upon along with the myriad other tools and resources available to the makers of contemporary fiction" (p.140).

However, not all writers (or researchers) concur that genre conventions can be disregarded during the creative process. They cite the need to reach readers through the vehicle of those readers' expectations (Dann, discussion, 9 July, 2013), as well as the value of proven structures and tropes in crafting stories of quality (Weiss, personal correspondence, 5 February, 2013). Harland (discussion, 20 July, 2013) contends:

Genres need to develop naturally, not as a challenge to something else. Writers need to have respect for their readers. They shouldn't be aiming to "teach them a lesson" or "show them how they've been

reading the wrong sort of stories for thousands of years." It's all right to experiment, of course.... But I think at some point you have to realise that stories have their own logic, their own way of going, and it works, and we don't really know why. It's part of what's built into us as human beings.

Weiss (personal correspondence, 5 February, 2013) also believes that genre conventions should not be overthrown on a whim. He stresses that authors who seeks to significantly challenge their readers' expectations must first build a relationship of trust with them:

if your audience trusts you, they will assume you have a good reason [for violating their expectations] and look forward to discovering what it is. All that interaction is part of the communicative process, just as much as the words themselves. Genres change for good when artists come up with good reasons for adding or changing their conventions and audiences accept, or are taught to accept, those changes.

Thus writers' latitude to manipulate or discard genre conventions, yet still effectively communicate with their readers, depends not only on the writers' artistry, but on readers' willingness to follow them into uncharted territory.

The relationship between writer and reader has traditionally been indirect: mediated by publishers, booksellers, and print reviewers, interaction with whom has been slow and problematic. For many decades, readers' only means of access to either writers, publishers, or other fans was letters written on paper to the magazines that published the stories they loved (Wolfe, 2011, p.11; Bleiler, 1998, p.xxvi). Yet the relationships that readers developed with the texts, and by extension with the texts' authors, have been no less complex and intense for that. Together, readers and authors have developed what Hopkinson (discussion, 18 May, 2013) calls "reading protocols", through which readers receive cues that help them interpret texts.

Some authors – Hopkinson among them – argue that even as writers have become more willing to take risks in playing with these cues, readers have become less so. Hopkinson (discussion, 18 May, 2013) says:

Writers are artists; we're always messing with stuff, as artists do. That's part of the fun. The longer you're an artist, the more you want to mess with stuff. When I was a younger reader, part of the fun was keeping up, trying to figure out what the writer had done, the delight of having my expectations confounded. But I'm finding, for instance, that many of my undergraduate students are not so accepting. If you can show them how to understand it, they go along a lot better, but they don't have the flexibility to figure out a lot of it on their own, and then they feel stupid, and then they feel frustrated, and then they get angry with the story and the writer.

However, many others speak of a growing diversity in what readers are willing to accept, and to seek out. For example, Gregory (discussion, 17 September, 2012) says:

Science-fiction readers are used to making connections from

disconnected bits of data.... They know that not everything is going to make sense right away. Collect your data, collect your data, and wait for the connections to come in. That's what I like about cross-genre: [the writer is saying] "Trust me. If I can win your trust in the first chapter, maybe you'll play along with me, and maybe it will go in ways you don't expect, but you'll still be playing along." That's always the dance: to get them to follow along with you.

Publisher and editor Gavin Grant (personal correspondence, 31 December, 2012) writes, "Crossing [genre] boundaries is what reading is all about. Of course you can read fiction that exactly mirrors your life, but for me it is more interesting to read across boundary lines and I think it must be for many readers." Writer Glenda Larke (personal correspondence, 28 May, 2013) similarly notes that "cross-over novels between genres are far more the norm now than they were.... And present-day readers love them."

Several researchers have noted that readers might not merely tolerate writers playing with genre conventions and flouting genre boundaries; they might even relish it, both for its creativity and for the ways in which it expands their experiences of reader communities, or fandoms. For example, Chandler (2000) writes, "Competent readers of a genre are not generally confused when some of their initial expectations are not met – the framework of the genre can be seen as offering 'default' expectations which act as a starting point for interpretation rather than a straitjacket" (p.8). Lankshear and Knobel (2007) go further:

Much of the point behind remix practices, for example, is to be and feel connected to other people and to celebrate a fandom: to participate in an affinity, to make shared meanings, to brighten the day, share a laugh, share one's passion for a product or a character, and so on. Conventional practices analogous to cultural remix, such as academic research and scholarship, include such values and orientations at their best, but typically embrace "higher callings" like pursuit of truth, advancement of knowledge, contribution to modernist progress, and furthering the field (p.13).

Saricks (2010) asserts that such "genre-hyphenates are a boon for readers... helping readers go beyond category to find more books they will enjoy" (p.27). She continues:

Genre-blending authors do that explicitly, effortlessly transporting readers from the familiar and introducing them to something more – and something different. Genre mash-ups allow us to expand readers' horizons and interests in directions we might never have expected. Authors who reimagine and reshape familiar genres can be a readers' advisor's ultimate Sure Bets because their work incorporates elements from several genres, creating multiple entry points and almost endless ways for us to share their books with diverse readers (p.27).

Thus, while fans' very loyalty to their favourite works and fan communities (Sanders, 1994) may seem to preclude their tolerating – let alone rejoicing in – admixtures among fandoms, are these fan communities truly so clannish? Are

there not significant numbers of fans who enjoy participating in several fandoms at once, and combining them through vehicles such as fanfiction, discussion forums, and conventions? A Google search (June 3, 2012) on the phrase “multiple fandoms” yields over 300,000 links, and the number of mashups commercially available continues to grow. The constraints some writers feel on their desire to experiment with genre conventions may, in fact, be due more to publishers’ wariness than readers’ demands to have their expectations met.

It has been a truism that to reach readers in the first place, writers must first convince publishers to take the significant financial risk entailed in publishing their work. Writers, editors, and publishers alike have made the point that works that flout genre expectations have less chance of persuading publishers to take that risk. Larke (personal correspondence, 28 May, 2013) comments:

I’m now a writer whose sole income is earned from writing, so my selection has a strong element of “what is most going to help me commercially?” to it. Of course, any label also has to be honest – no point saying, “This is a romance”, thinking that will make it sell better, if the romantic element is only a small element of the story. But labels and criteria are different aspects of defining a book/story. When I first started writing fantasy, I didn’t think in terms of definitions or limits or boundaries or even labels. I just wrote stories. One of my first published books (*The Aware*, written in 1990) was accepted in 2002 on condition that I toned down the SF elements of it – the editor concerned didn’t think that SF and fantasy could be mixed! ...It’s all very well to talk about artistic integrity and so on, but publishing is a business, and it’s no longer a business that can afford to carry writers that don’t make money, in the hope they will be more successful further down the line. In such a competitive field, a fan base is a pot of gold that should be nurtured. Those readers will buy a particular writer’s next book in the blink of an eye. They’ll also encourage others to do so.

She also notes that “if a publisher just doesn’t know how to market something, they won’t buy it in the first place. A cross-genre book that defies conventions still has to have a perceived audience before it will be picked up by a publisher, or accepted by booksellers.”

Wolfe (2011) agrees:

writers often have used the term “ghetto” to describe the sense of entrapment they may feel as a result of being categorized as a horror writer, science fiction writer, or fantasy writer, and some writers bristle at such labels altogether. Given the tendency of publishers and booksellers to market by category, the tendency of readers to organize themselves into affinity groups, and even the tendency of librarians to shelve fiction according to the special interests of patrons, this complaint is hard to dismiss. An experienced science fiction writer turning to mainstream realistic fiction may find herself very nearly in the position of a first-time novelist, and may even be warned by her agent against making such a risky move in the first

place (pp.138-9).

Webb (discussion, 9 July, 2013) also notes that publishers continue to have a great deal of power: not only in determining writers' careers, but in guiding readers' tastes by the works they agree to publish. Gregory (discussion, 17 September, 2012) highlights the sense of fatalism some writers feel in the face of this power:

...writers are not as constrained by the old genre boundaries as they used to be. I do think that from the writer's point of view it's breaking down altogether. But I'm not sure if publishers would agree, or if they just end up putting [works] on the science-fiction shelf and that's what they get sold as. That seems to be what's still happening most of the time. No matter how weird it is, they're going to pick a genre for it, and that's how it's going to be marketed.

However, not all publishers are basing their decisions on profit, or seeking to both shape and profit by mass taste (Dann, discussion, 9 July, 2013). For example, Grant (personal correspondence, 31 December, 2012), who with Kelly Link operates Small Beer Press, writes:

We set out to publish books that fell between the cracks of genres, so the only criteria were if we liked the book. Most of our books are somewhere in the fantastic fiction genre. We're not very good with definitions, preferring, if possible, to send the books out there and let them find their own home.... We have a core audience that will read almost anything we publish, but we have found that there can be very large audiences for fiction that could be classed as transgressive in one way or another.

In another example, Bart Leib, publisher of the small press *Crossed Genres*, has been quoted as saying, "Genres blend readily, so the rigid separation of stories by genre – arbitrary boundaries drawn mainly for marketing purposes – has never appealed to us. We've found that authors and readers respond very positively when a publisher prioritizes storytelling above category" (in Fox, 2012, p.24). While such small publishers carry nowhere near the economic or cultural momentum of the large commercial houses, their commitment to making their decisions based on their assessment of the value of individual works may point to readers' increasing willingness to read outside the conventions of commercially successful works.

Moreover, traditionally published works are no longer the only means of shaping readers' tastes. As media increasingly converge – stories transmediated from books to movies and back again to novelisations, spinoffs, audiobooks and podcasts, hypermedia and interactive fiction – the tropes and conventions of speculative fiction become a form of common cultural property. The proliferation of interstitial, cross-genre, and mashup works suggests that the process of genre breakdown may be making a significant dent in the framework of categories that has developed over the last century (Jones, 2009). Webb (discussion, 9 July, 2013) asserts:

I think that what has happened in general is that the mainstream is colonising the genre. For example, lot of advertising at the moment is magic realism.... There are a lot of things that are definitely genre

elements that have moved across into the mainstream and have been picked up. Once they start becoming commonplace in things like advertising, then that distinction [between mainstream and genre] has gone. They've been picked up from fantasy and science-fiction movies, but those tropes have become mainstream.

Larke (personal correspondence, 28 May, 2013), too, notes:

I think there could be an argument made that TV and film have encouraged that kind of cross-over, either by breaking new ground or by reinforcing ground-breaking books with their own visual media stories. Much of this cross-over seems to come from urban fantasy, by which I mean stories set in today's world. And I think space opera – where fantasy and SF march together, along with drama, romance, mystery – has played a part too.

With the diffusion of speculative-fiction conventions into the mainstream has come a loosening of their hold on writers, publishers, and readers alike, and new ways of experiencing texts. As Lankshear and Knobel (2007) write,

new literacies are more “participatory,” “collaborative,” and “distributed” in nature than conventional literacies. That is, they are less “published,” “individuated,” and “author-centric” than conventional literacies. They are also less “expert-dominated” than conventional literacies. The rules and norms that govern them are more fluid and less abiding than those we typically associate with established literacies (p.9).

The fundamental means by which such participatory, collaborative and distributed literacies have propagated has been the internet. Blogs, discussion forums, social media, and fan sites have accelerated the breakdown of the structured channels of traditional mass communication: niches proliferate and mass audiences fragment as the internet permits increasingly personalised consumption of all forms of media (Australia Council, 2008, p.33). Lessig (2001), referring to the growth of the internet, argues that “new products beget new markets. And new modes of distribution (including the removal of barriers to distribution) induce the creation of new markets for existing products as well” (p.126). He goes on to assert, “By increasing the demand for a diverse selection of content, and by enabling the cheaper identification of that demand, the Net widens the range of potential contributors” (p.134), and that “the platform of the Internet removes real-space barriers; removing these barriers enables individuals with ideas to deploy those ideas” (p.138). These changes may have an effect on writers' decisions to attempt to reach readers through channels other than traditional publishers. Larke (personal correspondence, 28 May, 2013) points out:

Certainly self-publishing on the internet is tailor-made for any writer who is writing books that don't fit a marketing or genre norm. The self-published can really stretch genre boundaries however they wish. If the result has a readership, then that particular type of story will enter mainstream publishing, without a doubt. So certainly, the potential is there for any existing boundaries to fall.... A writer writing for internet publication can make her own choices.

I think we're going to see more cross-genre in internet writing, but I suspect the labels will be maintained in mainstream publication.

Although, as Larke says, a writer who is publishing his or her own work independently on the internet is essentially free of genre constraints, Gregory (discussion, 17 September, 2012) cautions that this independence brings with it new demands: "I think there is...a lot of play involved, and people who are self-publishing can write whatever they want, and it's a question of how good your marketing and social-media skills are to find your audience."

Indeed, the internet is compelling authors to interact with their readers, to function within an online society where the arbiters of readers' tastes are distributed, and those tastes are consequently increasingly fragmented. Dann (discussion, 9 July, 2013) describes the state of affairs for writers striving independently to develop an audience:

It used to be in the magazines and it's now in the blogs, who affect what people will want to read because of what they blog. There are always doorkeepers in that sense.... Publishers are also...looking at the blogs, and they're also involved in fandom.... Word of mouth is faster and more international [with the internet]. But because of this new paradigm, no-one quite knows who to listen to, what to look at, because there's so much self-publishing now. In the previous paradigm, if I as an editor saw a book that was published by a vanity press or self-published, that was a strike against it. Some of that hasn't changed, even though there are some people who break through and make a lot of money, a lot of people who are doing their own indie publishing are never getting past that level that a commercial publisher would take you in terms of advertising and top-of-mind awareness. And they're running around doing enormous amounts of stuff and not being seen. It's much more possible now to be published and have no-one see you on the internet.... There's more going on, but it's extraordinarily diffuse.

Webb (discussion, 9 July, 2013), too, stresses the social nature of the internet, especially as it applies to speculative-fiction writers and fandoms.

The way the internet is working is very medieval.... You can have a group of people – and it doesn't matter where they are geographically – who are coming together to work on particular things at particular times.... They're not huge, but they're still operating internally in the same way medieval structures did. There's a feudalism happening on the Net. Science fiction in particular is very quick to get these points happening, because they were already happening for science-fiction people before the Net explosion, because we were already going to [conventions], and that connection was already there. I see [the continuity between pre-internet and internet-based fandom] as almost seamless. It's just moved across – particularly the fanzines: they quietly moved into e-publications and nobody blinked.

While some authors (Hopkinson, discussion, 18 May, 2013; Harland, discussion, 20 July, 2013) decry what they perceive as a lowering of standards as it becomes

easier for writers to avoid the gatekeeping functions of traditional publishers, the growing power of word-of-mouth in popularising an author's work is undeniable (Harland, discussion, 20 July, 2013; Dann, discussion, 9 July, 2013; Webb, discussion, 9 July, 2013).

Thus the internet has facilitated the dissolution of strict genre categories not only by giving writers direct access to potential readers, but by giving readers direct access to each other. Although blogger Eric Larson's (2009) musings on the effect of the internet on genre conventions apply specifically to music, they can provide insight on similar processes in other arts, such as fiction-writing:

When I was younger, the style and genre of a band acted as a barometer for their values and integrity regarding music as art.... What is interesting is how the availability created by Internet seems to have destroyed some of the needs or requirements for a genre.... It is fascinating to think that there is the beginnings of a generation that may never need to search aimlessly to find music that speaks directly to them. Likewise, from the bands [sic] perspective, it is exciting to know that they have fewer and fewer reasons to sacrifice their sounds in order to find fans (n.p.).

Further evidence can be found in on-line directories of internet-based magazines (e-zines): at 22 February 2011 the Open Directory Project (<http://www.dmoz.org/docs/en/about.html>) listed nearly 300 on-line magazines, including over 100 designated as "mixed genre". This suggests that fans themselves are becoming less rigid in their expectations and more willing to be flexible about genre boundaries. In the immediate term, as the Australia Council (2008) writes, "Niche interests proliferate online as the internet provides a mechanism by which users can quickly focus on narrow interest areas. As a result, online publication is particularly useful for niche literary genres" (p.33). Ultimately, as Lankshear and Knobel (2007) point out,

Thus the internet has facilitated the dissolution of strict genre categories not only by giving writers direct access to potential readers, but by giving readers direct access to each other.

Text types are subject to wholesale experimentation, hybridization, and rule breaking. Conventional social relations associated with roles of author/authority and expert have broken down radically under the move from "publishing" to participation, from centralized authority to mass collaboration, and so on.... This is not to say there are no norms in the new space, for there are. They are, however, less fixed, more fluid, and less policed, controlled and defined by "centralized" authorities and experts. The sheer proliferation of textual types and spaces means there is always somewhere to "go" where one's "ways" will be acceptable, where there will be freedom

to engage them, and where traditional emphases on “credibility” are utterly subordinated to the pursuit of relationships and the celebration of sociality (p.14).

Thus, the pervasiveness of the internet has fuelled an increasing fluidity in the normative aspects of genre conventions – in other words, the diminishing concern with whether a work of genre fiction is done in the “correct” way – and a shift toward increasing individuation in both taste and artistic practice. The growth of the internet as a medium of publication, the erosion of genre boundaries, authors’ increasing liberty to subvert – even overthrow – genre conventions, and the accompanying proliferation of accessible works in niche genres are combining to decentralise publishing and disempower traditional publishing outlets. The process is self-reinforcing: the more direct access writers have to their fans (or potential fans), the more latitude they have for artistic experimentation, and the more numerous and specialised niche markets can become. Indeed, as Harland (discussion, 20 July, 2013) says, “Micro-genres are developing and splintering, until you almost get a genre of one.”

This trend, writes Devitt (2004), has introduced a new factor into the relationship between writer and reader: the “valuing of variation” (p.176). Just as writers have increasingly sought to subvert genre conventions, readers have increasingly valued the ironic twist that it gives to their work, and the novelty of new approaches. While it may lead to yet further breakdown in the traditional taxonomy of popular fiction, Devitt (2004) argues that there is little to grieve as this process continues:

Since genres are so enmeshed in a fluid context and embedded in amorphous social groups, their histories reflect a constant balancing of tradition and change. As genres change, they need to maintain both stability and flexibility – stability to ensure that the genre continues to fulfill its necessary functions, flexibility to ensure that individuals can adapt the genre to their particular situations and their changing circumstances. Some genres achieve that balance successfully; some fail, dispersing into other genres and nothingness if too flexible, declining into arhetorical [sic] formulae if too stable. The loss of a genre is not necessarily something to be mourned, not like the loss of an extinct species. The loss of a genre reflects the loss of a function, the result of changing needs and ideologies as society and individuals change (p.135).

A number of compelling forces are acting to preserve existing genre conventions: writers’ enjoyment of the artistic challenges of working within a system, along with their recognition that they are more likely to succeed commercially if they do so; readers’ enjoyment of the familiar; and publishers’ tendency toward circumspection in their business decisions. At the same time, equally compelling forces are acting to dismantle these conventions: writers’ drive toward unique artistic expression and enjoyment of the irony that comes with disrupting expectations; readers’ increasing access to, and desire for, unique reading experiences; and the burgeoning of unprecedented global interaction between writers and readers. As societal and technological change continues, the place of

traditional publishers as the mediators between readers and writers seems to be diminishing – and, with it, the power of the genre conventions they have helped perpetuate.

Conclusion

I have sought to examine the development of conventions and constraints in genre fiction, looking first at the idea of genre taxonomies, particularly in popular fiction. For thousands of years, fiction has been categorised based on form, theme, or function (for example, artistic expression or entertainment); such categorisation has been a tool for developing shared expectations about texts. These expectations have in turn allowed writers to communicate more effectively with audiences, and for audiences to engage with works in a social, as well as a personal, context.

The development of what are considered today to be genres within popular fiction – based not so much on form, theme, or function as on characteristic plots, settings, and character types – has been a relatively recent phenomenon. My research has found that as late as the early 1900s, little distinction was drawn between what would later become the fantasy, science fiction, horror, adventure, and mystery genres. An examination of three authors writing popular fiction during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras – Arthur Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, and Talbot Mundy – reveals that their fiction liberally mixed elements of them all. Not only did they move among these categories to produce individual works, they also often combined elements of two or more in a single piece – and enthusiastic fans read avidly across their diverse oeuvres. This raised the question: how and why did the rigid distinctions that now exist among fantasy, science fiction, and other categories of fiction – which, indeed, became their defining characteristic, as they became known as “genre” fiction – arise? What benefits did these distinctions have for writers, readers, and publishers, and what drawbacks? How did these three key groups interact to intensify the evolution of genre conventions? Are these conventions now an inescapable aspect of popular fiction, or are they already giving way to a more fluid approach to writing, disseminating, and reading texts?

The literature, as well as discussions with current genre-fiction practitioners (writers, editors, and publishers), have suggested that writers, readers, and publishers all gain some benefit from the system of genre conventions that has developed. Many writers enjoy the challenge of writing creatively within the restrictions of genre; others find that these restrictions facilitate the writing process and make the production of new work easier. Readers find genre categorisations (as well as the quality-control process that traditional publishers provide) highly useful in allowing them to locate and select works that meet their tastes, and often find great satisfaction in seeing what a writer has done within the familiarity of shared assumptions and “reading protocols”. Publishers use genre conventions to target and develop bases of loyal readers who will reliably purchase books that meet their already-proven tastes. The system of genre categorisation has persisted within the field of popular fiction for decades because it offers genuine benefits.

However, it also presents drawbacks. Writers can feel constrained, both economically and creatively, by publishers’ unwillingness to risk producing their

more unconventional works. Readers, eager not just for mere novelty but genuine innovation within speculative fiction, are frustrated at a ceaseless offering of “the same old thing” from publishers and booksellers. And there are even some publishers who are willing to take the financial risk of presenting to readers new works that challenge their preconceptions and reading habits.

While these tensions have been inherent all along in the system of genre conventions that has predominated during most of the 20th century, recent changes in technology – specifically, the proliferation of the internet – have empowered writers, readers, and publishers with the means to reach each other with far more individuation and less financial risk. E-books and online publishing, self-publishing, social media, podcasts, and blogs have formed a basis for an intricate filigree of individual connections: readers are recommending works to hundreds of friends around the world; writers are tweeting and posting to thousands of devoted followers; and collaborating internationally with other artists to co-write, transmediate, and mash up their works; publishers are making back catalogues available electronically even as they offer low-overhead e-books, which no longer need to conform to strict genre conventions to find eager and adventurous readers. While this may seem chaotic compared to the orderly rows of neatly categorised paperbacks in a chain bookstore, it offers an exciting artistic freedom (even if not yet a living wage) to writers who yearn to experiment, and to readers who love not being quite able to label what they’re reading.

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