



MANUS & ASSOCIATES
LITERARY AGENCY

FICTION GENRE DEFINITIONS

(Courtesy of Candace Furhman Literary Agency)

Science Fiction: A book with a future-based plot which either extrapolates upon existing scientific principles and theories or involves some deviation from them. The key element of Science Fiction is believability; the plots are to be understood literally, not metaphorically as in a novel such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and therefore Sci Fi novels truly do find their basis in real science, even if they are not restricted by it. The genre is highly beholden to the culture and expectations of its cult-like, primarily young male audience. Sci Fi has gathered a reputation as essentially an unliterary genre, and Sci Fi writers who find mainstream success (such as Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut) are often reclassified as literary authors. Sub-types of the Sci Fi novel include Apocalypse, Dystopia/Utopia, Space Travel, and Messianic.

Fantasy: Fantasy is often lumped together with Science Fiction, though the two genres are quite different. Fantasy is based upon departure from reality. James Gunn described the difference this way: where Sci Fi novels represent an egalitarian world in which knowledge, not inherent abilities, is the key to discovery, Fantasy novels are predicated on the belief that some people are "special"; i.e., some people can cast spells or travel to parallel universes while other people cannot. But for both Sci Fi and Fantasy, an utter suspension of disbelief is key. Fantasy sub-genres include Fairy Tales, Arthurian Legend, and Sword and Sorcery.

Crime/Detective/Police/Mystery: The detective novel, in which the plot revolves around uncovering and piecing together clues from a fictional crime that has occurred prior to the start of action, is the most highly represented genre in most public libraries. The thrill for readers of this genre is in the process of solving a puzzle, and classic "whodunits" can be quite cerebral experiences. Though "Mystery," as a kind of overarching category encompassing crime, takes its inspiration from Edgar Allen Poe, the crime novel's most significant development was the advent of the formal detective in the 19th century. Just as with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes then, and with Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone now, a detective's personality can inspire great devotion among readers. The work is always highly plot-driven. As Dorothy L. Sayers described it: "There is one aspect, at least, in which the detective-story has an advantage over every other kind of novel. It possesses an Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle, and end. A definite and single problem is set, worked out, and solved; its conclusion is not arbitrarily conditioned by marriage or death."

Romance: Romance is unabashed escapist fiction, following the love story of a (usually female) protagonist, and intended to sweep women readers away from their day-to-day

problems. The Romance Writer's Association defines its genre simply as "a love story with an optimistic and emotionally satisfying ending." However, also key to Romance novels is an absence of moral ambiguity. Courage saves the day, justice triumphs, good defeats evil, and it is always readily apparent who and what is good and who and what is evil. Almost uniformly, Romance involves the "taming" or "civilization" of a wild man by a woman. Sub-plots and minor characters are kept to a minimum; these are not multi-layered works. Romance readers are seeking to relax and enjoy. Romances should be easy to read, but should strike strong emotional chords. Marriage is almost without exception the desired goal of a Romance plot.

Thriller/Espionage: Thriller is a loosely applied label, often used to describe any book with action or adventures elements. Thrillers, though, tend to be jam packed with linear plot action, usually involving some kind of race against time. They're full of chases, showdowns, rescues, and vigilante justice, and any "whodunit" element takes backseat to these heart-racing plot devices. Espionage novels usually follow the capers of a spy, working to defend his country's secrets or security against another, enemy country. The genre finds its models in such early classics as Erskin Childers' *The Riddle of Sands* (1903) and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907). Interest in espionage novels has declined in recent years, perhaps due to the end of the cold war. One of the hottest categories in the nineties was the Technothriller, lead by works such as Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October*.

Horror/Psychic/Supernatural: Horror works depend on the absolutely visceral reaction of pure fright. Their plots can take up everything from the supernatural to the occult, but their emphasis is always on unadulterated fear and a sense of dark, unknown forces. Horror fiction often overlaps with Fantasy and Sci Fi, and many of its authors write in all three genres, crossing boundaries indiscriminately. The Horror genre is rife with imitation; stories of haunted houses, vampires, and evil children are reincarnated almost to infinity and originality can be hard to come by. Horror tales most often take the form of the short story.

New Age/Inspirational: These novels tend to be didactic, with a thinly disguised message intended to inspire people to create a better world. The plot and the writing are secondary to the message. Successful examples are *The Celestine Prophecy*, *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, and Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

Historical: A Historical novel is set in a well-defined period and derives much of its interest from painstakingly accurate historical details. It can also involve the fictionalized recreation of a historical even or figure(s), as do E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* (which takes liberties with the events of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's life). Many historical novels are meticulously researched for fine points of setting, and they depend upon the reader's delight in the idea of vicariously experiencing another time and place.

Courtroom Drama/Legal Thriller: In a courtroom drama, the action takes place primarily before a judge and jury, and the protagonist is most often a lawyer. We are all familiar

with the works of John Grisham, for instance, and the excitement of seeing whether justice will be served. A courtroom drama often depends upon the absolute identification of the reader with either the prosecutors or defendants, and in the righteousness of their cause. This form is chock-full of inherently suspenseful and engaging situations: the witty repartee of a lawyer cross-examining a witness, the "a-ha" moment when the prosecutor finally discovers the thread that ties all his evidence into a can't-fail case.

Gay/Lesbian: Gay and lesbian novels, which involve gay or lesbian protagonists in what can otherwise be quite mainstream plots, enjoy a devoted and growing audience. These works can be Romances, mysteries, sagas - any number of forms. The distinction is that the action is filtered through a gay or lesbian consciousness.

Commercial/Mainstream: Commercial novels are works expected to sell well and be highly marketable. Generally speaking, they tend to be more plot-driven than literary works. Other traits of commercial (or, in alternative parlance, mainstream) novels are difficult to pin down, and may depend upon trends in public interest. Simply put, commercial works are books predicted to attract a large and diverse audience. They are seen as highly marketable books with great potential to gather cross-over readers.

Literary: Literary is, of course, a qualitative term, arrived at not by formula or definition but by aesthetic judgment. But, in general, a literary novel tends to be much more character driven than a commercial novel. But just what qualifies a book as literary is difficult to identify, and open to debate even among well established literary writers. Some cite moral ambiguity, an effort to grapple with dark and light and to see a situation in its full complexity, as a key characteristic. Others might point to layers of meaning, or resonance, of the careful use of language itself. Many speak of the "truth" of a novel, of an ability to address the human condition. Still others might stress universality. A dozen other qualities of "literature" might be discussed, but with most of them, whether a book possesses it and in what degree can never be an objective matter.