Over the wall ...

Alan Maley

is gripped by a genre that goes beyond tales of little green men.

This is the second time I have ventured into 'genre' literature (for the first one, see ET*p* Issue 79 on travel literature). This time I will be dealing with science fiction, which for its motivational pull alone is significant for language learners.

In fact, it is sometimes difficult to decide where the frontier lies between sci-fi and fantasy, or fantasy and myth, or sci-fi and 'serious' fiction. Is Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* sci-fi? And George Orwell's *1984*? And Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*? And how about Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*? Luckily, we do not need to split hairs in this way in order to enjoy all these titles – and many more besides.

Whenever science fiction is mentioned, it is the names of the 20th-century greats which tend to spring to mind, such as Arthur C Clark, Isaac Asimov, Kurt Vonnegut or Frank Herbert. Or perhaps the 19th- and early 20th-century masters: Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*), R L Stevenson (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*), Jules Verne (*Journey to the Centre of the Earth*), H G Wells (*The War of the Worlds*). But, of course, it is arguable that sci-fi has an even longer pedigree.

Surely Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* qualifies (especially Books 3 and 4) – and perhaps even *Beowulf*? In Book 3, *A Journey to Laputa*, Gulliver encounters a strange society which lives on a flying island and devotes itself to bizarre scientific experiments with no practical value, such as trying to extract sunbeams from cucumbers. Enemies on earth below are showered with rocks in an early version of aerial bombardment. In Book 4, Gulliver is cast ashore on an island ruled by highly intelligent and cultured speaking horses – the Houyhnhnms – who have to control the unruly tribe of Yahoos – uncouth versions of humankind. Although *Gulliver's Travels* was conceived as political satire, it does have much in common with the imagined worlds of sci-fi.

There is also a tendency to associate sci-fi with space invaders, little green men, *ET phone home* and the rest. But the essence of sci-fi consists in asking the question *'What if …?'* and following through the consequences to enter an imagined world. What if everyone was very small except for one giant (Book 1 of *Gulliver's Travels*)? What if extra-terrestrials took over a village and impregnated all the women with their children (*The Midwich Cuckoos*)? What if a race developed which could alternate between male and female characteristics (*The Left Hand of Darkness*)?

The Midwich Cuckoos

John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* opens with strange happenings at the village of Midwich. Anyone trying to enter the village is knocked down by an invisible wall. After a few hours, things go back to normal. But as the months pass, it becomes obvious that all the women in the village of child-bearing age are pregnant. They all give birth at the same time. Their children all look normal except that they have strange-looking eyes and silvery skin. As they grow up, they appear to possess strange powers of telepathy and the capacity to cause harm to ordinary humans through mind control. It later becomes clear that they have come to take over the world. Reports come in of similar incidents elsewhere in the world but all of these other 'colonies' have been wiped out. Only the Midwich cuckoos remain. How will the villagers get rid of them? Read on to find out – or watch the film if you can find it. Wyndham's stories are compelling, both for the basic dilemmas his plots set up and for the way he makes them seem credible. *The Day of the Triffids* – which asks the question *'What would happen to humans if a species of plant developed which had intelligence, could move around and had a lethal poison?'* – is another of his highly readable and original novels.

The Man in the High Castle

Philip K Dick seems to be enjoying a return to favour with re-issues of his novels and films based on them, such as *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall*. In *The Man in the High Castle*, the question is *'What if the Nazi and Japanese Axis had won the Second World War?'* Most of the story is set in the west coast area of what was the USA. It is under the control of the Japanese. The east coast area is run by the Germans. In between, there is a kind of no-man's-land which is so underdeveloped no one wants it, so it enjoys some kind of autonomy. In this area lives the man in the high castle, a shadowy figure who has written a subversive novel that everyone seems to have read although it is banned in the West and the East. In his novel, an alternative reality is described, in which

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the Allies won the war. The plot is highly complex, with sub-plots involving internal rivalries in the German camp, and between the Japanese and the Germans. Relationships between conquerors and vanquished are interestingly explored, and the flavour of life under an occupying power also comes across strongly. The main female protagonist, Juliana, decides to visit the man in the high castle. There, by using the I Ching (which has featured elsewhere in the story), she discovers that Hawthorne Abendsen, the author, wrote his novel using the I Ching, and that the story it tells is true – the Allies did in fact win the war …This disconcerting discovery of parallel universes is not explained further, leaving the reader to go on thinking about the story long after putting the book down.

Fahrenheit 154

Fahrenheit 154 by Ray Bradbury is one of the iconic sci-fi titles. It is short (172 pages) and shares the dystopian vision of Orwell and Huxley. It takes place in a world where books are banned – all books. The fire brigade's job is not to put out fires but to burn the books and the houses they are found in. The story follows the gradual rebellion of a fireman, Montag, who starts to hoard the books he is supposed to have burnt. He realises the futility and vacuousness of a society where people spend most of their time watching the mindless programmes projected on the walls in their homes. He makes contact with the resistance and, after a harrowing encounter with his cynical chief, Captain Beatty, which ends in Montag torching him, he escapes to join it. In this group, members have each 'become' a book by learning it by heart. They are the repository of a civilisation of literacy which may return one day. A nuclear conflict has broken out at the end, and we are led to hope that a new world can emerge from the rubble.

Before closing, I must mention two personal favourites, and one rather different kind of sci-fi.

A Canticle for Leibowitz

This book, by Walter M Miller, is set in the Utah desert centuries after a global nuclear catastrophe. The three parts are set at three points in post-nuclear time – each of which ends in a new disastrous nuclear conflict. The Monastery of St Leibowitz provides the link between these eras, and acts as the repository of human science after each holocaust. The opening scene is one of the most compelling in sci-fi.

Ridley Walker

Russell Hoban's *Ridley Walker* is also set in a post-nuclear world which has reverted to a kind of brutal, mediaeval state: full of superstition, half-remembered fragments of the earlier civilisation, and mindless violence. It takes place in Kent, near Cambry (Canterbury) and is written in an invented post-nuclear dialect of English. Absolutely brilliant. For once, the epithet 'masterpiece' is not an exaggeration.

Pattern Recognition

Finally, William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* is a borderline sci-fi story, set in the present and concerned with the use of mental manipulation and electronic communication in the service of advertising. It is written in a zippy style, with multiple twists and turns, so you need your wits about you. This is a real page-turner in a more contemporary idiom.

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Using sci-fi with students is a tricky business, of course, but many of them are already into it. Short stories may be better than full novels, and there are some suggested websites below. Tying sci-fi into film versions is also an obvious option. But whether you decide to use sci-fi in your teaching or simply to read it for your own pleasure, it offers not only little green men but some intellectually stimulating and challenging new worlds to explore. Sci-fi can be a machine for thinking about possible futures. ETp

Novels

Bradbury, R *Fahrenheit 451* HarperCollins 1954

Burgess, A *A Clockwork Orange* Penguin 1962/1973

Dick, P K *The Man in the High Castle* Penguin 1965

Gibson, W *Pattern Recognition* Berkley Books 2003

Hoban, R *Ridley Walker* Picador 1980

Huxley, A *Brave New World* Harper Perennial Modern Classics 1932/2005

Le Guin, U *The Left Hand of Darkness* Ace Books 1969

Miller, W M *A Canticle for Leibowitz* Bantam Books 1997

Orwell, G *1984* Penguin 1948/2008

Wyndham, J *The Midwich Cuckoos* Penguin 1953/1967

Wyndham, J *The Day of the Triffids* Penguin 1951

Short story collections:

Aldiss, B *No Time Like Tomorrow* Signet Books 1959

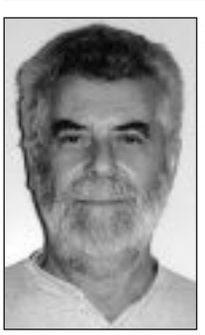
Asimov, I *A Different Flesh* Congdon and Weed 1988

Kuttner, H *Ahead of Time* Ballantine Books 1953

Moorcock, M *The Time Dweller* Mayflower Science Fantasy 1969

For a general list of short story collections:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Science_fiction_short_story_collections

For free downloads:
www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/sci-fiindex.html



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