

# SPACE AND SPACE FICTION

## A LITTLE LITERARY HISTORY

Space travel has always been the most important trope in science fiction. To many people, it's "all that outer space stuff." And certainly SF writers have been interested in the subject for a very long time. Johannes Kepler wrote about a voyage to the Moon in 1634, and although his hero gets there by means of magic, Kepler's description of conditions on the Moon was pure "hard" science fiction.

Early accounts of space voyages were often fantasies, either explicitly like Kepler's, or with a wink at the reader, as when Francis Godwin used migratory geese to carry his hero to the Moon in *The Man in the Moone* or Edgar Allan Poe used a balloon to carry Hans Pfaal there in "The Unparalleled Adventure of one Hans Pfaal." But by the middle of the 19th century, authors began speculating about ways by which people might really be able to leave the Earth. Edward Everett Hale proposed a giant catapult powered by spinning flywheels to launch an artificial satellite in "The Brick Moon," and Jules Verne envisioned a titanic cannon in *From the Earth to the Moon*. Later authors like H.G. Wells and George Griffiths realized the problems with those methods and concocted imaginary

"superscience" methods of negating gravity to allow their heroes to visit other worlds.

At the start of the 20th century, pioneering scientists like Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and Robert Goddard began to investigate the possibilities of rockets as a practical means of space exploration, and space travel moved solidly into the realm of hard SF, where it has remained ever since. Science-fiction writers (and fans) were soon bandying about technical concepts like specific impulse, delta-V, ullage, and gyro-stabilization. Some of them, like Arthur C. Clarke, mixed SF writing with research and theoretical work on space exploration.

Unfortunately for science-fiction writers, astronomers during the same era were discovering some uncomfortable facts about the solar system. As early as the 1890s, it was known that Mars was too cold and dry to support any advanced life, and in the 1960s scientists learned that Venus was equally inhospitable. A few writers tried handwaving about asteroids with Earthlike conditions or speculation about the moons of the outer giant planets, but the majority of SF writers began looking to the stars.

Tales of space exploration remained limited to the Solar system until about World War II, when writers began working on a larger scale. Because of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, the readers were also aware that journeys to other stars were likely to take a very long time. To speed

things up, SF writers began a long tradition of coming up with ways to cheat Einstein. E.E. "Doc" Smith's "Lensman" series used the "inertialess" drive to let spaceships crack the lightspeed barrier; others postulated short cuts through hyperspace, instantaneous "jump" drives, space-bending warp drives, and a long list of methods ranging from barely possible to ridiculous.

In modern science fiction, space voyages and interstellar faster-than-light travel are part of the "furniture" of the genre. Authors no longer have to explain how the spaceships work or waste much time describing the thunder of the mighty rocket engines, because those are all so familiar to the readers from movies and televised space missions.

## WHY SPACE TRAVEL?

Given that science fiction covers all possible futures, alternate pasts, other realities, and transformations of the human body and mind, it may seem odd that so much energy in the field is devoted to stories about voyages in outer space. Some see this as a continuation of the American idea of the frontier, with space fiction as nothing more than Westerns with ray guns. Others speculate archly about the sexual imagery of rockets. Certainly there is a lot of powerful symbolism involved in the idea of rising up away from Earth and mundane concerns to soar among the stars. In just about all mythologies the sky is where the gods live.

But there is more to space travel than just the symbols. The simple fact is that space travel (and interstellar travel) are the most plausible ways to have stories about humans in settings that are not Earthly locales and interacting with beings who are not other people like themselves. This is not very different from descriptions of fantasy settings – Narnia and Middle-Earth are not Earthly locales and have nonhuman inhabitants – but there is an important difference. Alien worlds in outer space are fairylands

## What's Not in This Book

Though *GURPS Space* is intended as the chief sourcebook for science fiction roleplaying using the *GURPS* system, the main focus of this book is adventures in space and on other worlds. There are whole subgenres of SF that aren't covered here, because they're important enough to get their own sourcebooks. Descriptions of specific game universes are covered in *GURPS* worldbooks. *GURPS Infinite Worlds* covers time travel, interdimensional travel, and alternate histories – and presents a campaign framework that links *all* the *GURPS* worldbooks. *GURPS Powers* describes psionics and other super-powers. Forthcoming "tech books" will provide shopping lists of futuristic gadgets.