

Speculative Fiction Genre Study Lunch, Book Talks, and Wrap-Up

Glenview Public Library
December 7, 2017

We are establishing a new tradition of having our last meeting being book talks (90 seconds or less) of any title or author not mentioned during the study that you would like to share. Those book talks will go out to our mailing list as well as being included on the ARRT website.

For the wrap-up discussion, we generally go over any and all topics mentioned during the study. Because Speculative Fiction is such a huge diverse area, we decided to focus our discussion on the mutual interview between Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro [Let's talk about genre](#), which includes many of the points brought up during our doorway discussions. (It may even been a perfect framework to discuss every genre.)

Gaiman and Ishiguro ask each other questions through the lens of SpecFic and the greater lens of genre.

Do readers care about genre, or is it a librarian, bookseller, and publisher preoccupation?

- Genre terms help librarians think about works in terms of appeal factors.
- In general, we agreed we shouldn't "throw out" genre, but it is less helpful in today's world of genre-blending.
- Part of the issue is how does the person you are helping define the genre – at that particular moment.
 - [The Buried Giant](#) by Kazuo Ishiguro
 - How does the reader describe it?
 - "I don't usually like literary novels, but I liked this one!"
 - "I don't usually like fantasy novels, but I liked this one!"
 - "I don't usually like historical fiction, but I liked this one!"
 - All are equally valid, just focusing on different elements of a book with a lot of appeal doorways!
 - A die-hard fantasy fan might say it's historical fiction.
 - A die-hard historical fiction fan might say it's fantasy. It has ogres!
 - They are actually both right!
 - [Sea of Rust](#) by C. Robert Cargill
 - It's literary. It's Science Fiction. It has robots, but feels like a western.
 - The genre blending makes for multiple entry points – multiple appeals – and a broader audience.
 - It makes using genre "pigeonholes" almost impossible.
- With so much genre-blending, it's important to figure out what part of the thriller do they like?
- We agreed readers care less about genre than we do
 - When a reader says "Mystery", they are including most of the very popular Thriller authors – Patterson, Sandford, Child.
 - In this sense, it matters more to publishers and the people handselling books.

- “Pigeonholing” probably matters most to the publishers.
- We discussed the times we haven’t be able to handsell a book because the spine label (or genre section of libraries with divided collections) made people hear nothing else we said.
 - For SF especially, once the book becomes a classic, people quit calling it SF: [1984](#) & [Brave New World](#).
 - Throwing these classics into Fiction truly does “ghettoize” SF.
 - Was it harder to handsell [The Handmaid’s Tale](#) when it was in the SF collection? Was it harder to cross that SpecFic “boundary” before the TV show took off?
- Some authors care very much that they are (or aren’t) a genre
 - Ursula K. Le Guin WRITES SPECULATIVE FICTION! She will tell you so in no uncertain terms.
 - Anne McCaffrey did not like being labeled “Fantasy”, but insisted she was “Science Fiction”.
 - Most readers disagree when reading the entire series. See it as Fantasy.
 - Everyone says Stephen King writes Horror.
 - So ingrained in their minds, it’s hard to make them realize he writes outside of Horror too: [11/23/63](#) or [The Dark Tower](#) series.
 - Some authors defy genre labels. Remember China Miéville?

Subdividing our collections by genre and labeling:

- Historically, libraries separated out by genre, but new trend towards single collection with stickers.
 - Partly driven by trend towards genre blending.
- We chunk our collections to make them more browsable.
 - But then you miss out on browsing books that are not in the sub-collection.
- How small does your collection need to be to be browsable?
 - Even if you chunk it, is it browsable?
 - Patrons still watch displays or recently returned as being more “browsable” in size.
- If you stick, how much do you sticker?
 - Romance + Christmas?
 - Romance + Paranormal + Christmas
 - At some point, genre blending can led to the entire spine being covered in labels!
 - Most of us limit to one genre per book, but vary on which one.
- Those with all our books in one collection, but with genres sticker found it easier to overcome “sticker” bias when handselling than to overcome “sub-collection” bias.
 - Everyone who didn’t subdivide labeled to some extent.
 - But even stickers can be a “problem”
 - Patron complaint about Romance label on a Karen Robards novel. Romantic Suspense has too much violence to be a “real” Romance!
 - However, opportunity for patron education – and to emphasize that we are here to help. That we can help!

- However, telling patrons the genre label/definition of what they enjoy creates self-sufficiency.
 - Argument for spine labels and explaining our definitions/jargon.
- A problem with spine labels
 - If you put Christmas on books, do you pull all those books during the “off-season” to save space? Do you treat them as separate from the regular collection?
 - Romance and mystery (especially cozy mystery) novelists often write Christmas books.
 - Sometimes they are “stand-alones”, but not always.
 - If you pull ever Robyn Carr’s [Virgin River](#) series book with Christmas in the title, then you’ll leave huge gaps in the series/your collection.
 - A lot of them are only “Christmas” very marginally.
- Problems when authors write in different genres
 - Do you want [Saturn Run](#) with the other John Sandford books, or in SF?
 - Does [Sisters Brothers](#) go in Fiction? Why not in Western?
 - But if you go by the definition of a Western, [Jack Reacher](#) by Lee Child is more of a Western than **Sisters Brothers**!
 - Knowing the defining characteristics of a genre allow **us** to make that connection – Thriller to Western. Is that’s not something readers need to consider?
 - Why does Larry McMurtry become Fiction, not Western? Because “he’s better than a Western”? Doesn’t that mean you are ghettoizing the books you put in Western?
 - Dealing with Preexisting Expectations
 - People came in for [True Grit](#) after seeing the movie, and were stunned to find they liked a Western. By putting it in Western, we did show them Westerns existed.
 - This also becomes a problem when doing collection development:
 - We all buy more of a John Grisham Legal Thriller than we do one of his other books.
 - Some readers will follow Nora Roberts anywhere
 - [Year One](#) – Dystopian
 - [Morrigan’s Cross](#) – Magic/Fantasy
 - But do all readers follow her to those “extremes”? Again, issue of how many we order for collection development.
- ❖ “I love the idea of genres as **places that you don’t necessarily want to go unless you’re a native**, because the people there will stare at you askance and say things like, “Head over the wall to Science Fiction, mate, you’ll be happier there . . .” – Neil Gaiman
- ❖ or, “Come over here if you want **but you’re going to have to abide by our rules.**” – Kazuo Ishiguro
 - Neither of these authors has ever really “abided by the rules”
 - However, this is part of why they have broad appeal
 - They are leaders in the genre blending movement.

Genre Blending in Everything!

- Think of all the horror creatures show up in all genres – ghosts, vampires, shape shifters.

- [Lincoln in the Bardo](#) is all ghosts having conversations
- [Exit West](#) is very Magical Realism and Dystopian.
 - What's **really** the difference in Magical Realism and Urban Fantasy?
 - NOTE: This title is going to be the first [Book Club Study](#) pick of 2018
- Do Literary Fiction readers accept these more readily because of Southern Gothic tradition?
- Think about zombies
 - Do you like [Mira Grant zombies](#)? (David Baldacci-type thriller, in a world that happens to have zombies.)
 - [Colson Whitehead zombies](#)? (Literary post-apocalyptic novel about reclaiming humanity.)
 - [Robert Kirkman zombies](#)? (High violence, high action – with TV Tie-in.)
 - Or no zombies ever?
- Like Neil Gaiman says – I think that there's a huge difference between, for example, **a novel with spies in it and a spy novel**; or a novel with cowboys in it and a cowboy novel.
 - Zombies doesn't not a Horror novel make!
 - Ask a parallel question: Do they want a novel with spies, or a spy novel?
 - For example, crime readers who say they want spy novel – but they really want faster paced, fewer-details political thriller with espionage flavor.
- Maybe the better question is how far do the atypical genre elements kick the reader out of their comfort zone?
 - How far is the reader willing to go out of their comfort zone?
 - Where are you on the spectrum?
 - Napoleonic Naval War fans willing to try Naomi Novik's [Temeraire](#) series?

Loved Theodore **Sturgeon's Law**: "Well, 90 per cent of science fiction is crap, but then 90 per cent of everything is crap," which is always a useful thing to remember.

Why are you reading?

- This question is often more useful than "What do you like reading?"
 - Are you reading for fun?
 - Are you reading for education? (Can be true of both fiction or nonfiction.)
 - Escape or learning?
 - The answer can change with your age, mood, and current life events.
 - Even the political climate.
 - Definition of "escape" can be radically different:
 - As world gets darker, some readers want lighter reads.
 - But cozy, sweet, mild (in any genre) totally bore some readers (e.g. Megan and Karen)
 - Maybe pacing is the most important fact – crosses any genre
 - Let the story be so fast, it sweeps me away from reality
- **What are you in the mood for?** □ Many agreed this is the best way to phrase the initial question.
- Many novels can be read on multiple levels.
 - [Sea of Rust](#) and [The Salt Line](#) can be thought provoking, or just straight-out adventure

- Primary example: [Gulliver's Travels](#) – is it political commentary or an adventure appropriate for children?
- Is [The Martian](#) a SF novel, a hard SF novel, or an adventure novel set on Mars?
 - Part of the answer is the mindset you have when you read it.
 - What expectations do you bring to the novel?
 - Genre labels create or change those expectations...
 - Say “SF”, “Fantasy”, or even “Western” creates a bunch of expectations – preconceived idea.
 - Often easier to book talk a book if you carefully DON'T define the genre. Stick to appeals!

Are you a book judger?

- As a teen, a number of us judged books
 - I will only read “important” books
 - If it's a paperback on a spinner, I won't read it. It can't be a really good book.
 - Karen was the opposite: If you say this book is “good for me”, I'm going to ignore it and keep reading my genre books. (Told to go read Jane Austen or Thomas Hardy. Rebelled by reading [Dune](#) series.)
- Many of us have gotten less judgmental and more open as we've aged.
 - But you don't know the state of mind of your patron. They may still be in a state of wanting to impress others with what they are reading (or wanting to defy conventions).
- Does society put people in boxes based on what they do with their leisure time?
 - Based on what people are reading?
- Note, with e-books, people can't tell what you are reading!
 - Especially helpful to fans of hot romance novels.
- Is part of the problem that genre fiction came out of pulp fiction?
 - Westerns and Historicals are based on things that actually happened!
 - SpecFic based on things that have never happened.
 - Common attitude: It's ok for kids to read SpecFic, but at some point they need to get over this.
 - Adults shouldn't be reading SpecFic still.
 - People who like SpecFic don't have social skills □ No social skills, so we can't help them with RA
 - Reality: You can't help them because you are a snob?
- To some extent, it's easier to help genre fans than patrons who say, “I just want a good book.”
- Loved Neil Gaiman's insight into China's take on SpecFic:

“You know, I was in China in 2007, and it was the first ever state-sponsored, Party-approved science-fiction convention. ... told me about how **science fiction was not just looked down on, but seen as suspicious and counter-revolutionary**... As such, it was very, very dodgy.

I took aside one of the Party organisers, and said, “OK. Why are you now in 2007 endorsing a science-fiction convention?” And his reply was that the Party had been concerned that while China historically has been a culture of magical and radical invention, right now, **they weren’t inventing things. They were making things incredibly well but they weren’t inventing. And they’d gone to America and interviewed the people at Google and Apple and Microsoft, and talked to the inventors, and discovered that in each case, when young, they’d read science fiction.** That was why the Chinese had decided that they were going to officially now approve of science fiction and fantasy.”

- Right now, nerd culture is actually cool.
 - Many people now self-identify as a nerd
 - It’s seen as cool.
 - Nerds are seen as smarter
 - Is it winning out, or just in our professional realm? Are we in a nerd world?

What are we trying to do?

- You like these books, and I’m going to give you more of that.
- You like these books, and I’m going to stretch you.
- I’m going to give you what I like.
- Issue came up in the Graphic Novel Wrap-up Discussion:
 - Who would you give Graphic Novels to that don’t normally read them?
 - Why are we trying to force books into people’s hands?
 - For our voracious readers, we need to stay one step ahead of them. Need to find them something to read that they haven’t already read!
 - Some books – like [*Can’t we talk about something more pleasant?*](#) – have great crossover appeal.
 - It’s wonderful for book clubs, who would normally never read Graphic Novels.
 - Part of the purpose of a book club is to stretch people.
- We love the “wow factor” of getting someone a book they would never have thought to read and then they love it!
- We can use displays and our suggestions to expose people to things they wouldn’t have thought about – display or suggestion
 - Give them multiple books. You might not like it, but maybe you will!
 - One you think is perfect.
 - One you think might be interesting to them.
 - One that might stretch them.
 - Our books are free!
 - Micro-displays of “Classics”
 - Used Golden Age Mysteries
 - Using word “Classic” gives it cachet

- Books they may have always meant to read, but forgot
- Build displays for exploration
 - Sneak in books of all genres
 - Display on Adventure, include:
 - Fantasy
 - Science Fiction
 - Western
 - Romance
 - Remember, “Adventure” isn’t just one thing!
 - Also remember to include diversity in every display in the same way!
- *Dancing with the Steers* display
 - Pulled books from everywhere
 - Romances with cowboys
 - Westerns
 - Science Fiction like Firefly or Star Trek (Wagon Train in Space)
 - Even Literary books with set in the old west or with a ranch setting

One of the best things about the article was realizing authors are thinking and talking about the same issues we are always thinking about.

[Ready Player One](#) movie is coming. What read-alikes do we give them?

- Send them to [Gallopig Ghost Arcade!](#)
- Let them try [all the books, movies, and games](#) mentioned in [Ready Player One](#)
- Problem when “I want a book exactly like this”, and those books don’t really exist!

Also, heads-up [The Shape of Water](#) movie is coming soon!

- [Book written](#) by Guillermo del Toro and Daniel Kraus
 - Daniel Kraus is the youth editor for *Booklist*
 - He wrote the book and screenplay
- This is going to be an Oscar movie!
 - Sally Hawkins, Octavia Spenser, Michael Shannon
- It is totally speculative, but also a love story and coming of age story
- Definitely meant for Adults (not a teen book)

We look forward to seeing you on
February 1, 2018
 at
Lisle District Library
 for our first session in the new genre study
[Introduction to Romance](#)