

Innovation over Imitation: Genre Boundaries and Prestige in Science Fiction/Fantasy Literature

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between science fiction/fantasy literature and literary merit. Starting with a short introduction to the history of the genres and their stigmatisation, a more in-depth analysis of prestige related to specific works and their relation to genre boundaries will follow. Then the success of certain science fiction (sf) and fantasy works and how marketing can influence the perception of books as genre literature will be discussed. Although critically acclaimed sf and fantasy works are not a new phenomenon, there is a certain elitism within the genres and even a rejection to declare literary works as sf or fantasy, although they clearly belong to the genre.

Key Words

Science fiction; fantasy; genre; prestige; literary prizes; Bourdieu

Introduction

For a long time, literary fiction was seen as realistic intellectual writing, whereas fiction sharing fantastical and science fiction (sf) elements was understood as commercial genre fiction. Sf and fantasy as genres have historically been associated with popular culture, 'cult', and escapism. Thus, genre literature like sf and fantasy is perceived to be for mass audiences and highly commercial. However, more 'literary genre fiction', fiction that combines characteristics of genre fiction and literary writing, is being published and acknowledged for its literary merit. As Thomas Hunter (2017) recently stated in *The Bookseller*, '[f]antasy and science fiction are riding high in both popular, critical and political cultures (see the protestors dressed as handmaids)'. Sf and fantasy novels are also awarded prestigious literary prizes such as the genre-crossing sf novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead, which has been longlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize, won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, and the 2017 Man Booker Prize winner George Saunders with *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), an experimental fantasy novel including ghosts.

Sf and fantasy works receiving critical acclaim are those crossing the boundary from genre to literary fiction and often hover between genres, combining the historical and experimental with sf and fantasy. Looking at the characteristics of the novels gaining prestige, it appears that chances for critical acclaim and literary prizes are heightened when genre-crossing and innovation is associated with a work. This results in a divide into literary high culture works and popular genres works even within sf and fantasy, which is also reflected in superficial indicators of genre fiction such as the cover design.

A Short History of Sf and Fantasy

A genre is created when it is discovered that several texts share properties; '[g]enres are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature' (Todorov, 1975, 8). Although readers recognise work of sf because of certain elements such as spaceships, aliens, or future technology, the genre is known amongst academics to be notoriously difficult to define. There are many sub-genres, such as alien invasion sf, apocalyptic sf, and dystopian sf, and some scholars see sf more as a literary

device to speak of political, controversial issues under the disguise of 'fiction'. Sf critic Darko Suvin famously defined sf as the genre of 'cognitive estrangement' (1972, 374, 375). In other words, sf 'must reflect the constraints of science' (Roberts, 2000, 8). Sf literature includes the impossible just as fantasy literature does but in contrast, it provides as pseudo-scientific explanation for what is described (Roberts, 2000, 3-6).

Sf as a popular genre developed in the 1920s with pulp sf magazines such as *Amazing Stories* by Hugo Gernsback, which was first published in 1926 (Booker and Thomas, 2009, 4), followed by the magazine *Astounding Stories*, edited by John W. Campbell in 1937 (Booker, 2009, p.7). However, there is also 'early' sf, not defined as sf at the time such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), or Jules Verne's and H.G. Wells's works of the 19th century. Due to Verne's 'scientific romances' 'modern science fiction began to emerge in an identifiable form – though [...] sf, as a publishing category, did not then exist' (Booker, 2009, 6). In the 1950s, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* was another important publication for the spread of sf, as well as the growing popularity of the science fiction novel (Booker, 2009, 7). Nowadays, the genre is still highly popular with a cult following of dedicated fans. Sf novels are regularly on the bestseller lists; this is largely influenced by recent TV and film adaptations.¹

Fantasy literature is 'younger' than the sf genre although its roots reach further back. Significant for its creation as a genre was J.R.R. Tolkien and his *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) series (1954). As Edward James argues in his essay, 'Tolkien, Lewis and the explosion of genre fantasy' (2012), *LOTR* 'establishes many characteristic of genre fantasy' (64). Moreover, James states that '[a]fter 1955 fantasy writers no longer had to explain away their worlds by framing them as dreams, or travellers' tales' (65). Through Tolkien, fantasy worlds as secondary worlds were established. However, even before Tolkien, the fantastic existed in literature. Tolkien himself was influenced amongst others by the fantastic stories by William Morris, Icelandic sagas, and the Old English poem *Beowulf* (James 2012, 67-68).

¹ More on this under section 4: 'Success and Marketing'.

Moreover, C.S. Lewis created a children's classic and likewise an influential fantasy classic with his Narnia series (1950-1956).

American publisher *Ballantine Books* played a crucial role in establishing fantasy and sf as a genre. Due to the success of *LOTR*, Ballantine published significant sf and fantasy works from the past 200 years with their imprint *Ballantine Adult Fantasy* in 1969 until 1974 (Barrett, 2016), and thus brought works by authors such as William Morris and Lord Dunsany back on the market.

Stigmatisation of the Genres

The perception that some literature is more 'valuable' and 'intelligent' than other literature recalls the theories of Pierre Bourdieu. The cultural field, 'the field of production and circulation of symbolic goods' (Bourdieu, 1993, 115) can be divided into the opposing 'field of restricted production', in which the literary fiction would be situated, and the 'field of wide-scale production', where genre fiction is located. The literature of restricted production contributes to our cultural and symbolic capital, which means it is 'higher art', experimental and thus prestigious (ibid., p.40). Moreover, this literature is not motivated by economic profit; it is 'the anti-'economic' economy of pure art' (Bourdieu, 2011, 142). On the other hand, 'low-brow literature' falls into the field of wide-scale production, where main capital is economic and not symbolic, which 'creates the need for the widest possible public' (Bourdieu, 1993, 126). Hence, the 'bad' reputation of sf and later the fantasy genre, although dependable on various factors, is rooted in the idea that popular fiction is literature for the masses and highly profitable as it is 'what sells' or rather what has a secure demand. In contrast, 'complicated' literary fiction with symbolic capital is riskier to invest in as it is not as commercial.

Moreover, historically, sf periodicals were seen as opposed to high culture (Rieder, 2010, 200). Hence, sf as 'cheap', easily readable literature is a prejudice that leads back to its days where it was mainly published in pulp magazines. Although sf critics in general recognise a deeper meaning in sf literature, some find sf populist due to its use of icons and

stereotypes; they see it as ‘an adolescent mode of writing, [...] not ‘serious’ or ‘high art’ (Roberts, 2000, 13). Suvin himself recognises a high-brow low-brow divide within the genre. He states, ‘[s]ignificant SF (to which, as in all genres – but somewhat disappointingly so – at least 95% of printed matter claiming the name does not belong)’ (1972, 381). For him, the rightly called sf is an ‘educational literature’ (ibid.), for which the reader must have a certain scientific knowledge in order to understand it and also execute ‘critical and creative thought’ (ibid.) by using his or her imagination.

While sf is often seen as a geek culture, so is fantasy. Like sf, fantasy is commercial fiction with hugely successful bestsellers and devoted fan cultures. Apart from the association with geek culture, a reason for the stigmatisation of fantasy literature is the discrepancy between literature read for improvement and literature read for pleasure and escape. Clearly, fantasy falls into the latter category; ‘literature is looked down on when it’s being used as escapism’ (2015), argues fantasy author Neil Gaiman in *The New Statesman*.

Moreover, fantasy is often seen as literature for children or young adults. Kazuo Ishiguro explains that this stigmatisation is ingrained in society; ‘[p]arents will naturally discourage children once they get to a certain age from continuing with the fantasy element in their lives; schools will, too’ (Gaiman, Ishiguro, 2015). Sam Jordison of *The Guardian* also states that ‘[t]here are probably good reasons for pillorying fantasy as the genre of eternal greasy adolescence. It’s also been easy to patronise the writing because of its literal lack of years’ (2009). Due to this stigmatisation, some literary writers even shy away from the association of their works with the fantasy genre.² Margaret Atwood does not describe her work as sf,³ and even Ishiguro commented on how he does not see his book *The Buried Giant* as fantasy (Barnett, 2015). This further complicates the matter as sf and fantasy is stigmatised to a certain degree from within the genre.

² Ishiguro himself has been accused of this by sf and fantasy author Ursula K. Le Guin. He, however, rejected this ‘accusations of genre-based snobbery’ (Cain, 2015).

³ Atwood ‘draws a distinction between science fiction (not for her) and what she calls ‘speculative fiction’ (McCrum, 2010); Le Guin also criticised her for this statement (Cain, 2015).

Sf and Fantasy as Literary Fiction

The prejudice that sf and fantasy cannot be literary, ‘an option that the distinction between high and low culture has tended to foreclose’ (Rieder, 2010, 198), is untrue when one looks at the many authors and genre works that have received critical acclaim and prestige. In *The Science Fiction Handbook*, Booker and Thomas list sf authors representative to the genre such as Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin and George Orwell (2009, 141,159,165). The works of these authors are known for literary merit and thus bridge the gap between intellectualism and popular mass fiction.

Sf and fantasy works have been acknowledged by literary prizes as well. Amongst Man Booker Prize nominees and winners,⁴ there are works such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), which is magical realism, the alternative history novel *The Underground Railroad*,⁵ which has been longlisted, and 2017 winner George Saunders with *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Margaret Atwood’s dystopian sf and often feminist novels are highly-regarded and critically acclaimed. Most notably, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) has won amongst other prizes the Man Booker Prize and the Nebula Award in 1986.

There are further literary prizes that have acknowledged sf and fantasy works in the past such as The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, The National Book Award, the Whitbread Awards, The Nebula Award, The Arthur C. Clarke Award, The Hugo Award,⁶ and many more. For instance, Ursula K. Le Guin won Hugo awards for *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974). As literary critic Andrew Milner states, ‘Atwood and Le Guin [...] achieved a kind of commercial success that pointed toward institutionalized consecration by the intelligentsia, if not the bourgeoisie’ (2011, 406). Kazuo Ishiguro who won the Nobel

⁴ The winners and longlisted works can be accessed on the Man Booker Prize website (The Man Booker Prize, 2018).

⁵ The New York Times review acknowledges its genre-crossing characteristic, stating that the book ‘touches on the historical novel and the slave story, but what it does with those genres is striking and imaginative.’ (Vásquez, 2016).

⁶ The Nebula Award, The Arthur C. Clarke Award, The Hugo Award exclusively award sf and fantasy works.

prize in literature is also the author of critically acclaimed sf novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and the fantasy novel *The Buried Giant* (2015).

Moreover, the amount of academic works written on sf and fantasy shows the genres' literary merit as well.⁷ In her review of *The Buried Giant*, Alicia Christoff states that '[d]espite the change in setting, genre, [...] [the book] shows Ishiguro once again exploring the same central themes'⁸ (2016, 627) found in his other highly literary works.

However, most of the critically acclaimed sf and fantasy novels are crossing genres. As mentioned above, they combine genre and literary fiction and even blur boundaries between genres. Atwood's works are often dystopian sf and feminist literature, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004)⁹ by Susanna Clarke is historical fiction and fantasy alike. As academic John Rieder points out, 'in modern Western artistic practices more prestige accrues to violating these [genre] boundaries than to conforming to them' (2010, 198). Hence, innovation and experimentation, a characteristic of works with symbolic capital according to Bourdieu's definition, is the reason for their reception of literary prestige.

Therefore, there is a divide between 'low' and 'high' genre fiction, between literary sf/fantasy and genre sf/fantasy. According to Mendlesohn and James, authors like 'Susanna Clarke and David Mitchell [...] were presented to the world as literary writers' (2012, 1), although their works are clearly fantasy. To illustrate how literary and genre fiction is separated *within* the genres of sf and fantasy, it is worth looking at their positioning in the literary field. Using Bourdieu's literary field map of the late nineteenth century, academic Andrew Milner highlights the 'Double Location of early French Science Fiction' (2011, 394). In his adaptation, the autonomous, non-economic and hence literary works are on the left side, whereas popular, market-driven works are on the right side. Sf novels are positioned between an intellectual and bourgeois, middle class audience; more innovative genres such

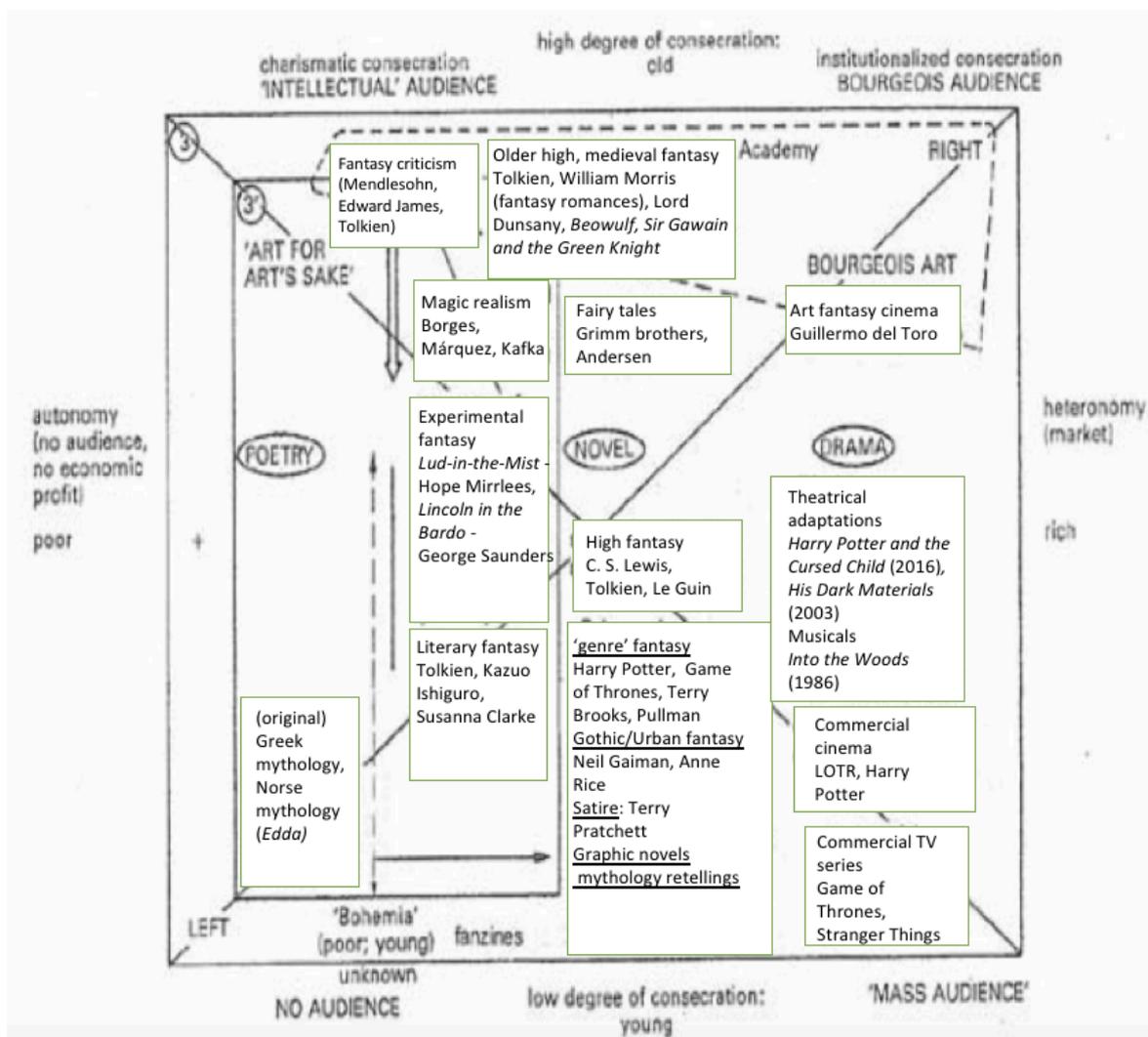
⁷ *The Handmaid's Tale* is a good example; for instance, academic David Ketterer in 'Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale': A Contextual Dystopia' (1989) writes about the novel's underlying themes.

⁸ She, therefore, positions the book as more literary than genre fiction, asking, '[d]id Ishiguro write a fantasy novel? Is *The Buried Giant* a (mere) work of genre fiction?' (Christoff, 2016, 627).

⁹ The novel was also longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2004.

as weird fiction and new wave sf are in the ‘intellectual’ field. Genre sf and pulp fiction on the other hand are however for a mass audience and have lower literary merit. The size of the market and its audience diminishes the more intellectually complex a work is.

Milner’s literary field map can be adapted in the same way for fantasy literature.¹⁰ For the fantasy genre alike, fantasy literature can be found in the highly commercial as well as highly intellectual and literary areas.



¹⁰ This is my own adaptation. The map is naturally limited due to the amount of sub-genres and fantasy authors.

Both literary field maps show that authors situated in the more 'intellectual' side of the field are categorised as 'new wave', 'weird', 'experimental', and 'literary'. Hence, if a work is seen as 'literary genre fiction' is connected to the extent a text conforms to a genre. If a work does not conform to one specific genre, it is more likely to be considered high-brow literature; 'the concept of 'literature' as such has repeatedly been formulated as the category where every work constructs its own unique genre' (Rieder, 2010, 198,199).

Therefore, the literary sf and fantasy texts gaining prestige are often those clearly crossing genre boundaries. They might be feminist literary sf, very subtly include magic such as magic realism texts, or alternate histories set in secondary worlds. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), which was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize, is described by the *The Times* as '[a]n impeccable dance of genres' (Mitchell, 2014, blurb on cover), whereas Neil Gaiman said of Susanna Clarke that he 'took particular delight in how well she understood high and low culture, and how comfortably she went between them' (2015). As Milner points out, literary sf is often not regarded as sf, but more like texts that cross genre boundaries (2011, 408). Rieder even identifies a trend; he observes, 'the particular way that high and low are connected in contemporary genre practices with innovation versus imitation is a more recent and specific development' (2010, 199). Hence, the idea exists that genre fiction with literary merit is supposed to be experimental and crosses genre-boundaries.

Success and Marketing

Sf and fantasy literature are associated with a significant amount of brand authors; there is J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and more contemporary ones like J.K. Rowling, George R. R. Martin, Margaret Atwood, Neil Gaiman, and Terry Pratchett. Sf and fantasy books regularly top bestselling charts, especially with series such as *Twilight*, *Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones*.¹¹

¹¹ Especially Harry Potter is a sales phenomenon, selling over 500 million copies worldwide according to its publisher Bloomsbury (Eyre, 2018).

Success of sf and fantasy books is often but not always influenced by successful TV or film adaptations. The bestselling books in sf and fantasy on Nielsen BookScan in the first quarter of 2018 (Appendix A) reflect recent developments in the film industry. Number one, having already sold over 18 thousand copies this quarter is *Ready Player One* (2012) by Ernest Cline; the movie adaptation will be released on 28 March 2018. *Blade Runner*, originally called *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), by Philip K. Dick is number two, the recent sequel of its original adaptation was also released on Netflix in February 2018. *Altered Carbon* (2002) by Richard Morgen, number 7, recently became a Netflix original series, and the adaptation of *Annihilation* (2014) by Jeff VanderMeer was also released on Netflix in March 2018. Number 12, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) is an Amazon originals production.¹² The film industry thus has a huge influence on sales in this genre and is a marketing opportunity for film-tie in editions.¹³

Genre-crossing on the other hand heightens the chances to earn an author prestige through literary prizes. However, prestige in turn is a driver for sales. *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* sold over 229 000 copies worth over one million pounds so far (Nielsen BookScan, 2018), *The Buried Giant* sold over 136 700 copies worth over £800 000 (ibid.), and *The Handmaid's Tale* 1996 edition sold over 457 000 copies (ibid.), to which the TV series tie-in edition of 2017 added over 124 000 sales so far (ibid.).

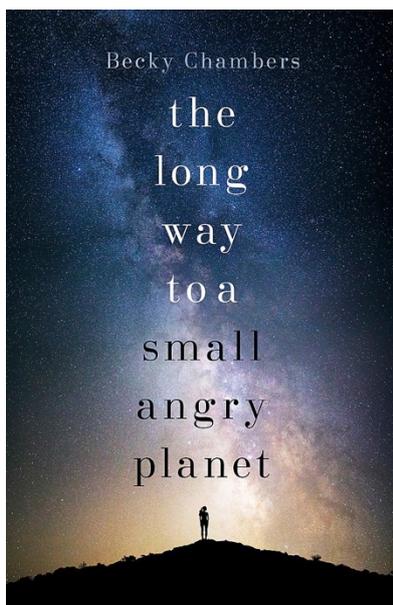
When it comes to marketing, labelling a book as genre fiction plays an important role. On Amazon UK, Nielsen BookScan or Waterstones, 'Science Fiction and Fantasy' is fused into one genre category. It seems logical that fantasy readers are interested in sf as well and vice versa. Labelling works as one or the other is a marketing technique valid for any genre. As Rieder states, '*attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception*' (2010, 200, italics in original). Genre hence can be a way of promotion but can also limit the number of potential customers; genre tells book buyers

¹² The series started in 2015 and the third season will be released in 2018 (Imdb, 2018).

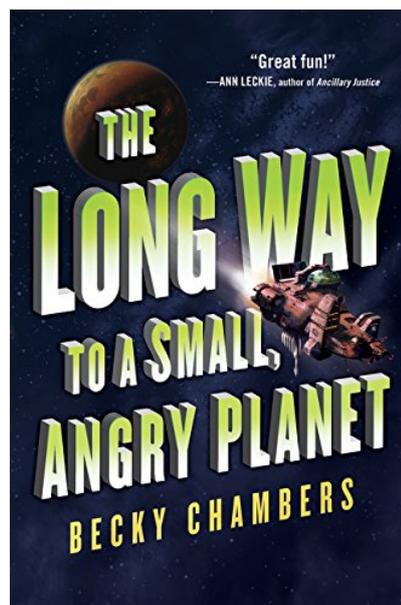
¹³ In the chart (Appendix A), *Altered Carbon* and *Annihilation* are film-tie in editions.

'how to read a text, and even more [it functions as] a kind of promise that the text can be usefully, pleasurably, read that way' (Rieder, 2010, 200-201).

However, marketing can manipulate the stereotyping of sf and fantasy literature as the decision against a typical sf and fantasy cover design can be made. If a sf book with a non-stereotypical cover design is positioned alongside non-sf fiction in a book store, the market for the book is broadened as it is more visible to non-sf readers. An example for the effect of cover design is *The Long Way to A Small Angry Planet* by Becky Chambers (Hodder, 2015)¹⁴. While the UK edition does not suggest sf content, the US edition does with a spaceship on the cover.



UK edition (2015)



US edition (2016)

The choice of cover can have a huge influence on how and whether customers perceive a book as genre fiction. More genre-crossing literary sf and fantasy novels such as *The Underground Railroad*, *The Buried Giant* and *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* have a more 'neutral' cover design as opposed to works by typical genre writers such as Philip K. Dick,

¹⁴ The two covers were mentioned in a presentation for the module 'Fiction and Non-Fiction' at Oxford Brookes University by Anne Perry, editorial director at Simon & Schuster UK (Perry, 2018).

whose books are specified as 'SF masterworks', Terry Brooks, or less well-known works by Tolkien that are more aimed at avid fantasy readers (Appendix B).

Marketing books without a specific genre categorisation is also a marketing technique. As Shana DuBois of the *Barnes & Noble Sci-fi and Fantasy Blog* observes, '[t]he role of genre boundaries in publishing almost always has to do with marketing' (2016). As the market changes, genres are going to change (ibid.). The trend of crossing genre boundaries, combining literary and genre fiction and including fantasy and sf into 'realist' fiction is likely to reflect the readers' desire for new, genre-defying fiction different from what is already on the market and has been published for decades. Additionally, not marketing a book like *The Buried Giant* as genre fiction will eventually help non-genre readers to get into sf and fantasy with the aim to heighten interest and sales in sf or fantasy novels (Barnett, 2015). Moreover, fantasy and sf novels are nowadays being listed for renowned literary prizes, which offers another marketing opportunity since these novels are not only appealing to genre readers but to those enjoying literary fiction.

Conclusion

Sf and fantasy as genres became stigmatised as popular fiction, produced for a mass audience and as reading for pleasure and escapism. However, more and more sf and fantasy novels are acknowledged for their literary merit.

Within sf and fantasy, a hierarchy of experimental, literary writers and authors of popular genre fiction exists, although lines are blurred. The critically acclaimed and prize-winning sf and fantasy novels show that innovation and experimentation are an important signifier when it comes to literary prestige.

The crossing of genre boundaries and marketing books as 'literary' and by means of a neutral cover design can be used to aim at a double market that includes genre readers and those not usually picking up a sf or fantasy book. Hence, sf and fantasy are highly adaptable as genres and can be used for crossing genre boundaries; the resulting innovative literary

fiction is then connected to prestige and literary merit, and thus helps to battle the stigmatisation of these popular genres.

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[2&keywords=The+Long+Way+to+a+Small%2C+Angry+Planet](https://www.amazon.com/Long-Small-Angry-Planet-Wayfarers/dp/0062444131/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1520772453&sr=8-2&keywords=The+Long+Way+to+a+Small%2C+Angry+Planet) [Accessed 6 April 2018].

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Appendices

Appendix A: TCM Chart Nielsen Book Scan SF and Fantasy 2018

Position	ISBN	Title	Author	Imprint	Publisher Group	Volume	Value
1	9780099560432	Ready Player One	Cline, Ernest	Arrow Books	Random House Grp	18,293	£102,720.62
2	9781473222687	Blade Runner	Dick, Philip K.	Gollancz	Orion Grp	16,664	£66,961.52
3	9781473629165	Caraval	Garber, Stephanie	Hodder Paperback	Hodder & Stoughton Grp	6,676	£33,265.14
4	9780141036144	Nineteen Eighty-four:Penguin Essentials	Orwell, George	Penguin Books	Penguin Grp	6,102	£24,841.11
5	9780006546061	Fahrenheit 451	Bradbury, Ray	Flamingo	HarperCollins Grp	4,747	£33,392.04
6	9781784754792	Ready Player One	Cline, Ernest	Arrow Books	Random House Grp	4,641	£28,539.12
7	9781473223677	Altered Carbon:Netflix Altered Carbon book 1:Gollancz S.F.	Morgan, Richard	Gollancz	Orion Grp	4,582	£33,290.08
8	9780091956943	Artemis	Weir, Andy	Del Rey	Random House Grp	4,193	£41,141.31
9	9780008238094	Knight of the Seven Kingdoms,A	Martin, George R. R.	HarperVoyager	HarperCollins Grp	4,023	£24,596.19
10	9780008139100	Annihilation:The Thrilling Book Behind the Most Anticipated Film of 20	VanderMeer, Jeff	Fourth Estate	HarperCollins Grp	3,666	£29,253.46
11	9780575097377	13 Minutes	Pinborough, Sarah	Gollancz	Orion Grp	3,555	£22,789.20
12	9780141186672	Man in the High Castle,The	Dick, Philip K.	Penguin Classics	Penguin Grp	3,394	£28,057.05
13	9781473221628	Left Hand of Darkness,The:S.F. Masterworks	LeGuin, Ursula K.	Gollancz	Orion Grp	3,353	£26,998.43
14	9781780898414	Last Jedi: Expanded Edition (Star Wars),The	Fry, Jason	Century	Random House Grp	3,224	£42,578.96

Nielsen BookScan. 2018. TCM Chart 2018 F2.2 Science Fiction and Fantasy. Author's Screenshot.

<https://www.nielsenbookscan.co.uk> [Accessed 23 Mar 2018].

Appendix B: Examples of book covers; literary and genre sf/fantasy

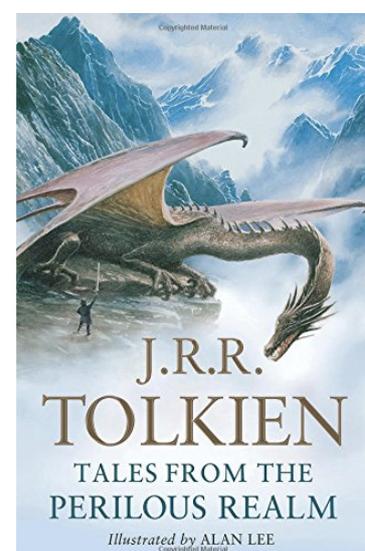
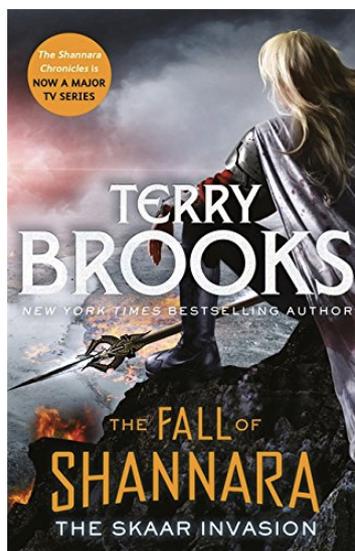
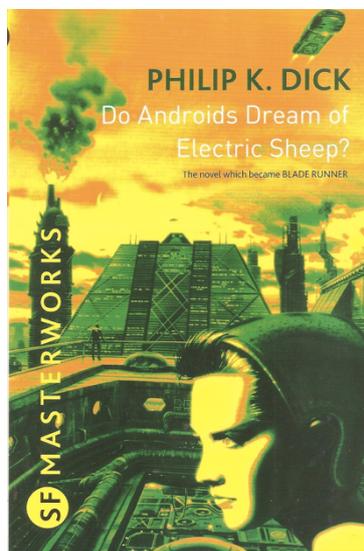
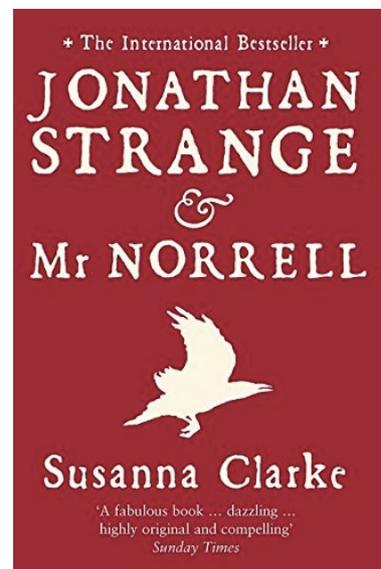
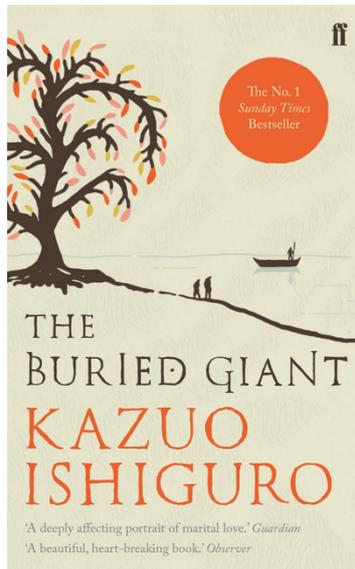
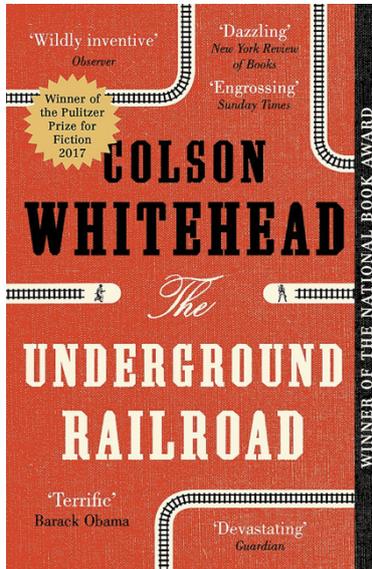


Image Sources:

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https://www.amazon.co.uk/Jonathan-Strange-Norrell-Susanna-Clarke/dp/0747579881/ref=tmm_pap_title_2?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1522938360&sr=1-1 [Accessed 6 April 2018].

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https://www.amazon.co.uk/Tales-Perilous-Realm-J-R-R-Tolkien/dp/0007280599/ref=sr_1_5?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1522940409&sr=1-5&keywords=beren+and+luthien [Accessed 5 April 2018].

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