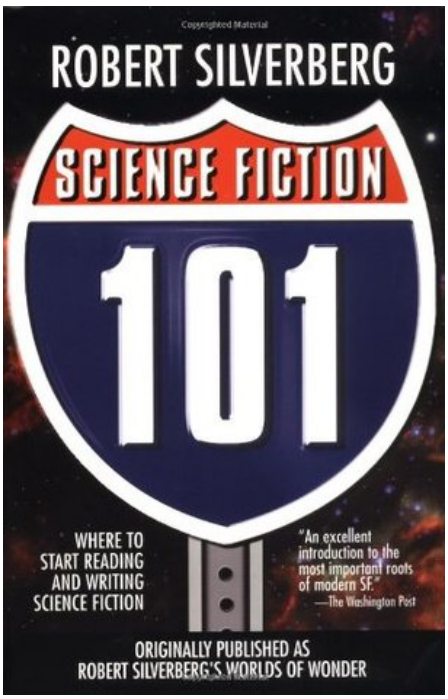

Science Fiction 101

Robert Silverberg (Editor) , Greg Bear (Introduction) , Jack Vance , Philip K. Dick , C.M. Kornbluth , Bob Shaw , Frederik Pohl , Damon Knight , more… Alfred Bester , C.L. Moore , Henry Kuttner , Robert Sheckley , James Blish , Cordwainer Smith , Brian W. Aldiss …less

Science Fiction 101

Robert Silverberg (Editor) , Greg Bear (Introduction) , Jack Vance , Philip K. Dick , C.M. Kornbluth , Bob Shaw , Frederik Pohl , Damon Knight , more… Alfred Bester , C.L. Moore , Henry Kuttner , Robert Sheckley , James Blish , Cordwainer Smith , Brian W. Aldiss …less

Science Fiction 101 Robert Silverberg (Editor) , Greg Bear (Introduction) , Jack Vance , Philip K. Dick , C.M. Kornbluth , Bob Shaw , Frederik Pohl , Damon Knight , more… Alfred Bester , C.L. Moore , Henry Kuttner , Robert Sheckley , James Blish , Cordwainer Smith , Brian W. Aldiss …less
If you read or write science fiction, here is the best introduction to the secrets, the craft and the art of science fiction. Included are thirteen classic works of modern sf; wondrous stories by Alfred Bester, Philip K. Dick, Jack Vance, Frederick Pohl and many others. If you love science fiction, read how a young fan grew up to become one of the most honored masters in the history of the field, as told in his own words.

Science Fiction 101 Details

Date	:	Published March 1st 2001 by iBooks (first published 1987)
ISBN	:	9780743412940
Author	:	Robert Silverberg (Editor) , Greg Bear (Introduction) , Jack Vance , Philip K. Dick , C.M. Kornbluth , Bob Shaw , Frederik Pohl , Damon Knight , more… Alfred Bester , C.L. Moore , Henry Kuttner , Robert Sheckley , James Blish , Cordwainer Smith , Brian W. Aldiss …less
Format	:	Paperback 555 pages
Genre	:	Science Fiction, Anthologies, Language, Writing, Fiction, Short Stories

From Reader Review Science Fiction 101 for online ebook

Tatiana says

3. Read a collection of essays (2016 read harder challenge)
1. A book you meant to read in 2015, but didn't (Around the year in 52 books: 2016)

'Four in one' Damon Knight, 4.5 stars
'Fondly Fahrenheit' Alfred Bester, 4.5 stars
'No Woman born' C. L. Moore, 1.5 stars
'Home is the hunter' Henry Kuttner, 4.5 stars
'The Monsters' Robert Sheckley, 5 stars
'Common Time' James Blish, 3 stars
'Scanners live in vain' Cordwainer Smith, 4 stars
'Hothouse' Brian W. Albiss, 1 star
'The New Prime' Jack Vance, 5 stars
'Colony' Philip K. Dick, 5 stars
'The Little Black Bag' C. M. Kornbluth, 4.5 stars
'Light of other days' Bob Shaw, 1.5 stars
'Day Million' Frederik Pohl, 3 stars

Nathan Boole says

This was an awesome collection of short stories, even if it had just been a collection. It was added to a great deal, I think, by Silverberg's commentary and breakdown of each story, and some of the things he has to say about writing are very good to know.

I was a little disappointed that there wasn't more about writing techniques in the book, but it was still an awesome book, and I think that several of the stories are now among my top ten favorite short stories of all time.

Specifically Slow Glass, by Bob Shaw, and Day Million by Frederick Pohl. Both great stories that I really enjoyed.

Ian says

I'd give this a 3.5 were it an option. Not perfect but Silverberg is a craftsmanlike writer who shows a surprising amount of humility in this volume. If nothing else he's an excellent anthologist and the majority of these stories are very enjoyable to read and fairly diverse in their style. Most date from the 50s and 60s so while its hard to fault Silverberg personally for it, as a contemporary guide to the form this may not be the most helpful. That said, Silverberg goes over the basics pretty well and the topics in this volume are diverse enough that any reader not already deeply versed in Sci-fi already should find a lot of stories to enjoy. The volume opens with an extended personal writing biography detailing Silverbergs own early years as a writer. Silverberg may not be the absolute most inspired of sci-fi writers but he was certainly one of the hardest

working and prolific writers in his heyday. He details all the essential elements even a basic writer needs to develop an effective story and doesn't pull punches for his own work. This is not the story of an instant genius of the field but of a writer that put in a lot of hard work to develop good stories. For that reason it might be a lot more useful than a guide written by somebody with an instinctive skill at storytelling as Silverberg was clearly a far more attentive writer. Each story (which I repeat are well-chosen if somewhat old)
is followed by an essay highlighting the character, structure, or stylistic elements that make it work well and stay engaging. Silverberg does take time to differentiate the elements he thinks are unique to sci-fi and that sci-fi can accomplish that other types of fiction may not, and on occassion why those elements sometimes effectively compensate for something like limited characterization that would cripple other more "conventional" styles of fiction. Admittedly the organization of this book was a little jarring at first, but even if you only read the stories themselves and dont care about the biographical material its still a good read. This isnt a "how to" guide strictly speaking, but it does select stories as exemplars of some particular quality elements, world building, characterization, narrative style, etcetera. A good volume for someone wanting some basic tips on writing, somebody looking for quality stories of early sci-fi or somebody interested thats a fan of Mr. Silverberg and is curious about his early days as a writer.

Laura says

I read this b/c one of the short stories was recommended by Connie Willis - now I don't even remember which one ;) Robert Silverberg takes you through his genesis as a sci fi writer and critically praises 13 stories that came out around the time (1950-53 or so) that he was beginning to have some success getting stories into magazines.

It was OK for me - the stories are (for the most part) REALLY good - I think there were only two that I just plain old didn't like. As for his commentary - I disagreed with much of it, but it was entertaining to argue with him in my head. And I can never get enough anecdotes about the golden age of SF! My continued nostalgia for times ere I was even born surfaces again!

Jlawrence says

Collection of good to excellent sf stories, framed in an interesting way: Silverberg's goal is to explore the craft of science fiction writing through the chosen stories. In the intro he gives a brief bio of how he became a sf writer (especially good for the sketches it gives of the editors who shaped him), and then follows each story with an analysis of what makes the story work. There's some decent variety in the stories, too - some lean more towards 'cool exploration of scientific idea', others towards a looser 'sense of wonder above all', others more towards character study, etc. - and Silverberg does a solid job of picking apart how these varying effects are achieved. Good read for any aspiring sf writers.

Sean Callaghan says

There were some nuggets in here that made reading it worthwhile. Mostly the value came from the selection of stories rather than the commentary itself.

Bill FromPA says

Silverberg has read a lot of SF and here gets to pick the *creme de la creme* from stories he read and learned from during his journeyman years. It's a very good selection - even casual fans who have dipped into stories from the 1940s through the 1960s are likely to have read more than one before. But even for the familiar stories, Silverberg's added commentary adds a new dimension to the encounter.

Silverberg mainly looks at how the mechanics of story-telling is handled by each author and doesn't attempt to explicate subtext beyond an occasional aside (such as the use of the name "McCarty" in Damon Knight's 1953 "Four in One"). Since these are stories he admires, most of the analysis looks at how the author did things right, but he will point out weaknesses where he perceives them, such as the tied-with-a-bow resolution of Cordwainer Smith's "Scanners Live in Vain".

Silverberg seriously disappointed me only in one instance where I was hoping for some critical insight, Alfred Bester's "Fondly Fahrenheit". This is my second encounter with this story, and in both cases I finished it dissatisfied. Silverberg considers the story almost perfect; the single flaw he notes is the way in which the opening paragraph is disconnected from the second paragraph and thus from the entire story that follows. I disagree with this - in this case Silverberg is being too dogmatically prescriptive of what constitutes "good writing":

> I work on the theory - which I picked up somewhere along the way from Ernest Hemingway - that every paragraph of a story ought to be firmly and welded to the one that precedes it, except where a scene break is used to create a deliberate discontinuity.

Bester's opening here serves as a kind of "motto theme" which has great relevance to the entire story if not to what immediately follows it - think of the opening of Bartok's Sixth Quartet for instance.

(view spoiler)

Ron says

Published as *Worlds of Wonder* in 1987, Science Fiction 101 still works on several levels: as an autobiography of "one of the most honored Masters in the history of the field" (and you thought Asimov immodest), as an introduction to classic SF short stories mostly from the 1950s, and as entertaining and insightful essays on just what SF is and how it works.

Unlike many current authorities, Silverberg places SF inside the fantasy genre. In fact, ignoring the obvious vampires, elves and magic, he argues that it precisely the possibility--however improbably--of SF which distinguishes it from fantasy. And demonstrates his point using several stories which have no overt SF characteristics.

Some of the stories are excellent; some less so, and a few irritating poor, but Science Fiction 101 is far better than most SF anthologies you'll find these days.

A good read.

Saqib Sadiq says

http://www.islamscifi.com/top-10-tips...

Marc Goldstein says

9 “Four in One” by Damon Knight
Recon party get ingested by an amoeba-like organism. Their brains and nervous systems remain intact in a symbiotic state with the amoeba. The narrator, an unflappable scientist, is the first ingested and the first to begin to work out their predicament. One of others is a political officer who orders them to return to camp. The scientist understands this will be suicide, and a power struggle begins. The four minds compete for dominance of the amoeba organism. The narrator and a female scientist both survive. They adapt to their new amoeboid bodies and perhaps will be better for it.

7 “Fondly Fahrenheit” by Alfred Bester
A man’s android turns homicidal when the temperature exceeds 90 degrees. The android is his cash cow, so he refuses to get rid of it. He and the android begin to merge identities. Was the man originally insane and imposed it on the android or the other way around? The android is destroyed in a fire. The man gets a robot. The robot wanders off with a young woman and the temperature falls below 40 degrees. The cycle continues. All reet!

7 “No Woman Born” by C.L. Moore
A popular actress/singer/dancer named Deidre is badly burned in a fire. A scientist puts her brain into a sophisticated robotic body. After her recovery, Deidre wishes to return to performing. The scientist fears that the audience will reject her. He wonders if he has created a monster; he knows that the longer her mind lives in the robot body, the more removed she will become from human experience and understanding. Her return to the stage is triumphant. Nevertheless, the scientist tries to kill himself. Deidre prevents his suicide, demonstrating superhuman powers. She still has compassion, but her robot body is already changing her.

7 “Home is the Hunter” by Henry Kuttner
Futuristic society divided into two castes: the populi, and an elite group of aristocratic head hunters who fight for sport and wealth. The pressure to kill and amass more heads is constant and unbearable for the narrator. When one of his friends is killed, he seeks revenge. In the process he wins more heads than any other hunter. He throws a party and, greeting his guests, drinks poison and kills himself. Metaphor for competition.

9 “The Monsters” by Robert Sheckley
Narrated from the POV of aliens who must kill their wives every 25 days to reduce the disproportionate female population. The men debate, take wives regularly, and kill each other without compunction or

consequence. Humans arrive in a spaceship. The aliens wonder if the humans are moral beings. They fear the humans, but make an attempt to communicate. When the humans have been on the planet 25 days, one of the aliens decides to kill one of the female humans as a favor to the males. Appalled, the humans kill the alien and order the rest to kill no more females. The aliens respond with outrage; the female aliens lead the assault on the human spaceship.

9 “Scanners Live in Vain” by Cordwainer Smith
Space travel is unbearably painful to anyone not in hypersleep. So spaceships are crewed by humans who have their consciousness projected from earth to space. The neural blocks required to do this render the men cripples, robbed of their senses and incapable of normal human contact without “cranking.” The Scanners monitor the crews and ensure the safety of all aboard the ships. The narrator “cranks” back to earth to spend some time with his wife. He expresses frustration with his life as a scanner. He is summoned to an emergency meeting of scanners. He is the only cranked scanner at the meeting. Their leader announces that a scientist has discovered a cure for the pain of space travel, rendering scanners obsolete, their sacrifices in vain. The scanners decide to assassinate the scientist. The narrator foils the assassination, and all the scanners are returned to normal life. Groundbreaking for its bleak view of the future and for its vision of how technology can destroy our humanity.

9 “Hothouse” by Brian Aldiss
Countless years into the future, Earth has been overgrown with vicious, aggressive, carnivorous vegetation. Humans have been reduced to scavengers hiding in the tree tops. The tropical nightmare is totally immersive: hot, humid, oppressive, with death lurking behind every leaf and branch. Village elders prepare to ascend to heaven. They place themselves in cocoons atop the forest ceiling. The cocoons stick to the bodies of giant spider-like plants called traversers, like pollen sticks to bees. The traversers spend most of their time in outspace, soaking up raw radiation from the sun. They frequently stop on the moon on the way out, and, as a result, have unwittingly seeded the moon with plant and animal life. The trip through space mutates the humans into winged “flymen.” The flymen elders have hatched a plan to return to earth.

6 “Common Time” by James Blish
Test pilot attempts faster than light travel. The time distortion effects slow time by a factor of 6,000. The oscillations of the engine then accelerate time beyond the pilot’s ability to process stimuli, and he enters a coma. During this coma he experiences an encounter with an alien intelligence that soothes and comforts him. Did he dream or hallucinate this meeting? He has no way of knowing for sure. When the test ends, he longs to return to space again, but learns he must undergo extensive testing and will never fly again.

7 “The New Prime” by Jack Vance
Five apparently unrelated episodes dovetail. They have been tests conducted in virtual reality to measure the personality of the candidate. The man who devised the test is the incumbent “Prime” – the executive leader of the galactic government. The tests evaluate the candidates social skills, aggressiveness, imagination, loyalty, and ability to withstand torture. The senators observing the test will decide who will be the new Prime. The senior senator points out that the incumbent’s test is designed to suit his personality traits, so it was inevitable that he should score the highest. He notes that the test does not evaluate characteristics that the incumbent lacks, and the senate believes are most important: compassion, sympathy, tolerance. One candidate has been driven insane by the torture test. He is the man the senators choose to be the new prime.

8 “Colony” by Phillip K. Dick
Explorers analyzing a planet being considered for colonization are unable to find any dangerous organisms, not even microbes. Then one of the scientists is attacked by his microscope. The planet is filled with alien beings that are capable of perfectly imitating the shape of any inanimate object. Dick mixes horror and farce

as human crew members are attacked and killed by towels, belts, welcome mats, clothes, vehicles, and other mundane items. A scientist releases some poison gas into the laboratory to see how many aliens there are. The lab is filled, half of the objects in the room are actually aliens. The crew decides to strip naked and call in an evacuation. In her rush, the captain neglects to explain the nature of the aliens to the rescue dispatch. The panicked crew crowds into the rescue shuttle. The shuttle turns out to be a giant alien. The real shuttle lands. No one is left to save.

9 “Little Black Bag” by C.M. Kornbluth
The explosive birth rate among the poor and uneducated creates a massive pool of idiots, lead by a small minority of elite intelligentsia. But because the elite caste is so small, many important, complex jobs must be performed by the moron pool. So the elite group creates technology that does the thinking for the morons. In this case, the technology is a doctor’s black bag. Accidentally, one of the black bags is sent back to the 20th century to the home of a disgraced, alcoholic doctor. The doctor plans to sell it for booze, but an emergency pops up and he uses the bag to heal a seriously injured girl. The girl’s sister threatens to expose the doctor unless he shares the money from the sale of the black bag. But no pawn broker will buy the bag, so the two devise a scheme to open a medical practice with the bag. When the old doctor decides to turn the bag over to science for the betterment of humankind, the girl kills him. In the future, they detect that the bag has been used to kill, and they deactivate it. At that precise moment the girl is demonstrating the safety of one of the knives to a patient, and unwittingly slashes her own throat. The girl gets poetic justice, but now there will be no betterment of humankind. Kornbluth the pessimist.

7 “Light of Other Days” by Bob Shaw
Brief story with surprising emotional depth. “Slow glass” greatly impedes the speed of light rays passing through it. In some cases, light may take ten years or more to pass through a sheet of slow glass. The narrator is having marital problems complicated by an unwanted pregnancy. He and his wife stop during a drive in the country to buy slow glass from an old man. The old man looks at his house, seeing images of his family through the windows. After the narrator buys some slow glass, the wife inadvertently enters the old man’s house to find there is no family. His wife and child died many years ago. The slow glass windows allow him occasional ghostly glimpses of them. The narrator and his wife are shaken by this revelation of loss, and walk away clinging to one another. Perhaps better conceived than told.

7 “Day Million” by Frederick Pohl
Future shock leavened with a healthy dose of authorial sassiness. The story itself is utterly rote boy meets girl. The uniqueness of the story is all in the shocking, otherworldly details of the futuristic world and the narrator’s cranky, taunting intrusions into the text of the story.

Alayne says

This is a very interesting concept - one of the great scifi writers has put together a combination memoir, anthology of the best short stories in science fiction and then a commentary on each story. My only quibble with it is that it is so old - all the stories in it were written in the 50s and 60s -which is hardly the fault of the author! So if you enjoy science fiction, if you would like to know how to write it, or if you just want to know how someone of the standing of Robert Silverberg became a scifi author, you will enjoy this book.

Jon Mountjoy says

This book, which covers "Where to start reading and writing science fiction," starts with an autobiographical section from Robert Silverberg. Yes, I understand this is a decorated science fiction author, but the pomposity borders on arrogance. It really took me two attempts at this book to get through his grandiloquent description of his own self. After that, a series of really lovely short stories - each accompanied by relatively useful descriptions by Silverberg.

Allan Dyen-Shapiro says

This book was recommended to me by a science fiction writer as having useful essays dissecting why science fiction works. They are useful. Robert Silverberg is one of my favorite authors, so I was happy to listen to anything he said.

However, some of the stories are real gems that I would not have otherwise come across. Silverberg culled the period from the mid-40s through early 60s--the "Pulp Era"--and found some that stand out as exceptional for that time period. My favorite was Alfred Bester's "Fondly Farenheit". The purposely confused point of view was wonderful--it really created a fantastic vision of the mindset the author was trying to convey (I can't say any more without spoiling a great story). Robert Sheckley's "The Monsters" was also a fabulous blend of horror tropes with science fiction tropes and absurdist humor.

I don't usually read this period of science fiction--my favorites are the 60s/70s New Wave, the 80s Cyberpunk, and the neat fusion of styles that has characterized the 90s through the present. So for others who are similarly 1950s-deficient in their reading, get this for the great stories. For those learning to write, the essays are quite useful.

Mike says

The premise of this collection is, to someone like me who aspires to sell stories to SFF magazines, a compelling one. Much-awarded writer Silverberg collects stories that were influential on him as a young writer, that he learned from, along with essays on each story analysing what he learned from it, and an overall essay about the start of his career in general.

The main drawback is that this is an almost-30-year-old book in which a writer whose fiction I've never really liked analyses stories that were, at the time, more than 30 years old and are now about 60 years old. Studying them might therefore not help a great deal with selling stories in the current market.

Now, there are some things that Silverberg says in the main introductory essay that I think are still useful. He talks about what he learned in his university studies about story in general, from studying Greek tragedy and storytelling theory, and he formulates it well. For example, he talks about how a story is built around conflict, the inevitable clash of powerful forces, and how the protagonist comes to participate in that conflict because of something he or she cares about; struggles against obstacles; and is permanently changed as a result. Reading this helped give me ideas for how to improve my stories: intensify the conflict or make it more interesting, increase the protagonist's investment in it, show more of their struggle, think about how they are changed by it. All of this is good stuff.

The analysis of the individual stories I found less useful. A lot of the stories of the 1950s, most of them, in fact, featured thin characterisation; Silverberg mentions this a couple of times, only in order to dismiss it as unimportant, because the science-fictional idea was what mattered. Perhaps this is one reason I've never loved his stories, because to me a character with some depth is important (it's why I can't abide Scalzi's work, which retains that 1950s flaw of indistinguishable characters who are more or less talking furniture).

I got my copy from the library, and an aggrieved feminist has written in it (in pencil) critiques of a couple of the stories, in particular Robert Sheckley's "The Monsters", in which casual wife-murder is used to make a cheap, glib point about moral relativity. She has a point. Along with thin characterisation, violence against women treated as a source of humour isn't going to play well in the current short story market, and quite rightly.

For that matter, a classical approach to story and plot won't necessarily help you to be published in some venues (Clarkesworld comes to mind), but I happen to agree with Silverberg on that aspect of the craft. And there are plenty of markets which do require a beginning, middle and end to a story, not just a lot of pretty jazzing about until you decide to stop.

In summary, then, I did learn something useful from this book, but most of it was early on. I did enjoy some of the stories (Frederick Pohl's "Day Million", for example, which closes the book, and which is an obvious inspiration for Harry Turtledove's 2013 story "It's the End of the World as We Know It, and We Feel Fine"), and it's a good idea to know the classics, if only, as Silverberg points out, so you can avoid rewriting them from ignorance. The idea of the book is a good one, and I'd really like to see the same thing done again by another writer with more recent stories. Maybe I'll even attempt it myself, drawing on the many stories that are free to read online these days.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

Robert Silverberg is one of the grand masters of science-fiction, with a distinguished career as an author and editor behind him. But in the early 1950s, he was an ambitious student at Columbia, teaching himself the craft with a stack of pump magazines in one hand, and books of structural criticism and classic rhetoric in the others. This is grand master Silverberg's letter in a bottle to uncertain fledgling writer Bob, thirteen stories with brief appreciative/critical essays.

What you have are *writer's stories*, mostly published around 1953. You may recognize the names (Dick, Pohl, Blish, Vance, Cordwainer Smith), but I had read only a few of these stories prior, (and I love classic scifi). Every story is solid, some of them amazing, and the essays provide pointers for how each author used his or her personal style to advance some fictive technique in pursuit of telling a wonderful story. And yes, her, as Sivlerberg elevates forgotten female scifi pioneer C.L. Moore.

Every scifi fan owes it to themselves to read this book. And someone should do an update for stories published since 1980 and 2000. We just need to find our *enfante terrible.*
