

# science fiction

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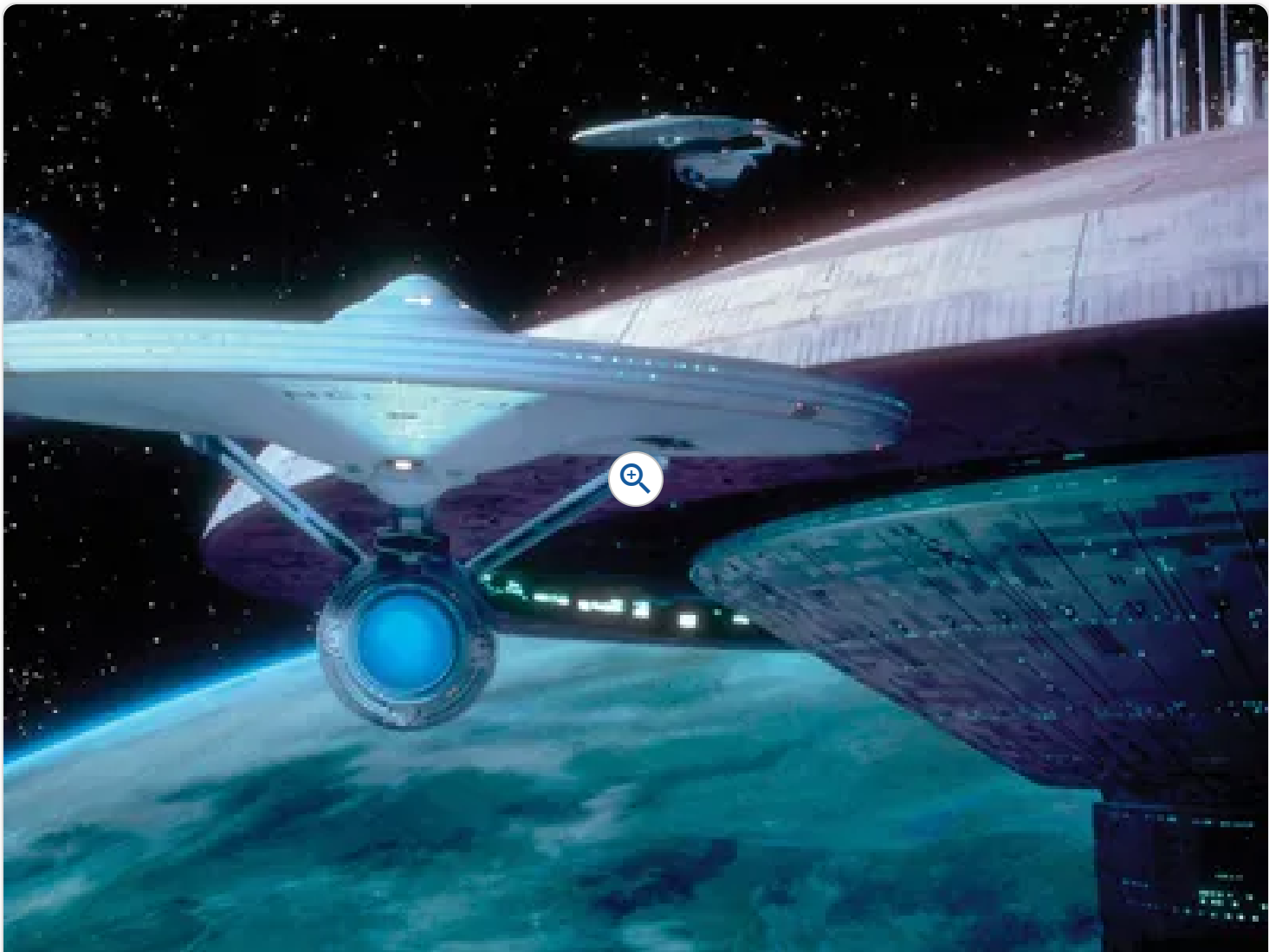
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**Key People:** [Nnedi Okorafor](#) • [H.G. Wells](#) • [C.S. Lewis](#) • [Jules Verne](#) • [James Tiptree, Jr.](#)

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## Top Questions

What is science fiction?



Where was science fiction invented?



Where does science fiction get its name?



Why was science fiction popular in the 1950s?



How is science fiction different from fantasy?



Is human space colonization only science fiction?



## Summary

Read a brief summary of this topic



**science fiction**, abbreviation **SF** or **sci-fi**, a form of fiction that deals principally with the impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals. The term *science fiction* was popularized, if not invented, in the 1920s by one of the [genre's](#) principal advocates, the American publisher [Hugo Gernsback](#). The [Hugo Awards](#), given annually since 1953 by the World Science Fiction Society, are named after him. These achievement awards are given to the top SF writers, editors, illustrators, films, and fanzines.

## The world of science fiction

Science fiction is a modern [genre](#). Though writers in antiquity sometimes dealt with themes common to modern science fiction, their stories made no attempt at scientific and technological plausibility, the feature that distinguishes science fiction from earlier speculative writings and other contemporary speculative [genres](#) such as [fantasy](#) and horror. The genre formally emerged in the West, where the social transformations wrought by the [Industrial Revolution](#) first led writers and [intellectuals](#) to [extrapolate](#) the future impact of [technology](#). By the beginning of the 20th century, an array of standard science fiction “sets” had developed around certain themes, among them space travel, robots, alien beings, and time travel (see below [Major](#)

[science fiction themes](#)). The customary “theatrics” of science fiction include prophetic warnings, utopian [aspirations](#), elaborate scenarios for entirely imaginary worlds, titanic disasters, strange voyages, and political agitation of many extremist flavours, presented in the form of sermons, meditations, satires, [allegories](#), and parodies—exhibiting every conceivable attitude toward the process of techno-social change, from [cynical](#) despair to cosmic bliss.

Science fiction writers often seek out new scientific and technical developments in order to prognosticate freely the techno-social changes that will shock the readers’ sense of cultural propriety and expand their [consciousness](#). This approach was central to the work of [H.G. Wells](#), a founder of the genre and likely its greatest writer. Wells was an [ardent](#) student of the 19th-century British scientist [T.H. Huxley](#), whose [vociferous](#) championing of [Charles Darwin](#)’s theory of [evolution](#) earned him the epithet “Darwin’s Bulldog.” Wells’s literary career gives ample evidence of science fiction’s latent radicalism, its [affinity](#) for aggressive [satire](#) and utopian political agendas, as well as its dire predictions of technological destruction.

This dark dystopian side can be seen especially in the work of T.H. Huxley’s grandson, [Aldous Huxley](#), who was a social satirist, an advocate of psychedelic drugs, and the [author](#) of a dystopian classic, [Brave New World](#) (1932). The sense of dread was also [cultivated](#) by [H.P. Lovecraft](#), who invented the famous *Necronomicon*, an imaginary book of knowledge so ferocious that any scientist who dares to read it [succumbs](#) to madness. On a more personal level, the works of [Philip K. Dick](#) (often adapted for film) present [metaphysical conundrums](#) about identity, humanity, and the nature of reality. Perhaps bleakest of all, the English philosopher [Olaf Stapledon](#)’s mind-stretching novels picture all of human [history](#) as a frail, passing bubble in the cold galactic stream of space and time.



Stapledon's views were rather specialized for the typical science fiction reader. When the genre began to gel in the early 20th century, it was generally disreputable, particularly in the [United States](#), where it first catered to a juvenile audience. Following [World War II](#), science fiction spread throughout the world from its epicentre in the [United States](#), spurred on by ever more staggering scientific feats, from the development of [nuclear energy](#) and atomic bombs to the advent of space travel, human visits to the Moon, and the real possibility of cloning human life.

By the 21st century, science fiction had become much more than a literary genre. Its [avid](#) followers and practitioners [constituted](#) a thriving worldwide subculture. Fans relished the seemingly endless variety of SF-related products and pastimes, including [books](#), [movies](#), [television](#) shows, computer games, [magazines](#), paintings, [comics](#), and, increasingly, collectible figurines, Web sites, DVDs, and toy weaponry. They frequently held well-attended, well-organized conventions, at which costumes were worn, handicrafts sold, and folk songs sung.



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## The evolution of science fiction

### Antecedents

[Antecedents](#) of science fiction can be found in the remote past. Among the earliest examples is the 2nd-century-CE Syrian-born Greek satirist [Lucian](#), who in *Trips to the Moon* describes sailing to the Moon. Such flights of fancy, or fantastic tales, provided a popular format in which to satirize government, society, and religion while evading libel suits, censorship, and persecution. The clearest forerunner of the genre, however, was the 17th-century swashbuckler [Cyrano de Bergerac](#), who wrote of a

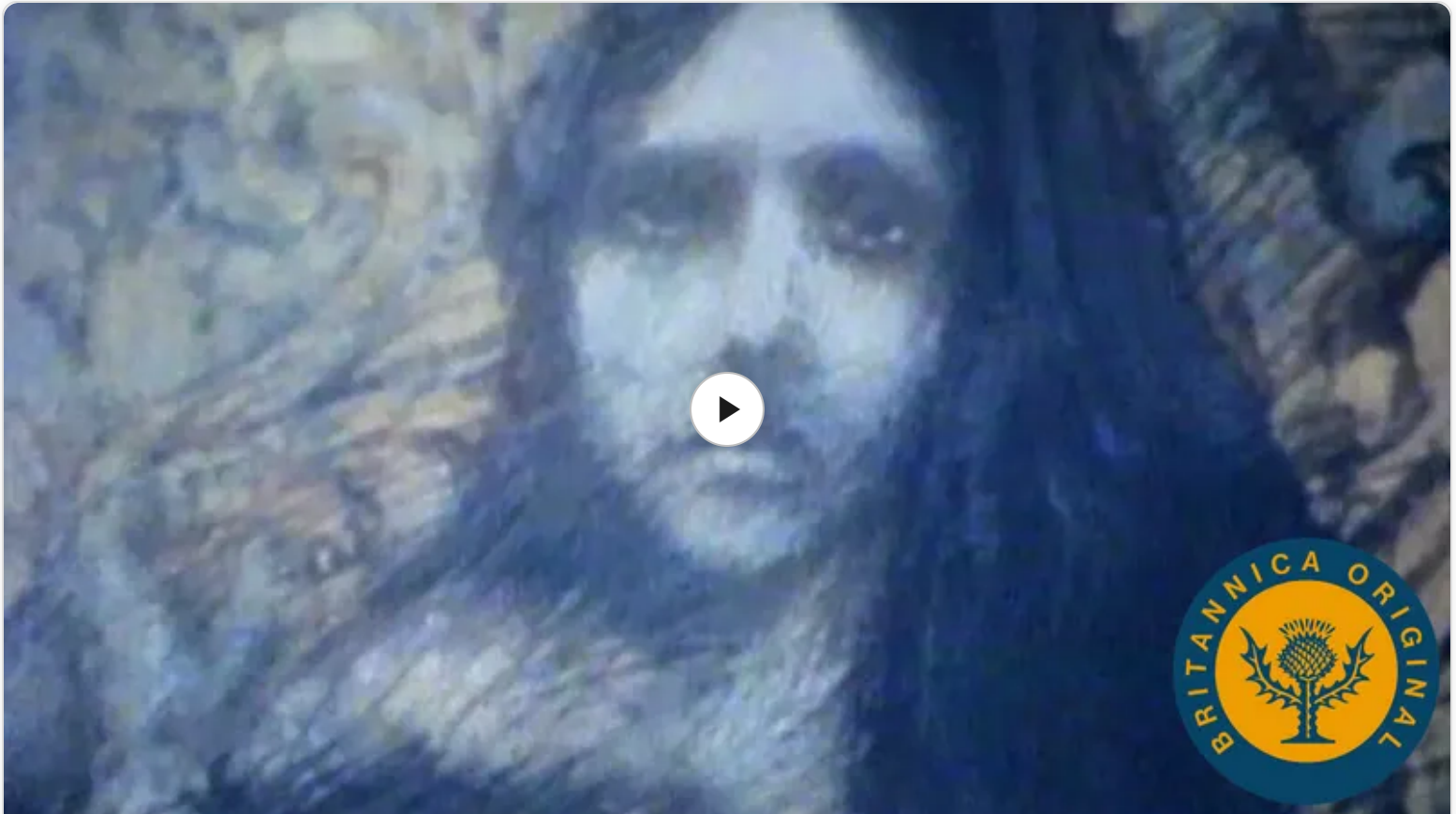
voyager to the Moon finding a utopian society of men free from war, disease, and hunger. (See below [Utopias and dystopias](#).) The voyager eats fruit from the biblical tree of knowledge and joins lunar society as a philosopher—that is, until he is expelled from the Moon for [blasphemy](#). Following a short return to Earth, he travels to the Sun, where a society of birds puts him on trial for humanity's crimes. In creating his diversion, Cyrano took it as his mission to make impossible things seem plausible. Although this and his other SF-like writings were published only posthumously and in various censored versions, Cyrano had a great influence on later satirists and social critics. Two works in particular—[Jonathan Swift's \*Gulliver's Travels\*](#) (1726) and [Voltaire's \*Micromégas\*](#) (1752)—show Cyrano's mark with their weird monsters, gross inversions of normalcy, and similar harsh satire.

Another [precursor](#) was [Louis-Sébastien Mercier's \*L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante\*](#) (c. 1771; “The Year 2440”; *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*), a work of French political speculation set in a 25th-century utopian society that worships science. While many writers had depicted some future utopian “Kingdom of God” or a utopian society in some mythical land, this was the first work to postulate a utopian society on Earth in the realizable future. The book was swiftly banned by the French [ancien régime](#), which recognized that Mercier's fantasy about “the future” was a thin disguise for his subversive revolutionary [sentiments](#). Despite this official sanction—or perhaps because of it—Mercier's book became an international [best seller](#). Both [Thomas Jefferson](#) and [George Washington](#) owned copies.

## The 19th and early 20th centuries

### Proto-science fiction

In 1818 [Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley](#) took the next major step in the evolution of science fiction when she published [Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus](#). Champions of Shelley as the “mother of science fiction” emphasize her innovative fictional scheme. Abandoning the occult folderol of the conventional [Gothic novel](#), she made her [protagonist](#) a practicing “scientist”—though the term *scientist* was not actually coined until 1834—and gave him an interest in galvanic [electricity](#) and vivisection, two of the advanced technologies of the early 1800s. Even though reanimated [corpses](#) remain fantastic today, Shelley gave her story an air of scientific plausibility. This masterly manipulation of her readers established a powerful new approach to creating thrilling sensations of wonder and fear. *Frankenstein* has remained in print since its first publication, and it has been adapted for [film](#) repeatedly since the first silent version in 1910. Frankenstein’s monster likewise remained a potent [metaphor](#) at the turn of the 21st century, when opponents of genetically engineered food coined the term *Frankenfood* to express their concern over the unknown effects of the human manipulation of foodstuffs.



**Consider science-fiction writer Ray Bradbury's views on Edgar Allan Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher”**

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Another significant 19th-century forerunner was [Edgar Allan Poe](#), who wrote many works loosely classifiable as science fiction. *The Balloon Hoax* of 1844, originally published in the *New York Sun*, is but one example of Poe's ability to provide [meticulous](#) technical descriptions intended to mislead and impress the gullible.

## Jules Verne





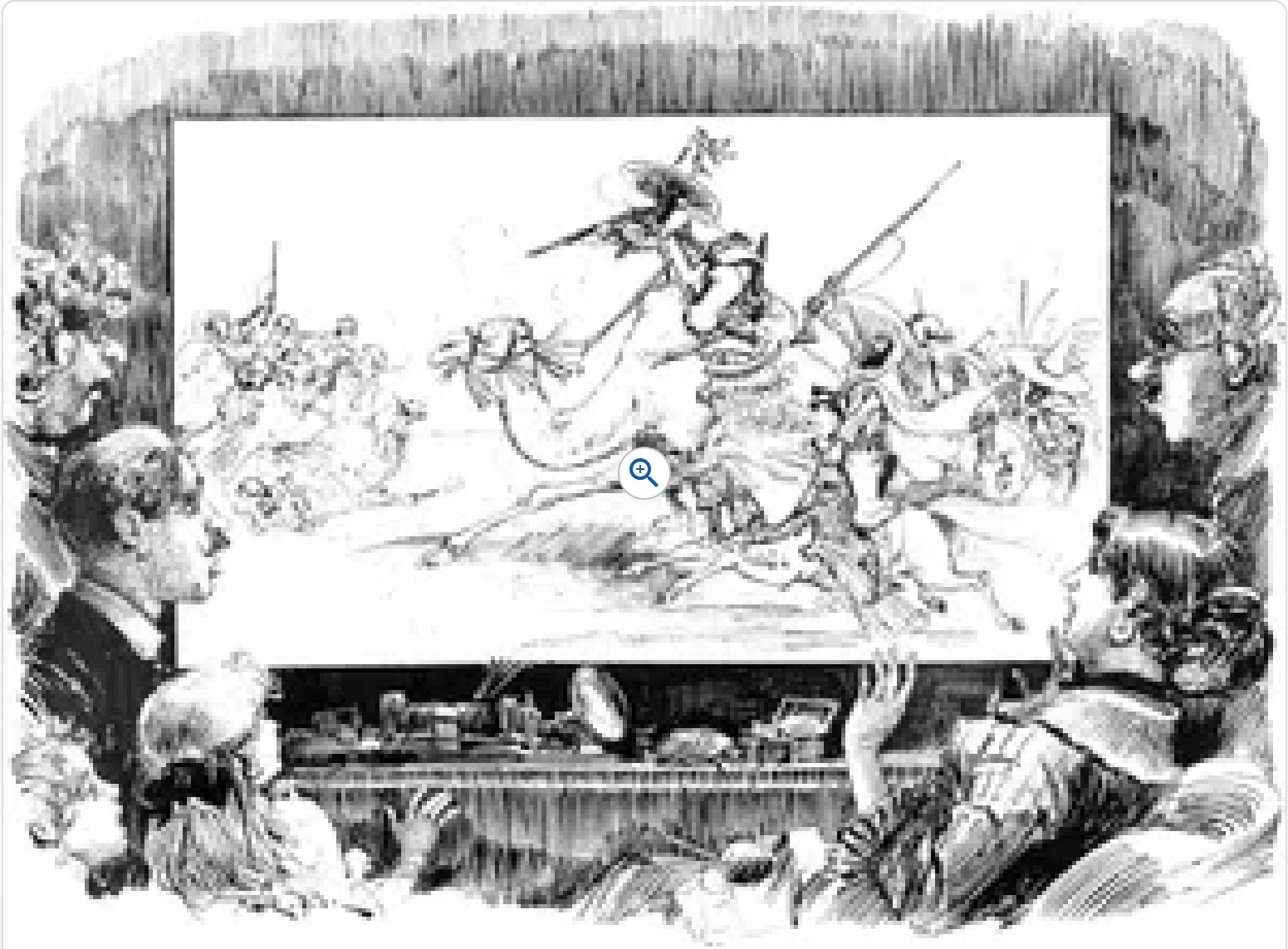




More significant to the [genre's](#) formation than Poe was [Jules Verne](#), who counted Poe among his influences and was arguably the inventor of science fiction. Verne's first [novel](#), *Paris au XXIème siècle* (*Paris in the Twentieth Century*)—written in 1863 but not published until 1994—is set in the distant 1960s and contains some of his most accurate prognostications: elevated trains, automobiles, facsimile machines, and computer-like banking machines. Nevertheless, the book's depiction of a dark and bitter dystopian world without art was too radical for Jules Hetzel, Verne's publisher.

Hetzel, who published a popular-science magazine for young people, the *Magasin illustré d'éducation et de récréation*, was a [shrewder](#) judge of public taste than Verne. With Hetzel's editorial guidance, Verne abandoned his far-fetched futurism and set to work on the first of his *Voyages extraordinaires*—*Cinq semaines en ballon* (1863; [Five Weeks in a Balloon](#)). In this series of contemporary techno-thrillers, the reader learns of balloons, submarines, trains, mechanical elephants, and many other engineering marvels, all described with unmatched technical accuracy and droll humour.

Verne's novels achieved remarkable international success, and he became a [legend](#) in his own time. His major works, which were adapted for film many times, remained popular into the 21st century, and the “scientific romance” became a permanent fixture of Western popular entertainment.



**Robida illustration**

Another uncannily prescient figure was the French illustrator [Albert Robida](#). His graphic cartoons (see the [figure](#)) and essays appeared in *Le Vingtième Siècle* (1882; *The 20th Century*), *La Vie électrique* (1883; “The Electric Life”), and the particularly ominous and impressive *La Guerre au vingtième siècle* (1887; “War in the 20th Century”). Although Robida’s shrewd extrapolations were created for comic effect, they proved remarkably akin to the 20th century’s reality. In fact, since Robida’s time, science fiction has often proved most prophetic not at its magisterial heights of [moral](#) sobriety but at its most louche and peculiar.

## Classic **British** science fiction

Great Britain as well as France experienced a flowering of creative imagination in the 1880s and '90s. Literary landmarks of the period included such innovative works as [Robert Louis Stevenson’s](#) *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and

H.G. Wells's phenomenal trio of *The Time Machine* (1895), [\*The Invisible Man\*](#) (1897), and [\*The War of the Worlds\*](#) (1898). Never before had fantastic events of seeming scientific plausibility erupted right in the midst of humdrum daily life. These works used the worldview presented by science to rip aggressively at the fabric of Victorian reality. As the 20th century dawned, many of science fiction's most common themes—space travel, time travel, [utopias](#) and [dystopias](#), and encounters with alien beings—bore British postmarks.

The technophilic tenor of the times, as well as 19th-century laissez-faire capitalism, also inspired a reaction from those who longed for a return to a preindustrial life. [William Morris's](#) [\*News from Nowhere\*](#) (1890) [envisioned](#) a 21st-century pastoral [utopia](#) that combined the [author's](#) socialist theories with the lucid and placid values of the 14th century. While some critics dismissed Morris's work as a communist tract, [C.S. Lewis](#) praised its style and language. Indeed, Lewis, [Lord Dunsany](#), [E.R. Eddison](#), [J.R.R. Tolkien](#), and a growing host of imitators imbued pastoral settings with heroic and mythic elements, often borrowing from a Christian [ethos](#). Examples of this type of work existed even across the Atlantic, notably in two novels by [William Dean Howells](#), the dean of late 19th-century American letters. In Howells's [\*A Traveler from Altruria\*](#) (1894) and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907), he described Altruria, a utopian world that combined the foundations of Christianity and the U.S. Constitution to produce an "ethical socialism" by which society was guided. Though heroic [fantasy](#) remained a minority taste in Britain and elsewhere for many decades, during the second half of the 20th century, it began to dominate bookstore shelves and book clubs (see [Science fiction after World War II](#)).

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