

*“Other Worlds, Other Ways -- or How Science Fiction Made Me a Better Historian”*

Amy M. Hay

This may seem odd, a graduate student entering their science fiction/fantasy collection for the MSU Libraries Student Book Collection Competition. Don't I have a zillion history books I could enter? Yes, but reading science fiction prepared me to be a good historian. Science fiction/fantasy deals with human beings put into other worlds, or at the very least, other circumstances, and examines what happens next. Good science fiction/fantasy asks “What makes us human?” or “How would humans respond if this happened?” I think I became a historian when I realized I could simply ask these questions of the past. Even more, I wanted to know how we came to this point in time having affected this world around us. If history looks at change over time -- looking backward -- science fiction just considers change over time looking forward (or speculating backward). Perhaps even more important, science fiction/fantasy offers glimpses of the human condition under a vast array of conditions, and the best writers do not hesitate to show humanity in all its frailty, ugliness, beauty and hope. For me, science fiction never appeared as an outcast literary genre. This talent shown by science fiction writers -- of exploring humans and the world they create -- seems to be essential to good historians as well.

So I guess the above represents my attempt to explain why I collected these books -- they spoke to me of what it meant to be human. All of these books suggest other ways to exist, other ways human beings organized their worlds, and other ways they handled difficulty. I began collecting some of the books listed here in my teens and early twenties, and have continued ever since. Over the last ten years, I have moved five or more times, sometimes out of the state of Michigan. Some of my books remain packed away in my sister's basement, waiting for me to rescue them with a tenure-track job and a home someplace. Some are very old friends, reread many times, while others are new finds, with all the excitement of discovering a new voice, a new vision. Some of these books would be called classics, and others deserve such designation. None of the books presented here hold intrinsic value -- none are first editions or signed copies. But they all contain priceless visions of very different worlds and other ways of being. All the authors here address, either in a small way or a big way, some aspect of humanity -- whether it be government, technology, cultural contact, insurrection, knowledge, families, love, hate, or fear. I gathered them a book at a time, often anxiously awaiting to find out what happens next ...