

Mr. Beck's Science Fiction/Fantasy Reading List, 2013-2014 School Year

Books that may change your life and how you look at our world and the future

I love science fiction. The best of it is true literature and it does something that regular fiction cannot do, at least not in the same way. Great science fiction takes humans with all their heroism and failures and asks, "But what would we do if we were put on worlds or in situations that humans have not encountered before?" Like all good literature, these stories have complex, believable characters and great narrative drive. Read them, write me at least a one page, "Response to Literature" style report describing the novel and what you thought/learned in reading it; 20 points extra credit. The following are some of my classic favorites, not necessarily in any particular order:

1. [*Dune*, by Frank Herbert](#). Set 10,000 years in the future, it is the story of the rise of a religious messiah on a desert world that is the source of a special drug that makes space navigation possible (since computers or "thinking machines" have been made illegal). It has strong male and female characters, adventure, war, politics, religion, giant creatures, ecological themes and empire. Considered a true classic of both science fiction and literature, *Dune* is kind of like *Lord of the Rings*, in that it takes about 50 pages to really get moving, but after that, watch out. Reading it, you will see where George Lucas and others borrowed many of the ideas for *Star Wars* and other movies.
2. [*The Mote in God's Eye*](#) by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. Other than *Dune* probably no other book can give you a better introduction to the best of what sci-fi has to offer in provoking wonder, fear, thought, imagination and a different way of looking at human nature. Another novel of galactic empire, but here the empire is the good guys. The story is actually about the first encounter with an alien species (a theme of many great science fiction stories) a couple of thousand years in the future. The novel is a great story of how we might handle a morally difficult and dangerous encounter, when the fascinating and adorable aliens turn out to have a terrifying secret – actually two or three of them. Along with humor, great characters (both human and alien) and realistic space battles, there are a lot of great ideas here in how space travel might be *lived*, how ships would be run and fought and how alien life could be both familiar and

- terrifyingly different. This story does a great job of taking you *there* and you will find yourself saying, “yes, that’s what it would be like...” to experience a different future that makes sense with what you know of today’s world.
3. [*Ender’s Game*](#) by Orson Scott Card. Written for the young adult market (that’s you guys, and it’s in our school library), there’s nothing simple or child like about this story, or the difficulties faced by one of the great characters in sci-fi, Andrew “Ender” Wiggins (along with two amazing siblings). Imagine being your age and having the fate of the entire human species on your shoulders. A classic story about the battle with a terrifying alien species (again, a “first contact” story) that wants our world and our destruction for their own very good reasons; this is a book that will stay with you and crop up unexpectedly in your thoughts long after you put it down. The epilogue alone will leave you shaken but elated. If you like this, try the two sequels, *Speaker for the Dead*, and *Xenocide*, longer, more involved novels that carry the main characters in *Ender* forward to our relationship with the second intelligent alien we discover.
 4. [*Ringworld*](#), by Larry Niven. A great adventure and some of the best human *and alien* characters ever in Science Fiction. The title describes the destination, a ring a million miles wide and the circumference of earth’s orbit discovered orbiting a star. And that’s just for starters; wait until you see what they find when they get there. Talk about living space.
 5. [*Footfall*](#), by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. (Yes, I like Niven’s work.) The classic invasion from space story (I’m amazed this one hasn’t been turned into a movie) set in our current time, not the future; but with a number of twists and alien invaders that are not what most people would expect. The story is good at asking just what hard choices people would be willing to make to defend the planet. Good hard science fiction, great characters and probably the best, most realistic, most exciting climactic space battle ever in a science fiction novel.
 6. *Childhood’s End* by Arthur C. Clarke. I mourned the death of Clarke in 2009. This book is one of the reasons why, and is the novel, along with *2001, A Space Odyssey* that made Clarke a giant of science

- fiction. It's set in our times and is the story of how humans are shown the next stage of their development and evolution by an all powerful, but sympathetic alien --- of course, with a twist. This one is a life changer for many people.
7. *Rendezvous with Rama* by Arthur C. Clark. The premise is that after a major earth city is wiped out by a small asteroid strike, the system set up to prevent it from happening again spots an alien object entering our solar system at high velocity. It's clearly not an asteroid and it's not heading to earth, but astronauts are sent to investigate. The object is code named "Rama". Good, hard science fiction first contact story.
 8. *I, Robot*, by Issac Asimov. This was made into a pretty good Will Smith movie a some years ago. Like many movies made from novels, there is *soooo much more* good stuff in the book. Each chapter is really a stand alone short story about the history of the development of robots through time, from the first klutzy models to those that are impossible to tell from humans. It lays out the "three laws of robotics" which you will see would *have* to be in place if we are to have robots in our world. Very clever, thoughtful stories, usually involving the implications and interpretations (by the robots) of the three laws and their effect on how robots and humans interact. Again, you will see the effect this novel has had on movies like *Blade Runner*, *A.I.* and other films.
 9. *Contact* by Carl Sagan. The late Carl Sagan was the astronomer and writer who pushed much of the planetary exploration we are doing today, and headed the Voyager probe programs for NASA. Both probes carry a disc with images and information of earth and its people. Sagan had these discs designed just in case the probes are ever encountered by some thing else out there as they head off as the first man made objects to leave our solar system. He was also a very prolific writer and one of the best at explaining science for the general public. If you ever saw the *Cosmos* series on Discovery or PBS, you saw some of his best work. *Contact* was one of his best novels, and was made into a better than average science fiction movie a decade or so ago starring Jodie Foster as an astronomer. It is another variation of the first contact story, only here humans are sent instructions on how to build an interstellar transportation system.

10. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter Miller: The world has been devastated by a nuclear war, and humanity has again sunk into a medieval dark ages in revulsion against learning and technology. Only in scattered monasteries, including one in the desert of what used to be New Mexico do men try to learn and relearn what was lost. Here a young monk is trying to decipher what he is sure is a hugely important document from before the “age of simplification.” The document was left by Saint Leibowitz, and it simply says, “pound pastrami, can kraut, six bagels, bring home for Emma.” What can it mean? The book is a series of vignettes set in the monastery as over the centuries mankind re-discovers science and technology – along with the benefits and dangers of technology. You will find the book both funny and at the same time, life changing in its thought provoking look at human nature. This is a sci-fi/literary classic that will come up in your thoughts for the rest of your life.
11. *The Star Beast* by Robert Heinlein: So, you’ve got this pet alien named LummoX that your late father brought back to earth from a war he fought *out there*. It’s been in the family for years, and it’s really sweet and it talks to you and is your best pal. It used to be puppy size but now it’s gotten REALLY big, it eats a lot, and whenever it eats iron (and the thing can eat *anything*) it grows even more. Then it *really* gets in trouble, and you with it. Luckily, you’ve got a really smart, hot girlfriend who can talk her way into or out of anything, and while the two you are working really hard together to save LummoX, and avoid jail time, things get really interesting when LummoX’s relatives come looking for him (her?) from – *out there*.... Heinlein always has a great young person’s view of the world, and while he loves being a guy, he writes great female characters. This book is funny, smart and as always in good Sci-fi books, there are layers of meaning. And with aliens, there are always surprises, no matter how long they have lived with your family....
12. *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury. Along with Heinlein, few writers are more revered by sci-fi fans than Bradbury. At this writing, he is in his 90’s and still writing. He has written screenplays, TV scripts, and some of the greatest sci-fi works ever. *The Martian Chronicles* is a series of vignettes about the exploration of Mars. Forget what we know about Mars, these stories will make you think about the nature of humans, what it means to be alien and how we

might interact with other species. Bradbury's writing is incredibly evocative and poetic. You will love his Mars and his Martians.

13. *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. Another classic you will have a chance to read this year in Language Arts. A gritty contrast to the poetic fantasy of *The Martian Chronicles*, *Fahrenheit 451* (the title is the temperature at which paper bursts into flame) asks what a good man might do if he had to enforce laws he knows are wrong, in this case, the burning of books. The book has a sense and theme similar to Orwell's *1984*, but most people like Bradbury's writing better, and like much good speculative fiction, it makes you think about how things could turn out if we are not careful with our freedoms.

Note to parents: The following novels are written for the adult audience and as such have some, usually limited, sexual and/or drug references in them. If your children have seen any PG-13 or R rated movies (and its likely many of them have, whether you know it or not), then you have nothing to fear from these stories, and much to recommend in terms of making them think about things beyond their everyday world. Given the movies and books many of my students do read and see, these stories can only be a positive counter to much of the culture they live in.

14. *Cosm*; *Eater*; and *Beyond Infinity* by Gregory Benford. Benford is a working physics professor at UC Irvine. These are great hard science fiction and are fun for those of us in southern California since many are set in and around Orange County. *Cosm* is about the accidental creation of a new universe branching off of ours through the interactions of particles in large particle collider. This is a theoretical possibility in the real world. As you may imagine, the existence of this "cosm" sets off a whole chain of scientific and political implications and peril for the main characters. *Eater* is about a small, intelligent black hole (its intellect exists in the complex magnetic field patterns that surround black holes) that wanders into our solar system and announces its intention to consume earth and its cultures. Now, what would you do about that?? *Beyond Infinity* is about the humans and their greatly enhanced descendents that live on a far different earth a **billions** years in the future. These still human descendents must live on an earth and in a solar system that has

changed almost unrecognizably from ours, and, they face a terrifying threat from other dimensions that is invading our dimensions. This one will stretch your imagination a lot.

15. *Titan; Wizard and Demon* by John Varley. This trilogy presumes that the first manned expedition to the outer solar system discovers a thousand mile diameter hollow, living wheel artifact orbiting Saturn. We haven't discovered this thing with our space probes because it orbits far from Saturn, it's colored black, and its' relatively small size and mass (because it's hollow!!) don't affect the orbits of the other moons to alert us of its existence. When the mission is re-directed – as it naturally would be -- to investigate the artifact, the wheel reaches out with tentacles to grab the ship. Again, that's just for starters. When the astronauts awake inside the wheel, they find that they are not the people they were before and that they are now inside a living, breathing intelligent being that is a world and god unto itself, and the creator of thousands of alien species, including a centaur like species made just for humans; a “first contact” story with a bio-engineering theme. This one is out there, but believable and fun. The central character, Captain Cirocco Jones is one of the great female characters in sci-fi; heroic, hot and smart.

16. *Time Enough for Love* by Robert Heinlein. Heinlein (see *The Star Beast*, above) is considered by most to be the king of the classic era of sci-fi, running from the '30s to the '70s. This novel is his masterpiece in many ways. It is the memoirs of a 2000 year old man, who happens to be the living ancestor of much of the human race at the time of the story some 2000 plus years in the future. He is old and tired and ready to die, but his descendents trick him into living at least long enough to tell his story and pass on all his wisdom. After all, wouldn't you want to hear what a guy who has been married hundreds of times, fought and survived dozens of wars and led the settlement of any number of new planets has to say? The novel consists of four or five periods from the character, Lazarus Long's life. The book funny and weird and exciting, and it has the greatest love story in all of sci-fi (trust me guys, you will get into it), his life with his non-immortal wife as they settle a new planet together. There are several sections (*The Notebooks of Lazarus Long*, since reprinted as a separate booklet) through the book of Lazarus Long's words of wisdom, which are worth the price of the book alone.

17. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, by Ursula K. LeGuinn, (see *Wizard of Earthsea* below). What would it be like if you lived in a cold, snowy world where everyone switched sexes every few months? That is, men would become capable of bearing children, and women would become men, then switch back again a few months later. LeGuinn is one of true literary masters of sci-fi. Like all of the best sci-fi, this asks us to consider who we really are. Though it sounds like the story would be about sex, or strange sex, sex itself plays little part in the story. What it really asks us to do is to consider who men and women are, and what roles do we really play in our lives and cultures. The plot is fascinating and takes several twists. Something completely different in a novel that is taught in literature classes around the world.
18. *Clan of the Cave Bear*, by Jean Auel. This is another series that people get passionate about to the point of starting web sites and fan clubs. Not technically science fiction, these are more properly historical novels, set 30,000 years ago during the last major ice age in Europe. The books are the story of Ayla, a human child orphaned at the age of five who is adopted by a tribe of Neanderthal cave people, the other species we shared the world with then. Ayla is raised by the medicine woman in the tribe, and grows up to be a healer and a person who can work with and control animals. The books trace her growth to adulthood, her decision to strike out and live alone, and of course the search for love, and a home of her own. If you ever wondered what it would be like to be a Stone Age person, these stories are for you. The books are meticulously researched and one of their great attractions is the detail about what life was like then in terms of food, clothing, hunting and home life. It isn't necessarily as bad as you might think (people were smart then too), and the food actually sounds pretty good. Of course Ayla is beautiful, intelligent, brave, a superior hunter and eventually meets Jondalar, a great, really handsome guy. Men, women, boys and girls love these stories.
19. *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams. If you can imagine what it would be like if Monty Python wrote science fiction, you have an idea of what this series of books would be like. Very English, very funny, but with an undercurrent of serious commentary on the human condition, quantum physics, bureaucracy, love and fate. The gist of the plot is that schlubby Englishman Arthur Dent is accidentally saved from the destruction of the earth (it's in the way of an interstellar transit system being built by an alien race called the

Vogons) and embarks on the search for the “Question to the Ultimate Answer” with his new friends. These books have a cult following of hip college kids and lovers of English humor. Goofy, intelligent fun.

20. *The Hunger Games, Catching Fire and Mockingjay* by Suzanne Collins. Sophisticated young adult novels about a post-apocalyptic America called Panem. Here, young people from ages 12 to 18 are selected to fight to the death in a huge, televised national event each year. The trilogy’s central character, Katniss Everdeen is one of those combatants. Like all good novels, these work at several levels as romance, political and social commentary and as raw, violent adventure. These will no doubt be classics in the future, and have a huge following of readers of all ages.

Fantasy/Horror Stuff:

I’m not a huge fan of fantasy/horror stuff, but there are some wonderful exceptions. With the same cautions mentioned above, try these:

1. The *Earthsea* books by Ursula K. LeGuinn. This is a series of four novels and a book of short stories by one of true literary giants of sci-fi. It starts with *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the story of Ged, a young wizard in training (you will see some of the influence this book had on Harry Potter, though it has almost nothing in common with those stories) in the world of Earthsea. Earthsea is an earthlike planet with basically a medieval culture and technology. However they do have wizards, **dragons** and magic in a world of islands, oceans and no continents. All travel is by sailing ship (making it nearly perfect). Ged is a brave but headstrong young wizard who oversteps his training and releases something awful into the world. The plot centers on his growth from boy to man as he seeks to undo what he started. It’s a quest and coming of age story that has influenced many of the fantasy (Ann McCaffery’s books and *Eragon*) novels many of you have read. It is beautifully written (no exaggeration, LeGuinn is an amazing, evocative writer), exciting and unlike many people’s concept of magic, the spells have a cost and consequences; nothing is free. This is right in there with *Ender’s Game* as one of the best novels ever written for young adult readers, and I recommend it to everyone. It’s also in the school library. Read the rest of the series if you like this.

2. *Interview With The Vampire* by Anne Rice. Okay, you've read all the Stephanie Meyer books. Now read the author that created our modern concept of the vampire 30 years ago. You will also read someone who is a beautiful writer with a wonderful command of the English language, which is not something you can always say about Meyer. Rice's vampires – Louis, his friend and nemesis Lestat, and the unforgettable Claudia -- are, to me, bigger characters, more charming and scarier than Meyer's, and this book is just *different*. Rice's vampires are also creepier and have a much deeper back story. You will never again pass a pale person under the streetlights at night without looking them over twice. People fall in love with these books and characters, and many of these stories will stay in your thoughts forever. Follow-up with *The Vampire Lestat*, *Queen of the Damned* and then *Memnoch, the Devil* (that one will get you).
3. The *Game of Thrones* series by George R.R. Martin. A world of kings, knights, dragons and a frozen north beyond a mile high ice wall, with winters and summers that last for years, these are amazing, complex and exciting stories. Some of the best fantasy characters ever, with complex, intertwining plots. These are stories that sweep people up for years. HBO has made a wonderful multi-season series from the novels. Again, these stories have some very adult elements, though many of the best characters are teenagers trying to find their way in a dangerous world.
4. *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. What would it be like to be a wild rabbit in the English countryside? Richard Adams is an English author who has written a number of books about life from the viewpoint of animals. We think of rabbits as the little white bunnies in pet shops. Wild rabbits are a much different creature, very much the way wolves and coyotes are much tougher and smarter than Chihuahuas. A rabbit is food for almost anything or anyone who can catch one. They survive by their wits, their speed, their toughness, their senses and by relying on their friends and family. If they can't outwit or outrun an enemy, they will fight and die if they have to, even if that enemy is another group of rabbits. When bulldozers destroy their home network of tunnels for a new housing development, the rabbit Fiver leads a band of

friends in their search for a new home. This isn't Disney and Thumper. The story has adventure, terror and humor set in the real world as the rabbits see it. Its tough being a rabbit in a scary big world, but it's also heroic. Like the Harry Potter books, it will take you a little while to get used to the England English words for plants and things like trucks (lorries in England – English), but you'll love it.

That should keep you busy for a while.

Mr. Beck