

## **What SF Writers Want**

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I think some of the appeal of SF comes from its association with the old idea of the Magic Wish. Any number of fairy tales deal with a hero (humble woodcutter, poor fisherman, disinherited princess) who gets into a situation where he or she is free to ask for any wish at all, with assurance that the wish will be granted. Reading such a tale, the reader inevitably wonders, "What would *I* wish for?" It's pleasant to fantasize about having such great power; and thinking about this also provides an interesting projective psychological test.

Some SF stories hinge on the traditional Magic Wish situation — the appearance of a machine (= magic object) or an alien (= magic being) who will grant the main character's wishes. But more often, the story takes place *after* the wish has been made . . . by whom? By the author.

What I mean here is that, in writing a book, an SF writer is in a position of being able to get any Magic Wish desired. If you want time travel in your book . . . no problem. If you want flying, telepathy, size-change, etc., then you, as SF writer, can have it — not in the real world, of course, but in the artificial, written world into which you project your thoughts.

To make my point quite clear, let me recall a conversation I once had with a friend in Lynchburg. "Wouldn't it be great," my friend was saying, "if there were a machine that could bring into existence any universe you wanted, with any kinds of special powers. A machine that could call up your favorite universe, and then send you

there." "There is such a machine," I answered. "It's called a typewriter."

Okay. So the point I want to start from here is the notion that, in creating a novelistic work, the writer is basically in a position of being able to have any wish whatsoever granted.

What kinds of things do we, as SF writers, tend to wish for? What sorts of possibilities seem so attractive to us that we are willing to spend the months necessary to bring them into the pseudoreality of a polished book? What kinds of needs underlie the wishes we make?

In discussing this, my basic assumption is that the driving force behind our SF wishes is a desire to find a situation wherein one might happy . . . whatever "happy" might mean for any particular writer.

There are, of course, a variety of very ordinary ways to wish for happiness: wealth, sexual attractiveness, political power, athletic prowess, sophistication, etc. I'm not going to be too interested in these types of wishes here — because such wishes are not peculiar to the artform of SF. Any number of standard paperback wish-fulfillments deal with characters whom the author has wished into such lower-chakra delights.

No, the kind of wishes I want to think about here are the weird ones — wishes that have essentially no chance of coming true — wishes that are really worth asking for.

I can think of four major categories of SF wishes, each with several subcategories:

*(1) Travel.*

(1.1) Space travel. (1.2) Time travel. (1.3) Changing size scale.

(1.4) Travel to other universes

*(2) Psychic powers.*

(2.1) Telepathy. (2.2) Telekinesis.

*(3) Self-change.*

(3.1) Immortality. (3.2) Intelligence increase. (3.3) Shape shifting.

(4) *Aliens.*

(4.1) Robots. (4.2) Saucer aliens.

Let's look at these notions one at a time.

(1) *Travel.* Your position relative to the universe can perhaps be specified in terms of four basic parameters: (1.1) space-location, (1.2) time-location, (1.3) your size, and (1.4) which universe you're actually in. Our powers to alter these parameters are very limited. Although it is possible to change space-location, this is hard and slow work. We travel in time, but only in one direction, and only at one fixed speed. In the course of a lifetime, our size changes, but only to a small extent. And jumping back and forth among parallel universes is a power no one even pretends to have. Let's say a bit about the ways in which science fiction undertakes to alter each of these four stubborn parameters.

(1.1) *Space travel.* Faster-than-light drives, matter transmission, and teleportation are all devices designed to annihilate the obdurate distances of space. One might almost say that these kind of hyper-jumping devices turn space into time. You no longer worry about how far something is, you just ask when you should show up.

Would happiness finally be mine if I could break the fetters of space? I visualize a kind of push-button phone-dial set into my car's dashboard, and imagine that by punching in the right sequence of digits I can get *anywhere*. (Actually, the very first SF story I ever read was a Little Golden Book called *The Magic Bus*. I read it in the second grade. The Bus had just one special button on the dash, and each push on the button would take the happily tripping crew to a new *randomly selected* locale. Of course — ah, if only it were still so easy — everyone got home to Mom in time for supper and bed.) That would be fun, but would it be enough? And what is enough, anyway?

In terms of the Earth, power over space is already, in a weak sense, ours. If it matters enough to you, you can actually travel anywhere on Earth — it's not instantaneous, using cars and planes, but you do get there in a few days. Even easier, by

using a telephone, you can actually project part of yourself (ears and voice) to any place where there's someone to talk to. But these weak forms of Earth-bound space travel are the domain of travel writing and investigative journalism, not of SF.

Hyperjumping across space would be especially useful for travel to other planetary civilizations. One underlying appeal in changing planets would be the ability to totally skip out on all of one's immediate problems, the ability to get out of a bad situation. "Color me gone," as some soldiers reportedly said, getting on the plane that would take them away from Viet Nam and back to the U.S. "I'm out of here, man, I'm going back to the *world*." Jumping to a far-distant planet would involve an escape from real life, and certainly SF is, to some extent, a literature of escape.

(1.2) *Time travel*. I once asked Robert Silverberg why time travel has fascinated him so much over the years. He said that he felt the desire to go back and make good all of one's major life-errors and past mistakes. I tend to look at this a little more positively — I think a good reason for wanting to go back to the past is the desire to re-experience the happy times that one has had. The recovery of lost youth, the revisiting of dead loved ones.

A desire to time travel to an era before one's birth probably comes out of a different set of needs than does a desire to travel back to earlier stages of one's own life. People often talk about the paradoxes involved in going back to kill their ancestors — this gets into the territory of parricide and matricide. And a sublimated desire for suicide informs the tales about directly killing one's past self. Other time travel stories talk about going back to watch one's parents meeting — I would imagine that this desire has something to do with the old Freudian concept of witnessing the "primal scene."

What about time travel to the future? This comes, I would hazard, out of a desire for immortality. To *still be here*, long after your chronological death.

To a lesser extent than with space, we have some slight power over time: each day

you live through brings you one day further into the future, and going to sleep is a way of making the future come "sooner." And one of the appeals of marijuana is that it can make time seem to pass slower, making the future come "later." And of course, a session of intensely focused recollection can make the past briefly seem alive. (Thus Proust, thus psychoanalysis.)

As with power over space, we must question whether power over time is really enough to wish for. Eventually, both of these powers simply boil down to having a special sort of "car" which enables you to jump here and there, checking out weirder and weirder scenes.

(1.3) *Changing size scale.* Without having to actually travel through space or time, one could see entirely new vistas simply by shrinking to the size of a microbe. Alternatively, one might try growing to the size of a galaxy.

One problem with getting very big is that you might accidentally crush the Earth, and have nothing to come back to. I prefer the idea of shrinking. What need in me does this speak to? On a sexual level, the notion of getting very small is probably related to an Oedipal desire to return to the peaceful and ultra-sexual environment of the womb. On a social level, getting small connotes the idea of being so low-profile as to be unbothered by the brutal machineries of law and fame. Economically speaking, being small suggests independence — if I were the size of a thumb, my food bills would be minuscule. A single can of beer would be the equivalent of a full keg!

I would like to be able to get as small as I liked, whenever I wanted to. But would it be enough? Would I be happy then? Probably not. After a week or so, it would get as old as anything else.

(1.4) *Travel to other universes.* In a way, all three of the powers just mentioned are special instances of being able to jump into a different universe. Most of what was said about space travel applies here. Of course, travel to alternate universes can also be

taken in a very broad sense which includes travel into higher-dimensional spaces and the like.

One's place in the world seems to be fixed by such factors as income and ability — in another world, things might be so much more pleasant. Rich people and poor people live in different worlds — on a crude level, winning a state lottery can act as a ticket to a different universe. A dose of a psychedelic drug can, of course, accomplish an equally dramatic (but temporary) transportal — this is one reason why people take them.

The drug issue raises the fact that the universe is not entirely objective. To a large extent, the way your world seems is conditioned by the way you feel about it. Keep in mind that I think the driving force behind all of the SF travel-wishes is a desire to find a place/time/size/universe in which to be happy. Rather than asking for a *different* world, one might equally well ask for a way to enjoy *this* world.

(2) *Psychic powers*. Travel is only the first category of SF wishes. Psychic power is the second of the four main categories mentioned above. What might we take to be the main types of SF psychic-power wishes? Let's try these: (2.1) telepathy, and (2.2) telekinesis.

(2.1) *Telepathy*. Supposedly, God can see everything at once — God is omniscient. Telepathy is a type of omniscience, particularly if we imagine it as extended to include clairvoyance. It would definitely be pleasant to know everything — to be plugged totally into the cosmos as a whole. I *guess* it would be pleasant — actually, it might get boring. The omniscient gods of our myths and religions do seem a bit restless.

On a more personal level, I think of telepathy as standing for a situation where you are in perfect accord and communion with someone else. This often happens when one is alone with a good friend or a loved one. These moments are, I would hazard, as close to real happiness as one ever gets. The desire for telepathy is basically a desire for love and under-standing.

Of course, what one often sees in SF telepathy stories is the hero or heroine being overwhelmed by the inputs from everyone else's minds. You want to understand the people you love — the others you'd just as soon not know about.

As with the case of space-travel, telepathy is a faculty that we already, to some extent, have. By talking or by writing, I am able to get someone to share my state of mind; by listening or by reading, I can learn to understand others. Maybe we already have enough telepathy as it is.

(2.2) *Telekinesis*. Not only is God omniscient, S/He is omnipotent. Given a really strong telekinetic (also known as psychokinetic or PK) ability, you would be, in effect, able to control anything going on in the world.

This power appeals to me very little. I don't want to control the world — I just want to enjoy it. I don't need to run it, it's doing a decent job by itself. Of course, a person with less self-doubt might find PK very attractive.

As with telepathy, I might also point out that we already have PK in a limited form. I stare fixedly at the cigarettes on my desk. I concentrate. Moments later a lit cigarette is in my mouth! (Does the fact that, by sheer force of will, I caused my material hand to pick up the cigarettes and light one make my feat less surprising?)

There is one special sort of telekinesis that I do find very appealing. This is the ability to levitate. All my life I have dreamed of flying — as far as I'm concerned, the ability to fly is right up there with the ability to shrink.

But what is so special about flying? Flying involves being high off the ground, and most everyone likes the metaphor of being high — in the sense of euphoria, elation, and freedom from worry. Rising above the mundane. Freud used to claim that flying dreams have some connection with sex, and I suppose that a good act of sexual intercourse does feel something like flying. And of course, flying would provide some of the same benefits that teleportation would, as discussed under (1.1) above.

(3) *Self change*. Under this vaguely titled category, I include: (3.1) immortality, (3.2) intelligence increase, and (3.3) shape shifting, or the ability to change the shape of one's body.

(3.1) *Immortality*. This is a key wish. As soon as we are born, we are presented with what I have elsewhere called the fundamental koan: "Hi, you're alive now, isn't it nice? Someday it will all stop and you will be dead. What are you going to do about it?" The fear of death is up there with the need for love as one of the really basic human drives.

One problem with immortality might be that you would at some point get bored. I've occasionally been so depressed that I've thought to myself, "Death is the only thing that makes life bearable," meaning that if I thought I was going to have to be here forever, I just wouldn't be able to stand it. (Though if you couldn't die, and you couldn't stand it, what could you do? Not a bad premise for an SF story . . .)

There are various sorts of immortality, short of the real thing, that we do comfort ourselves with. Let me list them, as I've thought about this a lot:

(3.1.1) *Genetic immortality*. If you have children, then your DNA code will still be around, even after you die. Later descendants may look and/or act like you — which means that the pattern you call "me" will still be, to some extent, present in the world.

(3.1.2) *Artistic immortality*. A human being consists (at least) of hardware (= the body) plus software (= the ideas). In creating a work of art, you code up some of your software. A person reading one of your books is something like a computer running a program that you wrote. As long as the person is looking at your book and thinking along the lines which the book suggests, then that person is, in some degree, a simulation of you, the author.

(3.1.3) *Social immortality.* Even if you have no children and leave no works of art, you will still, in the course of your life, have contributed in various ways to the society in which you found yourself. Perhaps you were a teacher, and you affected some students. Perhaps you sold clothes, and you influenced what people wore. Even if you had no direct influences, you were, to some extent, a product of the society that you lived in, and so long as this society continues to exist you still have a slight kind of immortality in that the society will continue to produce people somewhat like you.

(3.1.4) *Racial immortality.* This is similar to (3.1.1) and (3.1.3); similar to (3.1.1) if one takes cousins into account, similar to (3.1.3) if one views the human race as a single large society.

(3.1.5) *Spacetime immortality.* This perception of immortality hinges on the viewpoint that *time is not really passing*. Past-present-future all co-exist in a single four dimensional “block universe.” Today (May 14, 1984) will always exist, outside of time, and thus I will always exist as well.

(3.1.6) *Mathematical immortality.* It is abstractly possible to imagine coding my body and brain up by a very large array of numbers. This is analogous to the way in which extremely complex computer programs are embodied in machine-language patterns of zeroes and ones. The numerical description of me may in fact be infinite — no matter. The main thing is that this numerical coding can be represented as a mathematical set. And the Platonic school of the foundations of mathematics teaches that mathematical sets exist independently of the physical world. Therefore, long after I am dead, I will still have a permanent existence as a mathematical possibility.

(3.1.7) *Mystical immortality.* At the most profound level, I do not feel myself to be just my body, or just my mind. I feel, at this deepest

level, that I am simply a part of the One, a facet of the Absolute. The disappearance of my body will mean only that the ever-changing One has changed its form a bit.

(3.1.8) *Religious immortality*. Who knows — maybe we do have souls that God will take care of. This belief is in some ways like the idea of mathematical immortality. When the good thief asked Jesus to "Remember me," perhaps he meant it more literally than is usually realized.

(3.2) *Intelligence increase*. The idea of having a vastly increased intelligence is certainly attractive — particularly to people who already take pleasure in the life of the mind. One difficulty in writing SF about vastly increased intelligence is that it is hard for us to imagine — or to write about — what that would involve.

What does the wish for more intelligence really mean? It is somehow akin to the wish to be much bigger in size — a wish to include more of the universe in one's scope of comprehension.

Pushed to the maximum, a desire for increased intelligence is a desire for omniscience or perhaps a wish to know "the Secret of Life." What would it be like to know the Secret of Life? Somehow I have the image of an orgasm that goes on and on, a never-ending torrent of blinding enlightenment. It sounds nice, but we do need contrasts to be able to perceive.

(3.3) *Shape shifting*. One form of this wish is analogous to the intellectual's wish for more intelligence. An athletically-inclined person might naturally wish to be a world-class athlete; and a physically attractive person might wish to be a Hollywood star. In each case, it's a matter of wanting to be better at what one already does well. We might also include here a compassionate person's desire to be saintly, and an artist's desire to be truly great.

Why should we want to be the *best*? The drive for excellence seems to be wired in

way down there — it's good for the race, within limits.

The kind of shape shifting I really had in mind here, though, was things like *turning into a dog*. You could really get a lot of slack if you could totally change your appearance at will. For me, this one is right up there with flying and shrinking: the ability to change my body at will. It would be so interesting to see the world through a dog's eyes, or through another kind of person's eyes.

What need is this one coming from? Wanting a diversity of experience, I guess. A desire to break out of the personality-mold inflicted on me by my specific body's appearance and habits.

(4) *Aliens*. By aliens, I mean two kinds of beings: (4.1) robots, and (4.2) saucer aliens.

(4.1) *Robots*. Intelligent robots will be very exciting — if we're ever able to evolve them. One aspect is that if we can bring intelligent life into being, then we will better understand what we ourselves are like. Another angle that appeals to me is that, given intelligent robots, it would be possible to program one to be just like me, so that I would then have yet another type of immortality to access.

In some ways, we think of robots as being like the ideal sorts of people that don't really exist. The notion of a happy, obedient, intelligent slave, for instance. Given human nature, no such human slave is possible. But still we hope to build a machine like this. Such hopes are, no doubt, doomed for disappointment. A machine smart enough to act human will be unlikely to settle for being a slave.

Another thing that makes robots attractive is the notion that they might always be rational. People are so rarely rational — but why is this? Not because we wouldn't *like* to be rational. The real reason is that the world is so complex, one's data are so slight, and so many decisions are required. Full rationality is, in a formal sense, impossible for us — and it will, I fear, be impossible for the robots as well.

There's another SF tradition of writing about computer brains; here instead of intelligent robots, the vision is of a very large computer brain which is seemingly very wise and just. It is as if we humans might be hoping to build the God-the-Father whom we fear no longer exists. In most such stories the god-computer turns out to be evil, either like a cruel dictatorship or like a blandly uncaring bureaucracy. But this leads us out of the domain of things that writers *wish for*.

(4.2) *Saucer aliens*. I loosely use the phrase "saucer aliens" to include any kind of creatures that might show up on Earth, either from space, from underground, or from another dimension.

In C. G. Jung's classic book on UFO's, he makes the point that, in popular mythology, saucer aliens play much the same role that angels did in the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> There is a hope that no matter how evil and messed up things might get on Earth, there are still some higher forces who might step in and fix everything. The UFO aliens are, perhaps, replacements for the gods we miss, or for our parents who have grown old and weak.

Another very important strand in thinking about saucer aliens is the element of sexual attraction. A key element to sexual attraction is the idea of *otherness*. An alien stands for something wholly outside of yourself that is, perhaps, willing to get close to you anyway. This drive is probably hard-wired into us for purposes of exogamy: it's genetically unwise to mate with people so similar to you that they might be your cousins.

It is interesting in this context to note how some rock-groups try to give an impression of being aliens.

Of course, Earth is already full of aliens — other races, other sexes, other

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<sup>1</sup> C. G. Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1958. See my *Saucer Wisdom* for further discussion.

backgrounds. By constantly striving to broaden one's circle of understanding, one can begin to see the world in a variety of ways.

So — those are some of the things that SF writers want. Undoubtedly, I've left out some important types of SF wishes, and it may be that some other pattern of classifying SF dreams is more enlightening. One thing that I do find surprising is that it is at all possible to begin a project of this nature. When one first comes to SF, there is a feeling of unlimited possibility — what is startling is how few basic SF themes there really are. As indicated, I think most of our favorite themes appeal to us for reasons that are psychological.

As long as I'm whipped up into this taxonomic mania for systemizing things, let me suggest that the psychology of human behavior is based upon avoiding Three Bad Things, and upon seeking Three Good Things that are the respective opposites of the Bad Things.

The Three Bad Things might be called Jail, Madness, and Death — and the Three Good Things would be Change, Slack, and Love.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I mean “Jail” here in the sense of any kind of imprisonment or dulling routine, and I mean “Slack” in the sense of serenity and inner peace.