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# “To Boldly Go”: Why Cross-Cultural Missionaries Should Read Science Fiction

ALAN HOWELL

*The weary traveler arrives by aircraft, landing on the outskirts of a bustling metropolis. While in some ways this city reminds him of home, he is disoriented by the new language and strange clothing. People stop and stare at him, touching his hair and skin. He feels unsettled, wondering how he will be able to fit in and how he can find people who can help him accomplish his mission.*

*Another voyager awakens in what seems to be a different age. She seems to have traveled back in time, as the people surrounding her use antique tools and weapons. They cook over open fires and prepare foods with strange names and smells. She is intimidated, wondering how she'll be able to survive in this new environment.*

The two plot summaries detailed above could describe the latest movie releases in the science fiction genre, or they could be descriptions of the challenges facing cross-cultural missionaries. There are a number of similarities between frontier mission work and science fiction stories; from encountering new cultures, to learning how to live in alien environments, to the significant potential for misunderstanding and unintended consequences, there is much they have in common. Even the language that describes them is similar: exploratory ventures to other worlds are called—space missions.

My family and I have been serving in northern Mozambique for almost ten years now, and every time I read a work of science fiction I am surprised at how much the characters' challenges and emotions resonate with me. These stories often have unexpected applications to our work and context. What surprises me in talking to colleagues and friends on the field is how few of us cross-cultural missionaries read science fiction. While I am certainly not an authority on the genre, I believe it would be profitable for missionaries to explore science fiction.

## The Power of Fiction in Formation

Stories can effectively engage readers with difficult ideas and concepts. Jesus used narratives of everyday life in order to expand his hearers' imaginations and teach them about life in the kingdom of God. As a master storyteller, he created fictions that resonated with members of an agricultural society and continue to touch us today even though time and culture separate us greatly from that society. Whether it is Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, or even Tolkien's tale about Frodo and the Ring, good stories have the power to shape us.

Fiction, by its very nature, has the ability to construct safe places for personal reflection. One science fiction author notes that “fiction, because it is not about somebody who actually lived in the real world, always has the possibility of being about ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> As we dive into a fictional world that draws our attention away from ourselves, we are more apt to lower our defenses and make connections back to our own lives.

Science fiction stories resonate particularly with cross-cultural missions, because they both often deal with the unknown and unfamiliar. The genre uses many of the same raw elements found in Christian missions and creates realms beyond us and our situations—places where we can get some distance from our own contexts, where hopefully we may find some new light to shine on our lives.

## **Themes from Science Fiction that Resonate in Cross-Cultural Missions**

How, specifically, can science fiction illuminate aspects of a missionary’s life and work? In reading works of science fiction I have come across a number of themes that resonate with our experiences in cross-cultural missions. These books are not necessarily written from a Christian perspective, and the reader may find some objectionable content or language, but I believe they are still very worthwhile. So, at the risk of spoiling some plot points, I will articulate nine instructive themes from example works of science fiction.

### **1. Encounters with alien environments have a great possibility for misunderstanding and unintended consequences.**

Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow* tells the story of Father Emilio Sandoz, the only survivor of a Jesuit mission to the planet Rakhat. This tragic story deals primarily with the unintended consequences of mission, one of those being the ruining of the missionary. As the story progresses, the reader realizes just how little the characters understood the host culture and the ways their incorrect interpretations had heartbreaking consequences. Russell’s book is a helpful reminder of how significant differences in language and culture can blind us to what is really happening around us.

### **2. Mission is inherently risky and painful.**

If *The Sparrow* is a book about mission failure, then its sequel, *Children of God*, tells the story of Father Sandoz’s redemption. Father Sandoz has experienced some truly horrible things, and he is angry with a God who “abandoned” him. He has renounced the priesthood and has begun to move on with his life when he is abducted and taken back to the alien planet. We learn more about the unintended consequences, both good and bad, of the first mission to Rakhat. This book reveals more about Sandoz’s personal journey as he struggles to see God in the midst of tragedy. A major theme in this work is forgiveness as Sandoz comes to the realization that holding onto his anger at God or the people who wronged him will do him no good. He recognizes that the mission has ruined him, but still finds that he has an important part to play in the story.

These two books can challenge cross-cultural missionaries with the fact that, in spite of our best intentions, we or those we love may be ruined because of our decision to go. We must wrestle with the real risks and rewards of following the call to a “new world.” And in accepting the risks and pain inherent in mission we must prepare ourselves to deal with feelings of abandonment.

### **3. The mission team can be a major source of joy—and conflict.**

In Russell’s novels (*The Sparrow* and *Children of God*) we also learn about mission team dynamics as the main characters are forced to work together in a dangerous and unfamiliar environment. The teams struggle with isolation, frustration with each other’s weaknesses and strengths, and the place of leadership on a mission team. While the team that Sandoz is a part of in the first book has great rapport, they ultimately fail in their mission. In *Children of God*, though, Sandoz is part of a severely dysfunctional team, yet, they achieve some success in the end despite the best efforts of certain team members to sabotage the endeavor.

In these books we see how these fictional mission teams function for good and bad. Cross-cultural missionaries may relate easily with Sandoz and the way that so many of his moments of both deepest happiness and greatest frustration stemmed from his relationships with teammates.

### **4. The mission can be endangered by going alone.**

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin tells the story of a solitary emissary from a galactic network of planets who travels to the frigid world of Winter. The people of this alien planet do not have one specific gender. Their maleness or femaleness changes as part of a monthly cycle. This characteristic shapes Winter’s language and culture and the story dives into the anthropology in a fascinating way. The lone emissary struggles to accomplish his mission as he wrestles with the similarities and differences between Winter’s culture and his own.

At a number of points in this book the main character is at a loss for what to do and struggles without a partner in this endeavor. The main character’s isolation leads to miscomprehension, which endangers him, the mission, and his alien friends. This story shows the real value of having colleagues to help interpret the “alien” environment.

### **5. Mission involves equipping people to engage a reality that we ourselves may not fully understand.**

In Orson Scott Card’s books, *Ender’s Game* and *Ender’s Shadow*, humanity lives in fear of another alien attack. These books tell the same story from the perspectives of two central characters, Ender and Bean, children who have been selected by the world government for military training. We follow their journeys through Battle School, where they prepare for an eventual conflict with the alien enemy. Ender and Bean, while both extremely capable, are driven by different forces, and their teachers use what they know about their personalities (Ender’s empathy and Bean’s intelligence) to manipulate their environments in order to facilitate their training.

A primary task of Christian missions is to develop followers of Christ from within that host culture. The surprising ending of this story led me to reflect on cross-cultural discipleship and training for ministry. The teachers at the Battle School were training soldiers to do something that the teachers themselves were unable to do. This book raises important questions about how a person from a different culture can equip people for service to their own home culture: specifically, how can cross-cultural missionaries develop leaders with integrity for a context that missionaries themselves cannot fully understand? How soon should they share difficult truths with new disciples? And how can they train leaders to solve currently unforeseen problems? While Christian formation certainly is not solely dependent on human initiative and planning, these are essential questions that missionaries need to wrestle with as we train followers of Jesus in a foreign context.

## **6. Going on mission changes us, but the people we leave behind will inevitably change as well.**

In *Speaker for the Dead*, Orson Scott Card's sequel to *Ender's Game*, we see Ender hopping through the galaxy alongside his capable sister, Valentine. Valentine's marriage and pregnancy, though, mean that she will stay behind as Ender moves on to fulfill his mission on other worlds. Their conversations bring out the tensions that are often felt in families where one member leaves home to go on mission in a far-away context. Later in the book Ender has to accept the fact that his sister has matured and changed in his absence. This theme is important to consider. Cross-cultural missionaries cannot expect family members and relationships back home to be frozen in time. While we are being shaped by new "worlds," our friends and family are growing and changing as well.

## **7. The host culture is not static.**

One thing that I appreciated about Isaac Asimov's novel *Foundation* is the way he used science fiction as a way to tell a story about the development of a society. Asimov's story spans hundreds of years and dozens of characters as it relates the way political, religious, and economic forces mold a culture over time.

New Christian missionaries must do the important work of studying their host culture. But, there is a danger that these students of culture (fresh off the plane, notebook in hand, language flashcards in back pocket) may imagine themselves studying a civilization that is fixed. It is extremely important to remember that, especially in this increasingly urbanized and technologically infused world we live in, cultures change. Asimov's novel reminds us that due to a number of forces, both seen and unseen, society has changed, is changing, and will change again.

## **8. In mission we will meet evil in forms both familiar and unfamiliar.**

Some of the best science fiction to deal directly with the problem of evil comes from authors with an explicitly Christian perspective. C. S. Lewis's Space Trilogy and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* series have been some of my favorites since childhood. In these books the main characters travel to new worlds where they must wrestle with the

powers of evil. Interestingly, while Lewis portrays the evil in other worlds as being connected with or having origins in the evil at home on earth, L'Engle's stories portray our home world as "a bulwark against evil, and the battle is fought on other worlds."<sup>2</sup>

As the characters in Lewis's and L'Engle's stories do battle with evil, their position as aliens makes them all the more vulnerable. At times the evil reveals itself in familiar ways, and in other cases evil reveals itself in unexpected forms. As cross-cultural missionaries we must recognize the evil that exists in both our host cultures and our home cultures. And we must be aware that evil may take totally unfamiliar forms in our host cultures.

## 9. Beware the messiah complex.

Now we turn to a danger of reading science fiction. Frank Herbert's epic novel *Dune* is an excellent example "of the most frequent science fiction concept of the messiah—a human being more advanced than those around him or her, a 'man of the future' who pulls society into a new age."<sup>3</sup>

In this story a young boy is brought to a new planet by loving parents, and after dealing with tragedy he is able to fulfill his destiny as the messiah of a desert people.

In reading science fiction we must not let the "messiah complex" be the narrative that we adopt for ourselves. Depending on the context in which one is serving, we may be tempted to put ourselves in the role of the messiah. As people gravitate towards us because of wealth, nationality, or influence we may be drawn into patterns of behavior more fitting to a patron or savior. Missionaries must resist this tendency. Thankfully the people we serve already have a Messiah, and a good and all-sufficient one at that! So, in reading and applying science fiction to our lives we must be careful about the characters we most identify with.

## Conclusion

My hope is that I have piqued the curiosity of missionaries, especially cross-cultural ones. The genre of science fiction is a treasure chest of resources for those who cross new frontiers. My belief is that those of us called to "boldly go" on mission can benefit from these narratives as they shape our imaginations and aid us in effectively serving the people of these new "worlds."

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<sup>1</sup> Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (New York: Tor Science Fiction, 1994), xxv.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel McKee, *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 105.

**3** Ibid., 143.