

COLLABORATION NOT COMPETITION: WOMEN IN SCIENCE FICTION



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Space Race, Atomic Bombs, Penicillin and Women? The mid-twentieth century proved to be a time of tremendous growth, marking the end of World War II and the beginning of the American Feminist Movement. Because of the developments in technology and space exploration during the war, science fiction's popularity was "sky-rocketing." The combination of these events created the perfect storm for feminism to grow and thrive in the world of science fiction.

It is a common misconception that sci-fi is a predominantly male space. However, that has never been true since the first official work of science-fiction, "Frankenstein" was written by a woman, Mary Shelley in 1818. Not to mention, Shelley was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, the face of feminism in the late nineteenth century.

The existence of feminism in sci-fi should not be a novel idea, however it can be a rather surprising discovery for some people. The presence of feministic nuances, seemingly more evident in recent works, have always been incorporated in works of science fiction.

1940s: With the end of World War II in 1945, science fiction became a renowned form of entertainment. It proved to be a manner in which recent scientific advancements could be explored by the audience. One of the first sci-fi works released post-war was the novel "1984" written by George Orwell in 1948. Aside from his eerily accurate predictions about the future of technology and governmental control, Orwell included an important female character, Julia, in his novel.

Winston, the main character, and Julia are forbidden to love one another, but that does not stop them from developing a relationship. Furthermore, Julia is the only person Winston trusts to despise the Party, the government of Oceania, as much as he does.

They may be lovers, but they are equals. She compliments his gloomy, anxious character by being a confident, free spirit, yet they share the common goal of rebelling against the omnipotent government. She speaks her mind and goes after what she desires, while evading the consequences of the Party. Julia and Winston are the yin and yang of Oceania.

1950s: Moving into the next decade, the movie "The Day the Earth Stood Still" premiered in 1951 in every theater across the country. A well-rounded film discussing the importance of international understanding and agreement, Retrocinema Magazine explains how it is one of the first science-fiction films to portray the archetype of a 'sci-fi mom,' a resilient mother that contributes to saving the day.

Helen Benson is a widowed mother working as a secretary.

She unknowingly lets an alien, Klaatu, stay in her home and befriend her son. She helps Klaatu evade detainment so he can make his critical announcement to a group of scientists who must help save all of mankind. Helen rescues Klaatu, in turn saving humanity, keeping the peace internationally and galactically: all this while being a single mom to a pre-teen son in the 1950's...no big deal.

1960s: As the Boomer generation will remember, the show beloved by all sci-fi fans, "Star Trek," premiered in 1966. According to William Snyder Jr. in his article "Star Trek: A Phenomenon and Social Statement in the 1960's," Lieutenant Uhura is the highest ranking female officer to serve on the USS Enterprise. Uhura, along with her prominent position, is also a Black woman. This kind of role in the 1960s promoted feminism and discouraged racism in media. She was a strong character, showing immeasurable independence and intelligence. That is not a common occurrence in movies and TV shows during this time period, making the show all the more controversial, yet irresistible. Her excellence in her role proved to all viewers that a woman can not only succeed, but thrive in positions of authority.

According to Margaret Kingsbury's article "Star Trek Created Feminist Icons in Front of and Behind the Camera," there are many more strong female characters in "Star Trek," including Kira Nerys, Tasha Yar, Deanna Troi, Captain Kathryn Janeway, Philippa Georgiou and Sylvia Tilly. These women portrayed incredible female icons throughout their roles, inspiring young girls and women to aspire for greatness and to not accept defeat in the face of adversity.

1970s: Hold onto your butts, because this decade brings one of the most controversial, extraordinary pieces of science fiction to date, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," released in 1975. When considering feminism, a cousin to the movement, per-se, is the LGBTQ+ community. According to Angela Li in her article "Human Rights Hero: The LGBTQ Rights Movement," the Gay Liberation Movement was occurring right around the release of this film, during the 1970s and 1980s.

In the film, Dr. Frank N. Furter, a brilliant scientist and self-proclaimed "transvestite," creates a beautiful man/monster for himself to have. Although Dr. Furter does not transition into a woman until the end of the movie, she displays many female characteristics throughout the film, foreshadowing her transition from man to woman.

Additionally, she displays affections for all people, man, woman and monster. Dr. Frank N. Furter is secure in her femininity, dressing in corsets and makeup and singing about wanting to be actress Fay Wray.

"The Rocky Horror Picture Show" defines an era of ultimate rebellion against heteronormative ideals. There is gender fluidity and equality, bisexuality, omnisexuality and transgenderism displayed in the film, lending support to the advancing movement regarding the LGBTQ+ community. Plus, who doesn't love a cameo from Meatloaf?

1980s: This decade brings the film "Starman" introducing Jenny Hayden to the world of sci-fi in 1984. The film follows Jenny through her newfound widowhood. Starman, the alien who receives an invitation from Earth's satellite, the Voyager, gets thrown off course when the U.S. military shoots down his spaceship.

Landing near Jenny's house in rural Wisconsin, he takes up the identity of her deceased husband and asks her for help getting back on course. She obviously freaks, as any sane person would seeing their dead husband alive and well, but she soon comes to realize it is not her husband at all. Despite her internal struggle, Jenny agrees to help Starman get to Arizona, where he can catch a ride back to his home planet. Their journey is nothing short of tumultuous but Jenny protects Starman at all costs.

Jenny's character is not a badass fighting machine (although she does have her moments), but what makes her character so strong is her empathy and protective nature for this creature that she barely knows. Putting her life at risk for a stranger shows unmistakable character and strength, more than most people can claim to have even a third of.

1990s: Continuing with the theme from the 1970s, the 1990s further advocates awareness for feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. We are gifted with the first film in the series "The Matrix," which was released in 1999 and directed by the Wachowski sisters. Trinity is the strong female lead, working under the direction of Morpheus who helped her to escape the Matrix. Trinity is a sophisticated hacker and computer programmer, talented in operating machines and exceptional in martial arts. Her skills aid her in keeping her friends alive and escaping the Agents, the programmed police of the Matrix.

In addition, the film was directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, two transgender directors. According to Emily St. James in her article "How The Matrix universalized a trans experience - and helped me accept my own," Lana and Lilly had not come out as trans when the film was released. She goes on to say that because they were closeted during the filming, the movie depicts what the trans experience is like prior to coming out—portraying the mind transcending the body's limitations and the need for individual self-determination. This is one of the most popular works by a trans director and remains a staple in the trans community to this day.

2000s: The 2000s were jam-packed with novel sci-fi films, one of which was "Avatar," released in 2009 and directed by James Cameron. This movie, aside from its incredible portrayal of scientific innovation, wonderfully represents a feminist film. The roles throughout, male and female, are fairly equal, with the brain of the operation being scientist Grace Augustine. She designed the Pandora Program from the ground up, concentrating on the scientific discoveries to be made in Pandora while still respecting the culture of the Na'vi people. Her goal was to integrate herself and her team into their world to learn and discover. She unfortunately died a martyr, but her legacy lives on.

The prominent female characters native to Pandora include Mo'at, Neytiri and Eywa. Neytiri is one of the main characters throughout the film, as she guides Jake, a war veteran and rookie to the Pandora Program, through the ins and outs of Pandora and her clan. She is strong in battle and undeniably independent. Mo'at is Neytiri's mother and spiritual leader of their clan. She is connected directly to Eywa, who is less a character and more an entity. Eywa, comparable to Mother Nature, controls the balance of life and is an integral part of the

Na'vi culture. Each represents attributes of womanhood - intelligent, nurturing, tough, merciful - serving as role models to all viewers.

2010s: The 2010s were chock-full of feminist sci-fi works, including "Arrival" in 2016 and the novel "The Hunger Games" in 2008. In "Arrival," twelve extraterrestrial spaceships land in locations throughout the world. A linguistics specialist, Louise Banks, is recruited by the government to attempt communication with the aliens. Louise uses her knowledge of semantics, but more importantly her compassion, to create a bond with the aliens and learn to communicate with their language. She is a brilliant female lead, using her intelligence accompanied by some of her more traditionally feminine qualities to build a rapport with the aliens and save mankind.

In the novel "The Hunger Games," written by Suzanne Collins, the strong-willed heroine, Katniss Everdeen, brings well-deserved chaos and scrutiny to the Capitol of Panem. Her confidence and unshakable integrity exemplify the feminist lens used by Collins, opening the world of sci-fi dystopia to girls during this decade. She represents the strength within us all to fight for what we believe in and to do it with honor.

2020s: Released just last year in 2021, "Stowaway" presents the all-familiar motif of space exploration. A group of scientists depart from Earth on their two-year trip to Mars. Marina Barnett is the commander of the ship and successfully leads the crew out of Earth's atmosphere towards Mars. Unbeknownst to the crew, there was an accidental stowaway aboard the ship named Michael. Because the ship is only supplied for three people, the crew runs into problems with sufficient oxygen supply and scrubbing the ship's air of carbon dioxide.

Zoe, the doctor aboard the ship, faces the oxygen dilemma with compassion. She urges the commander to wait ten days for them to find a solution so Michael does not have to die. She institutes the solution effort to acquire more oxygen, heroically sacrificing herself in the solar storm filled with deadly radiation to do so. Her martyrdom gives insight into her character and the courage she has to sacrifice herself for the good of the other three crew members. She is a noble, brilliant woman who died with dignity.

Science fiction for so long was propagated for a male audience, seemingly due to traditional gender stereotypical interests. Generally written by men for men, science fiction quickly evolved to the inclusive genre it is today, but without much notice from the public. Sci-fi fans are now coming to realize the everpresent equality among the genders weaved throughout sci-fi films and novels. The feminist nuances incorporated into science fiction prove an exceptional vessel for the promotion of gender equality. It enhances the stereotypical "dominant" male audience to embrace the concept of equal partnership with women, as well as reinforces confidence in women and acknowledges their remarkable contributions to the sci-fi atmosphere. Sci-fi is not just a male space and never has been solely a male space.

