The Evil SF Trivia Quiz, Or What Happens When They Let a Fan Teach a Lit Class
By (in order of appearance): Heather Urbanski, Lauren McGill, Dana Patrie, Samantha Segreto, Karen Carr, Jennifer Glifort, Crystal Casey, Rachael Bouchard, Kelly McIntyre, and Ryan Donovan

English 448: Speculative Fiction Cautionary Tales, Central Connecticut State University

No. 164 - Heather Urbanski

Just before the fall 2010 semester, when I was preparing to teach my very first literature course after many semesters of teaching college writing, I asked around for some advice. To a one, my friends who taught lit classes on a regular basis told me not to change who I was as a teacher. Which, of course, made me ask, who am I as a teacher? I quickly realized that I am, at the core, two things: a writer and a fan.

And what better way to capture that identity than with a little fandom test? I created what at the time I thought was a fairly evil genre trivia quiz, just to see how many other fans were in the room on the first class meeting.

The fall 2010 group did fairly well. No one could define “fen” but then I hadn’t really expected anyone to. I just happen to like that term and, hey, it’s not like I asked them to define “filk.” But I did get the telltale fan questions, such as which Enterprise I was referring to in question 12.

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So, while the fall 2010 class was certainly not full of hard-core fen, there was enough of a shared basis in the genre to make things very interesting, from a fannish perspective.

Fast forward to August 2011: I’m updating the quiz for the new semester, fresh off of WorldCon in Reno (where The Drink Tank won a Hugo. Did you hear?). I substitute Blackout/All Clear for The Doomsday Book as the correct match for Connie Willis and change out China Miéville’s Kraken for our latest John W. Campbell-award winner Lev Grossman’s The Magicians because one of my main goals for the course is to highlight SF as a living genre, one that is constantly producing new material. But, other than that, I think the quiz is still evil enough with its mix of classic, slightly obscure, and currently well-known references.

Then I arrive at the first class meeting on August 30. Many of us in the room, me included, are still without power after a visit from lovely Hurricane/Tropical Storm Irene but it seems like the eight students (a smaller group than in 2010) are ready to get started, if a little nervous about what to expect.

And when I send the evil quiz around, I start to understand the nerves: laughter and versions of “I have no idea” fill the room very quickly. I even hear the phrase “I’m tapping out” after not even five minutes. No one flags me down and asks about multiple versions of any franchise. Most wear an expression of mild shock.

I end the activity much earlier than last year and...
as we go through the list, I discover, to my great excitement actually, that most of the class is entirely new to the genre. Most of the media-centered questions are answered correctly (if memory serves, 1, 2i, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, and 14 were all identified more or less accurately by at least someone in the room) but not all of them.

Clearly, this would be a different semester than fall 2010...and it has been. I personally am having a great time bringing fandom, and the genre texts themselves, to this group of neo-fans (which now includes one more student than on that first evening). But don’t take my word for it. Here’s what they have to say...

No. 167 - Dana Patrie

With angst and eagerness, I sit to register for my last semester of graduate classes. Plan of study in hand, I click on ENG 500, fill out my forms for my independent study, then go to click on Shakespeare: Comedies, the last of the Shakespeare classes I have yet to take. Horror and panic spreads from the tips of my fingers to the neurons of my brain. They have changed the time from 4:30 to a 1:40 class. Leaving my position as a middle school educator once a week to go to class wasn’t really going to go over well with the administration, so I quickly scan the literature courses that are still open. Topics in American Literature – gag. I’m a British gal. Romanticism – retch. I sigh. I peruse. I scour. I find Speculative Fiction on the list. Speculative Fiction? I don’t even know what the hell that is. I google the term and sigh heavily. Science Fiction? I’m done for, but it’s still better than Romanticism.

I sit with my advisor, the Shakespeare guru at the university. He looks at my change of course and asks me if I’m interested in Science Fiction with a raised eyebrow, weight back in his chair, stroking his beard. No. I’m not. But I need to graduate. Don’t get me started on the fact that you changed the time of the one class I wanted - needed - to graduate. Now it’s his turn to sigh. Reluctantly, he signs off on it, knowing I don’t want to do this. I get the book list, read the six books over the summer, one a night because I just can’t put them down. I have never been blown away like this! Excited and trepidacious, I hike the sixty-four steps to my first class. My professor, with a sinister smile, hands us all a quiz. I can do this. I just finished the reading list. I quickly skim the questions. Oh crap. Hugo? What’s that? Star Wars questions? Are you kidding me? I’m tapping out. I’m the girl who couldn’t finish The Golden Compass and doesn’t teach The Giver because of its genre. Deep breaths. Breathe. You can do this. And I do. We start talking about the fiction. And I’m glad they changed the time of that class ... what was I going to take again? I forget.

No. 166 - Lauren McGill

“How many Star Wars movies include Yoda?”
Was Yoda the hairy man-beast or the evil guy with the helmet head?
“What is the significance of the year 1977?”
Disco was alive and well and everywhere!
“What is a TARDIS?”
Um, someone who is perpetually late?

Ok, so clearly I didn’t do so well on the “evil quiz.” Before entering this next dimensional classroom, my closest exposure to speculative fiction was reading Frankenstein in my British Modernism class. And in retrospect we really didn’t spend much time on the science fiction-ish characteristics of the novel, more on the modern-day Prometheus action. To be quite honest I always considered speculative fiction to be a rather silly genre. As a self-described literary elitist, I judged (yes judged!) the fact that most sci-fi novels are approximately the same size and shape as those in the “Romance” section of the bookstore, and quite honestly their covers in some cases were humorously similar as well. So I went ahead and placed them both into the same category: “The Undesirables”. So, imagine my surprise when I sat down to read our first two novels, and tore through them both with the prowess of hungry lioness with six cubs to feed. I could not put either of them down! Now I feel rather silly about my pre-conceived notions, and will ask (with honest surprise) others the question when they ridicule it, “Why don’t you like Science Fiction?”

No. 168 - Art from Delphyne Woods
No. 169 - Samantha Segreto

It is 4:27pm by the time I have successfully located room 311 and maneuvered myself into a desk that is much too small for any deserving college student. In just three minutes, my speculative fiction class is beginning, and I have no idea what to expect. Dr. Urbanski, well-dressed and smiling, strolls into class, pulls out a stack of printer paper, and announces, “We’re having a pop quiz!” I’m not nervous, but I am a little embarrassed. The only piece of science fiction literature I can remember reading, in third grade mind you, is Into the Dream by William Sleator. As expected, I have absolutely zero correct answers, although my partner successfully guesses a couple. “Well, Sam,” I think to myself, “this will be fun, a challenge – something to finally push you, so here goes nothing.”

It is now the end of September, a palette of golden browns and warm crimson colors paint the trees, and the first quarter of school is officially over. Having dabbled a little further into the speculative fiction genre, with works like Beggars in Spain and “The Machine Stops” under my belt, I am satisfied, intrigued, and eager for what the future of this class holds. We have covered topics including nuclear warfare, information technology, and biological engineering, but what I am itching to unearth are those on monsters, aliens, and other beings. Although just a month ago I had little interest in the world of science fiction, my thirst for this stuff is only getting stronger.

No. 170 - Karen Carr

Ok, so we all know those people who can retain and regurgitate loads of useful information on command. Well I am one of those people but only when it comes to useless things like what is the next hot up and coming movie, TV, book, or actor; of course, nothing of great use unless I was planning on pursuing a career as a gossip columnist. According to my friends, I’m a bit of a know-it-all when it comes to pop culture trivia. Personally I prefer the title trivia connoisseur. I regularly get asked about who starred in what, when, or who are they related to, or who are they dating, etc. and the majority of the time I know the answer. I have literally been fought over like the last crescent roll at Thanksgiving dinner when breaking into teams to play such games as Scene-It. So when Dr. Urbanski walked in and announced that we were going to have a pop sci-fi trivia quiz, I was not concerned. Pop Culture and I are best friends. I had this.

First question, what is the significance of 1977...well I can tell you my mom was a freshman in high school, that is about it. Moving on second question match novels and authors, I was screwed. I had no clue. Science fiction was not something I regularly sought out to read. The last true science fiction book I read was probably The Giver in middle school. Moving on, question three, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, finally a title I recognize! Then number four, a Hugo, I have no clue what that is except is he the guy with the severe back problem in The Hunchback of Notre Dame? Nope, that is Quasimodo. Question five, What is Voldemort’s real name? Another one I know, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Ok, so not so bad, I knew two answers and was now only intrigued by the rest. Well then I flipped the paper over...ten more questions...seriously?!? This is going to be a long semester.

No. 171 - Jennifer Glifort

When my Speculative Fiction professor came by and handed out sheets of paper, I figured it was one of those “Get to know the person next to you and be best friends forever” monstrosities that teachers are so fond of. But when I looked down I saw that this was an actual quiz. A pop quiz. A pop quiz on the first day. Nice.

The professor said it wouldn’t be graded, which was a big relief, especially once I saw the questions. I thought I had at least a little sci-fi knowledge, but for the most part I was stumped. I got the question about Spaceballs (who doesn’t know and love Mel Brooks?) and guessed the rest.

I was pretty disappointed in my inner Trekkie (recently discovered due to the 2009 reboot movie. Hello, bandwagon!) for not knowing the designation of the Enterprise. NCC-1710? 1017? 1071... The number-shuffling just got worse as I went along.

Ah, well. I have a couple months ahead of me to get the gist of it.

172 - Crystal Casey

Have you ever been given a test on your first day of school? Talk about an immediate buzz-kill and a bit of self questioning, “Why did I take this class?” It was the first night of my 2.5 hour English class and floating around the room with a smile on her face our professor hands out this science fiction trivia quiz.

I once considered myself a novice in the subject but recall has never been my strong suit; thank the heavens this was not going to be graded. Perhaps cultivating a robot-like memory for ourselves is something
future generations should begin looking into.

Out of fifteen questions and one author/title match I was only able to legitimately answer two. The other seven students in the class managed to tackle this test with both humor and a team effort. Yet I kept my head down and racked my brain for answers that would never come.

Perhaps I can thank Harry Potter mania for preparing me for question number five: what is Voldemort’s real name? At least with this question many of us had a chance, whether we read the books or saw the films.

In the number six spot we were asked to identify the title of Mel Brook’s amazingly funny spoof Spaceballs. Who can forget Captain Lone Star, his mawg Barf and my favorite scene in which Alien actor John Hurt recreates the famous exploding abdomen scene with an alien bursting out after having the special at a space diner. Only this time the alien sings and dances on the countertop adorned with a cane and top hat rather than going on a killing spree.

Although this test challenged me and fired more synapses than necessary I did learn one thing: brush up on your science fiction, because the next time someone asks you what a fen is or what the designation of the starship Enterprise is, your very life or the life of your GPA can be on the line.

No. 173 - Rachael Bouchard

I have always felt a bit special, even perhaps unique because, as a woman, I understood jokes and puns that came from a very male-based world - the world of science fiction. When our town had a mayor run with the name Jean Picard and signs filled our town, my group of friends started up a collection and we prayed that he would be bald and talk with an accent. So I was excited when I saw Speculative Fiction being offered. Our Blackboard Vista page donned pictures of Cylons from Battlestar Galactica both the original and most recent version. Oh yeah, I thought, this class is definitely for me.

Imagine my shock when the first day in class, not a single man graced our classroom - not even the teacher. I didn’t feel less special or less unique, I was so thrilled I couldn’t help but to sit there in awe. Then we got a quiz on our first day. It consisted of terminology that most folks might not be acquainted with. Browncoats? Yup. Knew that one. Spaceballs? A crime of nature if you haven’t at least watched it. How many movies is Yoda in? My question to the question - computer generated Yoda or puppet Yoda? But then some stumped me. Harry Potter - that wasn’t science fiction to me - so when the question asked about Voldemort’s real name, I just let my pen skip right past the blank space. Must be a trick question, I thought. Overall, I learned that I knew as much as I didn’t know, and that only whet my palate. Now that we’re about a third of the way through the semester, my excitement has only grown and I can’t wait to tackle a new part of my world.

Maybe I’ll even stump my male counterparts.

No. 174 - Kelly McIntyre

I will openly admit that I am a nerd. I go to anime conventions, I cosplay, I participate in fandom communities on Livejournal, and at one point in my life I could recite about half of the first chapter of Harry Potter from memory (not because I tried to memorize it, but because I had just reread it so many times that it stuck). I broke my work’s internet use policy to get into the early registration for the Pottermore beta. Once we finally got our admittance e-mails, two of my friends and I actually held our own miniature Sorting Ceremony, hat and all, to see where we’d be more or less “officially” placed by J.K. Rowling. I’ve managed to get both my boyfriend and my “not into the whole magic and spaceships kind of stuff” mother (her words, not mine) totally obsessed with the British sci-fi show Primeval.

So, naturally, I was pretty pumped to be taking a class focused on science fiction and fantasy works. And though I definitely prefer fantasy, I’ll never say no to a good sci-fi work.

The professor passes out the allegedly “evil” pop quiz, and I see a lot of things I don’t recognize. Matching the novels and authors together is a total failure--I recognize some titles and some authors, but can’t connect one to the other, and some I’ve just never heard of. But that’s okay, because look--a Harry Potter question! I don’t even have to stop and think about that one. I have a total mind blank on the Mel Brooks question, and when I come to the fen one, all I can picture is the JournalFen website, home to the well-known “Fandom Wank” community... but I can’t remember what “fen” actually means. Oh well, moving on. The TARDIS? I’ve really never been able to get into Doctor Who, but I still know that it’s bigger on the inside. Browncoats? They aim to misbehave. When the class goes over these questions as a group, I answer those two while everyone else remains fairly quiet. Then we get to the Enterprise question, and I’m stumped. The professor looks like she thinks I might know the answer to this
question since I just answered the last two, but no such luck. The truth is, I don’t think I’ve ever even seen a full episode of Star Trek, so... maybe I’m not quite as big of a nerd as I’d thought. At least, not for science fiction. But hey, it’s never too late to start.

No. 175 - Ryan Donovan

“Well, let’s look at some courses and see what’s still available.” I don’t know how much longer I have left. Racing against the clock is very different when you can’t see the little and big hand. My advisor gets her password wrong about three times before she’s logged in and scouring English courses. “Have you taken any of the Brit or American lits?”

I say I’ve taken British lit one and two and have plans to take some of the American lit courses, but what are they like and do they meet in the morning versus late at night? The last add drop day and naturally, inevitably, I find myself needing to drop a course and supplant another in its place. How much time do I have left?

“What’s this,” I lean closer to the computer screen. “When does it meet?”

“Speculative Fiction? Meets Tuesday, 4:30 to 7:10.” The perfect time on the perfect day.

“Isn’t that that science fiction one?” The man who shares my advisor’s office asks, leaning over his newspaper. Indeed it is.

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The book isn’t so long but it’s dense, 60’s science fiction; hard to penetrate. The title is stupid, in my personal opinion. Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?. Seriously, the title of the book shouldn’t be a damn mouthful, should it? I’m 30 pages and about fifteen bucks into this book already and it has to be read for tomorrow. Tomorrow. I should have had a full week to read, everyone else in the class does. But I signed up Thursday, then went home before going to the bookstore. Now it’s Monday, and I’m 30 pages in.

It’s not that it’s bad – others in the class will protest this, tomorrow – I really like it, just a lot to read and absorb and take notes on, all in one day. It’s not like reading for pleasure, even when you take pleasure in the reading, because it’s work. Coffee, cigarettes, and the wee hours of the evening are all I need though. My tools.

Working in pairs, answer the following questions regarding science fiction and fantasy as a genre. Don’t forget that there are two sides!

Group Name (optional): ____________________

1. What is the significance of the year 1977?
2. Match these novels with their authors.
   - Connie Willis
   - Octavia Butler
   - Robert Heinlein
   - Isaac Asimov
   - Mary Shelley
   - Ursula LeGuin
   - Greg Bear
   - Anne McCaffrey
   - Lev Grossman
   - Ray Bradbury
   - Frank Herbert

   a. Dune
   b. The Magicians
   c. Left Hand of Darkness
   d. Blackout/All Clear
   e. I, Robot
   f. Kindred
   g. The Last Man
   h. Stranger in a Strange Land
   i. Martian Chronicles
   j. Dragonriders of Pern
   k. Darwin’s Radio

3. How do the humans attempt to communicate with the aliens in Close Encounters of the Third Kind?
4. What is a Hugo?
5. What is Voldemort’s real name?
6. What’s the name of the Mel Brooks spoof of science fiction?
7. What is the big reveal at the end of the original Planet of the Apes?
8. What is fen?
9. Who was John W. Campbell?
10. What is the TARDIS?
11. What is a browncoat?
12. What is the designation of the starship Enterprise?
13. How many Star Wars movies include Yoda?
14. Who or what are Cylons?
15. Bonus: How are Cylons different between the two series?